

MINETTE AND ANIL DE SILVA-AN APPRECIATION

Neloufer de Mel

Minette de Silva, Sri Lanka's pioneering woman architect died at the age of eighty two on 21st November, 1998. *Cat's Eye* pays tribute to her and her elder sister Marcia Anil, who died in England two years ago, also in November, at the age of eighty seven. They were both outstanding Sri Lankan women of their time. Courageous, self-confident, talented, innovative and dynamic, they tread into male domains where no women had been before and remained until the end of their lives deeply committed to women's causes, culture, education and progress. Minette the youngest in the family was very much influenced by the charismatic Anil.

Political Household

The daughters of George E. and Agnes de Silva, Minette and Anil, grew up in a political household shaped by their parents' activism and social concerns. George E. de Silva who was President of the Ceylon National Congress in the 1920s, and a Minister for Health in 1943 had a rough start in life. Viciously discriminated against by an upper-caste Sinhala lobby, he fought his political campaigns on behalf of the Kandyan "depressed" castes and classes and the estate workers he knew well from his boyhood in Nuwara Eliya, and later, Kandy, where he settled after marriage, pursuing a legal career at the Kandy bar. Their mother Agnes, was better connected than George. The daughter of a leading lawyer in Kandy, she belonged to a prominent Dutch Burgher family and was the niece of Dr. Andreas Nell and his sister Dr. Winifred Nell, one of Sri Lanka's first women medical doctors. Agnes was at the vanguard of the campaign for universal franchise which Sri Lanka won in 1931, way ahead of other British colonies. She had a strong commitment to gender equality. Giving evidence before the Donoughmore Commission, when asked whether Indian Tamil women labourers should also have the vote, her reply was, "certainly, they are women, too. We want all women to have the vote". Both George and Agnes spent time in England from 1928 to 1931 lobbying the British Labour Party for this important milestone on the country's road to independence. Their daughters went to England with them and stayed on there a few years.

An Interesting Contradiction

In Sri Lanka, the political activities of their parents exposed the young Minette and Anil to the key personalities of the day. These figures included the nationalist leaders of both Sri Lanka and India. Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu were guests of the de Silva's at their Kandy home. Minette and Anil were companions to the young Indira Gandhi when she accompanied her father on visits to Sri Lanka and kept up the friendship with Indira in later years.

Minette and Anil straddled an interesting contradiction. On the one hand, they were always aware of themselves as outsiders because of

their father's caste. The attacks on Anil in tabloids like 'The Searchlight' and 'The Comrade' in the 1930s on caste grounds were pure political viciousness against her father. On the other hand, they belonged to a Burgher elite, and a political elite, once their father attained national prominence. Their flamboyant lives are the story of how privilege protected and gave them self-confidence, but also of how their determination to succeed in life was born out of disadvantage.

The Indian Connection

Minette was the first woman student of architecture at the School of Architecture in Bombay in the 1940s, and in 1948, the first Asian woman architect selected as an Associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects (ARIBA). Anil in turn, was the first Asian woman to enrol for a course in art history at the Louvre in Paris in the early 1950s. Minette and Anil were founder members of the influential Bombay-based journal *Marg* devoted to a re-appraisal of art and architecture in Asia. They contributed articles on Sri Lankan art and architecture and Anil, in particular, was the first to introduce the paintings of George Keyt and the 43rd Group to the Bombay art milieu, through features in *Marg* and exhibitions in Bombay. Both sisters integrated well into the highly cosmopolitan and dynamic society that formed the Bombay artistic and political elite of the 1940s. After the confines of Sri Lanka with its caste hierarchies and increasing communal and religious nationalism that gave young women like Minette and Anil little room to be unconventional and innovative, cosmopolitan Bombay was a welcome refuge. These were also the heady days of the Indian nationalist struggle. Minette and Anil were already familiar with its leading personalities and sympathetic to its causes. Anil kept close association with the leading figures of the Indian Communist Party politbureau, and through her friendship with the writer Mulk Raj Anand, was able to influence some of its key cultural innovations. She is credited as having given birth to the idea of the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association (IPTA) which became, like the Progressive Writer's Movement, an influential art form which served the nationalist cause by presenting plays that showed the workings of imperial exploitation. Anil was its General Secretary, and given that these were war years during which many performances were banned by the British government, it was courageous activism.

Minette's Pioneer Ventures

Minette returned to Sri Lanka after Bombay although Anil never did, except for holidays. Minette continued her architectural studies in England. As she wrote, "The isolation in Ceylon was overbearing and having grown up in two worlds-that of Ceylon and India-the need to be involved with European civilizations was a must". Influenced by the famous French architect Le Corbusier with whom she was close friends, Minette's first job was

to design the Pieris House (1952-56) that was quite revolutionary for the time. It was one of the first modern houses to be constructed on pilotis or columns, although this had been a traditional concept in local architecture.

The material for the house was drawn from what was locally available, and throughout her career, Minette incorporated traditional designs, local wood and features that were already part of the landscape. "She departed from western stereotypes", as her autobiography claims, "to a combination of ancient craft-work and modern building and to create a modern tradition for building in Sri Lanka". Private houses were not her only architectural achievements.

She was the architect of the Watapuluwa housing scheme in Kandy and the Kandy Arts Centre. She gained recognition for her work recently in the form of a gold medal from the Sri Lanka Institute of Architecture in 1996 and in 1997, the honour of 'Officer dans Ordre des Arts et Letters' of France. Sadly, she died just before the publication of an autobiographical book entitled *The Life and Work of an Asian Woman Architect*.

Anil in France

Anil went on from Bombay to Paris where she married a Frenchman-Philippe Vigier, and her interest in Asian Buddhist art, originating with her work for *Marg*, inspired by the collection of Buddhist art at the Musee Guimet in Paris and consolidated through the course on art history at the Louvre, reached fruition in an adventurous trip to China in 1958. This was to document the cave paintings of Tun Huang and Maichisan. The research team comprised four women-quite something for the time! Apart from Anil there was Romila Thapar, the now famous Indian historian who went as research assistant, Dominique Darbois as photographer and Mingo Wong as translator. The women stayed at sparse monasteries during their trip, climbed sheer rock face to enter the caves, worked in dim light and painstakingly documented and photographed this great tradition of Buddhist art. Two books on the cave paintings came out of that trip. Anil was also the author of *Life of the Buddha Retold from Ancient Sources*, published by the Phaedon Press in 1955 which contained 160 plates of Buddhist art. Later she was the general editor for a UNESCO series entitled 'Man Through His Art' which featured the progress of human kind illustrated through art, under the themes of 'Love and Marriage', 'The Human Face', 'War and Peace', etc.

Minette and Controversy

Nor did the sisters ever lead demure, retired lives. Minette led an independent life and her friends included leading personalities, especially in the field of culture-the leading architect of his time, Le Corbusier, the photographer Henri Cartier Bresson and films persons Lawrence Olivier, Vivien Leigh and David Lean. Minette had a lively mind and took an interest in current issues. She remained at the forefront of controversy on issues close to her heart. She was one of the critics of the siting of the Kandalama hotel on environmental grounds. Always outspoken, she had learnt to be 'tough' in the male dominated world of her chosen profession. Not only were the leading architects of the day male, but also the *baases* and contractors without which support an architect could not progress. Minette found that she had to be firm with her male workforce, although she did not enjoy the emotional pressures it entailed. Despite her poor health, she was, until the time of the death, keenly alert to politics, with strong views on topics ranging from the ongoing war to corruption and consumerism.

The Sisters in Cambridge

Minette visited England often and spent time with Anil, who lived in Cambridge during the last decades of her life. Anil had turned her attention to lively medieval figures and wrote a book on John of Gaunt which was published when she was eighty three years old. Two years later at the age of eighty five, she completed editing a book on Christine de Pisan. John of Gaunt lived through a significant period of transformation in Europe which saw the first glimpse of the reformation, the decline of feudalism and the rise of the English vernacular. Christine de Pisan (1363-1430) was an early feminist, one of the few women of her time who wrote for the public, advocated gender equality and took on the misogynists of the day with courage. It isn't surprising that these figures inspired Anil.

Both Anil and Minette were women who applauded the progressive and the daring who were also great achievers. Their own lives mirrored these aspirations and in their rejection of the confines of borders and boundaries-whether private, public or geographical-they were bold and outstanding Sri Lankan women of their generation with a combination of personality, flamboyance and achievement that make them a rare act to follow.

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