

# The saga of the 'Unique First'

Sirima Bandaranaike was elected the world's first female Prime Minister on July 21, 1960

BY SAMANGIE WETTIMUNY

Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike has certainly left an indelible mark not only on the history of Sri Lankan politics but also on the entire world. When she took over the reins of the SLP and subsequently became the world's first Woman Prime Minister in 1960, following the assassination of her husband Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, many of her opponents and even some of her own relatives hardly thought that she would be able to withstand the rigours of political life. But she soon proved her mettle as a pragmatic Head of State in a country where the political arena was largely dominated by men.

Bandaranaike shaped the political landscape of Sri Lanka for nearly five decades by heading the country, from 1960-65, from 1970-77 and finally as Prime Minister of her Executive President daughter's government from 1994 to 2000.

Her first two tenures of office saw the nationalisation of key sectors of the economy namely banking, insurance and petroleum, a key indication that she was dedicated to keep the political promise kept by her husband who initiated the progressive socialistic policies in the country, forming his own party, the SLP, having resigned from the UNP government where he served as a minister.

Many responsible state institutions including the People's Bank were established and private schools were taken over by the government during her tenure making giant strides towards nationalism. In a drive to promote local industries and state-owned businesses, Bandaranaike's government launched massive initiatives to setup many local industries in the fields of rubber, sugar, steel and textile.

The first republican Constitution was promulgated in 1972 by the United Front government headed by Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike where the country changed many features inherited from its colonial past including its name Ceylon to become Sri Lanka.

Bandaranaike undoubtedly shone in the international arena with her government's non aligned Foreign Policy and her innovative role in the Non Alignment Movement as an active member is still remembered with much pride. Furthermore, she made the world stand to attention when she addressed the inaugural Non Aligned Summit in Belgrade in 1961 'not only as a representative' of Sri Lanka but also as a 'woman and mother who can understand the thoughts and feelings of the millions of women, and mothers of this world, who are deeply concerned with the preservation of the human race.'

Her inspiring and timely words delivered during the dark period when the world's then super powers, the US and the USSR were engaged in a nuclear arms race, were applauded by world leaders. Adding another feather to her cap, her government hosted the fifth Non Aligned Summit in Sri Lanka in September, 1976.

Bandaranaike's cordial ties with countries such as China, Cuba and India brought immense benefits to the country. Under the Sirima-Shastri pact, Indian nationals who faced the issue of statelessness were sent back to India. The legal acquisition of Kachchativu Island as a territory of Sri Lanka in 1974 during the tenure of Indira Gandhi is still viewed as a personal gesture of friendship.

She proved her diplomatic skills by mediating between India and China on the verge of the Indo-China war in 1974 by persuading the two Asian giants to arrive at an amicable solution.

Bandaranaike's political acumen was well displayed through the manner in which her government crushed the Coup d'etat attempt in 1962. Though not a career politician in the conventional sense of the word, she certainly showed more political astuteness and tolerance than many of her male counterparts and the way she handled the insurgency in 1971 bear ample testimony to this fact. She was even called the 'only man in her Cabinet' for staying calm, yet far sighted when controlling the riots that rocked the country.

However, her nationalisation move came under severe criticism of the Opposition, the UNP and her move to take over foreign business entities particularly petroleum companies earned the wrath of the US to the extent of stopping all aid to the country. She suffered an election defeat in 1977 and was deprived of her civic rights in 1980 by the government led by the UNP on the grounds of misusing and abusing power during her tenure of office, a move which was however viewed by her staunch supporters as nothing but sheer political vendetta of the ruling party.

Today more than 21 years after her demise, she still remains Methiniya in the hearts and minds of the people, and no other female politician or a First Lady, or even her own second daughter, the charismatic first Executive woman President of Sri Lanka could take away the term of respect from her!

Sunethra Bandaranaike, the elder daughter of Sirima Badaranaike who never stepped into politics but stood with the mother during her days of happiness and sorrow alike, shares with us the sensitive story of yet another mother, and the political saga of a legendary woman with a 'unique first' to her credit.



**N**ot that she willingly broke through the glass ceiling in Sri Lankan politics, but she was called upon by destiny to do so. Little did she know that 20 years after her marriage she would embark on her record setting political journey 'sailing through' the troubled blue waters, not because the waves were less boisterous, but because she, the navigator was calm, indefatigable and determined to reach the shores of success!

Never call her a record breaker, but a maker who set unbreakable records. In 1960 Sirima Bandaranaike set her very first record by becoming the world's first woman Prime Minister at the age of 44. And 34 years later, in 1994 she was appointed to the same position by her own Executive President daughter Chandrika Kumaratunga setting another unusual world record where both mother and daughter held the top positions in the government. Her legendary life is undoubtedly unique, so is the way she bid adieu to her life.

In 2000, at the age of 84 after having cast her vote for the SLPF, the party to which she dedicated her entire life, she breathed her last on her way back home from the polling station in Attanagalla!

She was weak and feeble. But it was sheer mental courage that let her live until the Election Day. It was her immense love for the Party that made her hang on until she cast her vote.

"My mother knew she was 'going'. She wanted to go. She had told her doctors that she had done her duties and it is time for her to go," reminisced Sunethra Bandaranaike, the elder daughter of Sri Lanka's legendary female Head of State Sirima Bandaranaike.

"You know if you have a strong will you can overcome what your body is doing. Your mind overcomes your body and I do believe she hung on until the Election Day so that she could go and vote. And she went and voted."

And got off the stage of life, but never to be forgotten. She has long been endeared in the hearts of Sri Lankans for her grace, charm and brains alike. Many accounts have been written on her political courage, wisdom and tolerance, but nothing could be as personal and intimate as her own daughter's account.



Sunethra Bandaranaike

## Early days

Taking a stroll down memory lane, Bandaranaike recalled her early days spent with her mother at Tintagel, which was popularly known as the Rosmead Place Residence

"Early memories of my mother I would say go back to when I was aged five or six. That's the time we had moved from earlier residence in Guildford Crescent to the house we lived subsequently until very recently - Tintgel at Rosmead Place. My clear memories start at that time. Very specifically what I could say is I was very young and she had the major responsibility of bringing up the three children, especially because my father was very busy in politics."

The family as reminisced by Bandaranaike had excellent domestic staff back then who were like 'mothers to the three children.'

"So this took the load off my mother to some extent, but she had to attend to all our needs, from what we are going to eat for our different meals to our clothes and our school books. She played a very positive role as a mother. She did not leave everything to the domestics. Domestics played their part indeed - they loved us and we loved them, but my mother was always standing there to make sure everything was right," Bandaranaike's memories of her childhood are still fresh with her.

Sirima Bandaranaike's life had never been a carefree one. First as a wife of a Minister, then as a wife of a legendary Prime Minister, next as a Prime Minister, she was always on a tight schedule. She was also busy involved with Mahila Samithi work and used to go to far-away places like Anuradhapura to reach out to the needy in the events of emergencies such as floods. But amidst her busy schedule she had always found time to attend to her children's affairs, her daughter noted. It was with nostalgia that Bandaranaike recollected how her mother had always been sensitive to the subtle necessities of her children.

## New books

"Every year at the beginning of the year we had to buy new books for the new class - exercise books and text books. My mother used to go and buy sheets of brown paper and every book was covered with

the brown paper. She had to open the book and cut along the sides to make it fit properly, so every book had a cover."

And not only that, Bandaranaike went on. Her mother used to buy small stickers with little pictures of fairies and flowers and would paste them on the cover 'to make it pretty!' "So she did 'little' things like that which most mothers may not have bothered to do."

## Strict

"However I must add that she was very strict. She and my father were extremely strict, after all it was the Victorian era and Victorian people were like that," she noted with a broad smile on her face.

Bandaranaike explained how the three of them had to be properly well behaved and how they were sent to Sunday school to the Vajirarama temple, to learn Buddhism. "We went to a Roman Catholic school because my mother felt that the discipline under the nuns of the Roman Catholic school was what well brought up young ladies needed."

So she was very strict about the length of our dresses, the length of our hair and that we should not wear make-up. Many things like that she was very particular [about]," she took a trip down her memory lane as she revisited their school days which were spent under the watchful eye of her mother.

"We did not like it, we resented it. Naturally we were young, we were growing up and we wanted to be playful. Some of our classmates' parents were less strict than my parents. But my parents said that's them, this is us. So you have to abide by our rules!"

Back then none of her siblings liked the rules set down by her mother. But today, decades after her demise, Bandaranaike remembers her mother as a very strict but very deeply caring mother who attended to all their needs.

"She never raised her voice to us, never slapped us or hit us. Always talked in a reasonable rational way to us," she added.

One of the most notable features of her mother was her amazing ability to understand the individual personalities of her three children.

"If she thought that we were not doing the right thing then she would sit down and talk with us which was very good because all three of us, particularly my sister and I, were very independent people. We were not prepared to be bullied and intimidated even by our parents to doing what they wanted us to do. They had to explain to us why they want us to do that way. We may or may not have accepted that explanation in total, but at least we appreciated that we were told why they were saying we should not do it."

Bandaranaike explained how her mother handled each one of them differently, not putting all three together. "That, I thought was a very intelligent way of handling children," she said.

She recounted that except for dinner they did not get the chance to have meals together during their school days.

"We had to go to school very early in the morning. So the three of us had our breakfasts quickly and bundled off in to the vehicle, with a domestic to chaperon us and sent to school. In the old days there were two sessions in schools - a morning session, one hour break for lunch and back again till 3'



clock. We were round the corner, so we used to come home to lunch," she reminisced.

Even though her mother did not have lunch with them, but used to wait for their father, she always used to sit at the table and make sure that they ate. "Balanced meals we used to have, whether we liked certain things or not we had to eat because it was good for us. We used to have our lunch and be packed off to school and when my father came back she used to have lunch with him."

It was dinner that they had together. "May not be my father always, rarely my father, but she and the three of us had dinner together, but there again more often than not she used to wait for my father. Because we used to be given dinner very early and packed off to bed for school next day. Adults didn't eat that early, but she used to sit with us," Bandaranaike recalled.

## Elders daughter

Bandaranaike said that to be the eldest daughter of any family was 'a bit of a tough job' because you were expected to have a greater sense of responsibility than the other members of the family.

"Though it was never spelt out it was silent understanding. My mother when she was growing up had five siblings and she was expected to play the role of mother to all of them. Not that she expected me to play the role of a mother, but I was expected to set an example to the others."

She added that whether the eldest or not, being the children of a Prime Minister was difficult for all three of them alike.

"People liked us, or did not like us depending on which political party they belonged to. Those who didn't like us showed they did not like us, those who liked us went overboard liking us. After the death of my father there had to be security for us. And where we went had to be looked at before we were sent there. And we had to be very proper and correct in our behaviour. So it was difficult, certainly difficult growing up as the children of first my father the PM, then my mother the PM," she noted.

## Deeply religious

Bandaranaike recalled how her mother had strong values and how she held on firmly to them. "She was a good Buddhist and was very well brought up."

"There was a shrine room in our residence in Rosmead Place with statues of the Buddha and statues of Hindu gods and we had to go every evening at about 6 'o clock with our chief domestic, a woman who looked after us and we had to sit on a mat on the floor and say prayers. My mother would have done it a little more often, offering Dana- Gilanpasa, and then it was taken away at a certain time and left out for the birds to eat."

Revisiting fond memories of yesteryear, Bandaranaike noted that her mother was also a very active member of the Vipassana Meditation Center in Wijerama Mawatha. "She finally ended up by being the Head of the Organisation."

She was very active in the sense that she went to all the meetings, she gave her ideas and views on how to improve the place... She was very positive about the role she played in the Vipassanan Meditation Center. Outside of that she went to temple.

I must say she didn't go overboard with her Buddhism. As far

as she was concerned, she believed in the teachings of the Buddha and she did her best to follow it in all aspects of her life - as an individual, as a wife, as a mother, earlier as a daughter. Anything she did in her life, even her dealings with the domestics, she was mindful of the preaching and the gentleness of her behaviour came out of that. I have never seen her losing her temper, I have never seen her raising her voice or shouting at anybody."

Bandaranaike confessed that she was the Coordinating Secretary of her mother from the time she came back from England in 1972 to 1977, but had never seen her very angry.

"She would get a little cross and talk sternly."

Bandaranaike recalled a unique feature in her mother and the amazing ability she had to get the work done under her staff.

"She used to look at you straight in the eye and tell you whatever she had to tell you, whether it was her officials, ministers or whoever, the person got the message. No question of going on talking and talking endlessly, the point was made and behind that was a fair amount of thinking that would have gone into that. So people carried out her wishes because of the manner in which she handled it."

## Principles

The most outstanding quality in her mother according to Bandaranaike was that she had a set of principles. "She did not waver from them unless there was a very good reason to do so. She inculcated those principles in us, her three children. She talked with us. She didn't say that 'I want you to do this and no questions asked.' Never. She always explained to us. Because as I said she understood her children, particularly the two daughters. She realised that we were intelligent and we had inquiring minds, we were independent and we needed her to explain why she took that on board and at all times she stood with us."

Bandaranaike was not hesitant to share her personal experience to show how her mother stood firm with her always.

"I married twice, to people she did not like. But when she realised that the daughter had made up her mind she stood with me. She gave me away in marriage both times, had little receptions and she got to know her sons-in-law and I think she began to like them."

But both marriages broke up and she stood with me solidly over both marriage break ups."

Walking down memory lane, Bandaranaike paused to recount the words of her mother.

"She did tell me 'look Sunethra you are not an easy person to live with.' She did not take my side blindly. I know you are a difficult person. You are stubborn and independent, but if that is your decision I will stand by you, my mother said"

And her mother never tried to "push her into returning to the marriage."

"She never said you must get married it was our choice, she never said you must have children, it was my choice not to have children, and when the marriages broke up she stood by me, the most civilised decent way she stood by me," Bandaranaike was overwhelmed with gratitude and her words were so heavy.

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