

# S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike: the silver bell of Asia



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The fourth Prime Minister of Ceylon, Solomon West Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike was often referred to by his initials 'SWRD.' Bandaranaike was well known as "The Silver Bell of Asia," due to his brilliant oratory, literary and writing skills. He served as the Prime Minister of Ceylon from 1956 until he succumbed to an assassin's bullet in 1959.

A highly respected politician, Bandaranaike was the founder of the leftwing and Sinhalese nationalist, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). His tenure as the Prime Minister saw some of the first left wing reforms instituted in Ceylon. He inherited the family seat of "Horagolla Walauwa" in Attanagalla and it became the home constituency for the Bandaranaike family.

Bandaranaike married Sirima Ratwatte at Balangoda on October 3, 1940, and a week later they had their home coming in Veyangoda. He was 41, she was 34. Their marriage dubbed, "the wedding of the century," was of great sociological and political importance. She was recognised as a pleasant, good-natured and practical spouse.

After the marriage, they settled down at 'Wentworth' in Guilford Crescent, Colombo 7. After six years, they moved to 'Tintagel' at Rosmead Place, Colombo 7. Their first two children, Sunethra and Chandrika were born at 'Wentworth' whilst son Anura was born at 'Tintagel.' The daughters were educated at St. Bridget's Convent, Colombo 7 and the son at Royal College, Colombo 7. The children were just 16, 14 and 10 when their father was assassinated.

## Birth and education

Bandaranaike was born on January 8, 1899 in Colombo, to the wealthy Sinhalese Anglican Christian Bandaranaike family, which had become one of the elite native families under the British administration. His parents were Sir Solomon Dias Bandaranaike and Daisy Edline Obeyesekere. Sir Solomon named his only son, after Sir Joseph West Ridgeway, the then Governor of Ceylon. Bandaranaike had two sisters, Alexandra Camelia and Anna Florentina.

Sir Solomon engaged A. C. Radford of Cambridge University as full-time private tutor to his son. He was provided accommodation at the ancestral residence of Bandaranaike's at Horagolla, where he remained for four years till his protegee turned fifteen. Radford introduced him to Western classics at an early age.

Bandaranaike was educated at S. Thomas's College, Colombo as a boarder during the wardenship of Rev. Arthur William Stone. The tutoring by Radford had provided young Bandaranaike with an edge over his classmates. Not surprisingly, a few years later when he sat for the Cambridge Senior he performed exceptionally well, obtaining distinctions in English and Latin.

Bandaranaike entered Christ Church, Oxford and read philosophy, politics and economics. Those were the days of sailing by ship. Bandaranaike reminisced on getting a berth in "a Bibby boat" and at long last launching on his great adventure. He also vividly described his train journey to Oxford. He was an undergraduate from 1921 to 1924, and had experienced disappointments and frustrations during the first year.

At Oxford, he had an active political life and won election as Junior Treasurer at the Oxford Union, prior to being elected as President of the 'Majlis' Society of Oxford. He remembered the dazzling of the union by his oratory brilliance. He graduated with honours and became a barrister and was called to the bar at the Inner Temple. On his return to Ceylon in 1925, he took oaths as an Advocate of the Supreme Court of Ceylon.

To keep his literary interests alive in Ceylon, Bandaranaike co-edited 'The Island Review.' His short story, 'The Kandy Perahera,' was carried in September 1926 issue of the journal. He enjoyed reading classics and found equal pleasure with horror stories and detective novels.

Bandaranaike's 'Memories of Oxford' is a collection of articles he wrote to a Colombo journal, 'The Ceylon Causerie' within a decade of his Oxford days. These articles written in an elegant style, encapsulates his days at the prestigious university. His writ-

**SOMARAMA THERA TURNED AROUND AND FOLLOWED BANDARANAIKE, SHOOTING AT HIM WILDLY. BANDARANAIKE WAS RUSHED TO THE COLOMBO GENERAL HOSPITAL. AT 1100, THE GOVERNOR GENERAL, SIR OLIVER GOONETILLEKE, DECLARED A STATE OF EMERGENCY. BANDARANAIKE UNDERWENT FIVE HOURS OF SURGERY, REGAINED CONSCIOUSNESS, REQUESTED CLEMENCY TOWARDS THE GUNMAN, AND DICTATED A MESSAGE TO THE NATION. LATER, HE DIED TWENTY-TWO HOURS AFTER HE WAS SHOT**

ings show he had enormous creative skills to reach great literary heights.

In 1951, Bandaranaike through 'The Mystery of the Missing Candidate,' a story serialised in the 'Sunday Times of Ceylon,' presented a glimpse of the life of a candidate during a Ceylon election. He had explained how politics can change an honourable person to trim his sails to every wind and make him lead a Jekyll and Hyde life.

## Early political career

After his return from Britain in 1925, he entered local politics by joining the Ceylon National Congress (CNC). He got elected as the Chairman of the Nittambuwa Village Committee. He became Secretary of the CNC in 1926, and within months elected to the Colombo Municipal Council from the Maradana Ward.

The implementation of the Donoughmore Constitution resulted in the establishment of the State Council of Ceylon and its members were elected through universal suffrage. Bandaranaike was elected unopposed from Veyangoda in 1931 to the first State Council as well as the executive committee for local administration.

In 1936, he was re-elected from Veyangoda to the second State Council. At its first meeting, he was elected as the Minister of Local Administration and was the Chairman of the executive committee on local administration, and a member of the Board of Ministers.

In order to promote Sinhalese culture and community interests, Bandaranaike founded the Sinhala Maha Sabha (SMS) in 1936 on Sinhalese nationalist lines. He introduced the Free Lanka Bill in the State Council in 1945.

With Ceylon heading for self-rule under dominion status, D. S. Senanayake invited Bandaranaike to combine his SMS with other smaller parties into the United National Party (UNP) which Senanayake was forming to contest for the 1947 election under the new Soulbury Constitution. Bandaranaike accepted the invitation, formally dissolving the SMS and merging with the UNP.

He contested for the House of Representatives in the 1947 election from the UNP from Attanagalla, winning with a good majority. In September 1947, Senanayake appointed him to his Cabinet as the first Minister of Health and Local Government of Ceylon and elected as the Leader of the House. Effectively this made Bandaranaike the most senior member of the Cabinet.

In fact, Senanayake had Sir Oliver Goonetilleke discuss with Bandaranaike, the draft agreements for independence; which Bandaranaike received with mixed feelings. However,



The Prime Minister and Madam Bandaranaike



Family Portrait of S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike

he did not object to the agreements signed with the British Government. As Leader of the House, he delivered the address of thanks at the ceremonial opening of Parliament on February 4, 1948.

During the next few years, he supported legislation proposed by the Government as the Leader of the House. This included the Ceylon Citizenship Act No. 18 of 1948 and the Indian and Pakistani Residents (Citizenship) Act No.3 of 1949. He initiated several projects as the Minister of Health, including the expansion of hospitals and uplifting ayurveda medicine.

He attended the Third World Health Assembly in Geneva in May 1950 as the Chief Delegate of Ceylon. However, he found himself at odds with the Senanayake administration on policy. By 1951, it was apparent that Senanayake did not intend to make an early retirement to pave way for Bandaranaike to succeed him as the Prime Minister.

## Sri Lanka Freedom Party

In July 1951, Bandaranaike quit



Prime Minister with his children, Sunethra, Chandrika and Anura

his Government posts and crossed over to the Opposition. Then, he dissolved the SMS and formed the SLFP, on September 2, 1951 at Town Hall. A few months later, D. S. Senanayake fell off his horse and died on March 21, 1952. His son Dudley Senanayake, was appointed as the Prime Minister on March 26, 1952.

Dudley Senanayake called a General Election in 1952, which the UNP won gaining 54 seats. Bandaranaike contested from the SLFP was re-elected from Attanagalla. With the nine seats of SLFP and nine seats of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), Bandaranaike was elected Leader of the Opposition. The leftist agitated 'Hartal 1953' affected Dudley Senanayake and Sir John Kotelawala succeeded him as the Prime Minister.

Between 1952 and 1956, Bandaranaike spent much of his time consolidating the SLFP. It was faced with lack of funds and support from media. However, it drew much support from the rural areas that were marginalised or neglected by the incumbent UNP Government.

On the issue of language, the party originally espoused the use of both Sinhala and Tamil as national languages, but in the mid-1950s it adopted a 'Swabasha' policy. The party asserted itself as a champion of the Buddhist religion and thus customarily relied upon the socially and politically influential Buddhist clergy to carry its message to rural Sinhalese.

Bandaranaike continued his policies on language, Buddhism, and Ayurvedic medicine. As such he said that the basis of the party would be the 'Pancha Maha Balavegaya' (Five Great Forces) which consisted of the native doctors, clergy, teachers, farmers and workers.

## Prime Minister of Ceylon

In 1956, Bandaranaike formed the Mahajan Eksath Peramuna (MEP), a four-party coalition with a no-contest pact with the LSSP and the Communist Party. Although he inherited his father's vast estate at the

death of Sir Solomon, he was short on funds for the election. Bandaranaike mortgaged his house 'Tintagel' to the Bank of Ceylon and obtained Rs. 200,000 for his campaign.

Contesting on the lines of Sinhalese nationalism and socialism, he was able to achieve a landslide victory over the UNP, gaining a two-thirds majority in the General Elections in 1956. Bandaranaike formed his Government, becoming the fourth Prime Minister. His Cabinet consisted of a collection of senior members of the MEP and several independents.

He enacted the Official Language Act (No. 33 of 1956), commonly referred to as the Sinhala Only Act that replaced Sinhala as the sole official language of Ceylon. He suspended all British and native honours. He took a neutralist stance in foreign policy. He established diplomatic relations with China and the Soviet Union.

He strengthened bilateral ties with India, China and Japan. The Prime Minister of China, Zhou Enlai visited Ceylon on January 31, 1957. The Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, accompanied by daughter Indira, arrived on May 17, 1957. They were followed by the Prime Minister of Japan, Nobusuke Kishi on May 30, 1957.

Bandaranaike requested the removal of all British service personnel from the island. Accordingly, the naval base in Trincomalee, airfields in China Bay and Katunayake as well as all British barracks were taken over in November 1957.

On July 26, 1957, he signed the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact intending to solve the communal disagreements but was forced to withdraw in May 1958. He enacted the 'Suspension of the Capital Punishment Act No 20 of 1958,' suspending the death penalty. The 1958 riots, leading to the deaths of many Tamil citizens was a major setback to Bandaranaike. As disputes over language stemming from the Official Language Act continued, he introduced

the Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Act No. 28 of 1958 to mitigate the effects.

He reformed labour laws and increased wages, established the Employees' Provident Fund and declared May Day a public holiday. The 'Paddy Lands Act of 1958' was introduced by him to protect peasant farmers. In 1958, he formed the Ceylon Transport Board and the Colombo Port Cargo Operations.

In early 1959, a Cabinet crisis resulted with the resignation of two leftists, however, the Bandaranaike Government continued. He extended a typical oriental welcome to the President of India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad at the airport on June 6, 1959.

In 1959, trade unions at Colombo Harbour went on strike crippling imports and exports. Bandaranaike requested the Police to intervene but the order was declined by the Inspector General of Police stating that it was unlawful. His Government was burned with economic problems as well.

## Assassination

On September 25, 1959, Prime Minister Bandaranaike was meeting the public at his private residence, 'Tintagel,' (65 Rosmead Place) when he was shot in the chest, abdomen and hand by Talduwe Somarama Thera. He died the following day at Merchant's Ward of the Colombo General Hospital. He was the country's first national leader to be assassinated.

Bandaranaike was seated on the front verandah. There were about 20 in the veranda and another 40 outside. Around 0900, Somarama Thera, took a seat in a chair and kept a file on a stool next to his chair. When he was called, he stood up and approached the Prime Minister, who in turn came forward, showing respect to the bhikkhu. The Prime Minister listened to him and responded positively for his request on certain improvements at the Ayurveda College.

Around 0945, Somarama Thera sat down again, and fumbled with the file, he had left on the stool, withdrew a .45 Webley Mark VI revolver from his robes and fired at point-blank range. Bandaranaike made a loud sound and fell down, but got up and tried to stagger back inside the house.

Somarama Thera turned around and followed Bandaranaike, shooting at him wildly. Bandaranaike was rushed to the Colombo General Hospital. At 1100, the Governor General, Sir Oliver Goonetilleke, declared a state of emergency. Bandaranaike underwent five hours of surgery, regained consciousness, requested clemency towards the gunman, and dictated a message to the nation. Later, he died twenty-two hours after he was shot.

The Prime Minister had been assigned a Police Sub Inspector for his protection. However, Bandaranaike had sent him back on the grounds that he should attend to more important duties, and on September 25, only one-armed police constable was on duty at 'Tintagel.'

The trial concluded on May 12, 1961 and the jury found Buddharakkitha Thera, H. P. Jayewardena and Somarama Thera guilty by a unanimous verdict and pronounced on all of them the death sentence. Somarama Thera, 48 was hanged at the Welikada Prison on July 6, 1962. Buddharakkitha Thera died, aged 46 in 1967, having served 7 1/2 years. Jayewardena served 17 1/2 years and was released in 1977.

## Legacy

Slain Prime Minister Bandaranaike's body was taken to the Parliament building at Galle Face to lie in State for two days. Thousands came, day and night, to pay their respects. On the third day, the remains were moved to Horagolla, where the funeral took place amid a sea of mourners. Bandaranaike was interned in a specially built mausoleum known as the "Horagolla Samadhi."

The Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall gifted in his memory by China in 1970, houses the S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike Museum. The murder weapon, fatal bullet and the clothing worn by him on that fateful day are on display at the National Museum of Colombo.

The Bandaranaike International Airport, the first international airport in Ceylon was named in his honour in 1970. A bronze statue of Bandaranaike, gifted by the Soviet Union, was unveiled at the Galle Face Green in 1976.