

# Committed to a Life of Social Change for Sri Lankans

Sunday 15 November 2020, by [RANAWANA Kshama](#), [WIJESINGHE Hemamali](#) (Date first published: 3 April 2020).

**She was born to a life of privilege and was planning a career as a medical doctor. However, she gave it all up in pursuit of a dream of changing this country to one where all citizens would enjoy equal status.**

Hemamali Wijesinghe was just 18 in 1971, and she was amongst the many young people who passionately wanted to see a social change in Sri Lanka.

Hemamali's parents were philanthropists and her older siblings felt very strongly that equality for all will be possible only through a drastic change in the decision making bodies, and the political, economic and class structure of the country. Her's was a home where deep and interesting discussion on the arts and politics took place.

Hemamali lost two older brothers in the 1971 insurrection while a younger served a jail term. She herself was injured but survived that ordeal. Despite all that she never gave up on her commitment to facilitate a social change in the country, and continues in her mission, mostly through her work educating women of their rights.

In several conversations with *Counterpoint*, Hemamali recalled her involvement with the 1971 insurrection and the direction her life has taken since.

**Q. Tell me about your younger days and the atmosphere you grew up in.**

**A.** I was born in Bosella in my mother's hometown. My father was from Colombo. They both owned land and other assets and my father, a proprietor planter was the only local amongst foreign land owners in the Kegalle area. However, he was more interested in supporting the arts and culture, instead of his lands and shops. In time he lost most of that. My parents were keen that we become fluent in English. I was boarded at the Kegalle Balika Maha Vidyalaya, but was unhappy to be away from home. Therefore, my parents gave up my mother's lands in Bosella and moved to Kegalle. We lived in a house that my father had leased to own, but when the time came for him to get ownership, we were all immersed in the revolution and had no interest in pursuing ownership of the land.

My brothers studied at St. Mary's, Kegalle. My second oldest brother Sarath was extremely talented and was able to engage anyone, whether educated or not in his discussions. He gained entrance to the University of Peradeniya and his tutors persuaded him to take up a special degree in political economics. He believed that it would give him the education to do something special and useful for the upliftment of the people and to work amongst them.

Even while in school, I felt strongly about the unequal distribution of wealth and status.

But, it was through my brother Sarath, a strong proponent of social change that I found direction for my life. All of my siblings excelled in their studies and my teachers had persuaded me to study bio-

science and become a doctor. I was also very good at dancing and singing, and was very involved in the arts scene in school. I had just begun my studies in the Advanced level class when the insurrection took place.

As a family we enjoyed music and our home was full of like-minded people dropping in for discussions. There was a huge shelf full of books in both English and Sinhala literature. But, after my eldest brother married and left home, Sarath filled those shelves with books on politics, Marxist theory, social change etc.

### **Q. How did you get involved in the revolution?**

**A.** As I mentioned, Sarath and his passion for social change influenced me. He was a member of the Communist Party (Shanmugathasan wing). We were also inspired by the various revolutions that were taking place around the world; in Vietnam, Cuba etc. That was in the late 1960's. There was no racist politics; my brother and the Shanmugathasan group even joined their comrades in Jaffna for protests.

Sarath mixed freely with anyone, irrespective of their status in society. The Chief Librarian James Seneviratne, was one of the first to join the group. Sarath was unhappy about the way society was divided on caste, wealth and class lines. He and Seneviratne started a Daham Pasal at the temple with the hope of changing the way people thought and acted. For instance, Sarath noticed that the so called aristocracy would not partake of the 'dane' that others had. He felt keenly about the manner in which people of lower positions were treated and he wanted justice for all. He used to even debate with the temple priests, but soon realised that religion only helped perpetuate governments and those systems.

So he began talking to the youth in the area and also had similar discussions with his university colleagues on the benefits of a social revolution. He had the knack of engaging even the parents of his friends in his discussions and introducing the changes that society must adopt. He was a charismatic and popular speaker and was able to motivate anyone who listened to him. He was once described as an open book because he did not hide anything. At home, we too participated in the discussions.

Even though I was still in school, I began organising women's groups, just like my brother, who had created a large network of mostly youth who wanted to revolutionise the way Sri Lanka was run. I would even talk to people at a bus stand and convince them of the need for social change. With time, more girls, even university students, joined me and we were able to get many more to subscribe to the cause.

By the late 1960's the student movement had spread widely across the country. There were other similar groups, but Sarath had the widest following.

Around this time, Rohana Wijeweera got in touch with him. He wanted Sarath to join him. At first my brother was not keen, but gradually other leaders in my brother's group felt they should join Wijeweera, and so my brother's group merged with them in August 1969. Wijeweera was keen to be the undisputed leader of the movement, even though it was my brother who had a network across the country.

My brother believed that there might, someday, be the need for an armed revolt, but he said that that should happen only if the people wanted it. Even though we were influenced by revolutions that had taken place in other countries, we firmly believed that we must chart a course that is best for Sri Lanka.

The movement had no official name. We were commonly known as 'Che Gueverra.' It was later that it was named Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna.

In 1969 November, Wijeweera was arrested and imprisoned in Jaffna and we put out posters calling for his release and he became known as the leader of the movement.

Our home was a hive of activity, with members of the movement even staying with us. My father could not hear very well at the time, so he was not quite aware of what was going on, but my mother was totally against it at the start; she warned that we would be hitting our heads against a wall. She was afraid for Sarath and for us. She read my brothers books and argued with him. Finally, because we were all supportive of Sarath, she gave in and fully supported us.

**Q. What was your role in the insurrection?**

**A.** My brother was in a special degree programme, but gave that all up for the cause. Therefore, I too decided to put my studies on hold and travelled around the country organising the women. I was confident we would be able to bring about the social change we desired, and then I could go back to my studies. We had the support of many, even though they were not actively involved in the movement.

Around February 1971 we had a meeting where we were advised to train in first aid and how to give a tetanus shot etc. Soon after that there was an explosion in Nelundeniya. At that time we all moved out of our homes. I went to live in Balapaththewa. There were 128 members there. On April 5<sup>th</sup> our group launched the attack and the Kegalle District came under our control, the government had only one square meter in their charge. We held it for one month, and moved about freely, until the security forces came in search of us.

Then we got word to retreat, and also that a group from the South would be joining us. I was always in charge of the First Aid box. We would walk during the night. The security forces were searching for us, and they even used helicopters.

We waited near the Balapaththawe temple for the other team till midnight, but they were unable to join us. Sarath went to Bulathkohupitiya and was killed there. Then my other brother Justin took his place and they were trying to join up with us. But they were unable to join us. They had lost their way, and finally got killed. Justin too had been selected to enter Peradeniya University. Only about 16 of the 100 odd escaped.

As we neared the Temple at Mampe that first night, we saw a steep rock. We ran up the rock, I could see foliage below and jumped and the other girls followed. The monk at the temple had told the security forces that no one could survive that jump. But we did, and the rest of the group found us there. A young monk at the temple gave up his robes and joined us.

We walked through the jungles, hiding from the security forces and occasionally returning fire. Sujata Handagama got shot and she died in our arms. We wrapped her in some sheets and hid her body. Another of our comrades, Karuna was captured and jailed. She had been raped.

We walked through the jungles. When we got to Madahapola in the Kurunegala District there was a big security contingent, and we had to move carefully. We were walking along the canals and the people threw fruits etc. to us as we passed them. The residents of Madahapola gave us a good meal and looked after us. By this time there were about 60 of us. Some had been caught or killed. Then we moved towards Pallekella and we stayed there. Gradually other members joined us, and there were nearly 200. One day some of the group went into Melsiripura and commandeered a lorry with

food stuff and brought it to camp. The next day the forces followed the route of the lorry and arrived at our camp and we lost a large number of comrades.

Those who escaped that raid, decided to leave the area, but I had to remain to tend to a girl who had been sick with malaria and another who had been shot. About 15 remained. I have never felt as sad as I felt that that day watching all the people who were closest to me leave. I wished I could die.

In August, a group that had gone to Wilpattu came back for us and we moved to Wilpattu with them. While there we had a conference, with about 70 comrades joining in, and we reviewed the course of action the movement had taken. We came up with 21 questions which we sent to Wijeweera who was in prison, but he did not respond. Instead we were seen as being against the movement and removed from the JVP.

We lived on one meal a day, and looked for places close to water sources to put up camp, even so, each of us was allowed only a bottle capful of water. We came under attack here too. Each of us had an assigned utensil, a pot, a pan etc. to carry each time we moved.

**Q. You mentioned that you were injured, how did you survive those injuries?**

**A.** On December 5 that year, our camp was raided by security forces. We were in Anamaduwa in the Puttlam District, on the Wilpattu border. I was sick and Merlin Dharmawardena (Dharma Akka) was cradling my head on her lap, so I was a bit late fleeing the attackers. I was known as Juliet Nangi, and I could hear the others shouting to me to run. But I was shot; one just missed my spine, the other went through my left leg, just below the knee. The third bullet hit my right shin, most of the muscles in the area were injured and a part of the bone was sticking out. Dharma Akka who was from Kirindiwala and Chuti Nangi (Swarnalatha Perera, from the Anuradhapura convent) and Ananda Gamage from Akuressa were killed there. When it was safe to move I started hobbling along, but could not find the others except one comrade.

After we had walked for a while, he climbed a tree to check the area and saw a temple. He hid me under a bush about half a kilometre from the temple and went to get some food. There were security force members in the shed where Bana is preached, so the priest had chased him away. But later the priest had brought some food. He had later helped to make me comfortable and had bathed my wounds and dressed them in a concoction made of ground rice, and bandaged them with strips torn off a robe. I may have passed out then, because when I woke up, he was gone, but he had left water and a pound of bread near me. He had gone to inform the Chief Priest who was away from the Temple at the time. But the bread was all soggy and there was a pool of water where I lay as it had been raining.

I could hear the security forces travelling close to where I was, calling out for us to surrender.

A few days later, I heard someone cutting branches close by and then faintly saw a yellow robe. My eyes were all blurred, I could hardly see. The chief priest had returned along with the young monk and believing that I must be dead, had come to bury me. No sooner I saw the chief priest, I started to tell him about our cause and he told me that I should surrender. I refused and he respected that. He would have thought I was younger than my age and decided to let me stay. I had seen so much death; so many valuable lives lost, and felt that it was alright if I died.

Three months later one of my comrades came, and I returned to the group.

The injury to my right leg never healed and part of the bone was sticking out.

As you know the government of the day was made up of left leaning political parties. Some members

of those parties felt strongly about the way we were being treated by the government and had decided to help us. Dr. Kumari Jayawardena, Kuru (Gamini) Gunawardena and Lalitha, Dr. Jayasinghe and Dr. Carlo Fonseka were amongst them.

About five to six months after I was injured they contacted us, and I was brought to Colombo. Dr. Carlo Fonseka was a university professor and his students were working at the hospital. I was kept at Kuru Gunawardene's home while they inspected my injury and discussed the best course of action. They decided that the piece of bone could be cut off, and I was taken to the accident ward in Dr. Jayawardena's car. Dr. Fonseka took over and pushed me in the trolley to the accident ward, and with help from his juniors, the protruding bone was cut off. I was sent home and they arranged for a nurse to visit me and tend to the wound till I was better.

Until 1975 I continued to live in the jungles, though occasionally I would come to the city. We roamed the length and breadth of the jungles, wrote songs and even novels. There were times I stayed with farmer families helping them with their chores, but I never stayed for long in the same place. I heard that both of my brothers had been killed, Sarath had died on April 8<sup>th</sup>. I saw my parents just once during this time, in 1973.

While in the jungles we continued to be in touch with our comrades, checking on them and even discussed the political situation at the time.

This was a time for self-reflection for all of us. We reviewed our actions and prepared a critique of the movement. We realised that our revolution was sniffed out so quickly because the wrong leadership took hold of the movement. The intellectual discussions had been wiped out and members given incorrect information; unlike today, there was no way members could verify information they received. Our plan was to give voice to a public struggle that could be led by anyone, any day. But I strongly feel that we became the pawns of someone else's greed.

The aim of the '71 revolution was to establish an equal society. But we could see that other members were moving away from that and embracing racist policies. They wanted to capture power, while we wanted a social change. We were critical of the direction the party was taking, moving away from the original ideology of which we were the architects.

**Q. After the proscription on the JVP was lifted what did you do?**

**A.** After the proscription of the JVP was lifted in 1976 we were able to move around freely. My eldest brother kept nagging me to complete my studies. But I was not interested; instead I continued my involvement with the student movements. My brother Sarath had done so much at Peradeniya to organise the students. The JVP formed the inter-university students' federation (ISF), which took on a violent outlook and embraced the ugly ragging of freshers'. Sarath had been against such behaviour. I decided to help other student unions to come together and be a force against the ISF.

We supported and gave the independent student unions direction.

I then went abroad for work, but returned after two years, because I wanted to contribute and facilitate the social revolution my brother had dreamed of.

In 1981, Dr. Kumari Jayawardena invited me to a meeting where I first heard about the international women's charter. She had launched Voice of Women a publication dealing with women's rights. While it helped raise awareness amongst women, I realised there was a need to spread this information across the country and not limit it discussions and events in Colombo. There were some other women in Kurunegala who were organising themselves, and I joined them and we started the

Progressive Womens' Front (PWF). Some of my '71 male comrades too were already in Kurunegala working with the peasants and helping to uplift their lot on issues such as farmer rights, peace etc.

In fact, in the rural area the PWF formed women's committees and focussed on addressing the needs unique to each area and identifying development opportunities. We introduced bank savings books and the co-operative system. We introduced the concept of pre-schools, arranging for the children to be looked after in one house, so women could also pursue some self-employment options. We trained them ourselves, or found trainers to teach women machine embroidery, weaving etc.

We received a lot of support from Deva Sarana a Christian Institute, and even financial assistance for some of our programmes.

We also established connections with Rajini Tiranagama and her groups in the North and with Prof. Chitra Maunaguru and her groups in the East.

During the second revolt of the JVP in the late '80's they were hunting us, the '71 breakaway group and we found refuge at Deva Sarana. Our group was gaining ground as a movement that was focussing on peasant rights and peace etc. while the JVP was taking on a more nationalistic and violent ideology.

I divided my time between Kurunegala and other areas and Colombo and helped start groups such as the Movement for the Defence of Democratic Rights (MDDR) and the People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFREL)etc.

The feminist movement was gathering momentum. Like minded women, both Sinhalese and Tamils gathered in Hendala for a two-day workshop. One of the activities was to write lyrics to popular tunes such as " Ane Mehema Asawak" . We chose to draw attention to sexual harassment etc. through those lyrics. These were published in a Sinhala language newspaper, and as usual there was a barrage of attacks, accusing us of bringing European ideas to the country, and that we were a bunch of women who had no idea of the real problems of the people.

We also launched 'Kantha Maga" (Women's Voice) and Athwela a monthly bulletin. Dr. Jayawardena thought I was better at politics and wanted me to contest, but I was not interested.

We also formed the Women's Action Committee(WAC) which comprised of members such as Bernadine Silva, Ana Subramaniam, Anathai Abeysekera Pulsara Liyanage, Sunila Abeysekera, Nimalka Fernando, Dr. Jayawardena, Kumudini Samuel and Kumudini Rosa. The women in the committee represented various groups such as the Women's Centre Negombo, the Free Trade Zone, and Centre for Society and Religion etc.

During the late '80's, when both the JVP and the government were unleashing terror, and most victims were men, rendering them unable to fight back, WAC along with the progressive women's groups across political parties banded together. That was how the Mother's and Daughters of Lanka was born and a large group of women launched a Satyagraha against the terror, at the Vihara Maha Devi Park.

Women's International Day was celebrated in Sri Lanka for the first time in 1983. In 1984, we brought a large number of women to Colombo to mark the day, and the police arrested some of us as they did not know why we had congregated in Colombo. One of the arrested was new to all of this, and had come because I had invited her, so I talked the police into letting her go and arresting me in her place. They thought I was the leader, because I was doing all the talking. Dr. Jayawardena and Bernadine were able to get us released.

The Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation had a two-hour daily programme for women, after lunch. I conducted a review of the programme and found that it only discussed cooking tips, fashion etc. and nothing about issues concerning women. These findings were presented to SLBC to persuade them to introduce women's issues to the programme.

We also looked at how media portrayed women. Lina Irene Haputanthri and Padmini Palliyaguru, who were with the JVP were persuaded to join us.

Seetha Ranjani who was with the Rajarata Service (SLBC) also became part of our women's group and we held a 'Kavi Hamuwa' (poetry circle) through which we could raise awareness on women's concerns. The Women and Media Collective was born out of this initiative.

Throughout all of this, I also went to India to study film and studied Social Science and Mass Communication at the Open University. I also studied for an MA in Women's Studies at the University of Colombo and took a residential certificate in psycho-social theory at the University of Peradeniya.

I was also involved in the "Sudu Nelum" movement and worked at the Women's Education & Research Centre where I started a magazine named 'Nivedini'.

In 1984 I married another comrade who was a member of the '71 group and we have two sons. As we are both committed to bringing about social change, even after marriage we continued with our work, often travelling around the country, with the children.

### **Q. What of the '71 breakaway group now?**

**A.** As mentioned earlier we broke away because we were not happy with the direction the JVP was taking. However, we have always supported it, when it took correct decisions.

In 2019, many of the democratic left groups, including the '71 group came together and agreed to support the JVP because the new leaders of that group have moved away from the violent policies it had followed previously. That was how the National People's Power came to be formed and we backed the candidacy of JVP leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake for the Presidency.

We formed the Progressive Women's Collective as part of the alliance and I am a member of the action committee.

Each year on April 5<sup>th</sup>, the '71 group meets to mark the anniversary of the first revolution. This will be the first year that we will not be able to meet as COVID-19 has put Colombo under curfew.'

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