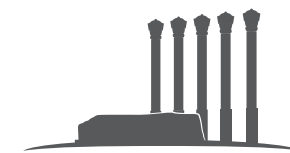




SIRIMAVO

STEERING THE DESTINY OF A NATION

Sarath Perera | Nalaka Gunawardene | Wijayabandara



BANDARANAIKE MUSEUM COMMITTEE - SRI LANKA





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This book is not meant to be a political biography of the late Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike, nor is it a chronicle of the political events that she was centrally involved in for decades. The compilers had only one aim: to gather, curate and share a pictorial record of the illustrious life of Mrs Bandaranaike, the person, wife and mother, national leader and internationally recognised stateswoman. In that process, every effort has been made to accurately annotate photographs, and any oversights or mis-identifications are inadvertent on the part of the compilers.

When referring to the country, the name 'Ceylon' is used in references up to May 1972, when the adoption of the new Constitution changed the country's official name to 'Sri Lanka'.

Mrs Bandaranaike's birth name was Sirima Ratwatte. She was widely referred to as 'Sirimavo' after she became a public figure (the suffix "vo" denotes respect). This book refers to her as Sirimavo throughout for the sake of consistency, except when referring to her at birth or in any formal documents that bear her legal name.

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Photographs form the core of this book are produced on a non-commercial basis as an educational resource and historical reference. They were originally taken several decades earlier - from the 1920s to the year 2000 - and have been sourced primarily from the photographic collections with the Bandaranaike Museum, Bandaranaike family and the National Archives. A few specific photographs were found in collections maintained at the Department of Government Information, United Nations archives at the UN Headquarters, and Sarvodaya. In most cases, names of photographers were not available and, therefore, it has not been possible to assign individual photo credits.

We acknowledge with much gratitude all the photographers whose work has helped to capture key moments in the lives of late Mr S W R D Bandaranaike and Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike.





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Introduction

Though I was born in the pre-independence era, I consider myself a part of the generation called *Panas Haye Daruwo* (Children of '56) who evolved with the social and political revolution ushered by the late Prime Minister Mr S W R D Bandaranaike in 1956.

If a person's adolescence is the time for developing knowledge and skills, managing emotions and relationships, and acquiring attributes and abilities that are important for the future, I was fortunate that my adolescent years coincided with the ruling periods of Mr Bandaranaike and Mrs Bandaranaike, which times were abundant with legislative changes catering to a framework of nationalistic revival.

That was the 'cast iron mould' in which the thinking and behavior of the emerging generation of youth was fashioned in the 1960s. I remember being overwhelmed with joy when voters elected Mrs Bandaranaike as the world's first woman Prime Minister.

When we try to identify a leader in our country's post-independence period who demonstrated ideal leadership qualities, Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike's name would rank very high.

Though her entry to politics was unplanned, the maturity she displayed as a stateswoman was remarkable by any measure which deserves to be analysed academically. She combined beauty, brains, patience, a strong willpower and a genuine desire to enable Sri Lanka to stand on its own feet in the community of nations.

Mrs Bandaranaike's exuberant grace and charisma enabled her to engage many world leaders at a personal level while her governments' principled, non-aligned foreign policy won admiration and support for Sri Lanka all over the world. In times of crisis – such as insurgencies, food shortages and oil price hikes – her appeals for help elicited rapid and tangible assistance. Friendly countries in the West and East were lining up to support Sri Lanka's infrastructure and industrial development.

There was a time when the terms 'Sri Lanka' and 'Mrs Bandaranaike' were synonymous in the world. A Sri Lankan introducing herself in a foreign country would often hear the response: 'Ah, the Bandaranaike country!' No other Sri Lankan leader has achieved such high name recognition internationally.

In national affairs and governance, she pursued economic and political reforms amidst many formidable challenges. Some of her reforms were bold and their impacts, far-reaching.

It is a tragedy of our times that Mrs Bandaranaike -- who transformed Sri Lanka to an independent Republic, voluntarily gave up ancestral lands to implement her Government's land reforms, saved the lives of thousands of misguided youth after the 1971 insurrection, and worked strenuously towards creating a self-sustained economy -- was mercilessly harassed and victimised after she lost the elections in 1977. She was expelled from Parliament and her civic rights taken away, forcing the lady to spend years on the political periphery.

Yet, when she returned to Parliament in 1989 and later served a third term as Prime Minister, she lived up to her own words in the speech made on 16 October 1980, the day she was driven out of Parliament: "I shall take my leave with malice to none and with sympathy for all who have been forced to deal with me harshly though their conscience spoke to them otherwise..."

Mrs Bandaranaike's elegance and firmness in decision making captivated the hearts and minds

of voters who kept on electing her to Parliament and high office as a trustworthy leader. To me and many others of my generation, she was the Mother of the Nation because her actions resonated with what we wished for our country. Hence, we identified ourselves as *Methiniyage Daruwo* (Children of Madam). *Methiniya* is how Mrs Bandaranaike was popularly known and that is how she is still remembered in Sri Lanka.

A few years ago, when I was associated with the Bandaranaike Center for International Studies (BCIS), I had the opportunity to study in some detail the domestic and foreign policy legacy of Mrs Bandaranaike. We showcased some of that legacy during her birth centenary celebrations in 2016 with the participation of her daughters, Ms Sunethra Bandaranaike and President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga.

Their guidance for producing this book is acknowledged with much gratitude. I owe special thanks to Ms Sunethra Bandaranaike who, as the Secretary of the Bandaranaike Museum Committee, kept track of this project's progress and provided valuable guidance.

By going through the pages of this book, readers can certainly gain valuable insights to the decisive role played by Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike both nationally and internationally.

Ranjith Cabral, PhD
Colombo, Sri Lanka.
31 October 2021









Foreword by Desamanya M D D Pieris

This book is the outcome of endeavours by Dr Ranjith Cabral and a dedicated team. It is an attempt to produce a photographic chronicle of the life of Madam Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who blazed a trail in 1960 by being elected as the world's first woman Prime Minister.

In compiling this book, the editors faced several challenges. The first was the collection of scattered material from many places. The second involved the difficulty of selection, given the richness of material available. Also challenging was the identification of certain photographs which merited inclusion but whose details were missing.

The result, nevertheless, is a strikingly visual record of the life of an extraordinary person and a family of unique achievements.

One cannot think of a family where both the husband and wife were elected Prime Ministers of their country; one of their daughters later elected the Executive President of the country; and the son becoming the Leader of the Opposition in Parliament and later, the Speaker of the House. Meanwhile, the other daughter excelled in philanthropy by creating and nurturing a charitable foundation for assisting differently abled persons to bring meaning and joy to their lives through dance and music. The individual and collective achievements of this distinguished family would find few parallels anywhere in the world.

Mr S W R D Bandaranaike spearheaded a social and cultural revolution in 1956 by installing a clear post-colonial regime of political governance in Ceylon. That marked a clear turning point in the political, economic, social and cultural evolution of the nation. During Mr Bandaranaike's premiership, Ceylon's foreign policy took a firm non-aligned stance which strengthened further in the years that followed.

Mr Bandaranaike had become too much of a threat to powerful vested interests and was assassinated in 1959. The country went through a short period of political turmoil until Mrs Bandaranaike became Prime Minister in July 1960.

As a widow just emerging from a traumatic experience and responsible for bringing up three young children, she was initially not keen to accept the leadership of a political party or face the

prospect of governing the country. But intense pressure from so many directions prevailed, and she accepted the challenge. The rest is history.

Many initially underestimated Sirimavo Bandaranaike. Some even ridiculed her as a 'mere housewife' suddenly elevated to high office. Unexpected though her entry into politics was, Mrs Bandaranaike was far from an ordinary housewife.

She was born into a family with a deep social conscience and spirit of service towards the poor and down-trodden. Her father, Barnes Ratwatte Disawe, was highly respected by the people. They did much to alleviate poverty and promote rural upliftment in their community of Balangoda. The young Sirimavo Ratwatte was regularly taken to the field by her father. At an early age she got to know people's problems and took part in marshaling resources to solve some of them.

After her marriage to Mr Bandaranaike, she continued her social work by joining the Lanka Mahila Samiti, the leading women's organisation at the time. She spent considerable time on the road attending to various problems and needs of rural women.

In running the home, she was no typical housewife either. Nor was the Bandaranaike's a typical home: it was regularly packed with political personalities, voters, clergy members and various professionals. While attending to their hospitality, the lady saw to the needs of her husband, children and other family members. The children's education had to be supervised.

Her husband had to be accompanied to key meetings and formal occasions including official visits overseas.

Besides all these, given Mrs Bandaranaike's great knowledge of the country and people, her advice and guidance were unofficially sought by some cabinet ministers and other key political personalities. Such persons often had a word with Mrs Bandaranaike first when they visited the Prime Minister.

Such was the personality that led her party to victory at the General Elections of July 1960. During her first term as Prime Minister, she continued the post-colonial national consolidation started by her late husband. She set up some strong national institutions covering critical parts of the economy.

For example, the import of crude oil and the distribution of petrol, diesel and other products were nationalized despite strong resistance from the United States. The Ceylon Petroleum Corporation, set up in 1961, took over. The People's Bank and the Ceylon Insurance Corporation are two other examples. The main thrust was to attain the maximum degree of economic independence and a strong state.

When her first administration ended in 1965, Mrs Bandaranaike became the first woman Leader of the Opposition in a parliamentary democracy. The then Secretary General of Parliament, Mr Sam Wijesinha, once noted how she grew in confidence and stature during the period 1965 to 1970 and commanded the respect of the House.

At the general election of May 1970, the coalition led by Mrs Bandaranaike obtained a two thirds majority in Parliament. Her second term turned out to be one of the most turbulent periods in the country's history.

Among other things, the period saw: the first youth insurrection trying to overthrow the elected government which led to death and destruction before it was contained; the 1972 Republican Constitution where the British monarch as Head of State was replaced by a President appointed within the country; a land reform process which substantially restructured land ownership; housing reforms which restricted ownership of houses and landlordism; the nationalization of plantations and the restriction of private ownership of large estates of plantation property such as tea; and the transfer of the tea auctions from London to Colombo along with the regulation of agency houses.

To cap it all, the fifth summit of the heads of state and government of Non-Aligned nations was held in Colombo in August 1976. At this summit the chairmanship of the non-aligned movement (NAM) was bestowed on Mrs Bandaranaike.

Her foreign policy delivered tangible domestic dividends. For example, she succeeded in resolving several intractable problems with India including the contested ownership of the tiny offshore island of Katchatheevu, the demarcation of the international maritime boundary between Sri Lanka and India, and the issue of the "stateless" Indian workers who had been brought by the British to work on the tea plantations.

To sum up, in the sphere of domestic policy, Mrs Bandaranaike believed in a strong economy minimising dependence on the outside world. After emerging from 450 years of foreign interventions, she wished to build a strong sovereign state. For this purpose, she saw the conduct of a strong non-aligned foreign policy as critically important. She did not want the country to be drawn into any power blocs.

Although she had a natural affinity towards socialist countries and the Third World, she did not have any strong ideological antipathy towards the West. She maintained good relations with the West too, and there were no significant problems with any Western countries.

This pictorial history presents glimpses of a remarkable personality who dedicated her life to public service, human development and the pursuit of international friendship, peace and harmony.

Desamanya M D D Pieris had a distinguished career in the public service for 37 years and held many important posts which included heading key ministries under different governments. He worked closely with Mrs Bandaranaike initially as Assistant Secretary to the Prime Minister (1962-65), and then as Secretary to the Prime Minister (1970-77).





Sirimavo Ratwatte Dias Bandaranaike

A Biographical Note

Hailing from an aristocratic family that was involved in local administration and marrying into another such family, Sirimavo Bandaranaike (1916 – 2000) was exposed to politics and governance from an early age. Devoted to social work, she did not become a politician until 44 – and then remained a dominant force in national and international politics for decades.

Her marriage in 1940 to Solomon West Ridgeway Dias (S W R D) Bandaranaike, a leading politician at the time, gave her a ring side seat to witness political processes just before and after Ceylon's independence in 1948. Mr Bandaranaike became Prime Minister in 1956 and embarked on far-reaching political and economic reforms that also earned him powerful enemies.

Mr Bandaranaike's assassination in September 1959 created a leadership vacuum. At this crucial juncture, Mrs Bandaranaike was persuaded to take over the reins of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) that he had founded. Contesting in a general election within weeks, she took her party to a decisive victory. On 21 July 1960, she became the world's first woman Prime Minister.

Continuing her late husband's policies, introducing her own reforms and striding the political arena with aplomb, Mrs Bandaranaike surprised those who had dismissed her lightly.

“If Mr Bandaranaike's stature as a politician and leader was built up over decades of campaigning, Sirimavo donned hers like a cloak that had been lying in her wardrobe for years, unworn, but which had been pressed and kept ready for wearing at any given moment,” her biographer Maureen Seneviratne wrote in the 1970s.

Both during her first term (1960 – 1965) and second term (1970 – 1977), Mrs Bandaranaike left an indelible mark in national politics and international relations. Voted out of office in mid 1977, she endured a dozen years of political harassment. Defiant and resilient in the face of adversity, she persisted for 17 years before her younger daughter Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga led an alliance of parties to election victory in 1994.

Soon afterwards, Mrs Bandaranaike became Prime Minister for the third time with Ms Kumaratunga as Executive President. By that time, the 1978 Constitution had changed the position of Prime Minister to be more ceremonial. For the next six years, she played the role of an elder stateswoman, advising and counselling younger politicians from across the political spectrum. She also started an institute to train career diplomats.

The wider significance of Mrs Bandaranaike's political career must be understood in the

context of her role in attending to the twin tasks of decolonization and post-colonial state-building.

The process of decolonization – which entailed restructuring the institutions evolved during centuries of colonial rule – entered a new phase under Mr Bandaranaike. Mrs Bandaranaike continued these processes during her first term and took steps to strengthen the state's role in economic affairs.

Emphasis in her second term was on three key elements of post-colonial state building, i.e. defining a foundation ideology for the state, building institutional apparatus, and developing a physical and human base in line with the above.

The Republican Constitution of 1972 which severed the constitutional umbilical cord with colonial Britain was an outcome of post-colonial institution building. Her land reform policies, implemented from 1972 to address youth grievances, set a ceiling for ownership of land and took over plantations owned by British companies. New state institutions were set up for managing the land so acquired.

Parallel to this, she also developed Sri Lanka's foreign policy to new heights earning international respect and goodwill. While remaining non-aligned *vis-à-vis* global Cold War power blocs, Sri Lanka identified closely with fellow developing countries to push forward their shared interests in global forums – the Non-Aligned Movement, the British Commonwealth and the United Nations.

Concerned by the rising superpower naval competition in the Indian Ocean, Mrs Bandaranaike proposed to the UN in 1971 to designate the Indian Ocean as a Peace Zone. She pursued an effective Asian policy to further Sri Lanka's national interests. While maintaining very close relations with India, she developed strong links with other Asian nations, especially China and Pakistan. She also engaged the Middle East and the Arab world at a time when few Asian leaders did so.

Throughout her political career she was committed to the Rule of Law. It was reflected by how resolutely and cautiously she handled two formidable challenges that arose when she was Prime Minister: the abortive *coup d'état* by some top-ranking military officers in January 1962, and the armed youth uprising in April 1971. The perpetrators of both were dealt with judicially and not extra-judicially.

Mrs Bandaranaike's leadership qualities became even more apparent when she was out of office. Amid many political turbulences, she maintained the SLFP as the alternative political pole. Under repressive political conditions, she did not lose faith in the democratic process. As a political leader, she had the capacity to win over other political parties to form coalitions through compromise and accommodation. Fittingly, her last act – just a few hours before death -- was to vote in the parliamentary election of October 2000.

Forty years of public service is noteworthy for someone who was suddenly thrust into politics under trying circumstances. The relative merits of her policies and reforms may continue to be debated, but there is no argument that Sirimavo Bandaranaike steered the destiny of Sri Lanka for a good part of the Twentieth Century.

*This note has been adapted and expanded from the Sirimavo Bandaranaike official website.
<https://sirimavobandaranaike.org>*

‘
Mrs Bandaranaike’s legacy is this: After her husband died, there was so much confusion and the party was almost collapsing. She was an untried leader. But she not only survived, she sustained the party and the family in politics.

’
Professor KM de Silva

historian, quoted by The New York Times, 10 October 2000



‘

Sirimavo discovered the prime minister in herself and invented herself in the prime minister. Where she made an early and acknowledged mark was in her clear realisation that in governance, in diplomacy and in the many dimensions of political leadership, the surest guide is one's own instinct.

’

Gopalkrishna Gandhi

Indian High Commissioner to Sri Lanka from 2000 to 2002

(and a grandson of Mahatma Gandhi)



‘
I noticed ... the way she was carrying herself with a great sense of authority. When she used to walk into Cabinet meetings, she had her files clutched in her left arm and walked with her head held high. She came across in a very strong way when she was negotiating one-to-one with leaders of other countries.

’
Ms Sunethra Bandaranaike
speaking to the BBC, November 2020



‘
Mrs Bandaranaike became one of the Third World’s
best known leaders, rubbing shoulders with
Indira Gandhi, Zhou en-Lai, Marshal Tito and others
in the heyday of the Non-Aligned Movement.

’

John Rettie

*British journalist and broadcaster, writing an obituary of
Mrs Bandaranaike in The Guardian newspaper, 11 October 2000*



‘

She was unruffled, calm, conscientious and had a mind of her own. As far as the public service was concerned, she acted with fairness and propriety.

She recognised that the public service had an important role to play, and she did not favour any political attempts to intimidate or brow-beat it.

’

Desamanya M D D Pieris

Secretary to Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, 1970-77

