

Keerthi Balasuriya as revolutionary fighter during 1970-1971

Vilani Peiris

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Keerthi Balasuriya was the general secretary of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), from its founding in 1968, until his premature death on December 18, 1987, at the age of 39. His death deprived the Trotskyist movement of one of its most brilliant representatives of the post-war period.

In this article, Vilani Peiris recalls Keerthi's life in 1970-1971, a critical period in the RCL's formation. Keerthi, then in his early 20s, led the party through these testing experiences and made important contributions to the perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the world Trotskyist movement, in Sri Lanka, South Asia and internationally. Peiris is an SEP Political Committee member and was Keerthi's companion from 1971 until his death.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) are holding a public meeting in Colombo on December 23 at the Mahaveli Centre at 3 p.m. to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the death of comrade Keerthi Balasuriya.

I first met Keerthi in 1969 at an RCL meeting to plan the party's educational work. It was my first meeting with RCL members outside my own town of Moratuwa.

The meeting's chair explained at the beginning that he hoped everyone would stay until the discussion ended. My sister and I got up and asked to leave early. The chair agreed, but a slight, young comrade in a black-checked shirt stood up in the audience and objected.

In an emphatic voice, he insisted women had to work in the leadership of the Trotskyist movement, then explained in brief the huge contribution of Rosa Luxemburg to the Marxist movement. That was the Keerthi Balasuriya. We left early that day, but I was deeply impressed by Keerthi's remarks.

I participated in an RCL study circle in 1969. There were two groups, one of which was led by Keerthi. He lectured on Lenin's position of "revolutionary defeatism" during the First World War and its political significance. In opposition to the betrayals of the parties of the Second International, Lenin insisted that the duty of workers in every country was to fight against their own bourgeois government by turning the imperialist war into a civil war.

Many comrades were inspired by Keerthi's teaching of Marxism. Before I joined the RCL's Moratuwa branch, he discussed with me the ICFI's struggle against Pabloite revisionism in 1953 and 1963. The Pabloites, he explained, had rejected the revolutionary role of the working class, abandoned the struggle for its political independence and capitulated to Stalinism. In economically backward countries like Sri Lanka, the Pabloites had ceded the historic tasks of the proletariat to various bourgeois and petty bourgeois nationalist leaders.

Keerthi insisted that without learning the lessons of the political struggle against Pabloism it was impossible to understand the betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP). The LSSP's entry into the bourgeois government led by Madam Sirima Bandaranaike and her Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in 1964 was the product of a protracted

degeneration that had been sanctioned by the Pabloites.

In 1970 Keerthi held several discussions with older workers, including in the railways, who had a history in the Trotskyist movement. They had been members of the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI), the section of the Fourth International on the Indian subcontinent in the 1940s, and of the LSSP when the BLPI fused with it in 1950. Following the 1964 betrayal, they had broken from the LSSP and joined the LSSP(R) of Bala Tampoe and Edmond Samarakkody.

By 1970, these workers had become thoroughly demoralised not just by the LSSP's betrayal, but the LSSP(R)'s abandonment of the struggle for Trotskyism. Tampoe and Samarakkody had opposed the LSSP's decision to join the Bandaranaike government, but rejected the ICFI and its analysis and pursued their own nationalist agenda. These discussions gave Keerthi a first-hand insight into the way in which the LSSP and LSSP(R) had disoriented hundreds of Trotskyists who had been dedicated to the movement.

Keerthi based himself on the necessity of international party and stressed the significance of the ICFI's intervention in Sri Lanka. He continually referred to the articles of *Newsletter*, the organ of the Socialist Labour League (SLL), the British section of the ICFI, about the struggle against the LSSP's betrayal.

SLL national secretary Gerry Healy had visited Sri Lanka in June 1964 during the LSSP conference that took the decision to join the coalition. Wilfred "Spike" Pereira and Sisira Jayasuriya, both of whom became founding members of the RCL, met him. Jayasuriya, who was a few years older than Keerthi, met him later at his school, Ananda College, while organising the literary association.

Keerthi used all his talents to expose the LSSP and Tampoe and Samarakkody, the opportunist LSSP(R) leaders, firmly based on Leon Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution.

In 1970, Tampoe started an opportunist collaboration with Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a petty bourgeois group known in those days as the "Che Guevara movement", which hailed Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh and Fidel Castro as "Marxist leaders". The JVP combined the nationalist outlook of these Stalinist and guerrillaist movements with its own Sinhala chauvinism.

The LSSP's betrayal had opened the door for outfits such as the JVP, which were orientated to the oppressed rural youth, not to the working class. Likewise the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) emerged in the north and east among Tamils, advancing a separate statelet. Both the JVP and the LTTE pointed to the LSSP's entry into the Bandaranaike government as proof of the failure of Trotskyism.

Keerthi wrote a series of articles in *Kamkaru Puwath* (Workers News), the RCL's Sinhala language newspaper, entitled "The JVP's politics and class character", which brilliantly analysed the grouping. Against the JVP's insistence that the peasantry was the "revolutionary force" in the backward countries, Keerthi reviewed the lessons of the Marxist movement going back to the defeat of the 1927 Chinese revolution. He

established that it was only the working class that could address the democratic aspirations and social needs of the rural masses by mobilising them in the struggle for power on a socialist perspective.

I remember internal party discussions in which Keerthi opposed several leading members who underestimated the analysis of the JVP and argued that long articles would decrease the popularity of the *Kamkaru Puwath*. Keerthi insisted that we would orient our newspaper not toward backward layers but toward advanced workers and intelligent youth.

What Keerthi analysed more than three decades ago has proven to be correct. The JVP has all but abandoned its “Marxism” and radical phrasemongering and is part of the political establishment, openly espousing the most backward forms of Sinhala chauvinism and demanding an intensification of communal war.

Keerthi’s articles on the JVP were eventually published as a book, which was popular among young people. In response, the JVP resorted to physical violence to try to intimidate the RCL. An RCL meeting at Vidyodaya University (now Jayawardanepura University) was broken up by JVP supporters, including Buddhist monks. At Peradeniya University in Kandy, however, the JVP provocations failed because of the support that the RCL had won among students.

Despite the JVP’s action, the RCL took a principled stand in defending it from state repression, firstly under the United National Party government and then the second Bandaranaike coalition, which took power in 1970. The RCL warned in *Kamkaru Puwath* that “today the forces who are repressing the Che Guevara movement tomorrow will be suppressing the working class and organisations of the oppressed masses”.

JVP uprising

That is exactly what took place when the JVP staged an armed uprising of rural youth in April 1971. The coalition government, which included LSSP ministers, responded with a reign of terror that resulted in the deaths of an estimated 15,000 youth. The repression was not limited to the JVP, but was directed against all political opposition, forcing the RCL to work underground.

The police raided Keerthi’s room and library at Moratuwa, but he was not there at the time. On April 13, the CID [Criminal Investigation Division], together with armed police, also raided the home of Keerthi’s mother in Demetagoda and threatened his family members. The government used its emergency powers to ban the RCL’s newspapers and its youth movement. The party office was raided. Two RCL members were killed by police at Kandy prison.

Keerthi managed to evade arrest, hiding in various places around Colombo with the help of comrades and party sympathisers. His courage in the midst of this state repression was an inspiration to all. His optimism in a revolutionary perspective was grounded on an understanding that the convulsions in Sri Lanka were part of a broader international crisis of capitalism.

In 1971, US President Richard Nixon ended the gold backing for the US dollar, which had been one of the pillars of the post-war order established at Bretton Woods in 1944. Capitalist rule in France had been shaken to the core by the mass strikes of May-June 1968. Strikes and political struggles were emerging in country after country in the early 1970s. The unrest among rural youth in southern Sri Lanka reflected international processes.

Keerthi intransigently fought any tendency toward pessimism or to make political concessions. He was furious when he found out that two leading comrades including Sisira Jayasuriya, had met with a LSSP leader to present a letter explaining that the RCL was not a JVP organisation. I was present at the meeting at Spike’s home, having come from my hiding

place in Galle to meet Keerthi.

Keerthi stressed that the action was completely contrary to the struggle for the political independence of the working class. The RCL had to expose the LSSP and its pretensions of being a workers party while actually defending the capitalist state. We had to demand that the LSSP break with the ruling coalition. It was completely wrong, Keerthi explained, to appeal for protection from the LSSP, which was part of the government unleashing state violence. He insisted that workers would turn on the LSSP and predicted that entry into the coalition would be the last days of the LSSP.

While Sisira Jayasuriya and several other members succumbed to the enormous pressures and quit the party, the experiences of the early 1970s steeled the RCL for the struggles ahead. Keerthi closely worked with Spike on the party’s perspective. Nanda Wickremasinghe, Kamalasiri Ratnayake and Ananda Wakkumbura collaborated closely with Keerthi. Wije Dias, the current SEP general secretary, was in London and exchanged letters frequently with Keerthi.

The RCL began publishing an illegal bulletin for distribution among workers and youth. Keerthi and I lived in a very backward area where there was no electricity and no running water but we were protected. Wakkumbura and two other comrades lived with us.

The RCL’s principled stand attracted a growing response from workers, students and intellectuals. At the government printing establishment and Colombo port, RCL members won the leadership of the trade unions. There was also strong support at the Central Bank and in the railways. Keerthi was invited for discussions by several Colombo University lecturers.

Following the end of emergency rule, Keerthi sought to deepen the party’s political understanding of the experiences through which it had passed. He began work on a history of the RCL and completed two parts before being instructed by the British SLL to work on a perspectives document. The perspectives document, which was adopted unanimously at the RCL’s third conference in late 1972, reviewed the theoretical struggles of the Trotskyist movement and emphasised the need to combat any tendency toward nationalism within the party.

Keerthi’s political life was bound up with the strategic experiences of the 20th century. He offers an inspiration, particularly for young people to devote their talents to the struggle for socialism through the building of the international Trotskyist movement.

When I met Keerthi late 1969, he was already a profoundly cultured man. He had a good library of Marxist writings and those of political opponents. He also used Spike’s library and university libraries and encouraged all comrades to build a library and scientifically study Marxism.

Keerthi loved culture and art. His library contained many works of great literature. He loved Russian novels, particularly those by Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Pushkin. He was also attracted to the works of D.H. Lawrence and the art of Picasso. He had a good knowledge of Sinhala literature and ancient Indian poetry. He was particularly fond of classical Indian music.

Before joining the Trotskyist movement, Keerthi was a talented young artist. His first poem on Sri Lanka’s famous ancient cultural work “*Isurumuniya Pemyuwals*” (loving couple at Isurumuniya), was published in the Sunday newspaper *Silumina* in 1962. He was just 14.

He kept writing poems for newspapers and published a book of poetry in 1963. He was one of the editors of the publication *Kauluwa*, which dealt with cultural issues. I particularly liked his short story “Prisoner” written in 1966 and published in the *Danuma* (knowledge) magazine. The theme of the story is that under capitalism women are prisoners of society. His artistic endeavours ended amid all his responsibilities in the Trotskyist movement, but his love for culture and art never stopped.

It is difficult to believe that 20 years have passed since his death. After

his death, the movement to which he devoted his whole adult life—the RCL, now the SEP—has made many developments. This is above all revealed in the extraordinary collaborative effort involving all sections of the ICFI that has produced the *World Socialist Web Site*. In its daily contribution to the political education of workers and youth around the world, his theoretical work and political struggles continue to live on.



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