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The Village at the Mouth of the River: A Biography of Basil Fernando

Le Roy Robinson

Basil Fernando, an attorney, is a poet and short story writer.
He was born in October 1944 at Palliyawatte, a village in Hendala, Wattala, Sri Lanka.
As a young boy he attended the village primary school.
He attended high school at St. Anthony's College, Wattala, and St. Benedict's College, Kotahena.
In 1972 he graduated from the Faculty of Law, the University of Ceylon, Colombo.
Until December 1981 he was a teacher of English as a second language in the Sub-Department of English, Sri Jayawardenapura University, Nugegoda.
In 1982 he began his legal practice.
In 1984 Basil Fernando started working as a human rights lawyer. He filed many writs of habeas corpus and handled other cases allegedly involving torture or extra-judicial killing by the security forces of his country.
In 1989 four of his immediate colleagues were killed within a period of six months, and he was warned by a police officer friendly to him that his safety could not be guaranteed.
In September 1989 he took up work as an appeals lawyer stationed in Hong Kong by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. He reviews cases of Vietnamese refugees.

*****
Basil Fernando admits that during his last two years of university he hardly
did any academic work at all.

Coming from the village of Palliyawatte, he had a whole new world to explore
in Colombo. And he did just that.

All sorts of student activities in and outside the university provided him with
the opportunity to see the inner side of Sri Lankan society.

Basil was joint secretary of the University Student Union. He was the vice
president of the Law Faculty Student Union, and a member of the faculty's debating
team. He was the national president of the Catholic Students Union.

He held all these positions at the same time.

He had many friends.

He was hardly seen at lectures, and when it came to the final exams, some of
his classmates had counted him among those who would fail.

But there was one who did not think that way. Terrance Wickramasinghe. He
is now a well-known criminal lawyer in Sri Lanka.

At the time of Basil Fernanbo's student activities, Wickramasinghe had been
in the university for almost ten years. He took very little interest in his studies. He liv-
ed a rather picturesque life at the university. He was a member of a Trotskyist group.

Privately some called him "the child of the revolution".

******

One vivid memory Basil has of Terrance Wickramasinghe was when
a deputy minister of finance, Bernard Souza, came to deliver a public lec-
ture at the university.

Souza was a veteran member of one of Sri Lanka's labor parties,
Lanka Samasamaja Party. The LSSP was then a partner in the coalition
government that had come to power in 1970.

Souza's lecture was on Lenin's *Imperialism, Highest Stage of
Capitalism*. After the lecture, when it came to question time, Wickramas-
inghe and a friend of his stormed onto the stage. They asked Souza whether he had a right to speak about Lenin’s concept of imperialism while he himself was a member of a coalition government.

It was part of the Trotskyist arguments at the time that coalition partnerships by labor parties always lead to major defeats for labor.

The student body responded with very loud applause. Souza got over his embarrassment by saying that Lenin belongs to all mankind and as such he too had right to speak of him.

*****

At the time Basil did not yet know Terrance Wickramasinghe well, but it was Terrance who suggested that Basil should sit for the final examination. To reassure Basil, who had no lecture notes to study, Terrance told him that he had collected notes of all the lectures.

Wickramasinghe was joined by Leo Samson, who is now a high administrative officer of Air Lanka, after long service with the Ceylon Transport Board.

These two had a problem. They did not have a place in which to conduct joint study sessions.

That was a problem that Basil could easily solve since he had made friends with students from many different organizations. A room was provided for them at the home for the deaf and blind in Ratmalana. There they had long sessions for a few weeks.

Basil was totally unaware of what had been taught at the lectures, so Terrance and Leo asked him not to raise too many questions so that they would not be too confused.

While these two discussed the past examination question papers,
Basil just waited, lying on a bed.

When the exam time came, the students who had practically lived in the lecture halls and the library were very anxious. One young woman could not continue with the exam as she became ill.

As for Basil and Terrance, they were very relaxed. They were just taking a chance with the exam.

But even Leo was rather tense. While studying he had placed his feet in a basin of cold water just to keep awake.

A few months later, when the exam results were to be announced, Basil Fernando was teaching temporarily at Wesley’s College, Colombo.

At that time Basil Mihiripanne, a famous dancer who had produced the popular drama *Sebaliya* (Female Soldier), and Huique Karunaratne, a well known violinist, were also teaching there.

Basil did not go to the university to look at the bulletin board to see the results of the examination; he had concluded that he would definitely fail.

The day the results of the exam were posted, Terrance Wickramasinghe came to Wesley’s College at noon and told Basil that he, Basil, had passed the examination. Terrance was very cheerful.

A few hours later Terrance told Basil that he, Terrance, and Leo Samson had both failed the examination.

But they considered Basil’s passing the exam their joint achievement.

They themselves passed the examination the following year.

Basil Fernando says that all he had done was reproduce what he had
heard them discussing, perhaps in a better style of writing.

Since that time Fernando has not been able to get over the idea that all exams are a form of cheating.

******

If Basil Fernando did not care very much about the examination results, he had no anxiety about getting employment either. Wandering around was quite good enough for him.

While his batch mates were rushing to the Law College hoping to become attorneys at law as soon as possible, Basil moved away from what is called “the legal circles” in Sri Lanka, to complete his education in the streets of Colombo and in the countryside.

The next eight years were economically unprofitable, but Basil says they were perhaps one of the best times of his life.

He found a “financially worthless” job as an English Instructor at Vidyodaya University (now Sri Jayawardenapura University).

At that time the Vice Chancellor was Dr. Samaranayake who had known of Basil Fernando as a student leader. At Basil’s interview, he asked a few questions that were not in Basil’s favor. One was: what was Basil doing there since after getting a law degree he would not stay there very long anyway?

However, Basil managed to convince the American professor who was trying to conduct some special research on English teaching that he was the type the professor was looking for.

It was perhaps fortunate for Basil that this professor had a father who was a lawyer.

Among the nine teachers then hired at Vidyodaya University were
Oranee Janez, who became very popular with students, and Upali Ath­thenayake, an actor who later achieved fame in movies.

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What Basil Fernando liked most about this teaching job at Vidyodaya University was that he had to work only two hours a day and that his vaca­tions were very long.

********

When Basil began his employment at Vidyodaya University, he was already a very active member of a small political group called the Revolu­tionary Communist League, Kamkaru Mawatha Group, which took its name from that of a Sinhala weekly newspaper Kamkaru Mawatha (Workers’ Path).

Basil and his friends used to joke that to be an English Instructor was to be a Kamkaru Mawatha full-timer paid by the government.

********

Basil Fernando had other reasons for working at Vidyodaya University.

Along with Vidayalankara University, now known as Kelaniya Univer­sity, Vidyodaya was opened as a result of agitation coming from a new elite in the Sri Lankan political world who had become very vocal in the 1950s and 1960s.

The members of this grouping claimed to be the voices of the neglected majority, meaning the rural population forgotten and even openly harassed during the colonial rule beginning in 1505 and particularly during
British colonial rule.

In their activities they searched for new ways of expression and association that took the form of revolt.

Basil points out that this was a national phenomenon and not confined only to Sinhalese.

For example, Jaffna University opened shortly after Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara as a result of a Tamil cultural revival.

*****

One of the reasons that Basil Fernando wanted to work at Vidyodaya University was that he hoped to encounter this social movement. He would be able to meet the people. He would be able to hear the discussions. He could see for himself everything that went on in the name of the awakening of the rural masses.

*****

Basil and his companions started their first sessions in May 1973.

*****

For some time Vidyodaya University had been a prison camp for J. V. P. supporters.

Even the room that Basil was assigned at the staff lodgings had been used by prison staff members.

When the prison officers left, they took away with them whatever they could collect, including the door knobs.

Prior to the April 1971 insurgency Vidyodaya had been one of the places where the J. V. P. movement had been very powerful.
The second suspect questioned at the Criminal Justice Commission inquiry was Mahinda Wijesekera, who is now a lawyer and a parliamentarian.

****

In the first batch of students that Basil Fernando taught there were many Buddhist monks. Most of them ceased to be monks by the time they finished their courses. The number of monks entering the university became less in the following years.

****

In 1973 one of the most visible things at Vidyodaya was the very prominent role played by the students union. Its leaders belonged to the youth branch of the Sri Lanka Communist Party, which was a partner in the coalition government then in power.

This student organization played a very significant role in defeating the former United National Party government by bringing a landslide electoral victory to the coalition.

After the electoral victory the students had kept their influence.

Reactions to this "student power" varied. Some said that the students were merely being used by some lecturers for their own ends. There were others who worried that academic life was disturbed by too much politics.

As for Basil Fernando, he found himself in what he thought was a pleasant milieu in which students behaved quite responsibly.

As for the students' independence, he now says, there was an aspect that was missing—indeed, independence of thought. There was hardly any creative expression. There was hardly any new thinking.

The students were somewhat politically opportunistic.
Most were hoping for good jobs after graduation through their connections with the student organization, which was linked to the government in power.

There was a subtle inner corruption going on that was betraying the moral strength of the movement. This led to the frustration of the more idealistic students.

The only group that challenged the coalition politics of the time was the Revolutionary Communist League of which Basil Fernando was an active member.

Despite belonging to the teaching staff at Vidyodaya University, he continued to participate in student politics by conducting weekly political discussion meetings debating the possible outcome of coalition politics for workers, students and the poorer sections of society.

There was some student opposition to the RCL activities but they were allowed to continue without physical violence against them.

There was an unwritten code of ethics among the various student groups. There was a basic decency toward each other.

Later, Basil says, after the United National Party introduced violence into every forum of political debate, everything changed.

Now, he adds, if anyone did one hundred percent of what the students in the seventies did by way of political activities, he would be on a death list.

During the eight years (1973-1980) he was at Vidyodaya Basil Fern-
ando lived in the staff lodge. Several other lecturers lived there too, some with families, some bachelors like himself.

Most of the time it was a lively place.

Basil’s own room was also lively. Many meetings were held in it. And later it was used to exhibit the paintings of Seevali Ilangasinghe, one of the well known painters of Sri Lanka.

********

The story of Seevali Ilangasinghe is itself well known. He was a rural boy from Sivalakulama, a village in the jungle in the Anuradhapura area of the dry zone.

Until about the age of ten, Seevali did not go to any school. But he had already begun to paint with all sorts of materials he found in the jungle.

At the age of ten he ran away from Sivalakulama. While wandering in nearby towns, he came across a school principal who recognized his talent and admitted him into school.

In no time Seevali’s reputation grew. Within a few years he was in Colombo, where he was able to support himself through the sale of his paintings.

His exhibitions received wide publicity. He found many patrons who promoted his paintings and bought them in order to help him survive.

He met a beautiful young woman, who was a student of dance. Thereafter most of his paintings were of her. Later she became his wife.

********

Basil Fernando met Seevali Ilangasinghe at a meeting of the Revolutionary Communist League, which held propaganda meetings at a
workers reading room at Slave Island, which is very close to the center of Colombo.

Seevali had been invited to this meeting by Dhamma Jagoda, a well known actor who was also a famous drummer, and by his friend Sucharitha Gamlath, now a professor who has written many books on Sinhala literature, some of which have been used as texts for school exams. Both of them remained friends of the RCL for a few years.

Upon their first meeting, Basil and Seevali struck up a friendship. Some time later Basil assisted Seevali with an exhibition of his paintings. Basil also acted as an interpreter for him with some of his foreign admirers. At that time Basil’s room became Seevali’s permanent exhibition room.

Basil says: “All the colors and figures in these paintings brought some light into my room”.

*****

When it came to administration, a rural atmosphere still persisted at Vidyodaya University.

Every vice chancellor had a special group of confidantes who would bring gossip to him everyday. This gossip often went a long way in his deciding many matters.

The administrative staff, the lecturers, and the students knew who the favored few were. Those who were opportunists sought the patronage of these favored few when they felt a need for it.

The lecturers, particularly the young ones who were keen on doing research and those who were creative, found no encouragement. They often complained that merit played little role in decisions regarding scholarships.

Of course, there were some heads of departments who resisted the
pressures from the top.

In the staff’s common room, where lecturers and other staff members often met, the general complaint was that there were no incentives for work. They did not refer to merely financial incentives.

Worst was the bureaucratic red tape.

There was a fear that those who tried to work too hard would be inviting trouble upon themselves.

*****

Students often held protests against the university bureaucracy. Sometimes their posters would fill all the walls of the administration building.

On one occasion the students kept one vice chancellor, Professor Jinadasa Perera, as a hostage all through the night. They demanded some promises from him on some of their demands. He gave in easily because their demands were just.

*****

Sometimes such poster campaigns would take a lighter and humorous aspect.

A vice chancellor who was alleged to have a love affair with a professor’s wife was greeted with such a load of posters that he fled from the university. He never returned.

It was later said that a chauffeur had leaked the information about the love affair to the students.

Anyway, the students got a change of vice chancellor.
In the 1970s, when two labor parties were partners in the coalition government, there was a rather friendly relationship between the students and workers of the university who were referred to as the minor staff.

Some attempts to celebrate the "age of the workers" ended in rather humorous ways.

Once the students held their annual sports meet. The student leaders decided that the chief guest must be a worker. They selected a chauffeur. The chief guest was requested to come to the meet in his usual working clothes, so as to show the significance of the workers. The chief guest came. He waited until the end of the sports meet. When the time came for the distribution of prizes, the vice chancellor appeared on the scene. The chief guest was very uncomfortable. The chief guest soon disappeared. By making use of some confusion occurring, the chief guest jumped over a fence and vanished. He had feared that the vice chancellor would feel slighted that a mere driver was presiding over the prize giving.

Perhaps he misjudged the situation. Basil Fernando says that the vice chancellor would have agreed to whatever the student leaders wanted, to prevent embarrassing confrontations in which the students always won.

At the time the sub-department of English was to carry out a special experiment. Passages from the text on the subject the students were offering for their degrees were used as material for teaching English. For example, if students were majoring in geography, the passages would be chosen from a geography textbook.
It was thought that students would take a greater interest in learning English in this way.

This method was used with varying degrees of success by different persons depending on the gift for teaching that each one possessed.

One of the more gifted teachers was Oranee Janze, a science graduate who had opted to teach English. She experimented freely with various ways of teaching. She even produced a book of poems written by her students who were just beginning to learn English.

Besides teaching, she participated in other student activities. Later she joined the Revolutionary Communist League whose newspaper she sold in the streets.

This was "quite a thing to do", Fernando says, for a person coming from an English speaking middle class background. Fernando says he heard that Oranee Janze's mother in law did not like it very much.

As Fernando puts it, Oranee Janze was a person looking for the right thing to do, to participate in the life of her fellow countrymen.

****

Another teacher in Vidyodaya University's Sub Department of English was Upali Attanayake, a gifted actor, who had been a teacher at the Royal College for a long time.

A cynic of some sort, he once wanted to demonstrate that English could be taught from any text. One day he went to the class room empty handed. He told the student of the point that he was going to make: English could be taught from any text.

He went to the waste paper basket, picked up a discarded newspaper most probably used to wrap a student's lunch parcel. Using this as text, he
conducted the class that day in what many students felt was an extra ordinary demonstration of his teaching ability.

But some of his enemies among the student leaders related this information to then vice chancellor Professor Jinadasa Perera, who had a few axes to grind against the Sub Department of English.

The vice chancellor brought up the matter at a staff meeting of the sub department over which he presided as the head of the Sub Department was on vacation.

Upali Attanayake then questioned the vice chancellor and challenged him to show what was wrong with teaching in that way.

Professor Perera was a teacher of Pali, a dead language, and did not take lightly to the reference to English as a living language. The furious vice chancellor walked away angrily.

*****

During the eight years that Basil Fernando worked at Vidyodaya University he met thousands of students, men and women, who came from far away villages in Sri Lanka.

Despite relatively fewer opportunities than urban students, they had done well in very competitive exams. They came to universities with great hopes — but also carrying the great burdens of their mainly peasant families.

Basil sometimes felt happy that he could be of use to them.

But shortly after he left Vidyodaya Basil realized how the hopes of most of these students would end.

Basil had just began to practice as a lawyer. Once he went to court in Gangodawilla to appear on behalf of one of the clerks of Vidyodaya Univer-
This clerk, Piyasena Dias, had filed a suit against Professor Jinadasa Perera, the vice chancellor.

After his appearance in the case, Basil Fernando went to the office of the court to apply for a certified copy of the day’s proceedings. While he was doing this, someone called him from behind: “Sir”. When Basil looked around, he saw a former student of his sitting behind a clerk’s desk.

Basil remembered that this court clerk had received a degree in geography a few years before. A court clerk’s job was a poor one with very little opportunity for promotion. For such a job Grade 10 education was quite sufficient.

Conversing with this clerk, Basil found that he was one of the luckier graduates. Most had not gotten any employment at all.

Students educated in urban schools who could converse in English and who had connections got far better jobs with much less education.

The late Doric de Soyza, who had been a senior lecturer in English Literature, once accused the younger generation of students of not even knowing how to use a telephone.

Despite de Soyza’s claim to be being a Marxist, Basil notes, he was unable to transcend the usual prejudices of the Colombo middle class, who looked down on the new generation of students emerging from the rural areas of Sri Lanka.

Whether they had or had not used telephones, they had a far greater understanding of the country than the earlier generation of graduates had, and, if they were given a chance, were in a better position to contribute to the development of Sri Lanka.

Unfortunately, Basil Fernando says, the Colombo elite lacked sufficient culture to be able to lead such an assimilation.
Ranjit Janez, also an English lecturer, once wrote that the culture of
the so-called cultured people was only skin deep; they had acquired only the
external aspects of Western culture but not its inner spirit.

Given the chance, these students with a rural background learned
technology very fast. All that they lacked was opportunity, which was
deliberately withheld from them in order to protect the privileges of an in-
secure middle class who feared competition.

*****

A story told to Basil Fernando by a very close friend illustrates the
contempt the urban middle class people had for the rural people.

While studying at university, Basil’s friend became a sympathizer of
a leftist political party. He made friends with some intellectuals much older
than he was.

One of these intellectuals was a former lawyer who had become a
senior civil servant. He was not officially a member of the leftist party, but
he worked for it quite a lot.

Basil’s friends used to visit him often, borrowed books, and discussed
many things with him.

Once Basil’s friend, then a young man, went home and found that his
mother was sick. He spent a few weeks at home and returned to Colombo
when his mother became well.

In Colombo he met this leftist gentleman again. After listening to the
young man’s story about his mother’s illness, the gentleman responded that
his bitch too was ill.

Basil’s friend said that this incident made him realize the distance bet-
ween him and even the more sympathetic people of the urban middle class,
the leftists.

*****

Basil Fernando is happy that at Vidyodaya University he was lucky to make a few good friends.

There was Doctor Kulasiri Perera, a physicist, whose flat was always open to Basil and others. Perera was sort of a practical man who felt that some of the bachelor students needed guidance. He was generous in offering it. Later he went to teach in Nigeria and then in South Africa. Whenever he returned to Sri Lanka for holidays he would meet with Basil and the others again.

*****

A person who became a close friend of Basil Fernando was Jayadewa Wijesiriwardene, who returned to Sri Lanka sometime in the mid 1970s after post graduate studies in Australia. His specialities were statistics and mathematics.

Wijesiriwardene at first ignored Basil who he thought was too involved in politics--only frauds are interested in politics, he thought.

They became friends after a long argument over literature one day at Doctor Perera’s house.

Wijesiriwardene liked to live the way rural people lived. He chewed betel.

He had been impressed by the liberal atmosphere in Australia, and he was very cynical about Vidyodaya University.

He once composed a poem satirical of vice chancellor Jinadasa Perera.
The vice chancellor had been irritated by a typist who was chewing betel when the vice chancellor passed. Perera felt somewhat slighted. He took the remaining betel leaves from the telephone counter and threw them on the floor.

The next day Wijesiriwardene’s poem “Leaf” was distributed all over the university. It was written in colloquial Sinhala. The first stanza translates as:

Oh, betel leaves. Oh, betel leaves.
Don’t chew the betel leaves.
If you do, your jaw bone will be broken
by the vice chancellor.
If you keep your betel leaves
on the telephone counter
they will be thrown away.

Then the poem refers to Soratha Nahimi, Venerable Soratha, the founder of Vidyodaya University, who also chewed betel, as most Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka do. The poem remembers the myth well known in Sri Lanka that Betel leaf was brought from Naga Iowawa, the world of snakes, to Nara Iowawa, the world of man.

The poem ends “Ae-yi Mei Naralowa Me-he-math Hutapata” — why are there such meaningless disputes in man’s world?

The vice chancellor may not have liked it, but as the poem came from the pen of a senior lecturer, there was hardly anything he could do.

Quite a few people memorized the poem.

*****

On Friday evenings assistant lecturers often met at the room of Basil
Fernando’s friend Vijaya. They drank arrack and sang songs. If the neighbors found this a nuisance, they did not make any complaints. Perhaps because such events broke the monotony that was the rule at the lodge.

In Basil’s book of poems *Evelyn My First Friend* there is “Mid-day at the Lodge”:

Some one is bathing in the next room,
Maybe Kanthi
And in the next room
Both parents are trying
To lull their infant into sleep.
Upstairs, I hear
Doctor Siri, a physicist,
Trying to calm his two children
Before lunch. His wife is
Unwell the last few days.
I try to listen to the tape,
A poem of Alexander Blok,
“The Twelve.” On and off
My trend of thought is broken
When I remember what Rani said.
She said that a girl
I recently liked much
Has suddenly fallen ill.
“Well, I did not know”,
I replied. Well, the other room
Is silent now. I must bathe too,
It is too hot.

*****

The general secretary of the Revolutionary Communist League was Keerthi Balasuriya, who died at the age of 39 in 1988. He was a heavy smoker. Besides, the worries that may have troubled him over the collapse of the League may have caused the massive stroke that instantly killed him at the party office where he was working.

*****

The 1970s were very active years for the R. C. L. but the 1980s were a time of disintegration. This group was the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which was a splinter group from the Trotskyist Fourth International.

The International Committee had its headquarters in Britain. The best known person in this group in the 1970s was the film star Vanessa Redgrave. Her brother Colin was also an active member of the group. The British section of the Committee was called the Socialist Labour League. The group was also known as Healyites after the leader of the group, Gerry Heally, a highly eccentric Britisher who was the animating force in the group.

*****

The first Sri Lankans who joined this group may have been attracted to it by two Sri Lankan Burgers, Tony and Mike Vanderputen, who were from a rich planter family in the up country. They had migrated to England in the 1950s and had become prominent members of the Healyites group.
Before migrating, they had connections with the Lanka Samasamaja Party (LSSP) when that party was a very powerful political force in Sri Lanka.

Mike, who was better known as Mike Banda, a pen name he had adopted in England, was Healy’s right hand man. He became the first secretary of the Workers Revolutionary Party.

*****

In 1963 a large group in the Samasamaja Party were opposed to that party’s joining the coalition with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) on the basis that the SLFP too was a bourgeois party like the United National Party (UNP).

A group of young university students and a large number of workers broke away from the LSSP and formed a fraction called Lanka Samasamaja Party (Revolutionary) LSSP (R).

Some students in this group came in contact with Tony Vanderputten, who was in Sri Lanka in the late 1960s. Basil Fernando was told that Tony had come with the purpose of confronting Ernest Mandel, the ideologue of another section of the Fourth International, who was on a lecture tour.

On Tony’s return to Sri Lanka he began circulating “Workers Press”, a weekly published by the British section.

In that way the RCL came to be a Trotskyist group and continued to derive its ideological line from “Workers Press”.

The major preoccupation of the RCL was to oppose coalition politics on the basis that such politics was anti-Trotskyist. As the LSSP claimed to be the largest Trotskyist party in the world, this debate attracted considerable attention, as many workers and students wanted to know which
was which.

By the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, however, the thrust of student politics changed with the emergence of the JVP, which claimed to be the only authentic communist party of Sri Lanka.

At this time the RCL concentrated its energies to show the JVP was non-Marxist.

A series of articles written in “Kamkaru Mawatha” provided the background for a debate in the university within the RCL and the JVP.

In a number of places this debate led to violent clashes. The JVP believed that all those who opposed them were class enemies that ought to be silenced.

To the credit of the RCL it must be said that while fighting with the JVP on theoretical grounds or what was then perceived as theoretical grounds the RCL defended the JVP against state repression and opposed violence against free discussions.

Most of these discussions took place at Peredeniya University.

One of the interesting characters who belonged to this group later became one of Basil Fernando’s close friends. A. J. Siriwardene, popularly known as Sira, was tall and dark looking; he almost looked like a “heavy”, not the mild, bookish type often found at the university.

Siriwardene was studying for a science degree. He was the son of a businessman from the south of Sri Lanka.

In confrontations with the JVP, Siriwardene was indispensable for the RCL. When the JVP forbade anyone from putting up posters at the campus, Sira put up posters openly and challenged anyone to tear them down. No one dared to challenge Sira physically.

His political activities so absorbed Sirwardene that he could not com
plete his degree.

****

When the state unleashed repression on the JVP, the RCL also had some casualties.

One such was Lucksman, a graduate teacher at Kandy at the time. Before the April uprising, he had some rift with the Kandy police.

Shortly after the April 5th uprising all government workers were given a date on which to come and collect their salaries. Perhaps the purpose of fixing such a date was to arrest any suspected member of the JVP who was in hiding.

Despite advice that the police might use this opportunity to harm him, Lucksman went to collect his pay. When he was returning from Kandy with a friend on a bus, the bus was stopped by the police. Lucksman was asked to get out. His friend protested, and the police asked his friend to get out too.

What happened to both of them is still not known.

Some time later Lucksman's family (he left a widow and a small child) received an anonymous letter saying that he had died honorably, defiant to the end.

He had been shot down near a lake into which his body was thrown.

The RCL press was later named Lucksman Press.

Basil Fernando did not personally know Lucksman for he came to this group only at the end of 1972.

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