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Spirit of the pioneer

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As full as a life can be led, Tan Sri Dr Devaki Krishnan's is an exemplary one. Her innumerable achievements continue to drive her as a voice of the people.

'MY dear Rose', the late Yong Shook Lin, prominent lawyer and politician of the 1950s, would call her on the many car rides to official functions that he and his wife shared with Tan Sri Dr Devaki Krishnan.

As the founding secretary of MCA and founder of the renowned law firm Messrs Shook Lin and Bok, Yong and his wife would often telephone Dr Devaki and pick her up from her house in Jalan Thamby Abdullah in their car.

"They were both very friendly towards me," said Dr Devaki, recalling the time the three of them would talk politics during the car ride.

As a young woman in her early 20s, Dr Devaki was leading a life quite uncommon at that time - that of a politician fighting for the rights of her fellow nationals prior to independence.

On the invitation of Datuk Onn Jaafar, she became a member of the Independent Malaya Party (IMP). She was the first Malaysian Indian woman to contest an open public election - the Kuala Lumpur Municipal Election - to become a municipal councillor in 1952. In 1955, she stood for a second time and won.

"When I stood as a candidate, I needed help to address the audience, so I would sit with Datuk Onn and another lawyer, Ramani, at his office," she described the IMP quar-



United team: Tunku enjoying eggplant and dried fish curry with friends at his home in Penang. On his right is Dr Devaki.

ters above Coxton Press, in what is now the landmark Sultan Abdul Samad building.

"Those days, there were no differences between Christian, Muslim, Hindu or Buddhists," says Dr Devaki.

"In school, we had religious studies. I had to study the Old and New Testament, which I achieved an 'A' in my Form Five, but we were not converted and our parents were not scared."

As a student in St Mary's in Kuala Lumpur, Dr Devaki had to pray in the chapel. She even encouraged her own daughter to do so.

"When my daughter got called up to read parts of the Bible in front of the whole school, I told her to go ahead. People will know that you speak very good English.

"I was never scared because I know Hindu is strong in the house."

Although already a teacher around the time of the municipal elections, Dr Devaki laughingly admits that she "hadn't the faintest idea of politics at the time."

Even the way she was selected as a candidate was news to her. As a dedicated teacher, she was already a respected and popular individual in

her community. Her husband came home one night and told her that she had been picked.

"We had rallies at many places, at the Kilat Club, Bukit Bangsar, the railway quarters at Sentul Main Avenue, and the Sentul Pasar grounds. Datuk Onn would be present."

Dr Devaki remembers that each rally would begin with Onn's address, followed by MCA, and then Railway Union president R. Renunal would speak for railway workers.

"Then I would speak on the manifesto, about what it was to be in IMP and what they would gain."

And so she won. No doubt, her political prowess started gaining ground at those rallies, and her pursuit of women's rights began.

"After the election, I became a member of the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC), which was then only a social and welfare association. They all came and supported me."

In due course, she became the vice-president of the Women's section of MIC.

Indian women then were only ever in the home. "No one taught them to come out. They were mostly shy and had strict upbringing.

"Wherever they opened branches in MIC, I would open a women's branch. I would take the women aside, talk to them, and tell them what they will gain and how they



can go about becoming members." Wanita MIC was then established and went national in 1975. Dr Devaki recruited throughout the nation.

Dr Devaki's recollection of independence still centres on Tunku Abdul Rahman and his shouts of Merdeka!

"No one says it quite as he did. Even now his voice rings in my ears. He was very friendly, and always talked about the Indians."

She used to see Tunku during official functions when he was Prime Minister and, after his retirement, would visit him in his Penang house every Hari Raya.

"He loved curry made with eggplant and dried fish, and we took a photo when he was eating the dish."

He also loved Indian mangoes, and Dr Devaki related how Nehru and the Tunku were good friends, being the first prime ministers of their countries.

"During the India-China War, Tunku promised to help Nehru and he did. With gratitude, Nehru sent over Indian mangoes - to Tunku's delight."

After 55 years in MIC, will she ever call it a day? Her answer is simple: "I cannot get rid of it. It's been in my blood since 1952." - Merdeka Press Secretariat