

Spirit of the pioneer

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As the first Indian woman to stand for local election - and win - Tan Sri Devaki Krishnan has made her mark in Malaysian politics and community welfare.

Tan Sri Dr Devaki Krishnan's life was and continues to be an exemplary one. Fuelled with a wholeheartedness and passion that she possesses even today, her innumerable achievements continue to drive her on her tireless journey 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 the Malaysian Chinese Association and founder of the renowned law firm Messrs Shook Lin and Bok, Yong and Mrs Yong would often telephone Devaki and pick her up from her house in Jalan Thamby Abdullah, Kuala Lumpur, in their car.

"They were both very friendly towards me," says Devaki, recalling the days where the three of them would talk politics in the car on the way to official functions.

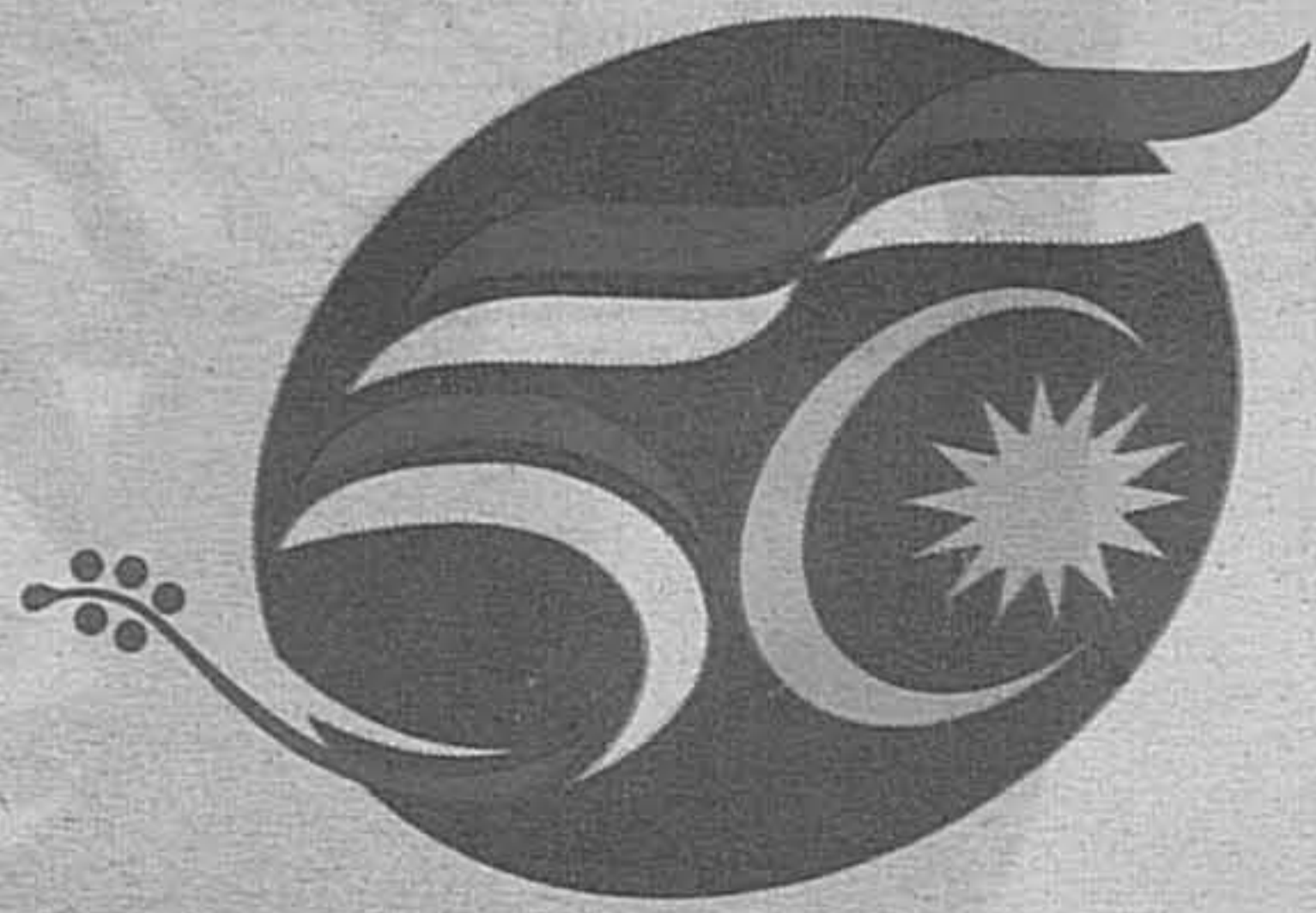
As a young woman in her early 20s, Devaki was leading a life quite uncommon at that time - that of a politician, fighting for the political rights of her fellow nationals prior to Independence. Indeed, she was the rare woman among men in politics, hence Yong's nickname for her.

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 for Kuala Lumpur 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, R. Ramani, at his office," she recalls, adding that the IMP quarters were above Coxton Press, in what is now the landmark Sultan Abdul Samad building.

"Those days there were no differ-



Malaysiaku Gemilang

ences between Christian, Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist," says Devaki. "In school, we had to do religious studies. I had to study the Old and New Testament, which I got 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, 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, read in the chapel. People will know that you speak very good English. I was never scared because I know we are strong Hindus in our house."

Growing up, Devaki remembers conversations at home with her parents - her father was acting controller of Post and Telecoms Malaya before he retired in 1949 and her mother was a college trained Tamil school teacher - on politics and religion.

Although already a school teacher around the time of the municipal elections, Devaki laughingly admits



Devaki (left) remembers Tunku's (second from left) fondness for eggplant and dried fish curry during Hari Raya parties like this one at his home in Penang.

that she "hadn't the faintest idea about politics at the time."

"The politicians that I read were the lives of politicians in India, Gandhi, for example, and his oppo-

sition to the salt tax, and the upbringing of the first prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru," and the many conversations she had with her parents, while reading

their English and Tamil magazines from India.

Even the way she was selected as a candidate was news to her. As a dedicated schoolteacher, she was

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TAN SRI DEVAKI KRISHNAN

already a respected and popular individual in her community. Her husband, P. Krishnan, who passed away in 1998, was a businessman and was not involved in politics.

In Dec 1951, he came home from a gathering which was discussing who would be best to serve the community in the municipal elections. He broke the news that the community had selected her.

"He was afraid that I might lose the election, but my father was firm and told him, 'we will see to it that she wins'."

Devaki, however, took it all in her stride. She learned all she could about the IMP and its causes, agreed with the Manifesto and decided that it was for her.

"I told myself, God wants me to contest so I will contest."

Her practicality and matter-of-fact outlook on life is evident here as it is throughout all her achievements and milestones over the years

"We had rallies at many places, at the Kilat Club, Bukit Bangsar, the railway quarters at Sentul Main Avenue, and the Sentul Pasar grounds. Dato Onn would be there every single time."

Devaki remembers that each rally would kick off with Onn's address, then MCA would take over, and then Railway Union President R. Renumal would speak on behalf of the railway workers.

"Then I would speak on the Manifesto, about what it was to be in IMP, and what they would gain. When I stood at the platform at the

Devaki, from her younger days when she was a member of the Civil Defence (far right) to the veteran politician that she is today, is driven by passion and practicality.



Central Club, all those in the field would listen hard. I spoke in Tamil and in English. The children who were studying with me would come to hear their teacher talk, and their parents would be there too, listening."

And so she won. No doubt, it was at those rallies that she honed her political prowess, 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.

In those days, Indian women stayed at home. "No one taught them to come out as they were shy and had strict upbringings.

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

Wanita MIC was then established and went national in 1975, when MIC president Tan Sri V. Manickavasagam proposed for it. Devaki, in her relentless pursuit for members, recruited throughout the nation and was very much satisfied with her success.

"I educate women so that they'll educate their children. I feel proud that women have come up, although not enough," she says, referring to the 30% quota of women in prominent positions.

Her most cherished achievement, however, the Guardianship Act 1999.

"We had to canvass even from the opposition, and the National Council of Women's Organisation (NCWO) was the main vehicle. What took 12 years was worth it as it managed to allow single women to take care of their children."

Another vivid memory of her energy well spent was during the riots of 1969.

As a member of the Civil Defence, a form of National Service, Devaki donned the uniform, cap, socks and

shoes to take care of the riot victims and homeless, numbering around 3,500, at Stadium Merdeka.

"I was in charge of the medical clinic. We prepared milk for the children, and we clothed them all. We stayed there until there were about 250 left, then we moved them to the nearby Victoria Institution."

As a member of the auxiliary police, she was in charge of the remaining 250, and managed to move them out within three months.

Devaki's recollection of Independence still centres around Tunku Abdul Rahman and his echoes of Merdeka.

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

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

Once, he was about to go sailing, but cancelled his trip when he saw Devaki entering the

compound in her car.

We would talk about politics as usual," says Devaki.

She remembers his love for food and a favourite was a curry "made with eggplant and dried fish".

"We took a photo when he was eating this curry."

He also loved Indian mangoes, and Devaki reveals that Nehru and the Tunku were good friends, as they were both the first Prime Ministers of their countries.

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

Today, Devaki who has three children and five grandchildren, continues to recruit women members for MIC.

"As current Chairman of MIC Syed Putra, I aim to

increase that number. We have to encourage MIC members to register as voters, so I am still recruiting."

After 55 years in MIC, will Devaki ever call it a day? Her answer is simple.

"I cannot get rid of it. It's been in my blood since 1952." - MPS

