

Wind beneath the Wings.

Posted on

To describe Sicille PC Kotelawala simply as a woman of great versatility would be to merely skim the surface. Blessed with natural good looks, she's also an artiste with a deep sense of commitment to our cultural heritage, and a businesswoman with an acquired business acumen, which makes her an invaluable asset to her husband Deshamanya Lalith Kotelawala and his conglomerate -the Ceylinco Group. "From the time I got married I've been 'slightly linked' with the Ceylinco Group When I was twenty-one. my husband put me on the board of his first company Middleway Ltd.", says Sicille, who is today a Director of the entire Ceylinco Group consisting of over sixty Companies



It was the late Senator Justin Kotelawala, brother of Sir John Kotelawala (3rd Prime Minister of Sri Lanka) and Sicille's father-in-law, who founded the Group's first Company Ceylon Insurance Company Limited (today Ceylinco Insurance Co. Ltd), which was also the first fully owned Ceylonese Public Company registered under the Companies Ordinance of 1939.

Describing her early involvement with the Ceylinco Group Sicille says, "I was secretary to my husband for about eight years with no salary". Next came Kuwait Airways in the late 60s, "I was given a little cubicle in the Ceylinco building to run my office, selling one ticket a month. Business was very bad because we were flying out of Bombay and to persuade a passenger to fly from here to Bombay, stay overnight to catch the Kuwait Airways flight, was a little difficult", she adds. Today, the travel arm of the Ceylinco Group is 'flying high, having ridden a wave of success that blossomed with the 70s boom in travel. Presently Sicille is mastering computers in preparation for the 21st century with the help of Ceycom another other venture of Ceylinco.

The younger daughter of former Justice Minister and Diplomat Sam P C Fernando, Sicille says, "I used to always think I could never become a businesswoman. I didn't want to be talking money, profit and loss, but little by little I got involved. However, I must admit my husband never pressed me into it. We have always believed in giving each other space, for which I'm most grateful. But wherever I was needed, I would step in and help."

The Fernando family lived in Moratuwa and Sicille grew up in an environment which today's children can only read about, "we were brought up in an environment of animals, antiques and books. We always had a book on every subject; be it gardening, poetry, literature, appreciation of antiques, ethnic jewellery etc.. there was always a book in the house for reference.

Sicille was five when she took up lessons in ballet and tap dancing. Then, her father arranged for Heen Baba-Sri Lanka's most famous exponent of Kandyan dance to teach his two young daughters this traditional art. That was the beginning of Sicille's most rewarding involvement with the Kandyan dance form.

Sicille led a very active childhood with all the encouragement from her parents who were themselves artistic. She says, "infact they first met each other while taking part in a play. In their day and age it was not very common to act on stage. My father was a lawyer and my mother was a teacher who eventually taught English to

the British for about fifteen years in London". She goes on to say that her mother was from Matara and her father from Moratuwa, "that's why the ensuing product is lethal," she adds with a laugh.

Sicille's childhood activities took on many dimensions. By the age of eleven she was already in her schools's senior athletics team. She debated for her school and also studied eight different types of dancing.

Harbouring an ambition to become a doctor some day, Sicille studied science but her father persuaded her to switch over to economics. She then went over to London and began preparing for her Cambridge entrance. "Then Lalith wanted me to come back and get married. He didn't want me to be away for three years." "My father was very disappointed that I didn't spend at least a year at Cambridge", says Sicille, who admits that at the time she too regretted not having gone to Cambridge, "but on hindsight I don't regret it. Because had I stayed on in London, I would have ended up very anglicized and might have found it rather difficult to fit in here. We were brought up to have our feet firmly on the ground, to deal with people from different walks of life and when I came back in 1961, there was a socialist government in power and we had to do without many things. My father was also the Minister of Justice at the time and my dress code and conduct had to be proper, so it was a bit of an adjustment even then".

While in London, Sicille's love for Kandyan dancing never ebbed, "we formed the Sinhalese Institute of Culture and I was able to continue with my dancing. I held several performances at the Tea Centre, danced solo at the Commonwealth Institute and at Oxford and also produced ballets and conducted classes in Kandyan dancing."

Sicille met her husband-to-be when she was only fifteen but her father did not permit her to marry until she was twenty-one, "he thought I should wait until I knew my own mind". Commenting on her husband's views on her dancing she says, "he first saw me dancing only the Cancan and the Hawaiian dance. He teased me like mad about it and made me so embarrassed that then and there I gave up Western dancing", her Kandyan dancing however met with the approval of her husband and after marriage she went on to become a teacher of Kandyan dancing at her Alma Mater, Bishops College. She also took part in several ballets the most memorable being the 'Kuveni' ballet, "that was soon after I returned from London. It was a sensational ballet at the Lionel Wendt", says Sicille.

Sicille's remarkable talent was not confined to dancing alone, She was also very much involved with English theatre, "I started English theatre when I was only ten years old and I have played lead roles in 'Ram & Sita', 'Kuvani', Chekov's 'Seagull' and Eugene O'Neill's 'Marco Millions' produced by stalwarts like Irangani Serasinghe, Percy Collin-Thorne, Lucien de Soysa etc., and several others". Sicille's part as Sita in the controversial play 'Rama and Sita' was captured on canvas by the eminent artist Nalini Jayasuriya, "the mime sequence of Sita chasing the deer was what caught Nalini's eye", says Sicille with pride.



Lalith and Sicille

As an impresario, Sicille has done much to educate and entertain the world about the Kandyan and Southern forms of dancing, She was the sole representative from Sri Lanka invited to the International Dance Conference in Hawaii in 1978, "it had always been my ambition to give my 'guru' Heen Baba proper exposure overseas with proper sponsorship. I also had to make sure that they were not exploited." Sicille eventually found the sponsorship she was seeking, through the Asia Society in New York, "they came thrice to Sri Lanka and auditioned all the Kandyan dancing troupes in Colombo as well as the Southern Province dance troupes They were not looking for choreographed ballet. They wanted the real traditional form and they felt that Heen Baba's troupe was steeped in tradition. So, they finally chose us. In 1974, Sicille took Heen Baba and his troupe to the United States, where they toured twenty-two cities from coast to coast and performed at prestigious venues such as the Carnegie Hall and the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC, receiving

standing ovations and excellent reviews in the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times and Washington Post.

Stemming from that tour was yet another one with the Southern Province dance troupe. "I chose eight people from the deep South who had hardly been to Colombo and never been on stage but specialised in the typical Southern ritualistic dance forms. They were a sell out all over the United States", says Sicille proudly. However, preparing for the tour had not been plain sailing. Sicille had to obtain fire licenses through the sponsor — Asia Society, for the troupe to perform the ritualistic fire dance. "they asked me if we could use plastic torches instead of the traditional 'dum mala' since they were having difficulties in obtaining a fire license and I promptly replied, we are not Hollywood. Sorry we can't come'. They were so desperate and some how managed to get the fire licenses and we proceeded. It was quite amusing to see people holding on to fire extinguishers on either side of the stage during the performance, but fortunately there were no mishaps."

Being the resourceful person she is, Sicille has also researched deeply into the history of the Kandyan dance – the Khohomba Kankariya and has written a monograph which was published by the Asia Society in New York. That

monograph can be found today in almost every library throughout the United States. "It was my father's last wish that I publish a book with all the volumes of research I had collected over the years. However, with other commitments taking over I was unable to put it together. But now I'm going to revamp it with all the photographs I have of my troupe and within this year it's going into print, she promises. The book will be titled The Classical Dance of Sri Lanka – The Kandyan Dance.



Sicille is also in the process of compiling four articles on Kandyan dancing, the Kandy Perahera and the 'ves' costume for the International Encyclopedia of Dance, which consists of dance forms from around the world. "I'm looking forward to it because they have been compiling it for years and being an encyclopedia. they've got to collect material from all over the world, edit it and bring it upto scholarly standards, she says.

Sicille, who recently celebrated her birthday says, "I'm a woman who is very happy to divulge my age, because when you reach your 50s, you can take stock of your life. I can't ever see either my husband or myself retiring. We enjoy our work and if our faculties help us I think we have to fulfill a major commitment to our country and that is why I believe we have been placed on this earth for."

A deeply religious person, her birthday also has a special significance because it was on that date, a few years ago, that His Holiness the Pope visited Sri Lanka.

“With the help of a dear friend I managed to get a pass to see the Pope during his departure at the Airport. There were only about thirty of us there and when he reached me down the line I was quite anxious to tell him that it was my birthday. He immediately placed the sign of the cross on my forehead and gave rosary” she says with unconcealed pride.

Although Sicille is no longer actively involved on stage, her passion for dancing is an important aspect of her life. “I have found through experience that it is valuable to be a little visionary and artistic because it gives a creative bent in business, which I’ve discovered I share with my husband. If he didn’t have that. I don’t think he could have diversified into such a big conglomerate of some sixty odd companies.”

When Lalith Kotelawala was awarded the prestigious Deshamanya” title he aptly opened his speech with the line from the famous song “Wind beneath my wings referring to his wife of course. It was a compliment that said it all, for it was Sicille who first came up with the idea to start a bank the Seylan Bank. Sicille says, we were having breakfast one morning when Lalith said that he was bored and wanted to retire. He felt there were no more challenges since the insurance arm of the group had reached the number one position along with several others in the group. I told him, don’t retire, start a bank. It was an instant idea I had and not planned.



Always in touch with Kandyan art and tradition

I also asked him to call it “Seylan’-a conjunction of Ceylao (Portuguese term for Ceylon) and Ceylineo. It later dawned that it was also a conjunction of Sicille and

Lalith". Hence, Seylan was spelt with an 'S' instead of C. at Sicille's request.

With a history of Banking in the family it seems only natural that the tradition be maintained: Lalith Kotelawala's great-grand-father William Dias had been a shroff at the Mercantile Bank and Sicille's paternal great-grand-father formed S.C. Fernando and Company one of the first private Banks to issue its own cheques during the coffee boom.

Seylan Bank Ltd., commenced its banking operations in March 1988 and was the 6th indigenous Sri Lankan commercial bank to be set up in the country, "there have been exciting moments such as when the Seylan Bank took over the BCCL. It was a ten minute decision and Reuters carried a report subsequently that Sri Lanka was the only country which paid back the BCCI depositors within six months", explains Sicille.

Yet another area she found her talents could be applied to was jewellery designing. When Blue Diamonds Jewellery Worldwide the jewellery arm of the Ceylinco Group commenced operations. Sicille's original designs turned into a great hit. The company researched and developed the computerised, clear carbonlooked setting of diamonds which brings out the entire lustre of diamonds and it was Sicille who helped in perfecting the curve on a single piece. "I designed a ring and they eventually managed to perfect the curve which led to the life-size diamond studded tennis ball" "Blue Diamonds Jewellery Worldwide was commissioned by DeBeers to design and manufacture the Dropshot Tennis Trophy for the 1993 Kraft Tennis Tournament.

The 58.8 carat life-size diamond tennis ball trophy was won by Steffi Graf "I was there when the presentation was made", adds Sicille. Blue Diamonds Ltd., are the Site holders for the world-renowned DeBeers diamonds in Sri Lanka. Using state-of-the-art machinery and highly skilled manpower the Company specialises in the processing, cutting and polishing of diamonds. It produces and exports the finest quality diamonds to meet the highest Swiss standards. When Sicille visited China in 1985, she made a commitment there, that one day, she would bring the Ceylinco Group to China, "now some of our finest officers from the diamond factory are training the Chinese in diamond cutting.

Even after years I was able to meet that commitment", she says. The Ceylinco Group today is managing diamond cutting factories in China and Thailand, with Sri Lankan experts in the field involved in training. Incidentally, the diamond cutting

factory belonging to the Group located in Katunayake is considered to be the largest in the world.

The sand bar in Bentota on which Hotel Ceysands stands to- day another Ceylinco enterprise won the hearts of both Sicille and her husband alike, “I told my husband, this is the place. I have never seen a place like this even in Hawaii and I knew it would be a winner. Everybody advised us against building a hotel on it. thinking the river might change its course some day”, nevertheless, the 100-room luxury beach resort Hotel Ceysands was built in 1974. “My husband used to travel down there every day and literally polish the brass, sweep the floors and prune the garden himself. Being a man who is so hands-on’ and dedicated this is how he motivates his staff. So, I too found myself getting dragged in, helping with the decor and so on, says Sicille.

Both Sicille and Lalith Kotelawala share a common philosophy, which is to help the poor and eliminate poverty. This common goal gave birth to the Sarana International Foundation- the charity arm of the group.

It was the late Sam PC Fernando, Sicille’s father, who once suggested to his in the early 60s, that he set aside a part of the groups’s prosperity to help the poor and hungry in Sri Lanka and so the Sarana Fund was formed, which eventually became one of Lalith Kotelawala’s pet projects. The Fund was sustained by voluntary contributions from the Ceylinco staff as well as those disbursed by the Group. Today, the Fund is known as the Sarana International Foundation.



“It will be run on a much greater scale than before, a lot of our friends abroad are willing to send donations. So, we have to guide that in a proper business context, in order not to fritter it away through handouts. It’s amazing how many people have come forward in Sri Lanka too and volunteered help”, explains a grateful Sicille adding, “I hope I could have a little fund for retired dancers and drummers because they have absolutely no way of eking out a living”

The Ceylinco building was among the worst affected by the bomb explosion in Fort, in January last year. The raging fire caused by the explosion could not however destroy the solid structure of the building which housed some of the Group’s subsidiaries.

“I was just a few feet away from my husband when the bomb went off. Even before I rose from the floor with glass spattered around, God took the fear out of me in a remarkable way”, says Sicille reliving the nightmare. Her resilience was probably what saved her husband’s life, “I was giving instructions almost involuntarily, to

carry Lalith whose face was covered in blood, down the stairs and not in the lift and right through to the hospital, my mind was clear, as I tried desperately hard to keep my husband's level of consciousness up at all times,"

Not forgetting his employees despite being critically injured, Lalith Kotelawala sent them a message from his hospital bed, "Ceylinco boys and girls are the best in the world. Don't let a bomb stop you,"

Within three days of the disaster, the Deputy Chairman of Ceylinco Group, Daya Senanayake, opened three buildings to house the offices which could no longer function at the main Ceylinco building, "I went on TV and gave my own little message to the public and I hope I was able

to uplift the morale of our employees because most of them didn't know how badly injured my husband was. It was such a disaster in which we lost everything", says Sicille who together with her husband look back at that unfortunate incident very philosophically, "we feel that some good has to come out of this and I think God has made us think on different lines, Whatever we do now has to be more charitable than it ever was before. I feel the Sarana Fund was not enough, that's why we decided to form it into an international fund on a larger scale, not for a few projects here and there. Our approach has to be different even in business", she adds.

Sicille offers her heartfelt gratitude to all those who rallied around her husband and herself offering solace when they needed it most," to the entire staff of the Ceylinco Group who have been so supportive, taken over responsibilities and done a marvelous job during my husband's illness and operation, our dear customers who have never let us down, the public of Sri Lanka, the doctors and staff of the General Hospital and Eye Hospital Colombo, Mr Cooling of Moorefield Eye Hospital in London, Lord and Lady Eden, all our friends and business associates both here and abroad. Quite a few of our business associates who could afford the trip came to Sri Lanka to visit us and over the months, they have pledged their support to the Ceylinco Group whatever the circumstances. That was so comforting to me. Even our President, the Prime Minister, politicians of all parties rallied around us, because I think they all appreciate my husband's contribution to this country. We were absolutely overwhelmed by the love and concern they showed us. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all these people for the morale and strength they gave me to see him through. It was a very difficult time for us", says Sicille. The pressure and responsibility on Sicille and those close to her was tremendous. Not only did they have to look after the welfare of her husband but also the future of the

entire Ceylinco Group with its sixty odd Companies, 200 branches islandwide, eleven thousand employees and several businesses abroad.

On the January 21st, this year, the redevelopment of the Ceylinco building commenced, “we’re going to redevelop it. We’ve been lucky in that we don’t have to bring down the building. It was mainly gutted with fire, but the structure is sound. So, it will have a new face and will hopefully be a better building with all the modern facilities”, she adds.

Sicille’s visit to Cairo as the sole delegate (by invitation) from Sri Lanka, at the Egypt Asia Conference on Trade and Investment held in November last year, brought her business acumen to the fore, “Ceylinco people as a whole are not the conference types, but this I accepted because my husband wanted me to do it.

When I agreed, I suddenly found myself having to talk solely on business.”, says Sicille, but having enrolled for a course in Business Administration just a month before her trip, Sicille made a presentation in Cairo which received huge ovations. “Two days before I left for Cairo, I discovered I was the only delegate from Sri Lanka. So I had to go armed with material to promote the country before Ceylinco. I also condensed the relevant areas such as diamonds and solar energy in the Ceylinco corporate video, which I had directed myself, interspersed with my dancers and drummers that make it very colourful and unique. Tradition, Variety and Harmony was its theme and those who saw it in Cairo were highly enthralled by it”, says Sicille.

During her twenty-two minute presentation Sicille put her best foot forward in promoting Sri Lanka as a destination for tourism and gainful foreign investment, as well as the Ceylinco Group’s business in diamond and solar energy. “I’m very grateful to Prime Minister Mrs. Bandaranaike, because she depicted state-of-the-art statesmanship in giving a non-governmental person such as myself, a letter of introduction mentioning my father and his career as a diplomat in Cairo, Lalith and the Ceylinco Group and finally greetings to the government and people of Egypt. When I read out this letter, they were greatly impressed because Mrs Bandaranaike is so well remembered and is a house hold word there. After that. I was pretty confident to bat on with my speech, says a grateful Sicille. “They even offered me desert land free, wanting us to come in”, she adds. The Ceylinco Group has plans to set up joint ventures in solar thermal power generation and a factory for cutting and polishing diamonds in Egypt.

Sicille's visit to Cairo also took her on a trip down memory lane. Her father was a former Ambassador to Cairo accredited to Jordan, Sudan, Yugoslavia and Lebanon as well, he was Ambassador to Cairo during President Nassar's time, who also became a very close personal friend of my father. In Fact, I used to send the 'peyava' from Sri Lanka to President Nassar when he had a cold and he gave my father an autographed silver tray as a personal gift and that I think is my only piece of dowry, which I treasure very much", she says.



Former Egyptian Ambassadors to Sri Lanka gathered at the Sri Lanka House in Cairo at a dinner hosted by the Sri Lankan Ambassador

When Sicille arrived in Cairo last year, it was his Excellency Chelbaya and his wife Madam Aida who helped her immensely, from the time of her arrival, they sat with me right through my interview with the Al Ahram newspaper, helping the journalists with the translations" says Sicille. Although she has rubbed shoulders with the richest of the rich, the mighty and the famous from a very young age, Sicille remains a charming, simple and a down-to-earth person at heart. When she was eighteen, she was presented in Court to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth and in later years she was to meet Princess Anne, His Holiness the Pope, Mrs Hilary Clinton, Mother Theresa, Mr & Mrs Harry Oppenheimer from the world of diamonds, film star Omar Shariff, President Mubarak of Egypt, Dr Christian Bernard and Dr. Yacoub, eminent heart surgeon. President Lee of China, the late Mrs Indira Gandhi and a host of others.

An unpretentious person, Sicille says her home is her haven, "I'm happiest when I'm at home". She affectionately refers to her adorable pet a dachshund named Rufus

(alias Roopet), as a source of inspiration to herself as well as to her husband, “being a ferret he understands everything and was the most affected by the bomb. He was never able to look at Lalith’s face when he had the injuries. He even discovered an injury on my leg. When I came home at midnight after the bomb, he started to growl at my feet, it was then that I discovered an injury on my leg. To have met a person like Sicille whose life has been a kaleidoscope of events, is a most rewarding experience and winding up an interesting conversation she says, “both Lalith and I have such a deep love for our country that we have never aspired to have one foot here and another there. Our workers and employees are like our children. We love to see them grow and blossom. After all, they are the future of our entire Group

“There, but by the grace of God go I”. is Sicille’s motto and it encompasses all her experiences in life.