



## T R I B U T E

### **Mythily Sivaraman, 1939-2021 Life and Legacy**

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Mythily Sivaraman, who died of Covid-19 on May 30, 2021, was a leading Marxist intellectual, writer, and Communist organiser of her time and generation. Although she was debilitated by Alzheimer's disease for more than 12 years preceding her death, and therefore cut off from participation in public life, the outpouring of sadness and solidarity at her death was as if this long period of disassociation had not occurred.

From the late 1960s onwards Mythily worked with, and wrote in depth about, the agrarian movement against class and caste oppression and violence in Tamil Nadu. In the early 1970s she became an active and well-recognised presence in the trade union movement in Chennai (then Madras) and in its leadership. From the 1980s and till the end of her active political life she was a leader of the Left women's movement in Tamil Nadu and India. Her leadership and interventions in campaigns against dowry, female foeticide and infanticide, caste-based violence, and domestic violence against women helped not only to build the women's movement and extend its reach to new sections of women, but also to change legislation on women's rights.

Brought up in Chennai in a middle class family, Mythily broke with family convention and decided to do graduate study in the United States. Her stay in the country coincided with a period of social and political churn. Radical students were occupying campuses, the Black Liberation Movement was at high tide, and there was widespread opposition by youth to the U.S. war of aggression against Vietnam. While working as a Research Assistant in the Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations in New York, she participated as a representative of the mission in committees relating to decolonisation. This brought her into contact with delegates from newly liberated countries, and further strengthened what were by then her broadly left-wing and anti-imperialist convictions.

In 1968, although there were many opportunities to remain in the United States, Mythily was clear that she would return to India – but not before making a clandestine three-week visit to Cuba, a trip that she would later recall, influenced her deeply. She would remain an admirer of Cuba and Fidel Castro for the rest of her life.

Mythily returned to an event that would become a turning point in her political life. This was the atrocity that took place in the small hamlet of Keezhvenmani in Thanjavur district on December 25, 1968, when 44 Dalit women, men and children were burnt alive in a hut on the orders of upper caste landlords. She arrived in the village within days of the crime, when the embers of the deadly fire still flickered on the ground, and a pall of despair and grief lay heavy on the village. It was a deeply affecting experience and Mythily, in response, turned to the power and reach of the written word. Through most of 1969 she wrote a series of articles, mainly for the popular press. She wrote with depth and clarity. Some articles were in journalist mode, leading the reader on a walk through a village that had just undergone a cataclysmic event. Others were more academic and scholarly, in which she unpacked the many layers of caste, class and gender oppression in rural Tamil Nadu, and examined the great conflagration that occurred when a movement by the rural oppressed confronted the forces that opposed it. She exposed the inaction of the State government led by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), a party that had come to power for the first time in 1967 on a plank of Dravidian identity and notions of social justice. She appeared and gave evidence before the Ganapathiya Pillai Commission, which was set up by the State Government to establish the reasons and suggest remedies for the agrarian tensions engulfing Thanjavur. Mythily's writings of the period were later published in the book *Haunted by Fire: Essays on Caste, Class, Exploitation and Emancipation* (LeftWord Books 2013).

One of Mythily's landmark essays, and an important contribution to the field of agrarian studies is "Rumblings of Class Struggle in Tamil Nadu," published in *Radical Review* in 1970 (vol. 1, no. 3, Apr-Jun). She wrote that the reasons for Thanjavur's agrarian unrest lay in its "iniquitous land ownership pattern and its enormous proportion of landless labour." Data from the Census of India 1961 indicated that the proportion of agricultural workers to total workers was 33 per cent in Thanjavur; the corresponding figure for the State as a whole was 18 per cent. she emphasised the persistence of pre-capitalist relations in farming in Thanjavur, and drew special attention to the "extent of tenancy, the exorbitant and illegal rents paid due to the pressure on land and the insecurity of tenants despite legal protection (*Haunted by Fire*, 2013, p 180). She also discussed the "peculiar distortions" in agrarian relations that followed in the wake of the Green Revolution in Thanjavur.

It was at this time, as Mythily grappled with the fallout of the Keezhvenmani massacre, that she made an important political decision, a decision in which V. P. Chintan,

freedom fighter, trade union leader and leader of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) played a decisive role. In an interview with the journalist Gnani in 2000, she recalled a meeting between her and Chintan that proved transformative. It resulted in her decision to join the CPI(M), a party with which her loyalties remained for the rest of her life.

The first half of the 1970s saw Mythily emerge as an active and influential leader of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU). It was a time when Chennai (then Madras), then a major industrial centre, was a hub of working class protest. The high expectations that workers had from the DMK government had dissipated owing to the latter's indifference to their issues and demands. Mythily became an office bearer of a number of unions, leading workers' campaigns and strikes. As President of the union at Tablets India, a pharmaceutical unit with around 300 workers, almost all women, she led a strike of the workers, finally taking her army of angry young women right up to the office of the Labour Commissioner of Madras. The women forced their way into his office to put their demands before him. In 1972-73 Mythily was elected Vice President of the National Carbon Company, a unit of Union Carbide, where she led a strike lasting 122 days, winning the demand for the regularisation of almost a hundred contract workers. She was Vice President of the workers' unions of Metal Box and India Meters, and after the Emergency (1975-77), became President of the union at Balu Garments. During the Emergency, she organised and led a big strike of quarry workers, most of them Dalit and all on temporary contracts, at Pallavaram in Madras. The issues of the quarry workers were resolved only after the Emergency, when Mythily led the negotiations that resulted in the regularisation of their employment.

Mythily's trade union activities overlapped with yet another important contribution. N. Ram and Mythily founded and were the moving force behind the quarterly magazine *Radical Review*, which began publication in 1969. Although the magazine had a run of only 12 issues, it was a publication of political significance. It carried articles on Marxist theory and issues of class and caste in India, on economic policy and agrarian relations, and several in-depth socio-political investigations of issues pertaining, for example, to industrial relations, the conditions of fish workers of Chennai, and housing and slums in Chennai city. Another aspect of its contemporary and continuing political significance is a unique collection of articles from the pen of the Communist leader and Marxist theoretician, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, a frequent contributor. His contributions covered issues such as the relevance and politics of Gandhi, the Asiatic mode of production, and Marxist theory as applied to India. Since Mythily's death, there has been a renewed interest in the paper, and a move to digitise its content and open it up to public access.

Mythily co-founded the Jananayaka Madar Sangam (Democratic Women's Association) with two veterans of the women's movement, K.P. Janaki Ammal and Papa Umanath, in 1973. After the Emergency, Mythily's attention and activism

turned increasingly towards the women's movement, first in Tamil Nadu, and with the establishment of the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) in 1981, in the rest of the country. To the Madar Sangam in Tamil Nadu, Mythily brought her understanding of the politics of gender, which she saw as inseparable from questions of class and caste, as well as her insistence on careful empirical analysis before framing demands. Her younger colleagues in the women's movement remember her practice of conducting on-the-ground surveys to understand the factors underlying issues such as dowry, female foeticide, caste-based violence against women, and child labour, before organising a campaign around it. This way the demands and goals of the campaign were clear from the start. She was known for pursuing campaign objectives doggedly until some measure of success was achieved. This often meant long hours spent by AIDWA activists in court proceedings with the affected families. On dowry, Mythily's insistence that a magistrate must conduct the inquest into a dowry murder was incorporated into later national legislation on dowry deaths. Mythily worked with AIDWA for the remainder of her active life, becoming Vice President and later a Patron of the organisation.

Mythily also worked with the Working Women's Coordination Committee (WWCC), which was established in 1979 to take up issues specifically relating to women workers as part of CITU activities. She had by then built up extensive contacts among white collar women office workers in Chennai. She was a regular visitor to central government and other public sector organisations, and organisations of commercial bank and insurance workers, postal workers, workers in public-sector telecommunications units, and others.

Mythily's role as a mentor to younger activists and sympathisers of the left movement remains a valuable contribution, and one remembered gratefully after her death. Her warmth and kindness, her political integrity and willingness to engage with issues and people, including those whose views she did not agree with, were qualities that attracted her varied circle of friends and admirers.

Mythily was aware of her declining health, and set upon a project on which she had long wanted to work, a memoir of the life of her grandmother, Subbalakshmi. The great culmination of this effort and phase of her life was the book *Fragments of a Life: A Family Archive* (Zubaan 2006). It tells the story of Subbalakshmi, a child bride who strained against the fetters of a conservative and patriarchal family to educate herself, identify with the freedom struggle, and find meaning in her life.

With her slow slide into Alzheimer's, Mythily became increasingly confined to her home, under the dedicated care of her family: her husband C. E. Karunakaran, daughter Kalpana Karunakaran and son-in-law Balaji Sampath.