

MERVYN DE SILVA – A TRIBUTE

Jayadeva Uyangoda

June 22 marks the fifth death anniversary of Mervyn de Silva, a colossal figure in Sri Lanka's contemporary English journalism. As a mainstream journalist, Mervyn had some distinctive and unique qualities. He was a friend of the Left and the trade union movement, with intellectual sympathies towards radical and anti-systemic movements, although he associated himself quite closely with the leaders of the political Right. Mervyn was never an ethno-nationalist, and in fact he showed no mercy towards ethnic chauvinism. Mervyn also had an incredible sensitivity to the trajectories of Sri Lanka's political and social change. Even before the 1971 insurgency, he foresaw the political consequences of the continuing alienation of the educated, rural youth of Sri Lanka's Sinhalese society. Similarly, he had an accurate historical sense of the decisive shift that Sri Lanka's Tamil nationalist struggle would take in the late 1970s through a radical departure from the parliamentary and negotiatory politics. Mervyn was an exceptionally gifted writer in English. He was the stylist par excellence, and the stylistic splendor of his literary idiom accurately reflected the flamboyance of his lively personality. Among the journalists I have known and seen in South Asia, Mervyn was undoubtedly the best-dressed. With personal mannerism of the intellectually sophisticated, he also had an amazing capacity to laugh at others as well as himself.

My personal acquaintance with Mervyn de Silva began with the journal he founded, *Lanka Guardian*. Mervyn launched LG, as Dayan, Mervyn's son used to call it, in 1978, after he found himself unemployed for a couple of years. He lost his then prestigious position as Editor, *Daily News* around 1975 in a battle with the United Front government's strongman Felix Dias Bandaranaike. The legend had it that Mervyn used the compensation money he got from the Lake House to start the LG. It was no accident that the first issue of the LG came out on May 1 of the year 1978.

Interestingly, I began my own 'writing career' in English with the *Lanka Guardian* when I was at Peradeniya University in the second spell as an undergraduate there. Dayan and I were classmates in the Political Science Special degree class with Dr. K. H. Jayasinghe, Professors Wisva Warnapala and Ranjith Amerasinghe as our teachers. I had just resumed my undergraduate career after nearly seven years tenure in what we called at that time 'the Queen's Boarding House.' I was also one of those successful cases of rehabilitation of the 'misguided' *thrashavadi* (terrorist) youth, belonging to the first generation of the JVP. When I went back to Peradeniya straight from Welikada, Professors Panditharatne and Karl Gunawardena, the Vice Chancellor and the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, generously allowed me to resume my undergraduate studies. In my class was Dayan Jayatileka, Mervyn's son, with whom I

immediately established a close friendship. When Dayan brought to Peradeniya the first issue of LG, I was immediately attracted to it because of its Left-progressive outlook as well as the political and interventionist thrust. My first piece of writing that Mervyn published in an early issue of the LG was a letter to the editor. Entitled 'Ugly Scene,' it described how a group of remand prisoners was made to walk across the Kandy town tied to handcuffs and without any concern for their human dignity. A few months later, I wrote a piece on Rukmani Devi after her sudden death, placing her in a socio-cultural context. Mervyn published it in the LG giving it some prominence. He had copy-edited my English essay, giving it some stylistic respectability. Through Dayan, Mervyn had sent me a message encouraging me to write more on art and culture. Then I started writing on cinema and theater. That is how I became an amateur literary critic during my undergraduate days. Later on I wrote political pieces as well, including a series on the JVP and on the right of self-determination of the Sri Lankan Tamil people.

Thus, most of my memories of Mervyn are associated with the *Lanka Guardian*. From the perspective of the intellectual history of Sri Lanka during the past three decades, the LG, which came out twice a month, was one of two important developments occurred in the immediate post-1977 period. The other was the launching of the Social Scientists' Association in 1977 and the Movement for the Inter-Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE) in 1978. The context against which these three institutions – LG, SSA and MIRJE – emerged was characterized by the triumph of the political Right under the UNP, the serious setback suffered by the Left and progressive forces and the rise of Sinhalese communal violence against the Tamil minority. After the UNP's massive electoral victory of 1977, which also saw the unprecedented defeat of all progressive forces, there was also a distinctly right wing drift in the political process. Liberalization of the economy and the new constitution of 1978 were the pillars of the new Right-ward trend in public policy reforms of the Jayewardene regime which soon turned itself to be politically repressive as well as authoritarian.

During this period of setbacks for the Left and progressive forces, the SSA provided organizational space for the intelligentsia, while MIRJE provided the forum for the activists. Mervyn came to the meetings of the SSA and MIRJE, thereby closely associating himself with the most active intellectual-political formations at the time. The *Lanka Guardian* of the late 1970s and the 1980s developed itself into a mirror of these developments by providing space for debate, discussion and reporting on themes like the political economy of liberalization, the agrarian crisis, emerging crisis in the plantations, trade union politics and more importantly the sharpening crisis animated by the increasingly intractable Tamil

national question. Mervyn also published in the LG papers presented at academic seminars in Colombo. Among the LG's frequent contributors were Regi Siriwardena, Jayantha Somasunderam, Godfrey Gunatilleke, Newton Gunasinghe, Kumari Jayawardena, Nihal Perera, U. Karunatileka and myself. Dayan did a regular feature under the pen name Chinthaka. Mervyn himself wrote the main column on current political developments, with razor-sharp insights into what we saw as the drift towards constitutional authoritarianism under the new UNP. He also regularly wrote analytical pieces on regional and international politics. Mervyn described himself as a self-taught international relationist, notwithstanding the fact that he remained Sri Lanka's best-informed analyst of international politics.

My first meeting with Mervyn was an unforgettable one. Gamini Dissanayake, who now lives in Canada and writes an astrological column to the *Sunday Observer* in Colombo, had joined Mervyn to work on the LG. Mervyn was operating from a small office at the Fort's YMBA building. Gamini had run into a major controversy with Lester James Pieris after he published in the LG an essay sharply critical of Lester as a film-maker. It was Gamini who took me to Mervyn's office at the YMBA building and introduced me to him. Mervyn was smoking a Dunhill cigarette and typing away something on a fairly old type-writer. What fascinated me was the style of his typing. He used only the two forefingers of his hands to hit the typewriter's keyboard. But he was pretty fast. He greeted me, but did not have a conversation as such. He said something which I did not quite understand and then burst into laughter. Gamini Dissanayake responded to Mervyn with an equally loud laughter. I felt totally out of place. I asked Gamini what was it all about. That morning, Mervyn has had a breakfast meeting with JRJ. Mervyn had just read out one of the lines of his Sunday column 'Men and Matters', which he wrote under the pen name Kautilya. In 'Men and Matters,' Mervyn presented deep political analysis in the form of cutting humor. When it comes to political satire in English Mervyn was unrivalled in South Asia, because his writings had wit, humor, penetrating insights and intellectual depth.

On a subsequent occasion, he invited me to a drink with him. This was somewhere in 1979 when the LG office was shifted to Union Place. He took me in his black Morris Minor taxi to the Colombo Golf Club restaurant, one of the greatest shrines of the Colombo bourgeoisie. Amazed and almost paralyzed by the intimidatory class ambience of the place, I sheepishly followed Mervyn and sat at the bar. He offered me a can of chilled beer. This was my first encounter with canned beer, chilled or otherwise. Being an ex-village boy who had some audacity to hang around with Colombo's middle class intellectuals, this was one of my unforgettable experiences of being initiated to modernity and urban, elite culture.

By this time Mervyn had indeed initiated me to one not-so-popular practice in Sri Lanka's post-colonial modernity -- writing in English. Later Mervyn invited me to the Orient Club for drinks. At the Orient, Mervyn was often seen in the company of some of the outstanding minds of that period -- Newton Gunasinghe, Ralph Pieris, Shelton Kodikara and Charlie Abeysekera. I would occasionally be a guest of Mervyn, Newton or Shelton. There we used to have intensely engaged political discussions. Mervyn often demonstrated that he had access to the thinking of the leading political actors at the time -- J. R. Jayewardene, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Anura Bandaranaike, Ronnie de Mel, Gamani Dissanayake, Lalith Athulathmudali. Newton complemented Mervyn's informative inputs with a sharp sociological analysis of politics. Among those who joined our drinking-cum-political analysis circle at the Orient often as Newton's guests were Quadri Ismail and P. Sivaram, two outstanding journalists of the new generation. When a few years later, I myself became a member of the Orient Club, providing amusement to some of its urbane members, I once treated Mervyn to a cool beer at the bar. At that particular occasion, Mervyn was an unhappy man. President Kumaratunga had repeatedly denied him an interview for the London-based *Financial Times*. That was the time when I was quite close to President Kumaratunga. Mervyn was telling me how close he was to Mrs. Bandaranaike, President Kumaratunga's mother, when she was the Prime Minister. Although I tried my best, I could not fix that appointment for Mervyn. But this episode revealed to me an interesting change in the sociology of Sri Lankan politics. Many people like Mervyn, who once enjoyed the trust and the company of the leaders of the old ruling class are no longer seen useful by the new ruling class led by Chandrika and Ranil. Their advisors, confidantes and allies are now recruited from two sources: the ranks of the subordinate social classes of the Sinhalese society and the circles of intensely loyal personal friends, belonging to their own age group.

Concerning me, both Mervyn and his wife, aunty Laxhmi, demonstrated an admirable and rare capacity to transcend class, social and generational distinctions. He is one of those few people who made me feel less awkward in the not-so charmed circles of the Colombo bourgeoisie as well as the urban intellectual elites. Mervyn, like me, was a village boy who came to the city, worked in the city and lived in the city. Unlike other ex-village boys of his generation who lived in the city as members of the professional elite, Mervyn never played with agrarian romanticism or Sinhalese-Buddhist chauvinism. He was a secular, non-racist, progressive intellectual who valued human rights, multi-culturalism, political pluralism and left-wing political activism. That was Mervyn de Silva I knew and admired. ■

Jayadeva Uyungoda is Co-Editor, *Polity*.