
IN MEMORIAM

R.A.L.H. GUNAWARDANA – AN APPRECIATION OF HIS LIFE AND SCHOLARLY CONTRIBUTIONS

Gananath Obeyesekere



I was saddened to hear the news of the death on 16 November of Leslie Gunawardana, someone whom I knew from our Peradeniya days and with whom I have maintained a long friendship even when I, unlike Leslie, lived and worked in the US for much of the time. He was ill for a long period and was undergoing daily dialysis and all of us knew, as indeed he did, that he would not last very long. Even though his death was expected, it is always sad to lose a friend who till the very end of his days continued his scholarly work unabated. Also unabated was his passionate commitment for social justice and the ills of ethnic discrimination that he critiqued in his writing. Although he was Vice-Chancellor of the University of Peradeniya and for sometime a minister for science and technology, he was not a public speaker offering platitudes but someone who expressed his social and political concerns through his scholarly writing. That writing, an enduring monument to his memory, is extensive in length and wide in scope and contains over a hundred scholarly articles and books both in English and in Sinhala. They deal with Sri Lanka's ancient and medieval past and the relevance of that past towards understanding the present. Let me present a few of the themes that animate his writing.

His first major book entitled *Robe and Plough: Monasticism and Economic Interest in Early Medieval Sri Lanka* was published in 1979 and contained the seeds of much of his later work. Given Gunawardana's Marxist orientation it was natural that he would relate Buddhist monasticism to the social and economic order although he eschewed any kind of naïve economic determinism. The book concerned, among other things, an important paradox: Buddhist monasticism, as much of Buddhist theory and practice, had to adapt itself to the socio-political world in which it found itself. Thus *Robe and Plough* is not only a brilliant descriptive account of medieval

monasticism but also one which dealt with phenomena antipathetic to the spirit of ancient Buddhism. It seems that in medieval times Sri Lankan monastic landlordism was well established largely owing to the largesse of monarchs who, like their Indian counterparts in respect of Brahmins, had given extensive properties for the maintenance of the Sangha. But this entailed many seeming contradictions, such that slaves became an essential component of monasticism, however benign that "slavery" was in comparison to European forms that developed later. Slaves were however not uniquely monastic; they existed among the wealthy of that time and later. Thus Leslie's work deals with the intersection of the monastic and the political order alongside with everyday lay life. The one cannot be separated from the other; each takes its meaning and significance in their interrelationships. From the point of view of Sri Lankan historical scholarship this work was a landmark event in critical historiography that until then was mostly concerned with descriptive accounts of the devolution of regimes (kings and governors, one might say) such that economic, political and social relations were for the most part relegated into separate "sections" of historical writing. It is as if lived existence can be confined to the barracks.

Leslie's concern with medieval and ancient Sri Lanka led him almost inevitably to discourse on the nation's great achievement, the complex hydraulic networks (the "tank" system as it is foolishly known), that brought about vast areas of arable land into the cultivation of rice and other crops. He is an astute critic of those who have suggested that this feature of civilization led to a form of "oriental despotism." His early research also prompted him to write on some key technical features of the hydraulic engineering, focusing on the complex technology associated with sluice gates. These

interests and his later work on early science and technology in South Asia have a technical quality about them that might not interest the present reading public. I hope that Leslie's papers will be posthumously republished in book form so that both the Sri Lankan and international scholarly public will have ready access to them and reflect on them with the attention they deserve.

The multiple themes in Leslie's writing inevitably led to the recognition that no island is an island unto itself but is involved in a wider world. Hence he is concerned with another theme, namely, the implications of ocean routes and international relations of the time on the local situation. Many historians have of course recognized this interplay of the "global" with the local, and the other way around, but Leslie's work has recognized its importance for understanding our ancient and medieval history. There is a kind of "trans-nationhood" to the historiography of the nation and Gunawardana illustrates it in many ways, as for example his work on the linkage between Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, especially Thailand and further his explorations into Tibet in a 1990 essay on Sri Lankan nuns' biographies found in Tibet. Let me now mention another example that might interest Sri Lankans. We know that Magha of Kalinga (1215-1236), with Tamil and Kerala mercenaries, led one of the most devastating invasions in Sri Lanka resulting in the conquest of the Rajarata and the destruction of Buddhist places of worship, graphically described in the *Cûlavansa* and the near-contemporary *Pûjâvaliya*. There is no doubt that these texts speak of "Tamil" invaders in the most horrifying terms. Yet, as Leslie and his friend and collaborator Amaradasa Liyanagamage point out, it is also the case that when this invasion occurred, monks fled to South India and there in the Chola country they sought refuge. This is no isolated pattern either. We know that the resistance to Magha was led by Vijayabahu III and he, the chronicles tell us, brought back these monks and in his reign and in the reign of his son, the great Parakramabahu II, the lapsed higher ordination was resumed with the aid of Tamil monks. And one of the founding monks of a notable monastery of the Dambadeniya period was a Tamil. It should also be remembered that several kings right down to the later Kotte and Kandyan times were knowledgeable in Tamil. And some of the kings of the Gampola and Kotte kingdoms had Tamil or Kerala ancestries, the most obvious examples being Bhuvanekabahu VI (Sapumal Kumaraya) and his brother Vira Parakramabahu VIII (Ambulugala). In other words scholars like Gunawardana and Liyanagamage point out that Sinhala and Tamil are not simple oppositional categories but instead their interplay must be grasped to properly appreciate our past and its continuing presence.

In his complex presentation of the past Leslie demonstrates how present day nationalists simplify the past to create a view of a sanitized Buddhist culture and reify the oppositional dualism of Sinhala versus Tamil, Buddhists versus others. Two of his papers are especially illuminating in this regard, these being, "The people of the Lion" and "Historiography in a time of ethnic conflict: construction of the past in contemporary Sri Lanka." There have been two responses to this dimension of his work. One is a scholarly reaction that is quite understandable because no one can be certain about what actually occurred in history and one must be satisfied with "reconstructing" history from the bits and pieces of evidence that we possess. History is always a matter of interpretation and interpretation permits considerable leeway for disagreement. There is and should be scope for scholarly debate. The other reaction is hostile vituperation, mostly in intemperate language that nowadays appears in every part of the world and, even as I write this, in the United States. In Sri Lanka it is by people who claim to be Sinhala Buddhist nationalists ignoring the norm of "right speech" that the Buddha himself promulgated. Leslie is right to ignore the latter persons who seem to have forgotten that "nationalism" was a term invented in Europe, even though there are "family resemblances" to nationalism in other polities. I do not know whether Leslie believed as I do, that fanatics should be left to choke in their own venom.

After his stint as Vice-Chancellor, Leslie moved into the political arena and was briefly minister of Science and Technology in Chandrika Kumaratunga's government during the period 2000-2001, not as an elected representative but as an appointed one. I doubt his appointment was based on his knowledge of ancient irrigation technology! Rather it was his long time association with the Communist Party of Sri Lanka, a partner in the Kumaratunga coalition government. I do not agree with Leslie's politics. Yet one of the interesting features of our political life is that it was possible for someone like me to have friends with political opinions I do not share, and some of which I openly condemn, as long as these political views do not entail intolerance or condone ethnic violence and discrimination or shackle our freedoms. We live in a small but complex culture and many have friends and relations on every side of the political spectrum. Friendship that cannot straddle differences is no friendship at all. For many in Sri Lanka continuing friendship and kin ties can involve considerable juggling, not always with happy results. With Leslie I have had no problem because his Marxist political beliefs were in fine tune with what I would call his "Buddhist humanism." I have known other Marxist leaders who, at least in their later careers, combined their Marxism with reasonable, sometimes

even disconcertingly respectable, bourgeois or capitalist virtues! I believe that Leslie never lost his compassion for the poor of our nation. I remember vividly his visiting our hilltop home in Kandy with his wife Viru a few months before his death. It was evening and the two of us were in our balcony overlooking the Eastern hills, the beautiful Dumbara valley below and the distant Knuckles range. And then as night fell there emerged another kind of beauty, the flickering lights from thousands and thousands of village homes, most of which one could not see during the day, hidden as they are by thick foliage. Leslie said, “a few years ago all would be in darkness but now, see, how many of our poor folk have electricity.” This is of course true. His was not a political statement defending any particular regime but recognition that some progress has indeed occurred for many of the poor and that is something one can be proud about. One can also be proud of the fact that Leslie was a “village boy” who entered the University from Tholangomuva Central School, itself a product of our Free Education system, a system that successive governments undermined and is now beginning to be dismantled. From Tholangomuva to the University of Ceylon where he obtained a First Class Honours degree in History and reaped many prizes and awards; and then on to London where he obtained his PhD in 1965, studying under the distinguished Dutch scholar and teacher, J.G. de Casparis. Perhaps it was de Casparis who stimulated his interest in Southeast Asia and prompted his desire to learn Dutch and Chinese.

Unfortunately, his official position as Vice-Chancellor at Peradeniya and his political views alienated him from many of his colleagues, perhaps for wrong reasons, perhaps for right ones. But surely his colleagues ought to have appreciated his enduring contributions to Sri Lankan studies? Leslie’s sense of alienation combined with his impending illness pushed him into a life of a recluse, such that very few except close friends visited him. A scholar can easily become a recluse and in Leslie’s case his hermitage was his study, lined everywhere with books and from where he continued to write whenever his illness gave him some respite. My reminiscence of Leslie in his twilight years gazing at the evening lights has triggered another memory, one of many, of our long gone greener years. During the course of my fieldwork near Maha Oya I had visited one of the most fabulous, and little-known archeological sites in Sri Lanka, Rajagala, a huge, forested mountain, extremely difficult to reach, then a refuge for elephants, another of the many species fast disappearing

from our Island. I suggested to Leslie, sometime in the late 70s that we should visit this site. My wife and I and Leslie ascended the mountain and there before us were acres and acres of scattered archeological remains. Leslie was in top form discoursing at length on them that we did not notice time go by and then realized that dusk had fallen and the three of us had to go back. We missed the footpath on the first round and the darkness was closing in on us. We were getting anxious, climbing trees to try to glimpse a footpath, and fortunately hit upon the right path almost by accident and got back to safe ground. Years later that place became a refuge for the LTTE and I have wondered: what became of those priceless remains of our past? Did terrorism spare the site? Or more somberly, has another brand of cultural terrorists searching for treasure despoiled it? It is with a different form of sadness I note, as I am sure Leslie did, that treasure-hunting has become a way of life for many and politicians, even an occasional monk, have become complicit in it. Something beside the long war has trampled on our values; or perhaps the effects of that long war. It is no longer Magha of Kalinga who despoils our religious sites but our own people. Everywhere in the area I am engaged in current fieldwork, there is evidence of despoliation, as when stone pillars are taken to build houses for politicians. In a cave that held old “primitive” paintings dynamiters have been at work, searching for non-existing treasure. And so is it with other sites. If one cannot take pride in the remains of the past, what can possibly remain of our future?

For me Leslie was one of the truly creative historians of Sri Lanka and I feel different kind of sadness to think there are very few of his caliber remaining. As with the remains of the past being despoiled, so is it with the remains of learning in our universities. Leslie hoped, as many of us do, that scholarship will in the future burgeon once again although some of us won’t be there to witness it as we join Leslie in the silent land. His was a long illness and during that time his wife Dr. Viru Gunawardena was with him, his companion and friend and succor. She is the one who administered the injections he constantly needed and who supervised the daily dialysis performed at home. In her quiet and self-effacing way Viru possessed an understated and quiet heroism. Our love and sympathy go out to her and to their son Asela who lives in Seattle and was with his father during his last days. What else could one say? Impermanent are all conditioned things and separation from loved ones are the inevitable part of our species existence. ■

Gananath Obeyesekere is Emeritus Professor of Anthropology