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# RANAWEERA LESLIE GUNAWARDANA

## 1938-2010

Amaradasa Liyanagamage

Ranaweera Leslie Gunawardana (Leslie to his friends), one of the bright lights of the University of Peradeniya, is no more. It would take quite some time for us, - indeed he was my friend and colleague for over 50 years - to reconcile ourselves to the fact that this great scholar, probably one of the brightest of contemporary Sri Lanka, has departed for good. Being the most outstanding student at the University Entrance Examination (1956), he was awarded a scholarship apart from a government scholarship, to finance his undergraduate studies. At the B.A. Final Examination, Leslie gained first class honours in history and carried away as many as four awards in a row, consisting of the much coveted scholarships and prizes. What is indeed the more remarkable and noteworthy, is the fact that he never allowed the brilliant start to loosen its momentum and fizzle out into a lack-luster pale trudge. The contributions made by the emeritus professor to unravel Sri Lanka's past, including, on occasion, that of the adjacent Asian lands, stand out in bold relief. He was at once a highly respected historian both in Sri Lanka and abroad.

Leslie began his academic career in 1960 as an assistant lecturer in the Department of History, University of Ceylon (Peradeniya), and in due course in 1982, on the basis of a merit promotion, he was appointed to a personal chair in history. Subsequently he was elevated to the position of Dean of the Faculty of Arts (1991), before he reached the pinnacle as Vice Chancellor (1997-2000) of the University from which he had graduated. Right through he had an interest in left-leaning politics. He was appointed the minister of Science and Technology in the administration of President Chandrika Kumaratunge. I should, however, note that at no time did he allow political discourse to dilute the rigour of academic discipline.

The life and work of Leslie present a range of achievements, which cannot possibly be compressed into a brief statement such as this. His publications, in the form of books and research papers, add up to a total of well over 100. Similarly, the seminars and conferences which he had addressed over the years are amazingly extensive. Very many of were at indeed

prestigious international centres of learning such as London, Cambridge and Oxford, Chicago, New Delhi and Tokyo. His research deals with a variety of complex issues, such as the structure of the state, ancient and medieval science and technology of Sri Lanka, ethnic issues, historiography, Buddhist monastic organization of Sri Lanka with special reference to economic interest, and so on. His work is of lasting value, in the sense that, despite the intricate problems arising from precolonial sources of information, he finds his way into the deepest nooks and corners of the past, with the aid of his powerful searchlight. His work is meticulously thorough and reliable.

Heading the list of publications as a major item is his book, *Robe and Plough: Monasticism and Economic Interest in Early Medieval Sri Lanka* which is his doctoral thesis accepted by the University of London (1965). In this book, the author examines with amazing skill, the intricacies of the management of extensive monastic estates which belonged to the Sangha, the proceeds of which were utilized for the maintenance of vast communities of the Buddhist order and its monastic properties. Anyone who would like to know more about it may read the detailed review in my book, *Society State and Religion in Premodern Sri Lanka*, which I consider a fitting tribute to this great scholar. As remarkable as his scientific approach to the study of history, is the significance of the choice of research themes. Most impressive, indeed, is the work he had begun on a promising scale on the development of science and technology in ancient and early medieval Sri Lanka. He has to his credit five excellent research papers in this field: 1. Hydraulic Engineering in Ancient Sri Lanka: the Cistern Sluice 2. Inter-Societal Transfer of Hydraulic Technology in Pre-colonial South Asia: Some Reflections based on a Preliminary Investigation, 3. Craftsman as Artist and Innovator in Early Medieval Sri Lanka: Two Lamps with Hydrostatically Controlled Oil Reservoirs from Dedigama 3. Immersion as Therapy: Archaeological and Literacy Evidence on an Aspect of Medical Practice in Pre-colonial Sri Lanka and 5. Obstetrics and Theories of Reproduction in Ancient and Early Medieval

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Sri Lanka. These studies, notably those on hydraulic technology, medicine and medical practice, are distinct and original contributions to the study of science and technology in precolonial Sri Lanka.

Equally important are Leslie's contributions to the study of Sri Lanka's pre-colonial social organization and Buddhist institutions. *Robe and Plough*, cited above, is an outstanding work, a model for research in the history of Buddhist Monasticism, with special reference to economic interest. Again, he draws our attention to the oldest extant Sinhala manuscript, (12<sup>th</sup> century, *Karma-Vibhagaya*, discovered by Rahula Sankritya-yana) in a Tibetan monastery. It rises to great importance, when one admits how little is known of the chronology of the hundreds of old leaf manuscripts, written in Sinhala and Pali, found deposited in our monastic and non-monastic libraries.

Quite early in my own career, as a student at the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya (1954-58), I had planned a book on the Anuradhapura period of Sri Lankan history (*Anuradhapura Yugaya*), to meet the need for reading material in Sinhala, with the transition of the media of instruction from English into Sinhala and Tamil in the mid-fifties of the past century. I am pleased to record, in retrospect, how Leslie who arrived in Peradeniya two years later in 1956, happily joined me as a collaborator in this project. It was published by the Vidyalandara University of Kelaniya in 1961, where I was a member of its academic staff from 1959. He contributed two chapters on political developments and South Indian Invasions respectively, to its enlarged and revised edition of 1965 (reprinted 1987), filling a gap in the original text. This was the beginning of a lifelong link as friend and colleague.

It needs to be stated that Leslie has to his credit publications, both in English and Sinhala, while, understandably, most research papers are in English. Apart from the joint venture referred to above, and *Sivura saha Nangula*, among Sinhalese works, perhaps less-noted but immensely valuable is his work on the evolution of the historical discipline,

(*Itihasaye Atitaya*), placed in its widest spectrum. It is a substantial volume dealing with a theme, on which no noteworthy publication had appeared previously. One other item which calls for inclusion is *Reflections on a Heritage: Historical Scholarship on Premodern Sri Lanka*, Vol. I, Part 1 (2000), a symposium of selected writings of past and present scholars, brought out by a dedicated committee of senior scholars, of which he was a member. A Sinhalese translation of this work is available, too. Before proceeding further, let me hasten to add that, I have picked up only a few of the more noteworthy and representative items of writing out of a long list, with a view to highlighting the caliber of his scholarship, taking into account the limited space available to me.

When I conclude this note of appreciation, it occurs to me that, while little or nothing is said of the men and women who had served their community with such distinction and devotion when they are alive, the loss is highlighted and songs of praise are sung when they are dead and gone! Personally, I am relieved that my tributes to this great scholar were paid when he was alive and well, and they are available in print, both in English and Sinhala. Still on a personal note, even more assuaging is the fact that I had visited Leslie and spoken to him at his bedside, weeks before his condition deteriorated irretrievably. One more comment: personal idiosyncrasies, if he had any, are his own. Of this there can be no dispute; he was every inch a great scholar.

Our condolences go out to his beloved wife, Viru Gunawardana, herself a senior professor in the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science in the same university, who obviously shared his joys and sorrows all the way, caring for him during his illness in the final weeks, as well as to his beloved son, Asela, and his wife. I stated at the beginning of this note of appreciation that it would be very difficult for us to reconcile ourselves to the fact of the death of this great scholar. Perhaps the only way out is to reflect upon the eternal reality that 'Life is uncertain, death is certain' *jivitam aniyatam, maranam niyatam!* ■

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