
CONVERSATIONS WITH LESLIE GUNAWARDANA

Romila Thapar

I was fortunate to have had many long conversations with Leslie Gunawardana on my visits to Sri Lanka, as well as in distant places such as Kyoto and Seattle where we happened to be at the same time. He was one of those rare historians for whom history was what E.H Carr described as a dialogue between the past and the present. His mind scanned the world around him and sought connections and contexts, as is characteristic of the best of historians.

But his curiosity did not stop at explaining the past. He was sensitive to the present and more so to its inequities and concerned about where our kinds of societies were heading. And as part of this he was interested in his friends and their lives and thoughts. I remember an evening of talking about the cantonment culture of the British Raj (which is what I grew up in) and his questions and comments which led to my thinking about nuances that had earlier passed me by. For him it was getting to know a friend.

Conversations with Leslie, and a few others, during the term I spent at Peradeniya in 1978, made me realize that historians writing on early Buddhism in the sub-continent, would find the work done on the same in Sri Lanka, quite illuminating. The structure of the Sangha, the monasteries and the political relationship with royal power, provided insights into the same relationship elsewhere in South and South-East Asia.

Leslie's magisterial work was on what Max Weber has called 'monastic landlordism'. In *Robe and Plough*, Leslie extended the meaning of the term by relating it to the socio-economic context that was its crucible. This he did by creatively using

Marxist methods of analysis, without in any way reducing the argument to a mechanical causation. It became an intensive study of the political relationship of the Sangha and royal authority as well as the economic base of the authority of monastic establishments. These were aspects that had received less attention from historians but the work of scholars such as Leslie has now resulted in more studies along these lines.

The dichotomy between the householder and the renouncer, so central to early Buddhism and Jainism, became blurred in situations where monasteries began to function as social institutions – holding property and employing labour.

Many Marxists historians discarded the Asiatic Mode of Production and Oriental Despotism on theoretical grounds. But Leslie delved deeper and carried out a technical survey of the hydraulic network crucial to agriculture. The evidence he unearthed did not support the theory. He was able to disprove it on both theoretical and technical grounds. This was no mean achievement.

He wrote extensively on the Sinhala-Tamil inter-face. By analyzing the texts from early to later times he was able to show that cultural articulation was plural; and that there was no consistent hostility of the one towards the other. Situations of accommodation or of conflict varied and were determined by multiple factors. It was important for historical writing to reflect this multiplicity. This became a particularly significant study not only in itself but also as a contribution to the dialogue between the past and the present. ■

Romila Thapar is Emerita Professor of Ancient Indian History.

**Books by Kamla Bhasin available again
at the Suriya Bookshop.**