

LESLIE GUNAWARDANA – A LEFT SCHOLAR AND ACTIVIST

It is hard to imagine that Dr Leslie Gunawardana is no more, and harder to write a full appreciation of his multi-faceted life and work, and his commitment to research and social change. Some of us first met Leslie as an activist young lecturer at Peradeniya University who came to Colombo regularly to mobilize academics and others on a series of political issues. While he was involved in the path-breaking task of separating mythology from history (and was involved in many controversies) as an activist on the left he had plenty of “street cred” – appearing at May Day rallies and also at demonstrations of progressive scholars led by Prof. E.R. Sarachchandra in 1970. Leslie was also a founder member of the Civil Rights Movement in 1971.

The Social Scientists’ Association formed in 1977, drew in Leslie and many progressive academics into its discussions. At a seminal conference in 1978 on ethnic issues organized by the SSA, Leslie electrified the audience with his paper entitled “*The People of the Lion: Sinhala Consciousness in History and Historiography*” which was published in 1984 in the SSA book *Ethnicity and Social Change*. The SSA also published several of Leslie’s works – including a Sinhala translation of his major work *Robe and Plough* (*Sivura Saha Nagula*).

Other publications by the SSA of Leslie’s writings included *Historiography in a time of Ethnic Conflict – Construction of the Past in Contemporary Sri Lanka* (1995) and *Periodization in Sri Lankan History: Some Reflections with Special Emphasis on the Development of the State* (2008) which won an award. Important articles by Leslie reprinted by the SSA as pamphlets, were “The

Kinsmen of the Buddha: Myth as political charter in Ancient and Early Medieval Kingdoms of Sri Lanka”. “The Analysis of Preconial social formation in the writings of Karl Marx”.

The hallmark of Leslie’s scholarship as a historian was his commitment to theoretically guided historical research and interpretation of historical evidence in the light of trajectories of socio-economic transformation. In this regard, Leslie drew much inspiration from the Marxist method of historical analysis. He was also the first Sri Lankan historian to treat historiography an integral component of the vocation of history writing.

Several generations of students and academics in Sri Lanka have been influenced by Leslie’s scholarship, by his Marxist analysis and his political commitment. Internationally, Leslie’s work was also appreciated by many outstanding scholars, among them Eric Hobsbawm and Romila Thapar, who like Leslie are also “public intellectuals” combining their research as historians with strong political interventions.

To us at the SSA the value of Leslie’s contributions were not only that he kept alive a critical analysis of Sri Lankan history, but also that during the 30 years of ethnic conflict, his voice was loud and clear against ultra-nationalism and chauvinism. This was a time when reactionary forces were espousing such causes and courage was needed to go against this trend. Leslie’s contributions will continue to inspire those who have a commitment to social change. “The struggle continues” as Leslie would have reminded us. ■

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