

REVIEW ESSAY

Newton Gunasinghe: Selected Essays

Edited by Sasanka Perera. Published by the Social Scientists' Association, Sri Lanka. 240 pages.

This deceptively slim volume of Gunasinghe's essays is a fitting commemoration and tribute to perhaps Sri Lanka's best cultural Marxist. They reflect both Gunasinghe's activist as well as scholarly orientation, and are alternatively academic tracts, journalistic writings, and political polemics. All the essays were written during the years 1979-1988, a ten year period which saw the escalation of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, which was also a period when Sri Lankan sociological inquiry appeared to lose its sense of orientation and purpose largely due to the looming crisis. These essays then reflect a sense of emergency yet while many of them are highly political interventions they are theoretically and empirically grounded in a manner that much of what passes for sociology today in Sri Lankan universities is not. Thus even though one might disagree with the Marxist metanarrative of world capitalist development, and neo-Marxist narratives of world historical under and uneven development which frame much of Gunasinghe's work, one is bound to recognize their edge and analytic rigor.

Gunasinghe described himself as a structural Marxist, but I have referred to him here as a cultural Marxist as a means of locating his work in the context of Sri Lankan sociology. In the past decades much of the writing on post/colonial Sri Lanka's crisis and conflict, or what Gunasinghe himself termed "social disintegration", has fallen into one of two moulds. Firstly, the culturalist mould where the analysis focusses on the rise of Sinhala and Tamil cultural and linguistic nationalisms, such as Stanely Tambiah's or Ganannath Obeyesekere's work on the betrayal or transformation of Sinhala Buddhism, or Coomaraswamy's work on the myths of Tamil nationalism. The second mould has been the narrowly economic arguments advanced by liberal intellectuals who view economic deprivation and under privileged status as the reason for and often implicit justification of ethnic violence. This latter type of argument has also been used by Sinhala and Tamil nationalists to justify ethnic chauvinism.

Gunasinghe managed to synthesize analysis of the cultural and economic determinates of Sri Lanka's past and present crisis without succumbing to ethnic fatalism - the false yet fashionable nationalist argument that Sinhala and Tamils were always already enemies. Gunasinghe's outstanding achievement is the manner in which he questions spurious ethnic histories, while integrating culturalist analysis with the political economist's concern for material causes and contradictions of the Sri Lankan crisis. His frame makes for comparison of disparate domains of society; from kinship and caste organization in remote Kandian villages, to ethno-religious ideology, the transformation of the economy and labour movement, and post/colonial State formation.

"Newton Gunasinghe: Selected Essays" is divided into three parts. The first part consists of a succinct guide to its contents by editor Sasanka Perera, as well as a brief history of Gunasinghe's intellectual trajectory which give the reader a sense of the man and his work.

The second essay in the first section written by Uyangoda not only helps the reader locate Gunasinghe's work in the cross-currents of debate between Marxist and anthropological approaches to the study of culture and society, but also tells of Gunasinghe's intellectual journey, first at the Universities at Peradeniya and Monash in Australia and subsequently in England at the Manchester school dominated by the well known anthropologist Max Gluckman, and later at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex. Uyangoda's essay provides a sense of the vibrancy of the scholarly and political debate in which Gunasinghe participated, and which in turn shaped his thinking.

The second part of the book consists of Gunasinghe's early essays based on his research on agrarian social transformation, and is titled "Underdevelopment, Agrarian Relations and Social Structure". This work was mainly the outcome of his doctoral research in Kandyan villages.

The third and final part of the book consists of a series of outstanding essays on the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka.

Though these essays are sometimes uneven, it is possible to trace several intellectual concerns which run through many of them. These concerns are still with those of us who deal with cultural analysis today, particularly the question: What is the nature of sociology or cultural studies given that ideologically and/or value laden analyses often pass for sociological analysis? That is to say, what distinguishes cultural or social analysis from the ideologically loaded positions, taken for instance by those who advocate *Jathika Chinthanaya*?

Though no single essay is directly devoted to this question, several essays in this volume raise it, and finally Gunasinghe articulates it in a frontal attack on *Jathika Chinthanaya*, which most of you must be familiar with as one of the more theorized Sinhala nationalist positions on culture and identity. Thus Gunasinghe writes (and this will give you a sense of the passion and humor he brought to his task):

A dentist (Amarasekere) and a mathematician (de Silva) who are absolutely uninformed on classical social theory have embarked on ideological observations relating to the hazardous field of cultural and social investigation, precisely what they are not equipped to do. Here the Sinhala folk term "one cannot expect lice to lift stones" may appropriately apply to their efforts which are merely a reflection of false conscious

ness on the part of the Sinhala petty bourgeoisie at a period of profound social and political crisis. ...in an analysis one must ...distance oneself from everyday affairs and attain a rigorous level of formulation" (1996:231)

The question what is the nature of sociology given the fact that social or cultural analysis is a loosely defined thing, and that often there seems to be little distinction between common sense and sociological analysis, has been again recently articulated by the distinguished Indian Sociologist Andre Betaille. (*Economic and Political Weekly* Vol. xxxi, Nos 35-37, 1996). Gunasinghe's response to this question is that "mass consciousness is in a state of flux... one is obliged to distance oneself from everyday affairs and attain a rigorous level of formulation" (ibid). His main concern is then with formulating the right question or "problematique". What distinguishes sociological inquiry from *Jathika Chinthanaya* ideology is that the sociological problem is thoroughly empirically based and located in a larger field of classical social theory. It is his commitment to social theory and empirical research which enables Gunasinghe to again and again reformulate the false social questions which the peddlers of ethno-nationalism pose.

The second intellectual project that unites his later essays is the attempt to integrate the analysis of material structures with the analysis of ideas, ideology or cultural structures. At the same time Gunasinghe was critical of both the vulgar Marxism which refused to grant cultural practices any specificity and refused to consider the role of culture in defining social relations, as well as, French structuralism largely because of its ahistoricity.

Gunasinghe's critique of French structuralism is one of my favorite essays in this volume. Titled "Caste, Kinship and Marriage in Ceylon and South India", this essay is an evaluation of Nur Yalman's book, "Under the Bo Tree" (1951), which remains one of the finest ethnographies on caste in Sri Lanka. In this essay Gunasinghe takes on Yalman's argument that the Kandian Sinhala kinship system is a bi-lateral system based on cross-cousin marriage and that this kinship universe is the building bloc of caste in Sinhala society - in

some ways a classically orientalist anthropological exoticisation of Sinhala culture.

Drawing from his own fieldwork in Kandyan villages, Gunasinghe goes on to show how Yalman confuses levels of analysis by arguing that Yalman conflates kinship terminology with kinship behavior. He concludes the essay with an excellent critique of French structuralist approaches via a critique of Yalman's analysis, even as he commends Yalman's ethnography as truly exceeding its structuralist straightjacket - a measured compliment. This essay also gives us a sense of what the broader South Asian anthropological project which Gunasinghe was developing in the last years of his life, might have looked like. Yet Gunasinghe's critique has its own silences, particularly on the fundamentally male-biased mode of kinship studies in South Asia which have screwed the literature and hidden the importance of women's roles and agency in the institution of family and kinship.

Though from a post-structuralist or post-modernist perspective which might also be summed up as the end of grand narratives, or the end of theoretical orthodoxies which have constituted disciplinary canons (including Marxism), these essays are too consistently grounded in an academic Marxism which in many ways limited sociological and political inquiry for over a century in many parts of the academic world, east and west. Yet it is also arguable that it was precisely Gunasinghe's life-long engagement with academic and political marxisms which lent his analysis of Sri Lankan society and culture its theoretical sophistication and rigor. Not surprisingly then, it is when this framework is submerged and free of Marxist legalese that his writing is most lucid and the logic supple.

Finally, given Gunasinghe's conversence with various schools of Marxist thinking, it is somewhat curious that despite his interest in cultural studies and issues of race and ethnic hatred, he did not turn to the Frankfurt school particularly Adorno and Benjamin who theorized the racial-cultural aspects of anti-Semitism. Rather, Gunasinghe remained faithful to a neo-Marxist tradition inaugurated by Gramsci and extended by Althusser.

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