

There he came into contact with some of the best elements of young radical students from the Third World. Sussex was then the undisputed center of radical intellectual ferment among English universities. There he did his graduate work under Scarlet Epstein, Dudley Seers and Richard Jolly.

Dr. Gunasinghe's doctoral dissertation on the production relations in the Kandyan countryside was based on his research conducted while he was a research scholar at Sussex University. Dr. Gunasinghe's decision to focus his research attention on Sri Lanka was taken against the wishes of his academic father-figure, Professor Max Gluckman. Professor Gluckman wanted his brilliant student to be a specialist on Africa, as he himself was, and was even willing to offer him the prestigious Rhodes-Livingston fellowship. However, it was Dr. Gunasinghe's meeting with Professor E.R. Leach at Cambridge that finally set his mind firmly on anthropological research in Sri Lanka. He initially wanted to do a new study on Pul Eliya — the village in the north central province which Professor Leach himself had earlier studied. However, at Sussex he appears to have decided to move to the countryside in Udunuwara, an area which he already knew fairly well.

Dr. Gunasinghe's doctoral dissertation which was published in 1990 marks the beginning of rigorous Marxist scholarship on Sri Lankan society. Until then, concrete studies on Sri Lankan society were not the strong point in our Marxist tradition. Sri Lankan Marxism had produced only theoreticians of the classical mould. They were, as Lerski once put it, princes of pamphleteering, and not scholars in an academic sense. Anthropological and sociological scholarship, meanwhile, had remained the exclusive domain of the liberal tradition. Raghavan, Ralph Peiris, Leach, Obeyesekera and some others had already established a pre-Marxist scholarship on Sri Lankan society. Dr. Gunasinghe's doctoral study marked the beginning of a new stream of academic practice. He was the first Sri Lankan scholar to combine Marxist theory with intensive field research methods. His dissertation was also the first attempt to concretely study production relations and class formation in rural Sri Lankan society.

The intellectual backdrop against which Dr. Gunasinghe formulated his theoretical ideas, as developed in his doctoral work, warrants some comment. The seventies were the years when a great debate occurred among Marxist scholars all over the world. The focal point of that debate was the nature of capitalist development in Third World societies, or in peripheral capitalist formations, as it is put in the neo-Marxist discourse. The origins of this controversy are rooted in the formulation of the Dependency school of post-war Marxism, as represented particularly by Gunder Frank's writings in the late sixties. The view of the Dependistas was that imperialism had imposed a capitalist mode of production all over the world, through the mechanism of under-development and unequal exchange. Ernesto Laclau challenged this thesis in 1972, arguing that the Dependency thesis of Frank and others was theoretically flawed, since it treated capitalism not at the level of production, but at the level of exchange and circulation. This led to an intense and spirited debate among Marxist academics. Known as the "Mode of Production Debate", it set the tone for many social science research studies

in economics, history, political science, sociology and anthropology. The only Sri Lankan contribution to this world-wide debate was made by Dr. Gunasinghe in his dissertation and in some of his essays on agrarian relations in Sri Lanka. Although it may now sound somewhat of a familiar position, Dr. Gunasinghe developed the thesis that peripheral capitalism is specific in that it reproduces, under the hegemony of capital, production relations of earlier pre-capitalist modes. He developed a special theoretical formulation to express this phenomenon, namely "the re-activation of archaic production relations in peasant agriculture under the conditions of peripheral capitalism." This, indeed, is a significant contribution to contemporary Marxist theory on social change.

Dr. Gunasinghe was a truly innovative social scientist. His creative mind was largely shaped by his thorough familiarity with classical as well as modern social and political theory. Similarly, his preoccupation with theory emanated from the recognition that even a partial understanding of the profound complexity of social phenomena required not mere platitudes, but sharpened and refined analytical tools. In this regard, Dr. Gunasinghe stood far above most of his fellow practitioners of Sri Lankan sociology. When it came to theory, he didn't possess a closed or sectarian mind. As he always told his colleagues and students, one has to fill the gaps in Marx's theory by drawing from other intellectual traditions as well. And he was ever willing to enrich his own theoretical premises with ideas from Machiavelli, Kautilya, Weber, Durkheim, Pareto, Louis Dumont, Umberto Eco, and even from the science fiction of Frank Herbert. While doing his detailed field studies on Kandyan social formation, he perhaps noticed some lacunae in the classical Marxist social theory. Then he moved towards one of the most creative Marxist thinkers in the twentieth century — Antonio Gramsci. He employed the Gramscian notion of "Agrarian Bloc" to grapple with some complex areas in the articulation of Kandyan social formation. Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci were, indeed, to have a decisive influence on Dr. Gunasinghe's theoretical mind. Althusser, like Dr. Gunasinghe himself, was thoroughly dissatisfied with the official Marxism of Communist Parties. Althusser was also an intellectual rebel within the French Communist Party of which he was a Central Committee member. The fresh Marxist theoretical wind that swept across post-'68 Europe partly originated at Ecole Normale in Paris where Althusser held the Chair in Philosophy. It is Althusser's magisterial work *Reading Capital* that had an inspiring influence on Dr. Gunasinghe. Friends will remember how Dr. Gunasinghe used to quote from memory the opening paragraph of *Reading Capital*, with his own emphasis on certain key phrases of Althusser's beautiful text. From Althusser, Newton Gunasinghe and an entire generation of young Marxist scholars learned how to read and re-read Marx's *magnum opus* in a new spirit of critical hermeneutics. Indeed, Dr. Gunasinghe used to describe himself as a structuralist - Marxist of the Althusserian mould. For Dr. Gunasinghe's own structuralism, I think, there was another source: French structuralist anthropology, particularly that of Louis Dumont. The creative synthesis of Marx, Althusser and Gramsci that Dr. Gunasinghe developed in his theoretical mediations was best applied to the study of social formations, the state and ideology. Two key Althusserian concepts were notably present in his thinking — the 'epistemological rupture' and the 'over-determination of contradic

tions.' They were complemented by the Gramscian concept of 'hegemony.'

The most productive application of this theoretical framework is found in Dr. Gunasinghe's short yet brilliant pieces on ethnicity and ideology. The turbulent years in Sri Lanka after 1983 presented a formidable challenge to social science scholars particularly because of the violent eruption of ethnic feeling among Sinhala and Tamil communities. In this crisis, intellectual mediocrity and simple mindedness led some Sri Lankan social scientists to parade demagoguery as scholarship, slogans as theory, and witch-hunt as commitment. Or they were simply anti-theoretical, a position emanating from a peculiarly fundamentalist state of mind. Dr. Gunasinghe's refined temperament, meanwhile, enabled him to stand far above the politics and ideology of ethnic frenzy. In several essays which he published in the *Lanka Guardian*, he examined how ethnicity had an overdetermining impact on political structures. In a masterly deployment of the Althusserian concept of overdetermination of contradictions, he diagnosed the hegemonic grip which nationalist ideology has had over Sinhala society as the key to the understanding of post-independence Sri Lankan politics.

Religious ideology, social structures and the state are a collective theme that drew the constant attention of this multi-faceted scholar. His first serious work on the Sociology of Buddhism was his Master's thesis submitted to Monash University. He was equally familiar with Buddhism and Christianity, Hinduism and Islam. Although he hadn't published any major essays on religion, he was, shortly before his death, planning to launch a major study on heresy and orthodoxy as expressed in the social and intellectual history of Buddhism and Christianity. Professor Bruce Kapferer, his colleague at Manchester and now Professor of Anthropology at London University, was to co-author this work. Incidentally, the section on Christianity was to be written by Dr. Gunasinghe who, as Professor Kapferer is reported to have commented, had a thorough knowledge of medieval Christian theology. Friends of Dr. Gunasinghe know how he was in the process of formulating a theoretical framework for this much anticipated study. A few months prior to his death, he came to revise one of his earlier theoretical formulations so that the articulation of religious ideology and social structure could be better explained. His earlier position was that ideology at certain conjunctures overdetermined social processes. After surveying the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma, he came to the theoretical conclusion that it is the social structures that determine, in the final analysis, ideological formations and transformations. The above theoretical position is not a mere moving back to the old master, Marx. It was also a result of an intense examination of the relationship between Buddhism, social classes, ideology and the state in Sri Lanka in pre-capitalist and capitalist modes of production. In his fascinating intellectual odyssey Dr. Gunasinghe appears to have moved away from Althusser in the last couple of years and returned to Marx via Max Gluckman and Louis Dumont. Perhaps he realized that the Althusserian hermeneutical framework de-emphasized the role of social structures in shaping the logic of long historical processes. Along with Gramsci, he noticed the power of religious ideologies in their ability to transform themselves and survive under different modes of production. The

question that Dr. Gunasinghe posed and sought clarification of however, is whether ideologies are just subjected to an autonomous logic of self-transformation, or are they responding to changes in the social structure. One of the sharpest observations he made in this regard, just two months before his death, is connected with the question of heresy in the Sinhala Buddhist tradition. In regular conversation, he asserted, in his characteristically forceful way, that the categories 'sacred' and 'profane' were not a mere question of theology, but a mode of the hierarchical ordering of social relations. Two review essays that Dr. Gunasinghe wrote within the last six months of his life are particularly indicative of his new thinking in interpretative explorations. One is a review of Gananath Obeyesekere's essay 'A Mediation on Conscience' and the other on Bruce Kapferer's recent book, *Legends of People - Myths of State*. Underlying the framework of analysis in these two essays is his reaffirmation of the centrality of social relations — classes, groups, and hierarchically-defined strata — in the articulation of ideologies. Colleagues noticed the re-activation of Dr. Gunasinghe's mind in the last stage of his life, although no one realised that time was catching up on him. In June this year he wrote a paper entitled 'Notes Towards a Sub-Continental Social Structural Perspective on South Asia.' In terms of the analytical framework suggested in it, this short paper is a landmark in Dr. Gunasinghe's intellectual career. Dr. Gunasinghe in this paper makes a case for a 'macro-social theory' covering the entire South Asian region. Noting that such a theory is yet to emerge, he attempted to establish a methodological perspective for it. To do justice to Dr. Gunasinghe's complex theoretical formulation, may I quote a key paragraph from his essay:

My objective in this note is to identify both variation and structural similarities in the South Asian social formations, but not necessarily within the confines of the territories of the modern "national states" as they are defined in the late-eighties of the twentieth century. To proceed further, along the lines laid down by Dumont, one should attempt to arrive at a macro-theory capable of encapsulating social processes at work in the South Asian region as a whole, while theoretically coupling it with sub-theories applicable to various ethnic segmentations in the region, such as the Sinhalese, Tamils, Bengalis, Gujaratis etc. Now, I shall return to an identification of elements of structural commonalities in South Asian social formations without overlooking the fact that these commonalities may articulate themselves in different or even contradictory forms.

To appreciate Dr. Gunasinghe's attempt to construct a Sub-Continental social theory, one must take into account the political and polemical climate that provided a backdrop to these important exercises of his intellect. The ethnic crisis and its aftermath had witnessed a narcissistic drift towards the self-destruction of our society. Almost all the intellectual resources of this society were being marshalled to re-affirm our isolation as an island nation. The latter-day apostles of Sinhala nationalism were advocating an obscurantist vision of salvation reducing the profound complexity of our society into an utterly simple category of the Sinhala Buddhist village. These apostles were rejecting everything beyond the shores of the Island, with the exception of opportunities for well-paid employment in the lands of the 'nasty Westerners'. Hypocrisy apart, they were making an entire generation of young intelligentsia believe that isolationist nationalism

promises the panaceas to all our social maladies. Dr. Gunasinghe's essay, by contrast, is an intervention which envisioned intellectual internationalism. 'You will never understand Sri Lanka, until you understand South Asia as a totality;' that is the simple message of that complex theoretical piece.

Dr. Gunasinghe's contribution to social science research in Sri Lanka during the past decade warrants special acknowledgement. Since 1980, he was the chief researcher of the Social Scientists' Association and its secretary. He was responsible for directing a major research project on agrarian structures in Sri Lanka. The monograph, *Capital and Peasant Production*, which he edited with Charles Abeyesekera, is a result of his research efforts. *Facets of Ethnicity*, an anthology of research papers on the ethnic question, is the product of a collective effort of a group of concerned academics, including Dr. Gunasinghe. He also co-authored a book on the international economic order and the Sri Lankan economy.

A few months before his death, Dr. Gunasinghe, in collaboration with his colleagues here and abroad, finalized the editing of a major anthology of ethnographic research on Sri Lanka. The learned introduction which he wrote to that volume is perhaps the first major review of ethnographic literature concerning Sri Lankan society. Besides his academic practice as a researcher, scholar and a university teacher, Dr. Gunasinghe was actively involved in trade union work, popular education, and human rights activities. He was the founder of the Workers and Peasants Institute in Kandy, an organization devoted to popular education. Through the WPIU, he organized and conducted seminars for working class and peasant cadres on social and political issues. The series of lectures which he

delivered on Gramsci to trade union representatives is the first attempt in Sri Lanka to introduce that great Marxist thinker to the Sinhala-educated intelligentsia. Later he published those lectures as a booklet. His thorough grasp of Marxist theory, coupled with his mastery of a rich and evocative Sinhalese idiom, enabled him to explain clearly to working class cadres even highly complex theoretical problems. Dr. Gunasinghe's trade union base was Kandy where he grew up as a young political activist. For the past several years, he was the President of the Lanka General Services Union, a plantation-based trade union in Kandy. His involvement in human rights activities has a considerably long record. When the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality was formed in 1979 as a body committed to ethnic peace and human rights, he was one of its founders.

The unique intellectual generosity of Dr. Gunasinghe is without doubt an integral part of his warm and lovable personality. Gifted with a fine sense of humour, and an ability to carry on a spirited conversation for hours, his genial company was always inspiring and educative. The fact that he never utilized his talents for monetary accumulation is indeed a rare quality for an academic in post-1977 Sri Lanka. He was a humanist and a visionary, who always stood for peace, democracy and socialism in this country. His extremely sensitive mind was greatly disturbed by the destructive chaos into which our society was plunged. He indeed foresaw, long before many of us did, the social and political catastrophe that was unfolding in our society. Perhaps, Dr. Gunasinghe died a less painful death. The void left by Dr. Gunasinghe as an intellectual with great human qualities, may never be filled. ■

**Jayadeva Uyangoda**

Courtesy, *Lanka Guardian*, November 15, 1988.

The Newton Gunasinghe 1998 memorial lecture will be on "Crisis as Identity: Notes from the Margins of War" by **Dr. Arjuna Parakrama, Dean, Faculty of Arts University of Colombo** at the National Library Services Board Auditorium, No. 14 Independence Avenue, Colombo 7, on 2nd December 1998, at 5.30 p.m.

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