



Sudharshan Seneviratne: Scholar, Activist, and Humanitarian

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Abstract

Among the eminent scholars that Sri Lanka has produced in the last century, Professor Sudharshan Seneviratne's name stands out, particularly in the context of history and archaeology. Having trained at two notable institutions in India and under the mentorship of some of South Asia's most renowned historians, Sudharshan Seneviratne's career as an archaeologist began with a thorough study of the early socioeconomic history of South Asia, later intertwining archaeology with heritage management for conflict resolution and sustainable tourism. Professor Seneviratne represented Sri Lanka in many capacities throughout his long and distinguished career, the most prominent of which were the two diplomatic positions he held in India and Bangladesh. He was a dedicated teacher and mentor, deeply committed to interdisciplinary work, improving curricula and career opportunities for his students, and instilling in his lessons philosophies of multiple histories and ideas that challenged historical biases.



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Early Years

Sudharshan Deepal Suresh Seneviratne was born in Colombo on the 8th of May 1949, to Major Herbert Reginald Seneviratne and Gladys Pearl Seneviratne (née Fernando). The middle child of the family, he was the younger brother to Harshalal (Dr. Harshalal Seneviratne) and older brother to Chaya. From an early age, the values of public service were instilled in him, with his father serving in the Ceylon Light Infantry and running for office in the Gampaha district in the 1960s. His mother, herself a skilled musician, nurtured a love for learning and reading, a trait that shaped much of his life and career in education and public service.

Seneviratne attended Ananda College in Colombo from the lower kindergarten to the Advanced Level, where he was a curious student and an active member of the school community. As a child, he participated in school plays such as *Mal Kumari* and was a Troop Leader of the Ananda College Boy Scouts. As a senior student, he continued to represent Ananda in many fields, organising various events, participating in several extracurricular activities and engaging in many clubs and societies. Most prominently, he founded and captained the school's first rugby team in 1966 and was elected Head Prefect in 1968. He was a keen student and flourished in his school work under the guidance of the college's many renowned teachers. In 1969, he was awarded the coveted Fritz Kunz prize for the Best All-Rounder along with his friend, Sanjiva Senanayake. His time at Ananda fostered a sense of civic responsibility and a thirst for knowledge and inquiry that he would pursue in his career. It was also where he forged deep bonds of friendship and brotherhood amongst his classmates, many of whom remained his close friends throughout his life.

In 1968, he met Harsha Seneviratne (née Perera), whom he would go on to marry in 1973. They enjoyed 50 beautiful years of marriage and together have one daughter, Shavera.

Higher Education

Having shown a keen interest in History and Archaeology from a young age, Seneviratne departed for India in 1969 to pursue his higher education, which began at Hindu College, Delhi University, where he graduated with a BA Honours in History in 1973.

Shortly after, he entered Jawaharlal Nehru University for his graduate studies under the eminent mentorship of Professor Romila Thapar. The first Sri Lankan to earn both an MA (1975) and a PhD (1987) at JNU, his work culminated in a thesis titled *Social Base of Early Buddhism in South East India and Sri Lanka (c. 3rd Century B.C. - 3rd Century A.D.)*, which was the first multi-disciplinary doctoral thesis conducted from a cross-regional perspective in this area. Additionally, he was also the first Sri Lankan to receive a merit fellowship from the Indian Council of Historical Research to support his doctoral research. While at JNU, Seneviratne was deeply impacted by the vibrant

social and political culture on campus and flourished amidst the spirited discourses in and out of the classroom. Many of his philosophies and ideologies around global politics, imperialism, identity, and especially issues that impacted the South Asian region, were cultivated as a result of the diverse student body and the excellent education he received during this time. As he did while at Ananda College, he made many wonderful and long-lasting friendships with his university classmates, many of whom have gone on to be important scholars of their own right and hold prominent positions in various educational institutions, administration and even within the Indian government. His decade-long experience in India, immersed in its rich cultural diversity, profoundly influenced his inclusive mindset and activism in the years that followed.

A Dedicated Teacher

In 1979, upon his return to Sri Lanka, Seneviratne joined the Department of Archaeology, headed by Professor P. L. Prematilleke, at the University of Peradeniya, as a tenured faculty member. This signalled a long era of research that broke new ground in the field of archaeology and a fruitful career of teaching and mentorship that produced several highly qualified students. In 1987, he was appointed as the Head of the Department of Archaeology, a position he held for nearly a decade. Additionally, he held the distinction of being the only Chair in Archaeology (Professor of Archaeology) within the Sri Lankan university system at that time.

Professor Seneviratne taught a variety of both graduate and undergraduate courses during his time at the University of Peradeniya. His classes covered Ancient India and Sri Lanka with particular focus on the Bronze Age and Early Iron Age. In addition to all the teaching he completed, he was also responsible for the creation of new courses and revising curricula to allow students to gain the most out of their time at university, outfitting them with the necessary expertise to make them competitive candidates at national and international levels. Professor Seneviratne incorporated new research into the department syllabi and ensured that students were aware of new cutting-edge methodologies and technological innovations within the field. He also encouraged archaeological science by combining geological, anatomical, and engineering modules with core archaeology courses and established courses such as Heritage Management, Environmental Archaeology, and Landscape Archaeology. He also introduced the study of history and historiography, the management of historical data in archaeology, historical geography and techno-cultural periods and zones of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, Pre-Harappan, Harappan and other Chalcolithic cultures, urbanism, state formation, trade and commerce and the emergence of land grant economies into the curriculum. He was keen on incorporating an inclusive approach to studying history, placing it on a problem-oriented and issue-based platform, an approach that avoided traditional elite-biased historiography and conventional periodisation. He questioned orthodox historical views that emphasise linear

developments and the static nature of history, and encouraged his students to do the same. Throughout his teaching career, he strongly emphasised multifaceted and interdisciplinary approaches to examining the multiple strands of history, encouraging emerging historians and archaeologists to approach their findings with unbiased and open minds, and was a strong proponent of curiosity and creativity.

Professor Seneviratne also provided students with opportunities to hone their skills in the field and become more proficient in practical archaeology. Students were taught archaeological recording, drawing, and cartographic skills, and were introduced to laboratory work requirements, in addition to practical courses that were mandatory for final-year students. He also arranged for second- and third-year students to spend one to three months in practical training sessions at heritage sites and gave students opportunities to work alongside foreign peers. The Samanalawewa Archaeology project with Exeter University, UK and the Tissa-Akurugoda Project with the German KAVA Project stand out among these initiatives.

Throughout his career, Professor Seneviratne also supported efforts towards curriculum development by participating in various committees at the Universities of Peradeniya, Sri Jayewardenepura, and Kelaniya, the Post-Graduate Institute of Archaeology, and the University Grants Commission under the Ministry of Higher Education.

Throughout his career, Professor Seneviratne cultivated a long relationship with US academia, teaching many generations of American students who studied in Sri Lanka, as well as holding various visiting professorships at US institutions. For over twenty years, he was a faculty member on the ISLE (Intercollegiate Sri Lanka Education) programme, which brought undergraduate students from a consortium of liberal arts colleges to Sri Lanka for off-campus studies. For ISLE, he conducted the Northern Tour that introduced students to many of the heritage sites of Anuradhapura, Sigiriya, Polonnaruwa and Dambulla, in addition to mentoring students interested in specialising in the South Asian region. He also conducted lectures at the University of Peradeniya for the ISLE students, visited the Senarath Paranavithana Teaching Museum with them and connected them with other faculty members as they conducted independent research.

He was also invited as faculty to large research institutions and liberal arts colleges in the US. He was a Visiting Professor at Cornell University (1990-1991; Ithaca, NY) and a Visiting Fulbright Professor at Carleton College (2000; Northfield, MN), and also held numerous Distinguished Professorships such as the Freeman Distinguished Professorship at Carleton College (1998; Northfield, MN), the Tallman Distinguished Professorship at Bowdoin College (2000; Brunswick, MA), the Cornell Distinguished Professorship at Swarthmore College (2010-2011; Swarthmore, PA), the Arnold Distinguished Professorship at Whitman College (2012-2013; Walla Walla, WA), the Hubert Humphrey Distinguished Professorship at Macalester College (2016-2017; Saint Paul, MN), and the Benedict Distinguished Professorship at Carleton College (2017; Northfield, MN). The courses he taught in the USA encompassed topics such as

South Asian archaeology, religious studies and early Buddhism's social history, early technology, money economy and trade, pre-industrial urbanisation, and capstone seminars on archaeology, museology, nationalism, and the political use of history. During his time at liberal arts colleges in the USA, he collaborated with various departments, including Sociology & Anthropology, Peace Studies, Global Studies, Archaeology & Classics, Religious Studies, and Environmental Studies.

Teaching and building long-lasting relationships with his students was one of Professor Seneviratne's great joys, and he was a passionate advocate for all his students, both at the University of Peradeniya and other institutions in which he taught both locally and abroad, as well as for students of archaeology and history everywhere. He maintained that the next generation of young scholars were the most important stakeholders of the university and the country at large, and centred emerging historians and archaeologists in all his efforts. Apart from the immense amount of work he put into creating the content of their lectures and classes, advising undergraduate as well as MA and PhD students, Professor Seneviratne also facilitated opportunities for students to meet other notable scholars in the field, travel within Sri Lanka and internationally to continue honing their skills, and prepared them for their lives after university. He was a strong believer in education taking place inside and outside the classroom and encouraged students to bring additional skills as organisers, artists, musicians, orators, debaters, etc., to their academic work, to produce multifaceted persons who could fit into many different environments and professions. The outreach programmes and public awareness exhibitions, such as 'Archaeology for Next Generation 2000' inaugurated by Professor Romila Thapar and 'Shared Cultures and Cultural Diversity 2006' inaugurated by the then High Commissioner of India to Sri Lanka, Nirupama Rao, for example, provided a creative platform for students to showcase their multiple talents and inspired local school children by providing them with insights about the responsibility of heritage researchers. At the end of the event, he offered constructive feedback and shared his own music and singing performances, along with a delicious meal generously prepared by his wife, Harsha, in a gesture of sincere appreciation for the students.

For Professor Seneviratne, teaching was a calling and a vocation. He loved nothing more than engaging in spirited discussions with his students or being out in the field in collective discovery. One of his constant mantras was that a teacher had just as much to learn from their students as students from a teacher; this philosophy underscored his entire career as a mentor to hundreds of students and is evident in the nurturing learning environments he built and his lifelong dedication to making sure students of history and archaeology had the best skills and opportunities possible. Many of his students have gone on to hold research and teaching positions and have successful careers of their own, including but not limited to roles as department heads, secondary and tertiary school educators, research librarians, and museum curators.

The Professional Academic

In his long career, Professor Seneviratne's contributions towards Sri Lankan archaeology were numerous, serving to advance knowledge of the island's centuries-long complex and diverse history, and also emphasising Sri Lanka's vital role in shaping the South Asian region. He conducted research at numerous archaeological sites in Sri Lanka and abroad, contributing to cross-regional studies, innovative research techniques in interpretative and theoretical archaeology, and training the next generation of heritage managers in the region. Some notable findings from his research include the special characteristics of South Indian Buddhism, Historical Resource Exchange Patterns, State Formation and Pre-State Chieftains, the shared traditions between South Indian and Sri Lankan Megalithic cultures, cultural diversity, shared cultures, and multicultural plural societies in South Asian history, as well as heritage for conflict resolution.

In the 1980s, he served as the Assistant Director of Archaeology at the UNESCO World Heritage sites of Polonnaruwa and Kandy. He was also the Co-Director for the Megalithic burial excavation (PGIA-KAVA project; 1984/85), the Anuradhapura Citadel Archaeology Project (1989-1994) along with Dr. Siran Dereniyagala, the Pinwewa-Galshonkanatta Megalithic Archaeology Project (1996-1997), and the Vessagiriya Excavation Project in Anuradhapura (2005-2007). In 2000, he became the Archaeological Director of the UNESCO World Heritage site at Anuradhapura Jetavana. Additionally, he was a member of the Board of Management at the Postgraduate Institute of Archaeology, the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute, and served on the Advisory Board to the Director General of Archaeology in Sri Lanka. He was also part of the Board of Governors of the Institute of Fundamental Studies (Kandy) and acted as the Director & Senior Coordinator for UNESCO and NORAD projects related to archaeology and heritage. As a result of these invaluable contributions to heritage initiatives, he was appointed Director General of the Central Cultural Fund (CCF) in 2007, the organisation responsible for UNESCO-designated World Heritage sites in Sri Lanka, a position he held until 2010.

In the late 2000s onwards, Professor Seneviratne's research centred on curating inclusive museums, developing environmental sustainability, and intertwining archaeology with heritage management and sustainable tourism within South Asia. His work also investigated themes like nationalism, multiculturalism, and higher education in multicultural societies, alongside the use of history and archaeology in heritage studies to promote human rights advocacy, conflict resolution, and peace studies, with an emphasis on involving school children and platforming rural communities. Many of these programmes are now recognised by UNESCO as operational initiatives under Heritage for Sustainable Development. Additionally, his professional and research activities focused on environmental protection—particularly of intangible heritage acknowledged by UNESCO—and sustainably managing the environment through heritage practices. This included revitalising traditional craft communities and launching

awareness initiatives targeting grassroots groups, aiming to connect heritage projects with economic renewal and skill enhancement. To this end, Professor Seneviratne invited traditional craftsmen to university exhibitions and public awareness programmes—for example, in the 2000 Diyatarippu craft activity—to showcase their endangered craft tradition to a wider audience. He also conducted research projects on craft families, such as the 2010 Craft Project, discussing challenges, contractions of modalities, and presenting the research findings at an international conference. In 2006, he facilitated the publication of *Alternative Archaeology* by the Department of Archaeology at the University of Peradeniya, which featured research articles by scholars from various cultural backgrounds in Sri Lanka and in Sinhala, Tamil and English. Another initiative he spearheaded revitalised craft heritage following UNESCO initiatives through the Palm-Leaf manuscript project, which trained Buddhist monks in ancient writing techniques, and involved brass workers in creating “Panhinda”, a traditional stylus. During his time at the CCF, he also rekindled the Replica Centre in Bataliya by encouraging the production of innovative, high-demand replicas and strategically establishing it as a new tourist attraction. Young artists who worked there during Professor Seneviratne’s time were trained in art and sculpture, made plaques for archaeological events as souvenirs, and crafted the Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva Replica as a gift for prestigious national and international events. One such life-size replica statue of both the Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva and the Goddess Tara was installed at the Indian High Commission during Professor Seneviratne’s tenure as High Commissioner in New Delhi.

Professor Seneviratne consistently represented Sri Lanka at international platforms and actively engaged in various national and international professional organisations and policy-making committees related to archaeology, heritage management, and higher education. He was also a constant advocate for placing Sri Lanka on the map in international forums, participating in several notable research collaborations with India, China, Germany, the US, the UK, Australia, Japan, and the Netherlands. He organised numerous colloquiums, seminars, workshops, and international conferences to promote intellectual and research advancement, both in Sri Lanka and internationally, and was supported by various organizations including the Ford Foundation, the American Institute of Sri Lankan Studies, the Institute of Fundamental Studies, the Postgraduate Institute of Archaeology, the International Center for Ethnic Studies, UNESCO, NORAD, SAREC, and the Toyota Foundation.

His publications and seminar talks in both international and Sri Lankan academic journals and venues address a broad spectrum of problem-focused and issue-related multidisciplinary topics tied to historical and archaeological research, including but not limited to, Indian history and archaeology, Early Iron Age archaeology, environmental archaeology, pre-colonial state formation, pre-industrial urbanization, ancient materials and technology, ancient trade and exchange systems, epigraphic and numismatic studies, ethno-archaeology, archaeology of identities and nationalism,

multicultural studies in higher education planning, and heritage and cultural resource management.

One notable aspect of Professor Seneviratne's work was applying his vast knowledge and years of research on Sri Lanka's history to activism and avenues of social change, particularly through avenues of Heritage for Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation. For the duration of the thirty-year civil war and in the immediate aftermath, he was adamant that scholars and intellectuals should employ their skills outside the bounds of conventional academic work, particularly in pursuit of challenging biases and to build bridges between our nations' communities. In addition to writing and publishing various articles that disputed ethno-nationalist claims with archaeological and historical evidence, Professor Seneviratne emphasised the importance of Sri Lanka's diverse history and historical plurality through various means and dedicated his efforts to fostering greater understanding among divided communities, creating essential space for moderate voices advocating for peace and reconciliation. One part of his attempts to reach people beyond the ivory towers of academia resulted in several public lectures and orations such as "Management of Knowledge Information in a Multi-Cultural Society: Redefining Education for the Next Generation" (Colonel Henry Steele Olcott Memorial Lecture, Colombo, 2001), "People to People Connectivity and Peace Interaction: Redefining Heritage for Conflict Resolution" (Vesak Commemoration Lecture, 2007, Kathmandu), "Humanism for Peace: A Buddhist Perspective" (UN General Assembly, New York, 2011), "Heritage Odyssey Sri Lanka: A Visual Narration Unfolding the Multi-faceted Personality of an Island Civilisation" (10th Sujata Jayawardena Memorial Oration, 2013) and so much more.

While Director General of the CCF, he also undertook several actions as part of the institution's programme for Heritage for Conflict Resolution and Peace Education. Most notable among these efforts was the curation of several museums across the country that reiterated the multiple religious and ethnic groups that exist in Sri Lanka and celebrate the shared culture unique to these locations and sites. These efforts emphasise his drive to promote cognitive archaeology and inclusive heritage and was an attempt to rectify the historical biases that are at the root of the many conflicts the island has and continues to face. This includes a multi-religious museum in Kataragama for Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim worshippers, the inauguration of the Galle Maritime Museum showcasing the many religions, language groups and ethnicities that partook in the oceanic connections of the island, the opening of a secular museum at the Sigiriya World Heritage Site, and the establishment of a museum highlighting the history of Tamil-speaking estate workers of South Indian descent in the hill country to draw attention to the severe oppression this community faced during British colonialism and after, and included efforts to revitalise some of their dying traditions of dance and music. The CCF under Professor Seneviratne's direction also conducted a successful proposal to the Cabinet of Ministers for the mandatory use of all three national languages in all heritage sites and CCF-managed

museums. Additionally, during this time, the CCF initiated a Diaspora tourism programme aimed at welcoming all visitors of Sri Lankan origin to World Heritage Sites, which included producing additional literature in Sinhala, Tamil, and English for children visiting from abroad. Other ventures included the organisation of various educational programmes and projects to involve history and archaeology students from the North and East in excavations, conservations and collaborations with peers from other universities in the country, providing multiple reports documenting all heritage sites in the North and East and multicultural communities along with their tangible and intangible cultural practices for tourism development and fostering peace education, cultural diversity and shared cultural heritage among school children through UNESCO School Clubs in Kandy, and many other similar projects.

Overseas Academic Work and Recognition

In addition to the many teaching appointments at prestigious research universities and liberal arts colleges in the United States, Professor Seneviratne maintained professional relationships across various countries, travelling extensively to places such as France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Pakistan, the USA, the Maldives, and Korea. He frequently visited his second home, India, for research and guest lectures, and in 1996, he returned to Jawaharlal Nehru University as a Visiting Fellow. In 2015, he was awarded a Distinguished Alumni Award for Excellence in Foreign Affairs by the Hindu College Old Students Association.

He also frequently delivered guest lectures at prestigious institutions such as the Universities of Pennsylvania, Harvard, Princeton, Indiana, Minnesota, Hawaii at Manoa, Wisconsin, Arizona, Toronto, as well as at liberal arts colleges including Whitman, Bowdoin, Swarthmore, Bates, Colby, and Macalester. Noteworthy endowment lectures took place at Whitman College (2006 Henry M. Jackson Lecture) and Carleton College (2011 Lindersmith Lecture). He served as Consultant Archaeologist for the American Institute of Archaeology, the World Megalithic Association in South Korea, and the Maldives Ministry of Tourism. Additionally, he was a member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Committees. Over the past decade, he represented the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in various countries, focusing on heritage, peace initiatives, and cultural diplomacy.

In 2002, Professor Seneviratne was honoured with the Distinguished Leadership Award from the American Bibliographic Institute (USA) for his exceptional contributions to Archaeology and History. He became a Fellow and Life Member of the esteemed National Academy of Sciences of Sri Lanka (2002), a distinction held by only a few social scientists. Additionally, he served as a Fellow and former President of the Sri Lanka Council of Archaeologists, the governing body for Archaeologists in the country. In 2004, he received the Distinguished Visitor status from the Central Government of India. In 2011, he spoke at the UN General Assembly in New York on "Humanism for Peace: A Buddhist Perspective." and in 2013, he was awarded the Best Practice in

Conservation & Heritage Management, marking the first time this honour was presented to an Asian by the American Institute of Archaeology, USA.

Diplomatic Engagements

Professor Seneviratne served as a cultural ambassador for Sri Lanka since 2000, representing the country in various nations during his tenure as Senior Advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under Lakshman Kadirgamar and Mangala Samaraweera. In July 2014, he was appointed High Commissioner to India, where his primary responsibility was to enhance political, economic, and cultural ties. To achieve this, he devised a multi-track diplomatic strategy that extended beyond traditional Track I and Track II political and economic diplomacy. Acknowledging India's vast size and complexity, he focused on initiatives in trade, investment, politics, heritage, religion, education, and tourism, connecting with several Indian states throughout the year. His extensive knowledge of Indian history, archaeology, and landscapes, along with his fluency in the Hindi language and his connections through alumni networks, proved invaluable in these efforts.

In 2020, he was appointed as High Commissioner to Bangladesh. Despite much of his time there being impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Professor Seneviratne facilitated the expansion of the mission with the request of a Deputy High Commissioner and a Trade Officer to better serve the needs of the Sri Lankan community in Bangladesh, as well as bolster the relationship between the two countries. During Professor Seneviratne's tenure, several partnerships between Bangladesh's and Sri Lanka's economic ventures were put in place, such as collaborations in the shipping sector as well as promoting Sri Lanka as a preferred MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions) destination for visiting Bangladeshi investors, business personnel and other relevant groups. In 2022, he facilitated the donation of urgent medication from Bangladesh to Sri Lanka, amounting to USD 2.32 million. He also consistently emphasised the historical connections between the two countries and the importance of both nations to the region, as well as to global interests. His knowledge of the greater South Asian region, its history and socio-political dynamics, and his easy ability to speak to Sri Lanka's strengths and promote the island's interests at a particularly crucial time allowed for several successful ventures between the two nations.

Upon the completion of his time in Bangladesh, Professor Seneviratne was appointed as the Executive Director of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) in Sri Lanka in 2023, to oversee the island's tenure as Chair of the organisation from 2023-2025. This was a natural extension of the work he had been conducting in the last several years in mapping the oceanic relationship between Sri Lanka and its neighbouring countries and exploring diverse ways of bridging the maritime economic, cultural and social connections across the IORA member nations.

Conclusion: An Enduring Legacy of Hope

For Professor Seneviratne, being a historian and an archaeologist was not merely an occupation or a job, but a calling that allowed him to contribute to his country and society in every way. From the time he was a student and throughout his professional career, his goals were to make history accessible, present it in its various complexities and multiplicities, and challenge every instance of historical evidence being manipulated for the use of various socio-political agendas, both within Sri Lanka and by those outside the country. For him, there was no distinction between teacher, scholar and activist; every lesson he taught, every lecture he delivered and every professional endeavour he undertook was always in service of pursuing the truth and in uplifting the voices of his students and the country at large. He studied and worked throughout some of Sri Lanka's most difficult periods—the 30-year civil war, the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna) uprisings in the south, the tsunami, a pandemic, and mounting economic difficulties—and despite this, had an unwavering optimism about our nation's potential. His enduring legacy lies not only in the hundreds of young minds he moulded but also in his passion for discovery and knowledge, his commitment to the truth as presented by history, and his belief in Sri Lanka's lasting resilience.