



Sudharshan Seneviratne: Student, Scholar, Friend

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I first met Sudharshan when he came to Delhi to study History. He was determined to study in Delhi, and if possible, with me. His interest was in research pertaining to ancient Sri Lanka. In the early 1970s, I had moved from Delhi University to Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). We had a long chat in which I had to explain to him that he could not go on to research until he first had a BA, which would enable him to do an MA with us at JNU, then proceed to a PhD. We did not have facilities for undergraduate courses at JNU, so Sudharshan joined Delhi University, where he did his BA Honours in History. I could sense his disappointment that he first had to complete a BA Honours in History, but once he decided to do it, nothing deterred him, and the result was an excellent degree.

As a student at Delhi University, Sudharshan would visit me occasionally to discuss what he was reading and thinking about, with reference to his academic interests. Then came the day when he got admission to the MA in History programme at JNU under my supervision.

It was an absolute pleasure to have Sudharshan as a student as he was really keen on exploring the History courses. After completing his MA, he wished to read for his PhD. We had no hesitation in admitting him and he seemed happy to stay for the required three years at JNU to complete at least the data collection for his PhD. In 1980, at the end of his study period at JNU, he returned to Colombo and submitted his thesis to JNU after a couple of years and obtained his doctorate. The last stages of completing the thesis had all his friends encouraging him to work diligently since there was a deadline for completion. He made it in good time and we celebrated his accomplishment.



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We were delighted when he joined the University of Peradeniya near Kandy and he made us proud when he became a Professor in the Department of Archaeology there. He not only led the research in archaeology at Peradeniya but was also the leading scholar on some of the projects on history and archaeology that were initiated in Sri Lanka at that time. Some of these projects were critical to the advancement of archaeology in Sri Lanka. At the time when these important projects were established, competent leadership was crucial, so it was just as well that Sudharshan was chosen to be the head of a few.

Sudharshan was able to do a great deal in giving direction to Sri Lankan archaeology and archaeological history as he was appointed Assistant Director of Archaeology at the UNESCO World Heritage sites of Polonnaruwa and Kandy in 1983, which at that point were receiving much attention from the international archaeological community. Being appointed to this position was an indication of the highest regard in which he was held in Sri Lankan archaeology. This was followed by his appointment to the Directorship of the Jetavana Project in Anuradhapura.

I happened to visit Sri Lanka and the Jetavana Stupa monastic complex with which he was very familiar - having studied the monastic chronicles in depth for detailed information. I was able to witness his expertise when he explained the project to me. What was so impressive about him as an archaeologist was the meticulous care with which he carried out small-scale excavations, reaching out to the smallest of objects that might have had a message to convey. It was a matter of much excitement when a small object known from the chronicles turned up in an excavation and these small objects were contextualized within the larger framework.

In 2007 Sudharshan was appointed as the Director of the Central Cultural Fund. This was also the period when a number of archaeological museums were established in Sri Lanka. Museums are crucial to the understanding and display of cultural heritage. The focus on deciphering the past was understood very well and with much sensitivity by Sudharshan, judging by the quality of the museums for which he was responsible. Sudharshan involved the University of Peradeniya, where he taught, in other activities of both excavations and museum displays. Not only were the displays attractive and informative, but they also attracted students of ancient history and archaeology to the study of these collections. In this, he worked together with Dr. Siran Deraniyagala and Professor Senake Bandaranayake.

A careful and meticulous study of the diverse Megalithic sites in Sri Lanka and those that had rock art remains was included in Sudharshan's research. He linked them to connections that these cultures shared with other regional cultures of South Asia. In a curious and significant way, his work (and that of his colleagues) appears to have uncovered counterparts in South India, as is apparent from recent excavations. Much of this activity, focusing on recent finds in the area, also led to the strengthening of beliefs in the important shared cultural heritage of the two regions. While there is much speculation about links between the two areas, future studies will further illuminate these connections.

Sudharshan was the Senior Cultural Advisor to the Ministry of Cultural Affairs when Mr. Lakshman Kadirgamar was in charge. I recall visiting Sri Lanka at the time and meeting Minister Kadirgamar, with whom I discussed archaeological matters.

Sudharshan's enthusiasm for establishing the importance of archaeology was evident not only in the various organizations that he was an active member of, but he was also particular that excavations were necessary and required. There was much excitement when he visited JNU, because he had been our student and had risen to such eminence in the area of his expertise, providing an opportunity to know first hand about the work he had been doing in Sri Lanka.

It was such a delight both for him and for us when he came to India as High Commissioner for Sri Lanka in 2014. He had to spend much time in Delhi meeting people in areas of government and less so in any academic work. Nevertheless, he still did much to enhance his professional work in archaeology. We at JNU had appropriated him as one of us and looked forward to meetings with him in his spare time. Sudharshan published widely but more so to cater to Sri Lankan audiences, believing that Sri Lankans must know about their own heritage. That he managed to combine his propagation of Sri Lankan archaeology and his own work on papers and books on the subject and on excavations was most impressive.

When one reads his curriculum vitae, one is rather bowled over by the many achievements he has to his credit. I knew him from his early days as someone who was very concerned that the work that was being done needed to receive rightful academic recognition - this was of major concern for all those working in this field. What is so impressive is the way in which he integrated many interconnected strands in his work. He did it with effective teaching and through holding positions in various organizations, both in international and Sri Lankan institutions. This required a wide-ranging vision and phenomenal energy, which he had.

We had many long conversations on archaeology and ancient history during this period. These continued from his days as an MA student to the years that ultimately brought him a PhD and beyond. I recall the time when Sudharshan as a graduate student and his wife Harsha, moved to the hostel accommodations at JNU. They had a small celebration. We all felt that it was a kind of homecoming. It was around this time that Harsha would occasionally make me the "love-cake" that I so enjoyed. It left me feeling the closeness of our friendship. I'll never forget the young, enthusiastic student of ancient history and archaeology who came to see me and talked about his wish to become a properly trained archaeologist. I knew from the first meeting that he was a person with a special interest in early history and was determined to make something of it, and he did.

Gradually, through our conversations, our relationship changed from teacher and student to that of two trusted friends. This friendship was greatly valued by me, not least because it was also reciprocated by Sudharshan, and his wife and daughter, Harsha and Shavera.

When Sudharshan's name is mentioned, what I immediately recall is the scholar, the archaeologist and the historian of the Early Historic Period of Sri Lanka and India. I also recall the lovable human being holding onto the best of values, however tough the situation may be.