



# A Tribute to My Mentor, Peer and Friend - Sudharshan

**Kumkum Roy**

Jawaharlal Nehru University (retired Professor) and Centre for Historical Studies, School of  
Social Sciences, India  
[kumkumr@yahoo.com](mailto:kumkumr@yahoo.com)

---

The day after Sudharshan passed away, I found an article from the *Madras Courier* in my mailbox. This contained an account of the Ajivikas. (Madras Courier, January 19, 2024). As is often the case, the succinct article provided an overview, in broad brushstrokes, of one of the many philosophical traditions of the subcontinent, drawing attention to its traces, in texts and architectural remains, spanning India and Sri Lanka. As I scrolled through it, I realised it was yet another poignant reminder of the presence and absence of Sudharshan Seneviratne, scholar, friend, and much more. He was the one who introduced me, and I suspect many others, to the quiet, unpretentious joys of the *Madras Courier*, to poems that were seemingly simple yet profound, to articles that ranged across time, space, and themes, offering unexpected insights into the taken-for-granted and the apparently familiar.

I first saw Sudharshan when I joined the Centre for Historical Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) to do a Master of Arts (MA) in the late 1970s. Sudharshan was then one of a handful of seniors, bigger than us in more ways than one. I do not think I ever spoke with him then. He, and others, were awe-inspiring figures who seemed to have a grasp of all kinds of theories that eluded us. This impression was confirmed when we saw and heard him participate in what was a fascinating international seminar on state formation, from a respectful distance.

It was some decades before the distance between Sudharshan and I was slowly, steadily, and irreversibly bridged. We shared a common research supervisor, Romila Thapar. As often happens, once the period of formal research supervision was over, spaces opened up for other kinds of interaction and, at least occasionally, I met Sudharshan and others in a more relaxed and less intimidating context than those of seminars. An unmistakably warm and bubbling presence, cheerful,



*Ancient Lanka: Volume 4 (2025)*

© 2025 by the author/s. <https://doi.org/10.29173/anlk871>

This is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons  
Attribution [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

concerned, and certainly not the formidable scholar I had imagined him to be. And yet, it would be several years before I would get to know him better.

Sudharshan was travelling, teaching at several universities across the globe, and working as a diplomat. He combined a deep commitment to an inclusive academic practice with an equally deep interest in archaeology and conservation in addition to his role as a diplomat. This could not have been easy in the best of circumstances, and South Asia, where I think he was most at home, was not the easiest of places in which to nurture these ideas.

It was when Sudharshan and I were involved in organizing a conference to acknowledge the contributions of our supervisor that we reconnected. Sudharshan brought his ebullient and contagious energies into the conference room and its environs, with Harsha, Sudharshan's wife, as a quiet, supportive presence throughout. And as we worked at an almost punishing pace to convert the draft papers into a publication, Sudharshan was one of those whose enthusiasm and patience never flagged as we plodded through the thankless task of redrafting, revising, and standardizing. I had stumbled on his enormous reservoirs of affection and goodwill.

After the conference, there was no looking back. We remained in constant contact even after the volume saw the light of day. And as we sank into the COVID-19 pandemic and all that it entailed, he was amongst those who unfailingly helped me access online resources. While this began as something to help students, Sudharshan soon began forwarding online articles, thought-provoking, disturbing, and occasionally funny cartoons from a wide range of journals, magazines and newspapers, from the subcontinent and beyond. Fiercely and tenaciously loyal to JNU in the 1970s as he remembered it, he celebrated the success of author Geetanjali Shree, even as he followed what was happening to his beloved university with anguish and anger. He was keen to do whatever he could to help us survive, individually and collectively. I soon discovered that he was passionate in questioning the seemingly benevolent gestures of western powers. And that he was an ardent admirer of Arundhati Roy, Indian author and activist. As often happens, I discovered that there was much more to him. I began sharing my translations of Rabindrasangeet, the songs composed by Rabindranath Tagore, with him, and as he moved to Bangladesh, I found that he enjoyed the renderings of Shama Rahman, soft, gentle, delicate.

Every now and then, I would receive a link to a live programme or to a recording. So [here](#) is one of her renderings, Shama Rahman and a translation of the song, a paean to friendship, at once human and divine, both transcending and transforming the everyday:

My friend, remain within my heart,  
Through all that I do, and think and know.  
My lord, come gently through sorrow and joy,  
Through my laughter and tears,

Embrace my life and be with me  
Through all that I do and think and know.

Yet, it was not only Rabindrasangeet – I discovered that Sudharshan loved songs like “Abide with me” just as much as he enjoyed “Come September”, so we took to sharing links to music, delighted and often surprised when we found something we had in common.

As I moved to Pondicherry and he returned to Sri Lanka, we talked about the small stretch of sea that separated us which, he assured me, was an archaeologist’s paradise, as it was littered with shipwrecks and laden with treasures that probably dated back several centuries.

At another, less tangible level, when Sudharshan discovered that I was trying to understand early Buddhist traditions, he shared personal accounts, intense and moving. I was humbled by his generosity in sharing what was experiential rather than academic, as he was always more than willing to help me trace textual references when I wanted them. Somewhere along the line, as he shared these, he was convinced that we must have been siblings in a previous birth, and were perhaps so in this one as well. So, I unexpectedly acquired a benevolent big brother. Amongst the many things he shared was a poem attributed to Shantideva, the 7th century CE Mahayana practitioner:

May I be a guard for those who need protection  
A guide for those on the path  
A boat, a raft, a bridge for those who wish to cross the flood  
May I be a lamp in the darkness  
A resting place for the weary  
A healing medicine for all who are sick  
A vase of plenty, a tree of miracles  
And for the boundless multitudes of living beings  
May I bring sustenance and awakening  
Enduring like the earth and sky  
Until all beings are freed from sorrow  
And all are awakened.

I am sure that Sudharshan touched many, many lives with his warmth – there must be many more siblings and others who remember him fondly with admiration and affection. Can we also hope that the dreams he nurtured and shared for a peaceful world will be realized?

## References

<https://madrascourier.com/insight/barabar-caves-the-lost-story-of-ajivikas/>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9h9zBFA7y4c>