

A friendship beyond borders, across changing political landscapes: Remembering my Friend Sudharshan Seneviratne

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It was July 1970 when I entered Hindu College, Delhi University (DU) as a young, sixteen-year-old Delhi girl to study history. With only one other girl in my class, I felt isolated and lonely, missing my school friends. Later, I became acquainted with Sudharshan, a serious-looking young man in my class, whose surname I took a couple of weeks to figure out. He introduced himself as coming from what was then Ceylon. Whatever little I knew about Ceylon at that time could be summed up in two or three sentences: there were two Buddhist chronicles, the *Dipavamsa* and the *Mahavamsa*, which had stuck in my mind because of an undefined interest in Buddhism, and a woman, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, headed the government at that time. I soon realized that he had something to add to my knowledge of Buddhism and much more. Somehow, it was easier to speak to a foreign boy in my class than to some of the others. Apart from the lectures, we spoke about books, our families, social background, music, rebellion, change, parental authority, and the world around us.

While we both enjoyed history, we found the lectures pretty boring. Our Ancient history teacher was one of the most knowledgeable. But somehow, I had this great urge to sleep as he went on and on in a droning voice. I soon discovered a way out of it. With my small, short frame, I would sit behind our dear, broad-shouldered Sudharshan and shut my eyes. If he moved, I would sort of kick him softly under the chair from behind and whisper, 'Don't move.' The first few times, he was a bit nonplussed till I caught him outside and explained the situation. He then got the hang of it and generally cooperated after that. All along, we gathered some more knowledge, or let us say I did, while he passed on more interesting snippets.



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My only lasting friendship from college days, somehow, came to be with Sudharshan, and we went on to study together at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). This was not purely coincidental. One day, towards the end of the term in our third year, he asked me whether I was planning to do an MA. 'DU is so boring,' I told him. 'Well, I'm trying for JNU,' he said. When I asked him why there, he responded, "Well, Romila Thapar is there," most decisively, reeling off a few other names. By then, both Bipan Chandra and Harbans Mukhia, who had earlier been part of the Hindu College history faculty, had joined the JNU faculty too. For some reason, after the conversation with him, I decided that if I decided to do an MA at all, it would be at the JNU. So, in July 1973, we both ended up being classmates again, at the Centre for Historical Studies, JNU, with both of us having opted to study Ancient History. Our batchmates included several who went on to make a place for themselves in the field of history and academia at a wider level. These included Shobita Punja, the well-known Art Historian and Neeladri Bhattacharya. Despite the language barrier to start with, Sudharshan struck up a warm friendship with Kuldeep, whom I later married.

Here, we were both studying under Professor Romila Thapar. One of my first tutorials submitted to her was on the Decline of the Harappan culture. The subject was no less daunting than her persona. Having until then studied history broadly as political chronology, I was totally at sea with all that I read around the various theories for the decline. Were we supposed to arrive at a conclusion, like what I thought was the likely explanation? I decided I needed to discuss it with the only friend I had, Sudharshan. So, I sent several messages to him and finally, a written note, saying 'help needed'! He faithfully came down. 'So, young lady, what is the problem?' That remained one of his favourite openings for such a conversation. We sat together for over an hour, discussing, and somehow, things became clearer. 'Well, you almost got there,' was Professor Thapar's consoling remark as she returned that tutorial to me.

In January 1974, after the winter break, Sudharshan came back married, with Harsha, soft-spoken and demure, very different from us ragamuffins. Harsha, of course, won us all over with her warmth and even more so with her culinary skills. The cakes she made were professional. To us, poor, deprived souls condemned to eating hostel food day after day, what she offered was a real treat. Their room in the married students' hostel was a regular 'bakehouse.' Harsha stood solidly beside him, embracing all of us as her friends. In later years, there was never a visitor to Delhi from Sri Lanka who did not carry some of her precious cake for us.

Many of my memories of my higher education are ones with Sudharshan. Our years in JNU had a lasting impact on our minds and on our lives as a whole. The Master's programme in History at JNU was refreshingly different from what we had been taught at the undergraduate level, encouraging us to read and explore more, including original texts. Sometime in the third or fourth semester, along with some members of our faculty, we went on a trip to Sonkh, an archaeological site near Mathura. I remember experiencing the thrill of being on an actual 'site,' amidst the artefacts that had been found. We walked around the vast site of fragmented remains from the excavation by a German team, and we got hands-on exposure on how an excavation is conducted. This included learning about the negotiations involved with the people residing around the site, of the deities and temples in the locality, which are often at

variance with the prevalent beliefs, and notions of the history of the place. Sudharshan was to face more of this and in very direct ways in the course of his professional work as an archaeologist. Back in Delhi, Romila Thapar also took us to the Purana Qila, where several layers of occupation – dating back to the early centuries BCE – have been recorded. The exposure inculcated an interest in archaeology and the epics, though more from a perspective of social analysis and interpretation. Whether it was a well-rounded education in Ancient History framed by an interdisciplinary approach, exposure to the works of so many scholars such as Vasudeva Sharan Agarwal, Irawati Karve, Sukhtankar, Sankalia, Kosambi, and hands-on exposure to archaeological sites, I was glad to have experienced these moments with Sudharshan.

We pursued our varied interests, finished our respective doctoral research, and went our separate ways. Sudharshan moved on to a distinguished academic career, but often stopped by in Delhi, enroute to his various assignments. Romila Thapar remained an anchor for him in Delhi, and we would try to meet on each of his trips to Delhi.

In the years after the Emergency in India (1975-1977), I got more directly drawn to contemporary topics and into activism, especially around women's issues, and Sudharshan was always supportive of my work. In March of 1980, the JNU Women's Committee, with which I was involved, put up an exhibition, *Marching Towards Equality*, and he insisted I give him a write-up on it and made sure that what I gave him was published in *The Lanka Guardian*. On his trips back home, he would pick up pamphlets and information on the women's movement, which he would share with me. He spoke warmly about Kumari Jayawardena, and her work often featured in my discussions with him. Alongside sharing our experiences around our professional pursuits, we also often spoke about the politics underlying developments in this region and social movements.

Somehow, our friendship had endured through the years of college, research, and long after that. Technology and emails made communication easier. He would share what he had written or published, or a reading that he thought was of common interest. He would refer to me as his oldest friend and family in Delhi.

We last spoke in early January 2024, when Kuldeep saw on Facebook that it was Harsha and Sudharshan's 50th wedding anniversary. Sudharshan took the call and cut it short, saying there was a medical issue and he would call back soon. That call never came. We waited. Worried. Instead, there was a message from his daughter, Shavera, who wrote about his critical condition, to say that she and Harsha wanted to reach out to his friends in India. By then, it was time to say goodbye. This was 17th January, 2024.

I will miss you, Sudharshan. For all that we shared as we grew up together, learning about our people, each other, pursuing our interests in history, our passion, our politics, and our concern for peace in the region. And above all, for nurturing a warm human friendship.