

Professor Sudharshan Seneviratne, As I Knew Him

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Introduction

In this appreciation, I wish to share my personal experience of Professor Sudharshan Seneviratne. Although I had met him whenever he accompanied his dear wife Harsha and his daughter Shavera to the *Sancta Maria* chapel in Kandy on Sundays, I came to know Sudharshan personally only towards the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka. As Amartya Sen said, we human beings belong to many diverse categories, and Sudharshan was one such multifaceted person.¹ In what follows, I briefly illuminate various facets of his life in an effort to render the totality of the human being he was.



Ancient Lanka: Volume 4 (2025)

© 2025 by the author/s. <https://doi.org/10.29173/anlk974>

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¹ "I can be simultaneously an Asian, an Indian citizen, a Bangladeshi with Bangladeshi ancestors, resident in America and Britain, an economist, a part-time philosopher, a writer, a Sanskrit scholar, a staunch supporter of secularism and democracy, a man, a Feminist, a heterosexual, a gay and lesbian rights activist, with a non-religious lifestyle, from a Hindu family, a non-Brahmin, who does not believe in an afterlife (or even, in case you wanted to know, a life before death). This is just a small sample of the different categories I can belong to simultaneously, but there are obviously many other categories of belonging that, depending on the circumstances, can influence and involve me" (Amartya Sen, *Identità e Violenza*, New York-London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006, 20-21. The translation from Italian to English is mine.)

Sudharshan the Gentleman

Although he was a leading academic in Sri Lanka, Professor Sudharshan Seneviratne had both feet planted in the ground of our lived reality, and his first priority was always Sri Lanka. In whatever he said or wrote, he spoke sense rather than voicing out ideas that had no relevance to any living creature in this world. No one could ignore his tall, elegant and imposing stature. Often, he had a friendly smile on his face and a down-to-earth human attitude, no matter the topic. But more than anything else, Sudharshan was a gentleman to the core. The refined language he used, the good manners that were of a second nature to him, and his calmness made anyone who met him immediately realize that here was a cultured man. However, his defining characteristic was his innate sense of justice and one that was most visible concerning national issues.

Sudharshan the Scholar and Professional Archaeologist

Sudharshan's vast knowledge of Sri Lankan history and archaeology was boundless, as evidenced by his many publications and talks, and one of his enduring qualities was his generosity in sharing that expertise, especially when it came to various historical and archaeological riches of Sri Lanka. Whether it was providing information for my special interest in the Sigiriya civilisation period, or for some of my work on the ancient shrine of St. Anthony of Padua (now located in Wilpattu National Park), he always provided far more than an average scholar would—a gesture that left me better educated than when I began. I recall on one occasion, while Director General at the Central Cultural Fund, he shared his knowledge with me and a visiting Redemptorist priest from Ireland, facilitating an enlightening trip to Polonnaruwa. Despite having been there many times, this was when I was able to experience these sights with a new perspective, thanks to Sudharshan's guidance.

But one of the most impactful things Sudharshan did with his immense knowledge and understanding of Sri Lanka's history and archaeology was to deconstruct and, thus challenge, many of the erroneous nationalist ideologies propagated about the island's past, especially ones that claimed, from both sides of the aisle, that Sri Lanka belonged to one group over the other.² Both of us had common interests – among them, patriotism and outspokenness – especially at a time when the identity and prestige of our Motherland and her centuries-old diverse culture was threatened by

² See for example, Sudharshan Seneviratne, "From Language to 'Race': Deconstructing 'Tamil' Identity in Antiquity", *International Relations in a Globalizing World*, Vol.1, Issue:1 (January-June 2005), 137-160, or his speeches, "Humanising Archaeology in a multi-cultural society (*Sunday Times*, March 24th 2013) and "Reflecting on a compassionate intellectual in a post-conflict era" (*Sunday Times*, July 10th, 2011).

those who had narrow political agendas—particularly Western powers with double standards about how Sri Lanka should approach the civil war. We both agreed that there were serious concerns of justice for Tamil citizens in Sri Lanka, and we were also equally convinced that this never warranted terrorism aimed at innocent Sri Lankan citizens—both Tamil and Sinhalese. His strong and frank feelings about how the war was always unfairly impacting those most marginalized and, time and time again, taking away the nation's best and most compassionate minds were clear in his lifelong outrage and grief at the loss of people like Rajini Thirangama and Lakshman Kadirgamar.³ Sudharshan stood above many of his peers mainly because of his unwavering commitment to the cause of Mother Lanka, in good times and bad, enabling him to stand firm in the midst of national and political whirlwinds. For him, it was more important to be human, and that's why he could move along with anyone, even with those who did not share his views concerning religious or political beliefs.

Sudharshan the Avid Reader

He was an avid reader, and we often exchanged erudite articles on various issues that interested us. Knowing my interest in Sri Lankan avifauna as a bird-watcher from my school days, Sudharshan often shared whatever article he happened to come across on birds. Once, when he sent me an article about the appearance of European Bee Eaters in Sri Lanka for the first time, I expressed my surprise at the range of topics with which he was so well-versed. He simply wrote back saying: "No worries, Father! I have great pleasure in sharing information with those who are dedicated to knowledge. In the process I too learn so much as always any snippet of this nature ends up in a worthy dialogue of knowledge. I never knew this bird is present in SL as well...It is indeed a great pleasure sharing knowledge, with those who appreciate knowledge and wisdom!"

On several occasions, he would send me similar thoughtful sources; once, he sent me a PDF copy of a book on Catholicism in China, and another time, he sent me a link to the Prayer Book of Thomas Cromwell. All these go on to show the man who was thirsty for knowledge with an open mind and ever-ready to share that knowledge with those who were interested. As I go through his email messages, I notice how, in almost all his communications, he ended with the phrase, "Please do keep in touch and let us share ideas."

³ See Sudharshan Seneviratne, "Walking through Corridors of Culture with Lakshman Kadirgamar", *Daily News*, 17th Nov. 2017, written after the assassination of the former Foreign Minister.

Sudharshan, the High Commissioner

Sudharshan was not only a scholar, but he was also the High Commissioner of Sri Lanka to India first, and then to Bangladesh. During those years of diplomatic service, he used his skills to build stronger ties between those two nations and Sri Lanka. In fact, high-ranking government officials in those countries knew him personally, and he used those personal relationships to enhance the bonds among the three nations of South Asia. His love for his country permeated his work as High Commissioner, and he used every opportunity to make Sri Lanka shine in the world.

In fact, I last saw him when I visited Dhaka while he was High Commissioner, in January 2021, when the Catholic bishops of Bangladesh invited me to speak to their local Church activists on “Contextual Theologizing”. Despite not being able to inform him of my visit, he somehow found out and invited me to the official residence to have dinner with him, Harsha and Shavera, adding that “we need to have a one-on-one chat”! At the end of a couple of happy hours of conversation and dinner, he personally accompanied me back to the Catholic Bishops’ Conference Residence in Dhaka, though it was almost midnight.

Sudharshan, My Friend

Every time I engaged in a conversation with Sudharshan, invariably we exchanged our honest opinions on various issues – not necessarily international politics, archaeology or religion – though we did not agree on every aspect of our own views. The conversations were so respectful and rewarding that at times, we happily dared to correct each other. At the end of such conversations, we came out enriched in our own views of and attitudes to life itself. Although we were brought up in two different backgrounds, Sudharshan and I formed a life-long friendship built on mutual respect and an appreciation for each other’s values. He often wrote a personal note of encouragement whenever he happened to read an article of mine, and was kind enough to write an Opinion for my book, *LTTE Terrorism: Musings of a Catholic Priest*, where he stated, “During those dark years [of the civil war] there was a deafening silence in the corridors of ecclesiastical and temporal powers thus condoning the violence unleashed by the LTTE, by default..... Rev. Fr. Vimal Tirimanna’s voice of the voiceless educated a dormant public that feared to challenge a cancer that was slowly eating in to the historically evolved social fabric of Sri Lanka. He is an embodiment of the activist-humanist who fearlessly and honestly translated his undiluted thoughts into

a sequential narrative through his powerful pen. It provides a clinical dissection of the activities and psyche of the LTTE during those critical years.⁴

Conclusion

In what I have penned down above, peeping into just a few aspects of his life, I have managed only to summarize how I experienced the person of Professor Sudharshan Seneviratne. In this journey of life here on earth, we encounter many events and people, and often, they shape our lives, and some of them create an indelible mark in our memories. Sudharshan certainly was one such person. While I thank God for making our life-paths intersect here on earth, I pray that we meet again beyond the shores of this life.

Dear Sudharshan, thanks for what you have been to your dear family and friends, to your country and to the world! May you attain Nibbana!

⁴ Sudharshan Seneviratne, "An Opinion about the Book" in Vimal Tirimanna, *LTTE Terrorism: Musings of a Catholic Priest*, Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2012, xvii.