

In Memorium: Emeritus Professor Laksiri Dharmasoka Jayasuriya (1931 - 2018)

Dr. Siri Gamage, Sydney, Australia

Emeritus Professor Laksiri Jayasuriya (Laksiri) who was Professor of Social Work and Social administration at the University of Western Australia passed away on April 20th 2018 in Perth. He was the founder of the sociology department at the University of Colombo and led an illustrious career in the Australian academia while contributing to government policy making processes in areas such as multiculturalism, ethnic affairs, immigration and citizenship. He nurtured cohorts of students under his care during his long career in Australia and continued to engage in scholarly activities and publishing after retirement. Professor Jayasuriya leaves behind a beloved wife Rohini and two loving sons Kanishka and Pradeep - both professionals - one in the academia and the other in the medical field.

I came to know Laksiri closely during 1999 when I coordinated the 7th International Conference on Sri Lanka studies in Canberra, Australia. He provided valuable inputs behind the scenes and was a keynote speaker. Since then we communicated regularly and shared each other's publications until a year or so ago. His death comes as a great loss to his academic colleagues, particularly in Australia and Sri Lanka. The energy and enthusiasm he showed on the subjects that he grappled with was extraordinary. He was truly blessed with an intellect and a vast reservoir of knowledge covering both the Eastern and Western social philosophies.

Laksiri was born on 27 October 1931 in Ceylon during the late British colonial period. His father was a prison medical doctor. Laksiri was the eldest in a family of three. His mother came from a wealthy family. He obtained primary and secondary school education from Royal College, Colombo (1945-1951). Among others, it was an institution that trained civil servants for the colonial government of Ceylon. Thus, he grew up with English educated elite in Ceylon and had access to a privileged background even though he did not belong to the highest caste. He participated in the debating team in the Royal College which included figures like Felix Dias Bandaranayake (later a Minister of Finance and Public Administration) and Mervin de Silva (later a reputed journalist). During the War, the school named Glendale moved to the hills and he was schooled in a residential facility for four years. It instilled British tradition and values in him while affording the opportunity to participate in sports. There he edited Glendale Gazette and took part in a mock parliament (David Walker interview 2012).

He commenced undergraduate study at the University of Ceylon (1949-50) but moved to Sydney university, Australia where he studied for a Bachelor's Degree with Psychology (Hons) between 1950-54 obtaining the degree in 1954 with first class and the University Medal. He came to know Ludowyks well and had initial conversations about studying psychology. Following the trend at the time of the English educated elite to send children for higher studies in Cambridge or Oxford, he also wanted to follow the same path. However, through an encounter with Professor A.P Elkin, father of Peter Elkin an English professor at the University of New England, Australia, on his visit to Colombo, the opportunity arose for Laksiri to go to Australia for tertiary study. He proceeded to Sydney in 1951 to begin his degree course as a private student by a ship called Himalaya and became a resident of the Wesley College. At Sydney, he was with a cohort of students who occupied influential positions in Australia and overseas (David Walker interview 2012).

Laksiri felt warmth and acceptance in the College as well as in the company of Australian host families outside the university where he was exposed to informality in social interactions compared to the very formal English manners the Ceylonese got used to at the time. In the College, there were many students from Asia and elsewhere who had come to study on Colombo Plan scholarships. Importantly, Laksiri brought with him a left orientation and political consciousness from his Royal College days. Sri Lanka had a strong Trotskyite Group at the time. He had a close relationship with David Ross –a senior student at Wesley and the son of a Communist Party Trade Unionist. At Wesley College, there were others such as Bill Ford (associated with Charlie Perkins, Aboriginal activist), Frank Stevens (who wrote the first book on Australian race relations). Other contemporaries included Hedley Bull –later to become Professor of International Relations and Jim Wolfensohn who became President of the World Bank. One man who influenced Laksiri greatly was his teacher Prof. W.M O’Neil. He had much influence on him in terms of ‘scholarship and academia than anyone else’ (David Walker interview 2012).

Laksiri was able to make powerful friends through university study in Sydney. The class of people he was interacting with at Sydney University was well aware of the need for Australia to engage with Asia. Rev. Alan Walker was a critique of the Australia’s white Australia policy. He gained a lot of understanding through involvement in university life. E.g. President of the Sydney University Psychological society in 1953, secretary of the Sydney University International Club (1953), President of Sydney University Anthropology Society (1952-53). He organised one of the initial Sydney film festivals. Later, he was to continue this interest in film when he took up his appointment at the University of Peradeniya as it was then called. Another notable feature of his time in Sydney was his work for Radio Australia called ‘Diary of an Asian Student’ which documented his response to or reflections on Australian life. In the 1950s, he received several prizes including Frank Albert Prize and a University Gold medal

Laksiri studied subjects such as history, psychology and anthropology. After completing the Bachelor’s degree in 1954, he was offered a Teaching Fellowship in the same year by the Sydney University. At this time Harold Holt was the minister of immigration who gave a special approval and endorsement on the passport for Laksiri’s contract appointment at the request of the university. Accordingly, Laksiri became the first or second Asian academic at Sydney University. Most students he taught were returned servicemen who were in a different age group. Laksiri was 23 years of age then. He taught a first-year statistics course. Teaching lasted until the end of 1955 (David Walker interview 2012).

Laksiri accepted a fulltime, permanent academic appointment at the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya in 1956. Having trained as a social psychologist, he joined the sociology Department which at that time included Ralph Pieris, Stanley Thambiah and Gannanth Obeyesekera. At the time, the department was – arguably – considered to be the best within the Faculty of Arts an institution that was very well regarded in Asia. The campus was a site of creative intellectual endeavour as well as of robust debate over academic and political issues. Laksiri built strong friendships with people such as K N Jayatilleke - Professor of Philosophy and J E Jayasuriya - Professor of Education. He was an active participant in these academic debates and remembered fondly by his colleagues and students.

After a stint at Peradeniya, Laksiri came back to Sydney in 1969 on a Leeverhulme Fellowship to the University of New South Wales. This was after he had spent time at Berkley on a Fullbright Scholarship (Prior to this, UNSW offered him a temporary Senior Lecturer position in 1968). He lectured in the departments of Psychology and Social Work. During 1969/70, Laksiri met people such as Faith Bendler and John Berry. This was a momentous time after the 1967 Referendum that granted Citizenship rights - including voting rights - to the Aboriginal People of Australia. During this period, Laksiri wrote articles to the Australian media about Asian literacy arguing that Asian studies ought not be focused merely on teaching Asian languages - as a language alone does not provide students with a deep understanding of cultures, political and economic systems or diverse histories. He argued that it is a mistake to push just for Asian languages following a utilitarian form of thinking. If we do so, students are missing out on 'the study of philosophies, civilisations and the cultural history and so forth' (Interview with David Walker 2012). His view was that learning a language is mainly for pedagogical reasons, a view shared by La Bianco –a language specialist. To see language itself outside the culture is a mistake, he believed. He maintained this position right through his working career.

Laksiri pursued postgraduate study at the London School of Economics and Political Science between 1957-60 securing his PhD in Social Psychology. In 1969, he became the foundation professor in the department of Sociology and Social Welfare, University of Colombo and developed the academic program within the Department. He was particularly proud of establishing the workers education program in Colombo. Between 1970-71, he was the Dean of Social Sciences. In 1974, Laksiri was appointed as foundation professor in the department of Social work and social administration-later social work and social policy at University of Western Australia, Perth. He was the first Asian professor at the University of Western Australia and one of the first Asians to be appointed to a professorial position at an Australian University.

During his academic career in Perth, he held the positions of head of department (1971-90), Director, Centre of Asian Studies (1989-92). He was a Fellow of the British Psychological Society, and the Australian Academy of Social Sciences and an Honorary member of the Australian Association of Social Workers. He became an Emeritus professor and a senior honorary research fellow at the same university in 1993 marking the end of his active full-time teaching and research career. Between 1993-94, he served in the capacity of a senior fellow, development studies at Edith Cowan university, Perth. He was never one to slow down. He continued his academic work after retirement in association with the University of Western Australia in an honorary capacity until his health started to deteriorate.

In the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s Laksiri played an active role in various State and Federal Government advisory bodies and reviews in Australia dealing with areas such as multicultural education, language services, and ethnic affairs. He was the first Asian to be appointed to a major Australian government advisory body when he was appointed to the Immigration Advisory council by the Whitlam Labour government. During 1973-75, he was on the Federal Government Committee on Community relations as well as the Migrant Taskforce, West Australian Government. He was the chair of the National Advisory and Coordinating Committee on Multicultural Education(NACCME) (1984-87).

He continued to serve on a range of government advisory committees and commissions including as the National Multicultural Advisory Council (NMAC) (1996-97). Between 2001-2007, Laksiri served on the Anti-Racism Reference Group of the West Australian Government. These roles highlight some of the key points of his significant contribution to policy making, review and advisory services. These roles exemplify some key points of his significant contribution in this important field. At State and Federal levels, they required liaison with the public service and the Government of the day. Through these roles he was able to elevate himself to be a spokesperson for the immigrant and ethnic communities whose needs and interests had to be looked after by way of government policies and programs. Government leaders had immense respect for Laksiri because of his advocacy role and the authority he commanded in the academic sphere in the field of Social welfare and Social Administration/social Policy.

He was one of the key architects of the multicultural policy in Australia. Main thrust of the multicultural discourse then was whether immigrants should assimilate or integrate to the Australian society? Some on the conservative side argued that they should assimilate (deleting aspects of original culture) whereas more liberally minded leaders in various sectors argued that the best way is for integration (retaining aspects of original culture). Laksiri was on the side of the latter.

His policy and academic contributions emphasized the importance of a political conception called 'pluralistic citizenship' as opposed to a narrow conception of 'cultural diversity' associated with cultural, linguistic or ethnic identity. The latter approach by the Government led to critical discussions about the inadequacy of government policy merely focused on Access and Equity spreading into various policy arenas including education, health, social welfare, community relations, and migrant services. During Howard years (since 2004), there was a rise in Anti-Asian immigration lobby led by people such as Historian Geoffrey Blainey. Laksiri took a public stand against their arguments through the media and engaged in robust public debate

Laksiri's Academic career at the University of Western Australia was a highly productive one in terms of teaching, supervision of postgraduate students, research and publications (1971-1993). He served on various Editorial Boards of reputed journals such as the *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, *Contemporary Social Work Education*, *Journal of Multicultural Social work*, and the *Journal of Population*. He was a member of a range of learned societies and public bodies. These included the Australian Population Association, British Sociological Association, Australian and New Zealand Sociological Association, Australian Association of Social Workers. He was an elected fellow in the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, and The British Psychological Society. In recognition of Laksiri's community and public service, he received Member of the Order of Australia Award (A.M) from the Government of Australia in 1984. Each year, recipients of these awards are announced on Queen's Birth Day for prominent Australians in various categories of service to the country and community.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Laksiri published papers and books on contemporary policy issues that were the subject of public and policy discourses and controversies. I was coordinating

and teaching into a Master's program on immigrants, multiculturalism, racism etc. during 1990s. I utilised Laksiri's publications in my teaching courses as they tackled these discourses, controversies arising and discussion points from a theoretical perspective. He Co-edited a book on Legacies of White Australia focusing on Race, Culture and Nation (2005), and another book titled Transforming a White Australia: Issues of Racism and Immigration (2012). There are a significant number of book chapters, occasional papers and journal articles to his credit as well. During his long and fruitful career, he published books, monographs and articles focused on Sri Lanka dealing with social development, as well as Welfarism and politics (2000) about which I published a book review in a Journal dealing with South Asian topics. The latter is a book used by postgraduate students researching about the way Sri Lanka turned away from Welfare government to one based on a neoliberal, free market economic paradigm.

In the later stage of his life, Laksiri focused on Buddhist Philosophy which his father also had shown a keen interest by publishing a book. Thus he published an article on Buddhist Humanism for the Asian Century in the International Journal of Buddhist Thought and Culture (2011) and a book titled Reflections on Buddhist Social Philosophy (2014). Laksiri had a keen interest on electoral politics in Sri Lanka also and he analysed election results after national elections and published papers in 2001 and 2002.

A significant part of his academic work examined issues of social policy and electoral politics in Sri Lanka and comparatively. His work in this area was guided by the question: How did Sri Lanka – along with other areas like Kerala – managed to produce a Third World welfare state that led to high human development outcomes – on measures such as literacy, life expectancy and infant mortality? His analysis pointed to the role of politics during the late colonial state along with the impact of left wing parties and coalitions together with influential ideas as contributory factors for the development of this third world welfare state. He was particularly interested in the way these social policies helped to shape new patterns of class formation and conflict in Sri Lanka. His book on social development in Sri Lanka entitled 'Taking Social development seriously' (2010) was a synopsis of many of his key ideas on these issues. He was interested – and disappointed in the way neoliberal policies over the last decades dismantled or impoverished some of these programs as he charted what he called the shift from the welfare to the warfare state.

Laksiri was asked to give the prestigious guest of honour address on the sweeping victory of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in 1970. This led to a very productive series of publications on Sri Lankan elections until 2010 and its broader social context. He published a book on the Changing Face of Sri Lanka's Electoral Politics. He was much concerned with the increasing authoritarian drift of Sri Lankan politics over the decades leading up to the change of government in 2014.

Laksiri was the founding President of West Australian Buddhist Society. He assisted Asian students through Australia-Asia House at the University of Western Australia in numerous ways.

A few years ago, Laksiri contacted me to canvass ideas about how to preserve his personal library and writings? I suggested him to contact the State library in WA or even in NSW. I am glad to see that his published work is now available online through the national Library of

Australia for anyone to access. It is a fitting tribute to a tireless academic, advocate on immigrant and ethnic rights, policy advisor, a humanist and influential figure in the Australian policy context like Professor Jaysuriya. Condolence messages received from the WA Government and former ministers of Multicultural Affairs etc. reflect his standing in the Australian community.

This article is not complete without adding a very personal note about my own relationship with late Professor Jaysuriya. By the time I joined the University of New England, Armidale in New South Wales as a Lecturer in multicultural studies in 1990, I was looking for published materials in the field. I was also looking for persons of Sri Lankan origin who were active in Australian ethnic affairs. Immediately my attention was drawn to Professor Jaysuriya and his contributions. I made contact with him and introduced myself. Our Peradeniya connection through the department of Sociology (though I was not one of his students) was also helpful in establishing a link with him. Since then he was very generous with his ideas, reflections and writings. We communicated through email regularly. Sometimes, he wanted me to read his draft papers before sending off to publishers. He returned the courtesy when I wanted similar help. He was a giver as one of his friends has remarked in the Guest Book maintained by the West Australian newspaper. He was a role model for me in my career in a new land.

I will miss his counsel and friendship as will many others from his Royal College, University of Ceylon, Wesley College and University of Western Australia days. He was a larger than usual figure who came to prominence due to his firm convictions, dedication, and belief in the power of the word, deep reading and reflection, forthrightness, and capacity for articulating a position for human advancement. He is fondly remembered for all he accomplished in his capacity as an intellectual rooted in Sri Lanka but based in Australia writing with integrity representing the interests of those on the margins in Australian society in the context of social theory, government social policy, ethnic rights, equity and social justice.

May he rest in Peace!

Sources

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