



PERADENIYA'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE REWRITING OF THE HISTORY OF SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

In the last 75 years, scholars at and alumni of Peradeniya have transformed the writing of the history of Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka has had a long and distinguished tradition of chronicles and histories. However, with the advent of colonial rule, with exceptions like the *hatan kavyas*, the writing of the history of Sri Lanka fell largely into the hands of the colonizers. Though the re-writing of history by Sri Lankans through the critical reading of sources began before 1942 as a response to the colonial depiction of local history, with the foundation of the University at Peradeniya there began a major efflorescence of writing on the Sri Lankan past. This occurred not in isolation but in the context of independence from the British in 1948, and the subsequent political and ethnic tensions within the country. This paper maps the progression of this scholarly endeavor, with an appeal to a continuation of the mission by the current generation of scholars at the institution.

Keywords: History of Sri Lanka, Re-writing of history, University of Ceylon and Peradeniya

On the 75th Anniversary of the founding of the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya, there is much to recall in terms of the achievements of this institution. One aspect that might have received less attention than it deserves is the way in which scholars of this institution as well as its alumni, have transformed the writing of the history of Sri Lanka.

As background, we might recall the ways in

which the history of the country was written before the founding of this institution in 1942. Sri Lanka has had a long and distinguished tradition of chronicles and histories. However, with the advent of colonial rule in Sri Lanka at the end of the sixteenth century, the writing of the history of this country fell largely into the hands of the colonizers. Whether we consider the writings of Joao de Barros, Diogo do Couto, or Fernao de Queyroz on

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the Portuguese encounter with Sri Lanka, or those of Francois Valentyn, Phillipus Baldaeus, and various Dutch governors of Sri Lanka on Dutch colonial rule, or the accounts of Sri Lanka by various British authors including Emerson Tennant, the story of Sri Lanka was written for several centuries by foreigners who looked at the country from an external viewpoint. Of course, there were exceptions. The later *hatan kavyas* (war poems) including the *Rajasiha Hatana*, the seventeenth century Sinhala *Rajavaliya*, and the eighteenth century Tamil chronicle, the *Yalpana Vaipava Malai*, continued to bring in indigenous perspectives on local history.

Nevertheless, the dominant interpretations of Sri Lankan history came to be 'from the decks of visiting ships.' To be fair, the re-writing of history by Sri Lankans through the critical reading of sources began before the establishment of the University of Peradeniya. G. C. Mendis, and Fr. S. G. Perera had provided readable histories of the island based on modern historical practices. As important, Paul E. Pieris, a Sri Lankan administrator, wrote several books approaching the Sri Lankan past from a nationalist, anticolonial perspective. Other local scholars wrote shorter pieces questioning some aspects of existing historical perspectives. Major Dutch and Portuguese writings and manuscripts were published in English translation, thus making a great deal of documentation available to local scholars.

Nevertheless, it was with the foundation of the University of Ceylon at Peradeniya that there began a major efflorescence of writing on the Sri Lankan past. Leading the charge were scholars such as K. W. Goonewardena and Suppiah Arasaratnam. Both of them were graduates of the University who returned to Sri Lanka to teach at the institution after obtaining doctoral degrees. The former wrote books and articles on various aspects of Sri Lanka's encounter with the Dutch, often questioning

the assertions and interpretations he found in Portuguese, Dutch, and English writings. The latter, among other things, effectively analyzed Sri Lankan trade connections in relation to other areas bounding the Indian Ocean, deftly using colonial documents. Meanwhile, Lakshman S. Perera painstakingly documented the evidence of inscriptions so that the story written in older Sri Lankan chronicles such as the *Mahavamsa* could be complemented, enhanced or contradicted. Sirima Kiribamune's work on medieval Sri Lanka was equally valuable in enhancing our understanding of the interactions between Sri Lanka and South India.

All this occurred not in isolation but in the context of a surge of nationalist pride that accompanied independence from the British in 1948, and subsequent political and ethnic tensions within the country. Peradeniya came to be recognized in the next thirty years as the center of historical research in the country and its historians received recognition and respect from all walks of life. Prominent and most prolific among the historians at Peradeniya was Kingsley M. de Silva whose writings covered mostly the 19th and 20th centuries and whose one-volume history of Sri Lanka became the standard work on Sri Lanka's history. Other experts of this period, notably Michael Roberts, Vijaya Samaraweera, Ameer Ali, and Ananda Wickremaratne, made major contributions to the study of British colonial rule in Sri Lanka, while V. Kanapathypillai and D. A. Kothelawala published numerous scholarly articles enhancing our understanding of the Dutch rule. T. B. H. Abeyasinghe and C. R. de Silva reexamined the initial colonial encounter with the Portuguese. W.I. Siriweera (medieval Sri Lanka), W. M. Sirisena (relations with Southeast Asia), K. M. Werake (fifteenth century Chinese encounters with Sri Lanka), Tilak Hettiaratchy (Kingship), Amaradasa Liyanagamage (Drift to the Southwest), and G. P. V. Somaratna (history of Kotte), all provided new perspectives and insights into

Sri Lanka's past. Eminent scholars such as K. Indrapala and S. Pathmanathan embarked on groundbreaking studies of Tamil settlements in Sri Lanka and the emergence of the kingdom of Jaffna. Lorna Dewraja researched and published on the Kingdom of Kandy. The work of many of these scholars came to be part of the new understanding of Sri Lanka's past, and their work was included in the *University of Ceylon: History of Ceylon*, Volume II (1973) and the *University of Peradeniya: History of Sri Lanka*, Volume III (1995). The generations of historians who followed were heirs to this tradition of scholarship.

The rewriting of history at Peradeniya, however, extended beyond teachers and students of the Department of History. Archaeologist Senerath Paranavitna who taught for years at Peradeniya edited *the University of Ceylon: History of Ceylon*, Vol. 1 Parts 1 and 2 (1959-1960). His successors in the Department of Archeology, including Leelananda Prematilleke, Sudarshan Seneviratne and others, significantly widened our understanding of ancient Lanka. Merlin Peris and D. P. W. Weerakkody traced references to Sri Lanka in Greek and Latin sources. Ian Van den Driesen and S. Rajaratnam both taught economic history in the Department of Economics and were inspiring teachers and sound scholars. Political Scientists at Peradeniya, most notably A. Jeyaratnam Wilson, contributed much to our understanding of political and constitutional changes in the early twentieth century. Ranjith Amerasinghe's work widened our understanding of left wing politics in Sri Lanka, while W. A. Wishwa Warnapala wrote extensively on twentieth century politics. Shelton U. Kodikara ably analyzed the foreign policy of the newly independent state of Sri Lanka (Ceylon). Medical Faculty's S. N. Arseculeratne worked on the history of traditional medicine in Sri Lanka, while Arjuna Aluvihare from the same faculty looked into surgery in ancient times. Geographers such

as C. M. Madduma Bandara, Gerald Pierism and Shantha Hennayake have provided useful perspectives on the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Above all, there was Gananath Obeyesekere, whose lively interventions into historical debates through scholarly articles over many decades stimulated us all. It was his inspiration that led to the formation of the Ceylon Studies Seminar through which many of us, young aspiring scholars of that time, circulated first drafts of scholarly papers and received critical feedback from our peers. From 1968 to 1989, the Ceylon Studies Seminar included formal discussions of more than 100 scholarly papers, many of them on history and related disciplines. The continued existence of *The Ceylon Journal of Historical*

and *Social Studies* through most of this period gave Peradeniya academics an opportunity to place their work before the wider academic world. The continued publication of two Peradeniya University journals, *The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities and Modern Sri Lanka Studies* has ensured that this opportunity remains open.

The work of rewriting the history of Sri Lanka will be a continuing mission for the current generation of scholars at the institution. As former Peradeniya historian P. V. J. Jayasekera has reminded us in his latest publication (2017), many of us might well have paid inadequate attention to how our analysis fits in with debates on historical interpretation that have enriched understandings of the stories of other parts of the world. Jayasekera also argues that some of us should have been somewhat more critical of colonial sources and been clearer on the exploitative nature of the colonial rule. Also, our historical writing could have benefited more from insights into Sri Lankan feminist scholars such as University of Colombo's Kumari Jayawardane.

As I understand it, history is not the past but more accurately, how people in the present (at any given time) look at the past. That is why we

can talk about varying historical interpretations rather than one 'History'. Viewed in this sense, the scholars at Peradeniya continue to have a formidable task ahead of them. They are responsible for assisting a new generation of Sri Lankans to use their experience, factual knowledge, and critical analysis to enhance their own understandings of what happened in the past and how current Sri Lanka came into being.

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