



OBITUARY: EMERITUS PROFESSOR LAKSIRI DHARMASOKA JAYASURIYA (1931 - 2018)

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Laksiri was born on 27th October 1931 in Ceylon during the late British colonial period. His father was a prison medical doctor. He was the eldest in a family of three. His mother came from a wealthy family. He obtained his 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. He participated in the debating team of 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-then 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 the Glendale Gazette and took part in a mock Parliament (David Walker interview 2002).

Influenced by the trend of the English educated elite at the time to send their children for higher

studies to Cambridge or Oxford, Laksiri also wanted to follow the same path. However, through an encounter with Professor A.P. Elkin - father of Peter Elkin and 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. In Sydney, he was with a cohort of students who occupied influential positions later in Australia and overseas (David Walker interview 2002). He studied for a Bachelor's Degree with Psychology (Hons) between 1950-54 at the University of Sydney, obtaining the degree in 1954 with first class honours and the University 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, where he taught a first-year statistics course until the

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end of 1955. He became one of the first Asian academics there. Laksiri was 23 years of age then. Most students he taught were returned servicemen who were in a different age group (David Walker interview 2002).

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. His contemporaries included Hedley Bull – later to become Professor of International Relations, and Jim Wolfensohn who became President of the World Bank. His teacher Prof. W.M. O’Neil had much influence on him in terms of “scholarship and academia than anyone else” (David Walker interview 2002).

Laksiri accepted a fulltime, permanent academic appointment at the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya in 1956. Having received his training as a social psychologist, he joined the Department of Sociology which at that time included Ralph Pieris, Stanley Thambiah, and Gannanth Obeyesekera. At the time, the Department was 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 robust debate over academic and political issues. Laksiri built strong friendships with reputed academics such as K.N. Jayatilleke - Professor of Philosophy, and J. E. Jayasuriya - Professor of Education. He was an active participant in the academic debates and is remembered fondly by his colleagues and students.

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 of the Department of Sociology and Social Welfare, University of Colombo and developed its academic programme. He was particularly

proud of establishing the workers’ education programme in Colombo. Laksiri returned to Sydney in 1969 on a Leeverhulme Fellowship at the University of New South Wales. He lectured in the Departments of Psychology and Social Work. This was after his time at Berkley on a Fullbright Scholarship. In 1974, Laksiri was appointed as foundation professor at the Department of Social Work and Social Administration (later Social Work and Social Policy), the University of Western Australia, Perth. He was the first Asian professor there 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, Department of Social Work and Social Administration (1971- 90), and Director, Centre of Asian Studies (1989-92). Between 1970-71, he was the Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences. He was a Fellow of the British Psychological Society as well as the Australian Academy of Social Sciences, and an Honorary member of the Australian Association of Social Workers. He became Emeritus Professor and a senior honorary research fellow at the same university in 1993 marking the end of his full-time teaching and research career. Between 1993-94, he served in the capacity of a senior fellow at the Centre for Development Studies at Edith Cowan University, Perth. Laksiri 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. The energy and enthusiasm he showed on the subjects that he grappled with was extraordinary. He was truly blessed with a sharp intellect and a vast reservoir of knowledge covering both Eastern and Western social philosophies.

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 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 of the West Australian government. He was also the Chair of the National Advisory and Coordinating Committee on Multicultural Education (NACCME) (1984-87), and the National Multicultural Advisory Council (NMAC) (1996-97). Laksiri served on the Anti-Racism Reference Group of the West Australian government from 2001-2007. These roles highlight some of the key points of his significant contribution to policy making, review, and advisory services. Through these roles he elevated 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 programmes. He was one of the key architects of the multicultural policy in Australia. His policy and academic contributions emphasized the importance of a political conception called 'pluralistic citizenship' as opposed to a narrow and tokenistic conception of 'cultural diversity' associated with cultural, linguistic, or ethnic identity.

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 the Australian Population Association, British Sociological Association, Australian and New Zealand Sociological Association, and 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 his community and public service, he received Member of the Order of Australia Award from the Government of Australia in 1984.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Laksiri published papers and books on contemporary policy issues. He Co-edited a book on Legacies of White Australia focusing on race, culture, and nation (2003), 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. 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 in Sri Lanka (2000). The latter is a book used by postgraduate students researching on 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 in by publishing a book. Laksiri 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). He was the founding President of West Australian Buddhist Society and assisted Asian students through Australia-Asia House at the University of Western Australia.

He had a keen interest on electoral politics in Sri Lanka, and also analysed election results after national elections and published papers based on them. A significant part of his academic work examined issues of social policy and electoral politics in Sri Lanka and comparatively. He was particularly interested in the way social policies helped to shape new patterns of class formation and conflict in Sri Lanka. His book 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 welfare programmes. 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, culminating in a book on the Changing Face of Sri Lanka's Electoral Politics.

His published work is 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. Condolence messages received from the WA Government and former ministers of Multicultural Affairs etc. reflect his standing in the Australian community. He was a giver as one of his friends has remarked in the Guest Book maintained by the West Australian newspaper.

Laksiri is fondly remembered as an intellectual rooted in Sri Lanka and nurtured in Australia, writing with commendable integrity representing the interests of those on the margins in Australian society in the context of social theory, government multicultural and social policy, ethnic rights, equity, and social justice.

May he rest in peace!

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