

Sri Lanka: Departure of a great scholar: Prof. P.V.J. Jayasekera

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The passing away of Prof. P.V.J. Jayasekera on July 11, 2024, after a brief illness, has left a profound void in the study of modern history in Sri Lanka. He lived a productive academic life, offering guidance to generations of students with his thorough and unique analytical perspective, right up until his last breath at the age of 91.

Prof. Jayasekera was undeniably one of the most distinguished historians produced by the University of Peradeniya. His influence extended far beyond his own academic achievements. He was a beloved professor whose teachings inspired countless students over the years. His trailblazing research on British colonialism and indigenous resistance opened up new paths for subsequent generations of scholars to follow. He belonged to a generation of world-renowned scholars from the University of Ceylon, whose research and teaching elevated the University of Ceylon/University of Peradeniya to a world-class academic institution.

Prof. Jayasekera hails from a culturally deep-rooted and well-connected family in Galle, being the fifth of ten siblings. He received his schooling at Richmond College in Galle, where he won the prestigious Darrel Medal as the Best Student in 1954, before entering the University of Ceylon. At the University, he pursued a Special Course in History and graduated in 1959. He won a Commonwealth Scholarship to Canada and earned his Master's Degree from the University of Manitoba. He later joined Vidyodaya University as a Lecturer. For his doctoral studies, following the tradition of Sri Lankan lecturers of the day, he attended the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London, UK. He received his Ph.D. in 1970, submitting his doctoral dissertation titled 'Social and Political Change in Ceylon 1900-1919' under the supervision of the well-known South Asian historian Prof. Kenneth Ballhatchet of SOAS. In 1973, he joined his alma mater, the University of Peradeniya.

Prof. Jayasekera was a highly popular lecturer who actively participated in the social and cultural life of the residential university. Beyond the classroom, he contributed significantly to various university events and initiatives, fostering a vibrant academic and cultural environment on campus. His engaging teaching style and commitment to student development earned him widespread admiration. His lectures were renowned for their broad vision and compelling arguments, grounded in rigorous historical facts. His ability to present complex historical events within a theoretical framework provided students with not only a deep understanding of history but also an insatiable thirst for further knowledge. His unique approach encouraged students to view historical facts analytically, fostering a generation of scholars equipped with critical thinking. As a mentor and educator, Prof. Jayasekera's legacy is reflected in the many students he inspired to pursue careers in history and related fields. His contributions to the academic life of the university will be remembered with great respect and admiration. Furthermore, from the students' perspective, his most admirable quality was his humanity. He was very approachable and always ready to lend a sympathetic ear to their grievances. He had a special concern and care for students from underprivileged social backgrounds.

He was a meticulous, thorough, and insightful research scholar who prioritised quality over quantity in his work. His research marked a definitive break from the liberal and positivist historiographical tradition in Sri Lanka. His essay on the Temperance Movement, published in the *Vidyodaya Journal*, is a groundbreaking study that challenged the prevailing arguments and interpretations of liberal-positivist historiography at the time. He analyzed the complexity of the *Amadyapa* Movement, identifying its different layers and positioning it as an indigenous resistance without aligning with the 'traditionalist' approach. Most importantly, he introduced class elements and group interests into his analysis of the *Amadyapa* Movement and the 1915 riots.

The two-volume work edited by Prof. Jayasekera (with Prof. Mahinda Wereke co-editing Volume II) and published in 1992 and 1995, remains a seminal contribution to the study of Sri Lanka's foreign relations amidst domestic and regional/international crises. Volume I, "Security Dilemma of a Small State: Sri Lanka in the South Asian Context," explores historical, strategic, economic, and socio-cultural factors influencing the security challenges faced by this small island state in South Asia, particularly in relation to its proximity to India. Volume II of the series examines internal crises and external interventions in Sri Lanka. Prof. Jayasekera emphasised that understanding the island's history necessitates consideration of both internal and external factors, given its strategic location. His passion for global affairs was evident during his doctoral studies in London in the late 1960s, where he contributed to the BBC as a resource. He successfully engaged the academic community studying international affairs and contemporary history, rallying their contributions to these comprehensive volumes.

His lifelong scholarly contribution to modern Sri Lankan historiography includes a two-volume work titled *Confrontations with Colonialism: Resistance, Revivalism, and Reform under British Rule in Sri Lanka*. The first volume, published in 2017 and spanning 569 pages, was followed by the completion of the second volume, which unfortunately Prof. Jayasekera did not live to see published. In his analysis of confrontations with British colonialism, he critiques and challenges liberal, conservative, and particularly positivist approaches. Introducing new social science methodologies, he reshapes the study of modern Sri Lankan history. Drawing on Edward Said's critique of Western colonialism, as articulated in *On Colonialism*, he applies it constructively to reinterpret British colonial writings from a modernist perspective. He traces ideological connections between modernist colonial approaches and the mechanisms of colonial domination, employing Michel Foucault's concepts to scrutinize the power-knowledge dynamics within Sri Lankan historiography, especially concerning British colonialism and indigenous resistance. Another distinguished historian produced by the University of Ceylon, Prof. C.R. de Silva, remarks, "In one of the most challenging and thought-provoking history books published in Sri Lanka in the last decade, P.V.J. Jayasekera utilises a diverse range of sources to question several prevailing interpretations of Sri Lanka under British colonial rule in the nineteenth century."

He was an intellectual giant on the broadly defined left flank of Sri Lankan academia. By no means a dogmatic ideologue, he employed Marxist and post-Marxist writings both constructively and critically to understand historical processes and unpack the historiography of colonialism and resistance. His unique approach makes him a shining star in the intellectual firmament, guiding light for generations of incoming historians.

Prof. Gamini Keerawella

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