

Sri Lanka: Santasilan Kadirgamar, the last of a generation of Tamil Marxists

Thursday 27 August 2015, by [DAVID Kumar](#) (Date first published: 27 July 2015).

Reflecting on Santasilan Kadirgamar's life.

He was my comrade and neighbor and oft would we sit out on my veranda, sipping the stuff that cheers and first talking sensibly, then slinging it out in voices that kept the neighbors, too polite to complain, awake till the late hours, as a bottle of the golden water of life emptied itself gently. He was a Christian, more than a superficial one as his wish that his funeral be both spiritual and secular shows. But this was less potent than the convictions that anchored his political sentiments. He was historian, scholar, writer and twice a local government election candidate of a left alliance.

A man of many parts who lived to the full and committed himself to its duties; however, what was most important about the life of Santasilan Kadirgamar? On reflection, and leaving to one side the wonderful family that he and Sakuntala raised and about which others are more qualified to write than I, I believe that what is most significant about Silan's life's work is that he was one, the last one of his generation, of Tamil Marxists. His commitment to righting the wrongs that had been done over decades to the Tamil people was indisputable; at the same time, the perspective he brought to bear was that of a Marxist. Silan was not a card carrying member of any party nor he did he proclaim a stance in public. But his method and approach, those he supported in political battles, and his description of himself in private conversation, marked him off as a Marxist.

I first got to know Silan in the mid-1970s through MIRJE (Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality). Father Paul Casperz, Rajan Philips, Upali Cooray and I founded MIRJE in Colombo and I was sent off to Jaffna to hold seminars and popularise its objectives. Silan was present at one, promptly joined, and became our anchor in Jaffna. It was a time in which it needed considerable courage; the state, (soon to be JR), the military and the police had taken the law into their own hands on the one hand, and the Tamil youth were mobilising under numerous umbrellas - the LTTE was not dominant yet. Neither the Sinhalese government nor Tamil militants respected law or liberty; in Jaffna you were at considerable risk. Still MIRJE held at the centre, Silan survived in Jaffna, and we managed to get a lot of work done, including exposure (Emergency '79) of the cold blooded murder of several young Tamils in one night when the authorities came knocking at midnight.

As a historian and scholar, Silan's forte was pre-independence radical Tamil activism. He had a deep well of knowledge of this period and was a productive writer. He was meticulous in attention to detail and precise in the use of reference material. He had a rich body of documentation which I hope will be carefully archived with the agreement of his family. Silan and I kept close contact after he moved to Japan and I to Hong Kong, and in 1989 we brought out a jointly edited book, *Ethnicity: Identity, Conflict, Crisis*. Silan's 30 page meticulous chapter "Lanka: Nationalism, self-determination and conflict" typifies the quality of his work and his range of interests. Lawrence Surendra who wrote a concluding chapter rendered invaluable assistance in getting the book out via ARENA, a

research and documentation centre.

Silan continued his work as a historian after getting back from Japan and about two years ago he brought out what may be his magnum opus, a history of the Jaffna Youth Congress which was founded in 1924 and was the forerunner of the Suriyamal, Samasamaja and the southern left movements. As is always the case with Silan, it includes an analytical part and a volume of substantive documentation.

More by design than accident the two of us purchased adjoining houses in Dehiwala on our return to Lanka and this was splendid, not only because staggering from one gate to the next, much enriched by Single Malt posed no problems, but also it allowed us to engage in endless political conversation and note comparing (and watching cricket on his big screen TV). It also enabled us to get back from Kinross together in a car with a driver, or to share a three-wheeler. Now that is all over! Silan passed away on Saturday 25 July and will be cremated on Tuesday.

Kumar David

P.S.

* "The last of a generation of Tamil Marxists":

<https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/the-last-of-a-generation-of-tamil-marxists/>