

Book Review

Situating History and 'The Historian's Craft'

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The Institutions of Ancient Ceylon from Inscriptions (from 3 century BC to 830 AD) Volume 1 by Lakshman S Perera (Introduction and supplementary notes by Sirima Kiribamune and Piyatissa Senanayake), Kandy, Sri Lanka, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2001.

The Antecedents

My first encounter with Professor Lakshman Perera was in 1974 when I visited the University library at Peradeniya as a postgraduate student. It was never a formal introduction—not even a personal meeting. Yet it was close enough for me to admire the man and his work. The silent space afforded by the Ceylon Room at the University of Peradeniya library was ideally suited for a dialogue with the past. I reached out to the past through the volumes of a doctoral thesis—so immaculately completed a year before I was born! Page after page three volumes of information unfolded a dimension hitherto less known in the history of Sri Lanka. This study, I thought, will always remain as a testimony to the 'historian's craft' (apologies to Marc Bloch) so purposefully executed by a scholar with a sober perception to the study of history.

I then asked myself the same question so many, I am sure, had posed before and after I had read these volumes. Why did this thesis remain unpublished? The response reached me only after 27 years when I read the author's preface to the printed volume. That this valuable study remained in the Ceylon Room for nearly five decades is only one part of its own history. The rest was poverty of human values rather than poverty of history. The author did explore the possibility of disseminating this stored up knowledge about the past to the present generations. Profit oriented publishers, however, were shy of undertaking a voluminous and specialised study for publication.

In the meantime these volumes were regularly used by several generations of historians and many pages were on the verge of being reduced to shreds. Some others claiming to be 'eminent scholars' hacked these volumes and conveniently forgot to acknowledge the authorship of 'their original ideas'. Plagiarism in any culture makes bad history. This valuable source book continued to languish in the Ceylon Room and was faced with the fate of being obliterated—not to be featured even as a footnote in the annals of historical writings in modern Sri Lanka. Many decades passed by and many more hands sifted through its brittle pages and only after 53 years following its completion, Professor Lakshman Susantha Perera's Magnum Opus finally appeared in print—and a classic at that.

This is also a gift of knowledge in perpetuity to the next generation by a select group of pupils and colleagues who admire the man and his work with dedication and affection. Prof K M de Silva, the Executive Director of the International Centre for Ethnic Studies and a small group of resource

persons, such as Prof Sirima Kiribamune, Dr Piyatissa Senanayake and others receive a great deal of credit for the end product. Their efforts were generously sustained by Prof. John Holt who brought in funds towards this project from the US-ISLE programme. The publication of this volume says Prof. K M de Silva in his foreword "...is the first volume in a new series of books and monographs by the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Kandy, a series on the history of Sri Lanka."

The Historical Context

It is sound logic, as Carr once put it, to 'study the historian before you study the facts.' Lakshman Perera's academic background, both here and in the United Kingdom, was situated in the best of Colonial social environments on the one hand and within the rising British liberal intellectual traditions on the other. The work of the historian must be appreciated precisely from that background. In doing so, one has to identify, first, the historian's responses to the existing social and ideological environment and second, how such images are situated in a historical context. Reading through the author's introduction to the thesis three aspects struck me immediately. First is the ability of the author to have avoided the conventional pitfall of producing a narrative history and a catalogue of events, a legacy of Colonial historiography and its bureaucratic psyche. The second is the contemporary tone on the idea of history and third, the selection of primary data from non-oral and non-textual sources.

The study of history in Sri Lanka (as for that matter elsewhere in South Asia) in the 1940s was very much tutored in the arena of Colonial historiography and nurtured in the best of classical and Orientalist/ Indologist traditions. In this grand scheme of things past Asian societies were viewed as unchanging entities in the clutches of Oriental despots who manipulated their subjects through hydraulic systems. Colonial historiography had its own rubric. Explanation in history was quite obviously linear and symmetric while continuity dominated over change. Historical dynamics were attributed to the role of the individual and 'Great Men.' The movement of historical processes were associated with evolution, diffusion and cultural implantation and certainly not with uneven and parallel developments in society. There were also generalised views over time and space including blanket developments within a pan regional context. Periodisation was based either after great individuals, dynasties, royal capitals and religions or within the vulgar Stalinist notion of the Stages theory in history. Historiography within the British Empire was yet enmeshed in Positivist trappings and stunted by the poverty of empiricism. A few dissenting voices questioning the functional use of narrative history did emerge in England. They yet remained in the intellectual periphery but showed signs of rejecting Ranke and setting the stage for a different phase in post Colonial British historiography. Conversely, French historiography was making a definitive and dynamic change in mid 20th Century history of thought through the Annales School. Interestingly enough, when the Annales school was finally 'established' in the 1940s it coincided with Lakshman Perera's arrival in England where he remained in close proximity to the on going intellectual debate.

'The Historian's Craft' in Situating the Past

Finley identifies the 'study and writing of history as a form of ideology' and defines ideology as 'a system of ideas concerning phenomena, especially those of social life; and the manner of thinking characteristic of a class or an individual'. Similarly, Perera eloquently outlines his central philosophy on history in the introduction to his thesis (pp XI-XXI). He first identifies the scope of the study and what he recognises as history. The succession of events and the structure of the society, in his view, have a symbiotic relationship. He then defines his concept of the institution as an organisation, pattern or behaviour or thought through which the life of a society in its political, economic, religious and social aspects expresses itself. He gives life to his thoughts and the society he retrieves from the past in the following manner. "The raw material of history consists of the activities of men and women in their day to day life and the numerous relationships they enter into with each other." These activities

and relationships are motivated by human needs, passions and ideas. When these events move within recognisable patterns and forms, states Perera, it is known as "the institutional structure" of a society. The structure and events according to him are integral components. Interaction between institutions, he then concludes, provides the dynamics of change.

Compare these ideas with Godelier's thoughts in *The Mental and the Material* written several decades later (1984). That is "...to explore the relations between thought, the economy and society, and to analyse the respective weight of the mental and material in the production of social relations, in the motion of societies, in history at large" or what Braudel wrote in 1950 stating that "...history in its essence and all its permutations has always been dependent on concrete social conditions."

Lakshman Perera's brilliant insights quite clearly ran against the grain of Colonial and Nationalist historiography embedded in the 'classical psyche' what Partha Chatterjee identifies as the 'construction of the Classical Past.' He also deviated from the established norm of swearing by the literary sources. Colonial administrators and Orientalists and later Nationalists used the classical texts as a primary point of entrée to the history of Sri Lanka. What some contemporary local and overseas anthropologists, archaeologists and historians have done at the other end of the spectrum is no better. They have not only 'anthropologised' the texts but have used the codified history found in the classical texts (often read in the translations) in taking a reverse view of history. This stems from the false notion that contemporary ethno nationalism is rooted in the ideology of the classical texts. Such scholars have resorted to a 'fashionable' form of critique, what we have identified elsewhere as '**Mahavamsa-bashing.**' This is linear history at its best. Ironically enough, this has only enmeshed such scholars in the historicity of the very source they set off to negate.

The methodology of utilising his primary sources reflects Lakshman Perera's historical objectivity. He outlines his justification (pp xvi-xvii) and states that institutions can be traced from any historical source either inscriptional or literary. The inscriptional data however is the earliest reliable source for the history of this country as they are contemporary records. The authors of the literary records, he states, were subjective while the inscriptions are more accurate, truthful and a contemporary record of the institutions. (One of course must give some space to exaggerated and boastful claims by Nissankamalla—which is a hallmark of any leadership prior to its political demise). "The study of institutions from inscriptions is therefore primarily an examination of all the available data given in the records bearing on every aspect of life revealed in them." Perera then goes on to enumerate his methodology of study as first, classifying them and arranging them in order and secondly evaluating the evidence found in them for a study of the institution or pattern that lies behind. The treatise, he says, takes the form of a detailed examination of all the inscriptions available based on the chronological divisions into four periods and another division into political, economic and religious aspects.

The inscriptions available to the author are in the main donative records. The simple pre urban society mainly consisted of lineage chieftains (*parumaka*, *rajha* and *gamani* to mention a few) who are the key players in the inscriptions of the Early Historic Period. With the dawning of the Middle Historic Period these inscriptions become a litany of conspicuous consumption reflecting complex institutional formations and structural adjustments during this period due to transformations in the production techniques and the nature of interaction between the state and monastic Buddhism.

To that extent the author has been able to cull a massive amount of information from the inscriptions alone on social, political and administrative titles, origin of kingship and lineage histories, village as an economic unit, agriculture, trade, craft production and guilds, money economy, property rights and taxation, the nature of the *sangha* and monastery including those who are often hidden in the history of Sri Lanka—women and non Indo Aryan speakers. It is also significant to note that Lakshman Perera in a dispassionate tone emphasises the critical need for comparative studies with

India. He was anything but parochial in his research. The author quite correctly states that there is no other study done on the inscriptions of Sri Lanka from this point of view and quite correctly identifies this as a pioneering study.

Early decades of the 20th century yet had apathy towards non-textual sources in writing down what was known as 'counterfeit history'. The use of 'auxiliary sciences' such as material culture, epigraphy, numismatics came to be accepted in the recent past and today archaeological sources form an integral component in historical explanation. It is also a fact that inscriptions of Sri Lanka represent a record of its elite society and to that extent they have limitations as a source unless, both, literary texts and archaeological sources are utilised as corroborative evidence within a proper context. On the other hand the classical literary texts in Sri Lanka (in contrast to the Sangam texts in South India) too are a strong biography of elite groups during the Historic Period. Some variations are found, for instance, in the literary sources belonging to the southern tradition (e.g. **Sahsavatthu** and **Sihalavatthu**) where limited notices could be retrieved about non-elite groups.

As for archaeological sources, the norm in the 1940s was yet firmly set on the study of monumental structures reflecting the 'Golden Age' and achievements, behaviour and the aesthetics of elite groups. The earliest stratified excavations revealing vestiges of wattle and daub houses of pre-urban and non elite resident communities were undertaken only in 1969, by Siran Deraniyagala at the Citadel of Anuradhapura. Considering the methodological constraints of his time I have much admiration for the manner in which inscriptions have been utilised as the primary source by the author.

It is not incorrect to state that Lakshman Perera provided a corpus of interpretative studies on the inscriptions that had all the potential to move from 'social history to the history of society' (after Hobsbawm). It is indeed a historical tragedy that while D D Kosambi's thoughts on similar lines revolutionised the idea of history in India during the next two decades, the next generation of ancient historians in Sri Lanka apparently did not pick up Lakshman Perera's ideas leading to an alternative explanation in history. The threads were picked up towards this goal only in the 1980s, more so by those who studied the history of Sri Lanka through social archaeological research.

Epilogue

The future of, both, historical and archaeological studies in Sri Lanka is at cross roads facing a dilemma of priorities, choices, resource persons, attitudes and above all quality of research. It is indeed reasonable to question the extent to which a new breed of charlatans and political animals in these disciplines are responsible for the emergence of a-historical attitude and an anti-historical bias in schools, at seats of higher education and the country in general. 'Anti-Orwellian' historians in this country who have slithered their way through 'corridors of power' have not only compromised the very fundamentals of intellectual decency but are now in the process of subverting the study of history for personal ends and political expediency. Such lumpen intellectuals, as Lev Davidovich would say, belong in the 'dustbin of history'. This is not a historical contradiction but dialectics to you!!