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Sri Lanka: The Last Conversation: In remembrance of Saman Kelegama

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The personal loss to all of us who knew this gentle human being can never be described. His exemplary family life and the lives of thousands of people he touched by making their lives better, as head of Singer & Co cannot be quantified.

by **Shavindra Fernando**

(June 28, 2017, Colombo, Sri Lanka Guardian) My last conversation with Saman Kelegama was about Oxford. It was a place that he was so fond of, and he always remembered his Oxford days with gratitude. He read Industrial Economics for his doctorate at St. Catherine's College. He was a St.Cat's man. Some of us Reuter Fellows, the first reporters to be sent to Oxford in the late 1980s got to know him at St.Giles, where we were housed at Queen Elizabeth House.

The "press" was focused on Sri Lanka at that time, though the Sri Lanka fraternity was tiny as always. The Indian army had been asked to leave by the Sri Lanka government under siege by the JVP rebels. Kelegama's views were of interest to us. He was a Sri Lankan who had studied Mathematics in India, and was seen as someone who had insight into the psyche of both countries.

Our last conversation was at the Institute of Policy Studies in Colombo, a few days before he left for Bangkok from where he was never to return. It was also about the matter of utmost importance concerning India, that had been entrusted to him by the state. He was undoubtedly the best man for the job, of taking the current India-Sri Lanka free trade agreement to the next level for better market access to the Indian markets.

His loss is immense to this country after the work he has done and left unfinished, at a time when India is Sri Lanka's largest trading partner. Overall bilateral trade between the two countries exceeds over \$ 4.5 billion. India is the largest source of imports to Sri Lanka and the third largest destination for Sri Lankan exports. It is among the first five largest investors in Sri Lanka and the bulk of Sri Lankan foreign direct investment overseas is located in India.

Saman was a man who understood its importance only too well. I realized during that last conversation how well he had grasped his entrusted task, in context of the great leap forward that Sri Lanka was poised within the global economy,with the inevitable rise of Asia. He knew that there was nothing to stop us now, as post war Sri Lanka was yearning for greatness. He knew the correct approach to India in the backdrop of the Sri Lanka government making tactical overtures towards China and India since 2015. Strategically located Sri Lanka had sought to craft its policies in the region to gain the goodwill and the funds from both Asian giants, when China has emerged as Sri Lanka's leading source of official development assistance and foreign direct investment with a total outlay of \$14.75 billion.

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The life and work of Saman Kelegama has to be appreciated not only because of his expertise in Industrial Economics. His entrusted work as a leading technocrat has to be valued in context of his overview of regional politics;he had developed from his Oxford days. He sought to understand life and politics outside the realm of applied economics and policy formulation. That is what made conversation with him a rewarding experience. He too believed as it has been famously said, that we too have tried to change our country more often than we change our shoes, and was idealistic enough to believe that history which usually changes slowly, can sometimes change during a conversation.

Oxford days of the tiny Sri Lanka fraternity in the late 1980s saw the dominant figures of Richard Gombrich, a foremost authority on Buddhism, who had written on Sinhalese Buddhism in relation to the Pali canon. He was working with Anuradha Seneviratna, a post-doctoral Sinhala professor from Peradeniya on Kandyan temple paintings. They were instrumental in bringing Sarachchandra and the Maname players, for a performance at Oxford.

All this was happening as Sri Lanka was falling apart under the second JVP rebellion and the British press was reporting it extensively. While LTTE apologists were active in influencing the Oxford academia, at The Oxford Majlis Asian Society (1896), the second oldest student society at Oxford after the Oxford Union which was Indian dominated in the late 1980's,there was Indian hostility towards Sri Lanka, after the Premadasa government had asked the Indian army to withdraw.

These events undoubtedly influenced Saman in his formative years at Oxford. He found his conversation with journalism fellows equally rewarding. We were tutored by Neville Maxwell a former London Times foreign correspondent to China, India and Ceylon, who had authored India's China War based on top-secret Indian military reports. Our regular haunts at St.Giles were the famous pubs, "The Eagle & the Child" and "The Lamb & the Flag". Beyond serious conversation on China, India and Sri Lanka we were fond of discussing the senior Indian civil servants who were also at Queen Elizabeth House, and it was said they were being "re-educated" by MI5 which "brainwashed the future of Asia".

The conversational spirit of Oxford was very much alive in Kelegama, when those were the days we thought would never end. That never left him and perhaps gave him inspiration from within, as much as the many he inspired. Since his return to Sri Lanka and his dedicated work in the island for over twenty five years, he never sought greener pasture overseas.

In my official dealings with him on behalf of a foreign government, it was a pleasure to observe how he used the resources offered to institutions under him to develop young underprivileged educated Sri Lankans without overseas exposure, to gain that experience in the US. He did it with the dedication of a man who was conscious of its immense benefit to nation building. You will be missed. We will remember you!

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