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Tribute to Dr. Saman Kelegama

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by Sriyani Hulugalle

On Friday June 23 I received a phone alert that Dr. Saman Kelegama, Executive Director, IPS has passed away in Bangkok. I read and re-read the message and could not believe my eyes. In shock, I called both Dr. Ravi Ratnayake and Mrs Chandanie Wijewardane to verify and both confirmed the news. It was only a month ago I met Saman at the launch of Dr. Godfrey Gunatilake's book at the BMICH. When I promised to visit him soon, I never dreamt in my wildest dreams that it would be my last encounter with him. The last living memory I will carry of Saman would be his relaxed and smiling face.

Dr. Saman Kelegama had an illustrious academic record; a First class Masters' Degree from IIT Kanpur in Mathematics and Masters' and PhD degrees from Oxford University. I met Saman through Ganeshan Vignaraja who also happened to be a student at Oxford at the time when both of them used to visit the Export Development Board in the late 80s to collect data for their thesis. The name Kelegama was not unknown to me since I am also from Kurunegala. Probably the second time I met him, Saman inquired my Kurunegala origins and from then onwards started a friendship which lasted till his demise.

I was quite surprised by this young student's quiet demeanor, humility and simplicity despite his impressive social status. He was much, much younger than I and he always treated me as an older sister from the day I met him. At that time he was known as Dr. Jayantha Kelegama's son but I knew that he never felt overshadowed by his father's achievements. Over the years he made a name for himself as an internationally renowned economist and eventually Dr. Jayantha Kelegama would have been referred to as Saman's father. Despite his long years in foreign climes, I was amazed at the unaffected mannerisms of this young and charming student and was proud of his achievements over the years.

Even before I joined the World Bank in 1989, I closely associated with IPS which was located at the DFCC building since I knew Dr. Howard Nicholas, Dr. David Dunham and Purnima Rajapakse from my ISS days in The Hague. When Saman joined the IPS after obtaining his PhD, I met him once again and being small offices we used to be in and out of IPS and World Bank. From those days, Saman was the one we turned to for any studies or presentations relating to trade, industrialization, privatization and apparel sector exports.

At the time I recollect he was not much aligned with the Bretton Wood thinking. As Dr. Wijewardane has indicated in his article, Saman always was sincere in his expression of his academic views and would not worry about being politically correct. That was a trait he never gave up to his last day. He loved the country immensely and stayed through tough times even though he could have easily left for greener pastures.

He was born to a wealthy, Kandyan, aristocratic family but was totally unaffected by his lineage and his academic excellence. He shunned popularity and kept a low profile compared to his contributions in the field of economics and always kept out of controversy to the extent possible. In the recent years, probably during the last decade he was much more vocal in his views of the economy and the IPS "State of the Economy" was awaited with eagerness by the economists and policy makers alike.

Saman created space for many young economics undergraduates who could serve short stints at the IPS while studying abroad and also for graduates from Sri Lankan universities. He also created space for internationally acclaimed Sri Lankan economists such as Prof. Premachandra Atukorale, Dr. Sisira Jayasooriya, Dr. Sarath Rajapathirana to name a few. He was also associated with the Gamani Corea Foundation. He had the good fortune of being groomed by his own father, Dr. Gamani Corea, Mr. Chandi Chamungam, Dr. Nimal Sanderatne and many more of such caliber which would have helped him to mature beyond his years. He was always disciplined, dignified and courteous and also treated the elders with due respect. Saman would be the "dream son" of any parent.

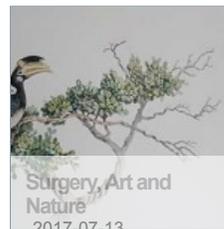
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Despite IPS moving out of the DFCC premises, he never forgot to invite me to all the IPS events if they related to trade, industrialization, privatization etc. I never missed an opportunity to attend the IPS events not only because of their intellectual content but also to meet eminent economists, policy makers, development specialists and academia. This was well reflected at the large gathering at his funeral. All chose to come because of the admiration, respect and affection they had for Dr. Saman Kelegama. Everyone who heard of his demise had a tear in their eyes as it's an irreparable loss to the nation. He had touched the hearts of all those who came into contact with him with his unique disposition.

Saman was large hearted and would never refuse a last minute invitation to chair a session, be a guest speaker or be the chief guest at any event. In October 2016, we organized the launch of the Innovation report of the World Bank and Minister Malik Samarawickrama was to be the chief guest. Around 7 p.m or so I was informed that the Minister had to attend another meeting with the President or the Prime Minister and that Dr. Kelegama had agreed to step in and I was asked to send the related documents to Saman at around 8 p.m. I am sure he would have had to at least glance through the documents to make the speech relevant to the topic the following day. We are guilty of stealing his spare time from him to save us from tricky situations like that.

Dr. Saman Kelegama's name is synonymous with IPS. From a small institution located on the second floor of the DFCC Building, he moved it to St. Micheal's Road and then to their own building at one of the most picturesque locations in Colombo which will remain a monument to Dr. Saman Kelegama. It will be hard to visit IPS in future without remembering Saman's smiling face.

It's hard to record all his achievements in a short tribute and a lot has already been written on his professional achievements. He was on many private sector Boards, state agencies, banks, advisory committees, professional organizations and also on charitable organizations. He had so many academic publications to his name and contributed to the newspapers and academic journals. He paid the supreme price with his life for being magnanimous with his time to the rest of the world. Had he said "No" to the growing demands on his time and had he not been so passionate about his "work", probably Saman would still be living among us.

I think Saman has been appropriately named. Like a jasmine flower with its haunting fragrance and simplicity, despite all the material and intellectual endowments, he remained remarkably humble. Saman has contributed very much more than his fair share to the country and the academic world and he will be remembered for his academic excellence, his forthrightness, simplicity and inborn charm for years to come and will be a role model for the future economists.

I wish to thank his mother, his wife Sirimavo, his son Chandana and daughter Jayathri for sharing Saman with us.

Dear Saman, I wish you will never ever have an untimely death in this Sansara and may you attain Nibbana! We are sure to meet you again in our long journey of Sansara and till then "Thank you & Goodbye."

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