

Appreciation

Ajith Perera: Chemist, Cricketer, Disability Rights Activist

In Memoriam

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On October 29, 2020, Ajith C.S. Perera, a well known activist for the rights of disabled people in Sri Lanka, passed away at the age of 64. He eventually lost a brave but uphill battle against kidney failure, diabetes, and various infections, with the added complication of being a paraplegic.

Ajith was educated at Royal College and the University of Colombo, graduating with a B.Sc. (General) degree, with a Second Class (Lower Division) from the latter institution in 1975. Despite only having a general degree, he was appointed as a Tutor by the Department of Mathematics, and as an Assistant Lecturer by the Department of Chemistry. He later obtained an M.Sc. in Analytical Chemistry, being one of the first students to register for what was then a brand new master's degree programme at Colombo. With these qualifications he joined the pharmaceutical industry, working successively for Glaxo Ceylon, Mackwoods Winthrop, and Hemas Pharmaceuticals. He also played cricket for the University of Colombo, and went on to qualify as a scorer and a cricket umpire.

In 1992, Ajith was at the peak of his career. He had recently joined Hemas, where he was in charge of quality assurance, and was the Hony. Secretary of the Royal Society of Chemistry's Sri Lanka section. He had also been appointed to the international panel of cricket umpires, and was within days of officiating at a Test Match between Sri Lanka and New Zealand. He was returning home one night from a meeting of the RSC, during a

violent storm, when a tree fell on his car on Baudhaloka Mawatha. His driver was killed instantly. Soldiers from a nearby army post rescued Ajith and took him to hospital, where he was found to be paralysed from the waist down. Months of treatment and therapy from physicians both in Sri Lanka and in the UK failed to restore movement to his legs, and he remained wheelchair bound for the remaining 28 years of his life.

Ajith was a man who was active in both body and mind, and the loss of physical activity, which would have caused many people to retreat into severe depression, only served to raise his mental energy levels. Deprived of the ability to work in a normal job—Sri Lanka even now has very little provision for the wheelchair bound to work in offices and similar workplaces—he took to writing. Over the years, he would write many articles to the press, but his major works were two books on cricket, written during the late 1990's. The first, *The Golden Age of Sri Lanka Cricket*, was the story of Sri Lanka's victory in the 1996 World Cup. The second, *Thinking Cricket*, was essentially a manual for players, full of advice and wisdom, in which he drew heavily on his experience as an umpire. Ajith had a unique style of writing, but in order to ensure linguistic correctness, he asked me for editorial assistance with the latter book. I was still living in the U.S. at the time, and he would send me a chapter at a time for me to edit and return to him.

During this time, Ajith had come to realise how little effort the establishment in Sri Lanka made to provide

even basic amenities for the disabled, such as wheelchair access to buildings, special toilets for the disabled, etc., all of them normal and available in many other countries. This was true despite nearly two decades of civil war, which had resulted in hundreds of disabled military veterans. With characteristic energy, Ajith became a lobbyist for the disabled. Realising that he would be a more powerful voice if he represented an organisation, but not wishing to be trapped in the agenda of others, he set about creating his own lobby. Thus, in 2005, *Idiriya* was born. Its members were his close friends and family, including my wife (his sister) and myself. Ajith became its General Secretary, and in that capacity did all the work – fund-raising, lobbying government ministries, banks, and private hotels, filing cases before the Supreme Court, and organising press conferences. He became a public figure. Even foreign embassies took note, and he was a regular invitee to many embassy functions. Largely because of his efforts, Sri Lanka has made considerable

progress in recognising the needs of the disabled, and wheelchair access is now a requirement for public buildings.

Time took its toll on Ajith, as it does with everyone, and during the last few years he found it increasingly difficult to maintain the pace and intensity of his commitment. His kidneys began to fail about a year before his demise. Although his twin careers as a chemist and as a cricket scorer/umpire were prematurely cut short, both those communities remember him with respect. The disabled are a community which, as Ajith himself was fond of pointing out, eventually includes most of us, at some time or another, for one reason or another – injury, loss of limb, paralysis, certain diseases, or simply age. For his single-handed efforts on their behalf, the society will remember him with gratitude.

Requiescat in pace.

Dr. R. D. Guneratne graduated from the University of Colombo with a B.Sc. in Chemistry and completed his Ph.D. at Cornell University, U.S.A. He has served as a post-doctoral research associate at the University of Iowa and Bennington College, Bennington, Vermont, and as an Associate Professor at Spring Hill College, Alabama. He returned to Sri Lanka to join the Department of Chemistry at the Open University of Sri Lanka and later moved to the University of Colombo, where he served until his retirement in 2017. He is currently serving at the SLINTEC Academy, Sri Lanka Institute of Nanotechnology.