

Guli Guna Suwanda: Remembering Gunadasa Liyanage 25 years on



In the halcyon days of journalism in Sri Lanka, when only skilled individuals could set foot in the hallowed halls of reporting and be in the presence of eminent editors, it produced women and men of excellent knowledge and reputation. Gunadasa Liyanage was a journalist who developed a distinct identity for the Sinhala language in journalism.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

Every year since the passing of Gunadasa Liyanage on March 12, 1998, his family has been commemorating his extraordinary life through the Kalasuri Gunadasa Liyanage Memorial Foundation. Gunadasa Liyanage was not an ordinary journalist. Born in 1930, he entered the universe of print journalism in the heyday of the English press. With well-known names like D B Dhanapala, he invented the language for a budding Sinhala press with much promise.

As the local media fraternity, artists, writers, and the public gathered on March 16, 2023, at the Sri Lanka Foundation, it was a momentous occasion to remember Gunadasa Liyanage, fondly known as Guli, 25 years after his passing, and his wife, Chandralatha Liyanage. She was an educationist, lecturer, and author who published many books for children. She was the author of the Grade 5 Government Sinhala textbook and part of the educationists/panel who compiled other Government Sinhala textbooks. It was a poignant moment of remembrance. For the family, it was a double commemoration of their parents—of a mother who patiently bore the challenges of an uncompromising media man.

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Honoring the man from the village of Divalakada, the Venerable Bothale Gnanissara Thero, the Assistant Chief Incumbent of the Divalakada Bothale Sri Beththaramaya and Paramadhamma Kithyaramaya, Malagala, Yatawathura who led the audience into a time of worship and remembered the colossus that was Gunadasa Liyanage as the man from the village of Divalakada who made great strides in local media. The family, the event's speakers, and several invitees began the proceedings by lighting the lamp. It was a touching moment when the children, Upeksha, Srimath Indrajith, Vajira, and Chethana, paid tribute to their parents by placing floral garlands on their portraits.

Gunadasa Liyanage, as the speakers pointed out, lived an authentically simple life. Professionally he was anything but that. Guli was a journalist, writer, and broadcaster. He was a man of his time.

A journalist passionate about his profession, Guli was mature and bold. His era was of typewriters and reliable media reporting. It was a time when the absence of the internet and social media was not felt. A time bubbling with creativity when journalists would research and verify. When media reporting had a semblance of unbiased and demonstrated responsibility and dedication. We are harking back to when working in media was a sought-after profession but was never lucrative.

Former editor of Sinhala newspapers Lankadeepa and Dawasa, Gunadasa Liyanage left an indelible mark in the Sinhala media by elevating it to an independent and stand-alone status. He wrote adult and children's books and was a biographer, translator, and critic of over 45 books. He worked as a Parliament translator. He was also the Sri Lankan correspondent for Asiaweek and Newsweek. Since his passing on March 12, 1998, his family has kept his legacy alive annually by giving space to intellectual discourses on how Guli transformed journalism in Sri Lanka.

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This year marks 25 years since his passing. Yet, again many well-known names in the industry narrated their encounters with the veteran media personality and his transformative role as a journalist and editor. There were interesting snippets from his life. They spoke of Sinhala journalism's coming of age under Guli and others.

Unlike today, Guli struggled to realize his love for journalism. It was told how as a youngster, his articles sent to the children's page in the Sinhala Silumina newspaper were repeatedly spurned until he wrote to its editor offering to send a bin to stash his throw-away articles. Funny as it may sound, his mockery won the day, and Guli had his way as the newspaper obliged after that. He never lost sight of his passion for journalism. His determination led him to his first stint as a regional correspondent for the Sinhala Lankadeepa newspaper.

Guli, the bilingualist, honed his language skills at a young age by leaving his village school to join Ingiriya Gamini Vidyalaya and later Horana Sripali Vidyalaya for secondary education (to pursue education in English). He would try reading and understanding the Times newspaper with a dictionary beside him until he saw the Sinhala Lankadeepa newspaper that had begun printing in 1947. Between the two, Guli was drawn to the Sinhala newspaper for its writing style. Guli yearned to meet his mentor D B Dhanapala, the editor of Lankadeepa, for a long time. Such was Dhanapala's reputation that he had become a brand associated with Lankadeepa.

Guli's professional life as a journalist began at a time when English newspapers reigned supreme. Many may need to learn that there was a time when Sinhala print media had no identity or autonomy, or status as its English counterpart. The Sinhala newspaper was a translation of the English newspaper published by the same company. As described by the former editor of Silumina, Mawbima, and Sarasaviya newspapers, Thilakaratne Kuruwita Bandara, Sinhala media had a "second class" status. Hence, Sinhala newspapers were only translations of the day's English newspapers.

The real stars were newspapers like the Daily News and the Times that reached an exclusive readership. And so, Guli's foray into the prestigious Lake House was as a translator to translate the English newspaper Times into Sinhala. It was D B Dhanapala who changed the "second class" standing ascribed to Sinhala newspapers that were relegated to a mere translation of the so-called "superior" English versions. These pioneers invented the language for Sinhala newspaper reporting and opened the doors for young women and men to become journalists in the vernacular.

Guli went on to become Lankadeepa's editor eventually. Between his first assignment and his editorship, Guli had undertaken many assignments as Feature Editor and Dawasa newspaper editor while managing Riviresa until the newspaper office was sealed by the powers of the time. Hardly out of work and always in demand, his return to Lankadeepa in 1975 marked the beginning of the revival and restoration of a reputed newspaper to its former glory. Guli was a different editor. He made sure his mark was indelibly felt in the newspapers he led. He was a stickler to time who would refuse to meet anyone late. A man who would quit a job if it went against his values and conscience. But his love for writing always brought him back to newspaper reporting. That was his passion and lifeblood.

Guli created a brand with true potential and skill and not just an inflated temporary “influencer” status—a man who walked the talk.

His work was his sacred calling, meaning nearly 16 hours dedicated to perfection. But his dedication had its limits. It was in tandem with the space for free expression and a work ethic that hinged on listening to one’s conscience and self-imposed censorship when required. When his freedom to express himself was under threat, he refused to cross the boundary line to please the dictates of the boss and the powers that be. In such moments it was the obstinate Guli who would quit his job. But such was his skill and creativity as well. He was a media personality who proudly practiced his profession in Sinhala, the language with a larger audience and the power to influence and change people’s thoughts. That line on Guli’s philosophy is what many aspire to be as writers and journalists but often fall short of expectations. In Guli’s case, as the speakers pointed out, he created a brand with true potential and skill and not just an inflated temporary “influencer” status—a man who walked the talk.

Even leaders turned to him for ideas. Another interesting snippet was how Gunadasa Liyanage convinced a former President of Sri Lanka not to name a village after his mother. Guli’s argument was plausible. One day, people would most likely swear her name should they rile and resent the President. And why not honor all mothers by naming the village “Maw Gama” and another “Piya Gama” in honor of fathers? Guli seemed to have had a good rapport with people of all strata.

Guli, the man of action, stopped the pretentious and grandiose culture of celebrating politicians, a pervasive plague in the 1970s. He believed that politicians didn’t deserve the honor that such ceremonies bestowed on them. Guli, the rabble-rouser, dared to shake the status quo of the time. Businesspeople and the rich patronized these countrywide celebrations. Guli, the ingenious journalist who had a deep conscience about who deserves credit, organized an equally flashy event to pay tribute to a man by the name of Johnny in Horana, who for more than 20 years had been a ubiquitous porter, shouldering the weight of goods from vehicles to the shops. Guli never used his space as an editor to criticize the event. His action spoke louder than words. And that ended the country’s ostentatious waste of money on celebrating politicians.

Guli’s breed of people was more than journalists and writers. They were communicators.

Guli also served well in radio and television, conversing with people whose knowledge he brought to the public domain and, fortunately, remains archived for future use. To his four children, their father was a towering example of hard work and achievement based on meritocracy, a philosophy he practiced with them, instructing them to seek success on merit and nothing else. Indrajith remembered his father as the man who was the voice for the voiceless and the underprivileged. He was a journalist with a conscience who wouldn't think twice about walking from his job, leaving behind the vehicles and the privileges but never allowing his family to be in want. His exemplary life was the light to their path and set the tone for their success. Why should Gunadasa Liyanage be celebrated today? At a time when banal and empty entertainers get the spotlight, the work of people like Gunadasa Liyanage, who maintained high standards of the profession, is an example to current practitioners and those aspiring to serve in media.

Echoing her brother's sentiments and those of the speakers, Chethana Liyanage, well-known in electronic media, the CEO of Maharaja Institute of Management and Director of Talent Management, The Capital Maharaja Organization, said that her father was a fearless journalist. "His yeoman service of over four decades is still appreciated and valued by the media industry. We are proud to be his children, and we know that he doesn't belong only to our family. And that is why we organize the Guli Guna Suwanda event annually to remember and appreciate his contribution to the media industry".

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The man from the village stayed true to his identity under the pseudonym Divalakada Gunadasa. He paid tribute to his roots by penning his autobiography under the same name despite being well-known as Gunadasa Liyanage and Guli. His work is distinctive because Gunadasa Liyanage became a brand identity tagged with the newspapers he served. In those days, newspapers were often attributed to their editor, and their successes were owed to the editor, and that's precisely what Guli delivered as editor of the Sinhala newspapers he led. People would often describe Lankadeepa as "Gunadasa Liyanage's Lankadeepa." He would take his identity with him wherever he went, and as a result, those newspapers enjoyed good ratings and great sales. Unlike today, when individuals blatantly demonstrate their affinities, Guli developed a brand identity by showing his independence and lack of political associations.

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One does not always find a journalist who remains etched in people's memories. Those who do are those women and men who pledged their lives to the profession, not just as a job but as a sacred role, willing to sacrifice the benefits to honor and uphold the truth. To that handful and fast-dwindling pedigree Gunadasa Liyanage remains a name for posterity.



Upeksha Liyanage paid tribute to their beloved father, Gunadasa Liyanage.

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Chethana Liyanage paid tribute to their mother.

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Invitees present to felicitate the 25th year of Gunadasa Liyanage's legacy.

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Venerable Induragare Dhammarathana Thero, Chief Priest of the Dunagaha Jethawanaramaya Temple and Professor at the Department of Cultural Studies, University of Kelaniya.

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Son Srimath Indraajith.

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Thilakaratne Kuruwita Bandara, former Editor of Silumina, Mawbina, and Sarasaviya

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Daughter Chethana Liyanage.

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Invitees of the event had the opportunity to witness some of his popular books.