

Silence Choreographed Timidity at South Asian University:  
**Interview of Sasanka Perera by Anushka Kahandagamage  
and Kaushalya Kumarasinghe**

(Sri Lankan academic Sasanka Perera, left the South Asian University on 31 July 2024 which he had helped establish as a SAARC institution. His leaving was consequent to a targeted attack against him as the only Sri Lankan scholar in the university and one of handful of non-Indian teachers in a heavily Indian dominated space. Perera's leaving and the widespread global coverage it received is significant black mark against academic freedom in India in general. It also marks the steady Indianization of the South Asian University which was meant to be a place of reaching and reflection for all South Asians. In this wide ranging interview, two former South Asian University students, Anushka Kahandagamage based in New Zealand and Kaushalya Kumarasinghe based in Sri Lanka speak to Perera at least about the incidents itself and its circumstances)

**Part 1:  
The Incident and Issues of Academic Freedom**

[\(https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/the-incident-issues-of-academic-freedom/\)](https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/the-incident-issues-of-academic-freedom/)

**Anushka Kahandagamage:**

**Can you explain what the key factors were that led to your decision to resign from South Asian University? How much did the disciplinary inquiry influence your decision? Would you have stayed back had this incident not happened?**

**Sasanka Perera:**

Let me be clear, technically, I did not resign but opted for early retirement, which is called 'voluntary retirement' as per Regulation 17.4 of the University. My date of retirement according to my contract with SAU is in August 2027. But I had planned to retire in August 2025 to begin some constantly postponed work for which I needed to be in Sri Lanka. The reason for August 2025 was to ensure that the four MA students under my supervision, all of whom are Indian, would graduate without a hassle. Incidentally, since the inquiry began, some students were not even given letters of recommendation by some colleagues simply because they were under my supervision. Such pettiness from academics, leave alone my own former colleagues, was utterly shocking.

But in real terms, you are right, my early retirement, can in fact be considered a resignation, simply because my decision to retire prematurely came from the way the disciplinary against me was conceived. For instance, I did not see even a shadow of justice coming from the process. After all, it was begun very clearly based on trumped up charges and utterly irrational claims.

So quite simply, yes, if such an openly biased and unprofessional disciplinary inquiry against me, one of the seniormost founders of the university was not begun and the if not for the illegal and unethical way it progressed, I would have stayed at SAU until 2025 and retired as I had planned on my own. But this became impossible.

I could see and as alluded to by some university administrators, there was an expectation that I would somehow sacrifice my PhD student to get out of the situation. Linked to this, there also was an anticipation that I would come begging to the Dean of Social Sciences and the SAU President seeking their "pardon". Unfortunately this is not how I work. This is also not I have worked at SAU in my 13 years there. These people should have known that from the facts on the ground. But they do not have any serious institutional memory. For me, certain things are very clear and simple. One of these is, what is wrong is wrong. And I never have and never will pander to anyone's wishes and diktats to save my own skin. Expectedly, this was not a welcome trait in the SAU environment which rewarded subservience.

**Kaushalya Kumarasinghe:**

**But did you try to seriously resolve this within the university before taking the decision to leave?**

**Sasanka Perera:**

Yes. From the beginning as all my written communications with the university would show. For instance, I had requested through a formal communication to the SAU President dated 9 July 2024 to allow me to leave in August 2025 after my MA students graduated and the supervision of my PhD student was transferred to a colleague I trusted; or, secondly, to let me retire in December 2024 after I had finished teaching a course I had introduced at students' request and after making arrangements for the continued supervision of my students, or as a third option, waive the immunity of the people who were levelling unsubstantiated charges against me, so that I could deal with this matter in courts without involving the university. None of these options were even acknowledged or responded to by the President. He in fact asked me to leave before the current semester began which hardly gave me enough time to put my domestic, personal and professional matters in order in this city where I had lived for 13 years. As a result, my pension has still not been paid.

In all these decisions by the university, no consideration was ever given to the fact that I had served it in senior capacities and had helped substantially elevate the reputation of the university in a very short span of time.

Had I left under normal circumstances as I had requested, none of the controversy and negative news coverage that spontaneously followed this incident globally would have happened. Clearly, the President and his bandwagon have to take responsibility for the negative press that SAU is getting these days.

**Anushka Kahandagamage:**

**As a sociologist and academic, how do you view the current state of academic freedom in South Asia, particularly considering your recent experience at SAU?**

**Sasanka Perera:**

To put it mildly, academic freedom is in serious peril throughout the region and not just in India. In India, it has taken a serious toll in recent times. This has happened in University of Delhi; Jawaharlal Nehru University and numerous public and private universities across the country. The problem in South Asia, where most governments are anti-democratic, academic freedom is feared because it is seen as an avenue through which critique of unreasonable state practices, broader injustices as well as engagements with power structures might become inevitable. So, academic freedom is considered a threat.

This said, often the assault on academic freedom comes from within universities though this may be encouraged by governments in power. For example, SAU was established under the leadership of decent people and scholars based on principles such as academic freedom and fair play. I came to SAU from Sri Lanka giving up my old job at University of Colombo because I saw this as an opportunity to build a great institution. Throughout the time I was in positions of power and influence as Head of Sociology, Dean of Social Sciences and the Vice President, I was moved only by these principles. And whenever there were threats, I stood my ground as did many others. But today, it is unfortunately no longer possible. And therefore, my penchant for calling 'a spade a spade' and standing up against what is wrong, did not sit well with the leadership and many others. Unfortunately, there is also a dearth of brave and sensible colleagues acting on principle. Instead, we have cowards only motivated by fear and their paycheck and led by a bunch of fools. Not even the welfare of students, who are the only reason we are all there, and the future of the institution in general matter to these people. When the new President was appointed, there was a sense of relief as there was an expectation that someone with experience would take over. I even wrote to some members of SAU's Governing Board to encourage consideration of this appointment as we did not have much choice. SAU was already going down the drain in the hands of the acting coterie, which President Aggarwal has continued unabated. Looking at his performance generally and his role in the unwarranted attacks against me, what comes to my mind is an ancient Turkish proverb, "when a clown moves in to a palace, he does not become the king, but the palace becomes a circus."

In this kind of situation, academic freedom will not stand a chance. To quote a recent piece in the *Colombo Telegraph* by Roshan Pussewela which I found very insightful, "Academic freedom is not merely a privilege but a necessary condition for intellectual progress. When this freedom is compromised, the integrity of the academic institution itself is called into question." The article further elaborates on the profound dangers of curtailing academic freedom: "The decision to force Prof. Perera into retirement can be viewed as a dangerous precedent. It sends a chilling message to other academics and students that engaging with controversial or politically sensitive

topics can have severe consequences. This, in turn, can lead to self-censorship, where scholars avoid certain subjects out of fear for their careers. Such an environment is antithetical to the mission of higher education, which is to foster critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, and the free exchange of ideas.

(<https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/in-defense-of-prof-sasanka-perera-academic-freedom-the-cost-of-intellectual-honesty/>)

**Anushka Kahandagamage:**

**How does this broader situation relate to what you experienced at SAU?**

**Sasanka Perera:**

What I quoted just now is the basic truth that my former colleagues have not understood. In SAU too, the inquiry against me was initiated by formal complaints by the Head of Sociology Dev Nath Pathak acting on a letter by a PhD candidate Antara Chakraborty and Dean of Social Sciences ably facilitated by the new SAU President K.K. Aggarwal. I find it distressing that PhD students have also been exploited in the unethical activities of the current Head of Department of Sociology. More insidiously, the colleagues in Sociology and across the university maintained such a deafening silence that they have ensured the university will never again stand for academic freedom in the future and politically sensitive social research, which are a necessity in our world.

In fact, colleagues who approved the proposal of the student working with me later gave statements to the inquiry committee trying to wiggle their way out of their responsibility essentially saying they had not seen the proposal. By doing so, they willingly became a part of this project to throttle academic freedom. What is interesting is that all these colleagues consider themselves 'critical scholars.' How can you safeguard academic freedom when your own colleagues (academics) themselves act against this freedom? Serious reflective work with any semblance of political overtones will never be undertaken at SAU again. Moreover, they have also ensured that utterly unreasonable actions may also target any of them in the future if the authorities want to as they have now helped create a very dangerous precedence with my case and the previous suspension of four colleagues.

The university has already made its mark as a very mediocre place particularly for social sciences. There is no way it can grow under these conditions and under this kind of leadership. No serious students would want to or should come to SAU, as long as these conditions continue.

**Kaushalya Kumarasinghe:**

**In your opinion, what is the significance of Chomsky's critique of the NDA government within the broader context of studying Kashmir's ethnography and politics?**

**Sasanka Perera:**

Prof Chomsky's criticism of the Indian Prime Minister as a 'Hindutva nationalist' and also by extension, the NDA government in the interview by conducted my PhD student does not offer anything new. To be clear, it does not have any direct bearing on studying Kashmir. This is merely a general criticism that Prof Chomsky has made earlier in different places and opted to repeat in this interview too. Unfortunately however, SAU's 'thought police' led by the Dean of Social Sciences Sanjay Chaturvedi seems to have missed all these precious statements which are still publicly available. Sanjay Chaturvedi ably led the pack unleashed upon me to attack academic freedom and the so-called critical scholars from sociology actively followed his diktats, and so did members of his own department of International Relations. Mr. Modi too has quite often and quite honestly described himself in these terms. If these people have a problem with these views, they should question the Prime Minister for describing himself as such in the first place. They could have also questioned Prof Chomsky.

*Targeting my student and me for an opinion that neither of us have authored is beyond ridiculousness.*

I had asked Dean Chaturvedi in the so-called inquiry against me, if he was advising that our students do not read Chomsky. I had asked if he would give us a list of whom to quote and not to quote and what South Asian national leaders should or should not be mentioned in research proposals and dissertations. I did not get any answer. Besides, Kashmir-related things and other so called sensitive issues in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar have previously been studied by colleagues. These themes have also been studied by students under the supervision of Indian colleagues. The issue here is that the student concerned is not just from Kashmir, but a Muslim and the supervisor, which is me, happens to be non-Indian. This is a classic example of the extreme parochiality in terms of ethnicity, religion and nationality now apparent in SAU coming to the fore.

But there is another clear message. For his role in this affair, Sanjay Chaturvedi has been rewarded by the President by making him the Director of the Institute of South Asian Studies, for which the initial groundwork and planning was done by me and another colleagues years ago. And true to the way patron-client relations work, Chaturvedi's first action as to invited SAU's own president for the inaugural edit ion of what is supposed to be a regular lecture series, and describe I public as the 'man of the decade' and 'the man of the century.' I felt truly ashamed through I had already left SAU.

## **Part 2: The Losing South Asian Character of SAU**

[\(https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/the-incident-issues-of-academic-freedom-the-losing-south-asian-character-of-sau/\)](https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/the-incident-issues-of-academic-freedom-the-losing-south-asian-character-of-sau/)

**Anushka Kahandagamage:**

**Do you believe there's a conflict between the university's international character and the expectations or pressures from specific national governments, particularly in relation to sensitive topics?**

**Sasanka Perera:**

Let's face it. South Asian University is no longer an international University. It is now merely a third-rate local Indian university that happens to have the words 'South Asian' attached to its name. You might as well call it the 'North Indian University for South Asia' which rings more truthful. One of the most basic issues I always confronted was officials conducting meetings in Hindi and sometimes even in Punjabi. A Sri Lankan Computer Science student once complained to me that his classes were at times conducted in Hindi, which he did not understand. These are among the ground realities.

Look at the facts. SAU's President is Indian. Its Vice President is Indian. Its Registrar is Indian. Its Director and Deputy Director (Finance) are Indian. Most of its bureaucrats are Indian. The Director of the Institute of South Asian Studies is also Indian. SAU's rules specifically prohibit this kind of appointments, specifically at the top level. Further, all its Deans are Indian, and all of its Heads of Departments are Indian while all the consultant academics of dubious background hired by the President in recent times are also Indian. The vast majority of students are Indian too. So, what is South Asian or international about this place?

When I was the Vice President as well as in the time of the first President Prof G.K. Chadda specific outreach programs were designed for Sri Lanka and Bhutan because these countries were underrepresented in the student body. There was an immediate increase in student applications and recruitment at the time. But nothing like this has been done in recent times. SAU no longer admits students from Pakistan and Afghanistan. SAU never attempted to attract students from the Maldives to apply where they historically showed little interest in SAU though its government paid its dues.

**Kaushalya Kumarasinghe:**

**So, you are saying SAU's South Asian or internation character is no more?**

**Sasanka Perera:**

It is obvious, isn't it? Yu would have seen that happening during your time at SAU too. SAU's South Asian character has been dismantled over a long period of time. This has also been possible because there has never been any serious critique of the steady Indianization of the university by colleagues or most students by and large.

As far as I am concerned, this is now a failed South Asian project though it began with considerable promise. All other countries should now officially withdraw from SAU and allow the Indian government to carry this forward as a purely local and very below average institution.

I hold colleagues within SAU responsible for allowing this to happen. The Ministry of External Affairs of India is also directly responsible for consistently deviating from the established norms of appointing Presidents and always appointing Indian political appointees who do not have the foggiest interest or track record in anything South Asian or even global in any other way. Look at the first press conference of the present President. He thought it was very smart of him to hold it at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of South Asia. But everyone who spoke including himself were all Indian when the university actually had at least six non-Indian faculty members and plenty of

students from countries other than India who could have spoken about the university's South Asian character with some degree of legitimacy. This did not happen. They were all marginalized.

Let me point to another telling factor of the erosion of the university's South Asian character: Since early this year, all 'national' days of SAARC nations were put into the SAU's calendar with the promise to celebrate all of them. This was an important decision. But only the Indian Independence Day and Republic Day were celebrated with the participation of the SAU President with much pomp and pageantry. Absolutely no recognition has been given to the other South Asian countries' national days.

So, the question is, why should any other government fund a university that is now for all intents and purposes an Indian college?

The University picks non-Indian faculty members as targets and more specifically those who have a vision. Comparatively, Indian faculty members, with serious complaints of sexual harassment against them or of academic malpractices are not touched. The Dean of Legal Studies Ravindra Pratap, whose appointment itself is illegal as he did not fulfill qualifications for Associate Professor has charges of sexual harassment against him. No inquiry has been held into these charges. Instead, he was made a member of the inquiry committee against me. At least two students have formally complained against the Head of Sociology Dev Nath Pathak for academic malpractices but no inquiry has been conducted against him either. It is very clear that if you are a vocal non-Indian you will be punished. I would dare the current President to conduct an inquiry against Ravindra Pratap and Dev Nath Pathak by a committee consisting of credible representatives from South Asian countries.

#### **Anushka Kahandagamage:**

**Let us come back to the issue of your PhD student's research proposal. Did the other professors, the Head of Sociology and the Dean of Social Sciences seem to be ok with the PhD proposal? Was the proposal approved by all the members of the department as per the university guidelines?**

#### **Sasanka Perera:**

Let's look at how this process works. Under my direct supervision, and under the guidance of two other faculty members, Ishita Dey and Ankur Datta who are part of the student's Research Committee (RC), the student wrote a proposal. He presented it to the faculty and students in an open forum and received numerous comments and criticism from faculty members. Then, he revised it, again under my supervision and the guidance of the Research Committee.

Importantly, I had also written to the two RC members especially asking if the proposal had any issues of sensitivity given my relative unfamiliarity of Indian and Kashmiri politics and what is and what is not considered sensitive. I received no advice on this. I assumed this is because there was nothing to offer. And for the record, I must say, I had no issues whatsoever with the proposal and I still do not. It is an excellent piece of work submitted by a bright and very hardworking student. Later, it was presented to the Academic Committee of the Department of Sociology which consists of all faculty members of the department and two members from other departments. All of them approved it formally as the minutes of this meeting show. This includes the Head of Department of Sociology Dev Nath Pathak who then forwarded it to the Dean as there were no issues.

The Dean kept the proposal with him for months without taking any action on it, playing with the future of the student, and thereby showing complete lack of professionalism. It was the Dean, Sanjay Chaturvedi who, in his own wisdom found the now infamous Chomsky quote objectionable. However, and amusingly, he belongs to a department which claims to work on "critical approaches to the study of International Relations". According to SAU rules if there is an issue with any research proposal, it is supposed to be sent back to the student and the supervisor to revise. As a former Dean, I had done this several times. It is a simple procedure. And there were no issues ever. But instead, Chaturvedi made a formal complaint against me which President Aggarwal was ready enough to proceed with. I am at a loss to understand what had been presented as his enormous experience in institution-building when his name was nominated as the incoming President by the Indian government. So far, none of that experience is apparent in the way he has handled this case.

Be that as it may, what I find far is worse is, neither the Dean nor the Head of Sociology have so far specifically and formally advised the student how he should edit his proposal. He is now in a situation of limbo for months unable to do his research. This is criminal. How can the life of a young university student be so casually wasted by a group of

people who call themselves academics? What is the meaning of something so fundamental as the ‘right to education’ in this situation?

This kind of harassment of students without consequence is unheard of in any other university. If it had been a normal public university in this country, these people would have by now been taken to courts.

**Kaushalya Kumarasinghe:**

**The student involved in this case has issued an apology. Do you think regular pressures are placed on students and faculty members to conform to certain political narratives? Is there a way to balance academic inquiry with respect for diverse perspectives?**

**Sasanka Perera:**

He has not tendered an unconditional apology as it seems to be popularly understood and reported. He has simply stated in his response to the university that he apologizes if the interview he had conducted has hurt anybody’s feelings. That’s all. For me, this is very normal and reasonable. The issue is not this. What has been done to the student and to me in this situation, are completely unreasonable and woefully unethical. This kind of thing should not happen anyone. These have been witnessed by my own former colleagues in the Department of Sociology as well as the Faculty of Social Sciences which also includes the Department of International Relations and the university in general in absolute and shocking silence. Unsurprisingly for SAU and surprisingly for what is expected from a decent university that is worth its salt, absolutely no one has uttered a single word. My former department, which I have spent considerable time building, and almost all university colleagues have maintained a very obvious and deafening silence.

Ironically, many of these people within the department and Faculty of Social Sciences were recruited by me, and almost all of them have worked with me on some occasion or another. The lack of concern both at a personal level and fairplay is disconcerting. It is shameful -- to put it mildly. But not at all surprising. This is exactly what happened when two of my former colleagues were illegally suspended from the university with two others from Economics and Law Faculties last year.

So, forget safeguarding academic freedom. They do not even have voices of empathy and collegiality when scholars the world over were raising questions on the attacks against me, and my colleagues earlier. And these are all people who wax eloquent about ethics, freedom of expression, public sociology, critical International Relations, academic freedom etc. But more than on any other occasion they have proven to the world, to the alumni and to SAU’s current students that this is all just pretense, and they merely pay lip service to these lofty ideals because they sound intellectually sexy in the global conference circuit.

But there are clear consequences of this silence and what I call ‘the institutionalized and choreographed timidity.’ As a result of all this, no critical and self-reflective research will be conducted by or via South Asian University. I am talking about all departments. Absolutely no one would want to supervise such research given the now clearly established timidity. It is a different matter if some students may want to do such work

So now, SAU is simply not a place for serious politically sensitive but crucial social research. I have heard that the student in the center of this controversy, because of his interest in studying memory in Kashmir, has now been informally advised to study folk dance and music. Unfathomable! So, the way in which SAU balances and deals with such themes has now been totally compromised, and that too from within. SAU is now merely an extension of the Indian state. Or, it is just a regular government office.

But I must concede, this has not happened due to specific instructions from the Indian government; it has happened because of the interests of people within the university like Dean of Social Sciences Sanjay Chaturvedi, Head of Sociology Dev Nath Pathak, and President K.K. Aggarwal who want to be seen by the state as looking after its interests. This happens when you have clearly mediocre and self-serving people without any vision in positions of power and influence.

Regrettably, this kind of institutional behavior or individuals will always be dictated by Indian interests as no other government or tax-payers in any other country are seriously interested in SAU anymore. As it is, it is only the Indian government that pays for SAU’s upkeep now.

**Part 3:**  
**Sri Lankan embassy's Involvement and  
the Implication of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs**

[\(https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/the-incident-issues-of-academic-freedom-sri-lankan-high-commissions-involvement-the-implication-of-the-indian-mea/\)](https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/the-incident-issues-of-academic-freedom-sri-lankan-high-commissions-involvement-the-implication-of-the-indian-mea/)

**Anushka Kahandagamage:**

**You have spent over a decade at SAU. Can you talk about the idea that gave genesis to the university and where it is now?**

**Sasanka Perera:**

I have spent 13 years at SAU. The idea of the university was a brilliant one coming from some of the foremost minds of South Asia including Ashish Nandy from India, Imtiaz Ahmed from Bangladesh, Kanak Dixit from Nepal and much later me too in some of the latter meetings in Colombo. This was long before the university was established and was only an idea. It was a grand idea to bring young people in South Asia together to learn collectively in a non-hierarchical setting irrespective of the issues the nation states from which they come might have with each other.

At the beginning the Indian government even came up with an unrestricted visa for all those who came to SAU – academics, staff and students. This has been since discontinued. The original idea was to have different faculties in different cities in the region or to have the main campus in Colombo or Kathmandu. The latter was to facilitate visa issues. But since establishing the university in Delhi, because of the promise of the Indian government to fund all construction expenses and much of the operational costs, visas have always been an issue. In this sense, Delhi clearly was the wrong place to set up the university. But it did and continue to offer library facilities and other infrastructure which other South Asian cities may find difficult to offer. For years now the university, financially, has been on life support with funding going down to almost zero from almost all countries. Only India pays something.

**Kaushalya Kumarasinghe:**

**Can you add some context to this?**

**Sasanka Perera:**

Let me put it this way. SAU's main failing was that, in the first place, compared to the passionate ideological commitment towards the idea of South Asia apparent in the university's founders, all the top leaders so far appointed as Presidents purely based on the Indian government's interests, have been completely devoid of any serious vision. Such appointees and the coterie that had surrounded them at different times were people with no serious exposure to international institutions, very parochial in outlook and negligible understanding of culture, society, politics and economy of the South Asian countries. They certainly did not have any notion of South Asia as perceived by the founders. Unfortunately, President Aggarwal also belongs to this coterie of woefully inadequate political appointees. And all these Presidents have made wrongful and illegal decisions particularly in appointing officials at the top violating SAU rules. It is truly unfortunate that the university's Governing Board and SAARC itself, which supposedly 'owns' the university have never seriously looked into these issues. This pronounced disinterest on the part of the Governing Board and SAARC has allowed SAU to become what it is today.

It is not that India does not have visionary and brilliant academic leaders if one must appoint leaders only from India. It is simply that SAU has always had mediocre minds at the top level. And the Indian government and the MEA have never nominated any of the intellectually sharp Indian colleagues who could have done the top job well. We have always got subservient academics and their main qualification was their proximity to the regimes of the time. I find this truly unfortunate and shameful.

Second, right now in addition to being led by people lacking vision, SAU also woefully lacks people who have experience. These are very average academics who merely got their promotions in SAU and that too often via dubious means. I am talking of the present Vice President, present Registrar, almost all current Deans and Heads of Departments including the junior colleagues who served in the inquiry committee appointed against me. One thing is very clear: how on earth would a university that does not look into credible charges levelled against its faculty by students and some staff, appoint them as Deans and Chairpersons and as members of inquiry committees?

This situation can only be remedied if the Indian government removes the immunity currently enjoyed by SAU and its faculty and allows people who have faced injustice to seek redress in courts. Right now, SAU is a fiefdom for the corrupt and the unethical, completely and wrongfully protected by the Indian government. This immunity must be revoked if the university is to have any future – legally and ethically speaking.

So, with all this in context, I would say SAU is completely and irrevocably dead when compared to the original grand idea I referred to earlier. It cannot be reinvented in the former glory with these kinds of people in charge. It can only go forward in its present mediocre sense.

**Anushka Kahandagamage:**

**Let us talk a bit about the Sri Lankan High Commission's involvement in your case. Why did you feel the need to reach out to the Sri Lankan High Commission in the first place? What were your concerns behind this move?**

**Sasanka Perera:**

Ideally, I would have preferred not to have done this. But I had absolutely no confidence based on past experience that any inquiry in SAU would be reasonable and fair. I have been proven right. For instance, before my case, four colleagues were illegally suspended for no good reason. Further, the arrears of the salaries of those who were later brought back have not been paid up to now. Students have also been suspended and expelled often without real cause or due process. But fortunately for them, Delhi High Court has recognized their right to education by setting aside SAU's claims of immunity from prosecution. Critical and reflective students are often sent 'show cause' notices and threatened with expulsion from hostels as a routine matter of intimidation. This is how SAU routinely works. All this is a matter of record.

Because of SAU's status of immunity, I also had no recourse to courts of law in Delhi. I think this immunity is the worst privilege the Indian government has bestowed on SAU. It has allowed the institution to become a criminal enterprise where illegality, lack of ethics and due process have become the norm. It has made SAU a safe haven for limitless malpractice. Right now, it is being run like a concentration camp. People have no rights. There is no sense of ethics or propriety. All these are a matter of record in SAU and in some cases in the public domain. As a foreigner in this situation, I was even worse off. If there is anything consistent in SAU, that is its illegality in dealing with people.

Now, let's look at my own case. Given this situation, I informed in my first response to the President with examples that the charges against me were trumped up; and since no evidence was presented against me, the inquiry should not proceed. But the President ensured that the inquiry continued, and that too led by an ethically compromised committee. I asked permission to be accompanied by a representative from the Sri Lanka High Commission to look after my interests and to observe the proceedings. This was roundly denied by SAU, and the High Commission itself, quite shockingly, did not pursue this which it should have. I requested all proceedings to be recorded, and copies made available to me. Though promised on record, such records were never kept. When asked for, the Charman of the Inquiry Committee Pranab Muhuri said, 'we only have notes and pieces.' Of my cross examination of colleagues, every single person edited their statements after the proceedings, and those doctored documents did not reflect what actually happened in the proceedings.

Would you believe that colleagues also stated on record that that they had not seen the proposal they had approved. If this is the case, any decent university would have routinely fired these people for negligence of duty in statutory bodies. It is they that should have been inquired into – not me. So, I refused to sign false documents with doctored testimonies. Minutes of meetings have been falsified too. All these are a matter of record.

I informed President Aggarwal on two or three different occasions formally of the illegal and unethical ways the inquiry was progressing. And I did so with evidence. But he did not intervene despite my request to do so, and instead presided over what became a Kangaroo court with a preconceived judgment, and ample space formally provided for falsification of documents including inquiry proceedings. All this was very ably and consistently supported by most colleagues in the university and particularly my own former department, by their abject and shameful silence.

So, in this situation, I thought the only protection and support I can get would be from the Sri Lanka High Commission. After all, as basic international relations would explain, it is among the most fundamental duties of an embassy. In fact, I must say, it did its job very well at the beginning with the High Commissioner herself initially



taking the lead. But later, she completely changed her position and literally threw me under the bus by lying in public via her letter to the *Indian Express* on 9<sup>th</sup> August 2024 claiming that I did not provide her the details of the proposal concerned, including the Noam Chomsky quotation. As you know, I have countered these allegations with evidence in the *Wire* of 9<sup>th</sup> August 2024.

Everyone in Delhi who has talked to me about it – including senior journalists, scholars of International Relations and South Asian affairs – has told me that given her shocking change of attitude, she would have certainly been told to retract her position and support to me by Indian officials. In fact, it certainly looks so in the absence of anything else that is plausible. However, I personally do not believe this to be the case. But I have no explanation for her decision to go against the interests of a fellow citizen when he most needed his country's support and had no other recourse. I can only say it was utterly shameful and unbecoming of a senior diplomat.

**Kaushalya Kumarasinghe:**

**Although you have written to the Sri Lankan High Commission about the problems you were facing at the university, did you ever think of reaching out to the MEA or any Government of India officials regarding this?**

**Sasanka Perera:**

I did not. I had very good relationships with a number of MEA officials and several Government of India officials when I was the Vice President. Almost all those I have met were intelligent people and I had considerable respect for them. But all this was at an official level. When this recent incident began to unfold, I held no official positions at the university and therefore I had no formal or informal channels open with them. Also, I had no confidence in the MEA by this time. After all, it was they who championed the appointment of President Aggarwal with all his questionable leadership issues at SAU, which have now become apparent. Besides, they have an official stationed at SAU who I am sure would have provided MEA details on what was going on. But at no point, did the MEA advise their own officer at SAU, or the President to be sensible or fair in what was going on. I had enormous regard for the earlier MEA liaison officer at SAU during my tenure as Vice President. The present person is like the fictional 'invisible man'. He did not even have the courtesy to make an attempt to contact me though I was the most senior and experienced academic at SAU and former Vice President. It was very unlike a senior diplomat. It is an absolute failure that there are no formal channels open between SAU academics and MEA that do not go through the SAU President, particularly in situations where victims do not have access to courts, and when MEA is the main Indian government body that deals with SAU.

MEA also knows well the issues of malpractice and corruption at SAU. Much of this, particularly involving the way SAU has recently dealt with protesting students and the four illegally suspended colleagues was in the public domain too. This should also include what I consider illegal salary increases in recent times. Besides, many MEA officials who have visited SAU have been paraded around looking at flower beds and buildings, while brand new ceilings are already crumbling in the main academic building, and go back after a curated high tea and a polite meeting. How can anyone learn of what is going on with that kind of choreographed performances?

So, given all this that I had seen at close quarters, I did not think MEA would do anything. After all, External Affairs Minister Jaishankar has already said in Parliament that SAU is an autonomous organization and they had no control over it. It is a very convenient public position to take while exerting all the possible control it needs behind the scenes all the time. The best thing MEA can now do is to remove the immunity enjoyed by SAU and its faculty so that at least it can come under the purview of Indian courts of law, and victims would have the possibility to seek redress, which they simply cannot at SAU.

**Kaushalya Kumarasinghe:**

**Let's now talk a little bit about your future after your exit from SAU. What do you plan to do in the future? How would you continue your academic work and research? Are there any specific projects or areas of study you plan to focus on?**

**Sasanka Perera:**

I have been planning for my retirement for five years now. So, I have a lot of plans. I don't consider myself to be a regular academic. But have numerous interests within and beyond my discipline. I must see to the completion of a book I am co-editing with a young colleague on what may be called intellectual traditions in South Asia focusing on key words in selected regional languages. I plan to complete the writing of my book on pilgrimage between Lanka, India and Nepal for which I did not have the time while in SAU. I have to continue the Heritage and Place Making

Project of which I am a chief investigator along with colleagues from University of Heidelberg, SOAS University of London and Social Science Baha, which I brought to SAU with millions of INRs in European Union funding though I never drew a salary from the project for my efforts. That must be now transferred to Colombo as it goes where I go as per the contract SAU has signed.

I have to continue my translation of poetry and fiction and also continue to write my own poetry. All these are matters of passion for me. And now, I am also thinking of writing a detailed biography of my time in Delhi and SAU given the information and institutional memory at my disposal.

I am also in the process of setting up some institutional structures for social research in Sri Lanka, but also with a South Asian focus. One must understand that the South Asian sensibility and focus in SAU's institutional makeup is clearly lost and have also become illegitimate. It needs to be rediscovered and reestablished, and preferably outside of India if one were to learn from these experiences.

*(Anushka Kahandagamage and Kaushalya Kumarasinghe are former Sri Lankan MPhil and PhD Candidates at South Asian University, New Delhi currently based in New Zealand and Sri Lanka)*