

PRESIDENT'S REPORT
AMERICAN INSTITUTE FOR SRI LANKAN STUDIES
October 2010 – September 2011

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Charles Dickens began his novel *A Tale of Two Cities* with the now-familiar words that probably can have all-too-immediate resonance for many of us in October, 2011:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way - in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

For the American Institute for Sri Lankan Studies, the year between October 2010 and September 2011 was somewhere between the best of times and the worst of times. It has been a year in which many good things have occurred while it has also been a year in which what-may-seem-to-be unprecedented challenges presented themselves before us, just as they have for programs in international education in universities across the United States; as they have for universities in general in the United States and in Sri Lanka; and indeed as they have for men and women around the world.

Reminding ourselves of the daunting challenges that face us as academics, as citizens of our individual countries, and as humans on this suffering planet facing its own unprecedented challenges helps us to keep in perspective the challenges facing AISLS, as an academic institution, and international education in the United States generally, as important and as immediate as these are. Perhaps the greatest challenge for us associated with the American Institute for Sri Lankan Studies is to keep moving forward into the future not distracted by the “noisiest authorities,” even those with the best of intentions, but to continue to work to realize the core missions of AISLS to “to promote US research and teaching on Sri Lanka and to build mutually beneficial links between US and Sri Lankan scholars and institutions” to the best of our abilities.

Indeed, there are very good reasons to say that we have faced up to these challenges in the past year.

As I look back at all of the activities of AISLS the past year, I am very mindful of how the work of AISLS as a scholarly organization depends on the generosity, imagination, initiative, and energy of many people and thus, in this challenging year just as in past years, I would like to begin this year's president's report with an acknowledgement and expression of gratitude to these individuals.

Above all, I would like to thank John Rogers for his work as AISLS' US Director and Ira Unamboowe for her work as AISLS' Overseas Director and as Executive Director of our Colombo center. Their initiative, their sense of responsibility, and their efforts continue to enable the work of AISLS to proceed effectively and smoothly. As I have said in previous years, it is no exaggeration to say that John Rogers and Ira Unamboowe are the *sine qua non* of AISLS.

The staff of our Colombo Center--Deepthi Gunaratne, M. de S. Weerasuriya, and Lorette Weeraratne--have continued, as in years past, to work effectively and independently to ensure the excellent functioning of our Center in Colombo, and they have also continued to work creatively to make our services as accessible as possible in Sri Lanka.

We sleep well at night knowing that we can rely on them.

In the United States, Don Keller (administrative support) and Selma Omerefendic (accounting) continued in essential roles that allow AISLS to function smoothly and to meet its organizational responsibilities.

The work of all of these individuals may not be immediately visible to the members of AISLS, but everything that AISLS does depends on their efforts and we owe them both gratitude and loyalty.

The work of AISLS in building connections between scholars also depends on its listserv in many key ways, and I would like to thank Michele Gamburd—once again--for her steady hand as our listserv director for the past year.

I am also grateful to Jeanne Marecek, as Past President of AISLS, for her counsel on many issues that have come up the past year.

AISLS continues to receive core funding from the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), US Department of State. The ECA funds are a subgrant from the Council of American Overseas Research Centers (CAORC). Mary Ellen Lane, Heidi Massaro, Robin Presta, Monica Clark and the other CAORC staff have continued to give AISLS important and critical support. I would like to thank these institutions and individuals for their support of AISLS, support that may often be invisible to the membership of AISLS itself.

For the past 11 years AISLS received generous funding from the US Department of Education, financial support which funded many of the costs of our Center in Colombo. We of course regret the US Department of Education's decision, which took effect on October 1st this year, to suspend support for American Overseas Research Centers generally, but all the same, we are grateful for their long period of support. I would especially like to thank Cheryl Gibbs, the program officer with whom we worked over this entire period, for her assistance.

If anyone is listening in Washington, D.C.— whether Congress or in the Department of Education-- let me say that I hope they will reconsider their decision and come to see it as short-sighted.

And if any members of AISLS in the United States are listening: WRITE YOUR REPRESENTATIVES! VOTE YOUR CONSCIENCE!

In addition to myself as president, the AISLS executive committee over the past year was comprised of Jonathan Spencer (vice president), Jeffrey Samuels (secretary), Daniel Bass (treasurer), and Jeanne Marecek (past president). I would like to thank all executive committee members for volunteering their service, but I would especially like to note my appreciation of the contribution that Daniel Bass has made as treasurer in these challenging times.

Finally I would also like to thank all of the members of the Board of Directors, both elected representatives and institutional representatives for volunteering their service to AISLS. The terms of Arjun Guneratne, Mark Whitaker and Deborah Winslow, three of the elected members of the AISLS Board of Directors, ended this year and I especially thank them for what they have offered to AISLS these past years as members of the Board, but I know that I am not the only one to note the value of their service all three were just re-elected to the Board of Directors. I thank Arjun Guneratne, Mark Whitaker and Deborah Winslow for their willingness to serve AISLS again.

Elections

To continue with the report on elections, AISLS held elections for four elected Board of Directors positions in the fall of 2011. The results were announced at our Annual General Meeting on October 22, 2011 at the annual South Asia Conference in Madison, WI and the new elected Board members are Arjun Guneratne, Sujatha Meegama, Deborah Winslow, and Mark Whitaker. The candidates for the Board positions in the elections were Stephen Berkwitz, Arjun Guneratne, Steven Kemper, Sujatha Meegama, Jonathan Walters, Mark Whitaker and Deborah Winslow, and I would like to thank Stephen Berkwitz, , Steven Kemper, and Jonathan Walters for their willingness to serve AISLS and stand for election to the Board of Directors of AISLS.

Awards and Grants

AISLS continued its established fellowship competition for scholars who already have the Ph.D. or equivalent by the beginning of their fellowship tenure. As our guidelines specify, fellowships can range between two and nine months. Because of restrictions set by our funder, the US State Department, only US citizens are eligible for our fellowship program, although we wish it were otherwise.

This past year fellowships were granted to Melanie Dean (Religious Studies, Eckerd College), Dennis McGilvray (Anthropology, University of Colorado—Boulder), and Susan Reed (Anthropology, Bucknell University).

AISLS continued its relatively new dissertation planning grants program, designed to enable graduate students to spend six to eight weeks in Sri Lanka to improve their dissertation proposals. An award was made this year to Cenana Pirani (History, University of California—Los Angeles).

Four awards were made during the year under the AISLS program to support language instruction in Sri Lanka

AISLS continues to offer its graduate student members support to attend selected scholarly conferences in North America through its Travel Stipend Program. Five such awards were made in the past year.

AISLS also directly supported two efforts to preserve and disseminate research materials. The Cornell Language Acquisition Lab is converting unique linguistic data on Sinhala into digital form and expects to make this material available freely on the Internet. The International Centre for Ethnic Studies, in a program directed by Gananath Obeyesekere, is working to locate, copy, and publish transcripts of early modern palm-leaf manuscripts found in various libraries in Sri Lanka. Some texts are being translated for the first time for an English-language publication.

AISLS was also supportive of efforts by the Digital Dictionaries of South Asia Project (<http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/>) to include Sinhala in this invaluable online project, and we are happy that memorandums of understanding have been signed to realize this. We are also optimistic that digital copies of the unique reference collection of the Sinhala Dictionary in Colombo will be made and also made available more widely.

Workshops and Conferences

In the past year, AISLS has sponsored a number of conferences and workshops that in a variety of ways have sought to promote international connections in the study of Sri Lanka, including our continuing aim to promote scholarly interaction between American scholars working on Sri Lanka and our colleagues in Sri Lanka; encouraging tri-angulated relations among American scholars, Sri Lankan scholars and those working in Europe; and promoting greater interaction between scholars working on Sri Lanka and those students and scholars concentrating on other regions of South Asia and also on Southeast Asia.

AISLS, as part of its commitments to the future, sponsored its second workshop in the United States designed specifically for graduate students. Entitled “Sri Lanka in South Asia: Future Horizons for Scholarship,” this workshop was held in March 2011 at the India-China Institute of the New School for Social Research, New York. It was a

two-day event, with the first day devoted to research panels and the second day consisting of a dissertation development seminar and a round table discussion. About 50 students and scholars from a wide range of disciplines participated.

I want to thank Sharika Thiranagama for taking on the responsibility for designing and organizing this workshop for two years in a row, and for her vision in putting these workshops together. I also want to thank those who helped her in organizing the 2011 workshop: Mark Balmforth and Mariyahl Hoole.

We are hoping to continue to support workshops for graduate students interested in the study of Sri Lanka in the future and we are very optimistic that a third such workshop, again organized by Sharika Thiranagama, will be held in 2012, but this time on the west coast of the United States.

In November 2010, the AISLS center in Colombo (or more strictly, our legal entity in Sri Lanka, the American Institute for Lankan Studies) sponsored a one-day workshop on “Sufism in Contemporary Sri Lankan Muslim Life, which was convened by Frank Korom and Dennis McGilvray. Four presentations formed the starting point for lively discussions among the ten participants.

In July 2011, AISLS also sponsored a two-day workshop on “Gender and Sexuality Studies in Sri Lanka.” This event juxtaposed the practical and experience-based knowledge of activists and practitioners with the theoretically grounded knowledge of academics. Eighteen persons participated in this workshop, which was convened by Jeanne Marecek and Monica Smith. Seven presentations from this workshop, on moral panics, are planned to be published in *Options*, the journal of the Women and Media Collective.

AISLS, along with the American Overseas Research Centers in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, sponsored a conference on “Water, Waves, and Weather: Climate Change and the Future of South Asia”, which was held in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in July 2011. Three Sri Lankan researchers participated in the conference: M.C.M. Iqbal, Dinaratne Sirisena, and Deepthi Wickramasinghe.

AISLS also was among the co-sponsors of a two-day conference on “Sri Lanka at the Cross-roads of History,” which was held at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Cambridge, UK in June, 2011. This event brought together students and scholars from the United States, Europe, and Sri Lanka. Around 40 persons attended. This event is connected to the special AISLS initiative on historiography that began in January 2009.

AISLS is, at present, organizing workshops to be held in the coming year. We also plan to hold a forum at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies in Toronto in March, 2012.

It is important for AISLS to continue to receive new ideas for possible workshops and I invite members of AISLS to contact John Rogers or myself with ideas for future workshops that might be convened by AISLS.

In addition to holding workshops in Sri Lanka and elsewhere as well as making library resources available to Sri Lankan scholars, we encourage and facilitate visiting American scholars to give lectures at Sri Lankan universities. This is something that we would like to become more effective at arranging in the future. Please let John Rogers or myself know if you will be visiting Sri Lanka for any reason and would like to lecture or present material at one of the eighteen universities in Sri Lanka.

Beyond the support it lends through its Travel Stipend program for graduate students, AISLS continues to encourage scholarly participation at various conference settings including the Annual South Asia Conference at Madison, the Tamil Studies Conference in Toronto, and the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies. In “unofficial” ways, AISLS also has aided the identification of Sri Lankan scholars to be invited to other academic meetings in the United States and I hope that all members of AISLS will provide us with suggestions on how we can both expand and become more effective in such efforts.

Information about scholarly conferences relevant to the study of Sri Lanka is also regularly disseminated through our listserv. Again, I hope that members of AISLS will facilitate us in this valuable service by informing John Rogers or myself of such meetings that they become aware of them.

Colombo Center

In the past year, the American Institute for Lankan Studies’ (or AILS-- AISLS’ legal entity in Sri Lanka) Colombo Center has served an increasing number of US-based, Sri Lankan, and third-country scholars. All books in the library are catalogued according to the Library of Congress system, and the catalog is now available at [http://catalog.crl.edu/search~\\$14/X](http://catalog.crl.edu/search~$14/X). The collection includes recent academic books on Sri Lanka published in Europe and the United States, many of which are not available in other libraries in Sri Lanka.

The library also offers access to JSTOR and some other electronic resources. Ira Unamboowe, the Executive Director of AILS, has been especially energetic in outreach regarding our facilities in JSTOR, traveling to different universities and institutes in Sri Lanka to provide an introduction to scholarly access that JSTOR affords scholars and students.

In September 2011, we signed a new lease for our Center premises for the calendar year 2012. We are especially grateful to our landlord, Mr. H. Rodrigo, for the intangible support that he gives each year to our Center.

Through the initiative of Ira Unamboowe and with the efforts of Deepthi Guneratne and Lorette Weeraratne from our Center staff, a pamphlet was published that will draw attention to the resources on “The Decorative Arts of Sri Lanka” that are now available through the Digital Library on Furniture and Decorative Arts of Sri Lanka (see << <http://dlir.aiys.org/LALORC/AISLS/aboutFDASL.htm>>> and << <http://www.localarchives.org/dlir/sri-lanka/>>>). This digital library, one result of an AISLS-sponsored documentary project, displays an inventory of furniture and other decorative arts that were created in Sri Lanka and are currently owned by Sri Lanka's cultural institutions and private collections.

The 2010 issue of the Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities was shipped from Sri Lanka to the US and distributed to interested AISLS members in 2011.

The center staff continues to be willing to try to meet requests from members for specific publications. These will be supplied on an at-cost basis.

The center staff also continues to offer general advice and support for AISLS members visiting Sri Lanka.

Among the officers of AISLS, Jeanne Marecek, the Past President of AISLS, and myself visited the Colombo Center in the past year.

Organizational Developments

Significant changes to the Companies Act in Sri Lanka have led to increased reporting requirements by the Colombo Center. AISLS's procedures are periodically adjusted to ensure that the organization complies with relevant legislation and regulations from the Government of Sri Lanka.

We welcomed Duke University, Princeton University and Stanford University to AISLS during the past year as institutional members. This brings the total number of institutional members to twenty-one. There are also 101 individual AISLS members. Obviously, we are always on the look-out for ways to add to our institutional and individual membership, and any suggestions will be appreciated.

Immediate Challenges for AISLS

The challenges directly facing AISLS in the immediate future are financial, and, as I hope is clear from what I have already said, certainly not ones of vision or commitment.

Most notably, and indeed most difficult for us, as I noted above, the year ending September 30, 2011 saw the end of our funding from the US Department of Education, a consequence of cuts in federal government expenditures for Title VI and international education; if you will allow me a personal opinion, these are imprudent cuts for the long term future of higher education in the United States.

Since this funding amounted to about 40% of AISLS' annual budget and provided funds that we could use directly to maintain our Colombo Center and the salaries of our invaluable staff in the US and in Sri Lanka, the loss of this support obviously poses many challenges for AISLS, but—and without in any way minimizing the challenges-- we know we are definitely able to maintain the Colombo center in its present form, and AISLS more generally, beyond the end of 2012 at the least and we are working in every way possible--indeed we are optimistic that we will be able to find ways to ensure that we can fulfill such commitments and aspirations about the Colombo Center and our staff, absolutely essential to AISLS' work and its purpose and mission, beyond that date into the future.

Other challenges facing AISLS, concerned as it is about the study of Sri Lanka in the United States, are ones that AISLS cannot address as an academic institution itself since they are ones that face international education in the United States more generally, but as members of AISLS, we can raise our voices in support of the various institutions and individuals that face these challenges directly. Let me emphasize that to say “more generally” is not to suggest that these challenges will not have significant impact on the future of Sri Lankan Studies in the United States, all of which is so central to the concerns of AISLS.

These include the teaching of the languages of Sri Lanka in the United States, both Tamil and Sinhala. Current information on the current state of things can be found in various sites on the internet, including:
<http://saveourforeignlanguages.wordpress.com/2011/09/12/cuts-continue-in-critical-language-studies/> AISLS has a special interest in the teaching of Tamil and Sinhala, and we all know that Sinhala has been taught during the academic year only at Cornell for a very long time although it has also been taught during the summer at SASLI at the University of Wisconsin--Madison. It is not welcome news that the *Cornell Sun* has reported that the teaching of Sinhala at Cornell in the future is at risk (<http://cornellsun.com/section/news/content/2011/08/26/after-cuts-cornell-fights-future-eleven-languages>) and I hope members of AISLS will communicate their appreciation of the teaching of Sinhala at Cornell over the years and their sense of the significance of Cornell's offering instruction directly to that university's administration. We will also all want to support the teaching of Sinhala and Tamil at SASLI (the South Asia Summer Language Institute at the University of Wisconsin—Madison) in the future (<http://sasli.wisc.edu/index.htm>) .

Funding for the National Research Centers at US universities was cut 47% last year as well and obviously this will dramatically affect the future of the study of Sri Lanka in the United States, for Asian Studies in the United States, and for international education in the United States.

I encourage members of AISLS to advocate that their own Universities support national efforts to restore and sustain international education in the universities of the United States. (See, for information:
<http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/forum/2011-07-15-albright-hagel->

[foreign-languages-budget-cuts_n.htm](#) ;
<http://homepages.indiana.edu/news/page/normal/19183.html>; and
<http://www.aieaworld.org/AnnouncementRetrieve.aspx?ID=72821>).

As part of AISLS commitments to the future, I also encourage AISLS members to pay special attention to what has happened and may happen to the Fulbright Program, a program that is so crucial to the academic formation of future generations of scholars specializing in the study of Sri Lanka, in particular; Asia more generally; indeed in international education itself in the United States. To remind AISLS members, news reports from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* can be found here: <http://chronicle.com/article/Language-and/127122/> and <http://chronicle.com/article/Fulbright-Presses-Forward-/129499/>

I again encourage AISLS members in the United States to speak out in their individual universities about the value of international education and to ask their universities to advocate for what we do; to contact their representatives about the value of Title VI and international education; and to vote their consciences.

I trust that those of us who are members of AISLS in the United States are also mindful—indeed also support—our colleagues and friends working in the universities and academic institutions of Sri Lanka as they face their own severe challenges, just as severe, if not more so, as what we in the United States face. As members of AISLS know, I have sent numerous emails on the AISLS listserv this past year on our Sri Lankan colleagues' Trade Union Action, but even with the Trade Union Action's mixed successes, our colleagues and friends in Sri Lanka remain the lowest paid among academics in the universities of South Asia, and the universities in Sri Lanka continue to be underfunded. Whatever their own challenges, our Sri Lankan colleagues also can inspire us in the United States by their commitments to the value of the academic life and in their commitments to the future (see, to take just one example; <http://futa-sl.blogspot.com/2011/07/academic-spring-in-sri-lanka.html> and http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=31156).

Into the Future

So, with the inspiration that our colleagues in Sri Lanka gift to us in mind, let me conclude this year's AISLS President's Report with some words about our future, stretching as our future does across oceans and continents, between the United States and Sri Lanka, by alluding to the words of Charles Dickens with which I began:

Let us continue to work on behalf of the American Institute for Sri Lankan Studies but especially on all aspects of its mission that is committed to the future, keeping in perspective the distractions of the "noisiest authorities" around us while at the same time doing whatever we can to contribute to

enable our shared futures, institutionally and individually, to measure well against the “best of times.”