



PERADENIYA THROUGH TIMES: A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE FACULTY OF MEDICINE*

An Interview with Prof. Arjuna Aluwihare**

ABSTRACT

Prof. Arjuna Aluwihare, after Trinity College, Kandy obtained his bachelor's degree in the Natural Sciences and Biochemistry from King's College, Cambridge, UK in 1960, and MBBChir(Cantab) and MRCS&LRCP at the London Hospital in 1963. Right after, he came to Sri Lanka for his internship. He left again for England and did his Final Fellowship of the Royal Colleges in 1966 (FRCS). He then conducted research at the College and St. Marks Hospital, and got the Cambridge Master of Surgery (MChir) in 1970. He joined the University of Peradeniya in 1971 as a young Consultant, and was a key figure in the Faculty, the building of the Teaching Hospital in Peradeniya, and in many roles in the University (including serving as the Vice Chancellor), UGC (including being Chairman), and senior roles in other bodies. Prof. Aluwihare retired from the university in 2004, but retained various links. He is very grateful for the role his parents and helpful and supportive wife and children, and many Sri Lankan colleagues played in making whatever he did possible. This interview was conducted by Mr. Shanti Nandana Wijesinghe of the Department of Sociology, University of Peradeniya, revisiting the journey of the University from the perspective of someone who has been involved in it from a very early stage in life.

Key words: University of Peradeniya, Faculty of Medicine, JVP Insurrection, Diamond Jubilee

Professor, tell me a little bit about the career experience you had at the University of Peradeniya.

I remember so many things about my stay at Peradeniya. Because I attended a school in Kandy, I used to go to Peradeniya from

as early as those days. My mother was a University Medical Officer working on part-time basis at the Health Centre, and also the warden of the Sangamitta Hall. As far as I remember it was from the 1950s to about 1968. When I was in Sri Lanka, I lived with my mother at her quarters. Even when I left

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the University for England in 1956, I visited her quarters from time to time during my vacations. I can remember her efforts towards stopping ragging and medical newspaper articles.

When my mother was in charge of the Hostel, she most of the time ate what the students ate. The rumor was that the meals in Sangamitta were better than in the other hostels. But when the number of students increased, and the space shrunk, there were problems. There was only one student in one room in hostels during the early days. Later, it became two. Even later there were three, but the staff had often posh cars. Therefore, issues started coming up regarding not only food, but also other aspects of student life including some students trying to fulfil their political aims using the University name. But things became even more interesting after I joined the University as a faculty member after my graduate studies in England.

Let's revisit those memories. When and how did you join the University?

My wife and I decided to return to Sri Lanka at the end of the job in which I got my Cambridge Master of Surgery degree. Many were surprised but from my father's background (Parliamentarian from 1936 to his death in 1961 and Minister many times) and mother's work as an obstetrician earlier and setting up Malaria hospitals in the mid thirties, we felt we would be better looked after in Sri Lanka than England. So we came in December 1970 with two kids and no job. A cousin gave us a flat for free and we made and sold slimming wheels (I did the wheel, my wife did the box design and instructions) to earn money.

In 1971, a position was advertised for Senior Lecturer/Consultant in the Faculty of Medicine in the Tamil stream. Fortunately enough for me a Tamil doctor in another department of the Faculty had got a Sinhala stream appointment. So, a Sinhala doctor applying

for a Tamil stream job was not an issue. I spent three days learning how to read and write Tamil, came for the interview, and got the job! So I became Senior Lecturer/Consultant at the Peradeniya University. Although the Faculty was in Peradeniya those days, the surgical wards were in Kandy. I used to work as a surgeon at the Kandy Hospital. It was the time when discussions were taking place about the construction of the Peradeniya Hospital.

Before I came here, my first paid medical job was in Sri Jayawardhanapura University as a temporary medical officer, I used my own instruments for some surgical procedures. A few days after I started work, the first JVP riots started (April 1971). When I was there, the student union came and told me that they were going on a field trip and they wanted to borrow a First Aid kit. I said no. Most of the JVP students were in Jayawardhanapura University during those days, and I suspected and realized later they had wanted to treat injured JVP activists. I didn't want to get involved in those politics.

I took up the job in Peradeniya when these conditions were worsening. I remember when I came for the interview in Peradeniya, I came by bus from Colombo. The bridge near Nelundeniya was attacked and broken. So I came by bus, got down near Nelundeniya bridge, and walked across the bridge. There were timber planks for people to cross the bridge. The police asked me who I was, may be because I was wearing a brown colour shirt. I said I am a doctor, and that I am going for an interview. Then they apologized saying that JVP members were also wearing brown colour shirts.

When we came for the job we were told that the JVP was stopping cars and stealing them. We had a new car. We put our two children and also goods until the car was full and packed some gunny bags of chillies. Our idea was that the JVP would look at it and think it

is not worth the trouble to remove all those things, and therefore would let us go. When we left Ratmalana people said to apply mud to the number plates of the vehicle because if the JVP sees a new number plate when we are going via Nelundeniya, they would steal the vehicle. But when we were coming via Bambalapitiya, the police stopped us and asked why we had applied mud. They said when JVP steals vehicles they apply mud to the number plates so that the the police cannot find out what car was stolen, and that if we were stopped at another place we would be viewed as terrorists. So then we went to a friend's place in Bambalapitiya and washed the mud on our number plates.

Why I am telling you all this is because we continued our teaching responsibilities in the Department of Surgery in this kind of volatile background, and also carried out research. I had been at a famous colorectal hospital in the UK and my research was based there and people thought I knew about the 'backside'. So I had hundreds of babies and adults with problems, and never refused to answer the phone and see patients – much to the suffering of my wife and eventually four kids who spent hours in the car – but it meant seeing lots of similar patients generating ideas and new operations and research- leading to many articles and prestigious presentations. One should learn never to refuse to answer the phone. Most of these things we were able to continue because we thought outside the box. I think if people think in an ordinary way nothing will happen, especially in trying circumstances like the JVP times.

A few days after taking up the job we got a cow, and then a couple more, and ran cows at a profit till near the end of my time as UGC Chairman in 1992/3. This helped with the income before my private practice started, and also was rewarded by the dignity of labour. My wife and I and the children can milk cows, clean cowdung, etc. and she made

cream cheese (which we sold), butter, etc. and we consumed milk. I had permission to take all cut medical faculty grass home in my car, so feeding the cows was no big problem. I must also mention in fear I came up to the Engineering Faculty nearing the end of my time in the UGC to play my cello in a concert and was thrilled to get a wonderful reception from the students- how good they can be!

How about your time with students? What are the special memories?

We came to this house in 1977. Then there was a marmalade tree here; I went to ayurvedic dispensaries and brought all kinds of oranges. First the students thought I am going to practice ayurvedic medicine. But we made and sold marmalade along with cream cheese to a supermarket. We undercut the market price. So after some time, our tree could no longer produce enough to meet the demand. It was very difficult to meet the demand for the cream cheese and marmalade by the supermarket we sold our products to. Medical students came here for so many years – this house and the earlier one: Sometimes for a class; some other times for a class and tea. If they wanted sugar or bread they brought it – and tea leaves. My wife made butter with the milk she got from the cows and used our marmalade. Then I would milk the cows while they watched for the tea. Most of the students remember it, even if they do not remember the surgery I taught! Again – the dignity of labour! All of this came into great use during the 1988-91 conflict times. When meeting violent students or the army or police, I would start by asking why the grass and jak and banana leaves were wasted – and we would discuss cows for a while – then mutual trust was established and the 'heat' got less and conflicts were resolved.

I will tell you another thing about the students. There was *kada* among medical students and also among other students in other faculties; *kada* was a social practice that had class

implications. Girls who attended leading schools in urban centers would not talk to girls from more rural areas. *Kada* was there even among male students sometimes. I tried to break this by assigning group work and requiring that each student kept track of the patients of other students as well. I would ask a student about another student's patients and if they could not answer the question, the student 'owner' who had not given the information to the others would be 'repeated' for two weeks so they all HAD to talk to each other. I also made sure that they were well prepared to treat their patients by reading the relevant books about all the ward patients, so they learnt to learn and not depend on us; I know students felt harassed by me, but it was to maximize their potential. Surgery lectures were not compulsory while I was Head – the best attended lecture I gave was on the subject of transbasin irrigation systems using again what our ancient kings had built! Why am I telling you all this? To illustrate that by similar methodologies the faculty developed, the university developed, and the students developed, and today we can see our students and juniors who are now better than us.

To reiterate, the students were and are the future – the mix of backgrounds, financial strengths, and language abilities was great. Sinhala and Tamil only started as I joined – my colleagues in Surgery agreed and we got a reading and dissertation project inserted into the Final MB mark saying they could read an article about any patient in any language and write critically about the article and the patient's care in any language – all used English and this trick helped English language improvement and helped again to show students how much they could do.

Another thing that greatly helped their development was the building of the Teaching Hospital in Peradeniya. The initial plan was to build the hospital at a corner of the then golf course. But when the ground was being dug

for construction, it was revealed that the earth there contained a semi-precious stone; I can't exactly remember what it was called. But someone involved in the project wanted the stones, and so went to the subject Ministers E.L. Senanayake and Gamini Jayasooriya and said that it would ruin Kandy's landscape to build the hospital there, because the first thing one sees when entering Kandy would be a hospital. Then they started looking for another place, and ended up in a plot of land near the Engineering Faculty. I met them at the river and forcefully pointed out that this land was flooded during the 1947 and 1957 floods. Then they went to Gampola to find a suitable place. I knew very well that Gampola didn't have a land that could be used for a hospital of this scale. So I waited for them to return. When they returned from a fruitless journey as expected, they went to see the land between the Veterinary Faculty and the river – another useless place and so I blocked their cars! I told them that if we flatten the hill behind the medical faculty, we could shift the wing of the proposed hospital that would fall on the Peradeniya side, to this side. Then no person entering Kandy would see a hospital as the first sight. It was great that two Ministers were willing to listen to an ordinary Senior Lecturer! I was then asked to come for the cabinet meeting to discuss the Hospital along with Ralph Panabokke who was the Dean back then, and that's how the Teaching Hospital came about. The Medical Faculty benefitted immensely out of this because most students could now come here for their training instead of going all the way to the Kandy city.

Apart from this, I was also involved in the improvement and management of student life in other ways. When I was the Students' Councillor there were commotions in the university that I intervened in and managed. One day a student was shot while doing a demonstration. With the VC's permission I stepped in and managed to pacify the demonstrators and the military. The students

knew my back ground. They know that even though I studied in another country and lived in another environment, I had a connection with them. I was rearing cattle, and I wasn't ashamed to remove cow dung, all these sorts of things. During my time as Students' Counsellor we also completely stopped ragging for a while with the help of the Students' Action Committee – around the time a student was paralysed after jumping off her balcony in fear and disgust. As the staff, we were very committed to our jobs and the students, and so they were a great help and very responsive. We did not switch off the phones those days, we were always available (one of my Vascular surgeon colleagues was also an example of this). I used to perform operations on small children, and I didn't get much time to spend with my family even. All this kind of thing helped develop a level of trust amongst students and staff and Deans. When I was in the UGC, this commitment of the staff even helped in accepting the increase of the medical student intake overnight to 800 using unused facilities and nearby hospitals.

I even suffered a heart attack in 1997. It was mostly because I was working very late hours... leaving the UGC office at around 9.30 in the night was average for me. I would go home, have dinner, and directly go to sleep. This lifestyle was what was chiefly responsible for the decline in my health. But it was also the source of great satisfaction because it enabled me to prioritize my students and work. If somebody from outside wanted to see me, he or she needed to have an appointment. One such was a Peradeniya don whose promotion had been denied on political grounds – I discovered this and corrected it and when he came to see me I could tell him his problem was solved and all we had to do was to have tea together.

But if it was a student, they could just walk in through the door without an appointment. Several students who had come to meet me

in this manner are now holding very high posts, and when they come to meet me they recall those things and appreciate it. I guess our collective dedication was another factor that made students listen to us.

You briefly mentioned some of your experiences during JVP days. Can you elaborate on the challenges you faced during that time?

I became the Vice Chancellor when the second JVP insurrection started in 1987. I can remember how the science special degree examination was taking place in the Faculty and the JVP threatened to stop it. I requested army presence, and the army was on the road throughout the exam period. Some students were not able to come, so we held a make-up exam for them after about a year or two. It was during this time that Profesor Stanley Wijesundara, Vice Chancellor of the University of Colombo, was killed. But I could not show my fear to the police, students, or the army. In due course I got to know all the leaders of the JVP and one chief even got my mobile back for me when it was stolen from the official car. Then the JVP forced the students to close the University. However, when I knew this was going to be forced on us, my Deans and I spoke to the 'authorities' and stopped the forces on the Peradeniya road, and I went amongst the students on the road in the University and said we had closed and are pleased go home. Then they went and the forces were not involved. We could go alone to the student centre even at midnight. Incidentally during the closures, about 70% did part time jobs of various types including as postmen, some agriculture students as labourers in the gardens, and so on. Learning work discipline helped many later.

After the closure, I sent letters to 5000 students of Peradeniya, asking them what they wanted. I got around 3000 replies. 28% said they wanted the North Colombo Medical College problem solved; others wanted the

food, canteen, halls, and other infrastructural conditions improved. 0.9% said they really were using the NCMC issue to change the government if possible using violence. But remarkably, none of the letters had addressed me in disrespectful terms. Then I showed them to the authorities and argued in favour of these students. That is the way I ran the university during that time. The Deans, Heads, and I had complete freedom of movement – we once even had a Deans meeting at 1 am! Once some students had put up some JVP posters near the Arunachalam Hall. I was on my way back to the University, and saw the police and army were about to enter university grounds for patrolling. I asked the students to take the posters down, and took them away in my car. That is the relationship I had with these people. When they were arrested I went to the police and asked them whether they needed anything, and whether their parents were notified. I never asked them whether they did a right thing or a wrong thing. When the police knew that I saw them, they couldn't be killed. Then shortly after Professor Wijesundara was killed and I became the UGC Chairman.

I did surgeries, with huge support from then Drs Ratnatunga and Buthpitiya, even as the UGC Chairman. I came to Kandy twice a week to perform operations, see the patients and also my family, and to show that if sacked (as was done later by President Wijethunga) I had a good/ better job to go back to. Those days some students were arrested and held in the Welisara Navy Camp, and I used to go see them; not to release them but to see how they were... so the army knew I came there, and therefore, they could not kill them. Once I remember going to Theldeniya area where some students were shot. I went to the middle of the crowd – students on one side, army on the other – alone. After waiting a while they all disbursed. At another location they had burnt a bus. It was opposite the Peradeniya Garden roundabout and there were lots of students as well as the army. I went there all by myself

next to the bus and had a chat with the army and students for about two and half hours. Then both groups were convinced that they cannot do any thing as long as I was there. So after two and a half hours the students left along with the army. That kind of action helped minimize problems.

I didn't always take the students' side. Professor Patuwattewitharana was killed during a medical strike. I remember I was with my elder daughter in the car in Colombo. I suggested that my daughter goes to Colombo South Hospital to do something for Professor Patuwattewitharana, but when we went there he was dead. I went to his office in Moratuwa; with blood dripping off the table, I gave a call to the Daily News and gave them a statement saying that doing these kinds of things is completely wrong, and later went to his funeral. On another occasion, as the UGC Chairman when I came to see the VC, I saw a poster saying it is better to give the death penalty. The Registrar then was Mr. Sumanasiri. I told him that this sort of thing should not appear in the University, and I removed the poster. The violence by the DJV (military wing of JVP) and later by the police and army in settling the situation was horrible and sadly forgotten today.

My approach to handling problems, as the Head of Surgery, then as VC and UGC Chairman, and later as Head of Surgery and Human Rights Commissioner, etc. was straightforward. I engaged with the relevant parties directly, and was left alive because I was accepted as being neutral by students and the forces under the guidance of President Premadasa (with whom I had electioneered for my father many years before). Knowing him also helped to ensue there was no political interference in my personal work or the University system, and we could develop Departments, the University Colleges many of which are now independent universities, with the help of students, staff,

and the general public including the business community. Political letters went into the waste paper basket. Meritocracy and fair play were observed throughout.

One day a large crowd of JVP students had gathered near the UGC gate, but it was closed without allowing them to come inside. I went to the gate and said to be heard by all students “security, open the gate. This is my institute. I am the one who is keeping you out. If you want to come inside you will have to take my permission.” Then they asked “Sir, are you not ashamed to talk in this manner, and behave in this manner (*vili lejjawak nedda?*)?” Then I said “what is shame? Please explain in detail.” About 90% started laughing. I knew when they started laughing that I have won. Then I invited them inside the office, gave them a cup of tea and asked them to leave. They cannot be controlled by putting fences around the UGC. A lot of trouble can be mitigated if things are done in a straightforward manner. The other important matter is not to forget there is a Sri Lankawa outside the Kelani river and Mahaveli ganga. There are millions outside the big cities and the slums of the cities. Once there was a big issue in the Matara University and I went alone and stood in the hall with over 2000 trade unionists and JVP students, and on the stage I refused their request. A senior person there said ‘if you are prepared to come to us alone and refuse our request – we accept your answer’. It was always better to go to the site of the problem than get people to Colombo.

I must also state – though you did not ask – how many mistakes I have made (like travelling a lot) and how many things were not done, forgotten, ignored, etc. in all sections. What helped though in our Department and University was that a person doing something I missed was not blocked – and especially in the Department of Surgery much more has been done by the others than myself! I cannot talk about this without paying tribute to my

wife and children, and to what we all learnt from the work, and the example set by my wife’s and my own parents, and other senior and junior colleagues and all levels of staff, and students.

At this occasion of the Diamond Jubilee of the University of Peradeniya, how do you assess the performance of the University? How do you think it can improve?

As far as teaching is concerned, I think the most important thing is to teach the students and staff how to interact among each other and how capable they are of learning, doing extracurricular activities, and so on. I intervened to break the practice of *kada* among students and to teach students to realize how much they can teach themselves. The faculty today should take similar measures to improve interaction between students and staff because that’s where a wholesome learning experience lies. I was lucky to interact with many staff and students and different faculties in many different ways during my time – 1971 to 2004 – and am aware of the tremendous hard work and imagination, introduction of new ideas and disciplines and technology by so many – much more than I had done. A tiny example is the work done in studying the old Surgical instruments at the Alahana Parivena Hospital in Polonnaruwa and in the process discovering how much Prof. Prematillaka had done to reconstruct the Nalanda Gedige! A related archaeological bit is the idea that the western part of the Sigiriya garden should not be dug up till good remote sensing technology was available to avoid damaging anything!

The University has done great things and expanded over the last 75 years; and in certain areas (like Medicine) is the best in the land. It has the capability of going further as I am sure it will as the present youth gets older! Vice Chancellors, Deans, Heads, all teachers, all levels of staff, and students, need thanks and congratulation – and be reminded

of the future that is possible! The political system can and must help in a neutral and fair manner, without nepotism, favouratism, and corruption. Strikes by students, teachers, and doctors is not acceptable and ragging is anathema; and every now and then in these and other matters the University community may have to remain faithful to its values and actualize its maximum potential.

One day I had to read a citation for the past president of the College of the Surgeons in order to give him a scholarship. I said "you are given this because of the work you have done as the president, but I am saying it is for the future. In my opinion, you are getting this scholarship not because of what you have done, but because of what you can do in the future." I am reminded of this now because of the relevance of that spirit to this moment. When there is a jubilee like this it is not just to celebrate what was done for the last 75 years, but also to think about what the University can do in the next 75 years.