



‘VAJRA JAYANTHI’ OF A GREAT SEAT OF HIGHER LEARNING: A MILLENNIUM PERSPECTIVE*

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ABSTRACT

Mine was a life closely intertwined with this great university and its intellectual traditions. I happened to be one of those few individuals who were privileged to be born in the same year in which the university was established, and lived the prime of my life in its idyllic landscape both on its summits as well as its ravines and witnessed its gradual growth, achievements, trials, and tribulations for over 50 years. I also had the exceptional privilege of presiding over its affairs in the mid-1990s. In this paper, I revisit the natural charms and attractions of the University of Peradeniya, its nascent years of being, and the ‘Golden Age’ of the University, as well as explore prospects for its future as someone who has been closely connected to the institution for most of his life. In terms of the desired future trajectory of the University, I have identified the need to re-introduce a culture of research, lifting the observance of ‘office hours’ within university premises (at least the library), and stronger critical connections with the development process of the country with a long term view to establishing a university town centered on Peradeniya.

Keywords: University of Peradeniya, Research, Development Process, University Town

EARLY BEGINNINGS

This Year -2017, marks the 75th Anniversary or the Diamond Jubilee of a pioneering seat of higher learning in Sri Lanka. The formal founding of the University of Ceylon had its origins in the Proclamation issued in Colombo

under the Ceylon University Ordinance No.20, on 1st July 1942. It absorbed the then existing two Government Colleges namely, the Ceylon Medical College founded in 1870, which became the Faculty of Medicine and the Ceylon University College founded in 1921 with its Faculties of Oriental Studies,

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Arts and Science. The shift of the University to Peradeniya began in 1947, as vividly described by the first Vice Chancellor Ivor Jennings himself in his well-known book *The Kandy Road* (1993) published posthumously. The University in its infancy grew under his able pioneering leadership and gradually blossomed into the present University of Peradeniya. The University Community, not only in Peradeniya but also in the entire university system in Sri Lanka, owes a deep debt of gratitude to this erudite man of Vision. Many years later when he returned to Peradeniya (in 1964) to receive an Honorary Degree conferred on him by the University, I happened to be in the audience of the ceremony held in the Arts Theatre to mark the event. In the brief acceptance speech he delivered, I remember him saying that he was 'glad to see the little plants he planted in the University Park have grown into big trees after he left', perhaps both in a literal as well as in a metaphorical sense!

THE CAMPUS SITE AND ITS CHARMS

I happened to be one of those few individuals who were privileged to be born in the same year in which the university was established, and lived the prime of my life in its idyllic landscape both on its summits as well as its ravines and witnessed its gradual growth, achievements, trials, and tribulations for over 50 years. I also had the exceptional privilege of presiding over its affairs in the mid-1990s. So mine was a life closely intertwined with this great university and its intellectual traditions. My family lived most of their lives on the Campus, and particularly my kids had their memorable childhood-haunts in the creeks and riverine forests of the Hantane Range with its rich biodiversity. The ethereal beauty of the moon-rise over Hantane, the majestic Mahaweli River flowing by silently, and the jacaranda scented parks of the main campus

still haunt our minds with an irresistible urge to return to where our souls belong.

Sarachchandra, a literary giant of our time, in the somewhat autobiographic note found in *Pin ethi Sarasavi waramak denne* goes to the extent of saying "there is hardly any place under the heavens as Peradeniya, which is so conducive to intellectual and creative activity" (1988, p. 26). While attempting to conceptualize a design for the landscape of the more recently born Rajarata University's main Campus at Mihintale, we were toying with the idea of creating a 'Philosophers' Garden' in the style of those at Cambridge and much later in Stanford and Harvard. Then, I began to wonder as to why this thought did not cross the perceptive mind of Dr. Ivor Jennings, a great Cambridge Scholar and who happened to be the master-mind behind the beauty of our Campus today. Perusing through the titbits of Campus history recently, I was flabbergasted to find that Jennings did not miss that too! Unfortunately, his initiative of a 'philosophers garden' seems to have gradually transformed itself into a 'Lovers' Lane' after he left to become the Master of Trinity Hall, Cambridge (1955), later to become the Vice-Chancellor of the same University (1962) - a coveted position associated with the British Royalty!

OPENING OF THE NEW UNIVERSITY OF CEYLON AT PERADENIYA

At the inauguration of the virgin Campus of the University on 20 April 1954, His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh had this to say in the presence of the Queen:

"Under the terms of the Kandyan Convention, Her Majesty is the successor of the King of Kandy who had the good sense to choose this site for a Palace...I also understand that one of your chronicles has described the river which passes the University Park

as a “necklace of pearls around the neck of the Queen of Kandy”. You can pride yourself, therefore, that the past, the present and the poets all approve the choice of this lovely site for the University” (Annon 1954). In trying to read between the lines, it is of significance to note that the British Royalty (still reigning) accepted the continuing legitimacy and legality of the Kandyan Convention of 1815 signed about 200 years ago, sealing any doubts about its authenticity among some lawyers, historians, and politicians. Although for some reason, our University has taken hardly any interest in the bicentenary of this nationally important event, it is gratifying to note that the Ruhuna University has not missed it altogether. Next year (2018) marks the bi-centenary of the Great Rebellion of Uva or the first freedom struggle against colonial rule, and hopefully the University takes the leadership in at least organizing an International Conference.

The booklet that was produced to mark the occasion of opening the university in 1954 also mentions some archaeological remains on Campus site, pertaining to Buddhist temples and Royal Palaces which were destroyed by the colonists. Even in the adjoining Botanical Gardens premises, such archaeological

remains still stand largely unexcavated.

The Duke also ventured further to explain that “beautiful buildings and lovely surroundings will not by themselves ensure the success of the University. Success depends on the type of men and women who graduate from here and their subsequent work. It also depends on the teaching and administrative staff, who must found and build up traditions which will be a source of strength and pride to all Ceylon...” (Annon 1954). These indeed are unforgettable visionary words of wisdom.

Turning to Jennings, he said, “you have remarked Mr. Vice Chancellor, that it is not easy to open a university because once established it is always open. However, like shopkeepers of London during the bombings during the second world war, I can declare this place to be *“more open than usual”* and doing so, I wish the University of Ceylon now established at Peradeniya, and all who may come here to learn, every success in their undertakings”. This statement i.e “more open than usual”, appearing at the main entrance to the Senate Building had now become a source of inspiration and a mark of identification of our University and even the title of some publications.



Jennings being a far-sighted visionary, had his own dream for the future of this University. As Ian Goonetilake, a celebrated past Librarian of our university, attempted to capture, "Jennings' idea of a single residential university on British lines, educating a highly select group of young men and women in a hot-house environment in the English tongue, to take their place as legislators, administrators, educators and professionals in the service of a little bit of England in Asia" (Jennings 1993, p. XIII), was not allowed to be clouded by changing political and social forces. The wheel however, seems to have turned full circle in recent times.

THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

It is well known that, at the beginning, there was only one University (the University of Ceylon) in Sri Lanka and later towards the end of 1950s, Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara universities were added. By 1972, when a new University Act came into force, there existed 4 independent Universities namely the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya, University of Ceylon, Colombo, the Vidyodaya University of Ceylon, and the Vidyalankara University of Ceylon. With the introduction of the University of Ceylon Act in 1972, these Universities and the College of Technology (that later became the University of Moratuwa), were amalgamated to constitute one single University of Sri Lanka within which all functioning universities became mere 'Campuses' with 'Presidents' in charge under a super Vice-Chancellor seated in Colombo. In August 1974, another Campus of the University of Sri Lanka was established in Jaffna.

With the growing disillusionment with a single unitary university structure, the need for a new approach was increasingly felt leading to new legislation in 1978 enabling the establishment of several autonomous universities. The legal effect of this 1978 Act was the establishment

of a University Grants Commission at the apex of this multi-university structure with provisions for the establishment, maintenance, and administration of universities with their campuses, institutes, faculties, and centres. Today the university system that grew from the original University of Ceylon consists of over 15 fully fledged universities.

In the meantime however, Peradeniya, which had been characterized as being anchored on the 'Oxford-Cambridge' or 'Oxbridge' model, despite its elegance and flamboyancy, could hardly cope with and appropriately address the pressures of social and economic changes that were sweeping across the country during the subsequent decades.

On the other hand, it appears that most other universities that followed, instead of striving to discover their own souls and *raison d'être*, were much more inclined to follow and often ape the University of Peradeniya, without adequately realizing the fact that the 'Oxbridge model' was under strain even there. This state of affairs prompted some recent critics, such as myself, to talk about the 'demise of the Peradeniya Model'.

THE NEXT 75 YEARS - A MILLENNIUM PERSPECTIVE

75 years may sound a long period of time, or reaching of an 'old age' for an average human being on human time-scales. For an institution, particularly for a university or religious establishment, this may be only a short period. My own college in Cambridge celebrated its 700 years of existence three years ago, rather coincidentally in the same year as our Asgiriya Temple – an ancient seat of learning and *vidarsana meditation* – which also celebrated 700 years! When we begin to think of the future of our own university it may appear almost nonsensical to think of such long time scales. However, we may be

compelled to envision our future at least for the next 75 years in order to charter its path of growth, expansion, and quality improvement. Without such overarching views, concepts, and dreams, the university is likely to grow haphazardly like an unplanned city, dependent heavily on short-term demands and exigencies. The goals and objectives of most corporate plans in vogue at best do not encompass such distant futures, which may be perceived as too abstract or useless bordering even on sarcasm, in a technologically driven world of rapid change. Recent experience however, show that such imprudent attitudes sans long-term perspectives, have brought humanity to some of its most intractable present-day predicaments such as climate change and environmental crises.

If we look at the distant future from a 'business as usual' perspective, what would be the scenario by the end of this century at Peradeniya? We may use certain statistical projections related to student numbers, physical investments, university budgets, and faculties, departments, centres, and institutes of the University, in order to predict such scenarios. Our own prognostication is that universities, like unplanned cities allowed to grow on their own, would be places of quantitative expansion often with qualitative degradation. They may become places rife with crises, conflicts, and chaos, with recurring battles between new and old faculties, and other institutes of the university. Such conflicts may become increasingly difficult to manage by statutory organs such as Faculty Boards, Senates, and Councils. Some degree of peace may perhaps be attained as in Peradeniya through allowing a certain degree of duplication, but with significant hidden costs in a resource poor academic environment. The introduction of the new Technology Faculties in recent times as in Kelaniya has created unforeseen strains and

stresses that cannot easily be solved through the existing organs of university governance.

On the research side, performance of most universities cannot claim to be successful, with obvious failures in attaining the desired goals. In most of them, university research funding is only nominal. Even the meagre funds made available sometimes remain under-utilized, and the quality of any research output is often questionable. It is hardly recognized that search for new knowledge is equally or more important than just teaching and learning. At the bottom of it is the lack of a serious research culture as in some reputed institutions abroad who are always on top of university ranking systems. Can any of our universities be brought within the top 100 universities in the world in the next 75 years? At one time it was my dream to see a healthier balance between undergraduate and post-graduate education in our university, mainly because I often felt that Peradeniya is too precious an establishment for general undergraduate education, particularly in view of the heavy investments made not only in buildings and other infrastructure, but also in human resource development. It is gratifying to note that Peradeniya has made significant progress towards this direction particularly in the faculties of Science, Agriculture, and Arts in recent years. However, a culture of 'full time researchers' has still not firmly taken root.

I believe that the time has come to create an appropriate environment for Nobel laureate level scholars to emerge at least before the end of this millennium! For this purpose, some concerted effort has to be made, even if it demands diverting investments to create conducive environs to attain that superior goal. Some may think that it would be silly to think along those lines, while we have to attend to burning day-to-day demands of different segments of the university

community. These are certainly lofty ambitions but my own belief is that we should not wait until things come to pass naturally and automatically. As long as we continue to run universities like Kachcheries by official working hours, it would be very difficult to attain such heights in research. Unlike in most advanced universities of international repute, our campuses plunge into darkness after sunset. I dream for the day when our campus lights continue into late hours, not only in the Halls of Residence but also in laboratories, libraries, and research rooms. It was Disraeli, the illustrious British Prime Minister who once observed that "universities should be places of light, of liberty, and of learning". He would have meant 'places of light' in a metaphorical sense i.e. that universities should dispel the darkness that often surrounds a world of ignorance. Here it is used both literally and metaphorically! So how can we devise ways and means of keeping the universities awake at least till late night?

In the modern context, universities particularly in the countryside, have to be vigilant on what is happening around them often in the name of 'development', in particular, specialized peripheral development strategies proposed in sectors like health, industry, and recreation. They should not only be aware of such projects, but also actively critique and contribute to them. University Towns feature highly in such development agendas. A University Town centered on Peradeniya may actually be a millennium dream worthy of consideration.

Infrastructure development is essential for any developing country. What is in fact necessary is 'smart infrastructure' with high levels of efficiency both in terms of economic and social benefits over costs. In order to do such evaluations, universities must have the liberty and capabilities to investigate and learn from past experience. Let there be up-

to-date development data banks established in universities, along with efficient retrieval systems that can be utilized expeditiously within a short time when needed by planners and policy makers as well as funding and lending agencies. Any investor who is interested in the region must be able to visit a regional university and get the information he needs within a few days if not in a few hours. The universities, in turn, should be trained and encouraged to produce this kind of knowledge with, of course, a strong critical element that is the primary mandate of them.

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