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RECOLLECTIONS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PERADENIYA

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ABSTRACT

These recollections have been drawn from adaptations of two types of material: 1) Speeches delivered at the Diamond Jubilee celebrations of the University of Peradeniya held at the University of Peradeniya on January 10, 2017 and 2) Interviews conducted with key personalities of the university. The main objective of this compilation is to throw into relief from multiple perspectives the growth, progress, as well as setbacks experienced by the university during its 75 years of existence as an academic entity. In addition, it seeks to map their respective visions for the university at the juncture of its centenary celebration. The experiences and memories of academic and administrative staff of the university have been revisited in this exercise.

Keywords: University of Ceylon, University of Peradeniya, Ivor Jennings, Research

CHANCELLOR PROF. P.W. EPASINGHE:

1942 was the year when the University of Ceylon, the first University, was established in Colombo in the premises of College House. The master plan of the University envisaged that all activities of the University will be shifted to Hantana in Peradeniya, the present premises of the University of Peradeniya after

several name changes. A number of Faculties located in Colombo were partially or fully shifted to Peradeniya as intended in the long term plans of University Education in the then Ceylon. Those parts of such Faculties which were not shifted continued to be in Colombo and progressed with development to become the University of Colombo in 1978.

* Based on speeches delivered at the Diamond Jubilee celebrations of the University of Peradeniya held at the University of Peradeniya on January 10, 2017 and interviews conducted with key personalities of the university.

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The major move took place in 1952 when the staff and students of the Faculties of Arts and Oriental Studies together with the Main Library and the University Administration were transferred to Peradeniya. The completion of this major move on 6 October 1952 marked the formal establishment of the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya.

This important event of the university becoming fully operative at Peradeniya was celebrated in subdued tone by the Vice-Chancellor planting a tree opposite the entrance to the Lodge, because the government was keen to postpone the ceremonial opening arranged for 1952, owing to the death of King George VI, until Queen Elizabeth II could participate in the opening ceremony in 1954.

The postponed opening ceremony was held on 20th April 1954 with the participation of Queen Elizabeth II. The Duke of Edinburgh while declaring open the university said "You have remarked Mr. Chancellor, that it is not easy to open a university, because once established it is always open. However, like the shopkeepers of London during the bombing, I can declare this place to be "more open than usual"... It is evident that the university moved to Peradeniya on 6th October 1952, nearly one and a half years before the ceremonial opening, due to the initiative of Dr. Ivor Jennings, the Vice-Chancellor. The University of Ceylon continued to function as University of Ceylon, Peradeniya, while those sections of the university operating in Colombo continued as the Colombo campus of the university until 1967, when they were split into two separate and independent universities.

Thereafter, University in Peradeniya continued to function as the University of Ceylon.

PROF. B.L. PANDITHARATHNE:

The University of Ceylon was established by ordinance no. 20 of 1942 with Sir Ivor Jennings as the first Vice Chancellor. The Peradeniya University is legally the successor along with

the University of Colombo to University of Ceylon.

Historical Background of the University of Ceylon and the Contribution of Sir Ivor Jennings

Sir Ivor Jennings was appointed by His Excellency the Governor General of Sri Lanka. His administration can be traced along two phases; in Colombo from 1952-1955, and in Peradeniya thereafter. He took great interest in establishing the Peradeniya campus and subsequently making it the Headquarters of the University of Ceylon.

One of the first functions of Jennings as the Vice Chancellor of the University of Ceylon was to establish five new faculties which were not included in the University College of 1922. They were the faculties of Oriental Studies, Arts, Law, Science, and Medicine. Faculties of Engineering and Science came much later. Long before we came in 1952, he also got final year students of the Farm School to form the core of the emerging Faculty of Agriculture.

Matriculation of Students

Initially there were no admission exams. London matriculation was the qualifying exam to enter the university. Students were typically from the middle class produced by urban schools, there was almost no one from central schools. From 1942 to 1946 or so till free education was introduced, education came with a heavy price tag. It meant that unless one received a scholarship or bursary, or one came from the affluent middle class, the university was barred to them. Thus the university was confined to the five faculties mentioned above, accommodating about thousand students.

In terms of making residential arrangements, one witnesses the introduction of the following residence halls: Arunachalam, Jayathilake, Broody, Broody for Christians, Aquinas for Catholics, Vithiyagara for Medical students,

and Queens Hall – the only one for the ladies, who were very few in numbers during the 1942-1952 period. The affluent among them chose to attend lectures from locations outside of the university. Some came from home.

Selection of a Place and Construction of the Second Branch of the University

As an extension of the University of Ceylon, a second campus was proposed to be built away from Colombo. From between the two locations under consideration for this venture, Dumbara and Peradeniya, the latter was chosen as the site of the new campus.

Jennings personally supervised the University plan and construction of the University along with architect Sherly de Alwis. The administration building which stands on granite pillars was designed to echo the glory of Anuradhapura. The Arts Faculty with the theater, The Lodge (the Vice Chancellor's residence), halls of residence including Jayathilake Hall along the Galaha road, Arunachalam and Marcus Fernando Halls along the incline of the hill, and Hilda Obeysekara Hall for the ladies.

I am proud to say I was the one of the first students from Colombo to attend Peradeniya. I was in my third year in Colombo, in September of 1952, when I chose to continue my degree in Peradeniya. A special train was started and at every major station like Polgahawela and Kadugannawa, students used to jump to the platform and sing and dance. The respective station masters were very indulgent and amused. The students that came here were dedicated to build the new campus both socially and educationally.

Sir Jennings was not known for having problems with students or authorities. But in 1953, amidst the rice ration and the consequent unrest, an island-wide strike was called, and university students took to the streets. Peradeniya undergraduates went on

a march along the Kandy-Peradeniya road, and promptly the police set about trying to stem the show of protest.

The students withdrew to Jayathilake Hall, removed a concrete slab and attacked the police, which injured Sargent Morly Banly. Jennings did not interfere with the law. The leader of the student group along with a few other students were prosecuted but the magistrate pardoned the protestors. Jennings left in 1955.

PROF. SHANTHA K. HENNAYAKE:

I was in the first batch of students to enter the Dumbara Campus of the Peradeniya Campus, University of Ceylon in 1978. It was a turbulent time at the campus as none of the students were happy with the set up at the new campus. I represented the English medium students at the discussions with the administrators in trying to find a solution. This was my first involvement in student politics and advocacy.

Contributions to University Administration

In 2010 I became the Head of the Department of Geography, Faculty of Arts. Later, in 2012 I was appointed as the Deputy Vice Chancellor of the University of Peradeniya. Attending to the student affairs is one of the key obligations of the Vice Chancellor. Deputy Vice Chancellor also becomes the Acting Vice Chancellor when the latter was away.

I played a main role in initiating the semester system in the Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya.

In the years 2011-2012 I was responsible for the formation of the Planning and Development Committee of the Governing Council of the University of Peradeniya. The Committee was responsible for advising the Council on future planning for the intellectual and physical development of the University.

Ragging of Freshers in the University of

Peradeniya (from 1979)

Even though ragging was there even during my time as an undergraduate, it was not politically motivated like now. Since student politics is at present connected with radical left-wing political parties, ragging today reflects these shifts as well. In the past, there were different political associations among the students and student elections were held regularly—student politics was much more democratic then. That type of democratic student politics is no longer found today. Ragging today is purely an exercise of violence, unlike in the past when it was rather playful mischief. Even though students who engaged in ragging activities were usually suspended for some time, they did graduate after they successfully completed their studies.

Ragging has now become a national menace. Student associations are controlled by the inter-university student federation and student unions are merely an extension of the inter-university student federation which is unofficially linked to the radical left political parties. Students are pawns of it; this was not there in the past.

Measures that were taken to prevent ragging were not effective. Attempts were made to allow parents to remain in the university premises during the first couple of months of the academic year when ragging takes place but it did not materialize. Leaflets were distributed among students and parents to create awareness about the harmful consequences of ragging but they too failed to achieve the desired objective.

I recall an incident in this regard. One day the Arts Faculty Students' Union violently protested against holding classes, despite the fact that lectures were scheduled for that day. The incident went to the extent that a lecturer was assaulted. The students' union leaders who were directly involved in assaulting the lecturer were suspended for three years,

but later they admitted to their fault. Another incident was that the Vice Chancellor had attempted to prevent an incident of ragging. He had been informed that ragging is taking place in the Akbar Hall where a large group of first year students were being physically harassed and were feed rice and curry with sand. . When he had gone to the hostel canteen to speak to the students, the students had started to protest violently.

I think legal punishments are only a temporary solution for ragging because it stems from much deeper socio-psychological issues. We need an effective approach to handle this issue that takes into account these deeper dimensions as well.

Interventions to Effect Changes in the University

I observed that the University of Peradeniya did not have an official anthem. However, then I discovered during my tenure as the DVC that an unofficial version was available. It was written and music was composed by two of our own students. Then I obtained the official approval of the Governing Council for this song as the official University Anthem.

The Ceylon University Press which was once housed in the University of Ceylon unfortunately went into decline in the late 1960s. I was responsible for the reestablishment of the University Press in 2014. One of the prominent works published by the University Press was Peradeniya: The Founding of a University, a five volume compilation by then Senior Assistant Librarian, A.T. Alwis.

I also took measures to ban the use of Polythene within the university premises.. This went hand in hand with the initiative to dispose solid waste to Gohagoda, the official dump of the Kandy Municipal Council Earlier garbage was dumped on the side of the road that leads to upper Hanthana.

I was also instrumental in establishing a

committee called the University supplies Committee. This committee is responsible for carefully analyzing past purchases (stationery, chemical substances, furniture, etc.) made by the university before approving requests for new purchases. Additionally, I took the initiative in establishing a shuttle service that took students from the halls to their respective faculties free of charge. With the help of the Land Committee, I also initiated measures to regain university lands that were encroached by outsiders.

Comments on the Desired Future Trajectory of the University of Peradeniya

The The University of Ceylon started in 1942 was brought to Peradeniya in 1952. At the time this university was established, most colonies were not independent. There were only a few universities for the whole of Asia and Africa. At that time, the University of Ceylon was among the top 100 universities in the world. However, during Prof. Attygala's tenure as Vice Chancellor (1955-1965), the introduction of Swabhasha as the medium of instruction in the University rather too hastily resulted in the decline of quality and standards especially in the Arts and Social Science faculties. All governments from 1948 should be primarily responsible for this downtrend.

The situation is the other way around in countries like Malaysia and Singapore. Their universities have developed and improved with time. But in Sri Lanka, even though school education and thus attaining simple literacy is given much attention and priority, university education and thus developing effective literacy is not given priority.

If the country needs a change in future, university education needs to be given much more attention and priority at the national level than it is given now. There are many changes that are easily possible within the universities in relation to their general situation. Certain other changes need to come from the

University Grants Commission, policy makers, and the government. Every party has a responsibility.

We must also reconsider the notion that there should only be state universities. For healthy competition among university students, there needs to be private universities. The university needs to have a great deal of independence with regard to its education and research in this regard, to have competitive advantage. For instance, it should be allowed to directly establish faculties, departments, and research centres and also to attract students directly. The University Grants Commission can decide on the minimum standards for enrolment.

In terms of internal changes, the academic staff and the university administration need to be depoliticized in general and de party-politicized in particular. Politicization has gone to the extent that even top level administrative and academic positions are not made any longer without political interference. Even those who are appointed without such interference ultimately have to bend down to it due to pressure.

The academic staff must be highly qualified. In the past, only the best were taken in to assume these positions. But since of late, the best do not always get into the academic staff owing to changing social, economic, and political conditions in the country at large. Some of the best brains migrate to other countries. Joining university academic staff has become a second choice for many of them today. There is a remarkable decline of the knowledge output to society by university academics. For example, in the Faculty of Arts, knowledge is mainly book-based, and hardly ever ventures beyond. Greater commitment to intellectualism is essential, and this should be prioritized over everything else within the University system.

To this end, the recruitment process should

be well-organized, and post-recruitment follow-ups should be systematized as well. Getting paid without work is not freedom. The university should be brought to a level where those who do not work are penalized and terminated from service. The 8 hour work schedule is an administrative and legal feature. It does not characterize the academia. Most importantly, the library should be open till night for students to access and students' academic culture should revolve around the library and laboratories.

The national harm caused by the university as exemplified by student protests, baton attacks on students, and academic staff going on strikes are all indicative of a general decline in the standards and intellectual commitment of the university system in general. These are not signs of progress. The university needs to be committed to intellectual development. If the current state does not change, the university system will decline even more.

There are serious disparities among universities as well. Despite its prestigious past record and lush landscape, the University of Peradeniya is located in the national periphery. Several universities are located in the Colombo Metropolis. The intellectual reality is that the University of Peradeniya is not 100 km away from the urban centre; in substantive terms it is 1000 km away. The periphery does not get the benefits, links, interactions and the attention that the centre gets. The University of Peradeniya suffers from all these negative factors. These issues should first be addressed if we are to hope for a national reinvigoration of the University of Peradeniya.

MS. MALLIKA RAJARATNAM

I received my first degree from the University of Peradeniya. I chose this university since my friends were here and also my husband is from Kandy. I arrived in June, 1991, and never stayed in the hostel. After becoming

a lecturer, she stayed at Lady Hill quarters. I recall my days in Peradeniya with great happiness as it was the most beautiful period of my life.

In 1991, I enrolled at the Department of Philosophy as an undergraduate student. For my graduate studies also I continued on in the same department. My post-graduate research was on Thagore's Philosophy. I never thought I would get the chance to be the Head of the Department of Philosophy because I am from an ethnic minority, but it was not a problem.

I love this university very much, and I work hard to bring it among the world's top universities. I think the administration of the University of Peradeniya is highly appreciable. It is reflected in the fact that students from other universities come to do their postgraduate studies at the University of Peradeniya. I have served here for 27 years now. My students now serve in leading in positions in the country.

Future of Peradeniya

Undergraduate and graduate training should take a more practical approach. The existing system does not allow students to think critically. This needs to be changed by introducing a practical component to education that would encourage students to apply their knowledge to real world situations and question/ revise it as necessary.

More importantly, libraries should not be closed under the excuse that students do not come. The libraries should be open for the ones who wish to study. We need to shift away from a purely logistical approach to these things, and broaden our operations to accommodate and encourage even the minority that is interested in academic endeavours.