

## BEGINNINGS OF UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA; IN RETROSPECT

By

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Although plans were underway for the implementation of the recommendations for the establishment of a University in our country, to suit our own needs, at a time when Sri Lanka (Ceylon) was a colony under the British, it took nearly ten years to bring the task to a fruitful finish.

Here, the background to the establishment of the University of Ceylon, its place of location, the nature of the University itself, courses of study originally provided, and the monopoly over higher education via the English medium, the contributions it has made towards the country are dealt with briefly.

There's much to be appreciated rather than condemned.

Constitutionally Sri Lanka gained her independence from being a British colony in February 1948. However, in the last decades of the 19th Century (before we had become an independent nation), Sri Lanka possessed a fairly-developed system of elementary and secondary education. The secondary schools mostly founded and run by Christian Missionary societies were known as 'Colleges' because they provided post-matriculation courses leading to University Degrees or to the intermediate examinations. We could say that these latter courses laid the foundation for our country's modern higher education system. However, this does not mean that Sri Lanka lacked a traditional form of non-formal education, in the Pre-European era.

The Colombo Academy — regarded as the Premier Government School was the focal point of such higher education courses as existed in the British period. It was popularly known as the Queen's College when it was affiliated to the Calcutta University in 1859. It was re-named as Royal College in 1881 and is regarded as the first College to provide some sort of modern University-education, in that it prepared students for the external examinations conducted by the University of London, in Arts, Law and Science, and later in Medicine and Surgery even though the number of students who proceeded beyond the intermediate examination were exceptionally small. The external examinations were popular then, and abolished only quite recently, with our reforms in education in the mid twentieth century.

The role of the Medical College is important, in that, from the beginning, medical education was better organised than other fields of education. Because of the necessity and demand for properly-qualified medical-staff — the Medical College was established in 1870 with Dr. J. Loos (surgeon) as its first principal; first as an elementary school for medical assistants, and later developing into an institution turning out fully-qualified medical practitioners. The persistent demand for a local University continued, mainly led by the western-educated and supported to some extent by individual Christian missionaries. As far back as 1870, P. Coomaraswamy, a non-official Ceylonese member of the legislative council proposed for the appointment of a special committee to review the state of higher education in Ceylon. As a result, a sub-committee was appointed with Coomaraswamy and another Ceylonese member serving on it. What is noteworthy here is the criticism made by the sub-committee on the policy of affiliation to Indian Universities, and the recommendation that the affiliation of 'Colleges' with Calcutta should be discontinued, and instead, scholarships be awarded for higher education in England.

Although the external examinations conducted by the University of London provided an opportunity for higher education, for those who could not afford the expense of a University education in Europe, by the beginning of the 20th Century there was expressed a strong urge for an indigenous University. In 1906, some of the leading members of the western-educated elite, under the leadership of Sir P. Arunachalam formed the Ceylon University Association, and carried on agitation for the establishment of a 'University adapted to local needs'. This demand for a University can be actually regarded as a symbolic feature of a national revival as well. This agitation and pressure for the establishment of a University developed into what was known as 'The Ceylon University Movement'.

The Ceylon Social Reform League founded in 1905 played an important part in the demand for a national University. The journal 'The Ceylon National Review' voiced the opinions of the great orientalist Ananda Coomaraswamy, that the University should be an institution where students would acquire "Culture and independence of thought", and where the oriental languages should be developed.

The plea for a national-oriented University was further stressed by Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam when he expressed the view that the chief aim of the Ceylon University would be to see that "Our youth do not grow up strangers to their mother-tongue and to their past history and traditions". (The Journal of the Ceylon University Association 1, 1906) — their aim should not be limited to an assimilation of some European words in our vocabulary and the incorporation of some European customs in our social life. Although the Colonial office was slow in the response to those demands, yet they could not ignore the agitation raised for an institution of

higher learning so vital to our country. However it was only after 1910, during the tenure of Governor, Sir Henry McCallum that a sub-committee was appointed to view the situation in the country as regards higher education. 10 members, collectively known as the McLeod Committee appointed in 1912 had in it 5 Ceylonese members of the Legislative Council. Their task was to examine whether it was feasible to continue system of preparing students for London University examinations, or whether provision should be made for an institution located in Ceylon — either a University or a University College.

This Committee (the McLeod Committee) recommended the establishment of a University in the new building of the Royal College in Colombo. This was particularly stressed in the interest of so many who could not afford to study in the United Kingdom or any other country. In 1913 the Executive Council also expressed the view that courses for teacher-training, pre-medical courses for medical students and higher education, generally by the establishment of a Ceylon University College. In its memorandum to the Secretary of State for colonies, Governor, McCallum pointed out that, if the University of London continued its external examinations, such an institution could prepare students for external examinations. In reply, the English Board of Education raised a number of questions such as:

- (i) Whether the Institution should be a University or University College.
- (ii) Whether it should be located in Colombo or Kandy.
- (iii) Whether special provision should be made for oriental-studies.
- (iv) Whether it should be affiliated to a British University.
- (v) Whether the Head of the Institution should be a Professor or an Administrative Head.

What is important about the exchange of ideas is the recognition of the principle for a local University. Matters were delayed as the First World War had its effects on the proposal as on all other matters in the country, as a colony of the British Empire.

The proposals for the establishment of a University College was further stressed by the Governor, Sir Lord Robert Chalmers. He emphasised that, at first the status as a College must be regarded as a preliminary measure, and that the ultimate aim was its development into a Degree-awarding University.

Work on the proposed University College was rather slow because of the war and the post-war depression. A few years after the war in 1921 the University College was opened in Colombo as a Government Institution affiliated to the London University. It was clear that this was a temporary

and transitory matter as the establishment of a full University College away from Colombo meant more planning and expenditure. As the Director of Education, Edward Denham pointed out — it was hoped and believed that the University College would develop into a University, awarding Degrees of permanent value, and of value outside Ceylon.<sup>1</sup> R. Marrs assumed the post of the first principal of the College (1921 - 22). By 1925, he had prepared a Draft University Ordinance, basing it on the Sadler Commission for Dacca and Lucknow. A main point of issue at the time was the choice of the site for the establishment of a University. The University College established on the Royal College site in Thurstan Road, Colombo was a makeshift arrangement as situated on 18½ acres in extent was inadequate for an expanding University. Marrs indicated the needs of University, and a sum of about Rs. 4,500,000 was voted for equipment and buildings. But, there was raised a difference of opinion on the site led by Mr. D.R. Wijewardena voiced through his publications: 'The Ceylon Daily News' and 'The Ceylon Observer'. They favoured a site in Peradeniya which would provide more land, a better climate and an environment for an institution of higher learning. A University in Colombo — his Press argued, would turn out "myriads of Anaemic graduates" with the "body as well as the soul killed". The argument for a site at Peradeniya was based on the advantages of a residential University with its salubrious climate, scenic beauty with opportunities for an agricultural education, with research facilities for tea, rubber, cocoa and paddy and scope for forestry. Dr. S.C. Paul supported the idea for a site in Peradeniya on economic grounds that 200 acres could be got at Peradeniya for the price of 3 acres at Thurstan Road. Other prominent Ceylonese such as Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam and D.B. Jayatilleke felt that the site at Thurstan Road would in the course of time prove "Utterly inadequate and unsuitable". They urged that it be established outside Colombo with 200 - 300 acres, and agreed for Peradeniya if the land was available there, for more expansion.

The controversy over the site went along when Sir Hugh Clifford who came as Governor was presented with a memorandum by D.R. Wijewardena and Dr. S.C. Paul, Dr. C.A. Hevawitharana and Rev. A.G. Fraser of Trinity College too, expressing their views in favour of a location in Kandy or Peradeniya.

In the 1923 - 24 period, the struggle over the site was to get the best that was practicable in circumstances as commented upon by Sir, Ivor Jennings later. It was but necessary to expand the University College in Thurstan Road. Governor Clifford appointed a Committee 'to consider the question of a site for the proposed Ceylon University, and to submit a Report thereon'. The Committee comprised Messrs. Justice M.T. Akbar,

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1. Jennings, Sir W. Ivor : The Foundation of the University of Ceylon — University of Ceylon Review IX 1951.  
Sessional Paper IX of 1920, P. 3.

Francis Molamure, D.B. Jayatilleke, Herman A. Loos and W.E. Waite. The Committee was in favour of a University that was 'teaching and residential' to be established close to Karidy at Uyanwatta near Kandy.

This was further taken up in 1927 in the Legislative Council resolving that the University should be residential and unitary, and that it should be located in the Dumbara Valley, and that the Government should work out the details, for the proposed University by a Commission. The opinion over the site was divided. Marrs however was consistent in his position for the establishment of the University in Colombo. The Buchanen-Riddell Commission that was appointed to go into the details submitted a Report which only formed a basis of a bill presented to the Legislative Council.

The expiry of the Legislative Council and the Constitutional changes that followed, affected the educational field as well. With the introduction of the new Donoughmore Commission 1931, education was placed under one of the Executive Committees of the State Council. But what was rather strange was that the discussion of matters pertaining to the setting-up of the University was placed under a Committee of 7 members who rarely saw eye to eye. The acquisition of land for the site was under the Executive Committee of the local Government. The responsibility of planning and erecting the University was with the Executive Committee of Communications and Works. The responsibility for medical education was in the hands of the Executive Committee of Health, and much later when the expansion of the Peradeniya site was raised, it was found to be a matter for the Executive Committee for Agriculture and Lands. So, of the 7 Executive Committees, more than 4 really were taken into the picture — and it was not easy to co-ordinate the interests.

However, no decision as regards the selection of the site or the erection of the University was taken in the first State Council, and the controversy over the site continued within the first Executive Committee on education till the dissolution of the first State Council.

In 1937, there was a new Board of Ministers with a new Executive Committee on Education as well. In 1937, George E. de Silva forwarded a motion for the selection of a site for a new University in Kandy at Aruppola once again. The Board of Ministers submitted a proposal to the State Council to draft an estimate for the purchase of a site at Aruppola. Once again Dr. S.C. Paul, together with Dr. Andreas Nell made a convincing effort to change the site from Aruppola to Peradeniya. They were supported by Marrs too this time. The arguments for Peradeniya appeared convincing. Yet the University College established in 1921 saw no major change till the site for the new University was decided upon and steps taken in the direction of the establishment of the University

at Peradeniya in 1951. The University College had therefore to cater to the requirements of the London University Examinations.

Although the battle over the site was almost resolved, there was differences of opinion over what type of University suited the country best. Mr. D.R. Wijewardena and Sir Ivor Jennings was for a residential-type, although some others, including Mr. Marrs and the College Council were for a non-residential one on the grounds that a student removed from his home-environment would feel insecure and take a larger time to complete his course of study. This opinion however far-reading was not taken into consideration probably as the University of Ceylon was to be on a Singular location.

Sir Ivor Jennings who succeeded Marrs as the principal of the College argued that "the needs of Ceylon could not be met by a partially-residential University," for, only students from affluent homes and convenient distances could benefit from such a University. Jennings felt that a poor student taken out from his environment could do very well if he is placed in a Hall of Residence.<sup>2</sup>

We see that Sir Ivor Jennings had built up his argument for a residential University on other considerations and motives. The Riddell Commission too had recommended for a unitary, residential and autonomous University'. This recommendation was incorporated into the Ceylon University Ordinance No. 20 of 1942 which was the foundation for the University of Ceylon or the first University. The site was decided upon — it was to be at Peradeniya. Its nature was accepted to be residential and autonomous and unitary. On this, the Ceylon University College and the Ceylon Medical College lost their individual identity, and were formed into one single University. As a temporary measure the University was to be in Colombo. The date of transfer was changed from 1948 to 1950, and finally to 1952. Till 1948 it was exclusively located in Colombo. Thereafter it was located both in Colombo and Peradeniya, till Colombo emerged as a separate University after nearly two decades.

The University of Ceylon Originally was planned only for an intake of 1,000 students, and the acreage confined to 363 acres; but anticipating an intake of 4,000 students on a residential capacity, the acreage was increased to 1,700 acres. The erection of buildings was entrusted to the Public Works Department and the University architect Mr. Shirley de Alwis. The University which was built around 4 major faculties — Arts, Oriental Studies, Science and Medicine having 17 independent departments of Study, expanded into 43 departments with the establishment of the Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Agriculture and Veterinary Science by 1953. The faculties of Arts and Oriental Studies (taken as one between them) had 8 Departments of Study in 1942.

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2. Jennings, Sir W Ivor : The Foundation of the University of Ceylon — University of Ceylon Review, IX 1951

In the first two decades of the University's existence, the Medical Faculty which stood out as the dominant factor, soon expanded into 10 Departments of Study — improving into 12 departments with the creation of separate departments for Forensic Medicine, Bio-chemistry, Pharmacology and Parasitology. There was a suggestion for a Faculty of Law, but there existed only a Department of Law in the Faculty of Arts in 1942.

The joint Faculty of Arts and Oriental Studies consisted of the following Departments of Study:— Indo-Aryan, Tamil English, Western Classics, History, Geography, Economics and Philosophy. By 1943 the Indo-Aryan section was split-up into three separate departments; namely, Sinhalese, Sanskrit and Pali. These together with Tamil, formed the Faculty of Oriental Studies to which was later added an independent Department of Arabic in 1945 and Buddhist Civilization in 1952. These courses of Study were given in the English medium, and continued as we know, till the early sixties, except for Sinhala and Tamil which slowly underwent changes in fifties.

One important proposal within the Arts Faculty was to develop the Department of Economics broadly, so as to constitute a broad-based Department of Social Science, comprising Economics, Economic History, Applied Economics, Statistics, Political Science, Sociology and Ethnology. By 1949, a separate Department for Sociology was established. In 1949, a Department of Education was established, providing a one-year course of professional and academic training for graduate teachers.

The introduction of the scheme of 'Free education from the kindergarten to the University' in 1945 almost coincided with the establishment of the University of Ceylon as a corporate body in 1942. As a result, the University of Ceylon began as an institution financed almost completely by the State, unlike many other foreign Universities. These funds were granted in the form of a Recurrent Parliamentary Grant, voted in the Annual Appropriation Bill in an amount determined on the basis of Estimates of Expenditure prepared by the University, and submitted to the Treasury through the Ministry of Education.

In the first 15 years of the University, a large investment of capital expenditure was made for the purpose of establishing a residential campus at the University. Much was spent on the acquisition of land, clearing and original buildings in particular, the Arts block, the Administration building, Halls of Residence and Staff-residence. The estimate for the complete scheme was increased to Rs. 57 million, financed from the National Reserve (NDR). These monies were spent till about 1957 for erection-purposes such as the building of the Science Faculty and the Library on the original plan. In addition to those, further investments were made on such capital projects as the shifting of the Engineering

Faculty to Peradeniya, the duplication of the Medical Faculty in Peradeniya, the Faculty of Arts in Colombo, the establishment of the Faculties of Agriculture and Veterinary Science, equipment for the Faculties of Science and Engineering, the Water Supply Scheme etc. In some instances, foreign aid too was received by way of grants or equipment. The overall capital investment on the Peradeniya Campus was in the region of Rs. 73 million while very little capital investment was made on the Colombo Unit other than the special expenditure of Rs. 500,000 on the establishment of the second Arts Faculty in Colombo much later.

In addition to the expenses on the construction in Peradeniya and expansion of Faculties in Colombo and Peradeniya, the government had to grant financial assistance to the students. In 1944, there were 168 receiving financial assistance; and this number increased to 1,008 by 1958.

In the first phase of the University (1942 - 1954), in the time of Sir Ivor Jennings' Vice chancellorship, the approach to University-expansion was essentially a highly conservative one, if not restrictive. In the University Council Report of 1949, it is argued that "The question of size is not only one of cost, but also of the number of graduates required for employment" and further adds that "Since education is at the expense of the State, it would be difficult to justify the provision of University education beyond the employment-needs of the country". This is re-echoed in the Council Report of 1954 where it is stated that, "Partly due to the restricted accommodation and partly due to a desire to relate output of graduates to the demands for graduate-employment, that University-admissions have been restricted to about 500." The attitude to freeze University-admissions instead of expanding opportunities for employment, or changing the character of University courses to meet the expanding needs of employment displays the failure on the part of the State to gear University education to national needs and interests of the time. Our system of education was more eager to hand down the British pattern of moulding a scholar and gentleman rather than catering to the needs of a developing country or encouraging in harnessing our own resources.

However, by 1956 this attitude to freeze University-admissions takes a different turn. Thus, in the early years in the post-1954 era, there are references to the need to expand the advantages of higher education to all those deserving of such an education. There are references to the need to establish additional Universities to cater to the growing demand for University education in the Council Reports of 1954 - 1964, and an increase in the vote for education.

Despite the 'control' on University-admissions, there was an increase in the student population in the first two decades after its inception. The numbers increased from 904 in 1942 to 10,723 in 1965 between the two



campuses at Colombo and Peradeniya. There also takes place the establishment of the Vidyodaya and the Vidyalankara Universities in 1958. This growth was more remarkable in the period between 1960 - 1965, with the functioning of three Universities.

The student representation according to ethnic origin is also interesting. Sir Ivor Jennings in his analysis of data on ethnic and religious grounds for the early years of the University (1942, 1943, 1944) observes, that as far as ethnic origin is concerned, "Tamils and Burghers are proportionately more numerous, and the Sinhalese and Muslims proportionately less numerous than in the island population". This view is further supported by S. J. Thambiah who says that not only were those two minority groups dominantly represented in the Administrative Services of Ceylon in the early decades of the 20th Century, but that, even though by 1946, more and more Sinhalese were entering the Administrative Service and other professions; the Tamils and Burghers were still "Significantly larger than their representation in the total population". The pattern of ethnic representation in the highest offices of the Administrative Services and professions such as Medicine can be best confirmed by the ethnic distribution of University students in the said period. We find that the Sinhalese were under-represented according to ethnic ratio in relation to population in the year 1946 and 1953, while Ceylon Tamils and Burghers were over-represented.

Another feature of University-admissions over the years is the increase in the intake of female students. Their numbers increased from 10.1 in 1942 to 26.8 by 1958 — the low figures being largely due to the traditional barriers and the meagre opportunities available to women in the early decades of the century.

As the demand for higher education continued with increasing numbers seeking University education, mainly as a result of the Free Education Scheme that was introduced in 1944, and the awareness that was gathering ground, the State as well as the University had to embark on a policy of expansion of University education. It is this increase in demand that led to the establishment of a second University at Thurstan Road, Colombo and the creation of New Universities in Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara. Although Sir Ivor Jennings had made references to the planning of a University in Colombo as far back as 1951 - 52, little planning was done in this direction in relation to the finances or human resources (1962). The arguments at the time (in the 1950s) to have new Universities oriented towards traditional learning are understandable in the light of criticisms levelled against the University of Ceylon imparting instruction only in the English medium. In keeping with the socio-cultural tempo of the time, there was little or no opposition to the suggestion to uplift the two Buddhist institutions of advanced learning — namely the Vidyodaya Pirivena founded in 1873 and the Vidyalankara Pirivena

founded in 1875 to the status of Universities. There were differences of opinion on the form and nature of the institutions to be established; however the idea that the new Universities should be full-fledged Universities, prevailed. The two Pirivenas — Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara were created as new Universities by the Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara Universities Act, No. 45 of 1958 based mainly on the Ceylon University Ordinance of 1942. These two new Universities came into existence on January 1, 1959, and function autonomously and independently. As a consequence the University of Ceylon lost its monopoly over higher education in the island.

The University of Ceylon established in 1942, in spite of the many criticisms levelled against it, gave to Sri Lanka, nearly 16 years of experience and traditions to consolidate its position as a University, providing thereby valuable arguments in favour of further expansion of University, academics of a high calibre transferring knowledge and experience to their successors; training and qualifying a number of remarkable administrators of the country, and setting very high academic standards which gave the Sri Lankan University an enviable reputation in Asia and the world. Today the University of Ceylon contributes its share towards higher education in the island as the University of Peradeniya, significantly as one among the seven national Universities of Sri Lanka. There's much to be appreciated rather than condemned.

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