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Country Needs Independent and Innovative Thinkers

Dr. C. M. Madduma Bandara

I feel honoured and deeply moved by the invitation extended to me by the University to deliver a Convocation Address at this exclusive and learned gathering today. In this regard, let me specially thank the Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies - Prof. Hemathi Ranasinghe for initiating and facilitating this kind gesture of goodwill.

As you are aware, a convocation is a ceremonial and festive occasion for any University at which Degrees and Diplomas are awarded to students, recognizing their attainments in different fields of knowledge. **Convocation** is a word hardly found in the Little Oxford Dictionary or the Thesaurus and possibly coined by the academia themselves. It may have possibly been associated with 'congregation' - a term with overt religious connotations. Whatever it may be, where proper quality standards are maintained, students arrive at this high stage after toiling hard, often both day and night since the entry to the graduate school, despite many sporadic distractions. Therefore, for 'graduands' (another word not found in many dictionaries!) gathered here today, the convocation marks the culmination of a highly stressful and competitive journey that had commenced from their early school days. It is pertinent to note that, we are indeed witnessing here today a convocation for postgraduate students who have passed through the highest levels of training in their respective fields, some receiving the highest academic Degrees offered by the University. For parents, guardians and well-wishers, it is a day of self-fulfillment in which they rejoice in the high attainment of a young or mature person they have scouted, often through difficult times from their early childhoods. For professors and teachers, who nurtured these graduands intellectually, it is a day of relief and rejoice since these are the persons who have learnt the art and science of their own thinking processes, in creating new ideas that may be carried to the society at large, and that perhaps has the potential to transform the world. For the Universities and Research Institutes, those who receive their higher degrees and other qualifications today, are expected to man their staff cadres to continue their good work for the future. For the country at large, every convocation particularly for post-graduate Degrees and Diplomas, is an opportunity to be optimistic about the future, since it adds new thinkers and researchers to the existing stock of intellectuals.

Questions of Relevance and Applicability

In my own thoughts on our contemporary university research, there had been a pestering feeling for some time, as to how much of the hardly discovered new findings of our professors and their graduands, find their way to the policies that benefit the society at large, that in turn nurtures our Universities and Research Institutes through tax payers funds. If such findings are not trickling down adequately, what

are the real impediments and 'bottle-necks'? In search of answers to this vexed question, my mind began to sweep across the whole spectrum of our socio-political scenario, from average citizens and researchers to the highest levels policy makers and their implementers.

In this context, let us first consider whether we have to put our own academic houses in order! I shall make an attempt to present here some of my own thoughts for your perusal and digestion for whatever they are worth. If one attempts to look at the research outputs of our universities as well as those of other affiliated research institutes, one common feature is that the large majority of them are obviously limited in scope to specific disciplines or to narrowly defined problems of individual or guided choice. This is because, still we are knowingly or unknowingly inclined to follow the western tradition of reductionism where our minds are trained to cut broader fields of knowledge into smaller and smaller parts. Despite its obvious merits, if we follow it to its logical end, one day we will know 'everything about nothing'! As a person who initially had the occasion to propose to the University Senate (Peradeniya, 1992), that, time had come to set up 'Faculties of Graduate Studies' that would eventually become happy homes for interdisciplinary research, I derive some innocent satisfaction of witnessing their birth, multiplication and growth in most universities, except perhaps in Peradeniya! On the other hand, the tradition of multiplication of Departments both in universities as well as in areas of administrative governance continued to flourish. This opened the way to policy makers to complain about the relevance and applicability of some findings and gloat over the fact that, 'communities have problems and conflicts but universities have Departments and Faculties'!

Most problems in human society today demand multidisciplinary treatment and they often seem to escape from scientific attention. The major problems of the kidney disease (CKDu) and dengue, *mega polis* development, the need for a change of the Capital City, out of Colombo, redefinition of colonial Provinces, to name a few, are not within any single scientific discipline, and become everybody's business but nobody's concern. In the contemporary research culture, our focus often appears to be more on 'tinkering' than 'thinking' on a wider canvass.

I am not thinking even for a moment, that we must distance ourselves from fundamental research. Nevertheless, in countries that struggle to become 'industrialized and developed', it is inevitable that applied and development-oriented research may receive precedence over fundamental studies. The critical issue here is however, the vital link between our research efforts and the societal needs, which we are compelled to re-visit from time to time and ask the question whether the ball is at least partly in our courts, and if so how to set about it.

One practical strategy to handle this link issue, seems to be for researchers to become thoroughly familiar with the manifestos and policy agendas of the Governments that come into office from time to time. Wherever they reflect the public will, it may be contended that it is even incumbent on the intellectuals to devote at least a part their best of skills to attain such societal goals. This may sound somewhat provocative to many conventional thinkers and researchers. But then, what other avenues are there to comprehend the public mind and the will? My contention is that it may become even detrimental to the interests of the research Faculties, Institutes and Centres to ignore the political manifestoes and

drag ourselves more and more towards ivory tower attitudes while cuddling the dreams of academic autonomy. In this regard, I am increasingly inclined to believe that, such conventional attitudes are also at least responsible to some extent for widening the gulf between research and policy making. At the same time let me ask , how many of us have taken the trouble to study the victorious manifestoes, or even the Constitutional Reforms Public Consultation Committee Reports, and the current government agendas such as *Megapolis* or Port City Development, Cluster Village Development Plans or the forthcoming 5 Year National Development Programme?

‘Thinkers’ and ‘Tinkers’

A self-critical examination of our university research academia will reveal that, there are different types of academics whose personas and aspirations are distinctly contrasting. In my own view, the core of our academic community consists of professors who work in silence and present their findings at high level seminars, symposia and conferences, and eventually publish them in reputed journals. This silent minority of the academic community are hardly seen or heard and often more well-known outside the country than locally. They live away from the lime - light of social media and power politics and often they have to be ‘discovered’ when needed. Another category consists of academics who prefer to go to town even with their meagre, and often piece-meal and sometimes questionable research findings. They seem to love publicity than their research and often become oblivious of the depth of social impacts of their actions. A good example is the competing theories some scientists are propound, regarding the root causes of the kidney disease that takes the lives of so many hundreds of people every month! However, it is indeed difficult to bring them all to a round table discussion.

There is also a third category who are half-academics and half-politicians. The research they conduct are often painted with ideological biases, and sometimes they come out of their academic garbs and enter the mainstream political arena directly. Most of our academics who crossed the line that way, have not only ruined their own academic reputations but also performed disgracefully, sacrificing their independence of thought. Another category consists of those who blatantly seek power and prestige at any cost, often appearing at strikes, public agitations, *padayatras* and the like, with the hope of getting into powerful positions in the newly emerging Governments irrespective of their political colour or ideology. Apart from politics, some researchers are also hell-bent on earning more and more money through lucrative research projects and consultancies. The arising uneasy question here is how serious research efforts can be undertaken by the young generation in such a mixed community of intellectuals.

Among the researchers, one can also notice loners as well as teams of multiple authors, the latter phenomenon is mostly observable in science-oriented disciplines. When it comes to their evaluations for promotions, the latter demands mathematical calculations. However, there are occasions when evaluators engross themselves with small sieves; the bigger decisions are taken through subjective means.

In the mean time, the younger generation of researchers have also evolved their own academic traits and attributes in the changing circumstances. Their concern often appears to be more on 'quantity' than

'quality'. This unfortunately appears at least partly in response to the endless promotional circulars and their stipulations emanating from higher authorities by indirectly promoting quantity than quality. Some of our most revered scholars like Sarachchandra, Paranavitane or Deraniyagala would have hardly had a chance if they were subjected to the currently operational rigorous quantitative assessment procedures! In this bizarre scenario we can occasionally observe academics who have produced over 100 research papers within amazingly short periods or who have written 10-15 'books' within a span of mere 5-6 years – in consonance with the normal promotional period!.

One can, of course, place the blame for this unhealthy academic culture with the changes in the economy and the society at large, particularly after the adoption of free economic policies during the last few decades. At the same time, it may be noted that, the university system was relatively immune to privatization processes, despite many socio-economic compulsions for them such as the massive outflow of private funds to other countries for educating the young who could not enter the local universities. Their destinations include some of our less developed neighbouring countries who may offer even lower quality Degrees for lucrative fees. It may be noted in this controversial context that ideological and political considerations seem to have taken precedence over the massive economic losses incurred by the country.

Empowering the Thinkers

As explained already, in our country, there appears to be widespread misgivings among the more educated general public, that the prevailing system of governance not only fails to accommodate new thinking, but indirectly discourages independent thinkers from entering the mainstream policy making processes. The virulent kind of 'Sri Lankan Democracy' that began to flourish during the last four decades, provides abundant evidence for an antithesis of the original thinking of the early philosophers and architects of democracy. For instance the words of Plato (c. 427-c. 347 BC) who defined a philosopher as a 'wisdom lover', still resonates and deserves to be revisited. Plato's argument that 'philosophers' should be the rulers of the Republic is valid and still persuasive. In his monumental work - 'The Republic', Plato argued that 'Kings should become philosophers or that philosophers should become Kings, or philosopher Kings, as they possess a special level of knowledge, which is required to rule the Republic successfully'. He further stressed that,

“there will be no end to the troubles of States, or of humanity itself, till philosophers become Kings in this world, or till those we now call Kings and rulers really and truly become philosophers, and political power and philosophy thus come into the same hands”.

At a time when we are desirous of following the path of a 'knowledge economy', the thoughts of early architects of democracy become even more relevant and useful. Let us look at the political paths that we were pursuing knowingly or unknowingly since Independence. At the time of National Independence, our leaders acted with much devotion, vision and wisdom. One can notice in the early video tapes how the first Prime Minister Senanayake spoke with deep sentimentality and national

commitment. He used to consult some of the the best thinkers of the day, particularly Ivor Jennings the first Vice-Chancellor of the University, almost on a regular and routine basis. It may also be recalled that he also wrote a book with the title "Agriculture and Patriotism". Then again when he wrote the forward to another monumental work by R.L. Brohier on Ancient Irrigation Works, it reflected his vision of the public service. That period of economic prosperity and national harmony gradually faded away, giving rise to the present political culture with hardly any deep-rooted values or ethics.

The rise of present ruling classes, irrespective of their party affiliations, that had now become a subject of public ridicule, and their hegemony, deserve more elaborate analyses. Let me therefore touch only briefly on a few outstanding characteristics. Most of the present generation of politicians are the sons and daughters of old and new political families, and much had been written on the subject of kinship in Sri Lankan politics. The real leadership still remains in the hands of the progeny of *Mudliars and Muhandirams* whose loyalties were with the English Monarchy than with that of our own. These were the political babies who have benefitted from that enormous wealth. and family power was passed on to them by their colonial fore-fathers. Their world outlook still remains not so much with the national ethos but with the wild liberalism of the west. The roots of their *comradie* and intellectualism are nurtured by the colonial schools, as could be seen in the composition of the Cabinet of Ministers last few decades.

Since the brief observations presented above may sound like an indictment of the prevailing political system, let me elaborate on it a little further. The malady of the present system is rooted in the issue that, higher anyone goes on the hierarchy of power, less and less time they can devote for deep thinking or reading. Almost all his time is spent on political meetings, social obligations and the endless selfish requests of his constituents. Similarly a high official in the administration has to keep on moving from one administrative meeting to another having hardly any time to pause and ponder, but obliged to make far reaching decisions affecting the society often under political compulsions. On top of that, he has to render unto his political lords with much awe and humility, and follow humbly all their public functions, if he has to have some peace of mind or even to save his position itself. Any decision making without deep analysis and thinking is indeed obviously detrimental to the well-being of the country. A case in point is the infamous Hedging Deal for petroleum supplies which is still continuing to have its devastating impact on the average consumer.

The persona of an average politician has been adapted over the years to serve his political overlords on one hand, and at the same time to keep his officers under control, often through the tactics used to humiliate them before the eyes of the public. It could be recalled that, there had been occasions when administrative officers have not only been humiliated, but also physically assaulted, while the politicians to go scotch free. The tragic part of such episodes is that most such politicians are less educated, or have had a poor record in the schools due to rough behaviour, than their subordinate administrative officers!. It has been often noted that, about one-fourth of the parliamentarians had much less education than their administrative subordinates who had come up to their current ranks and positions through hard work and highly competitive selection processes.

In most government organizations, appointments are made from the labour grade and sometimes even up to higher positions from the lists of loyalists submitted by the Honourable Ministers. Those with higher academic achievements are therefore wilfully suppressed giving way to the mediocrity to handle government organizations where delays, inefficiencies and corruption become rampant. The key issue here is under what law the Honourable Ministers are given this level of power and authority to abuse everything at their will and pleasure. At this time of Constitutional Reform, it may therefore be prudent to define the powers, duties and functions of local politicians, the Members of Parliament, Ministers and even those above them, without leaving the average citizens under their mercy, will and pleasure.

In this regard, it may be stressed that, all others in the public service from bottom to the top have their functions and duties clearly defined and there is hardly any reason as to why the same principle cannot be applied to the politicians as well. Practically such a suggestion may appear to be an almost impossibility, since any such change to the Constitution has to be ultimately approved by the same groups of politicians, creating a situation of judge and the jury joining together *or creating a 'naduth hamuduruwange baduth hamuduruwange' syndrome.*

It is indeed necessary to contribute even in small ways to create a society and a culture in which the knowledge and wisdom are valued and respected. In order to reach this noble goal, even a silent cultural revolution appears justifiable. The nature and form of this revolution in this country has to be designed and executed by the thinkers of the new generation of researchers and intellectuals.

In conclusion, the key message to be delivered to the graduands who receive post graduate Degrees and Diplomas today is that you are entering a world of fierce competition and power play. The higher you go up the bigger the pressures and challenges will be. It is important not to restrict yourself strictly to the area of your specialization, but to keep your antennas up in order to receive signals from the rest of the world. It is not just sufficient to be a good researcher or scientist, but one has to struggle to defend the thirst, dignity and respect for knowledge, that would be trampled by the unscrupulous rulers. The place that intellectuals deserve in the society and their productive role in good governance will not automatically come unless they are ready to struggle for it.

With those words let me wish you a bright future and a productive and satisfying role in the development of our motherland!

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