

Book Review

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***Peradeniya: Memories of a University*, K M de Silva and Tissa Jayatilaka (eds), Kandy, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 1997, 200pp, Sri Lankan Rs. 1,250.00**

Upon encountering English-educated South Asians abroad Westerners assume too readily that they can only be products of “Ox-bridge.” I have, consequently, derived great pride, and some perverse satisfaction, from asserting my Peradeniya degree. For those of us who were undergraduates in Peradeniya in the 1950s our nostalgic recollections are of a Camelot-like experience—without King Arthur (unless of course we are, posthumously, to confer this honour on its first Vice Chancellor Sir Ivor Jennings). For those who came after the numbers explosion of 1961, and especially the generation that experienced the bestial violence of the 1980s, their memories could perhaps be more akin to those of a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp—with the savagery of “ragging” and the deaths and injuries it has caused running through the years as an ugly sore. How is it that this uniquely beautiful Hantana—cradled valley could evoke such sharply different memories to different generations of students? The post-independence University created in Sri Lanka—with its self-consciously indigenous architecture and beautifully landscaped residential spread and the Americanism of “campus” to highlight its modernity—could never have been an academic grove totally insulated from the rest of the country. The history of Peradeniya must therefore mirror to a greater or lesser extent the history of post-independent political, economic, cultural and social development.

Kingsley M de Silva and Tissa Jayatilaka have brought out a volume on the University of Peradeniya to fill a void in the volumes of essays that

were published on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the establishment of the University of Ceylon in 1942. That void was the story of the lives of the students who passed through Peradeniya. It is a praiseworthy publication weaving together the reminiscences of 19 Peradeniya alumni and beautifully illustrated by Stanley Kirindé's evocative watercolour paintings and drawings of the University. It is also a "politically correct" volume carefully representative of every faculty (except Law, which moved to Colombo in the mid-1960s), every ethnic and religious group and with a reasonable gender balance among the authors. The book is a voyage through four decades of Peradeniya students with the political, economic and social trends in the country being reflected inevitably in this academic reservoir as the placid water turned red with the blood of the victims of mindless violence. It is a kaleidoscope which unintentionally serves as a sociological commentary on the growth of a university in a post-colonial society struggling with the pressures of a developing economy and the complex tasks of nation-building in a plural society. Peradeniya could not have succeeded where the nation's voyage of discovery remains unfulfilled fifty years after independence. And yet the question can be legitimately posed—could the University's task of elite formation have been more successful in providing the professional leadership with the patriotism and value system to modernise independent Sri Lanka and fulfil the aspirations of all her people? That judgement call must remain an individual response of the reader to this blend of chapters written by Peradeniya alumni some of whom remain as faculty members in Peradeniya while others who live and work in Sri Lanka and abroad continue to be tied to their alma mater through an intangible but firm bond.

The University tradition in the East, as with the West, had religious origins and Taxila and Nalanda and our own *pirivenas* attained great heights of academic scholarship. In the West the Renaissance and Reformation enabled the secularisation of university education and Oxford and Cambridge in the United Kingdom, Sorbonne in France, Heidelberg in Germany and Uppsala in Sweden belong to that generation of European centres of academic excellence which broke away from the moorings of medieval Scholasticism to launch an exciting journey of academic inquiry into diverse disciplines unfettered by dogma and a tradition of not questioning received wisdom dispensed by respected

elders. In the East with many countries going under Western colonialism no comparable development took place although academic scholarship continued in religious centres preserving cultural and religious traditions and often becoming the source of anti-colonial protest and independence movements. The establishment of secular universities thus took place in colonial times both under the patronage of the colonial ruler who patterned them on metropolitan models and through the influence of indigenous institutions like Tagore's Shantiniketan in Bengal which attempted to fuse the best of the Eastern academic tradition and culture with the secular outlook and Renaissance spirit of the West.

In Sri Lanka the University of Ceylon was established by the British colonial administration 140 years after we became a crown colony of the British. For decades before that the elite sent their sons, and a few enterprising daughters, mainly to Britain to study at the great Universities of the West. Unlike today where political and economic pressures have pushed our students to remain abroad, the majority of those who went abroad to study in colonial times returned—to the certainty, of course of securing a high level public service appointment, to a privileged position in the private sector or to politics. The broadening of opportunities for tertiary education first began with the establishment of the University College of 1921 awarding University of London degrees. The establishment of the University of Ceylon in 1942 provided the opportunity of modern higher education to a wider catchment area of citizens than the élite, and the middle class was the principal beneficiary. It preceded the revolutionary step of Free Education by four years—the single act which transformed education and the national scene opening the doors of academia to all social strata in fulfilment of a fundamental democratic right of equality of opportunity. Ensuring that equality through an equitable distribution of schools, libraries, laboratories, books and even school uniforms has been the aim of successive governments. The measure of their achievement was reflected in the Report of the Presidential Commission on Youth Unrest some years ago and its bitter *cri de coeur*, “*Kolombata kiri, apata kakiri.*” We have still, sincerely and effectively, to respond to that damning indictment of our society. The classic dilemma of combining élite formation with mass education is not only aggravated by the resource constraints of a developing country but also made more complicated by the fact that the language of the former

colonial ruler has become the link language between the two main linguistic groups and remains undeniably the passport to position, prestige and power.

It is against this background that *Peradeniya: Memories of a University* appears to me to be a limited exercise—a sentimental journey down memory lane of the English-educated elite. But who can deny that Peradeniya of the fifties, in the first decade of our existence as a modern independent nation, with its galaxy of world class intellectuals on the teaching staff and the opportunity of sampling the crumbs of a rich intellectual feast, was not a heady attraction for so many young men and women shedding their starched white school uniforms if only for the freedom to grow a beard, smoke a cigarette, wear the open sandals patented by the revered Sarachchandra and spout a confused mixture of existentialism, nationalism, and Marxism? And yet it was an unreal world as the urgent political and economic issues of our independence were left by myopic and self-serving politicians as ticking time bombs to explode in the decades to come, with such brutalising violence that it engulfed Peradeniya and its tranquil beauty. To their credit the editors have faithfully recorded the tumultuous transitions in their sensitively written Introduction noting how the student community changed. I have also to confess that I have not read the preceding companion volume published by the International Centre for Ethnic Studies—*The University System of Sri Lanka: Vision and Reality* (K M de Silva and G H Peiris [eds], 1995). The social conscience of the contributors shines through their essays in acknowledgement that our society, from which our university students are drawn, is not as level as the playing fields of Peradeniya. A trilingual volume would nevertheless have been ideal to record the memories of those not proficient in English, and especially those who came from the peasantry and the working class, in order to understand more clearly whether Peradeniya has served its purpose. As it is, despite the poetic evocation of those early Peradeniya days in Ashley Halpé's supple prose and the golden showers which Hemamali Gunasinghe writes of so elegantly, it was the final chapter by Imran Markar that I found most perceptive amidst the many entertaining tales of undergraduates humour and panegyrics to Peradeniya's undisputed beauty. His penultimate section deserves to be quoted in full:

“I went to Peradeniya primarily to study. But I cherish and value what I learnt at Peradeniya much more than my studies. The knowledge that had the most impact on me was gained by living with and learning from my batch mates. Until then my conceptualisation of life was on simplistic terms, based on urban middle-class aspirations. For me as well as my colleagues in the English medium a good degree was a pre-requisite to a good job, which in turn was the key to a good life. For many of my non-English medium colleagues it was not so. Firstly the facilities at their disposal in entering university, specifically for those rural based colleagues, were pitiful compared to what we enjoyed. Hailing from extremely poor families, often with no permanent bread-winner, studying in conditions lacking what we call ‘necessities’ and yet being able to enter university was no mean achievement.

It was on graduating from university that these students encountered the greatest frustration, as they still do now. For us upon graduating, even with a mere pass, there was a multitude of job opportunities available. For my non-English medium colleagues, having studied the same course, often getting better results, the door to the job market was often slammed shut. They faced the *kaduwa*—the lack of a proper knowledge of English was the *kaduwa* (sword) that decimated their hopes and aspirations of a better life—the weapon we had, which denied them the same opportunities in life though they were qualified in every other respect. The immense frustration, helplessness and sense of alienation this causes can never be fully appreciated by us on the other side of the divide. For them they start off disadvantaged to be finally victimised by the very system. I began to empathise with them. I also began to understand their hopes and aspirations. They believed that they could never carve out a place in society as it was structured at present. The alienation was reinforced at every turn and corner, often giving way to paranoia. It was this alienation and paranoia on which the JVP capitalised. Sadly the system continues to operate even today, with our children enjoying the benefits of a system which are denied to their children, perpetuating the injustice in a vicious cycle.” (p 196)

Imran Markar’s honest admission of how some of us have benefited from a system which shuts out others is a sobering one. The problem was there when Peradeniya began but to a much lesser degree. With the broadening of opportunities for education and the failure of our economic

policy to alleviate the poverty in our country it has gradually aggravated into serious proportions which neither Lalith Athulathmudali's far-sighted Mahapola Scholarship Programme nor all the much touted education reforms have been able to reduce to a significant degree. As a nation we have grappled for over two decades with another problem that has threatened to divide our nation. Equally explosive is the danger of two nations within us—the English-speaking and the non-English-speaking. While we reminisce in our old boy networks and Peradeniya alumni reunions of the good times we had in our charmed circles in Peradeniya let us remember our fellow countrymen and women who have not been so fortunate. The clock cannot be turned back as Imran Markar notes. “We can only learn from our mistakes, individually and collectively as a nation, and ensure that these events will never be repeated.” That, at least, is a beginning, and our years in Peradeniya would, then, not have been in vain.

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