

## **Convocation Address - IV**

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*(Former Director-General of the National Institute of Education,  
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### **Reflections on Education**

I am highly honoured and deeply moved on this occasion. I remember as an undergraduate of the then University of Ceylon (now Colombo), the convocation held to honour the first Prime Minister of our country Rt. Honourable D. S. Senanayake. He began his acceptance speech as I recollect in this manner; "It has taken me a long time to come to this stage". I wish to repeat that great statesman's proclamation on this occasion.

It has taken me a long, long time to walk to this stage. Born in a then underdeveloped part of the hill country and brought up in that disadvantaged environment. I began my primary education in C.M.S. school in Menikhinna (now a Maha Vidyalaya), a school located about half a mile from my humble home. Clad then in a mother hubbard type of dress and wending daily about a mile to school was a tedious task to a child. That school did not provide any meal, only water collected in a large earthen vessel. One day I was beaten by a teacher (then called 'monitor') with a thick wooden ruler. My mother discovered the marks of this ruler on my back when I was bathed in the village well. She was furious when she saw the marks on my back.

She took me to the school Head Master the next day and publicly announced her deep regret and hurt for beating a small child so harshly. But this incident moved my only brother, sixteen years my senior, to enroll me in an urban English medium school, St. Anthony's College, Katugastota. This was an institution of learning highly respected and regarded by the people. It gained national fame under the guidance of a Catholic father with many great teachers highly qualified locally and abroad.

If they were in an age after independence they would all be either lecturers of a Teachers College or a University. We had an Oxford educated teacher, Mr E.St. C. Rode, who later became a principal of a

central school near my home. He was a great educator. Transformed by this experience he was appointed as the first principal of Walala Central School (now College) to become a great educational leader.

From this school my educational journey entered the metropolis when I joined Ananda College for the then H.S.C. and University entrance examination. It was then confusing to a rural child who needed great improvement in his English and even in his mother tongue.

At the first examination level in the University we had to offer four subjects including one classical language. I chose Pali though I had never studied it before. I offered Sinhala, English, Pali and Geography at that level. I opted to specialize in Geography. This choice helped me to get employment in the then Department of Education of the University of Ceylon (now the University of Peradeniya).

In the University, a new world of opportunity opened for me in the academic world. I have remained in that field for the last 45 years until my formal academic career ended. Here, I stand before you today at the end of my career to receive this honour that my student, distinguished Professor Chandra Gunawardene, thought it fit to honour me with this academic distinction. I accept this honour humbly with the fleeing thought that I really do not deserve it.

It is my bounden duty to offer my sincere thanks to the Board of the Faculty of Education and the Senate of the Open University of Sri Lanka for conferring this high academic honour.

In the academic world "Education" is a subject of study or as a profession does not command much respect. But we all reach the position that we hold today to education. But education as an academic pursuit or a profession does not command a high position in University circles and in academia.

Ironically knowledge creation, innovation and distribution receive high recognition. As the process of globalisation reaches high ground, knowledge receives high praise and commands equally high recognition. The pursuit of knowledge and learning becomes respectable in the process of gathering information, creation and disbursement of knowledge.

The pursuit of new experience at present commands respect as thinking and information are promoted by many processes, specially through technology. For example, TV debates are more popular than open debates by university teachers in public forums.

The new technology has created new styles, new methods and high order thinking fashions in academic institutions and publications. Knowledge is highly valued in all societies, more so in the developing world. Malaysia, for example, is experimenting with what they call 'high order thinking skills'.

Subject specialisations, high scores in tests, and skills in essay writing no longer suffice to indicate high levels of achievement in intellectual performance. Creative thinking is specially pursued in Singapore. They stress the need to capitalize in information technology and in nurturing a vibrant intellectual culture.

Let me come to the core of my address. Our education system has earned both encomiums as well as encounters of harsh criticism. The two excerpts given below are such examples: The World Bank Report of the late nineties, entitled "Treasures of the Education System in Sri Lanka" has the following observation,

*The Sri Lankan education system has been celebrated in development policy circles and the economic literature for the success in providing widespread access to primary and secondary education and enabling the country to attain comparatively high human development for a low income economy.*

The National Education Commission of Sri Lanka in a report dated December, 2003 has a serious indictment,

*The education system has failed adequately to promote quality in education as well as relevance in terms of social stability, national unity, human values and individual orientation to the world of work.*

Learning at the school level has never been a source of fun and enjoyment to our children. The same report (NEC, December 2003, p.12) is critical of the curriculum, competition, management in the school and castigates the "education system, spawned also a private

*tuition industry which has become a parallel structure from secondary education ...".*

Officials, bureaucrats, administrators and teachers in this environment of uncertainty, the doubts of parents and guardians, and the cynicism of the mass media are expressed frequently in the media. With all these doubts and criticisms, the schools are patronized by all classes of citizens. Perhaps the exception is the upper wealthy class. Each middle class group of parents (alumni etc.) virtually administer the school of their children.

Every other parent (ours is a society, 50% reported as poor) is helpless, indifferent and accept the *status quo* as education is free from the kindergarten up to and including university education. In an anecdotal experience in a field study near a village in the campus of the Peradeniya University undertaken about three decades ago, a parent decried "*You think those teachers will teach our poor children?*" He was referring to the lower middle class teachers in a poor rural school so close to the premier University in the island.

The state education system is a form of preventive social care. This belief of the affluent classes sustains the school system as 'too politicised'. Rather an unfair state system of nearly 10,000 schools.

Knowledge is power. So is learning that leads to knowledge. It was in the possession of learned classes, the Brahmins and in Buddhist societies, the *sangha*.

Knowledge liberates people. So does learning leading to new knowledge, and the development of concepts and theories. The western missionary accompanying the conqueror, enslaved us with new positions given only to the converted with power to their elites, employment to believers, and wealth and honour to the puppet rulers.

Humankind however is not completely liberated from sinister practices of bestowing honour and wealth to the converted and the temporary 'believers' of the rulers and their wise men and women. Our societies are also given discriminatory names - "developing", "risk", "poor", "undemocratic" among other condescending epithets of the power groups of western societies.

The image this created for us by the wealthy and powerful nations, to say the least, are not very complimentary. Our societies at 'risk' are not

desirable to live for the '*gentee*' and wealthy sectors of the world societies.

We need to appreciate the commitment of our political leaders from the Donoughmore times of 1931. They have, with no reservations, provided for state education, free and accessible to all in the mother tongues, including English for the Burgher and Malay communities in the thirties and forties, of the last century. Their liberalism and foresight, sometimes challenged by some social sectors, have laid the foundations of a learning society in the globalising world. Our people are literate in one language and also a fair sector in bilingualism and even trilingualism, through schools located in the borders of plantations and Sinhala villages. In the small market town of these areas, one sees the easy bilingual and trilingual practices in the border villages.

No learning is foreign to our people. In their two millennia of recorded history they have learnt at one time or another in their life time. Strangely enough, language learning is an issue with the educated and not with the uninitiated rural and urban people of our land. They carry their historical and linguistic burden with ease, courage and fortitude. The learned and the educated need to give some thought to this phenomenon at the so called "grass root" level of our country.