

EDITORIAL

The Macro Institutional Mission of Universities in Nation Building: The Space for Politically Vibrant and Contrarian Discourses

Introduction

With freedom of expression unduly subject to draconian legislation against the will of a rational citizenry in a democracy, Sri Lankan national universities play a decisive intellectual role in enlightened public opinion formation. The work of Habermas on the Public Sphere (1972) has inspired writers like Baldwin & Goldthwaite, 1972¹ to argue that universities enable individuals to deliberate on issues of national interest, without concern for statuses and achieve rational consensus by critical discussion (Calhoun, 1992; Fraser, 1993²). They remind us that the liberatory promise is the logical outcome of the capacity of universities around the world to confer status to perspectives of burdened masses who are at the receiving end of attitudinally corrupt regimes that continue to impoverish the people.

Aren't State owned Universities in Sri Lanka structurally transformed institutions mandated to inform, educate and persuade all to be progressive and value centered. Here we as academics are not called upon to defend authoritarianism internally and externally, as the mandate is to be inspired by the democratic constitutional framework of Sri Lanka. The task before us is not to protect the interests of a few elites at a severe cost to the taxpayers.

Evolving structural transformation opened doors to a large mass of young men and women representing the non-propertied and under privileged classes resulting in a proliferation of ideological interests. Also, with post-independence political gains in Sri Lanka since 1948 resulting in upheavals

¹ Baldwin, John W., & Goldthwaite, Richard A. (Eds.). (1972). *Universities in politics: Case studies from the late Middle Ages and early Modern period*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press

² Calhoun, Craig. (1992). Introduction. In Craig Calhoun (Ed.), *Habermas and the public sphere* (pp. 1-48). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, and Fraser, Nancy. (1993), and, *Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy* in Bruce Robbins (Ed.), *The phantom public sphere* (pp. 1-32). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

against the status quo like the Hartal of 1952, and formation of new political movements leading to significant political changes in 1956, and insurrections rooted in Sinhala and Tamil youth insurrections in 1971 and 1989 in the South, Northern Tamil militancy for political autonomy from 1975 to 2010, and national level regime change in 2020 (Aragalaya) politics was put on the academic agenda of all universities decisively.

Neutralizing Assaults on Academic Freedom

One could say that freedom at the end of the day is meaningful only for those who value freedom. Ironically Sri Lankan universities are currently under pressure on how they should conduct themselves while the political leadership continues to deny them the basic human and physical infrastructure required for sustainable academic development. Revolting against all this are organizations like the Federation of University Teachers Associations (FUTA) and the IUSF (Inter University Student Federation) pontificated by the political leadership that students have no right to engage in politics. All this has implications to university academics too, and we need to address without any further delay, the impending threats to freedom that the universities would face in higher education. Against the established culture introduced to the Sri Lankan university system by Ivor Jennings, senior academics and university administrators are currently called upon to meet with the Minister of Higher Education and other politicians in batches. The message is disseminated that academics should believe in methodologies like surveillance, monitoring and control, and work closely with law enforcement authorities in dealing with wayward students. These are matters that come within the purview of autonomous University administration and not for the Ministry of Higher Education to deal with.

It is timely that we share with one another the words of Sir Ivor Jennings on the subject of academic freedom of both students and academics when politicians with authoritarian tendencies found it uneasy with regard to the conduct of universities during the historic Hartal of 1953. What Jennings stated in his reply to the Prime Minister seventy years ago is equally valid for us today. As stated by Professor K.N.O Dharmadasa in his tribute to Sir Jennings, also acknowledging the work of Amal Jayawardene, published in the Sunday Island of 19th December 2020:

During his office as Vice Chancellor Jennings had to face occasions when autonomy and academic freedom were put on test. For example, in the aftermath of the Hartal of 1953

Prime Minister Sir John Kotelawala writing to Jennings, expressed his concern about the growth of “Communism” and asked for advice on how to control its spread in the University. Kotelawala was suggesting a kind of political control over student and staff activities in the university. Jennings wrote back: “political control of a university is most undesirable...There are inherent dangers in a political control....The first step of any dictatorship is to ‘purge the universities’ because they are the bastions of freedom. Ought not a Democratic Government uphold and strengthen those bastions?”(Q. in Amal Jayawardene, op. cit.).Furthermore, with his wide experience in the study of politics he warned the Prime Minister that “If political control was introduced by Kotelawala’s government it would in due course be also exercised by the successors of his government.

Revisiting our Common Purpose: To be Value Centered and Not Value Neutral

The ultimate purpose and intention of the academia is to create a discerning public through enlightened public opinion leaders who will be competent in mind and spirit to offer parallel perspectives for the common good. Contestation of ideas is considered a pre-requisite for the revival of a nation that is bankrupted by the political leadership and their cronies in administration who have acted with impunity in national policy formulation and implementation. The taxpayers of a country heavily indebted to other countries and institutions due to no fault of theirs have vital questions to be raised from the perpetrators of national crimes in all frontiers. People also expect academics to help them to seek urgent redress for their woes without being Ivory Towers³.

Extra Ordinary Provisions to Curb Fundamental Freedoms

While the system at large continues to add misery to the life of the people we of the academia carry the obligation to ensure that students are democratically

³ As defined by the Britannica Dictionary, “A place or situation in which people make and discuss theories about problems without having any experience with those problems”

empowered through university education as what is spreading is an undue fear psychosis relating to freedom of expression.

Within this status quo, Altschull (1995)⁴ prescribes that we should correct a number of deficiencies within the established order as follows: (01) Distaste for open criticism of authority, (02) the fear of upsetting the unity of the community, and (03) the knowledge that any violation of the community's rules of propriety will lead to ostracism. These are not only constraints that limit the appeal of open exchange of views, but at best, a brand of democracy closer to authoritarianism, making the academic community irrelevant in the eyes of the people.

The threats we face right now as university students and academics convey the message that anyone holding parallel perspectives and dissenting views would be treated as an immense threat to public security. The most vociferous critics of the established order as seen through what happened to the National Conveners of the inter University Student Federation, Wasantha Mudalige and the National Convener of the Inter University Bhikkhu Federation Venerable Galewala Siridhamma makes it evident that dissenters could be detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act of 1979, in undisclosed locations even without clear cut evidence. After ninety days, the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka has ordered the Police in November 2022 to produce those in detention in court while granting leave to proceed with the Fundamental Rights (FR) petition filed by Wasantha Mudalige. This is a victory to the people and most specifically to university students who played a significant role in the Sri Lankan National Uprising of 2022.

Academic Indifference to Fundamental Freedoms

As argued by Professor Ratnajeevan Hoole (2007), a former Vice Chancellor of the University of Jaffna and former member of the National Elections Commission, "The Sri Lankan experience shows the total loss of liberty of academics, largely because of their own shortcomings, in allowing quality to be undermined in the name of politics and personal advancement. The Sri Lankan experience also shows that academic freedom and quality are very difficult to maintain without political freedom and the rule of law. Academics cannot have academic freedom without quality—of students, of teachers, and of institutions. Likewise, academics cannot have academic freedom for

⁴ Altschull, H. (1995), *Agents of power*, London: Longman.

themselves only, while ignoring the freedom of colleagues, of students, and of the wider citizenry”⁵.

Indifference to fundamental freedoms also means that there are those who operate on a parallel agenda of self-aggrandizement at a severe cost to ultimate dignity of the very institution of university that they represent. Purposeful and calculated appeasement of powerholders has become the norm for many to ensure accelerated career advancement.

Dialogical Democratic Culture with Distinct Ethos: Illusion or Reality

In general, our people including elected and non-elected representatives, as well as others in policy development discourses, continue to express views on grand concepts without a clear-cut Ethos for themselves. This was so with regard to issues like “Power Sharing”, Good Governance and Rule of Law, Bribery and Corruption, and right now “Human Rights and Democracy” to name a few pertinent issues. In all this, progress depends on principled commitment to grand ideals and not through empty rhetoric with self-contradictions.

Commitment to grand principles leading to viable reforms is a need reiterated by the national level uprising of youth as well as civil and political society. These should not once again lead to empty proclamations and self-contradictions. Contextually, the claim of the Ministry of Higher Education that it believes in a democratic dialogue or a dialogical culture, need to be honoured by themselves, without taking the contradictory position that university students have no right to engage in politics. The Sunday Times of May 1st, 2022 quotes the State Minister Dr. Surein Raghavan affirming as follows: “I strongly believe that democratizing the universities, their philosophy, their practice, and day-to-day activities should be one of our national aims. I firmly believe that education should not be tinkered with

⁵ Academic Freedom in Sri Lanka, in [Peace Review](#) 19 (4):507-520, November 2007

according to politicians' needs or political agendas". This position is commended if the government truly means respect for pluralism that provides scope for peaceful dissent.

We of VISTAS believe that good sense will prevail among national university stakeholders, including those of the national political leadership to ensure that fundamental freedoms are respected, with freedom of expression granted pride of place.

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