



AUSTRALIAN TAMIL MANAGEMENT SERVICE

Who Collapsed Our Institutions?

I write in response to the *Sri Lanka Guardian* article '*The Collapse of Institutions*' by Prof. Savitri Goonesekere.

It is obvious that Professor Savitri Goonesekere is upset by the current state of affairs in the University system. It is also encouraging to note that some of us care about carrying forward the value of our own contributions to these institutional structures. I went to prison here in Australia to uphold the true value of my work so Australian institutions would be more democratic. This happened through the University of New South Wales. What happens on the outside is not pleasant. But the events that followed confirmed that my work was recognized by the Highest Authority of All and the results came from that source.

In my yesterday's contribution to improving law and order in Northern Sri Lanka, I wrote as follows:

There are three ways in which we make decisions:

- (1) As per our likes and dislikes. When we decide as per our likes and dislikes they are as per our emotions and surface memories. One who uses this path needs to accept that others also would do the same. When I am judged on that basis – my interpretation of that judgment would be as per my assessment of the level of faith that the person judging has in me. The stronger the faith the more accepting I would be of emotional judgments. This is the path of Politics.
- (2) As per rights and wrongs based on Common Principles and Values. Knowledge / Intellectual discrimination is essential in this path. This path would include all investors – irrespective of whether we know each other or not. This is the path of Administration
- (3) As per Truth. Truth supports us to live independently in any part of the world. It automatically connects us at the deepest level.

As a non-academic – I expected University system to value (3) above – especially due to its Research component. But I was punished by the Administration for find the Truth about the University. To my mind, Australia is not better than Sri Lanka in delivering its mandate. On the other hand, recently during a seminar on Resource Management and Communication, many academics from the University of Jaffna communicated their appreciation of this path of seeking and finding Truth in our own fields of activity. In other words, our investment in University system is ultimately

reflected through Research and Teaching aspects in the common citizen – each one using it for her/his life for her/himself towards completing experiences.

In some ways – this sharing by Professor Savitri Goonesekere – confirms such sharing but more at the higher level of society.

The way Professor Savitri Goonesekere laments about the Colombo University I could lament about the deterioration in Jaffna where I grew up. I can hardly trace the values of that system in the current make-up. But I do find from time to time individuals who continue to carry those values – some being more apparent than others.

Most of the flaws that Professor Savitri Goonesekere has identified in the current University system in Colombo could also be found in Sri Lankan Public Service – including in Jaffna. If however, we ask the disenfranchised parts of our society – for example - the lower caste in Northern Sri Lanka, they would say that they are better off now than they were before. They seem better off on the outside – with most of the young ones using mobile phones and motor bikes much more than I use them / their parallels. Foreign money – including through foreign governments and members of the Diaspora – is a strong reason. But this quick rise in comforts without them having earned it through a structured system – is as they say in Tamil – ‘Pinjila Palukirathu’ – becoming ripe before maturity.

Most of us in the generation of Professor Savitri Goonesekere have enjoyed the structures of the Western system. We still tend to measure as per those standards. But over the years Nationalism has been actively promoted by leaders on both sides of the ethnic divide and this has led to loss of ‘common’ thoughts that prevailed through British and European systems – common to all of leaders. If this loss had been balanced by greater investment in our traditional / ancestral values – for example the essential values of Thesawalamai for Jaffna Tamils – then we would have continued to progress. But in place of that loss we have imported foreign goods that ‘show’ globalization on the outside but without common thought inside.

This is happening in the University system also. The Objective system of evaluating on merit basis works effectively only when we begin with zero base. This is very difficult even for Australian academics. Sri Lankan universities are relatively richer in human resource and poorer in money resource. To be effective – they need to bring the essence of their past into the current assessments.

Professor Gunesekere states *‘I was an ex officio member of two university councils as Senate nominee and Vice Chancellor and was privileged to serve with many eminent personalities from the public and private sectors. Senior academics on the Council considered themselves accountable to the university community and the public. Those Councils would never have considered a Senior Lecturer Grade II in the lowest academic grade as a person qualified for the post of Vice Chancellor of the University of Colombo.’*

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The position of Vice Chancellor in our current environment requires strong administrative skills – especially in terms of bringing money resources into the University. Often academics are highly subjective and hence do not meet these current democratic needs of the University. The old University system is not different to the traditional family system - with the husband earning money from the outside and the wife making a home that would support the husband and children in their interactions with the outside world. With more and more women becoming breadwinners - we need the Equal Opportunity system and zero base planning followed by merit based assessment of our achievements. The parallel of this in the University system is that non-Academic Administrators are playing higher roles in University management – often through bottom-up approach. Like with marriage, in the objective world, we learn more about ourselves when an outsider comes into the family.

Sri Lankan Universities serving the Common Sri Lankan, need business minded Administrators if they are to compete with foreign investors in Sri Lanka. They could be academics but need to be driven more by Objective measures. . Low achieving academic is a poor substitute unless s/he has demonstrated outstanding democratic skills in her/his past university life. This is the University parallel of the Sri Lankan Judicial system. As Sri Lankans we ought to have known long ago that this was going to happen. But the relief is that even if a few of us believe that we would release ourselves from this mess and be equal to any other system – it will happen for us.

As I wrote yet again yesterday – the system of Natural Justice / Truth delivered for me – even though the Australian University system and Public service failed. As a migrant I actually practiced Equal Opportunity system and demanded to be heard from zero base. To the Administrators, Equal Opportunity– was largely theory. Give them a test and they are likely to pass with flying colors. Likewise judges. Hence their judgments are about their own failures to practice. This was alright so long as they used it with others who also did not practice. I practiced genuinely and hence could identify with the punishments that came through migrants who took shortcuts to go to the media in the case of the University and through militants in the case of Prime Minister Howard who was present with the American president during 9/11 attack. The Vice Chancellor who sent me to prison was himself sacked by the University Council.

Like with the May 2009 war in Sri Lanka, we would all see what happened - from different angles. To the extent we see through our own Truth – we would see the path of karma which has never failed me. But to identify with that path one needs to go beyond the logical world – into the depths – as we do in research - until we are in Truth and nothing but the Truth. Even if one Sri Lankan does this – it would awaken / rejuvenate the Sri Lankan investment in Higher Education.

By Gajalakshmi Paramasivam 19 March 2013

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