



University of Jaffna

Sir Pon Ramanathan

Memorial Lecture – 2026



**“The Engaged University: Musings on Research,
Dialogue and Water Security”**

by

Professor Emeritus Nadarajah Sriskandarajah,
Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences,
Sweden.

on

Thursday 05th March, 2026 at 3.00 p.m.

at

**Library Auditorium,
University of Jaffna.**

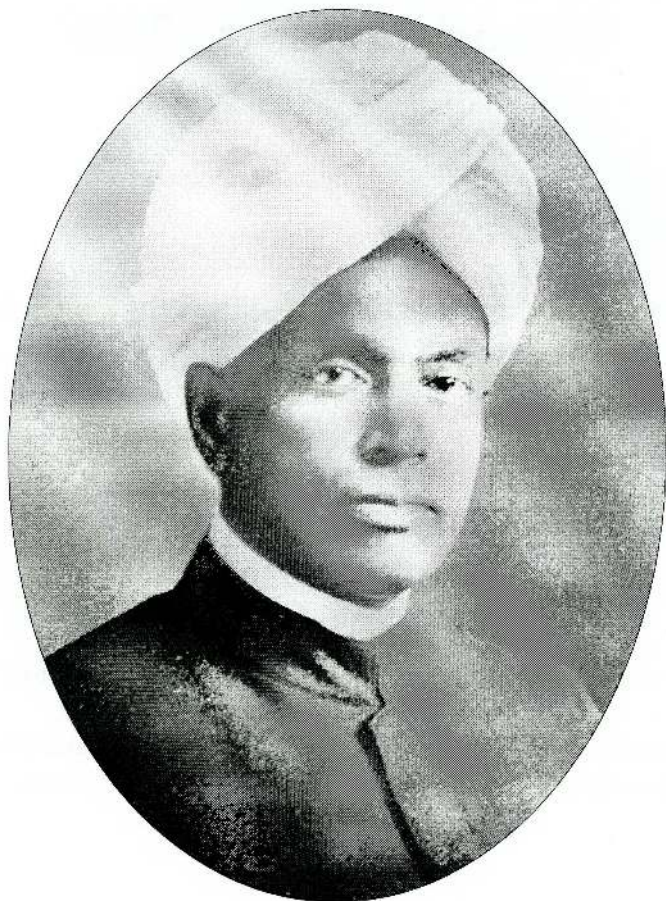
Sir Pon Ramanathan
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**The Engaged University: Musings on Research,
Dialogue and Water Security**

Nadarajah Sriskandarajah

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05.03.2026



Sir Pon Ramanathan

Message from the Vice Chancellor

Memorial Lectures are a way to keep the memory of the departed alive and acknowledge their significant contributions to society, particularly in their respective fields. As such, the University of Jaffna annually conducts memorial lectures to honour the legacies of distinguished individuals, often academics or public figures. Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan Memorial Lecture along with the Lady Leelawathy Ramanathan Memorial, is a cherished annual event and very well-established traditions of our university.

This memorial lecture series is a prestigious event organized annually by our university aligned with the Annual General Convocation to commemorate the legacy of Sir Pon Ramanathan, who was a leading Hindu Educationalist, Great Scholar, Nationally acclaimed statesman, and philanthropist. His immense contributions to education were the establishment of two schools the Ramanathan College for Girls, established at Maruthanarmadam, Chunnakam in 1913, and the Parameswara College for Boys, eight years later. The Parameswara College was acquired to become the main premises of the University of Jaffna.

University of Jaffna was inaugurated in 1974 and the Golden Jubilee celebration of our Shrine of knowledge was celebrated throughout the years 2024 and 2025 with all sphere of events. In this respect, Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan Memorial Lecture 2026 becomes highly significant. This Ramanathan Memorial Lecture is funded by an endowment instituted by the Board of Directors of Ramanathan College in 1980. The memory of Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan is very near and dear to us, every premises and building which form the nucleus of our mother university are closely associated with him.

We are indeed thankful to those who instituted this endowment for giving us the opportunity to cherish Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan's memory upon his service and establishing educational centres in this region.

This year, the memorial lecture of Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan is being delivered by Professor Emeritus Nadarajah Sriskandarajah, Chair Professor in Environmental Communication at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences in Uppsala. At present, he is a Professor Emeritus in Sweden at the Department of Urban and Rural Development, Faculty of Natural Resources and Agriculture.

Prof.Sriskandarajah completed his Bachelor's degree program as a Veterinarian from the University of Ceylon in 1972 and obtained a PhD in Nutrition of Farm Animals at the University of Sydney in 1982.

Prof.Sriskandarajah is an eminent scholar and works with young enthusiasts and change makers in Northern Sri Lanka addressing ground water security, food safety, and sovereignty. Now, He has been appointed as an Adjunct Professor at the University of Jaffna on Honorary basis. He is also working with the Water Security of the Northern Province (WASPAR) project and actively engaged in fundraising efforts for the above project.

Further, Prof.Sriskandarajah's association with our university will undoubtedly contribute to its teaching, research, and professional activities. University of Jaffna would like to express its gratitude to Prof.Nadarajah Sriskandarajah for agreeing to deliver the Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan Memorial Lecture for the year 2026 on the title "The Engaged University: Musings on Research, Dialogue and Water Security".

I firmly believe that this address will prompt all the water related scientist of our university and the community to contribute towards water security. Once again, I thank Prof.Nadarajah Sriskandarajah for accepting our invitation and delivering this Memorial Oration-2026.

All glories to Almighty God.

Prof.Sivakolundu Srisatkunarajah,
Professor in Mathematics,
Vice Chancellor,
University of Jaffna.
05.03.2026

THE ENGAGED UNIVERSITY: Musings on Research, Dialogue, and Water Security

Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan Memorial Lecture, 2026

Professor Nadarajah Sriskandarajah

Vice Chancellor, colleagues, students, guests of the University and friends, thank you for inviting me to deliver this year's **Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan Memorial Lecture**.

It is a privilege to honour a towering Tamil public figure, and to do so here, in Jaffna, a place that has shaped my scholarly sensibilities and my sense of responsibility to the community.

My beginnings in the village of Karainagar, under 20km north-west of Jaffna, offered me a *Gurukulam*-style of education for the first 7 years of schooling at the experimental Gandhian institution founded by my father's classmate, and teacher at Jaffna College, Mr P Navaratnam. Nationalisation of schools in 1958 ended the experiment. I joined mainstream schools to complete my high schooling in the Science stream, followed by a 4-year degree in Veterinary Science at the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya.

What started as an Assistant Lectureship at the Faculty of Agriculture, soon after graduation in 1972, enabled me to build a tour of duty and an opportunistic career path extending over half a century, and at half a dozen Universities along the way, to be here at Jaffna.

Today I want to reflect on what it means for a university to be *engaged* - not merely excellent in academic terms, but deeply embedded in the lives, struggles, and aspirations of the communities around it. I want to explore how **research can become a form of**

public dialogue, how dialogue can become a form of inquiry, and how inquiry can become a form of action.

And I will take one urgent example - **Water Security in the Northern Province** - to show what becomes possible when a university sees itself not as a passive observer, but as an active co-creator of change with its people.

A quick historical reflection

If we are to imagine the **engaged university of the future**, let us honour those who first imagined a university **for this island in the first place.**

Agitation for higher education - specifically for a local university attuned to the realities of Ceylon - began by the mid 19th century, gathered momentum by the early 20th, and led to the Ceylon University Association (1906), spearheaded by Sir James Peiris, Sir Marcus Fernando and of course, Ramanathan's own brother, Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam. Their advocacy pressed the government to move beyond external examinations and to establish institutions responsive to local needs.

Writing in 1906, Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam captured the heart of the matter. Arguing for a local university, he said:

“At the bottom of the movement in favour of the Ceylon University is the strong and widespread feeling that the holding of examinations is the least important function of a University; that Cambridge, London and other Universities on which we have hitherto relied for our Arts and Science Examinations, restrict their activity, so far as we are concerned, to this function, and this too under conditions which make a degree

inaccessible to the majority of our youth; that these Universities know nothing and care nothing about our needs and conditions, and that no education can be fruitful of good which ignores them.”

More than a century later, Arunachalam’s words sound like a manifesto for the **engaged university**: education must be **rooted in context, responsive to needs, and co - created with society** - not confined to the mere certification of knowledge.

The 20th century model of the university was often **linear**: students in, knowledge transfer, graduates out; research exported as reports, articles, or consultancy.

In a world of climate risk, social fragility, and technological disruption, that model is insufficient. Universities must be **porous** (open to knowledge from communities), dialogic (engaging differences productively), and **co-creative** (platforms for solving problems together).

These principles resonate with the fields I have spent much of my career nurturing: **Systems Thinking, Participatory Action Research, and Environmental Communication**. Together, they allow us to act meaningfully in complex contexts rather than simply describe them. With that foundation, let me explore how this vision animates our present: systems thinking, participatory action research, and a concrete case - **water security** - where the University of Jaffna has begun to live out that ideal.

Systems Thinking: Seeing Patterns, Not Just Parts

Most public challenges today are **complex adaptive systems** - causes and effects interweave, feedback loops amplify, and interventions in one place produce unintended consequences

elsewhere. Systems thinking asks us to look for **relationships** and **patterns**, to examine our own mental models, and to recognise that we are **part of** the systems we seek to influence.

Water security is quintessentially such a system - hydrology intertwined with agriculture, settlement, governance, beliefs, and markets. If we respond linearly, we create new problems; if we learn systemically, we create capacity for **adaptive, collective stewardship**.

Participatory Action Research (PAR): Knowledge as a Civic Practice

If systems thinking helps us **see**, **PAR** helps us **act**. Traditional research asks “what is happening and why?”; **PAR** adds, “**what might we do together?**”

PAR rests on the conviction that **people living with a problem hold vital knowledge about it**. **Dialogue** is therefore not an add on; it is the method. Researchers become facilitators; communities become co-researchers. Data gathering, reflection, and action proceed iteratively, building **legitimacy, trust, and ownership**.

I have seen in Sri Lanka and abroad that co-inquiry yields contextual, durable, and **just solutions**. It also builds the competencies universities now need: facilitation, listening across differences, and the ability to navigate science - society interfaces.

My time at the University of Western Sydney in the 1990s was marked very much by the influential work of Robert Chambers from the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex UK in the rural development field. Mounting a serious criticism of the conventional top-down technocratic interventions in developing country contexts, Chambers ushered in the concept of participation

as an essential element of a people-centred ‘development’ paradigm. ‘Whose realities count’ and ‘Putting the last first’ were some of the titles under which he offered this critique.

Participatory Action Research was then a natural stance for me to take when choosing to intervene in the affairs of rural communities, armed with a systemic awareness, a desire to contribute to new knowledge, and a commitment to improving their situation.

Academics on the whole defend a concept of the university devoted to theoretical activities while politicians and wider society keep arguing that the university should take up more practical concerns.

Using the classical pragmatist argument of John Dewey’s philosophy against a sharp division between **theory** and **practice**, Goetze (2019) showed how we can move beyond the debate between the theoretical and practical concepts of the university, while maintaining a place for pure and applied research, liberal and vocational education, and social impact through both economic applications and criticism aimed at promoting social justice.

This notion of theory linked to practice as a dialectic, a form of Praxis, was also the core of Experiential Learning, which became the hallmark of our education at Hawkesbury Agricultural College, later the University of Western Sydney in Australia, in the late 1980s.

Water Security in the Northern Province: A Call to Engagement

I will turn now to the immediate, the question of **water**, and indeed the impending water crisis in the Northern Province (NP), that was being talked about within a research team at the University of Jaffna when I visited here in mid-2019.

We in the Northern Province hold **no perennial rivers**; we rely very much on **groundwater** for drinking, and stored surface water in tanks for our farming needs, with **seasonal rainfall** and a **porous limestone geology**. Water security, as the complex issue was framed here, is no longer just **technical**; it is also social and **institutional**.

In view of the complex nature of the water situation in the NP and the critical need for more responsible action by all actors, business as usual did not seem an option for ensuring water security. This project took as its point of departure the failure of existing institutional and social structures and sought to 1) reconstruct a more informed citizenry through filling knowledge gaps, 2) create deliberative space for participatory planning and decision making for co-creation of water security options, and 3) encourage citizen awareness at all levels through citizen-driven measurements, quantification and experimentation.

WASPAR: A University-led Platform for Co - Learning

In 2020, colleagues at the University of Jaffna agreed to launch **WASPAR - Water Security through Participatory Action Research**. WASPAR brought together **socio-hydrology (the co-evolution of water and society) with environmental communication (the idea that how we talk about water shaped what we could do about it), and dialogue spaces** where multiple actors learn together and co-generate context-specific knowledge. It critiques fragmented, top down water management and advocates holistic, transdisciplinary, multi stakeholder governance - precisely the ethos of an engaged university.

Karainagar Island: Evidence from the Groundwater Lens

One of WASPAR's clearest illustrations is the Karainagar Island groundwater study. Karainagar, where my ancestral home is, for

those of you who do not know it, is an island of some 22 km². The island's 11,000 residents depend almost entirely on groundwater. Over three years (2019–2022), WASPAR researchers monitored 36 sample wells across the island for water level, electrical conductivity (salinity), pH, and rainfall. Several findings deserve emphasis:

- **High interannual rainfall variability:** records in the broader area ranged from ~517mm (dry) to ~1,868 mm (wet), strongly shaping recharge. **Wells required ~652–892 mm cumulative rainfall** to reach full capacity; early-season rain is therefore crucial for capture and recharge.
- A consistent **inverse relationship** between water level and salinity: as levels drop in the dry season, **EC rises**, pushing many wells beyond **safe drinking thresholds** used by numerous national standards (≥ 2500 us/cm).
- **Unregulated pumping** (including the proliferation of **deep tube wells**) and **electrically pumped irrigation** have triggered salinity spikes in previously potable wells (e.g., banana cultivation near **Well K20**), risking long-term aquifer degradation.
- Despite 2,600+ wells on the island, only seven among the monitored set were **reliably drinkable** during much of the year, highlighting **intra-island inequities** in access to safe water.
- Groundwater behaviour proved **highly heterogeneous** at small spatial scales-neighbouring wells can behave differently-underscoring the need for **site-specific monitoring** and **shared interpretation** rather than blanket policies.

- These findings are not just scientific; they are **civic**. Well owners are engaged in the monitoring where feasible. Elevated salinity can have public health implications (e.g., hypertension risks when EC exceeds typical national limits), reminding us that water security is inseparable from **social equity and well-being**.

Research as Relationship Building

Just as important as the data is **how** the data was produced. In Karainagar, **well owners** were trained to measure levels and salinity; **workshops** created spaces for villagers, researchers, and officials to discuss interim findings; and the project began scaffolding a **Northern Water Dialogue Forum** to sustain multi-actor governance beyond the project cycle. This is the **engaged university in practice: doing research with people, not on them, not for them**.

Lessons: What Engagement Looks Like in a University

From this work, let me sketch five lessons for modern universities:

- **Institutional Courage**
Openness to knowledge from outside the academy - from farmers, fisherfolk, youth - is not a concession; it is a **strategic necessity** for relevance.
- **New Skill Sets**
Facilitation, conflict transformation, storytelling with data, and **boundary spanning** become as vital as disciplinary expertise.
- **New Structures**
We need **living labs, community observatories, policy dialogue forums**, and transdisciplinary curricula that integrate science and civic practice.

- **Student Formation**

Students who co-inquire with communities develop ethical sensibilities, empathy, and confidence to act - capacities that lectures alone cannot deliver.

- **Democratic Value**

Dialogue-led inquiry builds trust and legitimacy, both essential for navigating contested resources like water, land, and fisheries.

The University of Jaffna's Opportunity - From Place to Stewardship

The University of Jaffna is uniquely positioned - geographically, historically, and socially - to become a leader in **engaged scholarship**. In a region recovering from conflict and facing climate volatility, the university can serve as:

- **A knowledge hub** for social-ecological understanding of the Northern Province;
- **A convenor** of dialogue among communities, government agencies, and researchers;
- **An innovation platform** for water governance, ecological agriculture, and climate adaptation;
- **A generator of hope**, modelling how evidence and participation can shape fairer futures.

Concretely, this could mean:

- **A Water Security Living Lab** connecting hydrologists, engineers, social scientists, public health experts, and communities to co-design recharge strategies, well use guidelines, and **local monitoring networks**;
- Embedding **PAR methods** into undergraduate and postgraduate programmes;

- Supporting **village-managed aquifer recharge** and **salt intrusion early warning**;
- Strengthening the **Northern Water Dialogue Forum** as a durable governance arena linking community stewardship with policy.

Systems + PAR + Communication: A Practical Synthesis

Let me summarise the approach we have tested:

- Use **systems thinking** to map interdependencies - hydrological, social, institutional;
- Apply **PAR** to co-define questions, co-gather evidence, and co-decide actions;
- Invest in **environmental communication** to create **dialogue spaces** where evidence can be understood, contested, and owned;
- Institutionalise this practice in **university structures**: living labs, forums, and transdisciplinary teaching.

This is how a university becomes **embedded** in its place - how it moves from being a **factory of degrees** to a **steward of futures**.

Returning to Arunachalam - and to the Purpose of a University

Allow me to **close where we began**, with the **Ponnambalam brothers** and the early agitation for a **Ceylon university**. Their campaign succeeded, stepwise: a **University College** (affiliated to London) in 1921; a fully-fledged **University of Ceylon** in 1942; and, over decades, the expansion of a national higher education system, now with 17 institutions. But their deeper argument was **not** merely for local degrees. It was for an institution that **“knows and**

cares about our needs and conditions” - for an education that cannot be “fruitful of good” if it ignores them.

That is the challenge before us now.

When a well owner in Karainagar learns to read a salinity meter and interpret rainfall–recharge curves; when a village volunteer detects an early pattern of salination in a village corner; when a local authority collaborates with citizens to regulate pumping near public wells; when students learn to facilitate **dialogue** alongside learning **hydrogeology** - in all these moments, the **university remembers why it exists.**

It exists not to hold examinations, but to **cultivate capacities** and **build a competent** society.

Not to export expertise, but to **co-create knowledge** that is **useful, legitimate, and just.**

Not to stand apart, but to **stand with** its people.

அறிவுடையார் செயல் உடையார் *The truly learned are those who act.*

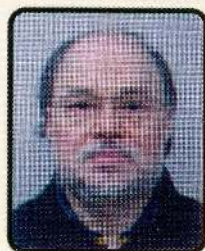
In that sense, this Sir Ramanathan Ponnambalam Memorial Lecture is a call to reconnect our universities to our communities, to honour the historical vision of a university that belongs to its place.

If we take Arunachalam’s words seriously - that “the holding of examinations is the least important function of a University” - then our task is clear: **become the engaged, embedded institution our predecessors imagined**, one that **knows and cares** about the conditions of this land, and that **co creates change** with the communities who call it home.

நன்றி

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Nadarajah Sriskandarajah held the Chair in Environmental Communication at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences in Uppsala (2005-17), working on Environmental & Natural Resource Management issues, particularly related to farming & food systems and nature conservation. He is at present a Professor Emeritus in Sweden at the Department of Urban and Rural Development, Faculty of Natural Resources and Agriculture.

Sri has held university positions previously in Sri Lanka, Australia, Papua New Guinea and Denmark, and worked on projects in a number of countries in Asia, Africa, Latin-America and Europe.

Educated as a Veterinarian (University of Ceylon 1972), Sriskandarajah obtained a PhD in Nutrition of Farm Animals as holder of a F.H. Loxton Fellowship in Veterinary Science at the University of Sydney (1982).

Having acknowledged the limits of a reductionist rationality in his sciences, Sriskandarajah embraced systems thinking and practice at the University of Western Sydney, Australia (1986-2000). Taking a systems approach to understanding complex issues at the nature-society interface, and applying communicative and change-oriented processes to enable social learning and transformation, have characterised his scholarly practice. Working across and beyond disciplines, his pedagogy is guided by the Freirean unity between theory and practice as praxis.

Today, he works with young enthusiasts and change makers in Northern Sri Lanka addressing ground water security, food safety and sovereignty, and novel approaches to environmental governance and education, all within an Action Research paradigm.

Water Security through Participatory Action Research in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka (WASPAR) has been Sriskandarajah's platform at the University of Jaffna since 2020, while at the University of Vavuniya he supports facets of the development of Environmental Science studies. Both universities have recently conferred the title of Adjunct Professor to Nadarajah Sriskandarajah.