FREEDOM AND THE UNIVERSITY

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

By

K. NESIAH, M.A.

at the

Sixth Annual Conference of the
National Education Society of Ceylon
Colombo, 13th September, 1958

Reprinted from the *Journal of the N. E. S. C.*
Vol. VII No. 3 August, 1958

FREEDOM AND THE UNIVERSITY

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Members of the National Education Society of Ceylon,

I value the privilege of giving the presidential address to the Society for the second time. In view of the public interest in University Education aroused by the inquiry held by the Needham Commission I thought I would address you on that theme. In fact I have incorporated into my paper large portions of the evidence I tendered to the Commission. The dangers threatening the freedom of learning here and elsewhere make it necessary for us to concern ourselves with the role of the university in national life.

I.

Learning has had a long history in this country and a close connection with ancient Indian educational traditions. But, like the concept of nationhood and the political and administrative system, the institutions of secondary and higher education of today owe to the impact of the West rather than to our own past. One of the earliest formulations of the aims of the new education introduced into this country is contained in the prospectus of the Seminary (later called Jaffna College), dated March 4, 1823:—

I. A leading object will be to give native youth of good promise a thorough knowledge of the English language....

II. Another object will be the cultivation of Tamil literature and....composition....

III. ....Sanskrit....

IV. ....to give a select number a knowledge of Hebrew.... Latin and Greek....

V. ....the sciences usually studied in the Colleges of Europe and America.

Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam made a similar plea half-a-century ago when he urged the establishment of a University in Ceylon that would make science and commerce an important factor in national life and help to create "a good Sinhalese and Tamil literature instinct with the best spirit of modern Europe". (*Journal of the Ceylon University Association*, October, 1906.)

It is not however the purpose of this paper to examine whether the university either in India or Ceylon, which claims descent from the liberal rationalist tradition of the West, has in fact acquired faith in the method of science and in analytical reason or whether it mainly serves an utilitarian purpose.

II.

In the condition of Ceylon the institutions of learning have to fulfil an important social function. History has made us a multi-group society; it is the task of education to build a nation. Equally irrevocably the political and legal system introduced by the British has led to the growth of a free and equal society; we need to develop the mental conviction to sustain such a society. Further, the growing relationship of Ceylon with an inter-communicating inter-dependent world makes it necessary for us to absorb its thought and its technology.

As I pointed out in my study of "The British Period and its Educational System,"[1] the University and the bigger public schools have contributed in no small manner to creating the first group of people who come nearest to being described as "Ceylonese". It is all to their credit that every Hall of Residence in the University and the hostels in these schools have reflected the new multi-group society of Ceylon. But with the restoration of swabasha to its rightful place in the schools and its products reaching the University, there is a danger of our returning to the many fatherlands of caste, creed and race that prevented social solidarity in medieval Ceylon. The fact of the matter is that we have in our midst parallel societies and cultures and if we have parallel school systems as well we may never develop the mental homogeneity that is the essence of nationhood. The age-long habit of toleration may not be positive enough to withstand the pressures challenging the ideal of 'one nation'.

In a country like Britain the social outlook can be taken for granted and the universities too reflect that outlook. "Our political history notoriously suggests that there is some such common, national, basis of belief," says Sir Walter Moberly.[2] "Our party-differences have not been carried to an extreme. After a General Election, the party newly returned to power does not undo the bulk of the work of its predecessors. The outlook which Mr. Churchill and Mr. Attlee have in common is more important than the things in which they differ." The Britons who study in any of the British universities come to share these basic values and the many common elements in their studies bind together the generations who thus share a "common intellectual estate". The Harvard Report[3] urges the same goal: "It is impossible to escape the realization that our society, like any society, rests on common beliefs and that a major task of education is to perpetuate them." To take one other example, the opportunities provided for British and French Canadians to study each other's

---

1. *Journal ol the N. E. S. C.*, Feb. 1956.
2. *The Crisis in the University*, 1949.
3. *General Education in a Free Society*, 1945.

culture is calculated to build up mutual understanding and respect. Witness the institution of a Chair of French Canadian Literature in the University of British Columbia, in a state which has a scanty French population.

We should unhesitatingly reject the suggestion made by the majority report of the Commission on Higher Education in the National Languages[4] that the community of higher learning should be a racial community and that access to such learning should be rationed among different linguistic groups according to number. Well did the Radhakrishnan Commission[5] oppose the assumption in 'quotas' that the nation is composed of separate and self-sufficient groups as "a negation of the national ideal and democratic principle." The Report adds: "The fundamental right is the right of the individual, not of the community. Every young man must have an equal chance with others, to make the most of his abilities."[6] In a democracy, as Prof. Marshall has pointed out, every child is a candidate for every position in society. From the national point of view, the discovery of exceptional ability and its fostering is important.

Whatever be the number of universities and their media of instruction it would be desirable for Peradeniya and Colombo to develop into two great national universities. They should be national in letter and in spirit, for while calling the university national if one group attempted to 'collar' it, that would be a betrayal of learning as well as of the nation. On the contrary, in a true community of learning the members thereof should be loyal not only to 'the intellectual virtues' but to one another. Nor is it enough if Sinhalese studies are an obligation only to Sinhalese students, Tamil studies to Tamil students and Arabic to Muslims. The contradictions of parallel cultures that confuse the young have to find their reconciliation in an intellectual synthesis which bridges not only the different elements of our heritage but integrates them with the values of the modern world.[7]

Peradeniya will be for many years our only residential, unitary, national university. Even with the addition of Science and Medicine and the overdue expansion of the Faculty of Agriculture, the stress will still be on the Humanities and the Social Sciences. Everything points to Peradeniya as the centre for developing advanced post-graduate studies in these two fields. One also sees the relevance of the suggestion of the Radhakrishnan Report that 2,500 students should be the limit for a unitary university, to retain the advantages of a coherent corporate life.

---

4. S. P. X. 1956.
5. *Report of the University Education Commission*, 1949.
6. The Supreme Court of India has now declared such a system of quotas to be a violation of Articles 15 (1) and 29 (2) of the Constitution. c. p. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26 (1): ".....higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit."
7. v. Kabir: *Education in New India*, 1956 (Chap. V).

Colombo, by the size and location of the City, can well develop into a large non-residential teaching and affiliating university, awarding both internal and external degrees. It is the obvious location for the country's main college of Engineering and Technology, Medical and other professional schools. These schools will have to take under their wing both post-graduate studies in these fields as well as sub-university courses. If industrialization is to get into its stride in Ceylon, day and evening courses must help to produce the technicians and business administrators. For all its technical bias, the Natural Sciences, the Social Sciences and the Humanities will still find a place. In addition, Colombo should recognize, as London does in Britain, affiliated colleges in the provinces till they mature into independent universities.

III.

The two national universities in Peradeniya and Colombo should by no means exhaust the pattern of university development in Ceylon. The ideal of society one envisages is not one where power, civil and cultural life are centred in a metropolitan city but dispersed over the provinces and villages; in economic development, not mass production and large industrial towns but decentralized small units and agro-industrial village communities. If universities have to be in responsible relationship to society, there is a case for a number of regional universities to pioneer new developments and to define the pattern of life for their respective regions. They will train rural administrators and social workers as well as develop new rural professions. Some, or perhaps all of these, will answer to the description of Rural Universities in the Radhakrishnan Report. Again, following trends in India, some will commence as modest Rural Institutes with the possibility of attaining university rank in time. Others may be full fledged provincial Colleges affiliated to Colombo till such time as they can earn the status of degree-granting universities, perhaps incorporating other local institutes.

On the other hand, the regional institutions should never be in isolation even after they have reached independent status. By including university men from outside on their governing and examining bodies, by the exchange of university teachers, by sending up post-graduate students to Peradeniya, Colombo, and abroad, they should keep abreast of the stream of learning and guard against a parochial outlook. It should not be impossible for some of these regional universities to outshine Peradeniya or Colombo in particular fields of study.

Politicians have professed satisfaction at the fact that the catchment area of the university has extended in recent years and that students are being drawn from rural areas hitherto untapped. It is true

that free tution in the university and schools and the establishment of central schools in rural areas have helped to bring into the university students from sections of the population who did not in the past send their children to the University. This is however, not to say that all is well with the education imparted in these rural schools. Granted that the urban English schools were too western-oriented in the past, a medieval curriculum bereft of the natural and social sciences, linguistic in content and academic in style, is no substitute for a modern education. It is like offering stone to those who are asking for bread. Nor should we be satisfied till all higher forms have staffs adequate in number, qualifications and quality. In fact, as I have shown in a previous study,[8] the chances of sending more university entrants from a given area are increased rather than diminished by reducing the number of university entrance forms and improving their size and staffing. Co-ordination of the provision made for the area and the affording of boarding scholarships to poorer pupils will have to accompany this reform.

The time seems appropriate for a fresh survey of university entrance form provision, with special reference to their curriculum, size of forms and staffing. The study may profitably be extended to the subject choices made at the university and classes of degrees gained by the products of different groups of schools.

The satisfaction at the arrival of more rural youth at the university will have also to be modified when it is realized that though their origin is the village, the destination of these students as of the rest is as often as not the City of Colombo. Social and physical mobility is not an unmixed gain. To cream off potential rural leadership and to turn their faces away from the countryside and their own people could indeed be a disservice to the nation. In that sense much of English education in Ceylon has been an erosive force, almost washing away the small village community that is the organic unit of civilized life. The rural universities and institutes contemplated may perhaps be the means of reversing this process and using higher education to fertilize local life.

When all is said, the position has not improved equally in all backward areas. According to the figures in the University Council's Report for 1957, Uva and N.C.P. continued to have a negligible enrollment at the University.

	In the Peradeniya Faculties.	In Science and Engineering	In the Medical Faculty	Total
Uva	5	3	6	14
N.C.P.	10	—	1	11

8. University Entrance Forms in Schools, *Journal of N. E. S. C.*, Feb. 1955.

A study of the actual cases will be necessary to see whether the tendency to self-recruitment in the professions has been overcome in the enrollment for Engineering and Medicine. In any event the figures speak for themselves. A clue to poor admissions from these provinces is provided by the poor literacy rate in both these provinces, Uva having maintained her place as the most illiterate province at successive censuses. Studies [9] elsewhere have shown that there is an intimate connection between literacy, higher education, economic development and income. The ultimate answers may therefore have to be found beyond the provision of university entrance forms: in the general school provision, in the relationship maintained between education and economic planning and in the stimulus provided by higher institutes of all types located in the region.

IV

It is true that when the language of administration is changed to the national languages at least 80% of the population would not need to know English; it would be enough if they could read books in their mother tongue which have been written by those who have absorbed the intellectual world of our time. Of those who complete secondary education, which may be some 20% before long, the vast majority will use English as 'language of communication' reading books and journals in their particular subjects. Only 2% or less, generally university men but not all university men, can use it as a 'creative medium'.

The medium of instruction in secondary education is in process of being changed from English to swabasha, English dropping to the place of a second language in school. It is when a new generation has acquired a competent command of swabasha and come to fill teaching posts in the university that they can attempt to teach in that media whether in Arts or Science. It would be rash on the part of Ceylon to attempt a quick change-over when India, after two decades of high school swabasha, hesitates to carry that medium into the university. [10] But while English may continue for some time as main medium in all faculties (except Oriental Languages), every undergraduate should follow a course and sit a paper in Sinhalese or Tamil for his degree; this course and paper should where possible be adjusted to suit his main course of study. The entrance requirements too should be so adjusted that all candidates have a minimum proficiency in English

9. *v. World Illiteracy at Mid-century*, UNESCO, 1957.

10. Jawaharlal Nehru said at the Education Ministers Conference, 1956: "The man power needed in the next ten or fifteen years for industrial, scientific and agricultural purposes cannot be trained in any Indian language in the foreseable future. It is not an arguable matter that scientific and technological training has to be given in English". He warned against "the danger of one unifying factor (English) being pushed out before allowing another to fully take its place."

and Sinhalese/Tamil. At present there is one general-language paper and four subject papers at university entrance. It may be required that entrants to the university should have at the General Certificate of Education reached the ordinary pass level in English *and* Sinhalese/Tamil, and at the Entrance examination a minimum level in the English medium in not less than one of the five papers and a minimum level in the Sinhalese/Tamil medium in not less than one of the papers.

V.

All those who value the autonomy of the university would deplore the fashion set by the M.P. for Pt. Pedro in opening a discussion on its affairs during the budget debates of 1956 and 1957.[11] That much of what he said was true does not justify his having said them in the wrong place. But his main thesis that university policy should be decided by the state was wrong though it seems to have convinced the ex-officio Pro-Chancellor of the University, the Minister for Education. The M.P. sought to defend his thesis by giving a badly twisted account of the relations between the universities and the state in Britain. Characteristic of his exaggerations is the reference he made to the autonomy enjoyed by the University of Ceylon: "It is an autonomy which no known University in a democratic world enjoys." He was certainly going wide of the mark when he said that the University Grants Committee was composed of M.P.'s and that the Committee was responsible to Parliament, through the Minister of Education, for the policy of the universities in Great Britain!

On the contrary, the University Grants Committee was instituted to safeguard the freedom of the universities to define their own policies. The Committee is composed exclusively of academic men who hold discussions with the universities and recommend directly to the Treasury the nature of the financial assistance sought. This is given in the form of quinquennial "block grants to be expended at the universities' discretion over the whole field of their activities."[12] In the words of Sir Eric Ashby, Vice-Chancellor of Belfast, "The secret of success of the British system is that the paymasters delegate responsibility for distributing public funds to bodies composed predominantly of the recipients of the funds."[13] The Minister of Education has nothing to do with the universities; the returns from the universities and the Committee's periodical reports are tabled in Parliament by the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

---

11. *v. Hansard* Vol. 26 No. 11, Vol. 29 No. 10.
We should likewise deplore the not uncommon habit of members of the university seeking press publicity for their alleged grievances and the journalistic standards which prompt the daily press to publish even confidential documents.
12. *University Development*: Report of University Grants Committee 1935-'47 (H.M.S.O.)
13. Self-Governmet in Modern British Universities: *Science and Freedom* Bulletin No. 7.

The University Grants Committee is a characteristic British institution; but even more characteristic is that the freedom enjoyed by the British universities derives, like British democracy itself, not so much from a constitution as from a tradition of liberty. As Sir Eric Ashby points out in the article quoted, whatever be the constitution of a British or Commonwealth university, there is a convention that business should flow upwards as proposals to be approved, not downwards as directives to be obeyed. Ideas are fed at the departmental level and seep gradually upward by a process of consultation and consent, becoming on their way the adopted policy of a department, then of a faculty, then of the academic Senate and are ultimately submitted to the Council which (outside Oxford and Cambridge) may have a lay majority. Not least important is that in the department the professor is expected to consult his lecturers as scrupulously as he expects to be consulted by the Council. Academic freedom means, according to Sir Eric Ashby, that the teachers of the university have *de facto* control of the following: (i) the admission and examination of students; (ii) the curricula for courses of study; (iii) the appointment and tenure of office of academic staff; and (iv) the allocation of income among the different categories of expenditure.

If the state is not free to shape the university to its will, neither is the university free to go its own way. "British universities are the creation of the British nation rather than of the British state." In the last analysis they must respond to the needs of the nation and both state and university recognize a higher loyalty. Autonomy does not mean anarchy, but responsible freedom. It is not impossible that corruption might creep in, or tradition may become cast iron so much as to say that 'nothing must ever be done for the first time' ! The method of constant consultation between the university and the government, especially through the medium of a body like the University Grants Committee will be a wholesome corrective. Secondly, special problems may be examined by commissions of enquiry appointed in consultation with the university authorities. Thirdly, the governing bodies of the university such as the Court and Council should reflect a wide cross-section of the community; rather than parliament, the alumni, the professions, agriculture, industry, commerce, local government, and learned bodies in addition to the academic staff. Finally official recognition should be given to the association of university teachers who are often in a position to make constructive criticism of university matters as well as safeguard the security of tenure of academics, an indirect safeguard of academic freedom itself.

Need one add that a single university is a limitation on the freedom of learning? On the other hand, the existence of a number of universities and a large total enrollment is both a stimulus to creativity and a guarantee of real freedom of expression to every point of view in the nation.

The time has come to consider a revision of the Ceylon University Ordinance, the revision procedure itself following the pattern suggested above. There is much to be said for deleting the provision, introduced in the colonial period, whereby the Minister of Education becomes ex-officio Pro-Chancellor. The Auditor-General having access to the books and accounts of the university is also inconsistent with its prized autonomy. The setting up of a University Grants Commission on the Indian and British patterns will be a step in advance. The terms of reference may be somewhat as follows:—

(i) to recommend institutions for recognition as state-aided universities or institutes;

(ii) to bring national needs to the notice of appropriate institutions so as to secure that there are no unfilled gaps and to avoid unnecessary overlapping in studies;

(iii) to recommend suitable grants from public funds and their equitable distribution;

(iv) to conduct the examination of accounts, over and above each institution's internal audit;

(v) to present annual financial returns from the universities and periodical reports on university development for submission to Parliament.[14].

VI.

"The function of a university is to provide an antidote to fear." (Seeley). For a university to be only concerned with its own freedom is to perform less than its mission; freedom is positive and the university has a positive function to promote freedom. In a world where the state has at its disposal the means of enslaving the minds of its citizens, the greater is the obligation for the university to do everything to maintain the conditions of freedom of knowledge. This responsibility extends beyond the national frontiers and includes an interest in the victory of the Gottingen University against Education Minister Schluter in Germany in 1955 as well as a concern in Apartheid, the threat to South Africa's universities today.

Examples of the university's positive function fall into some four kinds:—

(1) "The university's fundamental responsibility is to truth; all other responsibilities are by it and through it....it is not only a responsibility to the discovery of truth but also to the communicating of the truth....Nothing is truly taught unless truth is taught." [15]

14. v. The State and the Freedom of Learning (the presidential address of 1957) in *Journal of N. E. S. C.*, May 1957, for a comparative study of the state's intervention in education in various countries.

15. D. G. Moses in the *Idea of a Responsible University in Asia Today* (W. S. C. F., Geneva, 1952). Ths present writer wrote one chapter for this book.

The obligation then is for the scientist to follow the argument wherever it leads, for the historian to write the history of his country and not of his race, for the political scientist to consider democracy rather than his party and for the educationist to make his charges belong to "all" rather than to 'some'. [16]

(2) University men have a responsibility to participate in the thinking that precedes political measures and national movements. The ideas involved in parliamentary bills are not generated in parliament. As Dicey remarked, every major legislative achievement of the British Parliament was fought out by the nation. Witness the discussion that took place through conference, article in periodical and book between the publication in December 1938 of the Report on Secondary Education by the Consultative Committee headed by Sir Will Spens and the first reading of the Education Bill introduced in December 1943 by R. A. Butler. If democracy is maintaining the processes of discussion rather than holding periodical elections in order to enable parties to rule, it can function only when issues are considered on their lasting value and not with reference to their bearing on the fortunes of political parties. That nation will survive which has thinkers who will not take sides and say what they think is right. Universities and university men have a responsibility to procure and disseminate knowledge and maintain the processes of dispassionate discussion.

(3) The university's concern in learning extends to standards of general school education. This concern can be shown in several ways. For one thing, the university has an interest in teaching and the conditions under which all teachers are trained, both because it wants to ensure the quality of those who prepare its own entrants and because a large section of its alumni enter the profession of teaching. Against the dangers of excessive state pressure, the university is in a position to secure the freedom of both teachers and pupils as well as remind them of the values and purposes of learning. The new schemes of Institutes of Education in England by which all training colleges in the area are being integrated with the local University Department of Education and so passing into the sphere of academic freedom is full of suggestion for us. For another, it is time that the colonial pattern of a state department of examinations framing regulations, drafting syllabuses and prescribing text-books was replaced by a system of autonomous examining bodies composed of school and university

16. Ortega Y Gasset in his *Mission of the University* considers that the university's cardinal function is "enlightenment", "the task of imparting the full culture of the time and revealing to mankind, with clarity and truthfulness, that gigantic world of today in which the life of the individual must be articulated, if it is to be authentic." After stressing "the need to create sound syntheses and systematizations of knowledge," he adds that "men endowed with the genius (for integration) come nearer being good professors than those who are submerged in their research."

teachers. School examinations will then become the ally rather than the usurper of education and with the constant stimulus of research respond easily to new ideas. Research over a wide field is among the functions of the university: here we are particularly interested in research in education. To quote one example, from my own field of Comparative Education, the time seems opportune for us to make a study of Asian systems of education. Most studies in Comparative Education have been made in Europe and the U.S.A., but they generally stop at comparing western systems with one another. A comparative study of Asian systems and the comparison of Western influence on various Asian countries, supported by parallel studies in historical and political development, should be most rewarding.

(4) Finally, in addition to making the university more and more accessible to the rural and urban working classes, who missing a good secondary education have subsequently matured, there is an obligation for the university to promote culture and learning among the masses and to supply the inspiration to new national movements. Extension courses and publications are but two of the ways in which the modern university meets the ordinary man in his own neighbourhood. The danger referred to earlier of the university impoverishing instead of enriching local life argue in favour of an extension movement to carry higher learning to the remotest areas of the country. The rural universities in particular can develop institutions like the Danish Folk High Schools, so fittingly called the poor man's Oxford. Both learned and popular publications, under conditions of freedom, help in the dissemination of knowledge no less than extension courses. Perhaps swabasha can record its first successes in extension lectures and books for the masses on modern subjects.

University of Ceylon,
Peradeniya.

K. NESIAH.

Wesley Press, Wellawatte
J. 3314, 10/58