

JAFFNA COLLEGE

Vaddukoddi



PRIZE DAY ADDRESS

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University of Jaffna

*Jaffna College*



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Principal Sir, Chairman and Members of the Board of Directors, Your Lordships, Reverend Sirs, Staff, Students and Alumni of Jaffna College, Parents and Friends!

As I stand up here this evening, I am deeply conscious of the great honour that Jaffna College has conferred upon me by inviting me to deliver this year's Prize Day Address, and on my wife, by calling upon her to distribute the prizes. A sense of deep humility<sup>and</sup> guilt and a feeling of nostalgia overpower me at this moment - humility when I realise that the honour done by this old and renowned institution is too big for me; guilt when I remember that for as long as a quarter of a century I had not actively participated in any of the activities of this great institution - my Alma Mater - which was so dear to me when I was a schoolboy; nostalgia as I recall the nine formative years that I spent in these unforgettable surroundings.

It is indeed a great happiness to me to be present here on this occasion and to imbibe again something of the spirit of this famed institution and of the cherished memories that cling to this quadrangle and the buildings and the trees and grounds that surround us. Little did I anticipate as I walked up the steps of the temporary stage set up on this very spot to collect my very first school prize at the end of my first year at Jaffna College



more than three decades ago, that one day I would be standing here delivering this address.

Principal Sir, this year is a special one for the Alumni of this institution, for they are celebrating the centenary of the founding of their Association. And I believe, it is as a compliment to them that you have invited me on this occasion, although I am not the most celebrated or distinguished of them all. On behalf of the Alumni too I thank you for this gesture.

The Prize Day in an educational institution such as this often provides an occasion for the Chief Guest to air his views on current educational problems. Looking through the past Prize Day addresses delivered here, one finds that it had become almost a ritual with Chief Guests to dwell at length, often with gloom, on the decline in educational standards or on the defects of our educational system. As early as 1943, that renowned Sri Lankan educationist, Fr. Peter Pillai, in his Prize Day Address, expressed the view that changes were 'overdue in our educational system' and went on to 'protest against the imposition of a rigidly uniform type of schools' and to raise his voice against mass regimentation in the educational field. Commenting on the situation in the Island, he said that 'In India the sons and daughters of the land are prepared to make great



sacrifices for their country, whereas here in Ceylon we have place-seekers, office-hunters and money-grabbers' and lamented that 'our education is not facing up to this situation.' And only last year, my colleague in a sister university, Prof.K.D.Arudpragasam, launched a serious and frank indictment on the present state of the educational system, concluding that 'there is no education in this country, only teaching! Ladies and gentlemen, if this evening I make special reference to Prof.Arudpragasam's address, it is not only because I wholeheartedly endorse his views, but also because I do not want them to be forgotten with last year's Prize Day. The situation, in my opinion, has worsened since then and today the unofficial tutory system of education that he dealt with has not only become overpowering in our society, it is also at the point of taking over university education, at least as far as the Arts and Science Faculties are concerned. The school system appears to be breaking down. There are tutories in every nook and corner in Jaffna today, and, believe me, even garages and cattle sheds have been converted into veritable class-rooms. The tutories have made a thriving industry of education while our schools have completely abdicated their right to educate our children.

The students tutored in these mushroom schools enter the portals of our universities as ill-educated and



intellectually emaciated persons, who know very little outside the notes doled out to them in the tutorials. A survey of the general knowledge of the students admitted to the Arts Faculty of the University of Jaffna in 1979 revealed, among other startling facts, that 12 per cent of them did not even know who the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka was!

The universities are in no position to make amends and provide the general education that the students had missed in their schools. And so these students pass out as individuals who are incapable of playing a rich and rewarding role in the life of the community.

In recent months foreign observers and local policy-makers as well as educationists have been complaining about the poor quality of our graduates. In October last year, Prof. Howard Wriggins, a distinguished scholar of Sri Lankan Studies and a Professor at Columbia University (he was also the U.S. Ambassador in Sri Lanka at that time) sadly commented that 'interviews with candidates for Fulbright and other overseas fellowships are now indicating a shocking lack of knowledge among Sri Lankan university graduates not only of history, but also of geography and of the arts and literature'. A few weeks later, Dr. Wickrema Weerasuriya, the Secretary to the Ministry of Plan Implementation, provided facts and figures that amply sup



supported the view of Prof. Wriggins.

We are all to be blamed for this state of affairs—the schools, the parents, the universities, and, no doubt, the politicians. It is no use merely blaming ourselves or others — we have to do something about this and quickly, too. The younger generation has to be saved and prepared to face the demands of the twenty-first century. The world is likely to be a very different place for them and, if we do not act now, they will be left behind and are likely to lose in the struggle for survival.

'The goal of a democratic society', it has been said, 'is the production of fully developed individuals'. We as parents and teachers must realise that we cannot make fully developed citizens of our children as long as we have the craze to make engineers and doctors and accountants of them while denying them from an early age a general education, especially an education that includes the humanities and the arts. Principal Sir, you rightly said in your Report that 'we live in a period and atmosphere which are so tragic and sad where specialised knowledge within certain limits is pursued merely as a means to an end for material prosperity only and this at the expense of all the other worthy ideals in education and life'. Today we are living in a world where many of our scholars are indulging in what has been aptly described as 'learning more and more



about less and less'. Specialisation at the expense of general learning is being carried to such extremes that scholars are living in water-tight compartments unable to stand on common ground and communicate meaningfully with each other. The disease of specialisation begins in the school when our children are compelled by ambitious parents and uncaring teachers to concentrate on the areas of study that are needed to turn them into doctors or engineers, and to neglect all the others that are so essential for the fuller development of their personalities. In the end, the product of our educational system is a reasonably intelligent person who has gained a knowledge that will probably help him to earn a living and perhaps to advance himself in this competitive world where the ignorant and the untrained are at an economic disadvantage. But we will find that he is not equipped 'to make himself as complete and resourceful a human being as possible'. As Prof. Wriggins commented, he is ignorant of his own history and culture and is consequently incapable of overcoming the challenges or conquering the problems of the future.

I am not saying that our children should not strive to become engineers and doctors. We certainly need doctors and more doctors, engineers and more engineers. But the doctors and engineers that we need are those who have attained a humanized attitude towards themselves, towards



those in their immediate circles, to their community, nation and the world. It is for the attainment of this that a restoration of the humanities and the arts to their essential places in the schools and the universities is needed. This evening, ladies and gentlemen, I consider it my task to reiterate the plea<sup>made</sup> by Howard Wriggins a few months ago, namely, that we must find 'some way to alter curricula so that even those who go far in the Science stream can gain a sense of their own cultural and historical heritage.' And I would like to add to this by saying that such a curriculum should include the means to an acquisition of a knowledge and a love of the creative arts.

It is here that I feel, in fact I am convinced, that schools like Jaffna College have a role to play. It is no <sup>use</sup> blaming the state system, the politicians or the parents. If there is something wrong, we have to fight to rectify it. The situation offers a challenge to indifference and complacency. Institutions like Jaffna College are ideally poised to be in the vanguard of the movement to take up this challenge and change the situation. The history of this institution is replete with instances when it had shown the way to the others in the past. It can and must continue to do that now and in the future. Jaffna College, ladies and gentlemen, is not just another school. She has a role to play in our society, as she had done in the past. She must awaken and play that exemplary role.



This brings me to an important question regarding the future of this institution. As she still buoyantly floats in that joyous mood that came with the return of her lost premises, her alumni, friends and well-wishers, including those resident in foreign lands, are looking up to her to play again that leading role in education that was hers in this part of the country for over 150 years. What is Jaffna College planning to do now? When is she going to start undergraduate classes? These are some of the questions on their lips.

I can almost hear someone mumbling the answer: 'Do they want Jaffna College to be taken over again?'. No one who knows the history of this great institution and its contribution to the people of Jaffna will ever answer in that manner. Jaffna College, like her forerunner, the Batticotta Seminary, has never recoiled from doing her duty by the community, even before the fire of her enemies. Her leaders were never cowed down by the strong arm of even the state. If she has carved out a unique place for herself in the annals of this country, it is because her leaders had the courage of their conviction to stand up against their opponents. When the first American missionaries were planning to establish a college for higher education at Vaddukoddai more than 150 years ago, the haughty representative in the Island of the mighty British Government, namely Governor Edward Baines, did not grant permission for such a venture.



Undaunted, the missionaries affirmed the principle that governments cannot stop Mission 'exertions', and, undeterred by the Governor's refusal, went ahead to establish the Batticotta Seminary, which Emerson Tennent described, later in 1848, as an institution that was 'entitled to rank with many European universities'. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, it is worth recalling the courageous manner in which Dr. Daniel Poor, the architect of the Seminary, established that institution. To quote the moving words of James Rutnam, a friend of Jaffna College and a historian of the Batticotta Seminary: 'There were no buildings to speak of. Funds had to be collected. Even the final sanction of the Board had to come. But the Professors were there. The students were there too. Together, these pioneers formed the University, the first of its kind in Ceylon, and the second in Asia.' If Dr. Poor and his colleagues had been cowed down by the ban placed by Governor Barnes, we would not have had the Batticotta Seminary and I need not tell you what that would have meant to the people of Jaffna.

Later, when the Seminary was closed down, its alumni and friends joined hands with the missionaries and carried on a relentless agitation for the establishment of a college and succeeded in 1872 in founding Jaffna College. And you also know how recently Jaffna College



triumphantly emerged in a bitter struggle for her very survival in the face of the state's take-over in 1974.

Today Jaffna College has facilities and resources that no other secondary school can possibly boast of. And yet, these are undoubtedly excessive for a secondary school in our part of the world. Sir Ivor Jennings, the first Vice Chancellor of the University of Ceylon, once remarked that the success of a university ought to be measured by the use which it makes of its available resources. Principal Sir, permit me to modify this statement and say that the success of Jaffna College will come to be measured by the use she will make of her resources.

Last week, the Secretary to the Ministry of Higher Education announced that out of 105,000 students who sat the G.C.E. A/L examinations in 1979, 30,000 were found eligible for admission to the universities, but that only 5,000 were being selected for admission. That would mean that as many as five times the number of selected students are being kept out of the universities although they are eligible for admission. It is not for me to go into the serious implications of this situation. On account of the prevailing system of university admission, it is fraught with earnest implications for the Tamils. This



is a time when all available resources should be utilized to ameliorate the situation. It is a time for Jaffna College to rise to the occasion and play her traditional role. Our children are forced frantically to look for avenues of higher education abroad. Ironically, a worse system of university admission in Malaysia, is making the children of Tamil settlers there equally desperate and they have been looking for hope here in Jaffna! Many Tamil parents in Malaysia have been sending messages across to Jaffna College requesting her to provide facilities for medical education so that their children could come here. Interestingly enough, Sri Lankan Tamils constituting the Tamil diaspora in Africa and the West have already started sending back some of their children to Jaffna College the moment London AL classes were commenced here. Their eager eyes are watching the next steps that Jaffna College proposes to take.

At this juncture, encouraged by the news that a private medical college is to be set up soon in Colombo, many a Jaffna parent is voicing the view that such a college should also be set up here. Ladies and gentlemen, as one who is seriously concerned with higher education and deeply interested in the future development of Jaffna College, I will be certainly failing in my duty if I do not dwell on this issue.



As a student of history, my view rests squarely on the experience of the past. If we care to find out what the original ideals of the founders of this institution were and what this place really is and what she has stood for, then it will not be hard for us to discover which way she should go. The founding fathers of the Batticotta Seminary planned that institution of higher learning with, as J.V.Chelliah put it, 'large-heartedness, wide vision and statesmanship', and asked for support 'in the name of learning'. And they founded the institution of higher learning to provide for the further education of the many boys and girls passing out of their schools, thus taking upon themselves a heavy responsibility that even the state was not prepared to take for almost a century to come.

After the Seminary was closed down and Jaffna College had taken its place, there was a growing demand for university education in Jaffna. Jaffna College appealed to the state to set up a university in the Island, and finding that this university was a distant dream, went ahead to conduct undergraduate classes as an affiliated institution of the Calcutta University. That was in 1891. Thus, once again, she rose to the occasion. And she continued to play this important role of providing higher education even after the University College and its successor, the University of Ceylon, were established



in the South. When the university came to Jaffna she provided part of the nucleus for its establishment and lost her undergraduate department.

Today Jaffna College stands here, as I said earlier, not as a mere secondary school. No doubt we have the secondary school. We have also the Technical Institute. And there are, in addition, the buildings and hostels intended for the Undergraduate Department. At a time when our youth are clamouring for higher education, at this moment when the state is willing to allow private institutions of higher education, and when encouragement comes from even outside the country, Jaffna College should not hesitate to play her traditional role. 'Let others do it' should not be her policy, when she alone can do it. Let not her resources go waste.

Today the cream of our youth leaves the school having obtained the best results in the Science subjects. As the keenest competition takes place in the admission to the medical and engineering faculties, many of the best students are thrown out on the streets. It is with regard to this category of students that something must be done as soon as possible. The cream of our youth must be saved.



Principal Sir, this institution already has a Technical Institute which offers immense possibilities of flowering into an Engineering College. A para-medical school or even a College of Medical Studies may not be difficult to add to this place. We should not forget that long before the state thought of medical education in this dountry and even before the Tamil language had begun its development as a modern scientific language, the American missionaries associated with this place had the vision and the courage to start medical education in Tamil in Jaffna and to train the first Western medical practitioners among our people. The saga of Samuel Fisk Green need not be retold here. But what many of you may not know is that even before the arrival of Dr.Green, and even befor the founding of Batticotta Seminary the American missionaries had begun medical instruction to the youth of Jaffna.

When Jaffna College was founded, there was a move to endow a Green Professorship of Medicine and the Natural Sciences here. Donations were started in Jaffna and in 1874 Green himself came forward to contribute a thousand dollars towards the endowment. Unfortunately, such a Professorship was never founded. Perhaps because of the establishment of a state-sponsored Medical College in Colombo in 1870, this was thought unnecessary.



It may be well to remember that when Dr. Green was training medical practitioners, he was not thinking of producing doctors who would uproot themselves from the soil and look for salubrious surroundings abroad. His objective was quite contrary to this. If I may be permitted to quote his own words, he said: 'I hope by going into vernacular education, to get some doctors who will in native dress start off afoot in response to calls, and not demand a horse and carriage to be sent and a heavy fee also in addition. This aping of European habits is very well, but young Jaffna overdoes it.' Today we feel the need to return to the ideals of this founding father. We need doctors, as I said earlier, with a humanized attitude towards themselves and towards others. I am in favour of the sincere view that if Jaffna College could return to the ideals of her founders, she could show the way.

Talking of the ideals of the founders. I would like to leave one more idea for your consideration. The earliest American missionaries, Daniel Poor, Hoisington, Samuel Green, Miron Winslow and several others, studied Tamil thoroughly and laboured hard to promote Tamil learning as well as to develop the language as a medium of modern communication. Both Poor and Hoisington were themselves Tamil scholars who could hold their own against any traditional Jaffna scholar.



They were the first to begin the modernization of Tamil studies and to elevate Tamil Studies to the status of a university level subject. Green who came later was the first to use Tamil as a language of modern Science. He was thoroughly convinced about the need to develop it as a modern scientific language and worked hard to make it one. It will not be an exaggeration to say that Green's efforts in this field are still unparalleled. While the general impression in our midst today is that the missionaries introduced Western culture and alienated our people from their traditional culture, we find that Green went so far as to condemn the aping of European habits. The simple and dedicated lives of these early American missionaries must surely have been appreciated in nineteenth-century Jaffna. Today we find our youth moving away from such ideals as simple living and dedication/learning and work. The knowledge of the Tamil language that many of them possess is shockingly poor. Nor are they competent in any other language. If the lives and achievements of the early American missionaries in Jaffna can inspire both the teachers and the young students in this institution, then Jaffna College will be fulfilling her mission. Is it possible to return to the ideals of the founders?



Principal Sir, Ladies and gentlemen, I have now  
come to the end of my address. It has been indeed a  
great privilege to be with you this evening and to  
address you. I thank you most sincerely for your patient  
hearing. Thank you very much.

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