

BOLGODA CHAT

The Teaching Vice Chancellor

An interview with
Prof. (retired) GTF De Silva

The early years

When I think of my early days, there are two experiences that made a profound influence on my future career. My father was an Assistant Station Master, and he taught me all aspects of managing a railway station except telegraphy. Later, as my father become ill, my parents arranged accommodations for me in a house near the Ulapane station and left for our home in Ambalangoda. Occasionally, the station master used to consume alcohol during night shift, and he used to summon me to look after the station. At 10 years of age, I handled all the functions of a railway station including tablet operations, advising the cabin man on signaling, issuing tickets, and informing the transport office based on train numbers. My main problem was waking up the SM from his deep sleep when an express train approached, placing his cap on the head, and taking him to deliver the tablet to the driver.

After my father passed away, we moved to a small house owned by my mother's family and lived on the meager pension my mother inherited. Later, we moved to a better house with electricity, pipe born water and even a radio set. I used to help some neighbours who were obsessed with betting on horse races, by translating the radio commentaries and race books. I soon became an advisor on horses and jockeys even though I never placed any bet. Around 14 years of age, I had become the chairman of a youth club, started a library at our home, commenced a hand-written magazine, and started doing religious and social work. During our activities we had to clash with families consisting of known thugs around our village. I used to address some of them who were known killers as "aiya", and later in my life, this helped me in working with some "academic thugs" (laughter)!

My school education up to SC (equivalent to O/Level) was at Dharamasoka College, except for six months at a school near Ulapane. My school did not have the provision for HSC (equivalent to A/Level) in the science stream. In my search for another school, I was rejected by seven schools. Finally, having admitted by the Richmond College, I passed university entrance with distinctions winning the Darrel Medal as the best student that year. I also won the Galle Gymkhana Scholarship as the best student of the Southern Province.

I spent four years at the University of Colombo doing a Mathematics Special degree. That became the most boring period in my life. My boredom led me to make the mistake of joining a left wing pollical movement. Yet, I somehow managed to secure a second-class degree to enable me to join the Ceylon College of Technology (CCT) as the very first lecturer.

When I came to Katubedda, I was directed to an office where two gentlemen were seated. I approached the person who looked less violent. That gent later I learnt was Mr. T.O.P Fernando, Principal of the Institute of Practical Technology (IPT). He directed me to Mr. L.H. Sumanadasa, who was Director of the CCT. He greeted me with a Neil Armstrong like statement, saying "At last, somebody has come!" I was introduced to Mr. Muller, the Chief of the UNESCO team and to Professor Funk who was in-charge of the subject of Mathematics. The two UN experts took me to show the foundation of the building now named after the great Sumanadasa. Later, CCT and IPT were combined together.

Five of us were sent on UN Fellowships to do post-graduate studies and all of us preferred UK, and I was placed at Imperial College, London. At the end of the second year, we were asked to come home due to the 1971 insurgency. However, I was able to receive my MPhil, as well as obtaining my MBCS and C.Eng.

On my return, I found that the CCT had transformed to a University, with many Professors from Peradeniya and Colombo taking main roles. I became the president of the Buddhist Society and the Staff Welfare Society, and also held the positions of secretary and subsequently president of the Teachers Union. Student Union chose me as their Senior Treasurer, and I had to become involved when the University administration and students faced problems due to race riots, the murder of a student, ragging issues, and a notorious hunger strike.

They made me the Vice-Chancellor

The 1988-1989 was the worst era at the University of Moratuwa, which culminated in the assassination of the Vice Chancellor, Professor Chandra Patuwathavithana and the Chief Security Officer Mr. Upali Ranaweera, while attending to their duties. The University was in turmoil, and no one was willing to assume the role of Vice Chancellor. Ultimately, the Registrar called a meeting of the senior staff, and I did not attend this meeting saying "when the king is dead a crown prince should take over." There were several staff members more senior than me, and I received a notice from the Registrar, giving names of seven staff members who each had to act in the role of VC for one week. My name was the last on this list. We called this era the 'Sath Sathiya' (seven weeks).

Due to a request from some staff members, I had to take over in the third week as the VC and continue for several weeks. During my turn, the Buddha statue erected in the premises was declared open, and this was a great blessing for me. At this time, a search committee had been formed to look for a person willing to make



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the sacrifice and become the VC, and this committee approached me. I had a short answer for them; "I am neither eager nor afraid" to become the VC. One evening, the two Deans, Engineering & Architecture, visited me at my home. They wanted me to take over the vice-chancellorship. I said, "come, join me to watch Woody Woodpecker cartoon on TV". They somehow persuaded me, thus eventually I accepted the offer. My philosophy was "Bahu



jana hithaya, Bahu jana Sukaya," (well being and happiness of many people)." However, I had one condition in accepting this position, and that was, I should be free to continue teaching.

Thus ended the "sath sathiya", and I worked in this role for six years plus one more year. The 'sath sathiya' turned out to be a "sath wasara" (seven years). I continued teaching during and beyond! When I meet my former students, they fondly recall "numerical methods" lessons. The jokes I cracked to break monotone, they had nicknamed "VC's advertisements".

My role as the Vice Chancellor

I can now say, it was a blessing that I had no practical experience in management nor followed a single lecture of that kind. However, I had extensively read about great personalities. Moreover, I had read several books on university administration as a junior academic. The first thing I did was to develop a plan for the University and a plan for my conduct.

During my tenure, the library and hostel buildings were completed, and hostel facilities were provided for female students for the first time. A bank branch, a book shop, and a childcare center for the staff and neighbors were started. The university press, which was running at a loss, was closed and the building was converted to a drawing facility. Many services were rendered to the society, through activities such as regional and school seminars, regional development plans, and road development etc. I have described various activities conducted under my leadership during this seven-year period in a book written in Sinhala, 'Upakulapathi Mathaka Satahan' (Memoirs of a Vice Chancellor).

During my sixth year of tenure, arrangements had to be made for a new VC. Even though the position was advertised in the press and the University Council sent three names to the UGC, the government made no appointment. Instead they kept extending my service. From my end however, I kept pressing the UGC to find a replacement. At the inauguration of the Sabaragamuwa University held around August 1996, I met the Minister himself and made the request. His answer was, "professor, you're doing well. Please continue in acting capacity". I am a man of principles and disagreed with the minister. Finally, I succeeded to being my seven years long vice-chancellorship to an end.

Other memories

LEARN: Around 1990s, a young lecturer with a PhD in electronic networking came to my office with the Registrar. The lecturer wished to introduce the internet, by incorporating all the Universities and Research Institutes to an electronic network called LEARN, and to introduce e-mail system to start with. The Registrar's anxiety was that the staff of all the universities will use this service and we may have to pay a huge telephone bill. Ultimately, I allowed this on a provisional basis for three months. Today, the use of the internet, smart phones and electronic social media are commonplace in all universities.

Nuga Tree: One day, I got a phone call that the Nuga Tree near the L-Block had fallen. Despite the place is usually crowded with students and vehicles, the tree hadn't touched the slightest of them. This Nuga tree

had a history. Many wouldn't know, the "L-Block" was thus named because of this tree. A square building was planned, hence the tree was supposed to be removed. The first day, the machine brought to remove the tree broke down. The next day, the driver got injured and he refused to continue the task any further. Mr. L.H. Sumanadasa, the Director, changed the design to spare the tree. New building was in "L" shape. Not stopping there, he constructed a wall around it. I wasn't a witness, but the elderly security officer who related this story to me, was. At the time of the falling of the Nuga Tree, there were problems in the Campus and Wesak was approaching. I asked the maintenance staff to clean the area and colourwash the wall. On the Wesak day, I went to the Tree, did a simple Pooja, asked the blessing of spirits if any, to bring peace to the Campus. Then unfolded the miracle. The fallen tree that had been trimmed approximately 20 feet from the root, had become upright on its own. While the tree was standing up, a worker who was chopping the branches were on it. Being a great admirer of the tree, I couldn't help writing a poem about this.

The CAD CAM centre of the Department of Mechanical Engineering was opened during my time. I retired from the Department in 2001. However, I did some visiting lectures until recently. I also served as the chairman of the Ceylon German Technical Training Institute.

Indeed a miracle
Risen from the dead
Shedding hair of leaves
You have raised your head

Did you defy gravity
The math we taught
Or did nature help you
On scientific thought

Bless you mother giant
We have shed our gloom
May you live many ages
Grow strong and bloom

Most people have now forgotten that there lived another great 'Tree' that gave shade to the University fell sometime back. That was Arthur C. Clarke.

Now I am a writer

Now I am 84, happily spending time as a writer. I wrote a few detective stories for children connected to places I know such as Rambukkana, Ambalangoda, Ahangama & Weligama. The book on Sir Arthur C. Clarke in sinhalese had gone to the third edition. Translation of the Life Story of His Holiness Dalai Lama is to be released soon. I just completed translation of His book on Inter Religious Harmony. A novel in sinhalese "Happiness for Many" is with another publisher. The book "Experiences as VC" is a gift I give to any one visiting me.

Future direction for the UoM

I strongly feel that we must break away from the UGC and become an independent entity similar to the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT). Prime Minister Nehru created five IITs as he was not happy with the way Indian Universities functioned. He chose to keep IITs under him. They are now ranked among the best of that kind in the world.

When I first joined the CCT, which was created under UNESCO/UNDP, the leader of the UN team was a member of the team that set up the IIT at Calcutta. Even my subject of Mathematics was taught with a practical bias. I strongly believe that we have to produce practical engineers who help the man on the street, as Sir Arthur Clarke told a US committee on science applications.

Steps should be taken to bring more public awareness of the projects that will benefit ordinary people of our country. The people need to see solar and wind energy, low-cost housing projects, and other innovations that make their lives better that are built by the University.

<https://doi.org/10.31705/BPRM.v2.2021.9>

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