

06

Future of Sri Lanka: Leading the Nation to the 21st Century

J. R. Jayewardene

On the occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the founding of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, I am happy to be able to preside at the Silver Jubilee Convocation, as your Chancellor. Let me share with you some of my own thoughts on how we should think of the Future.

If you reflect for a moment on past history, the ancient civilisations of the World, of Iran, of Egypt, of India, of China and of our own Sri Lanka, they are now in the category of countries which are generally regarded as the underdeveloped. In contrast to these countries, we see that Western Europe, a small area of the globe, has outstripped them. Europe was soon followed by the United States, Japan, and the Soviet Union in leading the World in technology.

What separates the developed countries from the underdeveloped is largely the application of science to agricultural and industrial development and the existence of an economy based on modern technology. The problem of moving into the developed World is therefore a question of applying modern science and transforming the economy to one based on science and technology. By this, I mean the application of science to every phase of life, to agriculture, to food processing, to communications, to housing, to production of materials, to the mining of mineral deposits, to the utilisation of the resources of the land for the benefit of its people.

It is also my belief that it is impossible to transform the economy of any country today without establishing science as a vital force. Science and technology must be an essential part of development. It has to be part of upbringing from the cradle.

Although science has formed part of the programme of our Universities and the many research institutes set up in this country, science has never been given the important place as an organised national activity. It is only since 1978 that the Government has for the first time realised the important role of science and has tried to foster its activity and provide a suitable environment for its development. We have still a very long way to go.

At a public meeting held at Wariyapola on the 2nd of July 1982 I said-

“I wish to state here that we must look more and more forward into the future. The ongoing projects of ours are not enough. Today other countries

in the World, especially Japan, America and Germany are looking forward to the ushering in of a new era

Should we too continue to let our thoughts be enmeshed in the achievements of the industrial revolution which is already passing away or should we think differently, think afresh, think anew?.....

Our youth are educated and skilled; we will give them an advanced technological education so that in the future our society would have robots, computers and other new gadgets to help us live happier lives

Whilst other parties talk only of the cost of living we have to think of these expanding horizons..... Therefore all over the Island we have to give up old ideas and go boldly into the new technological era”.....

We have since then inaugurated the Institute of Fundamental Studies and we are in the process of establishing a Computer and Information and Technology Council.

A Micro Network Laboratory is already planned for the use of the 5th generation of computers which should be born in the 1990s.

In the Moratuwa University an Institute of Studies dealing with a wide range of technological and space studies known as the Arthur C. Clarke Centre has been set up.

A new course of studies dealing with Bio-technology will commence at one of the- Universities.

Thus the ideas that I propounded at Wariyapola are gradually taking shape in the sphere of research, university education, manufacture and space technology.

There is also a proposal to set up an Electronics Engineering College. This has become necessary because since 1977 Sri Lanka has undergone a revolution in the use of electronic appliances and equipment. The number of television sets in the country has increased from 2200 in 1979 to over 200,000 in 1983. The number of computers increased from 15 in 1978 to cover 300 in 1983. In addition, a very large number of electronic calculators, electronic clocks and watches, electro-medical equipment, photo copiers, and audio and video equipment had been imported into this country since 1977.

The objectives of this sphere of national policy are:-

- (a) to improve the quality of the life of the people;
- (b) to increase opportunities for Sri Lankan society;
- (c) to meet the technological challenges of the future ;and

(d) to harness the advances of modern triumphs to further the socio- economic development of the country.

The major developments in this country such as the Mahaweli Scheme will provide the energy and the water. We need science for the resulting agricultural and industrial development. We must make use of the great advances that have been made in the field of Molecular Biology to improve on nature. The Biosphere can be made to yield not two-fold but perhaps four-fold. The techniques of plant breeding which up to now were the basis of agricultural development are fast giving way to modern processes of tissue culture, hybridisation of cells, gene-splicing and the host of other developments which are being exploited by the advanced World. It is to such frontiers of science that our country needs to turn. We would otherwise be left behind in the race.

In the field of communications there are explosive developments. The introduction of Television to our country, barely 2 years ago has transformed the style of life of a number of our people. They have access immediately to events across the globe. They are partners to the exploration of the universe. They are eyewitnesses to history. We would like to take advantage of these major break through in science.

The microchip is today a carrier of knowledge. In spite of its diminutive size, it can hold a vast compendium of knowledge. It is my intention to encourage the use of these devices to bring new knowledge to the people of our villages. We have a vast reservoir of talent among our people. This can be tapped by the use of modern methods of education and information transfer.

The need to “leap-frog” into the future is paramount in the life of a developing nation. Indeed it may be the only way. In a sense we have an advantage. We don’t need to go through every stage, from the industrial revolution to the internal combustion engine, to the atomic age, to the space age. We can omit the intermediate steps. We can take advantage of the work that has been done so far and lead this nation into the 21st century. Time is of the essence. The time is now, and we must grasp it. You, young men and women of the future, will be the beneficiaries.

1984.02.25