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“Value Systems and the Role of the Universities”

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It is with considerable pride, not unmixed with a sense of humility, that I rise to deliver this Convocation Address to this distinguished assembly. Permit me first to express my grateful thanks to you, Chancellor, and to the Senate of the University, for the honour you have done me by conferring on me the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honouris causa*, of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura and by inviting me to deliver this address. I hope I shall prove myself worthy of your conference.

We are gathered here this afternoon to witness the graduation of a very large number of students of this University who have successfully completed their courses of study under trying and difficult circumstances and in far-from-normal conditions. The upheavals our country has been experiencing in recent years have affected and even prolonged their exertions as they have, indeed, shaken our own confidence in ourselves as a nation. I therefore think that it would not be inappropriate for me, in the Address to share with all of you, but especially with those young men and women whom we congratulate today, some reflections on the present discontents of our land. I seek not to analyse their causes or to prescribe remedies for them, but rather to focus on what I consider a serious malaise in our contemporary society — the erosion of values.

Ever since the beginning of time, and long before society came to be organised into identifiable and institutionalised groups, or units, man at every stage in his evolution from family to clan, to tribe, to village community, to municipality, to nation-state, bound himself by certain unwritten but generally accepted norms or standards of individual behaviour and communal relationships. These were not laws laid down by a law-giver, and, enforced by authority, but self-imposed and accepted and observed as being necessary for the protection, the preservation and the progress of all as distinct from each, of the whole as distinct from the part. These norms or standards came eventually to be regarded as the values which bound society in the common interest, the subversion of which, by a part would disrupt the whole. In the long and panoramic history of human civilisation, some of these values disappeared, others were transformed, and yet others were modified. Indeed, geographical, historical and cultural factors have produced different values in different places at different times. Yet, on the whole, there remains a basic value system to which all human beings, claiming to be civilised, subscribe. With the expansion of the social unit in size and population, with the growing complexities of life and labour, with the march of science and the spread of knowledge, the simple set of values of earlier times grew wider and deeper. In that growth the ancient seats of learning of India and China, of Egypt and Assyria, of Greece and Rome contributed, in full measure, through a remarkable succession of thinkers, philosophers, theologians, writers and artists. The world’s Universities later produced the Age of

Enlightenment and the Age of Reason, thus, further refining these values. We in Sri Lanka today are as much heirs to that legacy as the people of any other part of the habitable world.

Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen;

It is my belief that the erosion of values in our society is partly the cause, and partly the effect, of the disarray, we see around us today. Almost four and a half centuries of alien colonial rule cannot but affect, for better or for worse the indigenous traditions and standards of any community. The values of the simple rural agrarian people, who lived their simple lives, in their simple homes, basically buttressed by the teachings of the Buddha, were also simple values — understanding, sharing, mutual help, caring for one another, tolerance, compassion, respect for elders, reverence for life and for nature, humility, and an acceptance alike of life's joys as of its sorrows, its rewards as of its denials. Across this traditional way of contented existence, fell the shadow of individual ambition, selfishness, competition, and struggle and the concept of each for himself rather than that of each for all and all for each. By the end of the colonial era in Sri Lanka a conflict of values had arisen — Sri Lanka had been divided into two nations on the value lines, one, the nation of the English-educated, Western-oriented, urbanised, forward-looking, development conscious; the other, the nation of the indigenous rural masses, conservative, culturally inward-looking, traditional and static. The former mainly consisted of a small segment of society which saw the traditional value system of their forefathers as backward, dull enervating and old-fashioned. They were the urban middle-class, the professional and commercial intelligentsia.

With the increasing economic challenges facing the nation and its leaders, the value-systems were made use of as instruments in a politico-economic duel between collectivism (as represented by the traditionalists and individualism {as represented by the modernists}). Against the tolerance, the sharing, the caring, which were characteristic of the former were paraded the banners of initiative, private enterprise speed efficiency and competition which underlay the latter. Their acceptance set the stage for a readjustment of our traditional values.

Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen;

It is not my contention that the mere opening of the economy caused a deterioration of or disregard for values. But it is my contention that the opening of the economy in its entirety in one fell blow as it were, after years of control and restraint, sent shock waves through the social system as a whole. The free enterprise system in the advanced market economy countries which were cited as examples and adopted as models evolved from totally different historical antecedents, over a long period of time. That system could no more take root and succeed in a comparatively short period in the soil of an economy which had not quite recovered from feudal and colonial exploitation than the Parliamentary system of democratic government could take root and blossom in the soil of a polity not fully accustomed to a free and independent press and sadly lacking in an informed and articulate public opinion. With the opening of the economy with such unabashed speed, we also opened a Pandora's box of totally unexpected and unwanted evils. The intelligentsia of which, I daresay, we are all a part, soon found themselves

pursuing the competitive acquisition of wealth. “Each for himself and the Devil take the hind most” and “I’m all right, Jack” became the passwords to success and acceptance.

Unfortunately, the parameters of enterprise and expansion, which in the other societies that had adopted this philosophy with success had circumscribed, guided and channelled this national effort, were overlooked and ignored. In the quest for quick success in the a massing of wealth nation and individual alike forged ahead with no holes barred. The end was regarded as justifying any means. Moral and ethical constraints were forgotten, the standards of conduct in personal and professional behaviour were allowed to lapse; the concern for others took a second place, if it took any place at all; the ideas of sharing and caring disappeared; rights came to be emphasised over duties and privileges over obligations; moral accountability ceased to be recognised; wealth for wealth’s sake rather than as a means to an end became the prime concern. All this resulted in an imperceptible insidious and inexorable erosion of the individual and the collective character of our people.

“Ill fares the land to hastening ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates and men decay.”

The breakdown of values in any society at any time is bound to affect the quality of men and of life. History has given us repeated examples of this truth. Perhaps the most outstanding is the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. It was not foreign invasion or civil strife that finally led to its collapse, but the greed, the corruption., the venality and luxurious living of her patrician and oligarchic classes and the disintegration of values that constituted the dry-rot in the woodwork. Rome’s very success contained within it the seeds of its own decay. The peasantry, eking out an existence on money borrowed at usurious interest rates that guaranteed his inability to pay, slowly sank into poverty, bankruptcy and the slums; the returning soldiers trained in killing and used to looting found no taste or patience for the lonely labour of ploughing the fields, and joined the turbulent proletariat of the cities; the flight from the farms to the towns broke the humanising contacts of rural life and substituted an exploitation of labour unfettered by human relationships. In the meantime wealth mounted in Rome but did not filter down. The tasks of government were neglected in the search for wealth in business and its enjoyment in luxury. Corruption was practised without conscience or concealment. Acquisition, speculation and luxury were the order of the day. Vulgar ostentation became a symbol of one-upmanship. The smell of money had intoxicated society. This was Rome heading for its down-fall. It had abandoned all values except self-enrichment and self-indulgence.

Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my fear that, Sri Lankan society seem to be beginning to resemble that picture of Rome too closely for comfort. We are facing challenging times ahead. Our population is estimated to reach 21 million in ten years time. The Cost of Living Index, according to official figures, which averaged 318.2 in 1980 now stands at 1020 a 220 percent increase in ten years. In the name of private enterprise and foreign-exchange earning, all moral constraints seem to have been relaxed with devastating effect on our child population. In a searing expose in its issue of January 28, 1990, the “Weekend Sun” revealed

the frightening extent to which the sexual exploitation of children for commercial tourist promotion purposes exists a few miles away from our capital city. Sun, sand and sin are sold so that we may collect a few thousand dollars. According to the report, boys and girls, some of them under 10 years of age are hired to service the carnal desires of some of our more unscrupulous foreign friends. An executive of a Colombo-based travel operating firm is quoted as saying that “it may be that a little sin that comes along with the tourists will have to be overlooked, if not encouraged, as long as the country’s coffers are swelled.” What price values? The smell of money has indeed intoxicated our society. The Commissioner of Probation and Child Care Services has revealed that there are now in Sri Lanka over 10,000 child prostitutes (male and female) at a conservative estimate most of them in the age group of 8 to 15. And this year marks the beginning of the International Decade of the Child. Sri Lanka signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child earlier this year. Meanwhile, the Chairman of the National Dangerous Drug Control Board has stated that there are over 50,000 known drug addicts in the country with an annual consumption of about 300 kilograms and a financial turnover of Rs. 90 million a year. Ten years ago there were no reported cases of drug addiction in Sri Lanka according to him. After a decade of a free market economy when the annual growth rate reached an unprecedented 8.2 per cent in 3 successive years, H.E. President Premadasa has made the alleviation of poverty his Government’s first priority thus underlining my observation, Wealth had mounted but it had not permeated. The Commissioner General of Inland Revenue in his Annual Report for last year has indicated that only 20 percent of the Country’s professional cadres have paid their income tax, and the Government has expressed concern as recently as last month at the large scale evasion of customs duties by importers and exporters - the much vaunted commercial sector of our society. At a time when the country, and indeed the very city of Colombo, was in the grip of insurgent violence and of general fear and the Government had imposed a 10 p.m. to 4 a.m. curfew, those who should have set the example in self-discipline, respect for the law, and concern for the sufferings of their fellow countrymen preferred to use the opportunity for enjoyment and self-indulgence by drinking and dancing at “Curfew parties” in the luxury and safety of five-star hotels, mindless of what was going on around them, and insensitive and indifferent to the dying and killing that was taking place almost within hearing distance. This attitude epitomises for me, Chancellor and Ladies and Gentlemen, the nadir of the dehumanisation of civilised values to which those who should have known better had permitted themselves to descend. The professionally educated, sophisticated, rational segment of society had betrayed their claims to responsible preservation of society and of the bonds that hold society together.

Now, even the leadership and inspiration that the accredited spiritual segment of society often provides to its flock in times of moral conflicts and strains by its own example is sadly missing in our so-called “Dharmadipa”. As a Buddhist myself I grieve at the seeming indifference of the Noble Order of the Maha Sangha, in the face of this breakdown in moral values and the collapse of the social order when they should be in the struggle to preserve them. King Uttiya (brother of King Devanampiya Tissa) in his oration at the funeral of the Venerable Arahat Mahinda Maha Thera observed that one of the two potent causes of the progress of Buddhism in Sri Lanka was, I quote him “the example, by a rapidly growing Sangha who live what they preach and preach what they live. ... The Maha Sangha, under the enlightened guidance of the Maha Thera, taught by precept and practice.” It is most regrettable that this is no longer so.

I have spoken thus far, fairly frankly, about my disillusionment with the professional middle class intelligentsia and with the spiritual leaders in our society. This address relates to Value Systems in Society and the Role of Universities. It obliges me therefore to convey to you some thoughts on the academic segment of our society, which in any event, is also covered under the description of “intelligentsia.” From the ancient Universities of Nalanda and Taxila in India, of Al Azar and Alexandria in Egypt, of Paris in France, of Utrecht in Holland, of Bologna in Italy, and of Oxford and Cambridge in England, have come to the present generation of mankind not only a great tradition of learning and knowledge, but also of enquiry and the free expression of independent thought. Throughout the ages intellectual giants have suffered - and even died - for what they believed in. Gautama the Buddha was reviled, scorned and vilified by the orthodox Brahminical bigots of His time, Socrates was condemned to drink hemlock and die by his fellow Athenians; Aristotle fled to avoid a similar fate ; Jesus Christ was crucified by the Roman rulers; Copernicus was excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church ; Rousseau and Voltaire were banished from their native lands by their State authorities; Thomas Paine’s writings were publicly burned; Charles Darwin’s epoch-making “Origin of Species” was banned from being used and taught in schools. Mohandas Gandhi fell to an assassin’s bullet. They, and many more like them suffered and died as men of conscience, of stubborn incorruptibility, of a stern independence of mind and a fearlessness of consequence, so that the rest of us may benefit and live. They were human symbols of man’s eternal yearning and search for truth, and inspired the ideals which gradually began to be embodied in the search for understanding based on knowledge. The instruments of that search were, and continue to be, the world’s Universities, including our own. In that sense, Universities can be regarded as forming the core of human civilisation. Indeed, the Latin word “Universitas” implies an all embracing and comprehensive totality of the various disciplines or “faculties” of the human mind which would enable men to distinguish between the real and the unreal, the permanent and the transient, the true and the false, the substance and the shadow - in short, to identify a system of values which will be universally true and a guide in the complexities and challenges of life in the raw. Universities, thus, to my mind, are the inheritors, preservers and transmitters of - the distilled essence of human experience as generation overtakes generation.

In our own society, Universities have been understandably and inevitably, of recent origin and growth. It was only in 1942 that our own independent University was established as the University of Ceylon, in Colombo. Since then the increase in population, the rise in the demand for higher education and the economic development of the country spawned a network of these institutions covering our entire land. As in most other spheres of human activity, growth and expansion both in the number of Universities as well as in their student body seem to have affected standards adversely. Values can always be more easily maintained and preserved among few than among many. In this distinguished academic assembly, it is with trepidation that I venture to suggest that dedication to values, by both teachers and learners, seem to have declined. A University is an autonomous academic community, almost insulated from the rest of society by its very nature, but by no means totally unaffected by what goes on outside it. It has the potential to cultivate, to inculcate and to practise a purer and higher scale of values than any other community in society. It consists of the student body and the faculty members between whom there is a much closer relationship than is possible in any other comparable organization. It is an integral, human and humanising personal bond which provides ample opportunity for the transfer of more than mere knowledge or expertise. It is a cradle of character-moulding by instruction, by discussion, by comparison and contrast, by examination and criticism, and above all by personal example. Unfortunately, our Universities seem to have become, no doubt imperceptibly, and perhaps

unavoidably, institutions catering to a highly competitive and very restricted labour market. This naturally limits the wider approach to learning and knowledge and character-formation. Students become impatient and restless, and teachers become helpless.

On the wider canvas, the State has been gradually, but not so surreptitiously, encroaching on the preserves of academia and the autonomy of Universities. One segment of our society takes it for granted that Universities are hotbeds of radicalism and schools of insurgency; while another segment regards them as part of the Establishment. The State authorities themselves look on Universities with suspicion at best and with alarm at worst. In these circumstances, it must be conceded, neither teachers nor students can enjoy the best advantages and benefits that Universities are expected to confer on them and on society at large. Academic freedom, dissent, criticism, non-violent demonstration, expression of liberal opinion, are the hallmarks of a University distinguishing from other institutions. The pulsating throb of discussion, the clash of ideas, the sharpening of wit against wit, the collision of arguments galvanise their lives.

Sad to say, the excitement of intellectual activity has been replaced by the excitement of crude and sometimes violent infection of physical pain, mental anguish and emotional disturbance under the name of “freshmen’s rags.” At no time in our University history has this barbaric phenomenon reached such disgusting levels. Cambridge University, of which I am an alumnus, does not have such an event. Nor does Oxford or any other reputed University. Where did Sri Lanka inherit this from? Is it from the general breakdown of values that I have been speaking about? Or is it from selfishness, the competitive, the aggressiveness the power complex, the wealth complex, and the class complex? What are the values of a society which could produce University undergraduates (supposedly the cream of the educated classes) capable of such vulgar behaviour? If values are to be maintained the Universities are under an obligation to society to prevent such miscreants from adopting the respectability that the University bestows on its students - they should be expelled after proper evidence establishes their guilt.

The Charter of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) begins with the ringing proclamation “Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the seeds of peace must be sown.” Adapting those words, I say to you “Since values breakdown in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that we must seek to preserve them,” and I say to you that, *that* is the principal role of Universities today in Sri Lanka, as anywhere else in the world.

Chancellor and Graduands:

Listening to me you may think I am yet another Cassandra, a prophet of doom, a professional pessimist. Whatever I may be, I am, however not entirely despondent. I am not despondent because the faith I have lost in my own contemporaries, colleagues and class collectively is restored as I look upon your bright and eager faces with the bloom of youth, expectation and promise upon them. If the torch has been allowed to grow dim in the hands of the silent and spiritless men and women of my generation, I am confident that as you take it from our hands it will be rekindled again, and burst forth into the light and warmth of social consciousness and commitment to national values in yours. Learning is more than the mere acquisition of knowledge in a specialised field. A University is more than a school. As you go forth into life, as indeed, you will soon be doing, you will of course be experts, specialists and learned in the professions and you will be serving our people and our country. However, the years spent

during the most idealistic and promising period of your lives in a University are years of opportunity. Under proper guidance and in the hands of inspired and inspiring teachers you have widened your horizons beyond your own special discipline. It is the formative period during which you learn about life in general, of its challenges and its opportunities, of the dignity of the human person, of the freedom of thought, and of expression, of the needs of others less fortunate than yourselves, of the aspirations of those 'still without relief, and, above all, of the importance in this interdependent society of understanding, of tolerance, of compassion. The vast and historic developments in science and technology and in the expansion of man's intellectual vistas cannot but affect the narrow concept of 'learning' as mere knowledge gained from books. You will have been trained in the University to observe the reality of one sobering certainty change. Wherever we look, whether within or outside our own country, there appear to be tensions between the past and the future, between a pessimism we cannot shake off and an optimism we cannot quite subscribe to. The present appears therefore as a confusion of paralysing indecision and bewildering prospects which lead us often to an attitude of negativism. Unable to keep pace with too much that is happening too fast, we retreat into ourselves, digging in against the complexities that change always brings about, and we seek relief in escapism, in cults, or in self-indulgent and non-productive consumerism. Learning and a University education seem to be one available source of resilience against this trend.

Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen, Graduands:

I have in these general observations sought to convey to you my concerns about what I consider an invisible enemy of our society. I may have exaggerated some weaknesses, magnified some observations and over-emphasised some failures — indeed I may be quite mistaken. I sincerely hope so. But I have used this platform to lend some guidance to the young generation of our country from whom the country expects so much.

I wish to address a salute to those young men and women leaving this hall with the imprimatur of this University on them. Combine the knowledge you have acquired here with an attempt to learn from our mistakes. Our country and nation are in peril, is at your feet. It is for you to save them from self-destruction by your exertions. If, in your future lives, you ever have to cry, let it be a cry for justice; if you ever have to fear, let it be a fear of degradation, and if you ever have to loathe, let it be a loathing of the waste of human potential. I leave you today bringing to your attention the "Seven Sins" as enumerated by the late revered Mohandas Karam-chand Gandhi, and inscribed on the memorial of that great human being:

“Wealth without work
Pleasure without conscience
Knowledge without character
Commerce without morality
Science without humanity
Worship without sacrifice
Politics without Principle.”

Thank you.

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