



INSTITUTIONAL DECAY OR FAILURE?

A new institute or a renamed old institute appeared in Sri Lanka recently. It is what we used to call the old mad house in Angoda. In fact we had no hesitation in recommending it to our friends who showed the slightest sign of a mental imbalance. We had a grading system too, consigning less serious ones to a more relaxed place with freedom of movement. That was Mulleriyawa, situated not far from the main house. It is the renaming of this main institution that made headlines recently in Sri Lankan newspapers.

Just prior to that, maybe a few days earlier, appeared three news items equally important for the mental equilibrium of everyone in the island, i.e. the capture or the temporary immobilization of the police station at Mattakkuliya, the occupation or the siege of the J'Pura campus, and the demonstration within the chamber of parliament by M.P.s turning it into a virtual Lipton Circus.

Why do I treat the three instances differently from so many events taking place in our beautiful island? What specific features do they display in order to get such reverence or notoriety? This must be explained.

As far as I can understand, all three instances prove the immaturity or the lack of discipline on the part of three vital sections in the life of the nation, i.e. the police, the students or their superiors and the elected representatives of the people.

The incident at Mattakkuliya appears to have been organized or supported by the drug peddlers in the area. If that is true, then the President's matata tita program has done little to curb the menace. More than that it points the finger at those supposed to maintain law and order. Is it a case of PR failure? Or is it a lack of cooperation and consultation between the police and the public? Whatever the incoming IGP's have been telling his men (and women for that matter) has had no effect. One cannot forget the fact that a student from a campus in Malabe was transported physical-

ly to residence w of a Police big shot and assaulted by his son and wife not long ago. Culprits do not seem to have got their due. It is against such a background that these events are taking place. The police discipline is a must if they hope to get the cooperation of the general public



in carrying out their normal duties. Angulana incident would still be fresh in the mind of Sri Lankans to look at the men in kaki with suspicion. This unwelcome picture has to change if things are to improve. That change must come soon.

There may be others responsible for this state of affairs apart from the immediate people involved. What role do politicians play in this ugly game? It is high time the President put his foot down and ordered the parties to pull their act together. J'Pura Campus throws up completely a different and complicated issue. It has been the regular pattern in a number of campuses to agitate one issue or the other right through the years. What part of the problem can be laid at the doors of the academics? I can recall the warm and friendly relations that existed half a century or so ago, both in Colombo and Peradeniya, between students and their teachers. It is not simply case of nostalgia, but reminding one of what can be achieved with excellent student-teacher relations. I must emphasize that students then had immense respect for them, who acted more or less as their elder brothers, not imposing their authority on the latter.

The well-known author K. Jayatilaka had said somewhere that lecturers at Kelaniya University were in the habit of printing lecture notes to be sold to their own students. There must be at least a grain of truth in his story, without which he would not have made such statement. If that grain does exist, no one can dream of

healthy relations between the academic staff and the student population in any university. Jayatilaka goes further and says that academics are engaged in commercial dealing ignoring their academic responsibilities. If that is a regular feature among Sri Lankan university dons, their standing in the eyes of undergraduates would not help any relationship with the latter. In spite of all this apparently they were planning a strike for higher wage. The question is whether they deserve what they are paid eight now. It is an unkind but a valid question in the current context.

J'Pura is not the only place where students have been agitating. It has become a common feature in all universities. The very recent death of a student in Ruhuna forms part of that complex picture. Perhaps the elusive Bassa, people talk about may be able throw some light on the issue. There was one such death at J'Pura some time back. What part did the JVP play in these incidents? No one would deny the active involvement of the JVP in all university incidents for student organizations are under their control. University students all over the world engage themselves in various protest activities, but they do not as a rule, try to disrupt the smooth running of their institution. This happens in Sri Lanka all the time, giving their main objective of acquiring knowledge and skills a secondary place.

Who is responsible for discipline in the campus? There are persons appointed to look after this aspect both at halls of residence and in general everywhere in the university. Some of these are respected academics. Aren't they doing their duty properly or simply giving into the unruly elements within the system? Aren't they capable of consulting and dealing with students without giving the upper hand to the latter as a rule. This is an area anyone thinking of changing the existing pattern has to tackle first.

The new Minister for Higher Education has signaled the establishment of private universities soon. This step is sure to

bring another ugly show of resentment and protest from the JVP and its student bodies. That would be a litmus test for the minister, who is perhaps well prepared to handle the protestors. Someone has to call this bluff and bring about some sanity into campus life. Students ought to be guided by competent and confident academics and administrators who are prepared to implement government policies fearlessly, after consultations if called for, but not accommodating what is harmful or unnecessary just to placate some students. They must also be able to instill in the minds of students that discipline is part of the process of educating and character building that a university is engaged in.

I wonder whether the students have forgotten the fact they represent the cream of intelligent youth of the land, who will take over the reign of government in future, even though all are not going to be politicians. They will take over even from their teachers in university undertaking the building of a sustainable future generation. If this is understood or at least driven into their heads by someone, the current problems are going to surface and disrupt the equilibrium of national life.

The third example of indiscipline is even more damaging. M.P.s playing the role of disgruntled workers or students, coming out with banners, denouncing the government at the Lipton Circus, which has become the rallying point for protestors, both locals and NGO - sponsored servants. As far as I understand, M.P.s are the only persons enjoying the liberty to criticize, attack or even ridicule without grounds feeling safe from prosecution. They enjoy the rare privilege of being immune to all that as long as it is done within the chambers of parliament. No one else in the land is in that enviable position. That also means that they can use the weapon of argument to criticize, and embarrass their opponents, whether they belong to the ruling party or the opposition. It allows all members to come out with facts and figures to sort out their differences, without resorting to fistcuffs. Whatever arguments or facts are offered, it is not easy to topple a government with a clear majority in the house. This is the truth however unpleasant it be, that critics and opponents has to come to terms with.

It is really frustrating for a party in opposition to waste their lungs and being unable to shake or move the government in the direction it wants, but they have no other weapon than argument to achieve that. They also have the best forum available to do that. M.P.s ought to show discipline in what they do, in parliament, for the whole country, not only their electorates, are watching. No voter or citizen expects his representative to be a rabble-rouser at the Lipton Circus.

They ought to grow up. Grow up along with the protectors of law and order and the cream of the country's youth, the undergraduates.



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