

I am not sure whether I am qualified to write about undergraduates of Sri Lanka, for I belong to a time when even the term Sri Lanka was not in use to refer to our motherland.

The only qualification I can claim is that I happened to be an under graduate of the only university of the island at the time, the University of Ceylon. Although we studied at Peradeniya too, ours was still the Ceylon University. That was more than half a century ago, when a white man named Sir Ivor Jennings was calling the tune. Therefore my outlook and views may be out-dated and conservative. Even then I do feel for the country of my birth and for its youth, a feeling not strong enough to make me sacrifice my life for anything Sri Lankan.

As I sat down to write this I saw three news items, rather two items and an article, on the same issue, i.e. student unrest in universities. 'Six undergraduates sus-

Chandraprema hit the nail on the head. I was mistaken according to him. J.V.P. is in the thick all this. He goes on to list a whole host of activities that this Marxist party is responsible for over a period of 40 years. He seems to know what he is talking about. I on my part do not possess firsthand knowledge of most such events. Two points he makes are worth serious consideration. One is that the student body said to be behind these activities, has all along been attempting to hoodwink people by



declaring to operate independent of any political party while tied hands and foot to the J.V.P. under whose guidance they are carrying out protests and demonstrations at the behest of their political masters. He makes a further

back benches on both sides.) and Sri Lankan children going to Bangladesh for tertiary education, one wonders what all this fuss is about. Opportunities in Russian (rather Soviet) universities have almost dried up.

Going by the statements made so far by the Minister for Higher Education, one has to conclude that no one will be able to stop foreign universities becoming a reality in the country. Whether his veiled threat behind the words that one or two thousand students have to be got rid of in order to improve the universities, is to be ever carried out, there seems to be a serious problem with student discipline at all campuses. This in my view goes beyond the simplistic analyses and solutions offered by pundits from within and without the universities. It has to be taken seriously and tackled with patience and tactfully. With whatever weaknesses or deliberate mischief, everyone

easy solution to. When we passed out of the university we were sure of getting into a teaching job at the least. This is no more a reality to the present generation. This may be one reason that makes them prone to protests and agitations.

About four years ago, I had to walk through the grounds of the Harvard University located in the Boston suburb of Cambridge. I did this daily for a couple weeks going to and from the train station. Apart from the cosmopolitan nature of the student population, one thing that struck me was the presence of members of a separate police service. They belonged to the Harvard University Police. They seemed to be moving around almost unnoticed by the students rushing in and out of lecture halls and libraries. I was telling myself what if Sri Lankan universities too thought of introducing such a service. I can only throw up the idea because I feel these places need some individuals to handle law and order in the campus. University marshals of our days served a different purpose if I remember right. What if some men and women in uniform with an understanding of campus life and human relationship are put on the job?

This becomes all the more important in view of a report appearing in newspapers that a member of the security staff the Vice Chancellor of J'Pura University was attacked at a student hostel. There was another report about an attack on a group of students at Rajarata University. This is again by their own comrades. A Daily news columnist speaks of 'local thugs' in the campuses who belong to a particular political party. According to Tilvin Silva who makes an important announcement to the media, this party is that of the government. Does he let the cat out of the bag by volunteering this type of vital information? Does he believe that the people of the country have such short memories to forget the days when his party held the whole country to ransom by its declaration of emergencies at the drop of a hat, disrupting transport and even the work of the judges and magistrates. When one reflects on this record it becomes utterly impossible to believe comrade Tilvin Silva.

One aspect of undergraduate life that needs particular attention is the introduction and maintenance of cultural and sports activities that interest and uplift their life and outlook. I am not in a position to evaluate or criticize the current level of activities or even the attention paid to this area. What I can say is that in the absence of meaningful activities that the undergraduates can engage in and enjoy, their propensity to turn to other actions and even violence becomes more pronounced. The reported ban or suspension of the staging of a drama by Rajitha Dissanayake at the Rajarata campus brings to light either a lack of appreciation of this aspect by authorities or a bigger problem. It is the lack of a proper system of communication in the universities. Communication has to go beyond issuing circulars, news bulletins and instructions. A well-planned system of consulting the undergraduate population on all issues affecting their studies and campus life is a must in order to be fully aware of the thinking, attitudes and grievances of the students. As far as I can see this does not happen in most universities. The success of such a system depends not on the system alone, but the ability of the operators to handle the issues and understand the human beings involved. I see at least a few members of the academic staff with proper training and attitudes as the best candidates to fill this vacuum. Whatever the system is everyone in the academic and administrative staff has to play his role in ensuring proper communication in Universities.

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who steps through the portals of that august institution has to be considered part of the cream of Sri Lankan society capable of making a significant contribution towards the future prosperity of the land and its people. Therefore it is the duty of its rulers and citizens to leave no stone unturned in finding ways to make that possible by putting them on the correct path.

It is for this reason I stress that a more successful attempt ought to be made to discover, analyze and solve the variety of problems faced

by the current undergraduate population. I wonder whether there is sufficient attention paid to personal issues encountered by them. Apparently most students involved in recent unrests were freshmen dragged by their seniors unwillingly into the struggles. If this were true, then that speaks of the paucity of proper counseling for undergraduates who have ventured into a strange world. Two allied questions that come up are quality of teachers and teacher-student relations. I do not want to talk of good old days when our lecturers treated us as friends while maintaining their dignity at the same time, for the present day undergraduate lives in a different world. However, the quality of teaching and the dedication of the academics are issues better talked of and handled by competent persons beyond my level. One question though is paramount and has no



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pendent' said one news item, while another mentioned about an international conspiracy to de-establish the country by creating unrest among undergraduates. This apparently was a remark made by the Defense Secretary. More interesting for me was an article by a well-known journalist and political commentator, C. A. Chandraprema. In fact, I had discovered this journalist only recently to be knowledgeable about the recent events in the land, which he is able to analyze with a sense of responsibility and maturity.

As I was wondering whether the allegations against the J.V.P. for using undergraduates for their political ends were after all nonsense, in the light of what a leader of the students union said (quoted by SBS Sinhala service on Sunday 24 October)

point that while masquerading as non-political the union has always been agitating on issues which undergraduates in other countries are not taking up. On the international scene, he says the undergraduates are protesting on bigger issues such as the imperial threat to third world countries or global threat to climate, but the J.V.P. led union takes up hostel accommodation or the quality of food to stage their demonstrations.

I see at least one issue that is outside Chandraprema's list, i.e. their opposition to the setting up of foreign universities. This brings back memories of demonstrations against the private medical college that cost at least one life. When one sees the number of parliamentarians who have collected degrees from overseas universities, (leaders of both government and opposition do not belong to this category, but there are a few sitting on

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