

By R.M.B. SENANAYAKE

Fresh thinking needed for our system of University education

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh made the following statement at the 150th Anniversary function of University of Mumbai, June 22, 2007. "Our university system is, in many parts, in a state of disrepair... In almost half the districts [340] in the country, higher education enrolments are abysmally low; almost two-third of our universities and 90 per cent of our colleges are rated as below average on quality parameters... I am concerned that in many states university appointments, including that of vice-chancellors, have been politicized and have become subject to caste and communal considerations; there are complaints of favoritism and corruption."

What can we say about our own university system of education? It is characterized by the following features:

- It is a monopoly of the State.
- Funding is entirely by the State.
- The medium of instruction is Swabasha.
- It is heavily weighted in favor of the Arts and Humanities.
- The internal management of the universities is politicized.

Most people would agree that our system of university education is in a state of collapse. The universities are more closed than open owing to student agitations. The facilities provided to the students are woefully inadequate but a bankrupt state cannot provide the funds in real terms. It is driven to print money to fund its expenditure and the stage has been reached where no amount of created money spent by the state can maintain the expenditure in real terms.

Everybody talks about the need for reform of university education but nothing is done. Only a few of those who qualify at the GCE Advanced Level examination are admitted. Large numbers of students who could profit from university education are shut out. Can we set up more universities? The public thinks that the government has all the money in the world. But the government runs large budget deficits and borrows heavily from both local and foreign sources. When it borrows locally from the banks the economists say that it is creating new money. It raises the level of prices and makes life difficult for the average citizen.

The government increases the annual budgetary allocation for education but it is only in nominal terms for the rise in prices that takes place during the year will reduce its purchasing power and render the funding inadequate even to maintain the same level of facilities. If it seeks to increase the allocation to allow for the increase in prices which will occur, it will have to create much more new money and push up prices even higher. Most people who refer to expenditure on education refer only to the expenditure in nominal terms and not in real

terms. If the annual expenditure on education and higher education are adjusted for inflation it is clearly visible that such expenditure, both on schools and universities, has gone down in real terms. The expenditure per student in real terms has fallen even more. The government just doesn't have the money to set up new universities. We have to look for other ways to fund university education. But the youth are opposed to the setting up of private universities because they know that the private universities would produce a better quality of graduates who will outscore them in the job market. The graduates produced by these state universities have only one avenue of employment and that is government service. Why not reassure these students that their preserve of jobs in the government service is protected. Perhaps the government could pass a regulation that only graduates from state universities will have access to jobs in the public service. Those who graduate from private universities will then be confined to jobs in the private sector.

commercial banks to fund it through subscription to government treasury securities. This is money printing and it causes inflation and people are thereby paying through higher prices for the 'free education' bestowed on them.

Should this go on when other avenues can be found? There is in fact a creeping privatization of higher education that is taking place in an unplanned manner. These institutions

than allow private institutions to grant degrees from foreign universities which are second or third class? Let us encourage the first class universities abroad to set up campuses here since the charges for external students who sit their examinations from here are not affordable for the average middle class student. Let us also allow our businessmen to set up universities. This dog in the manger policy of the educational bureaucracy must be done away with and the new Minister of Higher Education, S.B. Dissanayake, a first class agitator during his university days has shown much courage in standing up to the misguided university students who protest over the setting up of private universities.

We must think hard before deeming any proposition 'off limits'. We should allow students studying for a degree at any university in Sri Lanka, UK or USA to follow lectures and classes being held at their local further education college or other institute. That means that the student will not have to bear the costs of living away from home but could still get a prestigious degree. That's actually how we should spread our access to higher education in the Liberal Arts and Humanities. This would meet the rising demand for degrees and would also be a far cheaper option.

The quality of education provided by our universities is also far below the acceptable international standards particularly in the Liberal Arts and Humanities. We should provide a better quality of education to equip the students to obtain employment. We are still short of doctors and engineers although the government doesn't have the money to employ them in state service. But they are needed for the economy and when the economy grows the demand for them will

Another important reform that is needed is to link the academic studies with practical training. The American philosopher John Dewey criticized the classical education and argued for the subordination of knowledge to action into the educational world by arguing for experiential education that would enable children to learn theory and practice simultaneously; he was a harsh critic of "dead" knowledge disconnected from practical human life. His slogan was that schools should encourage children to "Learn by doing."

Foreign universities cost a bomb

Many children go abroad to enter foreign universities. But this costs the country in foreign exchange. The obvious answer is to allow foreign universities to set up campuses here and even China has allowed British universities to set up there. It is true that such universities will charge fees but the cost of education will be much lower than sending children to foreign universities and the government should allow the setting up of foreign universities. The concept of 'free education' is misunderstood by the public. Really there is nothing free about it. It costs the government money although the government doesn't charge fees directly. But the government charges indirectly either through indirect taxation or borrowing and when the government doesn't pay an adequate rate of interest it gets the central bank and the

are unable to raise capital to expand and become proper universities because the State does not recognize private universities. Aquinas which earlier maintained high standards in teaching for the University of London degrees under Father Peter Pillai is unable to make progress because of the negative attitude of the bureaucracy in the regulatory bodies. But is it not better to develop proper universities with legal recognition rather

rise in the private sector. So we should allow foreign universities to provide education. Those who pass out as doctors and engineers generally obtain suitable employment and after a time they go abroad and refuse to come back. In other countries students are charged fees and the government provides student loans to enable them to pay these fees. These loans are recovered when they obtain employment. Shouldn't we adopt this practice at least for those entering the professions?

As for the thousands of Arts students they are not so lucky and find it difficult to obtain employment in keeping with their graduate qualification. In other countries students who can't afford to pay pursue their studies through distance education. The Open University is already catering to such students. Consider the model followed by the University of London. It has 45,500 students studying by distance and flexible learning in 180 countries. Another 6,000 students in the UK do the same. This is on top of the tens of thousands of students - the majority - who do study at the university's institutions in London. The university is made up of 19 colleges and institutes. Thousands of other UK students already study through distance learning with the Open University and degree courses are also taught by some further education colleges. If foreign universities are allowed here, they could become a training ground for students who wish to sit their examinations externally.

Private university education India has increased dramatically. In the case of engineering colleges, the private sector, which accounted for just 15 percent of the seats in 1960, now accounts for 86.4 percent of seats and 84 percent of all engineering colleges. In the case of medical colleges, the private sector dominance is less stark, but the trend is unambiguous; the proportion of private seats has risen from 6.8 percent in 1960 to 40.9 percent in 2003.

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So the arrangements we have now are clearly unable to respond to the current economic climate. "The current system is unsustainable from an economic point of view."

A banker who dedicated his free time to promote Sri Lanka wins the Presidential Award for promoting Tourism

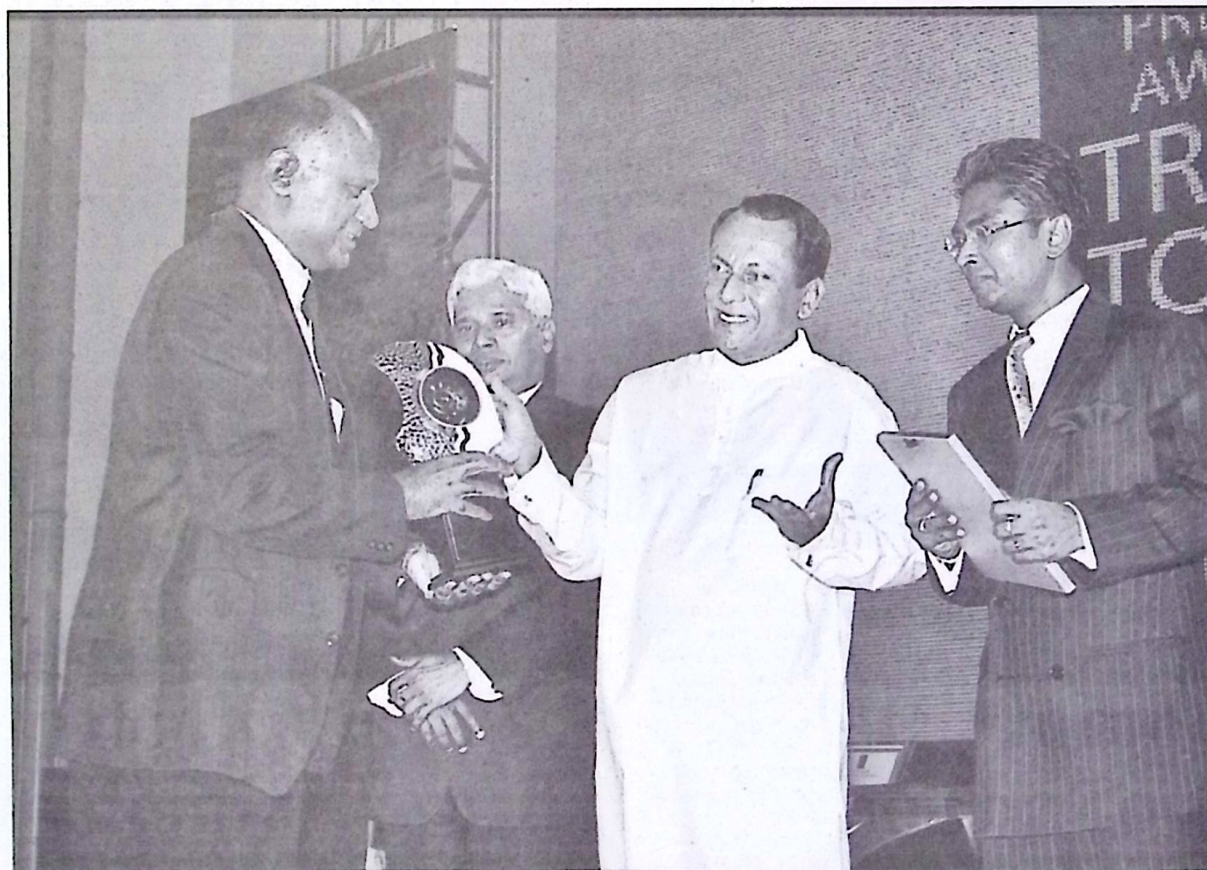
By GAMINI FERNANDO

Terrorism and negative travel advice affected the tourism industry in Sri Lanka to a great extent in the past three decades. The Tsunami tidal waves struck Sri Lanka in December 2004, bringing the entire tourism industry to a standstill. More than promoting tourism, almost all stakeholders in the industry was busy repairing and refurbishing their damaged properties and looking for grants and soft loans from financial institutions and the government to get back to business.

The government launched the "Rebuilding Sri Lanka" program just after the tsunami, and a banker named Ralph Gunawardena decided to contribute for this noble cause. The idea of helping the tourism industry came to his mind as tourism is the fourth largest foreign exchange earner in the country and nearly a million people's livelihood was affected directly and indirectly as a result of the tsunami disaster. He has travelled extensively in Sri Lanka, not only to see places but also to learn about Sri Lanka. At the time tsunami struck he had enough information and material to prepare a very comprehensive documentary on Sri Lanka. Though he didn't have any experience in either preparing a brochure or a documentary, his desire to help Sri Lanka was very great. So he decided to go ahead with the preparation of this documentary, come what may.

Though he is a Christian, he has always been very proud of the history and archaeological contents of the ancient Buddhist capital - Anuradhapura. Thus, he was waiting for an opportunity for a long time to promote Anuradhapura as well as Sri Lanka. However, the tsunami forced him to produce a documentary on Sri Lanka to promote tourism and the country in that time of great need.

At the time he decided to do the documentary, he had a lot of questions to answer. (1) Who will write the script? (2) Who will be the narrator? (3) Who will be the filmmaker? (4) Who will be the narrator? His desire was so great, he decided to use his own resources for this project and began to write the script on his own as the first step and a lot of research also went into it. This was the first time he has written something about Sri Lanka and he was surprised when the script came out well. He contacted Mr. Arun Dias Samarasinghe to do the narration and the Rupavahini Corporation to do the



Ralph Gunawardena receiving the award from Mr. Lakshman Yapa Abeywardene, Deputy Minister of Economic Development.

production. Mr. Chandana Seneviratna was assigned to do the documentary by Rupavahini. Within six months the production was over and master copy was given to Ralph Gunawardena and this very first documentary was named "Sri Lanka - The Pearl of the Indian Ocean". Thereafter Ralph went on to get 1,500 copies of this DVD done in Singapore at his own expense. He says that he was never a designer but he is proud of the fact that he designed the DVD cover and a brochure to be given with every DVD copy free of charge.

He contracted a company called Lanex Holdings to produce 1,500 copies each of the brochure and the cover as well. He has tried to get some sponsors to cover a part of the cost as it was too much to bear but no one has come forward. He says for nearly seven months, he was busy with his first documentary. Monday to Friday it was the bank work

and during the evenings and weekends he was busy with the documentary and when the final DVD came out with the cover and the brochure, he was delighted and very happy about the outcome of this wonderful product. There was no press conference or a launch of the DVD due to lack of funds.

Whilst doing the documentary he has collected all the information about the foreign VIPs who came to Sri Lanka in order to support the country just after the tsunami and he has sent each and every VIP a copy of his DVD along with a letter informing them that Sri Lanka can be re-built on tourism alone, provided that foreign countries support Sri Lanka by encouraging their citizens to visit as tourists.

So much so, one particular day, he has sent 28 copies to House of Commons, to British Members of Parliament who have visited Sri Lanka

after the tsunami, requesting them to promote Sri Lankan tourism in England. Even Bill Clinton acknowledged his letter when he sent his DVD. He says that he may have sent nearly 300 copies to foreign VIPs and another 400 to Sri Lankans living abroad, at his own expense, requesting them to promote Sri Lanka in their own countries.

After seeing his first documentary, "Sri Lanka - The Pearl of the Indian Ocean", the Tourist Board has requested him to do a documentary on Sri Lanka purely to promote the country and he has produced his second documentary - "Sri Lanka - A Land Like No Other", which became Tourist Board's official documentary for nearly two and a half years. He has supplied nearly 4,500 copies to Tourist Board for their official use. Ralph on his own, has sent copies to England, France, Germany, Netherlands, Italy, Canada, America,

Australia, Middle East, Japan, India etc., but the crowning moment came when his second documentary, "Sri Lanka - A Land Like No Other" was telecast live by Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation to all SAARC countries just before the inauguration of SAARC Summit in Colombo in August 2009. Very few people knew about his work and he has never sought publicity. He says that no one has come forward to help him except a very few. When he has approached certain advertising companies and big players in the tourism industry, he was more discouraged than encouraged. He has put aside all negatives and accepted the encouragement and blessings he has received from a few which has gone a long way. He has never sought any personal benefits from his documentary. He pays a tribute to those very few who have helped him and encouraged him and remembers with gratitude.

On June 15, 2010 he has been invited for the Presidential Awards ceremony at BMICH and when he went there, he saw all five star hotels and top travel company officials busily discussing about travel and tourism with other invitees and they were full of confidence about winning awards. It was an evening for travel and tourism industry stakeholders and not for bankers and he was sure some of the industry key players would have wondered what this banker was doing at the ceremony. At the time when his name was announced as the winner for Tourism Promotion, Marketing and Communication, it was a time for realization that the non-players (the people who are not in tourism business) also have contributed for the promotion of tourism in Sri Lanka. He says that it is the self-satisfaction that is most important in whatever you do.

This is a story to remember and a fine example for all where duty towards the country is concerned. It is the primary duty of all citizens to serve the motherland. Our President and the government have done a great service to the nation by eradicating terrorism and now it is up to us to rebuild the war-torn country. Mother Lanka expects each and every child of her to come forward at the hour of her need. This is the country where our ancestors were born and this is where our next generations will be born. Let us make this a happy place for all Sri Lankans to live. The paradise once lost is now found again. "Sri Lanka - A Land Like No Other" the documentary has opened the door for a presidential award for Mr. Ralph Gunawardena.