

The Brains Business

Unearthing the vision for fixing Sri Lanka's education System



Professor Sampath Amaratunga at his office

Senior **Professor Sampath Amaratunga**, the former Vice-Chancellor of the Sri Jayewardenepura University is the Chairman of the University Grants Commission, the apex body for higher education in Sri Lanka. It is clear that Prof. Amaratunga runs a tight ship but he rules with a warm heart and enthusiasm. Since his appointment no students have been teargassed outside of his office, which used to be a daily occurrence a few years ago. Within the span of less than two years, Sri Lanka is looking

at the creation of City universities in 10 districts, converting campuses in North and East into national universities and setting up new ones. If Sri Lanka has the world's best free education, Prof. Amaratunga explains why it is worthy to marvel at it. Nilantha Ilangamuwa, Editor in Chief of Lanka Courier sat down with Prof Amaratunga recently.

Excerpts from the interview;



Students at University of Jaffna

Q Let's start off about free education in this country, the challenges and the vision going forward?

A It is because of free education that Sri Lanka has enormous strength and growth. The largest resource for development is human capital. Equal benefits for all in education is important for the development of a country. An individual is given an opportunity (i.e education) and left with the option of taking it or leaving it. Only in Sri Lanka, do we have this free education system. I am a pure product of free education as I studied at Ananda College and went to Sri JayawardenaPura University.

Q You recently mentioned the riots in 1983 where you remembered a song sang by your colleague. That year itself was a turning point in our country's history. Why is that memory etched in your mind?

A I think it was a mistake, the war and the damage it had done, because the society had caused this

riot. The opinion of the general public, even the international community is not favorable to Sri Lanka because of this original incident. The Tamil Diaspora who are against Sri Lanka, came out of this 83 group. It is a threat to peace and harmony today. They do not allow the South of the country to shake hands with the North and East. The children of this Diaspora follow their parents who were part of this 83 group.

Q Undoubtedly education is one of the main ways to dispel these fears, as chairperson of the UGC how do you see this?

A We have a good network among the university system so we have to build trust. If you consider the University of Jaffna, that is a prime destination. The VC of the Jaffna university is a brilliant researcher who was nominated to the position many times but no one took notice. It was President Gotabaya Rajapaksa who arrived at this decision to appoint Sri Sathkunarajah as VC. Some spoke ill of him, but the President did not give in because Sathkunarajah is



Nowhere else in the world can you enter a university without an interview except in Sri Lanka, thanks to free education.

the right person for the right position. He is an important ambassador for peace.

In the South, universities have a huge tamil student population. In Sri Jayawardenapura and Colombo University we have more than 500 tamil students who peacefully coexist with others. Jaffna University has more than 1500 Sinhalese students. I don't see a better way to reconcile.

Q Sri Lanka is often criticised in the international forum for its human rights records and lack of reconciliation efforts. If you factor in the education sector, how can we respond to that in a substantial manner?

A We have to actively network and build on the trust between the North, South and East and the rest of the country. We have been engaged and we are successful. The government has announced the latest addition being the Gampaha Wickremaratchchi Ayurveda University. The President's vision is to have a university in Vavuniya for which will soo be a reality. There will be much development in the area once you have a university in that territory.

Q The issue of only a selected number of students being enrolled into universities remains. It is a highly competitive exam where only several thousands get through and the others fall through the cracks. What is the alternative?

A In 2018, we had 31000 students enrolled. By 2019, we increased this intake by 10 000, which is a 33 percent increase. This is the largest increase in intake. Yet another 140 000 students cannot enter national universities. We are therefore implementing many programs to facilitate them. We are enrolling 10 000 to the open university of Sri Lanka for Software engineering programs.

On the day they enroll we offer them a job. There are 40 000 vacancies in the IT sector in Sri Lanka. We have arranged an interest free loan for them for Rs.400 000 for a period of four years. We have also revisited all external degrees as it was a mess. We had allowed anyone to enter

and do whatever they wished. We have rescheduled all arts degrees.

Q There is this notion in Sri Lanka that students are closely engaged in union activities and spend their time and efforts on ragging and protesting. How are you going to tackle it?

A I was the VC at Sri Jayawardenapura prior to my appointment here. Sri Jayawardenapura was once popular for student riots but I managed to settle the student population. During my time, I sat with them to discuss their issues. Similarly, if I came to know of their arrival to my office here, I would never leave until I sat with them and spoke to them. At times, I would meet them at the gate. That is because I am confident of what we are doing on the inside. They also know that if they come here, they always leave with an answer.

Q There are claims that the quality of academia has been decreasing in the country and it is being widely reported in the media. What are the reasons and solutions to this?

A I don't accept that notion. If you consider the total population, half the percentage of our output does not require any guidance. They are employable anywhere in the world, they don't come here to the UGC and neither do they request anything from us.

This is a percentage of the students who have transformed their skills set during the 3 or 4 years of studying. The rest of the students outside this high growth bracket are those who have failed to achieve some personal growth.

A student spends 12-13 years of school life before entering university. We don't know what kind of student is coming. We don't get to interview them. Nowhere else in the world can you enter a university without an interview except in Sri Lanka, thanks to free education.

The problem lies here. Yet this does not also apply to all faculties. Engineering, medical, and science are able to grasp things quickly. Those who do management leave with multiple qualifications. But when it comes to humanities and social sciences, 80 percent of them remain unemployed.

To this end we have taken several policy changes.. The President wanted to us orient arts students with IT skills. It will be made compulsory for them to pursue IT and will be an added qualification. This way they will graduate with a double degree.

Q I wanted to speak off the intellects who left our country for better opportunities. This brain drain, how do we put an end to this?



A When a student pursues their higher education here and with the ample opportunities they are given, it is very likely they would receive a scholarship to a recognized institute overseas.

The reason we remain as a country lagging in economic growth is because of these selfish individuals. I feel that they must offer the country a service for the free education they have received. As soon as they finish a PhD their knowledge is still fresh and they can easily come back to offer their insight to the country or their own university. It can be in the form of new courses, new methodologies, research or technologies.

Q **What are the challenges you are facing because of the COVID pandemic?**

A Last year in March we closed all universities. The primary reason being the fact that our hostels have a huge student population residing and sharing open and public spaces such as canteens, libraries etc. So the risk was exponentially high.

The President wanted us to use this opportunity to activate distance and online learning during this period. It was quite a challenge to bring everyone on board because we had not delivered a single lecture online prior to the pandemic. We have however accomplished it and have begun enrolling new batches as well.

Q **Recently you have introduced the concept of city university for an employable workforce. Please explain further.**

A I developed this city university concept and it is now under the leadership of Dr. Seetha Arambepola. The concept is mapped out for 10 districts in Sri Lanka in the first phase. In each of these localities we have conducted an extensive case study before the opening of the university in that particular district. For example in Kalutara, we assessed the types of industries, SME or large scale that are in operation. We then went to these places and inquired of the raw materials, technology, competency of the individuals working there and how we can help with the supply chain.

We then approached these industries and asked the managers if they would like to have a hand in the development of their district, if they would like to offer training to their workforce, whereby it will undoubtedly increase their productivity, efficiency and output. An official from the ADB upon hearing of this project told me this is one of the best rural development plans they have ever seen.