

The Intellectual Enterprise In Sri Lanka - G. C. Mendis Memorial Lecture

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It is a great honour for me to have been asked to deliver the G. C. Mendis Memorial Lecture this year. It is also a great pleasure. When I was here before, working on my *Dilemmas of a New Nation*, as my manuscript was nearing completion in first draft, I went to him for advice. He read my paper with sympathy and interest; he made some excellent criticisms. This occasion, therefore, gives me an opportunity to thank him publicly for his very personal assistance that I have not forgotten - over some 23 years that have passed.

To honour him today, I thought it might be interesting to discuss aspects of the intellectual enterprise in Sri Lanka, to which he contributed so much in his time.

As you must have imagined, I take the intellectual enterprise seriously. I understand its urge to be the search for truth, a high calling. I believe there are a number of different dimensions and forms of what we call truth. A religious truth helps us to understand our connection to the world beyond human existence. We can - and do - have convictions about our origins, our links, however obscure, to our predecessors, or to whatever comes next when our hearts stop beating.

These are the issues of truth that preoccupy the theologians and religious philosophers. Theirs is speculative and intuitive knowledge, and mankind has for years devoted huge energies - and still does - to unravelling the ultimate mysteries of our existence, our life's or our death's purposes. I respect this search for religious or moral truth. But today, I have a more modest, far less grand intellectual enterprise in mind. I am concerned with what James Conant called secular learning.

The intellectual enterprise in Sri Lanka I will discuss today, in my view, is not all that different from similarly serious intellectual endeavours in a country like the United States. We all seek a better comprehension of society's origins, what changes our forefathers experienced, and what the future portends for us.

You, too, are seeking the ties that link your todays to your yesterdays. And like us, you seek to discern through the shadow of the future that lies beyond the horizon, something of our destiny in the tomorrows ahead. Here in Sri Lanka, as in my country, astronomers probe the ever-expanding universe. Similarly, we all are seeking better ways to appreciate the different cultures which together make up the human family. We, also, are speculating about just how much more beautiful is small. And we, too, are asking questions about the purposes of our earthly endeavours. the goals and justifications of our effort.

Both our peoples are seeking more productive economies, where each person's effort will produce more of what evergrowing numbers of men and women feel they need, or what they can sell in order to buy what cannot be made at home. Like us, you are interested in a more equitable society, where basic human needs, are met more fully and are more evenly satisfied. Both societies are seeking to shape institutions which will provide that preferred and workable balance between individual freedoms and a tolerable public order. We both grope for ways to combine the energies often evoked by private endeavour with the benefits that come only if these endeavours are set within a matrix of public goals and widely accepted notions of the public good.

We all agree that sufficient food - rice or bread - is necessary for a worthwhile life. The intellectual enterprise if properly conducted, is indispensable to helping us extract more rice, and whatever else we need to live, from the lands our peoples till and the work of their hands in factories and offices. But rice alone is not the end and purpose of our activities.

Without the intellectual enterprise, the life of nations stultifies, its sense of direction is lost; the savour of its life turns flat. If the society functions with order and productively but has little intellectual life, it can be the life of the ant. And where there is no vision, grave errors can be made, even if the people may not perish.

As I see it, the intellectual is more than a critic, standing on the sidelines watching the game, scoring the players' performance like some wireless announcer. Often there are self-proclaimed wise ones who take this superior stance. These are the irresponsibles. In my view, serious intellectuals should be involved in the national enterprise in some fashion. He need not be a political partisan to be engaged, but there are ways in which he can constructively participate. He finds his base in many places in our societies. He may be that almost defunct

species, the independent man of letters. Sri Lanka has had them in the past. More typically, he may be a scientist, pure or applied; or the highly educated administrator who is at the elbow of a senior Minister, Prime Minister or President, where the hardest choices amongst ends and means must be made. He may be a judge, or a Member of Parliament or Minister. Most typically, however, he finds his home in a college or university, usually in the teaching profession. It is of this intellectual enterprise I shall mainly speak this evening.

As Ed Shils,¹ that trans-Atlantic sociologist, reminds us, the intellectual performs a number of roles.

He is the *custodian* of what is already known in his field of specialization, what truths have been confirmed by disciplined study. His field of specialization is not called a "discipline" by accident or merely by courtesy. A methodology has developed for grappling with the special uncertainties and problems of pursuing truth in his field. Each discipline—and increasingly sub-discipline or more particularistic specialization—has its own method for confirming propositions—or truths—insofar as men can know them.

The university teacher also is the *giver* of that knowledge to the coming generation. There is little use, apart from one's own personal delectation, in knowing a field of study without taking it seriously enough to impart it to others. But to impart knowledge to the coming generation is not all that easy. Who cannot tell the difference between the skilled, experienced teacher, and the one stuffed with new-learned knowledge, but cannot teach it? Alternatively, he may impart specialized knowledge or wisdom knowledge to a wider audience—as a publicist, a writer or discourses to the public, like Walter Lippmann or Edmund Wilson. The intellectual as teacher may court popularity by lowering his own standards or by not asking as much of his students as they are able to achieve when they are pressed hard to do their best. The intellectual as publicist may corrupt his learning by sloppy popularization, by misleading but plausible analogies or by catering to popular myths or politically convenient misrepresentations that meet contemporary political fashions. Imparting knowledge is a high responsibility, and is as important as being its custodian.

The responsible intellectual may also be an *investigator*. He is seeking more reliable propositions on questions already asked in his special field of concentration. Perhaps, however, he is bolder than that,

E. Shils, (1978) "The Academic Ethos", *American Scholar*, Vol. 47, (t. 2.)

attempting to break new ground. He may be pursuing elusive truths in hitherto uncharted territory. To do this - it is never easy - he needs to take the search for better truths very seriously. He must be dedicated to that task. He must keep nagging at himself - and in the process annoy his wife and colleagues - by his dissatisfaction with known truths. He must ask questions. He must be restless with the ideas that are given.

To pursue the art of investigation, he must be disciplined and methodical. There are countless stories in the laboratory sciences of so-called discoveries by what are often loosely termed "accidents." But look carefully at each example, and we will see that the "accident" was within a very narrow range. It was accidental only in the sense that something occurred which had not been expected. Months of careful disciplined observation preceded that event; variables were meticulously identified, relationships among them recorded. And trained, alert and questioning specialists were carefully, patiently, even ploddingly pouring over their desks, or their workbenches, or their agricultural experiment plots. Otherwise, the accident when it occurred would not have been noticed; its possible significance not appraised; the creative, next follow-on question would never have been asked.

The *Double Helix* by James D. Watson recounts in vivid detail the urgent search for an explanation of DNA, that mysterious element of our genes that tiny fragment of a cell which carries all our physical inheritance from one generation to the next. The book dramatizes the interplay between empirical observation, incredibly specialized knowledge, and the casting up and testing of hypotheses as brilliant men and women competed against each other for the Nobel Prize. Suddenly, the pieces fitted together in a hypothetical explanation that seemed to provide an answer to the questions they were asking. And then, the ingenious, creative flash occurred that devised a method by which the inspired hypothesis could be tested.

In the non-laboratory disciplines, too, there is a similar process, although the events are rarely as dramatic. The questions are asked; the empirical materials are laboriously, painfully gathered; they cumulate often in disorder. Hypotheses are refined; the data by themselves do not provide answers to questions nor test hypotheses. Creative insight is required to formulate persuasive empirical tests.

If I may be autobiographical for a moment. In writing my book on Ceylon many years ago, the whole seemed a sea of confusion; I had much specific data from much reading and many, many conversations. I then came down with paratyphoid fever, and was laid up for nearly two months.

My dear wife provided me with kits and materials and I felt my strength gradually return as I tinkered with model airplanes . . . far from the subject matter of my major study. As I gathered strength in a quiet cottage in Nuwara Eliya, in a mysterious way, the shape of the finished product materialized in my mind. The outline of the book that gradually rose through the mists of my own uncertainty became more and more solid, and that became the armature for the whole study. How did it emerge? At what point as I toyed with balsa, glue and tiny diesel motors did the unconscious mind that brings its secret order to our lives define a design and float it to the surface for me to grasp? But had I not concentrated all my strength on grappling with that fascinating problem for over a year already, the framework never would have emerged. Had I not been alert, watchful, ready to grasp those inspired moments, the hints and suggested design would not have been noticed.

I use words like "grapple," "strive," "all my strength," because these affairs are not accomplished "at leisure," so to speak, when one is at ease. There is, however, a curious element in all this I have never understood. I also used the word "toyed with." Somewhere in the process there must be some lighthearted playing with ideas. The crazy hypothesis must be toyed with, there just might be something in it. There is effort in the process, but there is also fun. "Try it on for size" is an image we sometimes use in group discussions among serious scholars - a note of irresponsibility creeps into the argument; one is not putting forward an idea as a serious proposal; one's professional reputation is not at stake. There is no more seriousness about that than there is in going into a store and trying on a jacket or a coat, "trying on for size." So there is a serious, hard slog about the intellectual enterprise. But there is also a need for lighthearted toying with alternative answers to a difficult problem.

There is a fourth role of the intellectual these days, one which has tricky implications and special responsibilities. He may become an *advisor* to governments or to community leaders. Once upon a time, universities were thought to be largely places for custodians, mainly of religious truths, and for teachers. But in recent decades in my country, particularly, intellectuals have been drawn into advisory roles. Experience during the Great Depression suggested that in our universities there was a store of unused talents which if applied to contemporary problems, might help the community cope with what seemed then to be grave difficulties. This trend was further accentuated during World War II. The intellectuals may bring fresh ideas to bear on

old, all-too-familiar problems. They may imagine options which more hard-pressed or earth-bound bureaucrats could not imagine, or would not be caught dead suggesting because they would be thought irresponsible—the worst sin of the bureaucratic profession.

Though it may often be rewarding to the bureaucrat wise enough to tap intellectual resources that may be available, and to the intellectual involved, there are also liabilities to the intellectual who is drawn into an advisory role.

The intellectual must be wary that his reputation for special knowledge or for apolitical objectivity is not being misused by those in power to give legitimacy to an otherwise dubious policy solution. He himself must be careful not to misuse his preferred access to the corridors of power by promoting solutions that he personally prefers for reasons that have nothing to do with the special knowledge which gave him that entry to influence.

Moreover, to be frank, the bureaucrat will often find the intellectual not much help. Unless they have had opportunities to gain experience, to know the contingent, messy character of typical answers to “real world” problems, intellectuals can be very unrealistic. Used to contending on theoretical questions, where logic and the symmetry of intellectual structures are important, they may be unable to function in the contingent world of political or bureaucratic give and take and half loaves; a world where the perfect can be the enemy of the good. In many instances, the detailed knowledge necessary for applied solutions is not available in intellectual circles, since universities may have been working on quite other – and perhaps equally important – problems. A more deliberate scholarly pace or a commitment to thoroughness may be totally inappropriate to the urgencies of public affairs.

Finally, bureaucratic management is complex, and requires a detailed knowledge of elaborate structures and esoteric rules and conventions. An academic advisor will not understand them, or will take too long to see their importance.

These four different aspects of the intellectual enterprise – custodial, giving, investigating and advising – are important for a variety of reasons. The past must be known to the present; the young must be drawn into a perception of their past. But they must also have their minds trained, their analytical powers sharpened. In our future years, when there will be twice as many of us in a mere thirty-five years, we will experience more rapid

changes than in our past. Past solutions will not be good enough for the future. They must have intellectual curiosity and be of inquiring mind. Our children must be more ready than we to tackle unprecedented problems in unprecedented ways. For that their minds need to be trained. Men and women must be lured, invited, encouraged, indeed led forward to the life of creative intellectual activity.

If I may be permitted an observation, in Sri Lanka as in many countries, large numbers of people and institutions depend upon bureaucracies and politicians to chart our course and to define our answers in a remarkable range of fields, as if they were the fountainheads of wisdom. However, as a temporary full-time bureaucrat, I can affirm that there are real limits to bureaucratic wisdom. Each of us has to work within the area laid down for our own bureaucratic unit. There are institutional limits to what we can perceive, to the questions we can raise, to the solutions we can consider. Moreover, there is bureaucratic turf to be defended; our career interests can be seen to be favoured or harmed by one solution more than by another. As bureaucrats, we are neither infallible nor entirely disinterested.

Nor can it fairly be said that elected politicians are bound to be right. They have electoral imperatives bearing heavily upon them. These do not require the assertion of truths, but the evocation of what seems plausible. Politicians and parties are no more likely to be right in every case than bureaucrats. Political contests require the simplification of issues into slogans, and superficial ideological formulations which can as easily mislead as they can inspire.

Moreover, both bureaucracies and politicians have a foreshortened time horizon. Have they the detachment from the urgencies of today to press the case for answers that will be germane, even critical, five to ten years from now? At the same time, of course, policy must be set if the long run is to be reached at all.

That is why I argue the old fashioned, but nevertheless sound point, that it is better to have a variety of sources of insight than leave it all to politicians or bureaucrats.

On the other hand, my reading of recent South Asian history suggests that in a number of countries, the expression of criticism, or even divergent, alternative views on public issues can evoke annoyance, anger and even government reprisals. I believe there are two main reasons for this. In the first place, in monarchical feudal regimes before the Europeans came, and in the colonial regimes that followed them, and even, dare it be

said, in some successor governments after independence, to differ publicly with the ruler typically was seen as *lese majeste*, if not approaching treason. Elected rulers, for the most part, are typically unsure of themselves. Some believe they do have the only answers and are insulted by the presumptuousness of any critic. Some others are really aware of how shadowy is our knowledge, and they are made more edgy by that awareness. In either case, when an individual is hard-pressed by anxiety or by heavy day-to-day responsibilities that he is doing his best to shoulder, he is likely to lack that human resilience to absorb unsolicited criticism, even if well-meant. And of course, some criticism, of political leaders, of policies and even government institutions have been freighted with ill-intent and destructive purpose, often based on one-way ideologies that leave no room for diversity or political change once their believers get their way.

Precisely because the problems of changing formerly colonial countries into more productive and equitable societies is a complicated matter, I believe it is better to have a variety of sources of insight and policy advice. Quasi-independent centres of intellectual activity are desirable, indeed necessary, if huge, costly and sometimes irretrievable errors are to be avoided.

Shifting our focus from the multiple roles and possible public, short-run utility of the intellectual enterprise in general, what can be said about the state of intellectual activity in Sri Lanka toward the end of the 1970s? It would be presumptuous of me to claim to know the answer to that question. During this stay here, I have not had the opportunity to mix and mingle with your scholars as I would have liked; nor can I claim familiarity with the full range of Lankan scholarship since I read neither Sinhalese nor Tamil and am limited to the sphere of the social sciences. But I will venture an impression which I hope you will accept for what it is - an impression from reading and from talk. I must own to some disappointment by what I have seen and what people have told me about intellectual activity in contemporary Sri Lanka. I may be misreading the signs, but let me try a few observations.

The university community, while it has greatly expanded, has become more cautious. During the last ten years or so, there seems to me to have been fewer scholars ready to criticize government performance than used to be the case earlier. Even if the basic assumptions of policy are accepted, there are fewer efforts to suggest constructive alternatives to specific policies than was the case twenty years ago.

Some excellent books and articles have been written during the last ten years, to be sure. But alas, too many are the result of Sri Lankan scholars who have gone abroad, and all too few have been brought to fruition here at home. Two excellent volumes of the *History of Ceylon* have long since been completed and published. But where is the middle volume we have all been eagerly waiting for over ten years? Translations of useful works into Sinhalese have been proposed, even promised, but the labour is never even begun. What are the deterrents to serious scholarship? I am told there are numerous reasons for this. Many of your most talented faculty are greatly overburdened by bureaucratic routines. Is it really necessary for your finest scholars to have to devote as much time as they do to designing examinations? Or for marking examinations which serve only to scatter the candidates on a vertical scale but which provide little incentive to imaginative reasoning or creative thought on the part of those who are tested? From my own observation I would argue that competitive political gamesmanship has, at times, distracted certain professors from their higher priority tasks. But to be fair, the temptations and distractions brought to the campuses by outside political forces share responsibility for this impediment to serious work on the campus.

Creative intellectual endeavor is demanding. It requires many specific decisions of methodology, research strategy, empirical data collecting. Where empirical data gathering is necessary, it requires time in the field for interviewing or observing; modest travel funds are necessary. Often ideas must be tested amongst critical but interested peers, workshops can draw together knowledgeable colleagues. And in the end, there must be foreseeable opportunities to publish, so that others can know of one's work. Equally important, publication is a pre-condition for that other element of a creative intellectual enterprise - the critical review of one's work by equally qualified, and perhaps more knowledgeable, peers.

But none of this environment for creative scholarship is there ready made. It must be developed, encouraged, nurtured.

And for this the university environment makes a critical difference. Is there now modest support for such activities? Do scholars have such opportunities regardless of their political party affiliations, their family connections or their community of origin? Are there institutional devices to help identify younger, promising scholars and direct resources their way regardless of where they come from in society? Or does one still depend on such programs as Fulbright, British Council or other foreign fellowships? They are excellent, but are they enough?

None of this is easy, particularly when other development efforts for investment are so costly – and obviously urgent, and resources in the education budget are so limited. But I sometimes wonder whether it wouldn't be a better economy if more funds were allocated to inducing present faculties to turn their trained minds to contemporary policy problems while depending somewhat less on costly specialists imported from abroad for too brief consultancies. One cannot do without a number of foreign advisors during this period of urgent development. But are they *all* necessary? So many obvious local problems cry out for systematic empirical observation, analysis and recommendation which require study by scholars who know the local situation and culture in depth. And so many Sri Lankan graduates want to use their training to some good purpose!

A fascinating model study is now underway to determine which factors contribute to successful settlement in such places as Minneriya or Gal Oya, so that the new settlements can avoid errors of the past. But to find out, one cannot sit in offices or studies and speculate. One must get into the field and talk to the settlers themselves. Why do irrigation engineers and farmers so rarely see eye to eye on how to conduct and manage water on the fields, where the farmers labour? What happens to traditional family life as women go to work in factories and offices, or receive a level of education their mothers never dreamt of? And was "traditional family life" as lovely for all other members of the family as it was for father? Why have Sri Lankans rushed to the cities far less than their counterparts elsewhere in South Asia, and how can the countryside retain its attraction even as job opportunities in the towns and cities expand over the next ten years? Could some serious interviews with workers, managers and users of the CTB help us understand the problems of that essential but embattled service?

All these and many other questions require empirical field research. Serious exploration of this kind has its democratic imperative. To really know, one must pay sufficient respect to the opinions and experience of real live individual Sri Lanka, small, ordinary people, where they are, in their fields and in their homes. On their readiness to join the national effort, all else depends. Generalizations drawn up in government offices or from M. P. samplings, or grouped by such dubious concepts as "classes" or even "linguistic groupings" are far less valid than conclusions drawn from meticulous field work interviews. This is not easy; it cannot be done casually; it requires meticulous attention to detail and follow

through – all virtues that are sometimes difficult to sustain, when the weather is hot, field travel is often difficult if not costly, and where the people in authority who ask the questions may not use sufficient foresight so that the explorations can proceed in a timely, orderly way.

Resources are necessary, too. I take it there is an increasing use of contract arrangements between government agencies and members of the scholarly community. Is there not another possible source of support for such activity? Might not some of the wealthy families that still appear to have substantial funds available combine a portion of their resources into a scholarly foundation, like the Guggenheim or a Volkswagen foundation, though on a smaller scale? The families concerned could make a real contribution if ways could be found to stake creative younger scholars who want to tackle issues of public concern, regardless of their community of origin or their family connections.

It is a matter of regret, which I know is shared by many officials and scholars, that so many talented Sri Lanka have migrated overseas. It is wrong to assume it is simply the higher salaries that have lured them away from their homeland. This is only part of it. But by no means all, as has been demonstrated by a careful empirical study on the brain drain conducted by Bill Glazer at Columbia University. Could it be that the lack of intellectual stimulation in certain academic departments was simply stifling? In how many departments has it been the case that ancient chairmen, who held their posts for so long, really nurtured and inspired serious scholarship rather than discouraged it in countless subtle and not-so-subtle ways? Could it even be that in certain periods, the officials in the Ministry of Education have been highly arbitrary, sometimes acting as if university faculties were not more than interchangeable parts, to be shoved here and there in the way that clerks are sometimes treated?

Another requisite for sustained creative scholarship one might call protection or, better perhaps, autonomy. Who will protect the independent scholar from political reprisal if his observations do not fit the current contemporary fashion?

I remember with gratitude the staunch role played by the President of Vassar College where I was teaching before we came here in 1955. Sarah Blanding was herself no scholar, but she understood the importance of defending her faculty from the kind of political pressures brought to bear upon our universities during the McCarthy period. She firmly stood

between local political busybodies and her faculty. No amount of public innuendo or threat intimidated her. And I have always thought her a splendid example of what a university president may sometimes be called upon to do.

But to welcome, to encourage the expression of diverse views is not only the responsibility of the immediate university president or vice-chancellor. It is something that the wider society needs also to encourage. It is often said that the powers that be welcome criticism. Only if criticism is encouraged, it is said, can bureaucrats be kept up to scratch and Ministers deterred from the temptation to misuse their positions. Only then will urgent policies decided at Cabinet level assuredly be implemented at the nerve endings of the bureaucratic or organizational system, for often the top-most officials simply do not know when their orders are not implemented. They need the press as a check on performance. But has careful criticism really been welcomed? Have the studies of knowledgeable students of some aspect of public policy been given careful attention, even if they contained some criticisms or some exaggerated inaccuracies? To be sure, some critics of the whole system have taken unfair advantage of an atmosphere of tolerance. Some academics have been not analysts, but political polemicists. There may even be, as some claim, a tendency to run down out of jealousy anything constructive someone else has done which one did not have a hand in oneself. But have these been sufficient reasons for the public expression of diverse views to have become as difficult as they have in the past decade?

Looking in another direction, there are three very positive developments in the field of scholarship I would like to note. In the first place, promoting the training in colleges through the swabasha stream to the university community a far wider range of talented young men and women than was available when entry was only for those who knew English. To be sure, linguistic difficulties have been tragically intensified. It has been hugely difficult to teach university subjects when books and specialized articles in the indigenous languages were scarce if non-existent. As a result, many students have perforce been only partially trained. But I have been impressed by the number of talented individuals who have come into your scholarly life from the swabasha streams. A pool of talented men and women has been opened which earlier was not drawn upon.

Secondly, and I am on less sure ground here than I would like, I have a strong impression that training in agricultural sciences and engineering has been much strengthened during the past twenty years. The exodus to the

Middle East and to western countries is a sign that the quality of your training in these fields is of a high order. And we can only hope they will return once the pace of growth in the Middle East slows down, as some predict it will within the next few years.

A third, an institutional development, may bring a major difference. The University Grants Commission can make a real contribution if it is assured the autonomy its British counterpart enjoyed from the beginning. In Britain, its main function was that of allocating funds among already well-established institutions. Here the tasks of urgent academic construction – indeed reconstruction – pose far heavier responsibilities and make its role all the more important. If the members of its governing board can retain their stature as individual scholars and fend off the uninformed efforts of influential figures who are not fully aware of the requisites for nurturing a powerful intellectual tradition, that institution can make a major contribution to these matters.

Another innovation since we were here before deserves mention – the Marga Institute. There will always be those who will criticize an institution that is not performing the ideal function set for it. But Marga represents a positive innovation. Indeed, it may turn out that as we look back on Marga 10, 15, 20 years from now, it will have been one of the major institutions contributing to stopping, if not reversing, the brain drain. A number of younger scholars who have gained full training qualifications abroad are now finding Marga one of the most interesting places for them to apply their talents in Sri Lanka. At the same time, Marga is making a contribution to the analytical and intellectual framework within which certain problems of the Third World can be considered.

Nearing my conclusion, I return to that fine scholar we honor today. Professor Mendis did not do much in an advisory role on public policy. But he had clear ideas on the custodial, training and investigative aspects of the intellectual enterprise. As I look at his work, I see him to the very end probing, asking questions. What are the major unanswered questions of Sri Lanka's history? There are so many that still need to be examined! In the pursuit of historical truth, he quietly but persistently posed critical questions a reasonable but skeptical man might ask to clarify a point, to illuminate a shadow of doubt. He tested conventional – and often comfortable, accepted notions.

Two final observations related to Professor Mendis. He was a rigorous scholar, and laid high demands upon his students. But he was humane; indeed, to some of his students he demonstrated a degree of humane

sensitivity to their subjective selves that was most remarkable. Here is a story a former student of his recently told me. This young man worked for Professor Mendis as an assistant in the university hostel. He had boldly, and as it turned out, prematurely declared to his parents he needed no more support. He found meeting his financial obligations difficult, and had to layover his telephone bill each month. Professor Mendis, who every month reviewed the hostel's accounts, noticed this. After several months he quietly paid the telephone bill himself. And he came to my young friend and said, "I have paid your telephone bill; you must not let it worry you. If you allow it to worry you, my having paid it would have been useless. Let us now forget it and you will forget it and we can now start afresh." That was many years ago, but my young friend never forgot that understanding generosity, the inconspicuous gift, and his insistence that there be no need to worry his mind about it.

The second point relates to his professional concern - the teaching of history in certain schools has fallen off dramatically. It is not because people wish to free themselves from awareness of their history. But rather, the curriculum inherited and as presently established, precludes these students who go into sciences from studying history! Indeed, there are some leading schools in Colombo, I am told, where the teaching of history in the upper grades has practically ceased. This is so, it is said, because ambitious parents are so determined that their children should do well in their science exams that they are directed to leave history alone. Indeed, interviews with candidates for Fulbright and other overseas fellowships are now indicating a shocking lack of knowledge among Sri Lankan university graduates not only of history, but also of geography and of the arts literature.

This greatly distresses me; it would distress Professor Mendis far more. There must be some way to alter curricula so that even those who go far in the science stream can gain a sense of their own cultural and historical heritage. In Sri Lanka, history is as rich as it is varied if the full range of your country's historical experience is brought within reach of your students. C. P. Snow used to write about the two cultures, a division in the intellectual enterprise as unfortunate as it is unnecessary. Scientists are needed in politics and the public service at all levels, and indeed are actively involved in such pursuits here today. We have only to look at the ambitious Mahaweli Development Scheme. How much more valuable their contribution would be if they had more of the long range understanding and security of judgement that a study of history can provide.

In conclusion, on behalf of what Garrett Mendis stood for let me reaffirm my belief that the study of history, as he practiced it, is indispensable. I leave you with four important questions. How can we know what we are if we do not know what and where we have come from? How can we know what directions we can go in if we do not know where we have been? How do we know what challenges in the future we can overcome unless we are aware of the challenges we have already mastered in years gone by? And how can we conquer the problems of the future, if we ignore the valuable lessons of the past?