

HISTORY AS AN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE : REFLECTIONS ON ITS CURRENT STATE IN SRI LANKA

by
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It would seem rather strange that I should speak on the topic I have chosen for this evening to an audience such as this - a group of engineers. When I was invited to address this distinguished gathering I readily agreed to do so for a very good reason. I believe that your academic venture to compile and publish a History of Engineering in Sri Lanka, in several volumes, is one of the most encouraging developments in the field of historical studies in this country in recent times. It is too early yet for congratulations. Those will come only after some at least of the volumes you have planned are published and receive critical assessment. Nevertheless you are entitled to a sense of satisfaction at the commencement of a major intellectual enterprise.

The historical discipline and profession are in a state of acute crisis in this country today, and things are certain to get worse before they improve. The number of students reading history in universities has dropped drastically and that has had the effect of lowering morale among the teachers, lowering the quality of students offering history as a subject, and of reducing the availability of competent research students who could develop into the historians of the future. Our educationists committed an unforgivable blunder - for a country so conscious of its history - of practically eliminating history from the primary and secondary school curricula. The various sectors of education, primary, secondary and tertiary cannot operate in isolation as they have done in this country. Changes made in one sector have their effects on others, as this change in regard to the teaching of history as a subject in schools has had. There is now a glimmer of hope. At last history has been restored as a distinct subject of study in secondary schools. Up to now such history as was taught was part of what was called social studies. Ironically enough historical studies remained an integral part of the school curricula in other parts of the world not least in the rest of South Asia. We are now seeking to catch up. Perhaps in years to come there will be an increase in the number of students who will study history in the universities.

The teaching of history in our schools faces two major difficulties : a shortage of competent teachers, and secondly an acute shortage of textbooks. The more competent teachers are now on the verge of retirement. Their replacements do not appear to have the same sure grasp of the essentials of their subject, and the same familiarity with recent writings in history, most of which are not available in Sinhala or Tamil. Only a few days ago I found an University colleague (a scientist) and his wife desperately searching for a textbook written 40 years ago, for their daughter, who was studying history in a leading school. The textbooks available are so poor in content and so stodgy in style that parents and more knowledgeable teachers are reduced to combing second hand book-shops in a futile search for textbooks of long ago.

The historical discipline in the universities is also in a state of crisis, for which the fall in the number of students reading history is only one factor and may not even be the most important one. When I joined the Department of History of the then University of Ceylon as an Assistant Lecturer nearly thirty five years ago it had a staff of six or seven. These numbers increased slightly over the next year or two. History was then one of the most popular subjects in the Faculty of Arts. What is the position today? Practically every university in the country (with the exception of the Eastern University of Sri Lanka) has a Department of History. A few years ago the University Grants Commission found that there were actually almost as many teachers in the history departments as there were students reading history. There has been some slight improvement in this ratio since then, partly because history is treated as a "protected" subject with a special intake of students. The problem however is that the increase in the number of departments of history and in the number of university teachers of history has not been matched by any substantial increase in the output of historical writing in the Sri Lankan universities since the heyday of historical studies in this country 10 to 15 years ago. Fortunately the gap is being filled and in many instances more than adequately filled by others: I would like to mention the

work being done by archaeologists such as Siran Deraniyagala, Senaka Bandaranaike, and Sudarshan Seneviratne; by the writings of a number of amateur historians; by the work of institutional historians such as the group whose first volume we are gathered here to launch; and to a lesser extent by scholars in cognate fields such as anthropology.

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The historical profession has had problems of a different sort in other countries. Instead of a reduction in the publication of historical works of very high quality, there has been, if anything, an embarrassment of riches. If there is a crisis at all, it has been a crisis of confidence as historians watched the transformation of their craft from a discipline in the humanities with a link to literature - the most distinguished historians have been among the great stylists in whatever language they chose to write in, English, French or German - to a social science.

Moreover the historian's perceptions of the past have been altered by a very wide range of circumstances. The result has been that historians seek to answer wholly new kinds of questions with what amounts to new kinds of facts. While many of these changes occur within the various facets of the historical discipline, others reflect far-reaching changes taking place in society - scientific discovery, technological revolution, the vast changes that have taken place in economic activities and political organisations, quite apart from changes in forms of thought and in ideologies. All these in their particular and peculiar contemporary form have influenced the historians and the type of history they write, and the techniques they adopt. The competition with the social sciences was an unequal one, and the historians contributed to the erosion of the integrity of their calling by so easily falling prey to the blandishments of more popular disciplines. There is an unanswerable case for inter-disciplinary studies, the cross-fertilization that comes from an awareness of the contribution to knowledge from cognate disciplines like sociology, anthropology, political science and literature. But as historians resorted to the techniques of the sciences, to quantification and graphs and to elaborately constructed models that have little relation to reality they were, in fact, undermining their own calling.

A hundred and fifty years ago Thomas Carlyle in a famous essay on Chartism cautioned his readers about the pitfalls in statistical tables:

"Tables are like cobwebs, like the sieve of the Danaides; beautifully reticulated, orderly to look upon, but which will hold no conclusion. Tables are abstractions, and their

object a most concrete one, so difficult to read the essence of. There are innumerable circumstances; and one circumstance left out may be the vital one on which all turned. Conclusive facts are inseparable from inconclusive except by a head that already understands and knows".

The fact is, as Jacques Barzun, a historian of more recent vintage has pointed out in a well-known book, *Clio and the Doctors*:

"History has no need for mathematical precision because it deals with activity not process. Activities are what we do and can imagine others having done; processes are what goes on unwilled or unknown...."

.... The substance of history, we know, is not amenable to measurement in the scientific sense; and prediction in history, though often validated, is not scientific prediction capable of sifting true explanations from false. An historian's forecast is an affair of worldly judgement such as everyone uses, more or less well, in the conduct of life.

Twenty years ago another well-known historian H.J. Hanham in an essay entitled '*Clio's Weapons*', sounded a warning about what he saw as an excessive reliance on computers:

"The great merit of the computer is that it is an extremely flexible tool endowed with a memory. It can do all sorts of things that an adding machine and card sorter cannot do. And it can handle vast quantities of data with ease. For the historian, however, its chief benefit so far has been psychological. The very possibility of breaking away from what had come to seem a rather limited set of historical techniques has given a great boost to morale. Graduate students in their more optimistic moments see in the computer an escape from the treadmills set up by their predecessors. In fact they will merely exchange one treadmill for another. For the computer has done little more than carry a stage further the analysis of complex data which began long ago. Demographers, medical sociologists, social historians, historians of electoral behaviour and economic historians had all begun to use complex data long before the computer was available. The computer too had the effect of enabling them to handle yet more complex data. It has not had the effect of a revolution in the writing of history [and] the preoccupations of historians has changed much less than might have been expected."

"In short, we are at one of those stages, familiar enough to historians of technology, when the mastery of new techniques appears to be an end in itself...."

A reaction has now set in, in Britain and Europe no less than in the United States, to the excesses of history as a social science, to the so-called structural history, which so contemptuously rejected much of the heritage of the historian's craft, while burying meanings beneath a heap of statistics and a pile of learned jargon. As Bernard Shaw once put it, "Chaos has no statistics; it has only statisticians". I would like to add that the general run of historians who aspire to be statisticians only add to the chaos. D.C.M. Platt, a British historian delivered a withering blast at them two years ago in a book with an amusing but appropriate title, *Mickey Mouse Numbers in World History*.

In 1979, Lawrence Stone himself an accomplished exponent of analytical history, welcomed the return of narrative history.

"Historians have always told stories," he explained. "From Thucydides and Tacitus to Gibbon and Macaulay, the composition of narrative in lively and elegant prose was always accounted their highest ambition. History was regarded as a branch of rhetoric"

He took great pains to explain what he meant by narrative history:

"Narrative is taken to mean the organisation of material in a chronologically sequential order, and the focusing of the content into a single coherent story, albeit with subplots. The two essential ways in which narrative history differs from structural history is that its arrangement is descriptive rather than analytical, and its central focus is on man and not circumstances. It deals with the particular and the specific rather than the collective and statistical. Narrative is a mode of historical writing but it is a mode which also affects and is affected by the content and the method."

In 1983 there was a remarkable intervention by the French President Francois Mitterand in the debate on the nature of history and the techniques of writing history, when he called in question the fundamentals of the established style of French historiography. For two generations France was seen to be leading the way in historical studies with works of great erudition and depth but with little concern for political history and great disdain for a narrative style. As usual French fashions have had less influence on Britain than on the United States where they came to be more firmly established than in France itself. "The deficiency of teaching history" Mitterand declared, "has become a national danger." There was, he said, an urgent need for a restoration of the balance in favour of political and

narrative history, and an emphasis on notable individuals. The French school had no use at all for great individuals. Francois Mitterand may well have thought that history is too important a thing to be left to professional historians, and that historians needed to be rescued from the predicament in which they had placed themselves.

It required an unusually perceptive and self-confident politician to challenge the fundamental assumptions of a powerful intellectual tradition that had gone to seed. Almost at the time Mitterand was issuing his challenge, a new book was in the course of production which was to mark a spectacular return to the traditional historical methods. And to make the irony richer still it was a pathbreaking study of the French Revolution, written to commemorate its bicentenary, a Dutch scholar, Simon Schama's *Citizens : A Chronicle of the French Revolution*. Schama's book was in every sense a masterpiece, written as though in answer to Mitterand's call for a return to the traditional modes of historical writing. It is a marvellous book, written in an arresting style and yet based on years of research on the vast mass of data and documents available to students of the French Revolution. It is worthy to stand with some of the classic works of the past.

While all these stimulating intellectual discussions on the nature of history were going on in other parts of the world there was relatively little happening in historical studies in this island, among its professional historians. As a result others stepped in to fill the gap. I intend to deal with three such groups.

Let us begin with a very vocal group of western anthropologists, sociologists and a few political scientists who have written on the history and politics of this island over the last few years. A country in the throes of a major crisis, such as Sri Lanka is currently undergoing, suffers many misfortunes, and also attracts a whole host of people who seek to benefit from these. Some of these come easily to mind : journalists looking for sensations; some well-meaning do-gooders and a great many who are not so well-meaning; and of course the arms dealers. To these categories we need to add the anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists that I referred to. To be sure there are a few among them who have made an important contribution to the study of this country's history and culture and have written on these themes with great sympathy and understanding. But the vast majority of them use this country's misfortunes as a means of furthering their own academic careers with the help of articles, monographs and books of overwhelming superficiality. Their contributions have done little to

illuminate the issues in this country's ethnic conflict. But more distressing still are their writings on the country's history. They have no hesitation in reaching conclusions on the complexities of this island's long history without anything like a thorough knowledge of historical sources. They would write on Sri Lanka's ancient past without a knowledge of the languages which are essential to an understanding of that history. These anthropologists rush in where historians, conscious of the difficulties of a problem, fear to tread. Armed with some anthropological theory, concealing their ignorance and prejudices behind a veil of jargon, they make pronouncements on subjects which they do not understand. They would write on Buddhism and its historical evolution in this country, without a knowledge of Pali and Sanskrit, and basing themselves on English translations of classical texts. What a contrast they are to western scholars of Buddhism or ancient Sri Lanka of the previous generation, with their command of a wide range of sources in a great many classical languages and, above all, their understanding of the limits of their knowledge. One can go on about this at length. But this is not the occasion for anything more than a passing reference to it.

Let us turn to something more constructive; the contributions to historical studies being made by gifted amateurs who have put the larger body of professional historians, in this country, to shame. This is not something peculiar to Sri Lanka - in all parts of the world where the historical profession thrives, amateur historians, many of whom have spent years on painstaking research, enrich the field of historical studies by their contribution. Fortunately we in this country have always had many such scholars. A few years ago we thought that tradition had come to an end, but it has demonstrated a remarkable resilience, through the works of four persons: Dr. Nihal Karunaratne (a busy medical practitioner in Kandy; Dr. G.C. Urugoda (a medical man himself) Professor C. Arsecularatne of the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Peradeniya; and Donovan Moldrich (a journalist). They have, each in his own way, helped to keep historical scholarship alive at a time when the bulk of the professional historians themselves have been conspicuously unproductive. Through a study of the machinations and sheer skulduggery that permitted a masterful governor to build the King's Pavilion in Kandy (now known as the President's Pavilion) against the wishes of Whitehall, Dr. Nihal Karunaratne has illuminated the historical background of the period as well as the personal conflicts within the colonial administration, with a mastery of touch worthy of any professional historian. Donovan Moldrich's book *Bitter Berry Bondage: The Nineteenth Century Coffee Workers of Sri Lanka* has skillfully blended new sources

with old, both to supplement the work of professional historians who have written on this theme, as well as to fill in gaps in their studies. Just a few weeks ago Professor Arsecularatne's stimulating study of *Sinhalese Immigrants in Malaysia and Singapore, 1860-1990* was published. It heralded the arrival of a mature historian on the Sri Lankan academic scene. I have left Dr. G.C. Urugoda's book on the history of medicine¹ for the last, for the reason that it links us to our principal interest this evening - the institutional history of the engineering profession in Sri Lanka.

There has been a rich tradition of institutional history in this country in British times: we have had solid studies of the Public Works Department, the three volume work by M.P. Bingham published in 1921-3, and covering the period 1796 to 1913,² G.F. Perera's study of the Ceylon Government Railway,³ and two solid volumes on the History of the Police (Pippet⁴ and Dep⁵) covering the period up to 1913. Institutional history, and sometimes the history of a profession or an academic discipline have attracted outstanding scholars in many parts of the world. Such studies are often undertaken by professional historians, commissioned for that purpose, but in the more technical subjects where a training in the discipline or a cognate field is essential to understanding it, someone from within the profession or institution is usually better suited for the task than a professional historian or a journalist.

Professional or institutional history is now enjoying a revival in this country after a very long interval. We have Dr. Urugoda on the medical profession, Justice Ranjith Amerasinghe on the Supreme Court, and now with the work on the history of the engineering profession in its various specialities, which you are engaged in, institutional and professional history should establish itself as a major academic enterprise, and a very worthy contribution to historical studies in Sri Lanka.

The first volume in the History of Engineering in Sri Lanka series, a monograph on the Sri Lanka Railways has now been published. No doubt it will be the stimulus for the early publication of the rest of the volumes in the series. When that is done, one important task lies ahead of you, a single volume on the history of engineering in modern Sri Lanka written for that very illusive but discerning person, the general reader. Let me end this talk by wishing your enterprise great success. I fervently hope there will be no gaps in your publications, and that all the projected volumes would be published on schedule.

1. G.C. Urugoda, A History of Medicine in Sri Lanka from the Earliest Times to 1948 (Colombo, 1987).
2. M.P. Bingham, A History of the Public Works Department, Ceylon 1796-1913 (Colombo, 1921-3).
3. G.F. Percra, The Ceylon Railways : The Story of its Inception and Progress (Colombo, 1925).
4. G.K. Pippet, A History of the Ceylon Police, 1795-1870 (Colombo, 1938).
5. A.C. Dep, A History of the Ceylon Police, 1866-1913, (Colombo, 1969).