

Keynote Address

Falling into the Science Trap: Why Lankan Universities are Devaluing Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences-Studies Education

විද්‍යාවේ උගුලට වැටීම: ලාංකේය විශ්ව විද්‍යාල පද්ධතිය කලා, මානව ශාස්ත්‍ර, හා සමාජ විද්‍යා අධ්‍යයන විෂයයන් අවතක්සේරු කිරීමට හේතු

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The major error of those who claim that science and scientists must take responsibility for governance because governance needs definite knowledge which only science can provide is they do not appreciate that humanity and human affairs, including governance of free, diverse, independent people, would always need a capacity for informed judgement built through long study and struggle with human affairs and follies and membership of that culture. Humanities education must enable a capacity of judgment. General laws would not do, for there aren't any.

Dr. S. V. Kasynathan

(pers. com.)

I

The all-consuming rise and rise of crudely positivist and narrowly empiricist science has, within Sri Lankan academic and intellectual discourse at least but elsewhere as well, conquered all. Research today, irrespective of its disciplinary origin or focus, is measured by its “scientific” merit, preferably in quantitative terms. Thus, scholars from fields as diverse as literature and law, gender and geography, philosophy and public administration, scramble to trivialize their work into mathematically measurable bytes that confirm or refute simplistic hypotheses.

The Late Stephen Hawking was one of the strongest advocates for this “scientific methods” as the only worthwhile methodology and hence which should be emulated by all disciplines:

Any sound scientific theory, whether of time or of any other concept, should in my opinion be based on the most workable philosophy of science: the positivist approach put forward by Karl Popper and others. According to this way of thinking, a scientific theory is a mathematical model that describes and codifies the observations we make. A good theory will describe a large range of phenomena on the basis of a few simple postulates and will make definite predictions that can be tested [...] If one takes the positivist position, as I do, one cannot say what time actually is. All one can do is describe what has been found to be a very good mathematical model for time and say what predictions it makes.

Stephen Hawking *The Universe in a Nutshell*, p. 31

This presentation argues that the hegemony of science, thus narrowly conceived, is not merely non-rigorous and misleading in the Humanities and so-called Social Sciences, it is also suspect in other traditionally “scientific” disciplinary enclaves as well. Even within international scientific scholarship, alternative paradigms have emerged during the last five decades though they still remain marginal, but academics of all stripes in Sri Lanka must not only appear to be *scientific* in order to be credible, they are also evaluated within their respective disciplines as *scientists*, in the most limited of senses carried by this term.

Even among the handful of dissidents in the field, the oft-repeated defensive rationalizations are (a) my discipline/research is different because I do qualitative, not quantitative, studies, and (b) the scientific approach doesn’t cover all types of research. While these claims are obviously valid, they concede too much to this dominant avatar of science in order to carve out a safe space for “non-scientific” studies. Research can be multi- or inter-disciplinary as long as it is *scientific*, if one is a junior academic; if one is sufficiently senior as to evade such scrutiny, one must still rationalize one’s deviance.

II

My main focus and plea here is to young academics, graduate students, graduands and senior undergraduates working on their dissertations. We in the older generation have let them down, by caving in to the pressures of the dominant scientific ideology. Many of us our now fine exponents of this “disguised nonsense”, producing weak mathematical justifications and rationalizations for (jargonized) common sense. Here I will examine the formula for undergraduate dissertations (and now even masters theses), to demonstrate how bankrupt this model is for our work and thinking.

Moreover, the hierarchy is further entrenched by the ubiquitous use of science-oriented (concept) metaphors and epistemologies, which I interrogate in order to lay bare the burden of the straitjacket that has been imposed on research *per se*. Nowhere is this more evident than in the demand for postgraduate research and grant applications across the board to identify “research problems” and to test “hypotheses”, when to do so will necessarily result in the distortion and trivialization of the original study. Instead, we now design our research so that they more easily fit this model!

III

"My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense." (**Philosophical Investigations** Part I, section 464)

"If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments." (**Philosophical Investigations** Part I, section 242)

Using a little Wittgenstein and many concrete examples I demonstrate how these misplaced and misleading notions of science and the scientific method vitiate scholarship across a range of disciplines, invariably producing jargonized common (non)sense and platitudes on the one hand, or gross distortions on the other. In order to do so I also critically examine generally unquestioned

touchstones of rigour such as “clarity”, “objectivity”, linear “logical frameworks” and the self-evidence of numerical preponderance, positing in their stead a nuanced understanding of how power operates discursively in the making and privileging of meaning, in this instance in determining what legitimately constitutes scholarly research.

IV

“What I call the university of tomorrow ... [should be] free to know, criticise, ask questions, and doubt without any conditions attached, without being limited by any political or religious power.” Adapted from Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally* [The Last Interview], p.48

"මම අනාගත විශ්වවිද්‍යාලය ලෙස හඳුන්වන්නේ මෙයයි: අනාගත විශ්වවිද්‍යාලය යනු සත්‍යය සෙවීමට එරෙහි කොන්දේසි කිසිවක් නොමැති, අලුත් දේ දැනගැනීමට හා විවේචනය කිරීමට නිදහස ඇති, ඕනෑම අදහසක් හෝ මතයක් ශිෂ්ට ලෙස ප්‍රශ්න කිරීමට හා සැක කිරීමට වරම හිමිවෙන, දේශපාලනික හෝ ආගමික බලය විසින් කිසිසේත් සීමා නොකෙරෙන පරමාදර්ශී තැනකි."

Finally, I will make a speculative argument that because Arts, Humanities and Social “Sciences” are reinventing themselves and have been placed on the defensive, we are engaged in a self-fulfilling prophecy about the irrelevance and inadequacy of our disciplines and faculties. In fact, the answer we provide diffidently is itself a capitulation to this pseudo-scientific logic. On the basis of World Bank bribes and brickbats, we are further dumbing down our curriculum and making it narrowly instrumental, job-oriented, dependent on the Government’s politicized job-handouts and teaching.

In this interregnum, to quote Gramsci, where the old order is dead but the new is not yet born, morbid symptoms appear. I will attempt a hard explanation of what has happened to our university system as a result of the academic leadership in our faculties (and others too, but differently) not grasping the nettle of the problem. Hence, violence and counter-violence, as well as anti-intellectualism dominates the university, as I will explain in detail.

Job-orientation is important but we should not confuse employment with employability. I have long proposed two distinct types of degrees in our faculties: (a) a general degree of three years which is geared to the world of work and is packed with practical skills and high-demand competencies, and (b) four-year special degrees, for a limited number, that maintain academic rigour and create intellectuals with social awareness and commitment. Currently, our general degrees are weak imitations of the special or honours degree, and serves neither purpose outlined above.

V

At a school “you are not engaged much in acquiring knowledge as in making mental efforts under criticism. . . . A certain set of knowledge you can indeed with average faculties acquire so as to retain; nor need you regret the hours spent on much that is forgotten, for the shadow of lost knowledge at least protects you from many illusions. But you go to a great school not so much for knowledge as for arts and habits: for the habit of attention, for the art of expression, for the art of assuming at a moment’s notice, a new intellectual position, for the art of entering quickly into another parson’s thoughts, for the habit of submitting to censure and refutation, for the art of indicating assent or dissent in graduated terms, for the habit of regarding minute points of accuracy, for the art of working out what is possible in a given time, for taste, discrimination, for mental courage and mental soberness. And above all you go to a great school for self-knowledge.” William Cory, a Eton Master, quoted in Michael Oakshott’s essay “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind”.

පාසලක ඔබ ඉගෙන ගන්නේ දැනුම ලබාගැනීමට වඩා විවාරශීලී වටපිටාවක මානසික අභ්‍යාසයක යෙදීමටයි. යම් ප්‍රමාණයක දැනුම් සම්භාරයක් ග්‍රහණය කිරීමට හා එය මතකයේ රඳා පවත්වාගැනීමට ඔබට සාමාන්‍ය බුද්ධියකින් වුවද හැකිවනු නිසැකයි. එසේම ලබාගත් දැනුමෙන් වැඩි කොටසක් අමතක වන නමුත් එය වෙනුවෙන් ඔබ වැය කළ පැය ගණන පිළිබඳවද පසුතැවිලි වීම අවශ්‍ය නැත. එයට හේතුව අමතකව ගිය දැනුමේ සෙවනැල්ල විසින් අවම වශයෙන් ඔබව නොයෙක් මායාවන්ගෙන් ආරක්ෂා කරන හෙයිනි. එහෙත් ඔබ විශිෂ්ට පාසලකට යන්නේ දැනුම ලබාගැනීමට වඩා විවිධ කලා හා [මානසික] පලපුරුදු ලබාගැනීමටයි.

අවධානය එක්තැන් කිරීමේ පලපුරුද්ද සඳහා, අදහස් ප්‍රකාශ කිරීමේ කලාව සඳහා, ක්ෂණයකින් අලුත් බුද්ධිමය ස්ථාවරයක් වෙනුවෙන් පෙනීසිටීමේ කලාව සඳහා, ඉක්මනින් වෙනත් කෙනෙකුගේ සිතිවිලිවලට අතුළත් වීමේ කලාව සඳහා, සරදමට හා ප්‍රතික්ෂේපයට අවනත වීමේ පලපුරුද්ද සඳහා, එකඟතාව හා විසම්මුතිය අඩු හා ඔබ්බෙන් ස්වරයෙන් ප්‍රකාශ කිරීමේ කලාව සඳහා, සුක්ෂම කරුණුවල නිවැරදි බව පරීක්ෂා කිරීමේ පලපුරුද්ද සඳහා, යම් කාල පරාසයක කළ හැකි උපරිම දේ හඳුනාගැනීමේ කලාව සඳහා, රසාස්වාදය සඳහා, විෂමතා හා සමානතා තෝරාගැනීමේ හැකියාව සඳහා, මානසික නිර්භීතකම සඳහා හා මානසික සන්සුන්බව සඳහා. මේ සියල්ලටම වඩා කෙනෙකු විශිෂ්ට පාසලකට යන්නේ ස්වාත්ම-ඥානය ලබාගැනීමටයි.

What must we do now? I propose that we take stock of the damage done both to our disciplines and within our disciplines by this creeping scientism, which like a cancer has taken control of the body politic of our disciplines. The time for timidity is long past. If we believe that our work should not be a cheap imitation of positivist-empiricist science, or weak mathematics-statistics, we need to actively, not passively, resist this frightening trend. In the faculties of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences are diversity is our strength: one size does not fit all, and we should say, united in our diversity and radical difference, misusing Shakespeare's Hamlet:

“There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” Hamlet

We must continue to be true to our disciplines and principles, teaching our students to make judgements and to defend them, to go beyond petty nationalisms and other parochial ideologies. In short, we need to get back to the era when our scholars and intellectuals towered over all others in the university system, and for this we have to reinvent our teaching and research to create and nurture students with a humanist vision that puts science in its place as one method among many.