

St. John's College, Jaffna commemoration of the 175th anniversary. Some reflections on St. John's College, Jaffna

by Sterling Perera (Extracted from Sunday Island 16/08/98)

St. John's College, Jaffna, one of Sri Lanka's illustrious schools, celebrates the 175th anniversary of its founding this year. My acquaintance with this school is limited to brief visits in the seventies and to noting year after year that St. John's always ranked among best performers at the GCE (Advanced Level) Examination. In order to obtain an objective index of performance of schools at public examinations, a school examination performance index was devised by the Department of Examinations in 1986, when I was Commissioner. The commonly used means of gauging school performance by the number of 4 A's and 8 D's at the GCE (A/L) and GCE (O/L) examinations is misleading as it may hide more valid aspects of performance such as the number of 4F's and 8F's. In the first performance index for GCE (A/L), of 1986, St. John's ranked second country-wise. In the last issued (1993), despite the travails suffered by Jaffna, St. John's still ranks second. As such there has to be something special about St. John's which needs to be recognised from a general perspective of school performance improvement. With regard to the history of this great school, I am indebted to the several newspaper articles published in connection with its 175th anniversary and particularly to the comprehensive and up-dated 'History of St. John's College', published in 1983. This publication contains a re-print of the history, compiled by J. C. Handy to commemorate the centenary in 1923, as Part I, and that of the period 1923-1983, compiled by S. M. V. Tissainayagam, as Part II. In reading through this very comprehensive history one cannot fail to note the contribution made by the galaxy of her principals ranging from Rev. Knight the illustrious founder, through such more recent 'greats' such as, Peto (1920 - 1940), Arulanantham (1940 - 1957), Pooranampillai (1967 - 1976) and Anandarajan (1976 - 1985). I had the privilege of meeting only the last, Mr. Anandarajan, in connection with the School Project Work, in which Jaffna excelled, under the 1972 Educational Reforms. The 15 years of history from 1983 to 1998 covers the current period of strife in Jaffna as well in the rest of the country. For St. John's it is especially significant because principal Anandarajan, was one of the victims of the mindless cult of violence which characterises this period of our history. Before coming to that 'something special' that contributed to the greatness of St. John's, it would be in order to briefly look at the particular context which resulted in many of Sri Lanka's better schools being concentrated in the North. Early lead Jaffna had an early lead as regards education in its modern form which had its beginnings in the colonial period. Its geographical features and complete colonial subjugation two and a half centuries before the rest of the county permitted early and total penetration by the occupying colonial powers. Nevertheless there were other obstacles, not seen in the rest of the country which the missionaries had to overcome in Jaffna. The history of St. John's records in relation to the work of the founder principal Rev. Knight that, "The parents of the boys regarded the missionaries as outcasts. Indeed, we are told that it was usual for the pundit to go to the tank and bathe on his way home after giving his morning lesson (in Tamil) to the missionary". However, by 1786, during the Dutch occupation, "there were no less than 35,963 children in the schools of Jaffna" (Education in Ceylon, 1969). The first Seminary for the training to teachers established by the Dutch was also in Nallur, Jaffna, (ibid). This lead was followed up during the British period when, by the year 1888, 142 of the 1357 of the Government and grant-in aid schools were in the Northern Province. These schools provided for 1 in 10 of the population, far exceeding the ration provided for in any other province except in the Western Province where the ratio was the same. (ibid). Perhaps much more significant were the qualitative aspects. Jaffna schools took an early lead in the provision of College Departments in the High Schools. Their curriculum even as early as 1872, included, "Algebra, Geometry, Trigonometry, Surveying, Conic Sections and Calculus....Astronomy, Botany, Geology, Chemistry..." (ibid). "It was natural that this lead provided for greater opportunities for personal advancement. Thus with the social exemplars of success being the products of good education, it was also natural that education was perceived as the best patrimony to be bestowed on the young and supported as such. This perception has been an enduring feature of Jaffna as seen from the continued good performance of pupils at public examinations even under the severe hardships undergone by them in the post 1987 period." (from a recent study for the Resettlement and Rehabilitation Authority of the North-RRAN). In the search for that 'something special' about St. John's one had only to look for the contribution made by the dedicated principals and devoted teachers as amply illustrated in the well documented history of the school. In this respect St. John's is not unique. The other great schools of the country share the same experience. An equally significant feature perhaps was the remarkable and eccentric personalities of the teachers. The memories of the pupils about their schools were invariably related to their associations with such teachers and as such they remembered what was taught by them. The history of St. John's quite correctly devotes much space to record the pupils' impressions about such teachers. It records of Mr. Godwin Arudpragasam, of the 1867 - 1889 period as 'a nice jolly soul teaching much and caning less, portly and very ponderous, and gifted with a tremendous capacity for laughing so uproariously that his whole system would be shaken to the verge of dissolution'. It also records of Mr. Martin Luther who

'taught the mysteries of Euclid's first book, of the smallness of the point, of the magnitude of the line, of the exacting nature of the demands of a postulate, of the transparency of an axiom, of the immutability of a right angle, of the perversity of an obtuse angle, of triangles standing on their heads, and of angles bashfully concealed on the other side (of the blackboard)." The effect on the pupils of the infusion of such passion into teaching even a subject such as Geometry; as compared with the present day pedagogically better designed but uninspiring lessons; can be imagined. The history of St. John's also records of Mr. Vannitamby (senior), who "lectured in Geometry although he was Euclid's uncle. He seemed quite at home with the subtleties of the pons asinorum and divined the mind of the originator of that perplexity with the confidence of Euclid's executor or the next of kin. Geography - you would think he had been in all the British possessions and stayed in the principal hotels of the world. History - he knew Collier by heart and spoke of the great men in that book as though he had dined, breakfasted, and lunched with everyone of them from Odo to Wilkes". Common factors Pupils of other such schools from Ananda to Zahira, even of comparatively more recent vintage, could match such experiences with those of their own. The common factors are the passion infused into teaching by these great teachers regardless of the subject and their lovable eccentricities. As this note is concerned about reflective insights, it is appropriate to consider this aspect in the current context of teaching - learning in our schools. It is true that school teaching - learning today is narrowly examination-oriented and that too to meet the demands of an out-dated, 'sit-in', 'pen and paper only' and 'one-shot' summative examination system. The schools are largely redundant as a result of 'a seriously malignant by-product of this summative examination scheme, - the growth of a parallel but parasitic Meta-school system of tutoring". (ADB-PPTA Report, 1991). Although this situation has to be taken serious notice of and is one of the maladies expected to be addressed by the current educational reforms through such absolutely necessary measures as school-based assessment, I wish to draw the attention of the readers to another aspect of teaching - learning. This concerns the currently accepted pedagogical approaches. One would notice that our teachers are more specialised than those venerable teachers who taught Geometry as well as History and Geography. The new teachers are required to be objective in their approach to topics in the curriculum. They are expected to come prepared and 'teach to the point'. Perhaps the need for pupils to strive so hard to understand and remember what they are taught owes more to the 'dispassionate', 'objective' and 'totally relevant' approaches required by modern pedagogy. Perhaps in the pursuit of pre-decided objective oriented teaching, the human interest aspects are cast aside forgetting that teaching and learning are intensely human activities. It appears that we are dealing with two entirely different approaches, the older 'Great Tradition' to which belong all the great teachers from Socrates to the 'Vannitamby's' of St. John's and the newer "Little Tradition" of teachers, taught to be competent in pre-deciding the objectives of a teaching exercise and disciplined to deal only with the 'relevant essentials' in teaching a topic. It is recognised that only good teachers belong to either tradition, the bad, the indifferent and the incompetent belong altogether to a different 'non-teacher' category. A clue to the modern phenomenon of pupils being 'overburdened by the school curriculum' and studying so hard and for long hours even in the lower grades, is provided by the Owering and Travers' studies in the U.S. in the sixties. The need for long hours of study is linked to the inability to generalise and extend from one phenomenon studied to a number of different situations where the principle related to the phenomenon is the same. Then each phenomenon has to be studied as a different one; everyone of them taking the same time to understand as the first studied. If the underlying principle is identified and examples of possible extension are also given there is no need to study all the different phenomena linked by a common principle as a separate one. The study quotes the instance of relating the buoyancy of an object in water to the rising of smoke from a chimney; the linking generalizer being the Archimedes' principle. It is called teaching for transfer of training. Anecdotes The tight lesson planning limited to one topic at a time does not permit teachers to gaily ramble along as the old teachers did. Another reason is the lack of distinctness of each lesson which hinders pupils from remembering the lesson and retrieving what was taught at a later date. The celebrated teachers of St. John's amply provided for this through the use of anecdotes and infusion of passion. Learning was often incidental and a pleasurable activity (apart from the caning freely practised in those times), instead of being a dull and routine chore. The conclusion of the 'Overing the Travers' studies is that "pupils trained under conditions involving a minimum number of irrelevant cues performed well on the tests that also involved a minimum cues, but performed poorly on the tests that involved a considerable number of irrelevant features. On the other hand, those trained in the presence of many irrelevant cues were equally successful at the testing of problems regardless of the extent they included irrelevant cues." It appears that teachers of the "Great Tradition" had anticipated these findings centuries earlier! Another important conclusion of these studies was that, "A principle taught in a rarefied environment (such as the sterilised, rigidly objective and dispassionate environment of our classrooms) that eliminates all irrelevancies does not prepare the individual to handle problems in a world filled with irrelevancies." Another important feature about such schools is the close identification of the school with the principal and teachers of a particular period of its history. In fact the history of St. John's is divided into chapters, often indicating the stewardship of the celebrated principals such as that of Mr. Evarts (1867 - 1889) (in which the activities of the teachers mentioned above are recorded) and of Peto as the 'Peto Period" (1920 - 1940). Similarly, to mention a few other instances at random, Ananda College can speak of the Kularatne era; St. Benedict's, the Luke era; St. Joseph's, the Le Goc era; St. Thomas' the 'Stone age'; Mahinda, the Woodward era; Trinity the Frazer era; Visakha, the Pulimood era; Wesley, the

Highfield era and Zahira, the Azeez era. A similar tradition was seen to emerge during the first two decades of the institution of the Central College system, which were also the years in which these schools flourished. Therefore free education, per se, is not the cause of the reduction in the emergence of great schools. The practice of linking glorious periods of histories of schools with great principals continues as great principals continued to emerge, but not in the numbers one should have expected considering the rapid growth of the school system. The missing ingredient is the galaxy of great teachers associated with a particular period of a school and often covering more than one generation of pupils. Beginning in sixties, teachers including those of the former great schools, became a faceless itinerant mass whose association with a school was only transitory. The school was regarded by the bureaucracy as a physical facility to be supplied with men and material and not as a delicately balanced educational 'eco-system', dependent on symbiotic human relationships. This aspect is dealt with quite extensively in the Report of the Presidential Commission on Youth, of 1990 and according to which, "...there is something fundamentally wrong with our system of education as it has evolved over the years. The problem appears to stem, from the most part, from the fact that our political leaders have consistently believed that equality for the people can only be effected by a centralised state bureaucracy imposing unvarying standards and norms throughout the country. This centralisation may have resulted in some degree of equity but in the long run it has served to destroy the school as a dynamic community institution." Devolution Decentralisation or even devolution by itself will not change the situation as then the school will become a cog in the administrative wheel' (Youth Commission Report), of a perhaps more parochial and threateningly proximate local bureaucracy. The Youth Commission Report also recommends that, "any future educational policy should be centred on the autonomy of the school, giving expression to the aspiration that the school should be given back to the community." considering that the Youth Commission was dealing with a context that led to serious consequences, particularly in respect of the youth with adequate years of schooling, the recommendations have to be heeded. A recent study (1966) done by the Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Education (SLAAED), for the World Bank, Sri Lanka General Education Project II, in respect of providing guidelines for curriculum development, devotes much space to this important consideration. This study refers to the school as 'an institution entitled to freedom'. This study refers to how the 'vestigial sense of independence' when, 'the principals and teachers have been able to provide for themselves a sense of purpose somewhat independent of the supra-school authorities', enabled the schools to function "during the recent period of previous social turmoil. "This has been strong enough to keep the schools functioning even during periods of social turmoil, when the intervention of these supra-authorities was minimal. This sense of purpose provided very effective in situations where the schools had to exercise a large degree of discretion and where the supra-authorities were themselves unprepared, as when project-work and continuous assessment were introduced. This vestigial sense of purpose has to be deliberately fostered by recognising and respecting it by means of the institution of nationally accepted goals linked to school related competency development. (as proposed by the new educational reforms). There is also the need to look at the school as an organism with its own purposes and sense of history. Its links to the social and physical environment as well as to its heritage has to be recognised, not only in handling the situation with care but also to purposefully utilise it to extend the broad aims of education to the community beyond. The respect for the school as an institution, entitled to a large degree of freedom, has to be demonstrated by allowing it a measure of flexibility in such matters as, deployment of teachers, selective emphasis of curricular and co-curricular components and time-tabling." This demonstration of the provision of a degree of freedom as the report argues could be through conceding to the schools the right to school-based assessment. Precious young "The school is a reputed institution to which the precious young population is entrusted in its formative years. Yet, ironically, the function of pupil evaluation for certification is not conceded to the only institution most competent to do so. The respect for the school as an institution is best fostered by conceding to it the function of evaluation for certification, with necessary safeguards... Any scheme of school system upgrading has to include a scheme to foster the independent self-respect for the schools through such measures as the conceding of pupil evaluation to the school system for a part of the certification process," (This aspect is now conceded under the new educational reforms). An event such as the 175th anniversary for the founding St. John's College, Jaffna, is an occasion to be celebrated. It is an occasion to pay our tributes to the dedicated principals and teachers who made St. John's College, Jaffna, is an occasion to be celebrated. It is an occasion to pay our tributes to the dedicated principals and teachers who made St. John's what it is and also for a re-dedication, with modifications, to their ideals as well as for a resolve to carry forward their vision and mission. I have no doubt that those associated with St. John's will do all this with genuine love and devotion. But for the country at large it should also be an occasion for reflection with a view to identifying features of St. John's as well as of other such schools which contributed to their greatness. It is also an occasion to look for reasons which hindered the proliferation of great schools since independence despite the laudable achievement of providing for a five-fold increase of school pupils and of the near total coverage in providing schooling to the school age population. It is also an appropriate occasion, poised as we are not to enter a new millennium and quite significantly with far reaching proposals for needed reforms in education. These reforms are unique in that they for the first time involve all the sub-systems of education and not reforms limited to only aspects such as the curriculum. They are also unique in that they are the result of study and reflection over a period of years and have features such as locally

adaptable curricula, issue-oriented teaching and school-based assessment all intended to provide a greater and more independent role for the schools. For the first time curriculum development is to be based on overt and commonly accepted national goals linked to school learning competencies. Thus the framework has already been created for regional and school level adaptations of the curriculum and for provision of the required flexibility to be independently exercised by the schools. A strong national framework with clearly and overtly accepted goals can provide the basis for more freedom of the institutions at the periphery. Schools such as St. John's as exemplars of more independent institutions could provide the direction needed for restoring a greater degree of autonomy for our schools. The mere function of schools such as St. John's in preserving the 'gene pool of experience' out of which a new more independent school system could sprout and grow is in itself a cause for celebration. Sterling Perera, was a former Director of Educational Planning and Research and a former Commissioner of Examinations and retired as an Assistant Director General of the National Institute of Education.