

## **Discussion paper by Professor Angela Little**

I would like to congratulate Dr Aturupane for his excellent and comprehensive overview of progress in education in Sri Lanka over the sixty years since independence. Dr Aturupane is one of rather few writers on education and education policy in Sri Lanka. The World Bank volume that he led and coordinated in 2004/5 *Treasures of the Education System in Sri Lanka restoring performance, expanding opportunities and enhancing prospects* is an important milestone in the comparative education and one to which I refer many of my students on a regular basis. The text of this lecture too will, I am sure, become a key reference for students of education in Sri Lanka.

**First**, a comment about free education. I would like to underline the points made by Dr Aturupane about Sri Lanka's longstanding political commitment to equity and distributive justice over several decades, even from before independence. The Education Ordinances of 1939 and 1947 were fundamental to the steady progress in enrolments in the education system for all social groups, an achievement which is the more remarkable for the fact that most of the system is funded by government with a budget, currently 2.7% of national income, which is extremely modest by developing countries standards.

There is enormous value of adopting a historical dimension in the discussion of educational progress as Dr Aturupane has done this evening. The problem is to know where to stop and start the historical story. In the broader context of the Millennium Development Goals and the international discussion about free and compulsory primary education it is important to draw attention in the Sri Lankan story to

developments a century ago. The 1901 census of population had highlighted the fact that only about one quarter of children of school-age was enrolled in school. Pressure was brought to bear on the colonial administration by social pressure groups in England as well in Ceylon. The Wace Commission of 1905 recommended an expansion of fee-free vernacular-medium schools and the introduction of compulsory education. The Town Schools Ordinance of 1906 and the Rural Schools Ordinance of 1907 led to an expansion of the number of schools. Between 1900 and 1915 the number of government vernacular schools grew by 66% from 484 to 734, while the number of grant-aided vernacular schools grew by 64% from 1170 to 1827. By 1915 the proportion of English-medium schools was a mere 7%, while the vernacular-medium schools comprised 91% of the total. A bedrock of fee free, albeit vernacular, schools was well in place at the time of independence, contributing substantially to the primary enrolment ratio of 60% at independence to which Dr Aturupane referred at the beginning of his lecture.

**Second,** I wish to raise a question about Free Education. Dr C.W.W. Kannangara became Minister of Education of the State Council in 1931, holding office until 1947. Generally hailed as ‘the father of free education in Sri Lanka’, Kannangara directed education policy during the critical years of transition to independence.

Although vernacular education was fee-free already, English-medium education was not. The Kannangara Committee argued that since the English-medium schools offered the best employment opportunities and were attended only by those who could pay fees, then equality of opportunity would become a reality for all only when these superior schools were made free and open to all.

The free education act was intended to transform education from a 'patrimony of the rich' to an 'inheritance of the poor'. The policy was strongly supported by the nationalists and socialists from among the English-educated elite and the Buddhist monks, ayurvedic physicians and vernacular teachers from among the vernacular-educated elite.

However, one of the immediate consequences of the free education act was that the well-to-do continued to send their children to superior schools without paying fees, while the masses 'continued to receive free the poor quality education that had all along been free to them' (Jayasuriya 1979:475).

Language, or more particularly the Sinhala language in schools and in government administration, was central to the Sinhala-Buddhist political cause and the relationship between the post-independent state, religion and education. It was not long before English was relegated from a medium of instruction to a language taught as a school subject. The medium of instruction was changed to Sinhala or Tamil in year 1 of all primary schools in 1948; in the first year of the secondary cycle in 1953; and in the first year of the university for arts subjects in 1959. While fees in the hitherto English-medium superior schools had been abolished, the medium of instruction in these same schools would soon become either Sinhala or Tamil, an outcome that had not been envisaged by Kannangara's committee.

So my question for discussion is: *to what extent did the Free education act offer a government subsidy to the already better off who could afford to send their children to fee charging schools?*

**Third,** I wish to raise a question about the relation between educational progress and the ethnic civil war. As Dr. Aturupane has noted in his lecture one of the current education programmes is a series of activities designed to promote education for social cohesion. As many will be aware the civil war in Sri Lanka has been ongoing since the late 1970s/early 1980s, a period covering almost half of the sixty years in focus this evening. As noted already the language medium of instruction was central to the politics of the post-independent state, religion and education. With the relegation of English as a medium of instruction, all government schools, even the superior schools, became either Sinhala-medium or Tamil-medium schools. While it would be facile to suggest that this contributed directly to the civil war (there are many more fundamental political drivers) one wonders how much this segregated system of schooling might have led to a separation of the identities of Tamil and Sinhalese youth in the late 1960s and 1970s and, when the economy slowed and youth unemployment increased, to a fuelling of the conflict over economic resources? More particularly it raises a question for our discussion this evening: *What might be the role of contemporary education in Sri Lanka to the resolution of conflict and to the promotion of peace?*

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