Sinhala attitude to knowledge

G.Usvatte-aratchi

Some of you may have noticed that I have been a frequent though not a regular part of this audience. I have learnt much and found these lectures full of wit and wisdom. I have often felt guilty that I drank from this seemingly horn of plenty and did not care to refill it. One evening, about two years ago, as my wife and I waited for the lift to go down, someone tapped me on the shoulder and asked me whether I would talk at one of the monthly meetings. I promised Mr.Wickremaratne that I would try to find a theme on which to talk. And there was the nub. I had no theme on which to speak on. I avoided him in those little clever ways we have learnt to dodge people to whom we have promised to deliver but failed. These talks, indeed all good public lectures, have two common features. The speaker must have something new even completely outlandish to say. More important, a talk must interest the audience in variegated ways and at different levels. In subjects that seemed to interest this audience, I had no competence at all and in those in which I had some competence, as we are 'all ignorant but in different subjects', this audience would not care a bit. The fundamental conditions for a successful public lecture went missing and I kept playing that game of dodge ball with Mr.Wickremaratne. All that while, I rummaged my mind for something that, I hoped, might hold your attention.

Language as history

Then sometime last year I realised that information about the development of a language can give one quite useful insights into the history, the heritage, of the people who mainly speak and write that language. At a gross level, one observes that languages spoken by peoples in the Americas almost vanished from the face of the earth from the16th century. These people were conquered and mostly physically destroyed by invaders. From the north to the south of that vast land four European languages now dominate. The best literary works by people who now live there are mostly in Portuguese, Spanish, French and English, languages commonly used by people way across the Atlantic. Their scientific writings are, for other reasons as well, in those European languages. Languages in the Maghreb and West Asia in the centuries after the 8th made way for invading Arabic, carrying the new religion Islam. Only two languages survived that onslaught: Persian and Hebrew. The vocabulary of a people explain many things. The heavy presence of Latinate words in southern European languages and less heavy in northern European languages, speaks of the dominance of Latin as the language of learning in all medieval Europe. The presence in English of words from languages from all over the world is a consequence of England's long life as an imperial power. The inflow of Tamil words and literary forms from south India into Sinhala in the 14th-15th centuries, as evident from writings of those times, came from the presence of south Indian scholars in Kotte and connected kingdoms. The paragraph from Eric Hobsbawm on the screen tells us how the English invented words as their knowledge expanded and economies developed. Other languages have languished as their economies and societies stagnated. Clifford Geertz writes about those languages which remain effectively mere patois. In this lecture I venture to show how Sinhala fell to this latter category and how Japanese and Hebrew, with purposeful endeavor, marched forward into modernity. Thirty years ago, when the

Japanese, with characteristic good business sense, installed as a gift a large capacity NEC computer at the ESCAP secretariat, Bangkok, much to our discomfiture, all the documentation came in Japanese. Just two weeks ago, a novel written in Hebrew and translated into 36 languages including English, won the Man-Booker prize awarded annually.

I came upon the problem when I started to draft an essay in Sinhala on 'the idea of liberty'. We have an obligation to write in Sinhala and Tamil on central ideas including science that make up the modern world, (and not leave them as strange concepts invented in 'half-familiar languages by even less familiar peoples' as Clifford Geertz characterised). That kind of writing is the more necessary as people who are expected to be familiar with these ideas bandy about falsehoods that easily mislead the public, worse students. Here, it is as damning to call a person a neo-liberal today as it was to call a person a Bolshevik in US in the 1950s. When I started formulating sentences, to my consternation, there was no vocabulary. The very term for liberty '*nidas*' was problematic. It is the negative of '*das*', a slave or lowly person and is synonymous with *nivahal, vahala*, a slave For my purposes liberty is so powerful a force for good that to make it simply non-slave does not make much sense. I decided to use the word 'liberty' itself. Inquiry into the development of other languages, in particular, English gave me some clues, as to the causes of scarcity of words in Sinhala now, to talk of new concepts. In the 16th century they were also short of words for new ideas, but as they saw new things, developed new ideas or invented new things, they coined words to recognize those unfamiliar ideas and strange things. (Hobsbawm's paragraph is an admirable account of the practice in progress in the 18th-19century. Benedict Anderson wrote on how these features emerged in Europe east of France.)

'Words are witnesses which often speak louder than documents. Let us consider a few words which were invented, or gained their modern meanings, substantially in the period of sixty years (1789-1848) with which this volume deals. They are such words as 'industry', 'industrialist', 'factory', 'middle class', 'working class', 'capitalism', and 'socialism'. They include 'aristocracy', as well as 'railway', 'liberal' and 'conservative' as political terms, 'nationality', 'scientist' and 'engineer', 'proletariat', and (economic) 'crisis'. 'Utilitarian' and' 'statistics', 'sociology' and several other names of modern sciences, 'journalism' and 'ideology', are all coinages or adaptations of this period. So are 'strike' and 'pauperism'. [*E.J. Hobsbawm* (1962), ***The Age of Revolution 1789-1848*****].**

'What, from the ordinary speaker's point of view, is the natural vehicle of thought and feeling (and particularly in cases like Arabic, Hindi, Amharic, Khmer, or Javanese [and Sinhala] - the repository of an advanced religious, literary and artistic tradition to boot) is from the view of the main current of twentieth century civilization, virtually a patois. And what for that current are the established vehicles of its expression, are for that ordinary speaker at best half-familiar languages of even less familiar peoples. *Clifford Geertz (1973)****, The Interpretation of Cultures.)***

Kumaratnge Munidasa, who lived in the first half of the 20th century, saw more clearly than any one else, the plight of Sinhala and the excerpt I show you brings that out.

'He who produces new things in the mind makes new things with his hands.'

'A people who do not invent, progress not in this world

When begging fails, they lie dying agroaning.'

…….

Kumaratungu Munidas (19? **),** ***Preface to Virit Vakiya***

As this talk grew in my mind for well over the usual 39 weeks, the original single idea I expected, developed into twins. The first part of the talk deals with how Sinhala failed to grow into a 'diffuser' of modern ideas, and of course, an inventor of such ideas and institutions and implements which come out of such new thinking. This I do seeking instruction from what happened in other societies. Historians, sociologists, economists and art critics all speak of modern periods and modernism. The terms pre-modern and post-modern help greatly to give distinctness to the concept. The calendrical periods in which societies passed this phase of cultural change vary among societies. I shall accept that as beyond debate and deal with my subject. The second of part of the talk will deal more particularly with the Sinhala attitude to knowledge, using literary evidence.

The three excerpts I put on the screen give you an idea of what I am after. Hobsbawm's subject matter was the advent of a society to a new world of its own making. Geertz comments on the nature of languages in societies that did not participate the Enlightenment process and in industrial development directly in relation to metropolitan languages which were carriers of modernism. Kumaratunga Munidasa deals with the state of Sinhala in the 20th century, its failure to become a carrier of modernisation. (Gananath's book 'The Doomed King' should be the The Doomed Kingdom.) Ours is a confrontation of a society with a new world entirely foreign to it. Hobsbawm writing about what he called 'the long nineteenth century' (1789 to 1914) explains vividly how the English language grew with the massive changes that European societies went through not

simply during ‘the long nineteenth century’ but also many preceding centuries. The French Revolution, the first of the revolutions that Hobsbawm grapples with, neither started nor ended in 1789. The Industrial Revolution was a long drawn out phenomenon, the earliest seeds having been planted many centuries earlier. While languages in these societies grew as they modernized on their own after 1500, Sinhala faced gusts of winds of tremendous strength, their energy having been gained across several centuries of growth of speculation, science and technology in Europe. I plan to trace the weaknesses of that language to withstand these gusts by looking at its education system over a long period of time. That examination of the education system will include glimpses into the main contents of its literature, in a broad sense.

Since my undergraduate days in Peradeniya, I had been interested in European medieval universities, one of the earliest which I eventually attended and that had led me to inquire into their curriculum and syllabi, their methods of teaching and learning and the institutions which eventually became universities. I was referred by Father S.I.Pinto, who taught us Mediaeval European history in Peradeniya, to the excellent work on medieval universities by Hastings Rashdall published in 1936. From the 13th century when they started as *studium generale* and emerged as universities sometime in the 17th century, scholarship was in Latin until the European vernaculars gained body and muscle fed by not only Latin but also by ancient Greek, Hebrew and Arabic, which had found haven in Lombardy, Florence in particular, after the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the immense growth in new knowledge first in the course of exploration after escaping the safe havens of *mare nostrum*, the Mediterranean, and later in the course of that much discussed process named the Enlightenment . That in turn led me to study the growth of English as a world language (I wrote an essay in 2010 in Samskrti in Sinhala on

Dipa Bhasha ha Loka Bhasha) from ‘a language hardly spoken in our own island’ to the world language that it is today to the extent that a scholar in 2010 wrote a book named ‘Globish’. English had grown to meet the challenges it met in the philosophical speculation since the 17th century and the advancement of empirical sciences in the 18th century and thereafter and indeed led that movement for most of modern times, until Americans took the leadership and you now have snafu, laser and apps. Hobsbawm took note of the way English language accommodated the advent of industrial capitalism. Americans have contributed words in new technology. Germans, in much of the 19th century and before1934, added much to the academic vocabulary.

This inquiry belongs in the discipline epistemology, which used to be the domain of philosophers. In the 20th century with the over growth of anthropology in to many other fields, anthropologists came into the field of epistemology. One of their more interesting findings was how anthropology itself started as the collection and analysis of information on the life of subject peoples by colonial administrations, which knowledge they used for purposes of ruling and suppressing those peoples. (Callaway and Gooneratne, JRAS Locana) There began inquiries into which sections of a population benefited from the growth of a discipline and who were the centre of attention in some work and who had been of no account in earlier inquiries. So women’s studies. Subaltern studies became important in some universities. Language itself began to be studied from the point of view of understanding social structures and its use in the exercise of power. George Orwell’s 1948 celebrated essay ‘Politics of Language’, Richard Hoggart’s brilliant ‘Uses of Literacy’ and more recently the work of Claude Levi-Strauss and Michel Foucault brought forth the significance of these findings

The modern European vernaculars grew in response to the demands of merchants (a middle class as identified in 1925 by Henri Pirenne, the great Belgian historian) to learn to count, to read and write. When learning was in the hands of the Church and education was in Latin and a privilege of churchmen and the nobility, burgers and 'poorters' in the middle of the 12th century, began schools to give their children an elementary education and that in the vernacular. Communities in Europe developed their languages in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to meet the challenges of the Enlightenment and 'print capitalism' helped those developing languages to enable communities to imagine that phenomenon 'nation', as told by Benedict Anderson. Dictionaries and grammars appeared and a vocabulary was created to absorb the lexicon of modernity.

My endeavor here is to raise questions about why Sinhala did not become even a minor conveyor of modern knowledge, and remained 'a mere patois in the currents of modern civilization'. I will not talk of the most productive efflorescence of science and technology in early Anuradhapura as that question remains another Needham Puzzle confounding us in the absence of any evidence of how those feats were performed. Before I raise those questions I want to report how two very different societies, Japan and the Jewish population in Palestine (There was no state of Israel then.) faced these problems remarkably successfully. Those stories will help to crystalize the ideas I am after.

Japanese and Mori Arinori

Japan gained access to modern knowledge in the second half of the 19th century, which was, as it happened, in European languages. Japanese society was widely awakened to the reality that they lacked the science and technology that made European nations wealthy and militarily powerful, when a few British attacked

Kagoshima harbor in 1863 and a combined naval force of European powers attacked Shimonoseki in 1864. Both were in the Saitama Soon thereafter the Japanese opened the national school for the study of foreign languages, the Kaiseijo. The Kaiseijo bore several names in its early life: two of the more interesting are Bansho Wakai Goyo (Office for the Interpretation of Barbarian Books) and Bansho Shirabesho (Institute for the Investigation of Barbarian Books). What emerged in 1886, from those adventures in barbarian lands was the Imperial University of Tokyo, a truly magnificent swan hatched by some invading ugly ducklings. 'Between 1887 and1900, at least 32 translations and one critical study of (Herbert) Spencer's works were published…'. (Why Spencer is an interesting question that has been well written up.) As a Japanese scholar Nagai Michio observed in 1971, 'the modern Japanese university was born from translation' (page 59). The whole enterprise owes its energy and direction to a young man Mori Arinori, who aged 18 years went to Oxford and studied chemistry and mathematics. In 1885, aged 38, he was appointed the Minster of Education and he promulgated the Imperial University Ordinance of 1886 which laid the foundation for the present nine Imperial Universities, the shining gems of the Japanese university system. 'Mori noted that Japanese language was an unwieldy instrument for the transmission of civilization and enlightenment (bummei kaika) and that it be replaced by an improved 'Japanese English' as the medium of instruction in the new national school system'. (Nagai Michio 1971, page 24). In early Meiji years (1880 and beyond), 'the heart of university research was translation, and the mainstay of middle and higher school education was language study'. (page 62). Japanese language became not simply a conveyor of knowledge but also a major generator of new knowledge and new things as with the Institute for Physics and Chemistry that opened in 1917.

Let us dwell a little on the enrichment of both knowledge and the Japanese language with translations from 'barbarian languages'. The process started significantly with translations from Dutch in 1684. Why Dutch at that time in history? ' In Holland, you could come into contact with the people, the books and the ideas of all sorts of countries and this intellectual give and take was, at least in those days, unmatched in any other part of the world. All through the seventeenth century, and through most of the eighteenth, Englishmen, Frenchmen, Scots, Danes, Swedes, Poles, Hungarians and a still larger number of lieges of the Empire came to pursue their studies at Leyden, Franeker, Groningen and Utrecht…'. (Huizinga J. (1933) in Paul Hazard). In1699, it was reported that 'i(I)n the whole world there are not more than ten or a dozen cities where books are printed on any considerable scale. In England there are London and Oxford; in France Paris and Lyons; in Holland Amsterdam, Leyden, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht; and in Germany, Leipzig; and that is about the sum of it.' Huguenots (French protestants), who fled France after the Edict of Nantes was revoked by Luis XIV carried with them not only the skills in crafts and industry but also the science and philosophy that had been cultivated in France. The Japanese were wise to pick on Dutch just at the right moment. We can see the importance of translation in the transmission of knowledge among people. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 caused Hebrew, Greek and Latin scholars there to flee to Lombardy, then the most sophisticated region of Europe and they were engaged by affluent Florentines in both transcribing books and translating from other languages to Latin. The Renaissance in Europe owed a lot to these translations. In the second half of the 17th century, it was reported that in France 'Translations of the classics are coming out all over the place…'.

Some of the older among you will recall a theme promoted by UNCTAD in Geneva and UNDP in New York City which they named ‘Transfer of technology’, which in sum was a failure. Some inquiries into the history of the processes in a few countries would tell us why. Knowledge and technology was always transferred with translations whether from Hebrew, Arabic and Greek into Latin or from Latin into European vernaculars or from them into Japanese, Korean and other languages. A second means of transfer has been the education of young people from the receiving country in the country rich with knowledge and technology. In 2015, there were 385,000 students from China in US higher education institutions. A third and most powerful conveyor of science and technology has been the multinational corporation. Where all these processes worked together, the economy and the language have developed.

Hebrew and Eleizer Ben-Yehuda

The other experience comes from the development of Hebrew in about the same period of time. Again there is a remarkable man, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda more important in the relevant movement than Mori Arinori in Japan. Ben-Yehuda’s first language was Russian, having been born in Lithuania in 1858. He went to Paris to study medicine but was enamoured with the prospect of Hebrew developing into a conveyor and producer of modern knowledge. He joined a French-Jewish educational group and in 1880, the same time as Mori Arinori in Japan, and stood for ‘teaching Hebrew and its adaptation as the official language in all Jewish schools in Palestine’. He advocated the use of Hebrew ‘in the school and in the household’ and insisted that in his own home, no other language be spoken. He brought up his son hearing and speaking Hebrew and, as might have been his delight, completed the great 17-volume Dictionary of Modern Hebrew written by Ben-Yahuda which persists in wide use to date.

Sinhala and Kumaratunge Munidasa

We need to examine our own experience in light of these success stories in Japan and among the Jewish people now in the state of Israel. The scholar here who saw the importance of a modernised Sinhala was Kumaratunge Munidasa. He saw clearly, as none before him had, the need for a new vocabulary, a new lexicon for modernity and went about coining it, much as Ben-Yehuda did in Palestine . His perception is well presented by himself in the first verse in Virit Vakiya, a book in verse on poetics:

Aluth aluth dae notanana jatiya lova nonangi

-Hinga kema bari vuna tena lagi gaya mara gi

A people that do not invent, takes to begging, failing, lies there till death agroaning.

Munidasa went on to write a complete grammar of Sinhala: Kriya Vivaranaya (1935) and Vyakarana Vivaranaya (1937), in fact the first such grammar, Sidat Sangara of the 13th century notwithstanding. Sidat Sangarava was far too close to Pali and Samskrt in discovering rules of grammar in Sinhala. Munidasa's work in classifying verbs in Sinhala was entirely new. Munidasa saw the necessity for new words and to coin new words, he went outside the hallowed practice of seeking words of Samskrt origin to express concepts and identify objects which belonged in cultures entirely foreign to Samskrt. The process he began was carried forward by many scholars and teachers and last by two brilliant men: Arisen Ahubudu and Aelian de Silva, both of whom died very recently. Ahubudu was a teacher, a painter and a gifted poet. Aelian de Silva was a brilliant electrical engineer who used his expertise to coin words in science and technology. His book *Sinhalayen Siplaku Vadan* published in 2002 was a singularly valuable contribution to writing

science and technology in Sinhala. Common words that we use lihisi tel (lubrication oil), talabamanaya (turbine), rasyuruva (reservoir), piripahaduva (refinery), piriganananaya (computer) and bahana (cable, as in electrical cable) we owe to Aelian. He also taught us his technique for coining words. Munidasa's following was very large from1930-1955 or so. A close friend of Munidasa, Rapiel (for Raphael) Tennekone, a brilliant mind conversant in several areas of study carried on this enterprise writing history, some excellent essays and much poetry. There were a very large number of school teachers who took their messages to schools and there was much hope then that Sinhala would develop to be a vibrant language capable of handling complex modern ideas. Munidasa wrote Sinhala in a rigorous and exacting idiom reproducing the simplicity and the rhythm of Sinhala of yore. While this was attractive to those that appreciated that, many were entirely repelled by its rigour and utter simplicity. He exposed pretension in scholarship and many bhikkhu who were discomfited in public meetings never forgave him. (He was seriously squint eyed.) Munidasa did not suffer fools and the supercilious easily and was acerbic in his criticism. He was not an easy man to get along with and made many enemies, including Sarachchandra of Peradeniya.

The University Sinhala Department, for reasons not very clear, totally rejected Munidasa. Events proved this fatal to Munidasa's enterprise. The University of Ceylon put out graduates to teach increasing hordes of students who entered senior secondary grades in school. They went onto university and came back to reproduce in schools the prejudices and strengths of their teachers. And Munidasa lost not only his battles but also the entire expedition. The one teacher at Peradeniya who was friendly to Munidasa was Ananda Kulasuriya, as evident from his writings. He was a non-aggressive scholar who quietly set about his scholarly pursuits. The University later in the 1950s took to linguistics and the position that language is a

cultural artifact and should be left to grow like Topsy. However, soon they came against a reality check: university students had to be taught in Sinhala beginning 1962 and university Sinhala teachers became word smiths. That was a time for hurried coinage of terms to teach social studies, science and technology. Those attempts did not hold. Much university teaching today is in English, simply because there is no material to read in Sinhala. Recently Jayadeva Uyangoda has coined a Sinhala vocabulary for political science and sociology.

Martin Wickremasighe was not much younger than Munidasa and the most influential newspaper man of that time. Of course, Wickremasinghe lived a good fifty years after Munidasa. They both wrote and spoke on science and culture in Sinhala in the thirties. It was Wickremasinghe's language usage that the University endorsed and that caught on. Soon after Munidasa's death, writing in Sinhala came to be mostly creative fiction. Translations, publishers tell me, are mostly of fiction and sell well. Fiction does not add substantively to develop a vocabulary in science and philosophy. But in Sri Lanka there never was a well thought out programme of translation as in Japan and Sinhala remains a patois as identified by Geertz.

The contrast between Hebrew and Japanese on the one hand and Sinhala on the other could not be more stark. Michael Roberts, in 1975, published a short work on the Hennadige Jeronis Pieris's family of Moratuva as they climbed the wealth and social ladder of 19th-20th century. Commenting on Jeronis Pieris's letters to his younger brother who was a student at the Colombo Academy, Roberts wrote that that was 'one strand of thinking of the new national elite'. Without exaggeration one could say that that strand has continued over the last 150 years and more. Pieris's letters to his brother who was younger by 12years, were written entirely in careful Victorian English. Roberts also cited a letter Pieris wrote from London to

his mother and sister in Moratuva and it is in the most rustic Sinhala. When Selestina Rodrigo Dias decided to promote women's education in 1917, she established Visaka Vidyalaya which rightfully in the circumstances emerged as the premier girls' school in the country and it taught in English.

Someone who was very different and who it may have been expected would go the way of the Japanese was Anagarika Dharmapla. He was rich and came from a family which spoke Sinhala at home. He was generous. He knew English and saw much of the then rich world. He saw the importance of technical education and introduced them in Mahabodhi Society schools. As Sarath Amunugama informs us 'It (the Mahabodhi Society) set up technical colleges, textile weaving centres and several small industries. Partly due to his urging, Sinhalese Buddhist businessmen began trading with Japanese companies exporting furniture, graphite, gems and jewellery….'. Yet he did not see the significance of gaining knowledge in European languages. He rather 'pointed to a mythic, past which was essentially pre-modern', as Sarath Amunugama's remarked in his work published last year.

That disparity marked the difference in attitude to the two languages among the elite of this society. It is instructive to speculate, we can do no more in the present state of knowledge, why Munidasa's endeavours that seemed so promising at the beginning, ended up like a stream run in to a desert, in such deep contrast to the experience of initiatives taken by Mori in Japan and Ben-Yehuda among Jews in Palestine, well before the state of Israel came into being. In1942 the University of Ceylon was established and soon became the centre for the study of Sinhala. Munidasa had no university degrees and he was bitterly critical of the approach of the Sinhala faculty in the University College prior to 1942 to teaching Sinhala and the findings of Wilhelm Geiger about that language. To date our universities pay scant attention to the work of this scholar. They did not share the perspective of

Munidasa in regard to the function of language in modernizing a society. To my knowledge, no university teacher took up that theme, except a very recent piece of research on Language Planning by Sandagomi Coperahewa of Colombo.

Apart from school teachers and their students who enthusiastically followed the work of Munidasa, there were few who looked up to him. It had in part to do with intellectual elite of this society. In the colonial society that emerged in the 19th century, this elite bifurcated: one, who learnt Sinhala, Pali and Samskrt including bhikkhu sangha and laymen who took to teaching in schools and practised Ayurveda; the other learnt English and occasionally other Western languages and among other carriers took to the professions. The University of Ceylon was monopolized by them. The second group seemed the vanguard of modernization but remained aloof from the larger mass of people and was no vanguard. In fact many of them were ignorant of the indigenous languages which to them became virtually a 'patois'. Whereas, Ben-Yehuda insisted that children and parents speak 'Hebrew at home, Hebrew in schools', our intellectuals who had access to modern knowledge, made little effort to translate material from 'barbarian' languages into Sinhala. When Bandaranaike declared Sinhala the official language he saw no driving necessity to undertake a sustained vigorous programme of translation into Sinhala.

This feature of Sinhala, that it did not contribute to the development or even the spread of ideas that make up the modern world found physical expression in my library. In that collection of a few thousand volumes, Sinhala books comprise no more than 6 or 7 per cent of the whole. You might check your own collections. It is not that I am not competent in Sinhala nor that I do not enjoy working in Sinhala. On the contrary. There are simply no books in Sinhala in the subjects that I am interested in. Badddegama Vimalavansa, a most erudite bhikkhu of the 20th

century in his work *Ape Samskrtiya* (page 322) noted that on the whole the two most outstanding books written from Anuradhapura to the last kingdom in Mahanuvara were *Amavatura,* dealing with the teachings of the Buddha and the other *Buthsarana* dealing with the life of the Buddha, both written about the12th century. In an inventory of a bookseller in Amiens in 1509, there were '…forty-one different titles and 1,240 volumes, of which religious works constituted the overwhelming majority. …. Many of the books were in Latin.' (Mark Greengrass (2014), *Christendom Destroyed,* p.316.) This is probably true of the collections of Sinhala books that many of you possess now in the 21st century. You will further observe that you have few books, if any, except Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, written in English before 1500 and few books, if any, written in Sinhala after 1500, until 1920 or so when Kumaratunge Munidasa and Martin Wickremasinghe came on scene. Whereas, Ben-Yehuda insisted that children and parents speak 'Hebrew at home, Hebrew in school' and he was followed by the leaders of that society, in our society there persisted and persists today the urge for parents to compel children to speak in English as early as they can. That bifurcation persists still. Whereas university teachers in Sinhala would write in Sinhala even to daily newspapers (for example, K.N.O.Dharmadasa and Liyanage Amarakeerthi) you would not see teachers from the English Department write similarly in Sinhala newspapers. Ashley Halpe of Peradeniya did try his hand at translating Sinhala fiction into English and Ranjini Obeysekere of Princeton has commented on early Sinhala texts and translated some Sinhala works into English. But the not uncommon phenomenon of professors of English in India writing in indigenous languages is as rare here as white crows. When the wise and far seeing Selestina Rodrigo Dias set up Buddhist Girls' College (now Visakha Vidyalya) in Colombo in 1917, it taught in English. It was in 1943 that J.R.Jayawardena moved in the

State Council that Sinhala become the medium of instruction in government schools. V.Nalliah complemented that Tamil should too should be treated the same manner. It is important to note that Jayantha Virasekera who was a close friend of Munidasa and was also a person of importance in Sinhala Maha Sabha and also knew Jayawardena, all at the same time, may have had a hand in the initiative that Jayawardena took. It was this resolution that carried students to university in early1960s with little competence in English. The tragedy is that a few weeks ago a 4th year student, with no knowledge of English, reading sociology in one of our universities who had been assigned to write an essay on the problem of old age 'income security' came to me asking for material in Sinhala to help her write the essay. I had none and I could not lead her to any material. The more common and widespread consequences you see in journalism both print and electronic.

What is manifest is the sharp division between an intellectual tradition grown in the native tradition and one transplanted from another culture. The two pirivena that were revived in the 1870s edited books written before 1500 CE and taught them to their students. Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala was the most brilliant and erudite bhikkhu scholar in the second half of the 19th century and was very active in the well-known five debates on religion in the 19th century. He was responsible for the resurgence of Buddhist learning which had fallen on bad days from the 15th century. He was the man behind the Paramadhammacetiya pirivena, Vidyodaya pirivena and Vidyalankara pirivena and the resuscitation of Sinhala, Pali and Samskrt learning in the country. Yet he wrote in 1862 to Ambagahavatte Sarankara who was on a trip to Burma, 'It is proved that there is a difference of thirteen hours and twenty minutes according to the Sinhalese hour system between the two, sunrise in Colombo, Lanka, and sunrise in London, Europe, and that day in America is night here. Someone asked whether those countries belonged to

Jambudvipa (where there should be no such differences). Further, with respect to statements such as that in Norway the sun does not set for several days and that there daylight is continuous, we cannot say that it is untrue since it is said there are people who visit those countries for commerce as well as our own…… . Therefore, I entreat you to discuss this matter with the accomplished senior monks (theras) of that country (Burma) and quickly, without fail, tell us a way to understand it, or tell how to present the ideas of those senior (Burmese) monks.' The brightest in the native tradition as late as 1860 were unaware of discoveries made in Europe several centuries earlier.

Until very recently, a mere 50 years ago, knowledge was stored in books. Until 1500, knowledge was stored mostly in people's memory and transferred to others who again committed it to memory. You recall Brahmin priests who in Hindu kovil recite long Samskrt texts entirely from memory, as do bhikkhu, Pali sutta, a whole night long. So did yaka dura in night long healing rituals. A few manuscript books existed. But transcribing a manuscript was laborious and expensive. In the Pepiliyana inscription attributed to Parakramabahu V it was required that 1,700 scribers of Tripitaka be assembled. Each day each person was to be provided with 3 units of rice, vegetables worth 2 mas, two coconuts, 10 betel leaves, 5 areca nuts and one mas worth of 10 units(?) of salt, one panam worth of pepper, cumin seed and turmeric. They were to be provided with 100 panam each year for maintenance work. (Baddegama Vimalavansa, *Ape Samskrutiya*, p.287). In Lombardy, in the fifteenth century (about the same time as the inscription) 'the average price of a medical book equaled the living costs the of an average person for about three months, and a law book cost as much as a person's maintenance for one year and four months'. In 1392, the Countess of Bois in willing a copy of Corpus Juris to her daughter '…specified that she should marry a jurist so that the valuable

treasure would come into the right hands'. (Carlo M. Cipolla, *Before the Industrial Revolution*, pp.167-168.) All that changed with Johannes Gutenberg and his movable type press. Some have speculated on what might have happened to Luther's 95 theses had there been no press to distribute printed copies in Bavaria as the Catholic Church would have had ample time to seize the heretical document and its writer. The pamphlet spread in 'Germany' in two weeks and in Europe in two months. In a manner, that press was the parallel to social media today, when the document would have spread in less than two hours. What Hobsbawm termed 'print capitalism' made sure that books spread fast and inexpensively. As new knowledge is stored in new books, it is fair to conclude that there was little new knowledge generated or propagated in Sinhala. Therefore it is necessary to inquire now into the causes of that scarcity. One can be the attitude of the Sinhala to knowledge. Hence this inquiry.

Sinhala attitude to knowledge

Where can we find material to learn of the Sinhala attitude to knowledge: almost entirely in literary sources, some unwritten. M.B. Ariyapala in *Society in Mediaeval Ceylon* devoted 12 pages to discuss education. Baddegama Vimalavansa thero, an outstanding scholar who wrote in Sinhala after 1950, devoted more than 70 pages in 'Ape Samskrutiya' to discuss education and scholarship from early times. I also came across an excellent book written by Dr.Abayaratne Adikari with the title ' *Sri Lankave sambhavya adyapanaya ha maha sangana'*. I will use extensively two poems of the fifteenth century: *Gira Sandesaya* and *Hansa Sandesaya*, which these other writers also did.

The Sinhala term for formal knowledge is *silpasastra, sipsatara*. It is a combination of crafts (or technology) and 'that which is learnt' (Sinhala dictionary,

volume 24).. One is tempted to translate *shilpasastra* as science and technology, which is very trendy, but I think it is not permissible. (Interestingly, late medieval European universities which were devoted mostly to the study of theology, looked down with some contempt upon the study of 'the lucrative arts', medicine and civil law.) We shall accept that *shilpashastra* or *sipsatara* will be the term for knowledge.

Some of you will recall Maname sang***Sipsatara vee etara***

And later ***silpa igena taksalava gos emi, dula ekumari vivaha karagena, bala pitat vemi, baranas puravara***

when he was about to leave *taksalava* 'after having crossed over to the other shore of knowledge'. This is a recurring theme in Sinhala writings:

In Guttila Kavya written in the 15th century (verse113)

Dambadive tala noyeka- duru kara pili aduru seka

Sip sayuru tera deka *-vasana sanda anda mav piyan reka*

Guttila having seen the other shore in the ocean of the art of veena…'

(Verse 170)

Himi tama ***nana navin*** *-* *sadi gi taranga behevin*

Vena sip mahanavin *- kele ohu* ***para terata*** *manavin*

'….the master in his ship of knowledge took Musila to the other shore…'.

In Kavyasekhara written in the 15th century,

sav sata kela pamini*, guru van derana sapamini*

pirisidu sil gihini, ***siyal lova viyatunta situmini****,*

'Having mastered all knowledge, as unto guru (vrahaspati), teacher to gods who appeared on earth……and the highest ornament to all learned men,…..'. The reference is to Totagamuve Sri Rahula (*vijyaba piruvana*) himself who wrote *kavyasekeraya*. There is a further panegyric to the same bhikkhu who was the head of the *vijayaba piruvana*, evidently the pre-eminent seat of learning at the time, in *gira sandesaya* but that makes no claim to mastery over all knowledge but more particularly to buddhist teachings, veda, Ayurveda and poetics. Did this idea that there 'is another shore to the ocean of knowledge' which one could reach blunt curiosity and the pursuit of further knowledge? Compare that with the striking remark attributed to Isaac Newton (17th century): '….. I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the sea shore and diverting myself in and now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.'

A marked characteristic of knowledge pursued in Sinhala is the overwhelming pre-occupation with the religion, Buddhism. '*Siyabas lakara*' a book on poetics written in the 9-10th centuries, adopting Dandin's *Kavyadarsha* (Samskrt), laid down '*peden budu sirita'*, in poetry the life of the Buddha, and this dictum was affirmed several times over. '*Kavsilumina Kusada'*, written in the 14th century and considered almost universally as the noblest work of poetry in Sinhala, laid down

' kivi bav kivi dume- kusum sapath vipul pele

Ehi bosath sara vanum- viyathe muva path ve va

Let me destroy its beauty and translate it into workman's English:

The gift of being a poet is a tree

Its flowers are poems. The fruit from those flower is to extol the lives of the Buddha.

May those so gifted, excel in that task.

So they did. All notable works of poetry that have come down to us, with a few exceptions, are about the life of the *bosath,* the Buddha in previous births. *Kusa Jataka* has been the theme for two works of poetry, *kavsilumina kusa da* which I quoted just now and *Kusajataka kavyaya* written by Alagiyvanna in the 17th century. They also comprised the main themes of Sarachchandra's plays in our life time. In prose, Vimalavanse reports that the two most outstanding books written from Anuradhapura to Mahanuvara are *amavatura* and *buthsrana*, both written about the 10-11th centuries. Amavatura is about the earlier lives of the Buddha and buthsarana is about adoring the Buddha. As did *kavsilumina*, *buthsarana* gave rise directly to *budugunalankarya,* another work of Sinhala verse.

Baddegama Vimalavansa observed that the outstanding feature of Buddhist culture was the internal development of the person. (p.155). A contrast with the attitude to education in 18th century in Europe is that they were searching for useful knowledge which gave power over nature and for the perfection of institutions (of government, for economic activity) rather than lead more virtuous lives. (Joel Mokyr (2009), The Enlightened Economy.) We will substantiate this further when I consider the curricula of medieval European centres of learning.

Apart from the several *sandesa*, *perakumba sirita* (a panegyric to Parakramabahu VI of Kottte), *siyabaslakara* (a Sinhala version of Dandin's *Kavyadarsha*), practically everything else is about the Buddha, his teachings and the sangha. This includes prose works from *amavatura* to *ummagga jataka* and poetical works from *sasa dava* to *kusa jataka kavyaya* (of Alagiyavanna).

What was taught in Sinhala institutions of learning up to about the end of the 19th century? To answer that question, I shall use two *sandesa* poems written in the 15th century, in time very close to one another. (Dr. Adikari has an excellent account of the evolution of seats of learning from the earliest times and what was true of the 15th century may not be true of that which prevailed in earlier times.) In both, the messenger is a bird, a parrot (GS) and a swan (HS), that leave from Jayawardenepura carrying a message to the heads of two *pirivena* and the knowledge commanded by the heads of these institutions is described with gusto. They also write about the premises in which the *pirivena* were conducted, what was taught in each place and who were the students. The two pirivena are Totagamuve Vijayaba and Keragala Padmavati. Totagamuva is easily located, some110 km south from Colombo along Galle Road very close to the place where during tsunami, a train was washed off the rails. The parrot arrives there after flying past Bentota, Paratarakaya, Velitota (Velitara, now) and Mahadampa Modera.

I had difficulty in locating Keragala until I discovered that map on the screen. In *Hansa Sandesya*, the swan is instructed to go from Jayawardenapura to Keragala Pirivena via Veliveriya. The route he took is on that map on the screen:

What was taught at these two centres of learning?

Gira Sandesaya has an account of what was taught at Vijayaba piruvana: Abi dam pela (abhidharma texts), suturu daham (sutra), vinaya (rules of discipline), viyarana (grammar), vedaruth (veda), at satara (presumably Kautilya), sanda lakara (poetics), pabakara sidath (astrology), veda satara (Ayurveda), saku, magada, elu, demala (Samskrt, Pali, Sinhala, Tamil) and kivi nalu (plays which were sung).

There is mention that astrology was taught at Vijyaba Piruvana. ‘Pabakara sidath samaharu ganiti inda.’ Pabakara sidat (surya sinddhante) is a work on astrology. They placed shiny cowry shells in lines on boards to calculate the position of planets in relation to others and the rest of the skies. There is little mention in the two books or anywhere else to my knowledge about the study of arithmetic or mathematics. However, Dr.Adikari writes without citing evidence, that medicine, astrology, mathematics, logic, philosophy and law were studied in piruvana in the centuries after the 5$^{th.}$. He may be perfectly right and I would very much like to find the evidence. The system of digits used in Sinhala have been identified as in that slide on the screen and you may find them on pages of ola leaf books. They remind you of numbers in Latin letters and the same disadvantages apply and most damagingly there is no zero that all important symbol for nothing. It is intriguing that Indian numerals which changed counting in Europe did not jump the narrow stretch of sea from the Indian coast.

At Keragala, samanera bhikkhu studied books for novices (herana sika), those senior to samanera learnt mul sika valanda. These two books contain vinaya rules for bhikkhu. Another group studied *Kasayin Virita*, a grammar of the Pali language, written by Kaccayana, a bhikkhu who lived in the 11-12th centuries. The grammar was useful to study *buddha dhamma* in Pali. Other *bhikkhu* studied nisa bana. Nisa was a period of five years when a bhikkhu who had received upasampada spent under the tutelage of a senior bhikkhu, mature with learning. It sounds like a period of residence that young doctors spend in a good hospital. There is a prescribed set of books that were expected to be studied during these five years. After this status, those who were distinguished for being disciplined, for their wisdom and identified as fit to promote and propagate the dhamma learned and practised *tera bana*. Again there are prescribed texts. The title tera was earned

at least 10 years after being ordained upasampada. There were others who learnt of the deep *abhidhamma*. Still others studied the meaning of sutta, and still others, the vinaya. There were teachers who taught logic, grammar and poetics. There were some who read poetry and plays. Keragala pirivena was a centre for teaching and training members of the sangha. There was little besides that that was taught or studied there.

How were studies carried on?

They used books, collections of writings on ola leaves. HS 'turning from page to page both old and new books' (*parana alut pot perala panin pana*, 172).Teachers spoke to students. Students discussed material with their teachers and among themselves. There was a lot of memorizing. The students were mostly sangha as were the teachers. There are a few verses in which neither the students nor the teachers are identified as belonging in the sangha. This information about Keragala establishes itself far more firmly than Vijyaba Piruvena as a centre for teaching and training members of the sangha.

For contrast, let me dwell briefly on the curricula in medieval universities, my source almost entirely Hastings Rashdall that I mentioned earlier. *Studium Generale, Univeritas Generale and Universities* were the principal institutions of higher learning in medieval Europe from the12th century. There is far more information on these seats of learning beginning with those in Bologna, Salerno, Montpellier, Paris, Oxford and Cambridge. Some of these began as 'student's universities' as in Bologna or as 'master's universities' as in Paris. Many of these universities grew rather than were established. Students would invite a well-known master to lecture to them and hire space. Expenses would be defrayed with from fees collected from students. In other instances, a master would start teaching and

he would collect fees from students. Eventually, a charter would be obtained from the Pope, a Bishop, a Duke or a King. It is that charter that gave them authority to issue a licence to teach at any university, the '*ius ubique docendi*', the beginnings of the current university degree.

The language of teaching was Latin and teachers were almost without exception churchmen. The books they learned from were almost entirely in Latin. Greek, Hebrew and Arabic were to be discovered after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, although material in these languages were taught from Latin texts. Aristotle was learnt from translations from Arabic and Syriac into poor Latin. For example, Hippocrates and Avicenna in Medicine, Euclid and Pythagoras in Mathematics and Aristotle in Arts. The earliest *universitas generale* grew to teach law and medicine, the two 'lucrative arts' (*tiraschina vijja in the Dambadeni katikavata*), that were derided upon by the church in later centuries. Bologna taught law, both canon and civil and Salerno and Montpellier in modern France, Medicine. Paris, and its issues Oxford and Cambridge, were well known for teaching Arts. It was much later in-mid 19th century that science, engineering, social studies, technology business and technology became subjects for university teaching. As Latin was the language of learning, teachers from any part of the republic of learning taught in any other part. Bartholomew, the Englishman in Medicine and John of Salisbury in Philosophy were outstanding scholars who worked in Latin. English today resembles Latin in medieval Europe in these respects in that much scholarship is in English and anyone with scholarship so certified by a good university teaches in any university in the world. You think of Amartya Sen, Gananatha Obeysekere or Y.Karunadasa. So in early universities there were both teachers and students from many parts of Europe as means of transport permitted. In fact, that there were students from far

and wide divided into ‘nations’ commonly, was one of the criteria used to permit entitlement to the designation ‘*studium generale’*.

The common method of teaching was to lecture. Lecture or lectura in Latin was reading a text. Often students were required to have heard some books, in some instances several times, to complete a course of studies. One reason that it was the standard method may be because books were rare. Those who had read the texts, teachers, read them for their students. They were discussed later in smaller groups with the guidance of junior scholars. These were named ‘repetitiones’ and given by ‘repetitors’ who were different from the masters who lectured. The practice of individual or small group teaching characteristic of Oxford and Cambridge universities derive from these practices. They exist in different forms and driven by different forces in current American universities. British colonial universities also adopted the practice with variations. It does resemble what goes on in our universities now and that for the same reasons in that there is no literature in languages in which students or indeed some teachers are competent. The unfortunate difference is that what our teachers read are notes that their teachers had dictated to them!

There is a list of books used for lectures in the faculty of medicine at Montpellier in 1340. There were two books of Avicenna, five books of Galen, two of Hippocrates and one of Bartholomew, the Englishman. In the Faculty of Arts in Paris, for a B.A.. Students learnt Grammar, Logic and Psychology and for an M.A., Moral Philosophy and Natural Philosophy. Translations of Aristotle were central to the study of Arts. Astronomy and Mathematics were studied in the faculty of Arts.

This necessarily very cursory account of the content of higher education in medieval Europe shows us a very wide spectrum of studies that was provided a background on which modernizing knowledge grew.

The features of the Sinhala attitude to knowledge I put before you are the following. That there is a shore at the end of the ocean of knowledge. That knowledge in Sinhala over the centuries almost till the end of the 18th century was almost entirely of Buddhism. That from works that exist, it is manifest that writing about the Buddha including his *dhamma* was the supreme achievement of scholarship. Education was very much the monopoly of the Bhikkhu Sangha but institutions for learning by bhikkhu existed from the time of Anuradhapura. The information we have is pretty much limited to some celebrated centres. The principal means of learning was memorizing. Students learnt by listening to teachers and discussing with them as well as discussing among them. There were books in ola leafs. The subject matter learnt was overwhelmingly on Buddhism with some learning in the veda, astrology and Samskrt poetics. There is no evidence that secular law was studied as a discipline. There does not seem to be any learning in mathematics, although this is hard to believe.

Conclusion

The point I started from was that learning in Sri Lanka well up to the end of the 19th century kept us well away from that massive sweep that we call modernization. We had an attitude to knowledge and learning that we owe to the bhikkhu sangha. The languages they worked in were Sinhala, Pali and Samskrt. Those languages did not convey modern science and philosophy which had been developed in European languages. In the long stretch of time since1500, there was no attempt unlike in Japan to translate material from European languages to

Sinhala. Nor was there a deliberate plan, as among Jews in Palestine, to develop Sinhala to meet the challenges of disseminating modern knowledge, leave aside discovering new knowledge. Universities in the country did not see the urgency or the weight of the requirement. By default, the strategy for diffusing modern knowledge was left to that of learning English. The very slow and unsatisfactory pace of acquiring that facility so far does not foretell that within the next generation we can expect easy access to the world of knowledge by most people in this society.