CONVOCATION SPEECH

BY

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Overheated Ethnicity, Episodes of Social Volatility and Overcoming the Development Challenges in Sri Lanka

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I consider it an honour and privilege to have been invited to deliver the convocation speech at Rajarata University of Sri Lanka. My sincere thanks to the authorities at Rajarata University, including the Vice-Chancellor, Prof. P.M.B.Jayathilake, and the Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Prof. E.M.S. Ekanayaka, for having invited me to grace this occasion. I will use this opportunity to touch on an important problem, the solution of which requires multiple inputs from the humanities and social sciences that most of the graduating scholars and their teachers in the fields of political science, sociology, history, geography, and languages are engaged in. If any section of our society can play a positive role in developing viable remedies for this entrenched problem, it is people like us. I am not saying that any of us have a ready-made solution to this long-standing problem in our country. But it is up to us to use our knowledge in the fields I already listed to first help understand the problem and identify and advocate for viable solutions to this multi-stranded problem.

In my speech I will try to analyze the so-called ethic problem in Sri Lanka focusing on the following aspects:

1. What is ethnicity?
2. The nature and extent of the problem.
3. How it affects the shared future of our country and the people of all ethnic groups, including the younger generations or Gen Z that most of you belong to.
4. What causes the ethnic problem to the extent it continues to prevail and afflict our society?
5. What are possible remedies for this problem?
6. What would be your role as new graduates and new entrants to the labour force in containing or intensifying the ethnic tension in the country.

What is ethnicity?

Ethnicity refers to a sense of identity based on cultural specificities such as language and religion perceived as an essence of one's group identity. At times of intense ethnic rivalries people become oversensitive to whatever that happens to their language or religious identity. It is different from property ownership or production relations that Marx identified as centrally important in social class dynamics. People develop a strong sense of social injustice when some restrictions are imposed upon one's mother tongue or one's religious practices. Ethnicity is often regarded as an important basis of one's national identity (Anderson 1983). However, ethnicity is primarily a cultural identity whether or not it forms the basis of officially defined national identity.

When ethnicity is overheated it becomes it becomes not merely a basis of one's identity but also an overarching framework for understanding and assessing one's risks, overall security and future prospects within the prevailing political and social order (Chua 2003). Even though Sri Lanka has had moments when ethnicity is overheated, it seems to be under control in the long run, but the challenge is to sustain it at this level against a potentially vulnerable environment subject to manipulation by vested interests of different kinds.

Extent to which there is an ethnic problem in society?

Some see ethnicity not so much as a genuine problem but a pseudo problem exaggerated by various actors like politicians or businessmen for their own benefits. There is some truth in this but sociologists and political scientists argue that we cannot deny the importance of ethnicity. Sri Lanka has had a whole range of ethnic strife.

- Sporadic ethnic riots in 1958, 1983, and 2012.
- A full-scale ethnic war from 1983 to 2009 affecting the whole country, experiencing much destruction, devastation and public expenditure.
- Death, displacement, migration
- Property destruction, breakdown of infrastructure and human misery caused by the war.
- Diversion of investments away from Sri Lanka
- Fear, suspicion and lack of trust

Table 1: Damages Caused by Anti-Muslim Violence in Selected Locations, May 2019

	Number of Assets/People Damaged in Mob Attacks				
Location	No of houses	No of businesses	No of Mosques	No of Vehicles	No of Casualties
Kuliyapitiya	31	20	7	1	2
Nikaweratiya	22	15	2	0	0
Paduwasnuwara	91	87	15	42	3
Minuwangoda	12	64	1	9	4
TOTAL	156	186	25	52	9

Source: Silva et al: 2020, Adapted from Pumi Fonseka (2019)

It is apparent that the attackers in this instance targeted houses, businesses, mosques and motor vehicles owned by the Muslims and physical violence against Muslim persons were less common. On the whole, attacks concentrated on smaller Muslim communities rather than big Muslim settlements perhaps in fear of a possible backlash from the Muslims. Only in Paduwasnuwara such a big Muslim settlement was targeted, perhaps due to a special circumstance in this attack caused by a large gathering of unruly people in front of the Hettipola police station.

In conclusion, escalating ethnic rivalries and the resulting social, economic and political unrest have undermined the social progress of Sri Lanka since the 1950s. It has destroyed assets as well as hopes of many people and contributed to the economic stagnation, and social and political unrest in the country in multiple ways.

How it Affects Social Harmony?

- Spatial segregation
- Segregated school system
- Decline of cross-ethnic intermarriages
- Gossip and Rumour
- Ethnic hatred

Aspects of Ethnicization of Social Life

Any relevant problem is likely to be interpreted in ethnic terms.

One's perceived problems are attributed to the action of an ethnic other, poverty, landlessness, water shortage, infection. Ethnic other has become a kind of scape goat for all the ills people face as also reflected in print and electronic media and social media. As those with professional qualifications in social sciences and humanities you should be able to stand above the populist explanations of these events.

If you are landless, it is because the ethnic other has grabbed your land. Claims and counter claims about land grabs by one party or the other, business takeovers and corruption.

One's own agency is denied.

All other contributory factors like market failures or climate and environmental factors deemphasized.

Politics of blaming

Conspiracy theories are rampant.

Some analysts use terms such as ethnocracy (De Votta 2014), ethnic fratricide (Tambiah 1992) or ethnic genocide to describe the ongoing crisis in the country.

Possible Remedies

Many policies and remedies have already been introduced but they have had limited success. Examples include political decentralization, multilingual policies and educational reforms. Limited success. Limited progress in monitoring and evaluation. Important new developments like Sri Lanka barometer implemented by Insights Initiative in Colombo. .

1. Clear state policies are needed to prevent discrimination on the basis of identity.

2. Problem of public attitudes. Highly sensitive to one's own problem, but totally insensitive to the problems of other communities. Limited compassion and polarized public opinions.

3. De-segregation of the school system. Our children grow up in ethic enclaves as schools are segregated by language, religion and ethnicity and also the school curriculum is heavily infiltrated by nationalist propaganda from one side or the other.

4. Recognition of and respect for social justice must be built into social life, education, media.

5. Awareness raising targeting print and electronic media and social media. Prevention of hate speech. Prevent unethical reporting.

6. Importance of presenting diverse and at times conflicting opinions in social research.

What you can do as citizens, family members and public servants?

As new graduates, returning to society you will have multiple roles as citizens, family and community members and employees or public servants. You must seriously consider what best you can do to promote social harmony, prevent ethnic hatred and promote mutual trust among people.

Often people end up with a resignation that nothing can be done to change the situation. Much of Sociology challenges this view. C. Wright Mills. Sociological Imagination. Anthony Giddens. Reflective Sociology. Idea of Empowerment.

<u>As citizen</u>

Be aware of facts relating to the ethic problem.
Preferably a trilingual person.
Have friends and contacts within and outside your own ethnic group
Have a larger social network.
Be fully aware of your rights, duties and social obligations.
Do not get wrapped up in parochial views and attitudes.

<u>As a Community Member</u>

Do not reinforce prejudice in society
Avoid reinforcing rumour, hatred and mistrust
Reach out to all communities and groups
Avoid being narrow-minded

<u>As a public servant</u>

Serve without prejudice or discrimination

Your must serve every one based on accepted criteria, according to the need and criteria well established.

Official language policy, forms, notices and services in the language of the clients

Do not give special favours to friends or known people. As government servants you are expected to serve all who come for your assistance without fear or favor.

On the whole you must claim and establish your agency as social science and humanities graduates able to understand the social, economic and cultural reality in Sri Lanka and shape it in ways that promote peace, social harmony and rapid social development in pathways that avoid booby traps and facilitate economic and social recovery. It is high time that young people like you (Gen Z++ become change agents responsible for changing the future of our country for the better.

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