



Abstract of the Keynote speech by Prof Kalinga Tudor Silva

Growing Up with a One Track Mind? The Need for Diversification of Youth Attitudes, Skills and Interests in Sri Lanka

There is a wide range of evidence that youth in Sri Lanka grow up with a one track mind. In the educational process which shapes the views, ambitions and perceptions of most youth in Sri Lanka, the overarching ambition of most young people is to become a doctor or engineer, irrespective of their innate dispositions, life interests and inclinations because of the pressure from their families, school system, tuition culture and perhaps due to the penetration of a postcolonial mindset. This leaves out a host of other options in life, including esthetic and arts, service mentality, contribution to local and global cultures and creativity in life in general. In the employment market one track mind is most evident in the desire to secure public sector employment to the total exclusion of self-employment, employment in the private sector, starting one's own enterprise or explore opportunities in agriculture, livestock development, food processing or industries in general. In order to secure public sector employment of dubious value youth will stage violent and totally chaotic demonstrations on streets of Colombo or go after any politician or cronies of ruling regimes with no sense of human dignity whatsoever. To the extent any effort is made to take up self-employment particularly among those who fall out of the education system, they are limited to already congested and highly problematic income earning avenues such as becoming a three-wheel driver and waste one's valuable time in three-wheel stands and in traffic jams. The one track mind, however, is not limited to education and employment. LTTE and JVP insurrections were built on this one track mind so much so that a whole generation of youth gave up all the other interests in life, including education, marriage, family and life itself in some instances in order to bring about so-called liberation within a parochial mindset informed by populist nationalisms of one kind or another. There may be

various other manifestations and symptoms of this complex problem, but I have enumerated enough of its key features so that we can think of possible ways to address this menace.

Changing this long-established and widely entrenched state of mind among youth in Sri Lanka is not easy as it may have both colonial and postcolonial roots. Perhaps recognizing it as an issue is the first step and researching it through a series of youth surveys is an important preliminary step in addressing the problem. Even though important work has been done in this direction through a Youth Commission of 1989 and a series of youth surveys conducted by University of Colombo in the 1990s, a systematic effort is needed to update the findings of these prior studies and identify and critically assess the policy options in educational, cultural and employment spheres. There is a clear need to diversity youth skills, attitudes and interests through innovative educational experiences via work camps, internships, community-based projects and cultivation of a service rather than an elitist or white collar mentality. The school children must get out of the white school uniforms and get their hands dirty in farms, workshops, factories, elderly homes and other welfare institutions. They must get credit for this work and such experiences as well as a good Z score in GCE A Level must be prerequisite for entry into higher education. All students must receive a good liberal arts education side by side with whatever specialized education they receive in science and technology. These are by no means a final remedy for the problem of the one track mind, but they must be the necessary ingredients in whatever youth policy we formulate in the days ahead.

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