

**ADDRESS BY JAYANTHA DHANAPALA AT THE CONVOCATION OF
EXTERNAL GRADUANDS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PERADENIYA**

27 JUNE 2013

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Members of the Faculty, Distinguished guests, Ladies & Gentlemen, and, above all, my dear graduands,

I am greatly honoured to be invited as the Chief Guest for this fourth Convocation ceremony organized by the Centre for Distance and Continuing Education in the University of Peradeniya. I am infinitely proud to have obtained my first degree from Peradeniya and I warmly welcome all of you graduating today as my fellow alumni. You have chosen to follow the External Degree track for a number of reasons. That does not make your degree any less symbolic of the hard work and academic excellence you have accomplished. Distance and Continuing Education is a safety net in our society designed to help those who were unable to obtain the benefits of a University education immediately after they left school. It provides opportunities for improving life skills, a training of the mind and an enhanced sense of dignity while acquiring a qualification that would help you advance in your current employment.

There is no doubt that the country gains from such an expansion of educational opportunities at the tertiary level especially when economic and other constraints prevent larger numbers of qualified students from entering the existing universities. Mahatma Gandhi once wrote – “Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever.” An educated population is vital for the optimum functioning of our democracy. It is also vital for the Sri Lankan economy to maintain its competitive advantage in the international community with knowledge-based economies being at the cutting edge of

the globalized world economy in the 21st century.

I am glad the University of Peradeniya has long recognized the value of distance and continuing education. The gulf between universities and the larger community – or “town versus gown” as it was referred to in Western universities like Oxford – is not a healthy feature and distance and continuing education is one of the more imaginative and productive ways of bridging this fissure in our society. The relationship between the community and the University rests on a foundation of mutual obligations and shared values and this Convocation is an eloquent illustration of it.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I entered the University of Peradeniya in 1957 and on November 8 in that same year Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike addressed the Convocation which was held in the Gymnasium of the campus. As a young 18 year old student I was fascinated by his eloquence and his erudition. He chose to speak on the “Age of the Common Man” having caused a watershed change in our country’s political and economic landscape in 1956 as leader of a coalition that combined the Pancha Maha Balavegaya of the Sangha, teachers, ayurvedic physicians, peasants and workers who formed the bedrock of our traditional society. My purpose in recalling this brilliant Bandaranaike oration is not to relate it to our current national political discourse, but to use this as a point of departure for a discussion on international affairs today - an area in which I have spent the greater part of my professional life. Bandaranaike described that period of time in international affairs – the late 1950s - as an ‘age of transition’. He said, and I quote,

I feel that this age is not so much a new age but an age of transition between a state of society, a civilisation which is obviously decaying and dying, and a new society, whatever may be its final form, which will replace it. It is therefore essentially an age of transition, a formative age where a great responsibility rests upon all of us of this generation to think clearly, and correctly, in shaping that new civilisation, whatever may be its final form.

Later in his speech, while surveying the broad canvas of world history including the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution and the Russian Revolution, Bandaranaike said, and I quote him again,

One civilisation which has its rise, performs its functions according to the needs of that period, reaches its zenith, decays and dies, and is superseded by another state of society, another civilisation more suited to the needs of man at that particular period of its history.

Our present era is also a period of global transition and, as a member of an interdependent international community, it is essential that Sri Lanka and her citizens understand these changes and adapt to them. Far-reaching changes are taking place in the structure of international affairs since the end of Cold War bipolarity between the US and the old USSR led to a unipolar world dominated by the US. We now see the beginnings of a multipolar world in both political and economic terms with the old powers who are the permanent members of the UN Security Council – the US, Russia, the UK, France and China – having to accommodate the so-called emerging economies of Brazil, South Africa, India and the ASEAN countries resulting in new formations like the G20

countries who are gradually becoming the decision makers. The Asia Pacific region is now becoming the central theatre of activity eclipsing the Euro-Atlantic. China has become the second largest economy in the world and is expected to overtake the USA in 2015. We must not however be too hasty or arrogant in assuming that Asia has become the centre of the world since the geo-political reality is that we live in a highly integrated global society. Thus, some of the threats to global security like nuclear weapons, climate change, terrorism, poverty, the global financial crisis and human rights violations continue to affect us all and any one region's insecurity can have a global impact.

The tools for achieving common solutions to common problems continue to lie in multilateral co-operation and the global institutions we have established for this beginning with the United Nations and its specialized agencies. We also have regional bodies like the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) and solidarity movements of the global south united by its common colonial experience and its developing country status like the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). The time is long past when individual countries, however rich and powerful, could rely on themselves exclusively to achieve their political, economic and environmental security. Belonging to the multilateral order requires us all to conform to multilateral norms whether they are international treaties and conventions or principles that have been accepted in global conferences. In violating these norms, countries run the risk of being outcast and are the subject of boycotts and sanctions. Advocates of multilateralism are frequently criticized as being unpatriotic in a subtle undermining of policies of greater interaction with the international community. Wrapping themselves with the national flag, advocates of concepts of unilateralism are able to make serious inroads in public opinion to the

ultimate detriment of national security. Xenophobia is often the refuge of critics of multilateralism.

This is especially true when we come to the controversial subject of human rights. Human rights are not a “white man’s burden” or a luxury that only the rich countries can enjoy and enforce elsewhere outside their boundaries. It is in the interests of the entire international community that the upholding of human rights everywhere has become a global public good. It is not a right to be pursued only in courts of law and international human rights fora. It is the common property of the people to be safeguarded and exercised, as with all human rights, in the mainstream of society. Human rights are a global common in the same way as the protection of the environment and preventing climate change is and has to be mainstreamed in our collective consciousness. No country has a perfect human rights record. A collective and co-operative effort to advance the cause of human rights throughout the world must replace the adversarial and sanctimonious finger-pointing exercise and the double standards that contemporary human rights dialogues have descended into. Martin Luther King once said - "Become a dedicated fighter for civil rights. Make it a central part of your life. It will make you a better doctor, a better lawyer, a better teacher.....Commit yourself to the noble struggle for human rights. You will make a greater person of yourself, a greater nation of your country and a finer world to live in." That is especially true in our Asian culture where embedded in the religious philosophies of our region there lies a true respect for human rights.

National security is undoubtedly important and we have just reasserted the rule of law and national sovereignty throughout our land after the defeat of terrorism in 2009. However national security without human security is a hollow achievement. For human security in Sri Lanka to be achieved peace and reconciliation through the implementation the recommendations offered by our own Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) is essential. The Asian Pacific century must distinguish itself from the preceding centuries marked by European colonialism and American dominance with a value based approach to human development. Although Sri Lanka today is a middle-income country we still have poverty degrading the human condition in our country. The UN's Millennium Development Goals pledged to halve extreme poverty in the world by 2015 among other tasks. A high level UN report titled "A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies through Sustainable Development", which has just come out last month sets a new date for the total eradication of poverty for 2030 and gives the following description of the world today –

“There are a billion more people today, with world population at seven billion, and another billion expected by 2030. More than half of us now live in cities. Private investment in developing countries now dwarfs aid flows. The number of mobile phone subscriptions has risen from fewer than one billion to more than six billion. Thanks to the Internet, seeking business or information on the other side of the world is now routine for many. Yet inequality remains and opportunity is not open to all. The 1.2 billion poorest people account for only 1 per cent of world consumption while the billion richest consume 72 per cent.”

The High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post 2015 Development Agenda led by Prime Minister David Cameron of UK, President Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia and President Yudhoyono of Indonesia set themselves the vision and responsibility of ending extreme poverty in the context of sustainable development and to aim at sustained prosperity for all. For this purpose they recommended a big universal agenda driven by 5 transformative shifts –

- ❖ Leave no one behind – reaching out to excluded groups irrespective of gender, ethnicity and religion
- ❖ Put sustainable development at the core
- ❖ Transform economies for jobs and inclusive growth
- ❖ Build peace and effective, open and accountable institutions for all
- ❖ Forge new global partnerships

From the contemporary international context let me return to the late Prime Minister Bandaranaike's definition of the age of the common man -

“ One of the important factors of this new age is a growing emphasis on the needs of the common man and the need to give everybody an opportunity of living a human life without artificial barriers between himself and his fellows.”

Bandaranaike, despite his early advocacy of regional councils, is frequently accused of fracturing our national unity and bringing in exclusivist legislation that alienated the minorities. Perhaps if his life was not cut short his more liberal views on ethnic harmony and national unity may have prevailed. His successors today should dwell on the following words from his Peradeniya Convocation Address –

What is the spirit that must animate us all today ? I feel that as never before in our history we have to recognize the dignity and the brotherhood of man, that we are all one, whatever may be our religion, colour or race or ideology. We are all one today. We cannot permit our dislikes of one another, racial, ideological, linguistic, economic, social or otherwise, to reach the point when we feel that we cannot live together. The whole world is very close together today and, whether we like it or not, either we have to live together or surely we shall perish together.

Transitions whether from insecurity to security, from war to peace, from poverty to economic growth are rarely smooth and stable. Political transitions are fraught with competition, controversy and tension; economic transitions can exacerbate inequalities; social transitions may exclude and marginalize some groups. We must therefore ensure that transitions are managed wisely and effectively. Had Bandaranaike lived longer he may have managed the age of transition that he identified so perceptively seizing its opportunities and challenges. Our generation and the current leadership of the country can learn the lessons of the past and build on the Bandaranaike legacy to ensure a united and peaceful country where all ethnic, religious and economic classes live in equality and harmony.

May I conclude by wishing all of the graduands a life of greater fulfillment of your aspirations both as individuals and as responsible citizens of our country. The degree certificate that you have earned today is only a beginning of a journey; not the end.

Thank you.