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A.V. Suraweera’s Atta Bindeyi Paya Burulen

LeRoy Robinson

Alankarage Victor Suraweera is Professor of Sinhala and Chairman of the Department of Sinhala, Sri Jayawardenapura University, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka.

Suraweera has published many scholarly articles and books on Sri Lankan culture and literature. He has also published five novels and four volumes of short stories.

"An Introduction to the Stories of A.V. Suraweera" (July 1982), "A.V. Suraweera’s The Faithful Wife" (December 1982), "An Interview with A.V. Suraweera on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka" (December 1983, June 1984, December 1984), and "A.V. Suraweera’s Atta Bindeyi Paya Burulen" (March 1986, January 1987) introduced Suraweera to an academic audience in Japan.

This introduction continues with the publication of further sections of Suraweera’s college novel of 1977, Atta Bindeyi Paya Burulen (Tread Softly, Lest the Branch Break), translated from the original Sinhala by Vijita Fernando, and edited by Le Roy Robinson.

In "An Interview with A.V. Suraweera on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka" (June 1984) Suraweera says his story deals with the life of a university campus in turmoil. "The powers of the university’s president are limited; he is not able to take a decision of his own. The deans, Professors, lecturers, student counsellors, marshalls-- all are puppets more or less. Students are distracted by
their leaders, who, in turn, are controlled by various political parties from outside the campus...On the whole, the academic atmosphere expected of a university is lacking. There is a general deterioration of discipline. Certain members of the faculty are involved in politics or personal rivalries...Life in the university goes on amidst all this tension. The best way of survival is to tread softly; otherwise, the whole thing would tumble down.”

*****

President Baladasa scribbled madly in his notebook. There was no definite pattern to the lines he drew this way and that.

The Registrar, Mr. Kariyakarawana,\(^{1}\) sat in front of him. The president ignored his presence. Dr. Baladasa knew Kariyakarawana was there to get him to sign a personal letter to be presented to the Senate House.

Kariyakarawana had come on transfer from Peradeniya nine months before. From the time he had joined the university service he had lived in Peradeniya, where he had bought a piece of land and built a house. From the day he came he had been trying to get back to Peradeniya. to his wife and family there. He was already living the greater part of the week in Peradeniya. On casual leave, duty leave, sick leave, leave without pay, and through any other means he could find.

Kariyakarawana said: “Sir, see. Today I left home at four in the morning. Mother-in-law is not well. And my son is creating no end of troubles; he has got involved with a girl at the campus.” He laid the typed paper before the president still speaking.

Dr. Baladasa signed the paper without even reading it. There was no use listening to this harangue.

Baladasa said: “Mr. Kariyakarawana, things don’t look good
these days here. This morning there was some trouble among the students. It would be good if you looked into these things at least till the elections are over."

The president wanted to tell the registrar he expected better service from him, but he couldn't decide just how to put that into words. And even as he had said the words he wondered whether they had hurt Kariyakarawana.

The registrar answered: "It's the same troubled state all over the country that's here in the campus too. It will be good if we can escape being assaulted by these chaps. Whatever we do, we will be blamed from every side."

The president turned the conversation in another direction. No good was going to come of this one. "What about the tender for chairs? Has the agreement been signed?" "We have referred it to the supply section."

At this moment a band of eight students burst into the room. The president knew the young man with the lush beard covering his face and the matted hair reaching down to his shoulders was Gajanayake, President of the Sri Lanka Socialist Students' Front. Wherever Gajanayake went, his girlfriend Gita was there too.

The president deduced the problem was an acute one from their demeanor, their sweaty faces, their dishevelled hair. Gajanayake said: "Injustice! Why is one section treated in one way and us in another? We must have our meeting. Otherwise we will have to find a political solution. We are not going to bow down to threats!"

The president kept cool. He was used to these rantings. As the heat lessened and voices were lowered and the students became a little more calm, he was able to understand their complaint.

The Bandaranaike Hall had been booked for a meeting of the
Sri Lanka Socialist Students’ Front between 4 and 6 p.m. The same evening the Buddhist Brotherhood had booked the hall for a film, “The Bicycle Thieves.” The Brotherhood had spent the afternoon carrying chairs and getting ready to block the Students’ Front meeting. They had got permission to sell tickets for the film to outsiders; the Front was forbidden to invite outsiders to their meeting. The Brotherhood had invited the Deputy Minister of Education. “Is he not an outsider? A politician?” The students now charged the president had not acted impartially.

The president explained: “Your Front is a political organization. Everyone knows no outsiders are allowed to attend these political meetings.”

Gajanayake said: “That’s right, sir. We accept that. But isn’t the Buddhist Brotherhood a political organization too? All these Buddhist names and films are really election propaganda. They want to ruin our meeting.

Gita said angrily: “Now they aren’t leaving even the Buddha and the gods alone!”

It was clear to the president. Allowing two meetings at the same time was going to create confusion. It had not been done with his knowledge. It must have been an error by the clerk in charge. It was impossible to work with such clerks! They were appointed not because they were suitable but for political reasons. This particular clerk was irresponsible, anyway. The president had complained about him several times but nothing had happened. The clerk was a trade unionist. Nothing could touch him.

Now the responsibility of righting the clerk’s wrong was on the president.

The president said: “Now the only thing is to work in harmony now that the two meetings have been inadvertently fixed for the
same time. If there is trouble, it will be bad for us, all of us. I mean the campus.”

Gajanayake answered: “Sir, there won’t be any trouble from us. They are the ones who will create trouble. You should tell all this to them, not to us.”

“All right, I will tell them not to cause trouble, not to block your meeting. Right?” Dr. Baladasa smiled widely as if in triumph. He was glad the phone rang then. A good chance to drive away these students. The speaker at his ear, he spoke to the students: “All right, now? Yow go away. And don’t cause any more trouble.”

“Hello. Speaking. Good morning, Deputy Minister. Yes, the show is at 6:30. Bandaranaike Hall. Yes, a little distance inside... turn left. What a good thing. No, I won’t be able to come. Another appointment. No, I can’t miss that. Please excuse me. Right, sir.”

President Baladasa broke into a sweat. If the Deputy Minister gets upset, there would be hell to pay. “I don’t know why these devils want to come here. If some small things happen, they want to shout about them in Parliament.”

*****

President Baladasa remembered the variety entertainment held some months earlier. He had persuaded his wife to come. Visitors and university students were walking towards the new arts theatre. The day had been cloudy. By 6:45 p.m. it was dark and forbidding. The area shaded by mango and palm trees opposite the Gnanawasa Building was darker than elsewhere. The wooden seats under these trees were there for students to relax and discuss academic topics. This was the right academic atmosphere for students to give voice to new ideas, new theories, to argue, present facts and discuss matters for the benefit of people at large.
As he walked, wrapped in these thoughts, Dr. Baladasa heard a couple of hoots. He looked at his wife. He looked angrily towards the direction from which the sounds came. A crowd of students stood on the balcony of the Ratanasara Building looking at the people. He saw their focus of attention was behind him. He looked back and saw Dr. Caldera and his wife walking briskly. The hooting was for Mrs. Caldera. She walked in a pair of red trousers. Her hair was in a Sigiri knot high upon her head.

“Wickrama, just see!” Mrs. Baladasa said. “Why can’t these children behave in a civilized way? Always hooting.” She did not know who the hooting was intended for. Perhaps it was aimed at her?

“The campus song,” somebody quipped. The president lowered his gaze and walked on. This was a hint to him.

Then they were walking in the shade of the trees. Mrs. Baladasa’s eyes strayed towards the cooing couples on the benches under the trees. She was disgusted at seeing the boys and girls nestling so close each pair looked like a single person, giggling, whispering and behaving as if no one else existed. Mrs. Baladasa’s eyes constantly shifted to these scenes by the roadside. She saw one girl looking down in shame, trying to cover her breasts with her arms. This must still be a fresher. One young man lay on the bench, his head on the girl’s lap, gazing at her breasts. In a moment she would lower them! Mrs. Baladasa looked furtively at her husband. She looked down, deciding she had read these things somewhere in a book. What a fool she was to come! “We were in the varsity, too, but I have never seen such shameful behavior.” She said “chee!” softly so only her husband could hear her.

President Baladasa said: “The country is changed. Times have changed. You haven’t seen the things that happen here. If you want,
I’ll take you to the other side of the campus and show you.”

Mrs. Baladasa said: “Chee! Do people really behave like this? Their parents must be thinking they are here studying hard. Why don’t you all do something? Why do you shut your eyes to all this?”

President Baladasa answered: “What can we do?”

*****

Dr. Baladasa remembered: The Deputy Minister was coming for the film show. He will start talking about what is happening here...at meetings...in Parliament. Wonder if he will get away without being assaulted.

The president had a sudden flash of intelligence. He phoned the security section. “This evening there are two meetings. Visitors will be coming for the show. Ministers and M. P.’s. Tell Mr. Peiris to meet me. We must see no trouble starts. This is most important. Yes, I have another appointment this evening. You must take full responsibility. If there is any problem, phone me at home. All marshalls must be on duty, right?”

*****

The meeting coming at ten that morning continued to bother Dr. Baladasa. He would have to find answers to the demands presented by the Students’ Union. The things the students said about their difficulties and the actions of certain officials were not altogether untrue. But they were often exaggerated. That was natural, he granted, and if he were the student leader he himself would act the same way. Whatever it was, finding solutions was not an easy task. What was necessary, even more than solutions, was appeasing and commiserating with students.

At the meeting it would be feasible to discuss steps to prevent
the kind of conflict between political parties that had resulted in the morning's fracas and to make sure such incidents did not recur. The best remedy would be to raise the estimation of the students in the eyes of the staff and toss back responsibility to the students themselves.

President Baladasa telephoned Professor Paranawadiya to discuss these ideas with him. He was happy and relieved when Dr. Paranawadiya agreed to his course of action. Paranawadiya said: "Yes, the best thing is to pass the responsibility to the students themselves. I think we can trust Janadasa with this. The monk Vinitha is also good. The trouble maker is Wanasinghe. He's at the root of most of this trouble. In this crisis it's difficult to stick to the truth. They're trying to get at some loophole. Getamanna can explain these things to the students. He's popular with them." Dr. Caldera came in clutching a pile of documents. He looked triumphant. He sat opposite Dr. Baladasa and started complaining about Getamanna.

Dr. Baladasa said: "What on earth is the matter with you? I'm here at sixes and sevens. There's this meeting at ten. Haven't you heard about what happened this morning?"

Caldera said: "It looks as if I can't get on with the work in my faculty at this rate. The diploma exams are starting tomorrow. How can I start the exams without the question papers? This Getamanna. The rascal!"

The president said: "That's why there's a Dean. The question papers should have been completed by now."

Caldera went on: "The trouble is with Getamanna. He has taken on everything. He's student counsellor. Politician. He wants to do the work of the societies. Everything. The exam starts tomorrow. He still hasn't given the question paper scheduled for the day after."
What am I to do? He's always like this. This time he won't be let off lightly. I have the personal file here. I've asked Sirisena to send a report. Getamanna must be interdicted. It can be done on my report.” Dean Caldera laid three typewritten pages on the president's table.

Dr. Baladasa stared at Dr. Caldera in great confusion. It was no easy matter to interdict a lecturer. In this situation, when everything was reaching a crisis, he didn't want to have a hand in this. And Getamanna of all people.

Caldera was insisting: “This is a serious matter. We can interdict him at once. Have an inquiry later at leisure.”

Baladasa said: “A man can be interdicted only for very serious offenses. Has Getamanna done anything so grave?”

Caldera continued: “Everything is in this letter. He has failed in his duty. Read the details. I won't have any tomfoolery. And it will be very difficult to change my decision.”

Baladasa responded: “Getamanna is having some problems these days. Someone in hospital. Quite ill. And he's had a lot of work in the campus these days too. He'll give you the paper today. Why are you getting so excited about such a trifling matter?”

The president spoke as if he were not really paying much attention to Dean Caldera's suggestion in order to calm him down a little. When Caldera wanted to get anyone in trouble he could make mountains out of molehills. For a long time he had not been well disposed toward Getamanna. Caldera did not like Getamanna's cordial relations with students. He felt that would tarnish his image.

Caldera insisted: “I have done the work on this. I have spoken to the Vice Chancellor. He asked me to send a strong report. He's prepared to get tough.”

Dr. Baladasa was rather disgusted. Caldera had spoken to the
Vice Chancellor first. Any complaint against a lecturer in the campus should have come to him first. Going directly to the Vice Chancellor. Circumventing him! His power had been denigrated. Caldera had done similar acts several times before. These were not inadvertent lapses. They were deliberate. That thought made Baladasa angry.

"I am the president of this campus. It is wrong that you should have spoken to the Vice Chancellor without informing me first. You have no right to do that. When you do such things how can I run this place? How can I be responsible for what happens here?"

Baladasa had meant to say something like this to Caldera for a long time.

He had not been able to harden his heart to that extent. This was a fine occasion. He glared at Caldera.

Caldera smiled craftily as if to evaporate that anger. "I'm sorry if I've done anything wrong. I didn't mean to overlook you. I spoke to the Vice Chancellor for some advice. I prepared the report according to that advice. We will not be able to carry on the work of this faculty without teaching Getamanna a lesson."

Dr. Baladasa flung the documents at Dr. Caldera. "All right, then, do the rest according to what the Vice Chancellor says. Why tell me?"

Several peons hovered around the door listening to this exchange, at times peeping into the room. They were not surprised at what was happening. They were happy to see the great Dean Caldera discomfited.

Dr. Baladasa continued: "You are creating problems. As if what we have to face now is not enough! Go, do everything with the higher-ups. Don't tell me. I have a meeting with the students right now. I have no time to be talking here."
“No, no, Wickrama. Please don’t be angry. Forgive me if I’ve done anything wrong. All I want is to punish Getamanna. Otherwise we can’t get anything done here.”

Dr. Baladasa responded: “That’s not what has happened, Caldera. You don’t know how win the support of your subordinates. At least twice a week someone complains. Even the typists and peons complain to me. Most of my problems are due to you. This is not a place where you can do things as you want.”

The president looked at the clock. Eighteen past ten. “We’re late for the meeting with the students. You come too.”

The dean said: “I can’t come. I have some work at the Ministry.”

Baladasa got up in anger. He scraped his chair. “You can do just what you want!” He muttered: “As if what I have on my plate is not enough.”

Caldera pleaded: “There’s no need to be angry, Wickrama. Please pay some attention to what I’m trying to say.”

Baladasa ignored Caldera’s attempt to placate him. “No, I say. There is no need for me to get angry? I’m fed up. All right. Then come at three. We can talk as much as you like. If there’s time.”

* * * *

The ten o’clock meeting with representatives of the Students’ Union was to discuss the demands made by the Union. By the time Baladasa came—he was twenty minutes late—everyone was seated in the board room.

The demands were over two months old. President Baladasa had postponed this discussion several times. It was fruitless having discussions that would merely give the students a platform to berate the staff and officials of the campus.
The Students’ Union had issued a notice that if within three days the Union did not receive a reply to its latest report, copies of which had been sent to the Vice Chancellor and the Minister of Education, there would be a strike. The Minister had requested problems be solved by discussion. All this had prompted the president to decide there could be no more delaying.

President Baladasa had learned that Janadasa, the president of the Students’ Union, did not himself agree to some of the demands. There had been many disagreements between Janadasa and the Union secretary, Wanasinghe, when the demands were being prepared. At the end Janadasa’s opinions had been ignored. Of course, Janadasa also had some responsibility for them as he had finally agreed to accept them though he thought differently on some issues. As president of the students’ union he could not act according to his own conscience but had to bow to pressure.

Dr. Baladasa knew some of the demands were reasonable and could be granted. Some were unreasonable. They could not be granted within the framework of the campus—and his powers. Some demands were totally useless. Nonsense. But to each one he had to find instant solutions. It was clear the aim of this report, which had been widely circulated among the students at large, was to broadcast the concessions at the next election and win the students’ support. Baladasa did not want to act in a way that would seem partial to one group of students. But he had to find solutions.

*****

The twelve delegates of the Students’ Union included Reverend Vinitha and two women students. Except Caldera the deans were there. The registrar, the treasurer, Professor Paranawadiya and other student counsellors. The Chief Medical Officer. Some Min-
istry of Education representatives and some officials of Senate House had been invited to attend also. They did not attend. As usual.

President Baladasa decided to conduct this meeting calmly and shrewdly. He put on a smiling face. First of all he apologized for his late arrival. He smiled at each face in front of him to get undivided attention. When he had everyone's attention, he felt like an actor. He was self-confident, at ease, amidst applause from his audience.

Baladasa spoke calmly: This was a moment when everyone must act to preserve the honor of the campus. He had not forgotten he had acted as a student leader many years before to win students' rights. So too had he acted in the interests of students from the day he joined the staff of the university. He had never denigrated the students' fight to win their rights. Each problem that had surfaced now, each problem that seemed insurmountable, could be settled with fair and just discussion. It was important there be faith in the student advisory board who had always acted as an example to students.

In a pre-arranged move to prevent Janadasa, the president of the Students' Union, from speaking first, Wanasinghe, its secretary, rose to speak. He looked around. He cleared his throat.

Wanasinghe, started: "President of the Campus, lecturers, comrades. We are grateful for the words of the president. As a student organization we have always acted in a manner that has protected the honor of this campus. The honor of the campus is primarily the honor of the students within the campus. The responsibility is ours. Therefore, things should be done the way the Students' Union thinks fit. We submitted our suggestions over two months ago. Till today what happened? Nothing. I mean nothing
was done about them. How many times did we meet the president? Every time the discussion was postponed. This is a malady that has struck not only this campus but the whole country. Administrators are silent. They are asleep. They go about in cars. They warm their chairs. They earn salaries in the thousands of rupees. But no one looks at our problems. Not the President. Not the Vice Chancellor. Not the Minister. Not anyone above them. As long as we let this capitalist framework continue, nothing will be solved. Not now. Not in the future."

Warasinghe was gradually getting warmed up. He lowered his voice. He raised it. He accompanied these vocal modulations with gestures. Then every minute his voice became stronger and stronger filling the room.

"A university means students. If there were no students, there would be no university. Then why is it the demands of students are not met? These are just demands. There is nothing here that cannot be done. It is we who can manage the students. Not the administrators. We have proved that. We were able to completely do away with the freshers' ragging. The administrators with their strict rules couldn't do it. We did what they couldn't do. Then why can't they meet our just demands?"

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Dr. Paranawadiya looked down. Administrators. Corrupt rule. Reactionaries. Student front. March of socialism. These words, tossed about without any real target, were arrows that struck all over Paranawadiya's being. In his school days--thirty years back--there were no such words in the vocabulary of the students. There were more solutions then than problems. The only problem was to find better solutions. Economics honors? Buddhist studies? Lang-
uages? Lecture hall or laboratory. Civil service or university staff. Love or dowry.

Paranawadiya accepted that today's situation was different. Students' lives were full of unrest. They faced thousands of problems. The big problem was where would all this end? Wasn't young people's lack of faith in the university, in the government, in the political system, going to have fearful results? In 1971 hundreds of young people had lost their lives. Wasn't that against a background fearfully like this? Listening to Wanasinghe, Dr. Paranawadiya looked fearfully into the very near future. He felt great hopelessness.

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"Look at what happened at Peradeniya. That was a terrible thing. That girl didn't jump from an upper story because of the ragging. There were other reasons. The students were not responsible for that. These reactionary journalists write false reports to dupe the people. The Kularatne Commission on ragging was appointed to tie our hands. To muzzle us. I challenge anyone to prove our sister from Peradeniya committed suicide because of the ragging. No one can prove that."

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President Baladasa pretended to be listening calmly to Warasinghe's harangue. But it seemed as if someone was pricking him with needles. It was not easy to sit and listen, but listen he must. Suffer in silence. Otherwise he couldn't do the job of president.

****

Paranawadiya's attention strayed. In the past students had
acted with greater responsibility. A wrong was a wrong whoever committed it. These people were trying to cover up their shortcomings, exaggerating those of others. Then, if anyone made a speech like this, inside or outside the university campus, he would have been a university student no more. Not only because of Ivor Jennings’s dictatorship, but also because whatever ism they professed they deplored irresponsibility. They were dedicated to learning. He had always respected duty, right, justice, the freedom of the individual. Wasn’t Wanasinghe turning justice and rights to his own selfish advantage?

Paranawadiya was happy Wanasinghe was not one of his students. But still he was a university student. Wasn’t it his duty as a counsellor to lead this young man in the right direction? Paranawadiya knew there were many reasons today’s students lacked discipline. The student counsellors should do much more. Students should be shown the truth. Their responsibilities should be explained to them. It was the duty of all the teachers. The time for action was here and now.

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Wanasinghe’s red shirt was drenched in sweat.

“I am speaking for the whole of the student body. There are twenty six demands here. The students have endorsed all of them. We have the power to fight for them. Before the meeting is over we want solutions for them. That is our just demand. We have promised the students to give them solutions for these twenty six demands before the day is over. Every single student from every single campus is with us.”

President Baladasa looked at his watch. Twenty three minutes had passed. Among the demands were facts that were general and
could not be considered demands. Some demands could be solved at the level of the campus. Some could be coped with at the level of the Vice Chancellor. Others had to be considered by the Education Ministry.

There was debate. Certain students argued if the president could not take a decision on whatever problem concerned the campus then he was not fit to be president. The debate was heating up when Janadasa and Dr. Paranawadiya intervened and things cooled down somewhat.

Wanasinghe’s girlfriend Harriet jumped on Janadasa: “Don’t be a blackleg! Are you trying to get us to forfeit our rights?” Janadasa remained calm at the intervention of Reverend Vinitha.

Wanasinghe next questioned whether the administration was trying to deny them the right to put up banners and notices explaining party policies, a right they had in earlier elections. This morning’s fracas, he said, was due to this question. And because of the Marshalls.

“Our innocent students have had to shed their blood due to the follies of the administrators. They are responsible.” Wanasinghe shouted, raising his arms above his head. He turned towards the president.

The president explained. Generally election propaganda started after nominations were handed in. This time banners were being put up even before that. The incident that morning was the fault of the students.

Wanasinghe repeated it was the fault of the marshalls.

Dr. Getamanna spoke. He blamed the marshalls, too. He dealt at length on what he had done for the students. He suggested in an emergency there should be a special vehicle available to take students to the hospital.
Wanasinghe endorsed this suggestion. He praised Dr. Getamanna for his service to the students.

In an effort to cut the discussion short, the president said he would see about a vehicle after the elections.

Getamanna said: “This is urgent. Otherwise we will always have to use my car.”

“All right,” the president said. “We’ll see what can be done.”

The students next demanded Chief Marshall Peiris be retired immediately. He had reached retirement age, hadn’t he? Some students tried to outtalk others relating how Peiris had wronged the students. Every speaker repeated no service was being done to the campus by Peiris.

“They are keeping reactionary Peiris, an old man, to do spy service here. He thinks he is still on the police force. He treats university students like one of those capitalist police in khaki uniforms. If a girl’s dress goes up a bit when she is running, he gets livid. We can look after our own discipline. The only service he does is tell false tales against the students.”

The president said he couldn’t take a decision on his own regarding this. He would discuss it with the Vice Chancellor.

“Discussion is not enough, sir. We want a decision soon.”

The president had believed he would get the support of the student counsellors. True, Dr. Paranawadiya said some of the demands were childish and others were unreasonable. But the president was surprised along with everyone else when Dr. Getamanna spoke several times taking the side of the students.

The president whispered in Paranawadiya’s ear: “This man is talking nonsense. He wants to be a hero to the students.” As a teacher Getamanna should speak with greater responsibility.
Dr. Paranawadiya’s memory raced back to the time he himself was an undergraduate. Bitter-sweet memories. After his third letter to the Vice Chancellor he was able to meet him to discuss the shortcomings of the students’ common room. Paranawadiya had never imagined he’d get an interview alone with Ivor Jennings. He had been planning to go with a delegation. Only he was summoned, as secretary of the Students’ Union. He’d had to go it alone not even sure he’d even understand Jennings’s English. How could he argue and win against a learned exponent of international law? He felt like writing a note saying the students wanted Jennings to meet a delegation and that he would not come alone. But would that mean an adverse note in his personal file? After much thought and several discussions with his friends he decided to meet Jennings alone.

The way he got ready for that interview was still etched in his mind. He could laugh when he remembered. He had had to make a good first impression. If he didn’t the interview would be a failure. That might mean trouble for him. He had walked up and down Main Street looking into every shop window and bought himself a fine shirt for twelve rupees and fifty cents.13) He had to pay extra to get his white tussore trousers pressed at short notice.14) On the advice of friends he shaved off his beard too. If the Vice Chancellor directed the conversation to his beard it would mean disaster. There were many stories about how Jennings discomfited students on account of their ties or their beards.

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Paranawadiya’s right hand involuntarily strayed towards his chin. He smiled. He looked at each student seated in front of him. It was disgusting to see these beards and the long straggly hair. In
his time it was possible to distinguish between men and women. Both sexes wore shirts now. A shirt cost no less than sixty rupees. The changes. The generation gap.

* * * * *

Next Wanasinghe discussed the removal of the police post from the campus grounds. The police were there to protect the administration. The students did not need police protection. The discipline of students was the business of the students. In any case, for whatever reason, it was not in the good name of the university to allow the police in the campus.

President Baladasa felt any argument about keeping the police within the campus would be futile. He agreed to present these demands to those who were responsible.

Wanasinghe presented the next demand: the immediate rescinding of the decision to require those who did not pay hostel fees to leave the hostels. The students were entitled not to pay hostel fees as the conditions in the hostels were bad.

The president tried to explain. Hostel facilities were available for only some students. It was unfair not to pay fees while others did pay.

"Sir, whatever you say, we will not pay fees. That is our decision."

"All right," said the president, "We'll let the Vice Chancellor know of this."

The next discussion was about raising the monthly bank loan to students to two hundred rupees.\(^1\)

The president said this was not something he could take a decision on.

Wanasinghe said: "Sir, that's the reply you give every demand.
Sir, you are here to present and explain these demands to those who are warming chairs at the top. If you can’t do that, we would like to ask you what the purpose of your being here is. If you are not prepared to do this, please tell us straight.”

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Dr. Paranawadiya remembered his interview with Ivor Jennings. Seated at a desk about a fathom wide, the Vice Chancellor requested Paranawadiya to sit down. He started the conversation as if they were old friends. This friendly attitude made Paranawadiya believe he would be able to get the okay for all his problems and go back to the Students’ Union victoriously. Jennings took a cigarette from a tin marked Peacock and, lighting one, puffed a whirl of smoke towards Paranawadiya. Jennings, smiling sarcastically, opened a file. The conversation was in English.

“Yes, Mr. Paranawadiya, let’s get down to business.”

“Sir, there are some demands about the students’ common room.”

“What? Demands? Demands are for trade unionists. These are educational matters. Teaching. Learning. I am in charge of all those. And if I need advice there is an Advisory Board.”

“Sir, we accept that. But the Students’ Union decided...”

“What? The Students’ Union decided? The only person who can take decisions here is me. Me alone. Don’t ever forget it.”

“Sir, I want to explain. As Secretary of the Students’ Union...” Paranawadiya could hardly talk. He felt the sweat trickling down his spine.

“Shut up and get out!” Jennings enunciated the first three words carefully and deliberately. He spat out “get out” in a voice that filled the room and echoed in it.
Paranawadiya had heard nothing more. He could only feel the sweat drenching his body. Lights were flashing in front of his eyes.

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Paranawadiya looked around him in shame. Even today, remembering the incident, he was overcome with shame.

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Wanasinghe was on the twenty first demand: The rule that students who do not attend at least sixty per cent of lectures, tutorials and practicals during the academic year cannot sit for annual exams should be rescinded forthwith.

The president pointed out that formerly the rule had been at least eighty per cent attendance, but he had taken the matter into his own hands and relaxed the rule to sixty per cent because he felt this just and reasonable.

Wanasinghe argued: There was no need for old absolute dictatorial rules any more. These were there to limit the freedom of the students and prevent them for participating in political activities. Anyway the knowledge students gained from extra-curricular activities was much greater than the knowledge they could gain from lectures. Besides in the face of travelling difficulties. Besides very little notice had been given. This was unreasonable.

When Dr. Getamanna agreed with the students, Wanasinghe got ready for another long harangue: “Our brothers and sisters came here with great expectations. Our parents thought they had got their divine wishes when we entered the university. We are here while our parents and brothers and sisters starve to finance us. Only after we came here we discovered this is a vast desert. We thought there was a band of wise people here to share a world of
wisdom and learning with us. Only after a few days here we discover what a lot of empty heads there are here.”

The president interrupted. There was no need to ridicule the teachers.

Wanasinghe tried to go on. But Janadasa said neither he nor other moderate students agreed with what had just been said. He begged the teachers’ pardon. There was an exchange between Wanasinghe and Janadasa. They were quieted.

The president agreed to do away with the sixty per cent attendance rule.

Dr. Paranawadiya remembered several years ago he had refused to sign examination application forms of students who had not put in the necessary quota of lectures.\(16\)

The next demand was presented: The government should supply jobs to all students as soon as they complete their university education.

This was a fine opportunity for some students to criticize university education and the government.

Two hours had passed. President Baladasa breathed a sigh of relief. Some students and student leaders had let off steam in front of the university higher-ups—that was all. He whispered to Paranawadiya it was necessary to give students a chance to let off steam.

The president asked himself if the whole discussion hadn’t been a triumph for him.

* * * * *

When the meeting was over the president was tired and relaxed in his office. Earlier too he had gone through this mixture of exhaustion, relief and happiness after an encounter that could cause the foundations of a powerful position like his to tremble. What a
surprising inner strength he possessed! This power of remaining calm in the face of all the odds.

He sat in his easy chair with his legs stretched out in front of him. It was nothing new--these students flinging everything in his face. Alone or in small groups they spoke respectfully. In the mass when they represented the Students’ Union they did not speak like students. They behaved like trade union leaders. Without the proper demeanor and strength to face them, it was not possible to be President. He felt proud of his strength.

President Baladasa wondered why Dr. Paranawadiya had seemed confused and disgusted throughout the meeting. In the face of all that had happened that day, it might not be impossible Paranawadiya would now want to give up his student counsellorship. If he did, it would be very difficult to find someone to fill his place. Dr. Getamanna would probably get his name proposed by the Students’ Union, which had asked to be consulted in these appointments. Baladasa thought he should act in a way to appease Paranawadiya. How could he get round him? He had to wait until this heat was over and talk with him calmly.

A few days earlier Dr. Paranawadiya and Janadasa had come to the president with an invitation for him to address the study circle. The topic proposed was “A University President’s Expectations and Problems.” He had said nothing definite. Now he decided to accept the invitation. That would please Paranawadiya.

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Dr. Baladasa remembered Dr. Paranawadiya’s contribution at a discussion on university education in Sri Lanka: We have to accept, albeit with regret, that university education is gradually deteriorating. The enthusiasm of both teacher and student has de-
creased. Both are apathetic. When students show no interest in learning the enthusiasm of the teachers naturally wanes. When teachers have no enthusiasm for teaching the students do not show any interest. Students blame the teachers. Teachers blame the students. As a result discipline suffers. This problem cannot be solved by the university alone. It is a problem for the nation.

Dr. Baladasa remembered Paranawadiya had spoken with great mental pain. How close were his arguments to the truth? The most intelligent students of the country get into the university. The fault is it’s not possible to channel their intelligence in the correct direction. The sad thing is it was not possible to explain this to the students.

With anger Baladasa remembered some young teachers like Dr. Getamanna made these situations worse. The president could not bear the way Dr. Getamanna was trying to be a hero in the eyes of the students. It was not possible to have any confidence in him. He was making every effort to turn his shrewdness and craftiness to his own advantage.

The president decided to invite Getamanna to a friendly talk. He must first get the facts about Caldera’s charge against Getamanna. But he should be careful what he said. He should avoid threats as well as pleadings. It wouldn’t be wise to allow Caldera’s proposal to interdict Getamanna to bear fruit. The students would take Getamanna’s side. He regretted he had not been able to speak with Getamanna about this before the meeting. He might have been able to get Getamanna to disagree with some of the students’ arguments. But it was still not too late.

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Just then Dr. Getamanna pushed his head into the room and
grinned.

"Come, come," Dr. Baladasa said. "How are you, Dr. Getamanna? Shall we have some tea?" He ordered a peon to bring tea.

Dr. Getamanna said: "Sir, I thought it was a good thing to let the boys talk and get things off their chests. That's why I spoke on their behalf a little. The best way is to win their confidence. Otherwise it's difficult to get anything done. I'm telling you this in case you misunderstood me."

Baladasa replied: "Yes, I was thinking of reminding you when you spoke in front of the students to be a little cautious. We must not show them our weaknesses. This is Peiris's work. There is truth in what the students say about him. He can't stand the ways of the young. But it would be a sin to sack him. He has a large family, four grown up girls. I'm thinking of giving one of them an appointment here." The president spoke with compassion.

"Yes, I'm sorry about Mr. Peiris. He's been here a long time."

"Dr. Getamanna, tell the students there is no point in being hasty. Tell them we'll do whatever we can about their demands. I'm going to discuss them with the Vice Chancellor."

"I'll do that, sir. I can shape the boys." Getamanna felt some relief that the president was not displeased. He felt too the president respected him, accepting the students were partial to him.

"I say, Getamanna, there's something else I want to talk about, but I'm very tired now. We must talk at leisure. Can you come this way after lunch?"

"I have to go to hospital, sir. I'll come after one."

The president had made Getamanna feel a hero of the students; it would be best to let him enjoy that feeling for a while. By one he should have the facts about Caldera's charges against Getamanna.
Getamanna was convinced the president was seeking further help from him. He ran down the steps whistling an old tune.

As Getamanna entered the room Wanasinghe and a few other students surrounded him.

Getamanna asked: "What do you all think of the discussion?"

Wanasinghe boasted: "My speech stunned the president. This time I'm sure something will happen."

Getamanna said: "That's why I spoke so strongly several times. When the president realized I was supporting you all, his power went down a lot. But I don't know whether the noose will tighten around my neck. We'll have to be careful of that. But I'm not scared to take the side of the students on any question."

"Don't have any fears, sir. We are with you."

One of the students noted Paranawadiya hadn't poked in his two cents during the meeting, and Getamanna said, "He must have been thinking of another world. He's usually not in this world, you know." Everyone laughed.

The Venerable Sobhita snatched the cigarette butt from Wijes hand and puffed a whirl of smoke into Mayuri's face. "I'll tell Getamanna," Mayuri whispered. "Shhh."

Getamanna continued: "Now, I'll tell you something. However much you try, nothing is going to get Peiris ousted. That's for sure."

Wanasinghe said: "We won't have that. Then, both Peiris and Balaya himself will have to go home. That's our stand."

"Right. Right." Someone said once when he went to the president's office there'd been two girls with him. "I waited half an hour and then I peeped into the room. Peiris's two girls. Talking in English. Balaya was highly thrilled. So that's the secret?" The students cried: "Ho! Ho!"
Sobitha said: “Stop making up fairy tales.”
Getamanna lied: “No, it could be true. I’ve seen them too.”
Wanasinghe said: “Machang, shall we put up a poster about the girls?”
Getamanna interrupted: “Don’t be hasty. Otherwise I’ll get it in the neck. Whatever you do must be planned well. I’ll tell you went the time is ripe.”
Getamanna then took Wanasinghe’s right hand in his: “How about my other business? Will it be okay?”
“Yes, I’m sure it will, sir. I’ve spoken about it.”
The students left.

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Getamanna went over what had happened. When the president and the others could find no answers to the students’ demands at the meeting, only he, Getamanna, had been able to voice his opinions. He felt he had been born with a cure-all in his hands to cure all the ills of university students. The president was seeking his help in this. That was why the president wanted to meet him again today. Getamanna had great satisfaction.

Getamanna mused about what the president would tell him: “Dr. Getamanna, don’t think I blocked your promotion. I can’t talk about theses things here and now, but I promise I will do it for you. No one other than you can please the students so well.” Getamanna dreamed: he had the president of the campus in his hand. He felt as if he were wafting up a spiral staircase. Amidst the spiralling smoke that spread through the room the breeze cooled his body and he remembered the question paper he still had to do. He must complete it and hand it in before he met the president.

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Dr. Paranawadiya locked himself in his room. For a long time he was deep in thought. When his mind focussed on a subject he explored it in every aspect, in every dimension, without freeing his mind from it. Many times his wife had complained to him about this. But Paranawadiya considered this concentration not a deficiency but a gift seldom merited by human beings. The Cittavagga in the Dhammapada: a noble achievement to concentrate one's mind on one subject.\textsuperscript{[8]}

The way the students had spoken during the meeting that morning, the arguments they presented, haunted his mind: “A university is students. Everything must be done for the welfare of the students. If you, the staff, cannot do it, we take matters into our own hands. All the students are with us. We can control them.”

How concepts had changed!

Who was responsible for this state of affairs? Students? Administrators? Politicians?

On the surface there was some truth in their arguments, but they did not have the power of serious thinking. Wasn't it the duty of the teachers to explain this to them and free them from their illusions? But these illusions persisted not only in the university but throughout the whole country. There was a great gulf between the privileged and the non-privileged, between the haves and the have nots. University students felt the staff had all the privileges living in the lap of luxury. The staff were enmeshed in their own problems. But the problems of the students were more serious. Neither could understand the problems of the others. Wasn't it possible to find a solution by peaceful discussion? Both sides had to face the truth.

Paranawadiya felt for all this it was necessary to have people who were prepared to understand their responsibilities. Wanasing-
he was trying to be a leader of the students by fair means or foul. Janadasa and Reverend Vinitha were more sincere. It was a consolation that within the campus there were students who did not always run with the herd. They were prepared to accept the truth. If students and teachers worked together with understanding, the situation could be turned for the better. It was not too late.

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When Janadasa and Reverend Vinitha entered the room Dr. Paranawadiya was still thinking. His head hanging low and his eyes shut, he seemed to be in a trance. For a moment they looked at each other as if to ask "Is he dead? Damn sin!" Piles of notes scattered over the floor were covered with dust.

The soft tread of their feet woke Paranawadiya. Raising his head slightly, he smiled at them. As they saw his face drowned in thought, the weary eyes, they felt a great compassion. Each one thought the image of Paranawadiya as a man of strong will bent only on academic matters was not true. Reverend Vinitha was more shaken because he was reminded so sharply of his late revered venerable teacher.

"Sit down," Paranawadiya said. "I wanted to meet the two of you to discuss the state of affairs of this campus quietly and calmly. I've been alone here since this morning thinking how to find solutions to our problems. Never in my life have I felt so much pain as I did today at the meeting."

Paranawadiya's forehead was covered with sweat. His eyes were moist.

"I am not blaming the students. But we must think very seriously about these problems and discuss them seriously. Can't we do that? The staff accuses the students. The students accuse the
staff—and the politicians. The situation has become worse. I joined
the university in 1951 at Peradeniya. I came here to Vidyodaya in
1960. I wanted to be a good teacher. I have never knowingly hurt
anyone. Students have treated me well."

Paranawadiya looked around. He straightened his bent spine a
little. A tear from his right eye trickled down his cheek without his
being aware of it. He was choked with emotion. He bent his head
and was silent for a moment.

Reverend Vinitha, who felt he too had contributed to the man’s
distress, felt tears come to his own eyes. Janadasa bit his lower
lip.

Paranawadiya controlled his voice: “Today’s students are
very different from my old students. Times have changed. They
have changed with the country. Today teachers are like useless
coins. They are the enemies of the students.”

Janadasa tried to placate Paranawadiya. He pointed out most
of the views expressed at the meeting that morning were not the
views of all students. He made it clear he himself was not going to
support all of Wanasinghe’s proposals.

Janadasa asked: “Isn’t the primary reason for today’s unrest
on campus the fact that the university degree has become a worth-
less accomplishment?” The degree became of worth only when ex-
ternal forces were at work. A professor could only certify a stu-
dent’s academic achievements. But an election agent of an M. P. in
some far flung constituency could do better. In the face of this,
what was the use of studying hard and getting good examination
results? Wasn’t it more meaningful to show allegiance to political
parties and seek solutions through their leaders?

Reverend Vinitha spoke to console Dr. Paranawadiya: “Sir,
don’t feel so bad. Don’t feel hurt about all this. We’re not going to
endorse all of Wanasinghe’s ideas. Most of the students are moderate. We all know you’ve discharged your duties properly.”

Janadasa, trying to find out more about what Paranawadiya was thinking, added: “Sir, I must say one more thing. Today’s university students are completely different from those of the old days. Today’s students are more interested in the problems of the country. We’re interested in politics.”

Paranawadiya answered: “True, Janadasa. I accept that. These students are the people who will take charge of the country in the future. So they should be politically conscious. And, yes, politically active. No doubt about that. But with a complete sense of responsibility. That’s what’s lacking! They must act with total comprehension. They must accept their responsibilities.”

Reverend Vinitha supported what Dr. Paranawadiya said: “Otherwise, there’ll be a repetition of 1971.”

To this reference to rebellion, Dr. Paranawadiya responded: “That’s my greatest fear.” His face was serious.

Vinitha and Janadasa were pleased an experienced wise man like Paranawadiya could accept the truth and justice of their arguments.

Paranawadiya now spoke without his former sadness. “I’m thinking of getting the staff together to talk about these things openly. The majority may now have understood the seriousness of the situation. We should get together and start a program of action.”

Vinitha thought what good fortune there were teachers honestly interested in understanding students’ problems, what consolation.

The sun shone in dispelling the darkness. A fresh breeze cleared the thick air. The dark clouds on Paranawadiya’s face gradually
disappeared.

Paranawadiya spoke at length. He was now more confident in the university students, their fine aims, he said.

Vinitha and Janadasa accepted everything he said, ready to make sacrifices on his behalf. They said, full of hope: “Thank you, sir. Thank you for talking openly with us. Now we understand things more clearly. We promise to act with greater responsibility from now on. There are only two of us here now but there’s a crowd outside who will listen to us.”

Paranawadiya’s voice changed again: “No, no. I don’t want promises. We’ll get together and solve our problems. We’re one family here. We must remember that all the time. That’s all. There’s no point in students pulling to one side, teachers to the other, and administrators pulling in still another direction.”

Paranawadiya pulled a cigar out of his pocket. As he puffed on it thoughtfully, he now spoke as if his earlier enthusiasm had vanished: “What hurts me is students proclaiming in public we teachers are not intelligent. Yes, we have our shortcomings, but they are here to learn from us. All right, let’s set aside learning. They’re here to widen their knowledge by their association with us.”

Janadasa reacted quickly: “Sir, that’s why I spoke out against them at the meeting. I wanted to run out of the room. I thought to myself am I learning and working together with damn fools like these? Reverend Vinitha and I think we should have a meeting and explain things to the students and beg forgiveness in public.”

Paranawadiya said: “I’m not angry. But what the president did was right, defending the teachers.”

“Sir,” said Janadasa, “Please, don’t be unhappy about that. Reverend Vinitha and I know what you are like.”

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As the two students left his room, Dr. Paranawadiya felt a sense of pleasure. He had tried to discipline himself not to be too emotional over things that happened to him, whether occasions of joy, health insult; he tried not to allow himself to be overjoyed or to sink to the depths of grief. Obviously, he had not always succeeded.

He remembered some occasions when he was overcome with joy. When his first published work came off the press he had smelt that fragrance of newness. He turned each page, one by one. He admired the book’s artistic cover. His deep happiness had weaned him away from troubles in his life for a short time.

His pleasure now was comparable. He felt he had the power to correct the stubborn thinking of so many of today’s students. Teachers could understand the problems of the students with compassion and justice. It would not be so difficult to solve those problems.

Dr. Paranawadiya left his room. With his usual heavy tread, he walked along the corridor. The whole student body had faith in him. What other treasure did he have besides the students? All this time he’d obtained satisfaction doing research. Wouldn’t it be possible for him to get equal satisfaction trying to understand student thinking, students’ ideals? By trying to portray the students as tough and stubborn the teachers had been deceiving themselves.

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The peon watched Paranawadiya. He was waiting to shut up the room and go away. As long as the professor was still around he could not do so. 1:48, and the professor still here, not gone to lunch, and showing no signs of going.
The peon scratched his head humbly. "Sir," he said. "You haven't had lunch."

Paranawadiya gave Peter a smile he was unaccustomed to: "I'll be here awhile. You can go."

Surprise! It was Peter's duty to stay on as long as the professor stayed on. Not able to believe his eyes, Peter watched that smile and the brightness of that usually sad face. Something jolly had happened. Fantastic!

Notes

1) Kariya=duty, action. Karavana=One who gets things done.
2) Gaja=elephant. Nayake=chief, leader.
3) Gita=song, melody.
4) Bandaranaike, Hall is named after S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, a former Prime Minister of Sri Lanka.
5) Gnanawasa Builling, named after a scholar monk, contains lecture rooms.
6) Ratanasara Building, named after a scholar monk, contains lecture rooms.
7) Women in ancient Sigiri paintings have their hair tied in a knot on top of their heads. Young women today wear the hair in a knot behind. Mrs. Caldera is not typical.
8) Sri Lankan university students are notorious for hooting, called the "campus song."
9) Chee=bad, base, ugly. Used mainly, though not only, by women.
10) University academics are not usually interdicted in Sri Lanka. Interdiction is for misconduct, neglect of duty, fraud. The Vice Chancellor or the President must be fully satisfied that a grave offense has been committed. A full inquiry will then be held.
11) In 1971 the Janata Vimukti Peramuna (People's Liberation Front) attempted to overthrow the government of Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike by force. Most J. V. P. members were young men and women.
12) The University of Ceylon was founded in 1942. It was then the only university in Sri Lanka. Sir Ivor Jennings, a constitutional lawyer, was the first Virst Vice Chancellor.

13) This was a very expensive shirt for the time being recalled.

14) Tussore=name of a white-colored cloth used for trouser material.

15) Earlier, university students whose parents had low incomes were given bursaries. Later, these were changed to monthly bank loans re-payable after student borrowers were employed after graduation.

16) Students were required to apply for examinations.

17) Balaya=President Balada's nickname is also the name of a fish.

18) In the Dhammapada, Compendium of Buddhism, the Cittavagga is the section explaining the nature of the mind. Citta=mind.

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