



Title	A. V. SURaweera's ATTA BINDEYI PAYA BURULEN
Author(s)	Robinson, LeRoy
Citation	経営と経済, 69(1), pp.121-142; 1989
Issue Date	1989-06
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10069/28392
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This document is downloaded at: 2019-02-19T17:20:38Z

〈資 料〉

A. V. SURaweERA'S *ATTA BINDEYI PAYA BURULEN*

Le Roy Robinson

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

Suraweera, born on October 2, 1930, was the son of a rural family and grew up near the interior town of Gampaha, about twenty-five miles from Colombo.

Suraweera attended the Government English school in Gampaha and later graduated from Royal College, Colombo, one of the most prestigious high schools for boys in Sri Lanka. In 1954 he graduated from the University of Peradeniya. In 1957 he was awarded a Master's degree, and in 1964 a Ph. D. by the same university.

Suraweera has published many scholarly articles and books on Sri Lankan culture and literature. In 1959 his book on the culture of the Anuradhapura Period won a State Award. In 1968 his critical edition of the *Rajavaliya*, a Sinhala classic, won another State Award.

In the 1970s Suraweera received an Asia Foundation Grant and for one year participated in the creative writing program at the University of Iowa, and, on a Commonwealth Fellowship, he spent a year at the University of Kent, Canterbury, U. K., where he did research on the sociology of literature.

Suraweera has published five novels and four volumes of short

stories. In 1980 his last novel *Sada Melesa Pura Derana* (Thus the City Was Built on Earth) won a State Award. Two of his collections of short stories have also won State Awards, and one of them was prescribed as a textbook for Sinhala in the G. C. E. Advanced Level. He has also published three Books of stories for children. He has translated Aristotle's *Poetics* into Sinhala.

"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, July 1987) introduced Alankarage Victor Suraweera to an academic audience in Japan.

This introduction continues with the publication in English of the final sections of Suraweera's college novel, *Atta Bindeyi Paya Burulen* (Tread Softly Lest the Branch Break). The novel was published in 1977 by the Lake House Investments Company, Ltd., Colombo, in an edition of 2, 500 copies. The novel was translated from the original Sinhala by Vijita Fernando, a journalist who contributes to Sinhala and English newspapers in Sri Lanka. The novel was 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 compus. 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 in-

volved in politics or personal rivalries. Life in the university goes on in the midst of all this tension. The best way of survival is to tread softly; otherwise, the whole thing would tumble down."

Wimal Dissanayake, presently Professor of Mass Communication and Associate Director for Asian Studies, East-West Center, Hawaii, reviewed *Atta Bindeyi Paya Burulen* in the *Ceylon Observer*, September 11, 1977. He says that the novel "recreates the true nature of campus life with a remarkable degree of understanding and discernment." He says, "The university president is hemmed in by politicians, higher authorities, students, minor staff, his own colleagues. He struggles against great odds to discharge his duties impartially and responsibly." Dissanayake describes some of the professors in the novel: One is "shrewd, scheming and perfidious." Another is "ostentatious and status seeking." A third is "a sincere teacher with an honest compunction."

Atta Bindeyi Paya Burulen

President Baladasa was deep in thought. Problems. Problems. Now Dean Caldera had set up another that was not going to be easy to solve. Dr. Getamanna was a shrewd character. He said one thing in front of the students and another to the teachers. To the president he said still another thing. A shrewd guy if ever there was one.

The president was worried about Caldera too. He was another one trying to make use of every opportunity. He now felt the time was ripe for some action to his advantage. He could exaggerate out of all proportion Getamanna's lateness in handing in the question paper.

The president decided this was not the time to antagonize Getamanna; he needed him to solve other problems. If this situation between Caldera and Getamanna got to the students things would get even more serious. The president did not want to get involved in the fracas between

Caldera and Getamanna. "Let them go to hell!"

Sirisena, the clerk in charge of examinations, burst into the president's room.

The president now blamed himself for not having questioned Sirisena earlier.

Sirisena said: "Sir, I came to see you several times. You were busy. I want to say something about the question papers."

"Yes, Yes," the president said. "Good thing you came. I wanted to speak with you too. But don't you know when one thing is over here another begins? Now what is this thing between Dean Caldera and Professor Getamanna?"

Sirisena now placed a string of facts in front of the president. "Sir, Professor Caldera wants a statement from me about Dr. Getamanna's behavior. He is pestering me. I told him I must speak with you first. He scolded me. He said we're not getting together to support him. He blames you too. I have never heard such accusations!" As Sirisena said the last words his voice trembled. He took a white handkerchief out of his pocket and turning toward the wall wiped his eyes.

"Don't be upset, Siri. You know Caldera's ways."

Sirisena said: "Who is blameless, sir? Dr. Getamanna did bring the question paper, finally, and that examination is not for tomorrow but for the day after, so there won't be any delay, after all."

At that point Dr. Getamanna himself came into the room.

"Come, come, Dr. Getamanna," the president said. "We are discussing your problem."

Getamanna answered: "Sir, I have given the paper to Sirisena already." He turned to the clerk: "I told you I had a lot of problems these days: campus worries, illness."

Sirisena explained everything again, his story this time amplified in response to the president's cross questions and Getamanna's hints.

Getmanna spoke in anger to the president: "Sir, I have spoken about Professor Caldera earlier. He's always trying to get me into trouble. I'm the only one here who talks straight to him. True, there have been mistakes on my part. I accept that. But Caldera does not know me!"

The president did not like staff problems discussed in front of clerks. He had winked at Getamanna several times but he chose not to understand or did not notice because he was angry.

"All right, Mr. Sirisena. You can go," the president said. Then he remembered he should advise Sirisena about one more thing. "Mr. Sirisena, speak with me later about that statement, right? If you are asked about it, say you cannot give it over till you speak with me."

Getamanna thought this statement must be about him. Caldera was going too far! Getamanna wondered what the president thought about the whole thing.

The president pretended to be busy with a file for a moment. What should he tell Getamanna? Better to make him happy. "I say, Getamanna, don't get excited. Don't you know what Caldera is like? I'll look after everything. This is a minor matter. But don't discuss it with anyone. If the students get to know about it..." Baladasa looked at Getamanna as if he were reading his mind.

Getamanna felt relieved. "But, sir," he said. Caldera is going to report me to the Vice Chancellor, isn't he? If so, I know what to do!"

President Baladasa said: "What rubbish. Don't be alarmed. Don't get excited."

Getamanna breathed more freely.

"Now, Dr. Getamanna, what do the students say about the discussion this morning?" The president did not wait for a reply. Instead he spoke in

a downhearted manner: "What can I do, Dr. Getamanna? My hands are tied. I have to work within the confines. People at the top say I'm not enforcing the rules. Students say I'm too harsh. I'm hemmed in, like an arecanut in the grip of the cutter. Every problem comes to me,"

Getamanna listened carefully.

The president went on. "Some of the students' demands are fair. They're excited because of the prevailing unrest. If I were a student I might even be on their side."

Getamanna's eyes brightened.

"Look at all these officials," the president said. "How many of them can do a proper job? We can't blame only the students." The president loosened his sweat drenched shirt.

Getamanna realized the president was trying to get rid of a pain that had lain dormant in him for a long time.

The president continued. "But there are a few wild ones here. Tough. They know no reason. All they want to do is create confusion. Their character is beyond redemption. They are the ones who go to the politicians. There's nothing wrong in university students getting interested in politics. But party politics lead them astray. That makes them tough and fearless. For every simple headache they run to the party office. Or to the Vice Chancellor. Or to the Ministry. Then those people shape everything. Make false promises. They blame us in the presence of students and they become heroes. What can I do? Give up. But they won't allow that either. Anyway, somebody has to do this job, but whoever comes the situation remains the same."

Getamanna had not expected President Baladasa to speak so openly. On the one hand, he felt some pride the president trusted him enough to speak so frankly. On the other hand, there was much more to be said. It looked as if the president was not going to be there for long.

"Just look at the student counselling," the president was saying. "You are one of the counsellors. From whom do students take advice?"

Getamanna did not try to answer until he knew more about what the president was thinking.

"Do you know from whom?" the president said. "Not from us. Not from you counsellors. They go to politicians. They run to their party office. Everything is done according to what the politicians say. So what is the use of trying to find solutions by discussions with students?"

Getmanna wanted to please the president. He knew there was some truth in what the president was saying, but he himself was not ready to say such a thing in public. "Sir, what you say is quite true."

"That's why I say it." The president spoke sharply. "But I'm not blaming all the students for this. As things are, they will gain something. A few student leaders might even get jobs." The president laughed.

There was silence in the room. The fan had stopped.

Getamanna knew the problem about the delayed question paper was still there. Caldera was a serpent.

The president knew by intuition what Getamanna was thinking about. Whatever happened later, he should console Getamanna now. "I say, don't get excited about that question paper. I'll look after everything."

Getamanna snapped: "But, sir, I cannot bow down to injustice. I will see what I can do too." Getamanna left the room. He was angry enough to stab Caldera.

Dr. Baladasa was greatly surprised by Getamanna's sudden angry exit. He wondered whether to summon Getamanna to another talk. But there was nothing more to be said, was there? If the students heard, there would be trouble. But the students' anger would be directed at Caldera not him. Caldera would learn a lesson from the students.

The telephone rang. It was his wife. "Daughter? Fever? Then take

her to the doctor. It's impossible for me to come now. What can I do? Try to get a taxi. No taxis? O.K. I'll try to come."

The president decided to go home as soon as possible.

Dr. Getamanna had been careful to speak in such a way as to win the president's praise. But he had had no time to think about himself. He had agreed with whatever the boss said. He had grinned to please him. but once he left the room Getamanna had to face the serious situation he was in. Caldera was a powerful man. All responsibility for the Arts Faculty rested with Caldera. Nothing could happen within the faculty without Caldera's goodwill and sanction. Caldera could transfer him. One sentence would be enough. "As there is not enough work for a man of Getamanna's capabilities, we are recommending his transfer to another campus." Caldera would recommend the annual increments. It was serious to be negligent at exam time. If Caldera wrote two words — "Work unsatisfactory" — they could not be erased easily. Even if they were, the scar would remain. One order from Caldera could tumble down all the castles he had been building up all this time.

Getamanna felt faint. His knees trembled. He walked down the stairs hanging on to the bannister. Meeting Wanasinghe and a group of students he gave them a short version of what Caldera was going to do. The students followed him.

Wanasinghe spoke sharply: "Sir, what do we do now? We are ready to fight for you. We can't allow unfairness. We can't allow Caldera to dance the way he wants to. Tell us, sir." Wanasinghe was all set, his weapons sharpened.

Getamanna had to visit his brother in the hospital so he walked toward the main gate. He said to the students: "I say, I can't think of a single course of action now. But the matter is serious. Caldera has been out

to get me for a long time. They're all wild because I take your side, the side of the students." Getamanna went out the main gate.

The students did not like Dean Caldera's crafty smile nor his manner of speaking nor his posturing nor his way of walking nor his jaunty clothes — his large striped ties! — nor his James Bond briefcase nor his 6 Sri Toyota.

"Machang," Gautamadasa said to Jayatissa: "Is it true Caldera has made trouble for Dr. Getamanna?"

Jayatissa said: "What? Man, were you sleeping all the time? Caldera's reported Dr. Getamanna to the Vice Chancellor."

A bevy of girls returning from an English class entreated: "Tell us also. Why are you all hiding things from us?"

Silva, very much the all-knowing hero of the occasion, said: "Just be, women. You are all English-fying. And here Dr. Getamanna is in trouble. He's the only one who supports us. And the others are trying to suck his blood. This is a trick of Caldera's. And Balaya."

At the last, Harriet shook her head: "I don't think the president has his hands in this."

"Don't you? Well, let me tell you about him. They were talking together for a long time in Balaya's room."

It did not take long for the rumor to spread: Dr. Getamanna had been interdicted. Yes, Caldera himself had bragged to his favorites about it. As each group of students related it, the story was exaggerated completely out of proportion.

In front of the Sumanagala Building banners with slogans in bright red appeared.

"Hands off Dr. Getamanna!"

"Save the friend of the students!"

“Banish the capitalist professor!”

“Fight till the eyes of the administration open!”

“Remove the interdiction order at once!”

At least a hundred students gathered, talking, laughing, clapping. The steps of the Sumanagala Building were filled with girls and boys, legs stretched out sitting, standing.

Cooing couples in the shade of the trees were also talking of the same thing.

The boards on the campus were full of slogans. Stories of Caldera and Getamanna and their clash were written on them in the light of old Jataka tales. Students read the slogans and the stories and enjoyed themselves hugely.

Surangi said: “Don’t know who wrote the Jataka story. Very well done.”

“I think it’s Tilakasiri. His Sinhala is very good.”

“But who is Ganthimana, aney?”

“Can’t you understand? That’s Dr. Getamanna. He speaks well but he does no work in the classes. He gets hold of some topic and talks for a whole hour. I don’t even like to go to his classes.”

“Yes, yes. He’s a real ice karaya!”

Students on their way to the library stopped and stood around trying to get more information.

Lalitha whispered to Yasawathie: “Don’t know what they’re trying to do this time.”

“As for me, I’ve had enough of all this. They’re not here to learn. They’ve come to reform the varsity. To teach the teachers how to teach. We’re the ones who suffer from all this.”

“I’m scared too. How will we be able to do the exam properly? We can’t do any work in the hostel with all this commotion. We can’t work in

the library. And they say we cram! I suppose we should also waste our time like them." Several students endorsed what Podimenike had just said and they accused the troublemakers too.

Gunapala laughed: "Now we should form a union of students who want to study."

"Podimenike should be the chairman!"

The two people who were always in front of activity such as was happening today were not there. Some students inquired after them: "Where is Janadasa?" "Where is Vinitha Sadhu?"

Gautamadasa explained: "They're upset. They're on another track now. They say these people have not looked into the facts before starting this. they say not to put up placards until we get the facts and discuss them."

Chief Marshall Peiris usually ran around the students at a time like this getting excited. But he was not in the campus. Had he been there something might have ignited.

More students came. They had no organization. They had no objective. But all the same this kind of commotion that happened once or twice a month gave everyone a bit of a thrill.

Other students, who did not approve of Wanasinghe and his crowd and their actions, stood around. But they did not want to get involved.

President Baladasa was able to consider himself victorious when he solved each problem as it came up or when he postponed its solution. But little bits of those problems sometimes haunted him, making his brain a little less active with each minute that passed.

Today it was much worse. He could not discipline his brain to think on any subject. As he read a file he forgot the beginning by the time he reached the end. All he saw on the pages were ink blobs and a host of lines. He threw it aside. He stared at the wall. He hoped this would give him lightness of heart. He breathed a deep sigh.

Now his little daughter was ill. If someone at home had a headache he was sure to be informed. It was nothing much. Just a little temperature. But he must go home earlier than usual. His wife's usual complaint was sure to be longer today: "You're always at the campus. You don't ever look at what is happening in your own home."

The president had to send a report of the morning's meeting with the students to the Vice Chancellor without delay. He was not in the right frame of mind, but he had to do it. Fast. From the day he had taken this job he had never been able to do anything quietly, slowly.

He summoned his typist. He read out sentence by sentence. After a few introductory sentences he wanted to state in detail each aspect of the discussion. But he could not find the order he wanted. He could not think of the correct word or the correct phrase. He dismissed the typist. He put off the report until the next day.

The president's eyes turned toward the wall in front of his desk. He looked at a picture of a fresco. He had seen it a thousand times, but he could not remember what it was. He laid his head in his hands and tried to bring to mind all the frescoes he knew. It was of no use. He remembered an image house in Polonnaruwa. But he could not remember its name. He was ashamed. He felt he was alone in the midst of a host of lonely ruins. The place was dark with age. The droppings of bats made the place musty. His nose and ears were assaulted. He was afraid to be in this dark place all alone.

President Baladasa got up. He walked about the room. He was able

to get his senses back. His eyes shifted to the other wall with its shelves of books. Some books seemed to beckon to him. Student Unrest. Education and Leadership. The Age of Reason. The Naked and the Dead. The Dark Arena. Problems. Solutions. Treatment. Nonsense. A dream world.

Baladasa had never felt so lonely, so alone, so frightened. He was even terrified of putting down the foot he had lifted. The step would go deeper and deeper into the bowels of the earth.

He heard the braying of dogs. That wretched noise pierced his being. A cow began to moo. The grassland was parched. He was alone. He could not stay alone. The whole weight of the campus was on his head. How could he bear it alone? Everyone was waiting for him to fall. Like a tree with its roots loosened. As soon as he fell they were waiting to applaud and laugh at his ruin. They were all his enemies. Teachers were enemies. Students were enemies. Officials and workers were enemies. What traps had they laid for him?

Even inside the room there could be a time—bomb. Who knew? It could be anywhere. Behind the bookshelves. Inside the drawer. It was about to explode! The President's right hand drew out part of the drawer. He was terrified of looking inside it. He laid his hand inside and explored. There were envelopes, papers, pencils. Nothing unusual.

Once in another campus a group of students had burst into the president's office and forced him to sign a document at the point of knife. Would he too have to face such a danger? He trembled. He wanted to call the police. That was not wise. The students were dead set against the police coming into the campus. Whatever the reason. The campus must have freedom for the students to shed blood in their quest for liberation. Full freedom!

The president's legs trembled. He was too scared to keep his eyes open. He was too scared to close them. Mother! To the north are the

Tamils. To the south, the sea. How could he stretch his arms or legs? What else could he do but stay huddled? Was this a dream?

Baladasa heard a commotion from the direction of the Sumangala statue. What could it be? Noises. Voices. Stern tones and exchanges gradually grew louder. He tried to ignore them, but the noises forced themselves into the room like a flood. He went to the window and looked out through the faded blind. Some disturbance again! They had promised not to make trouble at Bandaranaike Hall. The promise was already broken.

Marshall Fonseka entered the office. He was trembling with fear. "Sir, there are posters everywhere. Let's save Dr. Getamanna. Let's banish capitalist administrators. What do we do, sir?"

Fonseka waited impatiently for every word that would drop from the mouth of the president. At moments like this the president spoke softly.

Dr. Baladasa stared out of the window. He then spoke in a defeated tone: "Hmm. Never mind. Don't get involved in any trouble, understand? See if Dr. Getamanna is there and come and tell me."

Fonseka's fearful face disappeared.

This is one of Getamanna's tricks, the president said to himself. He has said one thing here. He is doing something else now. He has incited the boys. What do we do? He lowered himself into his chair. He covered his face with his hands. The darkness was better than the light. He dozed. He got up with a start when he heard someone enter the room. Was a long pointed knife to be thrust against his chest?

Dr. Paranawadiya, Reverend Vinitha, Janadasa and a few others — they were all startled to see the president, his hair disshevelled,

his face pale, almost jump up. They looked at his weary darkened face. No one said anything.

The president, who had been imagining it was the end of him, felt embarrassed. He hastened to dispel the impression of fear he had given them. "Ah, Professor Paranawadiya. Reverend Vinitha. Please sit down. I have a slight headache. It looks as if there is some trouble. There is no end to this trouble."

Dr. Paranawadiya began: "Yes, we're here to talk about that."

In order to make the president feel better, Janadasa said: "Sir, we must not take so much notice of these posters. This is the work of those ruffians."

Reverend Vinitha spoke with firm determination: "Yes, sir. We've been thinking of these things for a long time. We understand what is happening. Before you came we had no one to speak to in confidence. All this time we were running with the pack. We worked without aim. But what is past is past. From now on we are going to do everything intelligently and carefully."

Dr. Paranawadiya lit a cigarette. He puffed. "After this morning's meeting we discussed everything at great length," he said. "At last there's a small group ready to accept the truth."

Dr. Paranawadiya continued: "The biggest mistake is we think the university is a special world. Most students come here straight from high school. They don't realize life's difficulties. Their parents did everything for them. Once they come here they forget even the little they knew of life. They begin to live a dream life. They are not ready to spend three or four years here and then go back to their villages. What they want is to go direct from here to a fine job. But that's not possible today. They talk for the people who sweat, they say; they talk on behalf of the oppressed. They are very clever at that. And to go on parades."

Dr. Baladasa had some understanding of these problems. But he could not sort them out in his mind. He had once done a long report suggesting every student should work for one year before entering the university. But now he could not present his ideas very well. He thought of speaking to his visitors about higher education in another developing country like Tanzania.

Baladasa spoke with remorse: "But I'm not blaming the students only. We're to blame for this too. Have we discharged our duties as teachers well? I'm speaking of the majority. That is my greatest pain."

Dr. Paranawadiya went on: "But we can't blame the teachers for this situation. Within this frame, the teachers alone can't do much, however they try. Those higher than us should also bear some of the responsibility. In a way, the whole country, the whole society, is responsible. This is like a wheel rotten at every joint. But we must not let the cart break down."

Janadasa said: "Sir, your example is a fine one."

Dr. Baladasa dispelled his apathetic air. He now spoke firmly: "The argument is whether this is progress or deterioration. This kind of thing happens in any institution or in any country. These are temporary lapses. A lapse of the intelligentsia. But through these experiences we can build a strong future."

Dr. Paranawadiya laughed heartily: "This is not a lapse of the intelligentsia. It's a make believe world of the mentally deficient." Paranawadiya wanted to dispel the unease that prevailed. He wanted to create a more suitable climate for discussion.

"A dream world!" someone echoed him. And the others joined him in his laughter.

Janadasa explained: "Sir, all students are not bad. There must be twenty or thirty bad ones. All this confusion is because of them"

Dr. Baladasa spoke in pain: "There is something I can't understand,

Janadasa. Why do students act as if the staff is their enemy? Most teachers would never do anything to harm them. We teach them. We guide them. If they don't all get jobs after their degree it's not our fault. Why do they treat us as if we were hostile to them?"

Janadasa and Reverend Vinitha struggled to reply. Vinitha was first: "You asked us that question, too, sir. But all students are not alike. It's only some student leaders who are trying to create this kind of situation They and a few inciters. They only want to fight. But we must talk about the other side too, sir. The students know the good teachers. The students love them. But we have no time for the frauds."

Janadasa began: "Sir, we're always talking about these things..." He could not finish his sentence because the peon of Dean Caldera came into the room panting. "Sir, sir. There's trouble in the dean's office. Some students have poured a bucket of ink on Dr. Caldera. All over his body."

Dr. Paranawadiya exclaimed: "Whaaaaaat! What on earth is happening?"

The president thundered: "We must have a full inquiry into this!"

Reverend Vinitha said: "Just wait here, sir. We're not going to let there be any hooliganism. We'll look after everything." He and Janadasa and the other students and the peon ran out.

The president and Dr. Paranawadiya stood in stunned silence.

"Getamanna is the man who is creating all this trouble," the president said.

Making sure there was no one listening, Dr. Paranawadiya whispered: "This is the first time that such a thing has happened to a professor in this campus. I feel hurt. How can we face the students now? How can we face the country? How can we work like self-respecting teachers? If this gets known..."

The president said: "That's right. But some people bring these things on themselves. They should know how to preserve their self-respect. They should know how not to get assaulted by students."

President Baladasa remembered the Deputy Minister was to arrive shortly. Somehow he had to get away without getting involved. "I must go home early today," he said. "My daughter is ill."

At this Dr. Paranawadiya's face changed slightly.

President Baladasa felt Dr. Paranawadiya thought he was trying to escape from a tricky situation by telling a lie. But he had to get away soon.

Dr. Baladasa insisted: "She's phoned several times from home that the child is ill. They're waiting for me to go to the doctor with them. If I'm late the doctor won't be there." He began tidying up his desk. "Are you going too, Dr. Paranawadiya?"

"No, I'm not going just yet."

Coming out of the president's office, Paranawadiya walked quietly down the steps. He couldn't decide whether to see Caldera or go to his own room.

As he walked down the steps, his right hand went to his head. He wondered at what moment a bucket of ink would be upsent on his head. But this was no time for wondering. This was a time for action. So far he had never had to face such a situation. But it was a crime to turn one's back on one's duty.

Even if a mountain fell on his head, he must explain things to the students. He must try to bring about settlement. He must try to bring peace to the campus.

Dr. Paranawadiya walked swiftly forward. He was full of determination. He walked with firm steps into the center of the trouble.

Afterword: An Interview with A. V. Suraweera

ROBINSON: How did you come to write this novel of academic life in Sri Lanka?

SURAWEERA: How was it written? I had been the head of the Department of Sinhala at the Vidyodaya campus for a long time. And from 1975 to 1977 I was the Dean of the Faculty of Arts. That was a very difficult time for the campuses here. The newly started job-oriented courses were thrust upon the universities. The faculty members were not ready to accept this. Students found they had no jobs after graduation. Politics was playing havoc in the campuses. Students were just puppets in the hands of political parties. There was frustration everywhere. There was no remedy to this situation. I think that this novel was written under this strain while I was Dean with first-hand information — a person pushed and pressed from all sides: students from below, administration from above, and the faculty sideways. I think it did not take more than six months to write it. I had all the material, all the experience.

Then I was rather frightened to publish it. Government and the administration on the one hand, my colleagues on the other, some of whom supported the government, the students. So I distributed the manuscript among a few of my friends, the president of the university and his wife, other deans, heads of departments, some writers, critics. I invited them home, and we had a frank discussion. It went on for hours. Anyway, to my surprise, the response was very satisfactory. The campus president, Dr. W. M. K. Wijetunge, a personal friend of mine, a man with a very good understanding of literature, though he was a scholar in history and sociology — he and his wife had no objections. In fact, he encouraged me. So, with minor changes and improvements, it was published.

As far as I know, by the way, this kind of discussion of a manuscript was the first time in Sri Lanka that such a thing was done.

ROBINSON: Did you have any particular problems in writing what you feared would be a controversial novel?

SURAWEERA: Particular problems? Every incident, big and small, every character, was a problem. I had so much material accumulated in my mind that almost everything had to be thrown out. Selection of material was the biggest problem. That is perhaps why I had to impose on myself a restriction, namely to confine the story to half a day. That was how I overcame my problem. As I told you before, that was the first time that technique was used in a Sri Lankan novel.

ROBINSON: Incidentally, how do you translate *Vidyodaya* into English?

SURAWEERA: *Vidya* is science or learning. *Udaya* is dawn. So, dawn of learning.

ROBINSON: How did the critics or reviewers in Sinhala newspapers and magazines receive this critical kind of fiction?

SURAWEERA: In the Sinhala press, *Atta* had very favorable reviews. Edwin Ariyadasa reviewed it in the daily *Dinamina* in May 1977. He talks in his review of the difficulty of writing a novel on university life. He says university life is made of different structures or stages. All these are operative simultaneously. And there is conflict in each structure and among each other — interaction. So the problem a serious writer would face would be to portray the picture in entirety, that is, the happenings, in and out, in all structures and the interaction. He says that I succeeded in doing this, mainly through the one-day structure of the book. He especially liked the beginning and the end — Getamanna climbing the steps and Paranawadiya descending them at the end. The steps you climbed yourself.

K. Jayatillake, a leading fiction writer here, a writer of children's stories, too, reviewed it in *Silumina*, the Sunday weekly, in July 1977. Apart from the virtues, he points out that problems of the students are not sufficiently dealt with in the novel from their point of view.

Nevertheless, he concludes: "In spite of the title of the novel which indicates that everything needs to be taken lightly, the work itself conveys a deeper meaning, not only to those in the universities but to everyone."

Somaweera Senanayake, the Editor of *Navayugaya*, a literary weekly, reviewed *Atta* in August 1977 and said it was significant in form and content.

ROBINSON: How did the readers among university people react to *Atta*?

SURAWEERA: University colleagues on the whole were already disappointed with the whole set up. I think the majority welcomed my bringing to light their, our, common problems. I remember a professor at the Kattudbedda campus Faculty of Engineering who usually doesn't read Sinhala fiction who read the novel. He was then a member of the National Council of Higher Education at the time. He recommended that his colleagues read *Atta* to get an insight into the universities. Certain teachers, of course, did not like it, my exposing the hidden to the public. The response among the students was mixed. But, as usual, everyone talked of it and soon forgot it. I wish that the novel had been discussed at length. This didn't happen. So the effect I desired was not achieved.

ROBINSON: Did your wife read the novel?

SURAWEERA: Yes, she read it in its manuscript form and in print. She likes it. No surprises, as regards incidents, for she's aware of the university set up.

ROBINSON: Did you have any actual people in mind when you wrote *Atta Bindeyi Paya Burulen?*

SURAWEERA: Actual people? Well, my characters in all my novels are real and typical. They are a synthesis of truth and imagination. Of course, my colleagues, students, and readers from outside the campus as usual all attempted to see resemblances without success.

ROBINSON: You have no women characters among your faculty members. Why is that?

SURAWEERA: The representation of women in the academic community was very small. It still is. Things are changing now. But in our university there isn't a single woman professor. We have a few women lecturers. In my department, however, there isn't a single woman lecturer.

ROBINSON: Your picture of academic life in Sri Lanka in 1977 is rather bleak. What is the present situation like?

SURAWEERA: Things have aggravated day by day. My novel, it turns out, was a pointer, a warning, to the future. Almost two months back, a student leader of one political party was killed. It's said that another student group was responsible. On May Day recently a student of our own university was killed at a May Day Rally. Recently, members of this faculty have been taken hostage by students to achieve their political ends — for example, to get their friends who have been arrested by the police released.

ROBINSON: How do the universities function in this turmoil?

SURAWEERA: Nowadays the universities are more closed than open as a result of a few university students leading strikes, boycotts of lectures. Political strife and rivalry has ruined university education here. I must say again there is no atmosphere conducive to study, academic pursuits.