

The Thomian Tradition

(An extract of a Speech made by Mr. P.S. Duleep Kumar as Chief Guest at the Prize Giving of S. Thomas' College, Gurutalawa on 13th August 1977).

“In my days as a student, no teacher stayed away from class without undergoing a moral trauma even if he was physically very ill and his absence unavoidable. Today, the picture right round the island appears to be the contrary and this to my mind is one of the chief causes of indiscipline and delinquency in schools and demands the special attention of the education authorities as well as the many teachers' unions and associations who should insist on higher standards or responsibility from their members.

Then again, the setting of the school enables the many marvels of Science and the learning of this new age to be unfolded against a backdrop of the beautiful mysteries of nature so that at all times boys of this school will be constantly reminded that truth has a far greater dimension than is revealed within the confines of their class rooms and the lintels of the laboratory. Recently, a Commission on Education in secondary schools in England concluded that the pre-eminent factor in determining the quality of a school was the stature of the headmaster. In this too, S. Thomas' Gurutalawa has been singularly fortunate and blessed. We could not have had nobler men as founders of this school than Dr. Hayman and the late Canon Foster and thereafter we have had headmasters who measured well to the highest standards of our founders. For the last 15 to 20 years or so, we have been constantly reminded that we live in an era of rapid social change. The message for schools like S. Thomas' is that as offspring's of a culture impregnated with the values of English liberalism we should not make the school an ivory tower elitist institution out away from the main stream of our national life. On the contrary this would be a betrayal of these values; and the example of the boys of this school and the parents of the boys themselves can give the lie direct to this misconception. We have been always adaptable to change but without betraying to any degree as far as possible the wide vision of our founders and the moral basis of our heritage.

As far back as in the early 1930's a Chief Guest at the College Prize Giving in Mt. Lavinia once criticized the school for its seeming apathy to what he advocated as national oriented education. Dr. Hayman who proposed the vote of thanks replied to this criticism by advising the speaker that S. Thomas' indeed did teach its boys about the Mahaweli Ganga and Pidurutalagala and added “but we also teach them that the Mahaweli Ganga is not the longest river in the world nor Pidurutalagala the highest mountain.”

Just as an individual has a right to an identity, so must also a school have the right, and the great case for decentralizing education lies in this fact. Let not our schools wherever they are in the island whether State or Private, take on the dull uniformity of Government departments but each develop its particular genius according to the locality in which it is placed and its own distinctive ethos.

In education as in all things let a hundred flowers bloom, each of a different hue.

Patriotism and national mindedness does not lie in conformity not yet does change demand the abandonment of tradition. In S. Thomas' we have a great tradition which this year goes back 125 years and I would like this opportunity to articulate briefly, particularly to the boys of the school, some ingredients that contribute to its totality.

Firstly, we believe in the equality of everyone. In S. Thomas' a boy is not judged by his religion, race, caste, or class. Boys in school are either good chaps or bad chaps and furthermore, it has always been recognized that there is some good in even the worst of us.

Secondly, we learn to share. Naturally, some boys are richer than others. When I was in school the official pocket money per boy was always -/50 cts. a week and those boys who were more affluent than others were taught and learnt to share without any patronage on the part of the giver or obligation on the part of the receiver. No one went to the tuck shop alone and if anyone dared to do so he received the undisguised opprobrium of his fellows.

Thirdly, we were taught to respect and honor our opponents. In school matches there was no hooting or jeering of the other side. We were allowed only to cheer what was good on both sides. The game was the thing and let the best team win.

Fourthly, it was expected of us to be magnanimous and generous in victory but also courageous and unbowed in defeat. If excuses were ever made, it would be the winners who would find them for the losers and no winner won more encomiums than a loser for his pluck.

Fifthly, we were made to respect authority. This had many facets to it. It meant respect not merely for our parents and teachers, but respect also for any one who was older. If authority was flouted it was never from disrespect but for daring. Punishment was borne without bitterness and taken like a man. There was no place for squealers and no higher authority was ever brought to bear on the authority within the school itself.

Sixthly, we were taught never to throw in the towel. Never to give up and always to run a race however far down the field one was, to the end. The word "Grit" became synonymous with S. Thomas'. And finally, of many more precepts of conduct and behavior the one that stands out in my mind was the constant injunction to stand up for the underdog.

Today we are gathered together to share in the success of all these boys who by their endeavour and talent have reached the top in both work and play. We have no doubt that justice has been done in making the wards and our congratulations are well deserved. But it is the tragedy of our times that so many young men and women carry their certificates and their idealism into a world of cold cynicism and brutal hypocrisy. It is the harsh reality of our existence that kissing goes by favour and success eludes those who most deserve it.

“I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not for the swift, nor the battle to the strong. Neither yet was bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour of men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all”. You can substitute for time and chance “but Party Politics happeneth to them all”. These words written many many centuries ago and taken from the Book of Ecclesiastes in Bible is the common experience of many, as they move into the Machiavellian world of adult-hood. No wonder then that youth is in revolt. Youth will tolerate anything but injustice. It is this that turns their idealistic vision into a nightmare and destroys their faith in all they have been taught.”