A HISTORY OF UNFAIR EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES

Monday, 27 August 2012 00:00
By Professor S. Ratnajeevan H. Hoole

While agreeing with The Hon. Ranil Wickremesinghe’s statement that “Education blunders led to terrorism” (DM 20 Aug. 2012), I am writing to correct his claim that “the arms struggle in the North began with students being unable to enter universities. This happened in 1973, 1974 and 1975.”

The insidious practice of keeping Tamils out of universities began with the 1970 admissions. The Maanavar Peravai (Great Forum of Students) that was formed in response held demonstrations through the Summer of 1970. We were brutally assaulted by the police and the Peravai leadership began training for a violent response by 1971, holding classes at Jaffna and the universities at Peradeniya and Katubedde.

When 103 of the 150 students admitted in May 1970 to engineering from the 1969 ALs were from the Tamil medium (30 Sinhalese medium and 17 from the last third shy English medium batch), Sinhalese agitators held that 130 Tamils had got in. Despite a Royal Commission that went through our scripts finding that there was no difference in marking and if at all there was, it was in Tamil examiners being slightly stricter (Daily News of the time), Mrs. B and Minister Badiuddin Mohammed announced a policy whereby 28 marks were added to the Sinhalese four-subject aggregate before comparison. Having announced our admissions to read for the B.Sc. Eng. degree which was only by University of Peradeniya, the government directed some 44 of us by letter to report “at the Ceylon College of Technology” in Katubedde. When we reported, the Registrar laughed and threw the letter back at us saying there was no B.Sc. Eng. Degree there and only a 5-year Dip. Tech programme. (How CCT Katubedde got upgraded to University of Ceylon (Katubedde Campus) as a result is another story).

The justification for adding 28 marks was laughable and shameless. A majority in control of all state resources effectively held that a Sinhalese permanent secretary’s son at Royal College had inherent disadvantages compared to the child of a poor Tamil laborer from the estates and deserved 28 marks more before the competition began. The next couple of years were even more
stringent and Tamils in engineering dropped to 10% or so with similar drops in medicine and the sciences.

The majority using its might to claim advantages as if they were a weak minority was not a sustainable concoction. Sri Lanka, Ceylon then, was losing face internationally. So Premadasa Udagama, a political appointee under Mrs. B. as Secretary and Director General of the Ministry of Education and presently the Chancellor of University of Peradeniya, misused his knowledge from his Ph.D in education in what might be called an act of evil genius. The practice of standardization, like the Z-Score in the news, is used to compare the performance of two people in different subjects with very different averages and standard deviations. Thus a score 40% in a subject where the mean is 30% may be reckoned as better than a score of 60% in a subject where the mean is 80%. For example chemistry has a very low average (equivalent to a fail grade) and Arabic a very high A-grade average. Standardization normalizes these marks so as to allow a comparison.

Udagama’s evil genius was to apply this scheme for different subjects to the same subjects from different media streams. Tamil marks went down and Sinhalese marks went up. As a result, when Tamil and Sinhalese medium averages were very different (as in maths and physics then) a Tamil score justifying say a C, could after standardization become an F. It was utterly evil in that under the previous scheme a Tamil with a C grade but no university admission could go for a job or accountancy or some other career path. But now with an F?

My uncle the late K. Nesiah of the Tamil United Front – he resigned when it became the TULF with the Vaddukottai resolution (which shows that advocacy for Tamil rights is not antithetical to our Sri Lankanness) – who had retired as Head of Education at Peradeniya was able to tap his students at the Ministry and this information became the subject of TUF/FP speeches in parliament. Mrs. B., enraged by this, sent his son, a CCS officer, to the pool (where there is no desk or assigned work and one had to only sign a daily attendance register and go home). Admission details were declared secret, opening the way for massive fraud by internal staff (now free of external scrutiny) as brought out when the UNP returned to power in 1977. My father-in-law, a senior SLAS officer, had his colleagues offering to have my wife’s marks (55% in physics and the grade of F) safely changed so that she could move from physical science to medicine, an offer that was politely declined. Such was the corruption opened up by meddling with education.

The only good thing perhaps was when regional quotas were introduced to give a kindlier facade to a system of admissions whose sole purpose was to
keep Tamils out. For repackaging his communalist scheme as regional quotas which had the same effect on Tamils, Udagama is now touted as a “pro-poor thinker.”

Sadly, today, we Tamils have been destroyed so badly by standardization and the war that made our best teachers and students flee, that without quotas we will not even get the university seats we get today. After breaking us so, it is inane if not cruel, for Sinhalese nationalists to ask what problems we Tamils have.

Because the term standardization came later than the system of distorting Tamil performance to keep us out, many make this same mistake as The Hon. Wickremesinghe of thinking that discrimination in education and Tamil militancy also came later. But I am thankful to him for acknowledging the evil done to us Tamils, which few are prepared to do today.