

**H. L. Seneviratne** is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at the University of Virginia. His publications include *Rituals of the Kandyan State* and *The Work of Kings*, a study of Buddhist monks and their social involvement in contemporary Sri Lanka.

# LANGUAGE

## IS THE KEY TO HALTING BRAIN DRAIN

**Prof. H. L. Seneviratne** stresses that restoring English as the language of teaching is vital to nurturing home-grown talent. **Uthpala Gunethilake** evaluates the pathway to knowledge.

Commentators on this column have pointed out that we have much to learn from our large and powerful neighbour across the Palk Strait when it comes to diaspora relations. India lays claim to a strong expatriate community that has been galvanised successfully in support of the country's service and interest. Its tech-savvy expats in particular

played a critical role in establishing the Silicon Valley of the subcontinent, in Bengaluru.

Yet another lesson we can learn from the Indians revolves around national identity, observes Prof. H. L. Seneviratne. As a student in the US in the late '60s, Seneviratne met Indian students "who were fiercely proud of their particular local languages and cultures", while retaining "a

strong sense of being Indians". And India, he points out, "which was far behind us on all social indicators at the time of independence, has successfully crafted a nation out of a multiplicity of identities, ethnicities, customs, beliefs and languages".

But on our resplendent isle, "the ruling politicians failed to understand that it's by giving people the freedom to be separate that they will want to be united".

Seneviratne laments that the message still hasn't sunk in. Despite the opportunity of a lifetime that blossomed at the end of the armed conflict, we continue to perpetuate a host of ingrained bad habits – for want of a better word – that push reconciliation out of reach.

Among these missteps and intolerances, he cites the imposition of Sinhala-Buddhist names on roads and streets in the north and east, banning the national anthem being sung in Tamil, and the settlement of military families in the north and east.

There's also a rush to identify archaeological sites in former Tiger territory, in an attempt to prove that they were originally Sinhala-Buddhist land.

Besides alienating the people in these regions even further, "this view overlooks the fact that South India was the last bastion of Indian Buddhism, and that there would have been substantial communities of Tamil Buddhists in the neighbouring north and east of Sri Lanka", he points out.

Seneviratne is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at the University of Virginia and has lived in the United States since 1965. While the values of equality and respect for the individual are fundamental to the American psyche, and the idea of an open society drew him to the US, his research interests (they focus on religion and politics) are centred on South Asia.

Examining the Sri Lankan condition post war, Seneviratne insists that devolution – despite being a notion that isn't winning favour in the current climate – is the need of the hour. "The recognition of the linguistic and power-sharing rights of minority citizens is critical," he says, if we're to stop this unprecedented opportunity to build a unified nation from slipping through our fingers.

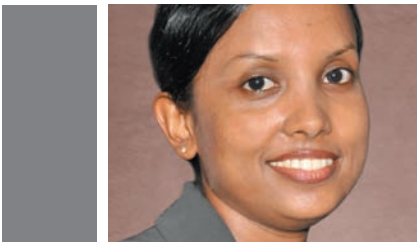
Similarly, our international relations leave much to be desired, as we seem to be "moving away from the traditional policy of cultivating good relations with all countries".

Seneviratne concedes that "it is understandable that the Government nurtured ties with countries that were willing to help in the war against the LTTE", while distancing itself from the West. He adds however, that "the unprofessional and undiplomatic way in which this was done has given the impression that Sri Lanka is moving away from democracies and embracing dictatorships".



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We are on our way to Zimbabwe, not Singapore...



And in that light, we are taking sizeable steps backwards... rather than marching forward into peace and prosperity.

One political decision with no small measure of nationalism and insularity at heart that put us on the back foot for decades is the Sinhala Only policy of the 1950s. Those who felt alienated by it formed the first waves of what is identified as the ‘Sri Lankan diaspora’ today. As Seneviratne says, “the abandonment of English is one of the most retrograde steps our leaders took”.

The push factors have multiplied over the years and the diaspora today consists of many layers. “Some of them – for instance, those who work in the Middle East – are already contributing to the economy in a major way,” Seneviratne notes.

But he feels that while the brain drain represents a loss for the country, it’s a fact of life in a globalised world. Talented people in many countries are attracted to

greener pastures, and convincing the cream of the crop to remain on home soil is a function of incentives – including “appropriate remuneration and working conditions, avenues for further advancement, a hospitable workplace atmosphere and freedom from capricious interference”.

And if we are aiming to entice foreign-trained professionals from the upper echelons to return to their land of birth, attractive working conditions and remuneration packages must be on the table – but in this regard, we don’t pass muster, he contends.

“We can’t compete with developed countries in inducing [trained professionals] to return. They can however, be encouraged to invest in Sri Lanka. The success of this depends on hospitality, tax and other incentives, and on minimising bureaucratic harassment,” he adds.

And what of that segment of the diaspora that has perhaps the most troubled relations with their motherland? Seneviratne’s guess

The writer was LMD’s Editorial Supervisor until recently and returned to Australia after a stint in Sri Lanka.



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Wonder of Asia. Is this mere hyperbole? Do we really have what it takes to become a prosperous, modern nation on par with emerging Asian superpowers like Singapore and Malaysia?

Seneviratne's candid response to this question is: "We are on our way to Zimbabwe, not Singapore."

He charges that an inhospitable investment climate that includes poor governance, a breakdown of law and order, the subordination of the judiciary, politicisation of the Central Bank and short-sighted foreign policy have aborted the much-anticipated post-war rush of FDIs.

The electoral process has become "a bloody, violent and lawless affair that is reminiscent of [the] monarchical heritage

of arbitrary rule and violent succession", the professor charges.

Furthermore, "a work ethos based on a sense of duty and commitment is at a high level in the private sector, but it is dismal in the public sector", he observes, adding that "we've failed to build on the two sources of urbanity, modernity and civilised life that are available to us: first, the ethical pillar of Buddhism; and second, liberating social and human doctrines rooted in the European Enlightenment that came to us through our colonisers".

Against this backdrop, the outlook for lasting and inclusive development is grim, in Seneviratne's assessment. "But there's still time to wake up and change course," he adds, in conclusion.

is that the majority among the expat Tamil community are moderates who might entertain the idea of returning home one day.

He suggests: "A systematic attempt needs to be made to encourage them to return and participate productively in the economy. Our foreign missions can take the initiative in reaching out to them. A political solution with devolution as its centrepiece would be a major appeal, and the moderate diaspora leadership can be harnessed to send out a message of friendship and welcome."

As for nurturing home-grown talent, Seneviratne believes that this cannot be achieved without fully restoring English as the medium of instruction. This is particularly so since the removal of English from the mainstream "affected the rural poor in particular, because it's in school that they were exposed to English and they did exceedingly well in mastering the language".

Since the nation's much-celebrated war victory, countless references have been made of our potential to become the

## SRI LANKA SWOT ANALYSIS



### STRENGTHS

- A workforce yet to be fully harnessed
- Talented business community
- Concerned intellectual elite
- Civil-society organisations

### WEAKNESSES

- Backward mentality
- Majority supremacism
- Ill-governance
- Visionless leadership
- A somnolent middle class

### OPPORTUNITIES

- Limitless in the right climate

### THREATS

- Further law-and-order breakdowns
- Increasing crime
- Stifled democracy leading to uprisings
- Social unrest from extreme poverty



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