

SCIENCE IN SINHALA

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The recently departed Professor Nandadasa Kodagoda was a scholar who studied the Sinhala language as a Sinhalese national and used it for the dissemination of science. On being invited to contribute paper to the commemorative volume of 'Vidurava' being released in his honour, the topic I selected was "Science in Sinhala". The teaching of science in Sinhala was first promoted in the island in the early nineteen fifties. Our children were not able to acquire a comprehensive knowledge of science then they were unable to study it in Sinhala. The causes and obstacles were many. One was the existence of scientists who had learnt science in English only and had no love for the Sinhala language. The other was the identification of science and scientific thinking as something that was far removed from Sinhala or national languages. Another reason was the scarcity of books written in Sinhala. University education being restricted to the English language was yet another reason. The birth of Vidyodaya and Vidyalkara Universities which were then known as Pirivena Universities was the beginning of a successful programme of teaching science in Sinhala in University education. The inclusion of science as a subject for secondary education at the same time, was also the beginning of the teaching of science in Sinhala.

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Department of Official Languages was also set up. In 1956, a publications bureau was set up by the Department of Official Languages and the formulations of technical terms or scientific words in Sinhala was begun. This was helpful in providing the terms required for G.C.E. ordinary level students and for persons who wished to study science or widen their knowledge of science through supplementary reading in Sinhala. Later, the contents of the technical glossaries were also published in the form of small booklets. Although some of the technical terms coined were not quite in harmony with the Sinhala language, these were helpful in extending the knowledge of science and helped those who sought knowledge in Sinhala and in translation work.

Asian countries were ahead of us in the study of science and expression of ideas in the national languages and preceded us in it. The extension of knowledge through the State language has been taking place for some time in every state of India. Although the official language is Hindi the knowledge of science developed in the Bengali language in West Bengal in Tamil in South India. It was the same in other South Asian countries. Even the Chinese are quite advanced in this respect. In Japan the knowledge of science developed only in the Japanese language and every scientific paper was prepared in Japanese and later into English and other languages.

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Although the Sinhalese took time to grasp scientific teachings in Sinhala, after a start was made, it progressed. Programmes to popularise science among ordinary rural people were also helpful. However, efforts to write books and publish them were few. This was because it took time to include this in University education.

In 1969 I presented a substantial amount of facts in an article titled 'University Education and the National Language' in the Sarasaviya magazine of the Vidyodaya University. In it I said that science education is yet unsettled in our country. This was due to the fact that there was little love for the Sinhala language in those who had a University education and further training abroad. Another factor is that those who entered the teaching profession without a higher education, entered that profession with a short-sighted outlook. The widening of syllabuses while ignoring the basic concepts of science was yet another reason.

The path we should follow is to convert our education into an education founded on basic principles suited to our country as has been done by new Universities in other countries. The progress of science education commenced with the

introduction of the teaching of science in Sinhala and progressed further with its entry into the realm of higher education. The Vidyodaya and Vidyalandara Universities contributed greatly to this process. The staff of the science faculties of these Universities were from the beginning dedicated to the teaching of science in Sinhala. Likewise there were groups of students who were desirous of science education in Sinhala and who co-operated in this endeavour. A new avenue was opened up for village students. It was a boon to students from areas considered as rural. Their knowledge of science began to develop. This process which began in the 1960's yielded at the beginning of the 1970's a large number of graduates who had developed their knowledge of science in Sinhala. Further, their post-graduate research work was equivalent to world recognized research. This wave of education in the national language which commenced during that period, saw the birth of scholars who are even today ranking as Directors of research institutions and Professors.

Just as the Vidyodaya and Vidyalandara Universities other Universities too gave high priority to science in Sinhala. Therefore, after the introduction of the teaching of Science in Sinhala as a foundation to higher education in science, in our country too science education in Sinhala received a similar status as occupied by the teaching of science in other languages in other countries.

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The main feature which helps the growth of a nation is the language. Language is a birthright of all persons from existence. Speech as well as thought is confined to language.

Everything that we write any speak is born through the power of thought. A Japanese professor, whom we once met said, “We think in Japanese, we write and speak in Japanese. A different language is not required only for science. To achieve proper results, we need the Japanese Language”. Such a country which is at the forefront in science and technology could be taken as an example. Just as in everything else during a period of five decades, the success achieved in the sphere of science too, was achieved through the development of mental powers by the concentration of thoughts in Sinhala as a person born Sinhalese.



*With students at a School Science Day.
(Prof. P.L.D. Waidayasekera- middle and Prof. Nandadasa Kodagoda- right)*