Theocracy, history and historiography: An exploration in professional ethics

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India has recently seen the so-called Vedic science being moved into universities. We examine the Sri Lankan experience for insights to Indian scientists on what might be in store if the Indian policy is carried forward. The history and historiography of Rao Bahadur C. W. Thamotherampillai is used to show what such a step can do to scientific honesty. We explore human rights as a religiously neutral basis for shared professional ethics.

Background

THE Indian scientific scene saw some excitement as the Government pushed for Vedic science to be elevated to the status of being taught in the university curriculum. According to the *Skeptical Inquirer*, 'India's University Grants Commission (UGC) has recommended [the] teaching of astrology and ancient Vedic sciences at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. This is in keeping with the revamped UGC's striking policy resolutions that are more often than not dictated by the Human Resource Development Ministry of the central government'[1].

In May 2001, several distinguished members of one of the Academies of Sciences in India signed an open letter in *The Hindu* (Chennai edition) in protest. This shows that scientists instinctively know that the new policy is wrong. But in thus-far secular India, policy-makers must think in a vacuum to determine the possible outcomes of elevating Vedic science. However, Sri Lanka offers a living example from which India can learn. In particular, we cite the example of Rao Bahadur C. W. Thamotherampillai, one of the first graduates from Madras University – a scientist, lawyer and Tamil scholar. We advance the idea of using human rights law, the outcome of social consensus through democratic governance as the basis for professional ethics.

Devaluing of science in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka followed a path of ethnic chauvinism since independence. The year 1970 saw marked intensification of this phenomenon when preferential university admissions for the different ethnic groups was introduced. Theocracy was introduced by constitutionally granting Buddhism the foremost position in Sri Lanka. Subsequent commu-

nal riots with specific attempts at ethnic cleansing at universities saw the collapse of the university system from one that produced international academics of renown to one where, say, a whole faculty of engineering of 100 senior staff would produce a mere 1 or 2 ISI-indexed papers a year.

These past 30 years have affected science at the highest levels. Sri Lanka's National Academy of Sciences (NASSL) functions almost as an appendage of the government, with a membership that is communally unbalanced. Even though lofty admission rules of NASSL are based only on publications, influential administrators with almost no (sometimes absolutely no) international journal articles are inducted, while distinguished scientists are left out. Although the Sri Lankan legal system offers avenues for redress, the NASSL is difficult to challenge regarding its admission practices because decisions are by secret ballot among the members rather than administrative. Unlike its Indian counterpart, the intellectually effete NASSL has rarely been known to challenge any government policy and engages in no serious scientific activity.

Today, the government of Sri Lanka recognizes the enormity of the policies it had pursued and is mindful of the damage caused. Ethnic biases in university admissions have been removed. A Presidential Truth Commission has laid bare what happened during the ethnic riots. A University Council report details the attempts at getting rid of Tamils from University of Peradeniya. The exception to the policy reversals is the foremost position given to Buddhism which has been too sensitive to be challenged by the political establishment with theocratic Buddhist prelates entrenched in commanding influence and needing to be consulted on all major policy initiatives.

Today the fundamental rights provisions of the constitution are widely exercised by citizens (Tamils and others) and the courts have been giving rights never before imagined.

Many successful cases concern university admissions. But despite the broad change of direction in the country it is now long since the educational system collapsed. The question is whether the system can be resuscitated when

the best minds have fled the country. One of the writers is serving as 'the Tamil member' on the University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka trying to reform and revive the system.

While the question of successful recovering what was lost in Sri Lanka will remain open for some time, India must take heed and learn from the Sri Lankan experience.

The humanities

The politico-religious tilt of the Sri Lankan system was first to affect the humanities because of its implications to politics. History has been rewritten to suit political agenda. Fortunately, an eminent Sinhalese historian, Leslie Gunawardena, has already exposed historical rewriting on the Sinhalese side in his brilliant book[2] and little further needs to be added.

As Tamils it is felt sufficient to deal with this aspect of history and historiography from the perspective of Tamil rewriting. Although Sinhalese distortions are made to make a political point against Tamils, and Tamils are usually the first to protest, we ourselves do not have clean hands. We will now take up the issue of C. W. Thamotherampillai (CWT), one of the first two graduates of Madras University, using him as an example, to show that Tamils too rewrite history.

Rao Bahadur C. W. Thamotherampillai

CWT was an eminent Tamil from Jaffna who did singular service to the Tamil language by searching throughout South India for ancient palm-leaf scripts and piecing them together from various sources and publishing with a preface, several lost *Sangam* texts, including the *Tolkappiam* (*Porul Athikaram*), the oldest extant Tamil text. He effectively used the textual criticism found in the Bible translation by missionaries under whom he had studied. In 1857 when Madras University opened its doors, he with his teacher from Jaffna's Batticotta Seminary, Daniel Carroll, both graduates of Batticotta seeking validation of their credentials, successfully attempted, first, the entrance examination and, then four months later, the Bachelor of Arts certification examination in 1858. As the senior High Court judge in Pudukkottai he was Regent when the crown prince was a minor, and for this service was awarded the title 'Rao Bahadur'.

CWT was born in 1832 to Cyrus Kingsbury (a first generation Tamil convert to the America Ceylon Mission (ACM), a pandit and assistant priest) and Mary Dayton, another convert[3]. CWT was baptized as an infant and given the name Charles Winslow Kingsbury[3]. Thamotheram was his house-name. The Americans established Batticotta Seminary in 1823, the first collegiate institution in Asia. The curriculum included Christianity, Mathematics, Tamil and Astronomy[4]. CWT graduated from there and

worked as an evangelist at the Anglican Mission's Teachers' College in Kopay, Jaffna and assisted the *Morning Star*, the first Tamil newspaper in publication since 1841 from Jaffna. By 1852 he had published *The Book of Genesis* in Tamil verse (*Aathiyaahamak-keerthanai*) and *Neethineri Villakkam*, an old Tamil manuscript with his preface. Moving to Chennai to work for the *Thinavarthmani*, another newspaper, he rose to be Auditor General in Chennai and used his income to expand his Tamil interests. He became a judge after his earning the BL degree in Chennai.

In India he became negatively conscious of his Christian – and thereby presumed low-caste identity – and reverted to Hinduism, taking on Tamil names to correspond to his initials C. W. and adding the suffix 'pillai' to his house-name to assert his Vellala caste identity. He was thereafter known as C. W. Thamotherampillai. Little of the foregoing is in dispute in academic circles. A master's thesis[5] and a doctoral thesis[6] from Jaffna University confirm these facts.

The problem of history comes from CWT's reversion to Saivism. Despite the records therefore, the following have been said and repeated in formal writings:

- That CWT was born a Hindu and pretended to be a Christian for privileges (in a Tamil school text used in all of Sri Lankan schools for Year 6 children[7]);
- That CWT 'recognizing Saivism as the true religion', broke off from Christianity (in a Jaffna University MA thesis[5] that passed the examiners);
- That CWT followed in the traditions of Arumuha Navalar[8], the Hindu revivalist from Jaffna. But CWT had published prior to Navalar his first re-discovered text and Navalar had no formal qualifications like CWT and knew nothing about law. This myth of CWT being Navalar's follower is stated in almost any book from Jaffna, although Indian scholars rate CWT **highly as a man in his own right**. In fact both Navalar and CWT worked under and were trained by Peter Percival who later lectured in Tamil (probably holding the first chair) at Presidency College when it was established.

Family members of CWT (including these writers) have demonstrated the true facts through published formal theses by Hindus, their own reviewed articles and serious academic seminars. They have protested to the government and the academic community, particularly against distortions at the school-level textbooks. But to no avail.

Ethical basis in a secular framework

We see that theocracy erodes a scientific outlook, distorts history and even brings the integrity of the examination process into disrepute. We need a common ethical standpoint. But since ethics usually flows from religion, ethics

itself usually imposes religion. How then can ethical arguments be made without appealing to religion?

Science, paying obeisance only to the freedom to create with no inherent loyalties to anything else, is by its very definition culturally neutral (although in challenging superstition it could be perceived as non-neutral) and endorses diversity. Cultural neutrality is non-exclusivist in terms of ideas and the multiculturalism and diversity that flow from this neutrality are the fountainhead of inspiration. This is not to say that we as individuals have no culture or specific religious faith, but rather that as a collective scientific community we do not endorse any particular religion or culture. Such a milieu is necessary for the promotion of learning and the free exchange of ideas; indeed, for the unfettered practice of science.

Acceptance of cultural neutrality, to be sure, does not negate individual cultures and faiths, but rather it celebrates the right of everyone to choose his/her faith and settle into a culture of choice. Cultural neutrality is, 'not a melting pot, but rather a salad bowl' – meaning that we do not all settle into one universal culture but rather live side by side with our own individuality as do the several vegetables in a salad.

Without a religious framework, what is ethics based on? For the authors in particular, in a Sri Lankan situation where the communities are divided and charges of communalism and treason are freely thrown about, how does one teach professional ethics to one's students without drawing on any culture?

This vexing issue of teaching ethics, particularly a basis for ethics, has recently worried professional organizations and ethicists. For example, from 1996 to 1999, forty two papers in the American Society of Engineering Education's Annual Proceedings were devoted to teaching ethics[9]. Ethical guidelines are today justified in a combination of bases[10].

Utilitarian basis

This claims that an act is good when it produces the maximum good for most people. While providing a good working basis for culturally neutral ethics, it fails in certain situations such as in the application to nuclear power plants – they do produce cheap electricity for most people, but can have catastrophic effects on those living close by.

Duty basis

This assumes that everyone has certain duties to others. The problem is in agreeing on these duties and ethicists speak of prima facie duties that all rational reflective persons can agree on. The limitations are clear.

Virtue basis

While the other three provide mechanisms for decision-making, the assumption here is that virtuous persons make good decisions. The focus is on character. The weakness is in defining a universal standard for virtue and therefore gets close to religion.

Rights basis

This assumes that an act is acceptable when the rights of others are respected.

Human rights as basis for ethics

The human rights basis is now an ascendant method of justifying ethics for scientists and professionals[11–14]. Human rights are now increasingly defined through a body of laws and international covenants. Importantly, they emerge through social consensus in evolving laws by the agency of a democratically elected parliament and signing international covenants. They are religiously neutral and are the outcome of a democratic process.

Even though human rights is subject to the criticism of promoting '...a certain culturally specific "Western' model ..."[15] it is now admitted that 'international human rights, both in conceptual and legislative terms, is gaining increasing importance as a normative framework for the guidance and protection of humankind'[16].

Particulaly in Sri Lanka, because all communities find comfort and redress through the growing body of human rights laws, these rights receive their natural setting of cultural neutrality.

The body of human rights laws therefore provides the easiest of the bases to justify, but runs into problems only when the rights of two parties are at odds, as in the right of an individual to peace against a neighbour's to play loud music. Some institutions (e.g. the University of Pennsylvania) have been very proactive in demonstrating their commitment to human rights by dismissing academics who have publicly espoused racist causes, saying that such academics cannot be trusted to be equally fair to all their students. Even though there may be no evidence of wrongdoing, hostility to a section of the students takes away from the integrity of the examinations system that underpins the quality of credentials from a university. It is a classic case where two rights are up against each other – the right to dignity and fair treatment of the student and the right to political expression of the academic. It is an issue that comes up repeatedly in Sri Lanka's university examinations. The dilemma is resolved when the hierarchy of rights is usefully invoked.

Though many fail to notice, there is indeed a hierarchy of rights. For instance, the right to life in the UN Convention on Civil and Political Rights is unquestionably higher than the right to vacations with pay in the UN Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Nobel Laureate John Hume, in the context of human rights was quoted on Rupavahini Television from Co-

lombo as saying that human rights cannot be advocated by us if we deny the most basic of rights, the right to life (*Evening News*, 6 February 2002). He was clearly alluding to a hierarchy of rights.

This hierarchy will get more clearly defined legally as courts give judgements and establish precedents. Defining this hierarchy resolves the remaining hurdle in using human rights as a basis for ethics.

Teaching human rights to scientists and engineers

How do we justify teaching human rights? Science curricula are now crowded and academics are ever reluctant to incorporate what they consider 'soft' material, despite the strong need to regulate the profession. But the hurdles can be overcome.

In engineering for instance, there are good reasons why an engineer ought to be familiar with this body of laws, and the case has been made to teach human rights law; it has been successfully done despite complaints by nationalists who are instinctively against human rights. The reasons why such laws are important are[12]:

Productivity. Hiring the best relates to productivity and a happy organizational culture where employees are satisfied.

Laws of Geneva. The humanitarian international laws confer protected status to civilians in war zones. A company breaching certain conditions can negate the protective status enjoyed by the staff.

World Bank inspection. Many mega-engineering projects could once be executed easily with World Bank money. But now the Bank's Inspection Panel assesses human rights and social impact. As the Narmada Dam and Tibetan Population Transfer projects show, mega-projects can be cancelled if engineers do not pay due attention to social impact.

The ILO regulations. These dictate different minimum ages for employment in different countries and for different kinds of work, so that the laws become complex and can jeopardize the well-being of a firm if they are violated.

Liability. New laws make a company liable through human rights violations by its partners. Nike has suffered immeasurable damage through its contractors' poor working conditions.

Product label. When a company has a good reputation for treating its employees well, it acquires a prestige which then transfers to its products.

World Court. The new World Criminal Court that just went into operation, removes statutory limitations for liability in certain types of crime. Individuals working for a corporation (rather than the corporation itself, as recently was the case) using slave labour can be prosecuted at any time in any country.

Trade preferences. These are now, as applied by New Zealand and Australia, based on the human rights records of a country. Thus firms need to be alive to their obligations.

These arguments for teaching human rights to engineers, can easily be extended to teaching it to business students, scientists and any professional group on grounds of laying the foundation for professional ethics. A deeper theoretical treatment of the subject, particularly in the context of Asian values is given by the authors elsewhere[17]. We show that 'Asian values', usually applied to southeast Asia, applies as much to South Asia and how it affects administrative ethics in south Asia.

Summary

Theocracy in Sri Lanka has led to the erosion of scientific standards and outlook. and diminished the integrity of examinations. History falls prey. Pressures mount on minorities to conform to the preferred religious ethos. Faculties well known for their liberal treatment of students are tainted as the society over which they have no control wreaks its communalist carnage. We need to revert to a common theme for ethical, culturally neutral living together. Human rights offers a basis for that. India must learn from this.

However, in Sri Lanka, there is new hope. A new generation of academics admitted since the late 1980s without communal preferences, are moving into important positions and they appear to be more impartial. A new government elected in December 2001 has embarked on a peace initiative with the Tamil militants, and many of the hurdles faced by Tamils from the government side have been removed from early 2002. Although there still is cynicism about the bona fides of the government and the militants, unless we are positive there will be no hope at all.

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