

A LITTLE BIT OF EVERYTHING FROM THE 18TH WARDEN OF S. THOMAS'

Prof. Indra De Soysa
- by Mevan Peiris

Hailing from a prestigious lineage of aristocracy, the 18th warden of S. Thomas' college Mount Lavinia is not known to mince his words. An intellectual in the true essence of the word, his academic rigour added with his sporting past puts forth the result of a special kind.

More than half of the city of Moratuwa is named after the De Zoysas and Indra has the honour of being the great grandson of the man who was Ceylon's richest in the late 1800s, whose statue today, is the centre of De Soysa circus overlooking the sea of shoppers at ODEL.

A talented table tennis player in his youth, a brilliant academic whose work has been acclaimed in his field of work he is also a very able manager who overlooks one of the most difficult administrative operations that one could think of. This ruggedly handsome Professor has already made his mark within the two years he has occupied the Warden's office as - 'the smiling warden'.

Young Indra De Soysa was an average student who was involved in a lot of sports during his time at College. He played Table Tennis very seriously and in fact was the Junior National Champion in 1980. Due to the fact that he was living down Hotel road, Indra was able to engage in Cricket, Rugby and Swimming in the junior age groups and spent much of his leisure time within the school premises. He describes his school days as a time when the entire island was going through one of its worst phases ever.

After seven years of the Sirimavo Bandaranaike regime where import substitutions were imposed together with inward looking national policies, the education system of the country had also degenerated greatly. This was the time that the hallowed quadrangle on which only the staff and prefects are allowed to cross through while school is in session, was used as a mere patch of vegetation to grow manioc and sweet potatoes

However, the light at the end of the tunnel for Indra and his batch mates came in the form of the Sub Warden at the time. Professor Rajiva Wijesinghe, while being one the youngest to hold the office of Sub Warden in the history of the school was apparently a great inspiration and asset to the students.

"He came from Oxford, and started walking into classrooms unimpressed by the fact that there was a lack of teachers at the time. He sometimes taught subjects whenever he was free, he gave us books from his own library and finally there was someone who saw the potential in the students and was very interested in harnessing it. That was our lucky card".

During this time people like Richard De Soyza were brought in to conduct classes and Indra says that it was a privilege and a huge excitement at the same time to be learning from individuals of that calibre.

Apart from trivial rays of hope the situation in the country as a whole had worsened with time and it is no surprise then, that after completing his advanced levels during the times of the '83 riots, Indra had a clear ambition to leave the country in pursuit of higher education and greener pastures.

In hindsight, Indra believes that the war which erupted during his last years in Sri Lanka had a huge bearing in shaping his ambitions and his chosen fields of study. Opting to follow Political Science for his first degree and then following on with a Masters in International Relations, Indra finally wrote a thesis on International Political Economy. His academic career was an illustrious one and he gives much of the credit to the support received from his professors and superiors. Indra was also lucky to be one of the twelve PhD students from around the world to receive the United Nations Scholarship to be a part of the PhD Fellowship in Japan. This gave him an opportunity to interact with the brightest international students from around the world who were highly intelligent and insightful.

During this time Indra was writing a paper on the effects of foreign investment on economic and political development, while having the luxury of utilizing the United Nations databases and other UNCTAD resources. This was later published as a book titled 'Foreign Direct Investment, Democracy and Development'.

After returning from Japan and completing his PhD, Indra considers it a very lucky coincidence that he was offered employment at the Peace Research Institute in Oslo, Norway which was also the home country of his wife Ann Kristin. This was an ideal occurrence at the ideal time since the PRIO was a prestigious workplace for a young grad student emerging from College and simultaneously the peace process in Sri Lanka was in the pipelines which gave this a personal touch. As Indra puts it in his own words "this was a double bonus".

Two years later, Indra and his wife had their second child and at the same time he was offered a position to lecture at the University of Bond. There were almost no hesitations since teaching was one of his passions and he found that working for a research institution had its drawbacks in terms of being autonomous. He thoroughly enjoyed his time at the University since he had ample free time to research on self decided topics while carrying out his teaching duties. It was during this time that Indra De Soysa added the prefix to his name "Professor".

Five years after reaching this pinnacle in his academic career and after many more publications and teaching, Professor De Soysa was invited to join the prestigious Royal Norwegian Society in Sciences and Letters. In the year 2010, after the end of the armed conflict back at home, the idea of returning to Sri Lanka had not only grown but looked a very feasible option for the professor and his family. When the vacancy for the post of Warden arose, Indra applied gladly but void of expectations and claims to be honoured to have been offered the position.

Sharing some of his expertise in his field of specialization, Professor Indra says that he had closely followed the conflict situation in Sri Lanka and had been profusely outspoken regarding the Norwegian mediatory involvement in the peace process..

"There are several BBC interviews in which I share my thoughts about the situation and I wrote to the newspapers as well as engaging in public debate. Lot of LTTE

forums that I had to duck from getting hammered!” remarks Indra with a chuckle. He also recalls a very heated debate with Mr. Vaiko during his time in Oslo.

The professor in his academic papers on conflict rejects the claim that there is anything ‘ethnic’ in a conflict. His criticisms were not loosely based or influenced by any of his personal sentiments, but were deeply rooted in theoretical and empirical academic study.

“People do not fight for large grievances but it is only private gain that drives conflict. Within this setup expecting democracy from Prabhakaran was a no-starter. Unless you put constraints on the flow of weapons and funding for war there was no way to stop it”.

Continuing further he says that as an academic who was specializing in conflict this so called ‘peace process’ was defeating its purpose. He says that the collective action of people who were affected needed to be addressed rather than trying to bring the government and terrorists to a common platform.

“Karuna didn’t break away from the LTTE because the Norwegians facilitated it. I used to always say that we didn’t need you to make peace with Karuna, in fact we don’t need you if the two sides want to really make peace, we would’ve made peace already!”

This is seen by Professor Indra as a common misconception shared around the world in issues relating to conflict. “Understand what makes rebellion feasible. Understand that people who head rebellions are not great lovers of democracy – they just want power. So building schools in Afghanistan is good if it is for educational purposes, but it is not going to end conflict. It’s just another target for the rebels”

Furthermore, Professor De Soysa criticizes the naive sense of implementing justice and says that it is far deeper than what can be seen on the surface. “Don’t assume that where there is no conflict there is absolute justice. People suffer in silence”.

Professor De Soysa is seen by many as a very successful academic and was recently invited to make a public lecture at the Kadiragamar Institute for International Relations and Strategic Studies. Furthermore he seems to be on the right track of being a successful warden as well looking back at the several observable developments in the College during his tenure so far. This is most aptly exemplified by the recent ‘revival’ that the Thomians have had in terms of sports. But the Warden says that education should be at the top of the priority list of the school and goes on to say that he hopes to achieve this not at the compromise of sports or other character building extracurricular activities but as a wholesome attainment”