

COMMENTARIES & NOTES

Vidya Jyothi Professor V. K. Samaranayake (1939 – 2007)

Prof. Vanniarachchige Kithsiri Samaranayake, Emeritus Professor of Computer Science of the University of Colombo and Chairman, Information and Communication Technology Agency of Sri Lanka passed away in Stockholm, Sweden on 7th June 2007.



While it is not possible within the confines of any short note to do justice to the enormous breadth of his influence, this appreciation of *Vidya Jyothi* Prof. V. K. Samaranayake seeks to outline some of the significant milestones in his illustrious career as an Academic of the highest calibre, Administrator par excellence and Philanthropist of knowledge to society at large.

Prof. Samaranayake retired from the University of Colombo in 2004 after a long and most distinguished career spanning a total of 43 years of service. In recognition the University honoured him with the title Emeritus Professor of Computer Science, and conferred upon him the Degree of Doctor of Science, *Honoris Causa*.

Born on the 22nd of May 1939 in Colombo, Kithsiri Samaranayake had his early education at the Hewavitharana Vidyalaya, Rajagiriya where his father was the Principal and the mother was a teacher. He joined Ananda College in 1948 and sat for a competitive examination through which he was admitted to Royal College in 1950. Throughout this entire period, Prof. Samaranayake lived in the environment of a school Principal's quarters where he was often co-opted into the educational processes and activities of the school. This contributed to his success in the field of education.

Prof. Samaranayake entered the University of Ceylon in 1956 to read for a degree in Science and was selected to do a Special degree in Mathematics. His academic excellence was recognized and he was offered an Assistant

Lecturer post immediately upon completing his degree with First Class Honours in 1961. Thus began a long and illustrious university career which spilled over to service to the nation.

Prof. Samaranayake secured a state scholarship for Postgraduate studies at Imperial College, London in 1963 and then moved on to University College, London to complete his PhD in record time before returning home in 1966. At the age of 35, in recognition of his great scholarship, the University of Colombo appointed him to the post of Professor of Mathematics in 1974 and Senior Professor of Mathematics in 1984. In 1996 He was appointed as the first Senior Professor of Computer Science.

In 1987, the Government of Sri Lanka, recognizing his immense experience in the field of Information Technology, appointed Prof. Samaranayake as the Chairman of the Computer and Information Technology Council of Sri Lanka (CINTEC). During the 12 year period at the helm of Sri Lanka's topmost IT Policy making body, he was instrumental in setting in place many of the systems which gave rise to the well known Sri Lanka ICT Roadmap and the e-Sri Lanka programme. During this period he was also tasked with chairing the Presidential Task Force on Integrated R & D in Science & Technology 1997-2000 and the National Y2K Task Force in Sri Lanka 1998-2000.

Even during this era in national spotlight, Prof. Samaranayake continued to contribute actively to the education system in general, the university system in particular and most prominently to the University of Colombo. In 1992, with what most would explain as 'blind faith', he invested in Sri Lankan school children who he believed could reach the pinnacle in Computer Programming, by committing CINTEC funds for sending teams of 4 to the International Olympiad in Informatics (IOI). Due to his great foresight, to date, Sri Lanka has been able to secure 3 Gold, 5 Silver and 13 Bronze medals at successive IOI's with a record of never returning without a medal since 1994. In 1995 he was instrumental in setting up intensive discussions with Sri Lanka Telecom,

to commence Internet services in Sri Lanka. These discussions eventually brought LEARN and Internet connectivity to Sri Lanka in 1996. Among his other national contributions during this era of his life, was the setting up of the Law Committee which has set in motion a series of IT law reforms, initiating the steps needed to standardize the use of Sinhala on Computers and the Internet, including the UNICODE Sinhala code chart and the recently finalized SLSI 1134 standard, the IT outreach effort epitomized by the CINTEC 'Mobile Computer Unit', and advising the Education Ministry and the National Institute of Education (NIE) on how to most effectively reach the entire country's IT education needs through Computer Resource Centres.

During this time, Prof. Samaranayake also helped immensely in organizing the IT industry at large by forming associations for Computer Training Organizations (ACTOS), for the Software Industry (SLASI), and for the Computer Vendors (SLCVA). With foresight he also created the umbrella organization for these associations in the form of the Federation of IT Industry Associations (FITIS) which recently hosted the largest ICT event in Sri Lanka – the ASOCIO ICT Summit. He has also been involved with the organization of the well known ICT Trade Exhibition INFOTEL whose Chairmanship he has held from 1997. INFOTEL has in turn been the major funding organization for many industry and human resource development efforts in the field of ICT.

Prof. Samaranayake's involvement in the scientific community has been no less impressive with the Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Science (SLAAS) electing him to the office of General President in 1994 and the National Academy of Sciences of Sri Lanka electing him as a Fellow of the Academy, its Vice President and finally its President for 1998-99.

His quest for capacity building in ICT human resources can most clearly be seen in his single handed contribution in this area at the University of Colombo – making it the showcase among the entire university system in Sri Lanka and beyond. Investing in human resource development in ICT also involves huge risks – that of aiding in the Brain Drain. This is where Prof. Samaranayake's broadness of vision and almost unreasonable trust, especially in the case of training Faculty in the University, is most clearly seen. Commencing with the meager funding resources extended by donors in the 1970's in an era when the developed countries themselves were just getting into the area of serious ICT human resource development, Prof. Samaranayake commenced his quest of directing all local

and foreign funding to develop ICT Human Resource development at the University of Colombo.

In 1984 he had his first major breakthrough, with full backing of the then Chancellor, Dr. P. R. Anthonis and Vice Chancellor Prof. Stanley Wijesundera, in the form of a substantial Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) grant from the Government of Japan. Almost simultaneously, the UNDP provided some much needed research funding to build up Academic Faculty in Computer Science at the University of Colombo. Starting with the Statistical Unit and the Statistical Computing and Data Processing Centre within the Mathematics Department, Prof. Samaranayake first convinced the University to set up a Department of Statistics and Computer Science in 1985, the first of its kind in Sri Lanka, and then went onto create the first School in the university system in the form of the University of Colombo School of Computing (UCSC) in 2002.

In the year 2000, Prof. Samaranayake initiated another major milestone in ICT HRD in Sri Lanka with the launch of the innovative Bachelor of Information Technology (BIT) External Degree programme which provides an ultimately scalable mechanism for affordable ICT education in a way that incorporates the private sector – a feat no other degree programme has been designed to do. Apart from the prestige of a University of Colombo degree to students, the BIT programme also has the indirect but most desirable effect of standardizing ICT education in an era where commercialism is threatening the quality of education.

In recognition of his towering contribution in the field of ICT in the country, he has been bestowed with several national awards in the form of the Lions' Club Gold Medal for the Most Outstanding Citizen of Sri Lanka in 1986, the *Vishva Prasadini* Award in 1996 on the occasion of the 80th birthday of the then Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike and the *Vidya Jyothi* Presidential Award in 1998.

Prof. Samaranayake's characteristic skill at excelling in multiple tasks simultaneously is also demonstrated by his continuing involvement in research, being named a Fellow of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, USA in 2001, Research Fellow at the National Centre for Digital Government at Harvard University, USA in 2003 and the appointment as Visiting Fellow in the Digital Vision Programme at Stanford University, USA in 2005. A particularly high point of this skill was when he simultaneously chaired two International Conferences while playing a key role in the Government declared

Information Technology Week in December 2004. He also continued as Chairman of the International Information Technology Conference till his untimely demise.

Since his retirement from University Service, Prof. Samaranayake was called upon to shoulder yet another significant national responsibility, as Chairman of the Information and Communication Technology Agency of Sri Lanka which was responsible for the ambitious e-Sri Lanka programme: Sri Lanka's ICT Roadmap. He was assigned this task when the Agency was at one of its most crucial cross-roads, and was able to steer it to safe ground by standing firm to ensure the best interests of the country were not compromised.

Over the years, Prof. Samaranayake has also organized several events and conferences at national, regional and international levels. His assignment at the time of his death is yet another testimony to his towering stature: evaluating ICT projects from all over the world for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).

Prof. Samaranayake leaves behind many legacies, one of the most significant of which was his singular ability to create opportunities within the restrictive state system by bending, but not breaking, the rules. His attitude of scorning the pessimistic, being willing to take calculated risks, seeing farther ahead than others, loyalty to the institution and the nation, and trusting in the abilities of others – all for the benefit of the university, public sector and society at large, are qualities too rarely seen in Sri Lanka today.

In summary, it would be accurate to state, that the University System and the nation as a whole, has benefited by the life and work of Prof. V. K. Samaranayake in ways still to be fully comprehended by many.

Prof. Samaranayake leaves behind his beloved wife Sriya, who supported him in each of his many great endeavours and was very much his soul-mate as proclaimed at an aptly timed felicitation ceremony just prior to his death. His two dear sons, Samitha and Nayana, no doubt will walk in his giant footsteps.

Ruwan Weerasinghe

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Vidya Jyothi Prof. V.K. Samaranayake had served as a member of the *Journal of the National Science Council* (presently, *National Science Foundation*) Editorial Board from 1994-1996. The NSF gratefully acknowledges his services extended to the scientific community.