



**Mr. Piyathissa Ranasinghe**

**Q Mr. Piyathissa Ranasinghe is known as one of the most sincere and patriotic public officers who retired after tremendous contribution to the public sector and the nation. We would like to hear from you about your journey from childhood to such a remarkable role model.**

It was a remarkable journey full of memories and various experiences in nearly 40 years of public service.

I entered the University of Kelaniya in 1965, and received an appointment as a government teacher before getting my final examination results in 1968. I worked as a teacher in Kurunegala district up to 1971. Thereafter, I joined the Ministry of Housing and Construction as a planning officer for a year. Next, I joined the Ceylon Administrative Service in 1973 and was on the top of the batch in Sri Lanka in that year.

In the same year, I was appointed as the Divisional Assistant Government Agent, and in 1974 as the Regional Assistant Commissioner of Local Government. I left for Japan in 1980 for my postgraduate studies (offered through a scholarship) and came back in 1983. Then, I was appointed as the Deputy Director of Public Corporations in the Ministry of Industries and Scientific Affairs. In 1984, I got my Class I promotion as the Additional Government Agent, in Rathnapura District. From 1986 to 1988, I got the opportunity to work as the Acting Government Agent since the Government Agent had gone for a foreign scholarship at that time. Then in 1988, I joined the provincial council of Sabaragamuwa as the first Secretary to the Chief Minister for 6 years (up to 1994). Then, I took over as the Commissioner of "Samurdhi" for few years and returned back to Sabaragamuwa Province as the Secretary of the Provincial Public Service Commission and was promoted to the Chief Secretary of the Sabaragamuwa Provincial council in 1999.

In 2005, her excellency Chandrika Kumaratunga Bandaranayake, then president of the country appointed me as the Permanent Secretary of the Post and Telecommunication and the Udarata Development Ministry. At the same time, I was appointed as the Chairman of Telecommunication Regulatory Commission of Sri Lanka (TRISL). I retired from public service in 2007, but immediately after my retirement, the cabinet appointed me as the Senior Adviser to the Youth Employment and Empowerment in the Youth Ministry. At that time, I was the Director of the National Youth Corps in Sri Lanka.

In 2000, I resigned from National Youth Corps and worked as the Senior Consultant for the Post and Telecommunications. In 2016, I was appointed as the Director-General of the Right Information Commission and worked until up to 2019.

**Q I think you are the right person to explain the evolution of the public sector in Sri Lanka from ancient days to the present?**

- What is the purpose and meaning of public service to the nation? Role and functions?
- How do you compare public administration under the king and colonial era? Especially with British ruling.
- How do you compare public service before the independence and after the independence?

I would like to talk a bit about public administration in the colonial era and compare public service before and after the independence. From the British period up to now, we can identify three phases of our public service, in terms of roles and functions it perform.

In the first phase, during the rule of the British power, all roles and functions were seen from the view and interest of the colonial power. One of the main functions was collecting revenue to run the administration since the British parliament did not provide money to run the administration of Sri Lankan authorities. Then the second function was to maintain and develop the relationship between the British bureaucracy and the Church that existed from the 18th century. Then the third function was to facilitate the economic activities, encouraging the British investors to come to Sri Lanka to start their businesses. The government also played a significant role as the main infrastructure developer. The fourth role was to take steps to maintain law and order while trying to establish the judicial systems. They enforced rules and regulations, enacting laws to regulate people's behaviours and activities. All the above signify the first phase of our public service.

The second phase, post-independence, the government-maintained revenue collection as a function and responsibility, while establishing an independent public service along the colonial administration measurements.

However, the perception changed and public service started to focus more directly on providing economic facilities and social services to people with the extended role of providing public goods and services. Those days, especially between the 1940s and 1965, we were one of the wealthiest nations in Asia. With a large amount of foreign reserves, we could afford easily to import foreign goods, food items, and many other consumer goods in which this was considered as a major role of the government.

Ultimately, this resulted in creating a dependency culture among people. People were asking for free fertilizer, free education, free healthcare, etc. But after 1977, that culture took a turn. The government of late president J.R. Jayawardhana's marks the third phase, changing the role of the public service from commercial and economic activities to a much broader role. The thinking/thought was that government should change from being the key economic actor and the provider of goods and services. They believed that the government should focus on providing services and the private sector should handle economic activities. Therefore in 1977, there were three prominent roles and functions that indicated the public sector. Public Service should be guiding the country towards economic and social objectives, facilitating economic activities and regulating and safeguarding citizens and the environment.

Then, as we moved into market economy, the private sector had understood it as a corporate governance system. At the same time, citizens, organizations, and people expected fair management and increase transparency and accountability. Those concepts came into the public services since 1977. But unfortunately, we can see today that the role and functions of the public sector introduced by JR's government have not been greatly appreciated by the educated society. Actually, this was complicated by the continuous use of structures established under the British rule. Then also we had the ministry system, departmental system, and cooperation systems. Public servants are working with that old machinery fighting to cater the demands of the time. So, if you want to get out of that context, my personal argument is public service machinery needs rethinking, reorganization and restructuring.

**Q "English ruling is better than the ruling of our political parties", we commonly hear this argument. How do you look at this social discourse critically?**

Yes, people often make this statement. Mostly out of the unmet expectations from the public service. Further, those old generation firmly believe that English ruling is better than the present ruling. But I can't entirely agree with that discourse as we can't compare the context during the British ruling and the post-independence. At that time, the population was 1/5 of the present population, and 92% of the population was in villages where they had a self-sufficient living system and limited needs. So, they didn't have so many expectations from the government or the rulers.

But after the independence, especially in between 1940s to 1960s, the population and urbanization increased. In 1940, the urbanized population was below 8% whereas in the 1970s and 1980s, it was more than 20%. Now Currently, it is nearly 40% of the total population. The nature of the job opportunities has totally changed. Foreign employments have gradually replaced the plantation industry. Moreover, The hotel industry and tourism are coming into the front of the economic earnings. The British ruling system was limited for law and order, collection of revenue and few other activities, hence would not serve today's need. But there is something to admire in the British rule and that is the way it was structured as three separate circles; political leaders, public administrators and people. Political leaders were in India and once they prepared and decided on the policies, they sent them to Sri Lanka for implementation through the administrators. There was no interaction between administration and politics, as well as

among the people and politics. People were separated from the administration and politics in the British period. Those three circles separately functioned. But after independence, all three circles merged and have more political interference over the public administration. It happened all over the world in democratic countries, not only in Sri Lanka. Suppose we compare ourselves with India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, where those politicians are also preparing the policies and laws in which they get power over appointments, transfers, promotions, etc. But under the early constitution, known as 'Donoughmore Constitution', public service was totally separated from politics, and the Public Service Commission took decisions. All of the public services were handled independently, including the universities. The government gave just financial assistance for universities and they were more independent.

Then after independence what happened? Both three circles were merged, collaborated and interacted. As a result, so many problems entered into the system. Added to the problem, population increased gradually. Exploitation got very complicated and the world became one market where we all have to compete against each other.

**Q In many other nations, we could observe a stable public service without drastic changes due to changes of rulers and ruling parties. How do we find this assumption in Sri Lanka? What is the connection between public service and the ruling party or political changes in Sri Lanka?**

In many other nations, we could observe a stable public service without drastic changes due to changes of the rulers and ruling parties. Under the Donoughmore Constitution, as I explained to you; public service was independent, and Public

Service Commission was appointed by the Governor-General who got the recommendations from the British Intellectual Councils and the parliament, and he was appointed as the Public Service Commission for Sri Lanka.

Then, the Public Service Commission did/handled all appointments, transfers, promotions, recruitments, and exams. In 1972, we abolished the Donoughmore Constitution and introduced a new constitution. Under the 1972 constitution, the Public Service Commission was abolished, and the Cabinet of Ministers took over the power of appointments, transfers, dismissals, and disciplinaries.

Cabinet ministers and political leaders believe that the government should handle public services to accelerate the socio-economic activities for political gains. They wanted to carry out political decisions through the public service. In 1972, the entire public service was placed under the control of politically appointed rulers, eroding the independence that was exercised. But in some countries, as an example, India didn't change the Public Service Commission. Indian Administrative Service people are selected by the Public Service Commission, and controlled by the Public Service Commission. Most of the public service officers in India are not under the influence of political wishes and thinking/thoughts.

In the 1978 constitution, the connection between the public service and the ruling political party in the country was not changed. Even in the 19th amendment it was not changed. But we tried establishing the independence of the public service in the 17th amendment. It created back the independent Public Service Commissioner in Sri Lanka and handed over the powers from the cabinet to the Public Service Commission. However, it was all cancelled again by the 18th amendment. In the 19th amendment, they started some democratic processes, but Public Service



Commission was not independent. Power over appointments, transfers, and promotions are under the cabinet even in the 19th amendment and 20th amendment. But in some other countries, public service is maintained under independent authority, just like Public Service Commission. Some countries gradually changed their ruling mechanism, expanding and evolving the roles and functions of the public service understanding the needs of time. For example, in most of the developed countries they understood the importance of public service for the development of private sector.

**Q We hear many public officers saying it is difficult to work with the politicians in Sri Lanka. Is it a problem with the politicians or with public officers?**

If somebody says they can't work with the politicians, that is his/her weakness. According to my experiences, I have worked for nearly 40 years with politicians. For example, when I was the Commissioner of Local Government, all Municipal Council, Urban Councils and local governments were under me. When I was working as the Additional Government Agent, all the capital expenditure were handled by me. Those days, district coordinating committees and political circles came to me to get advice and services.

If you want to work with politicians sincerely, there are three factors to keep in mind. The first one is subject knowledge. You need to have the essential subject knowledge in your field so that you can advise them. Second, hard work and build your credibility with them. Third, you should understand that politicians are under tremendous pressure than public servants as they have to fulfil the aspirations of the people who voted them. So, they are under heavy political, social and economic pressures, and a heavy workload. As public officers, we should help politicians to get

out of that pressure by cooperating with them, within the legal framework. However, if you can't do it within the legal framework, you better point it out as "No Sir, I can't do this; this is against the rule, procedure and process, and it will be harmful to you as well. Someday you may be punished by the law, or your voters may punish you." I was the Secretary to the Chief Minister for five years, Chief Secretary for another five years to six years. Moreover, I worked as the Secretary of very adamant ministers like honorable R. Premadasa, D.M. Jayarathne, but they were pleased with me, and I continuously pointed out to them what was right and wrong. They believed me, and they depended on me for advice. Therefore, you should be knowledgeable, you should be tactful, and you should be a better guide to the politicians and finally you should be brave. Otherwise, if you are working as a "Yes Sir", you will be in a problem!!

**Q Today you and I experience many of our public organizations are away from the original purpose of establishing and running mainly for the betterment of employees, forgetting the need and care of the general public. Why this situation occurs? How can this situation be overcome?**

According to my understanding, when we got our independence, we had only 67 departments and 10 ministries. Now, it has developed up to 89 departments, 326 corporations and authorities and nearly 19 commissions.. At the time of independence, all public service consisted of only 50,000 employees and now we are more than 2 million. The main reason to decrease in the quality of the public service is the increasing number of institutions and people. Political leaders think of public service as a place for job placements and recruit without any base. They provide job opportunities for their voters. Indeed, frankly, the government doesn't have human resources planning. You see now how many

graduate trainees are here without any work. That is the same situation all over the country.

The next is that most people do not know their organization's vision, mission, and objectives. They don't try to develop their capabilities, skills and knowledge and change their attitudes after joining the public service. Then, after joining services, they suffer from the Dependency Syndrome and the Burn-out Syndrome. Dependency Syndrome means they always depend on the government and expect houses, fertilizer, loans, school admissions, and so many things for free. Burn-out Syndrome is because salaries and facilities are abysmal, political interventions are heavy, and so many rules and regulations and red tapes to get through. They do not have proper training and development, suitable promotional schemes etc. They always resort to protests, objections and strikes to get their basic rights and facilities. But they do not leave the public service due to the job security and no alternative livelihood. In Sinhala, "Davi davi ea thulama innawa". They are burning and they continue to live in that state.

The next is, after joining the public sector, especially the managerial level employees don't have enough understanding about the expectations of the poor and innocent people of the country. They are trying to satisfy their politicians to achieve their own career success. That's why, one of the administrative experts says, please go to the village, live with the villagers, learn from them and train among them.

**What are the moral principles and wisdom (should be with) possessed within every public service personnel?**

My idea/notion is that first moral principle should be hard work. You should work hard continuously keeping aside your own comfort and benefits. Then if you can't do the hard work in the public service, you better get out. It is your role to inculcate

positive attitudes, dedications and commitments. Second is to guide the politicians towards what is right and wrong as I talked before.

**Q As you are one of the key pillars in establishing provincial council systems in Sri Lanka and have served for the provincial government for an extended period, how do you interpret your positive and negative experiences with provincial councils? Do you have any ideas aspirations over streamlining the provincial councils for the betterment of the nation?**

Actually, I was the first person to join the provincial system in Sri Lanka, 12th May 1988. At that time, I was the Additional Government Agent in Rathnapura. I got up from my chair, handed over the government agenda, and started the Provincial Council. Those days some ethnic problems were existing in the country. It was implemented as a solution for the ethnic problem in North East. Actually, it was constricted according to the Indian module. If you can see the Indian constitution and our constitution, both have similarities.

According to the way it was set up, if it were to devolve, the territory should have the right to prepare the laws and handle their activities and enough resources should be supplied. Though the 13th amendment was passed by the parliament, the central government did not fully implement it. The provincial councils were not given the powers of police, land and health. What happened? All schools were handed over to the Provincial Councils and taken back as national schools after that. All the divisional secretariates were handed over to the provincial council, and later taken back to the central government under the Ministry of Home Affairs. The central government did not provide enough money to the Provincial Councils to do their activities and fulfil the expectations.

Earlier, when it was started in 1988, BTT was also handed over to the provincial council, but once BTT was taken back by the government they cancelled it. So, the revenue sources were converted towards the center.

Now what has happened to our provincial councils? They depend on the government and work as government's sub-departments. If the government can do all the work with their departments, then there is no need for such provincial councils. At the same time/Simultaneously, the government has devolved some subjects to the provincial council, but they have created various ministries at the center to handle the same matter. As an example, preschool education is a devolved subject. The provincial council should handle it. But under the cabinet, there is a State Minister of Preschool Education. Further, the provincial councils should handle all rural development activities. Now, what "Samurdhi" movement is doing? They are managing rural development. Yet it has been failed. My argument is that the type of provincial councils we have today are not effective. If we are to have an effective provincial council system, the central government should provide enough manpower, legislative power, and money. Otherwise, it will not be fruitful and which is actually a good system. The system is working well in India, Switzerland, and so many other countries. Switzerland has 25 provincial councils like our 25 districts and they are maintaining those 25 provincial councils very productively.

**Q Well, we come to another crucial contribution provided by you as a member of the university council for an extended period; what do you think about the university system and contribution as a council member to enhance the higher education sector, particularly universities in Sri Lanka**

I came to the Sabaragamuwa University as a member of the first Council in 1992. When it was an affiliated university, I came as the official capacity of the Provincial Secretary of Education. My experience is that the university started with four faculties earlier, and now it has expanded up to eight faculties. Additionally, another two new faculties will be established as Sports Science Faculty and Veterinary Faculty. And the total number of students and the number of staff have also increased. In 1992, there were only six permanent lectures and two senior lecturers, including one or two PhD holders. Now/Currently, I think there are nearly 150 PhD holders in the university. Overtime, our educational patterns, educational facilities, systems, infrastructure have been well developed. But my thinking is whether we produce graduates to the world market. That is one of my questions, and can we change our teaching and learning systems? Let's take an example if we compare foreign universities; they use modern equipment to conduct their lectures, practicals, training sessions, and fieldwork and develop very positive thinking among students. In the job market, those people challenge our products. We have so many obstacles. University Grant Commission trying to control us is one obstacle, and financial problems are also existing.

But we can do more by getting creative and innovative ideas from academics. They should get together and discuss and rethink how we should reorganize and restructure our university. Presently, deans of the faculties are implementing the decisions taken by the Vice-Chancellors. In my view, the deans' suggestions and proposals are submitted to the senate and council. But those are implemented based on the vice-chancellor's and students' agreement. So, we should get out of that circle.

On the other hand, we should interact with the commercial sector and the local community. Now we are away from them and need good collaborations with those parties.

**Q As universities are supreme institution which support nation-building and global sustainable development, how do you see the relationship and integration of the university with good governance and nation-building process?**

I think that the university can do and have some role in the nation-building process. Sometimes our current human resource production does not help nation-building. First of all, we should identify the necessities to be fulfilled in nation-building, the type of person that should be developed, and the type of human resources that should be developed for that purpose. We are not the provider of infrastructure facilities. Hence, our thinking patterns should be changed.

**Q At last, senior citizen and veteran in public service and integrating education in development, what would be your advice and forethoughts for young academics, public servants, entrepreneurs and other professionals on self-achievements and take part in the nation-building process.**

My advice is, if you joined the public service or university or any other institution, the first thing is your dedication and commitment. Hard-working should be the essential quality. To be an effective employee, you should follow the five principles. Firstly, you should improve your knowledge and second continuously develop and acquire the necessary skills. The third is self-discipline; do not misuse public property for personal use and do not neglect duties and responsibilities. The fourth is coordination. You need to coordinate with everyone across all levels, those who are from the same level, upper or lower levels. Then, the last is the respect towards the culture. You should help to preserve the culture, religion, values, beliefs, customs and traditions of our beautiful nation.

Thank you very much.