

English Education and the Estranged Intellectual in Colonial Sri Lanka

The Case of James Alwis (1823-1878)¹

"An English education such as the Royal College provides," wrote Ananda Coomaraswamy in his monumental *Medieval Sinhalese Art*, "leaves the 'educated' ignorant of everything that would appear to be of special interest and value to him, and unable to hand on to others even that knowledge which he possesses of the great world beyond, and the lesson he has learnt from a study of the history and manners of other peoples. Most stupid of all is the affectation of despising everything Sinhalese and thoughtlessly admiring everything English, reminding one of that time in England when falsehood in a Ciceronian dialect had no opposers; truth in patois no listeners."²

Coomaraswamy's anatomy of the educational system in colonial Sri Lanka, especially during the last three-quarters of the 19th century, finds its most clear-cut illustration and vindication in the life and writings of James Alwis³ (1823-1878) — lawyer, critic, politician, historian, poet and orientalist *par excellence* of 19th century Sri Lanka. Indeed, Alwis' career is representative of one important sector of the contemporary social ethos: the alienated English-educated Sri Lankan intellectual in mid-19th century. Alwis' life experiences typify some of the spiritual dilemmas of the English-educated Sri Lankan who increasingly felt, (as he matured intellectually), that within the very education that he had so perseveringly and admiringly pursued, lay hidden the seeds of spiritual and cultural disintegration and alienation of himself from his monolingual countrymen, even from his own parents, brothers, sisters and friends.

The spiritual dilemma described above was not limited to the Sri Lankan social context; indeed, it was to be expected in all colonial contexts in which the conqueror's language (English in the case of Sri Lanka, India, and other former British colonies) was enthroned by law as the official language, the most important medium of instruction in schools, and the only path to preferment. The alienation of the native intellectual

1. I am grateful to the following colleagues at the Peradeniya University for their valuable comments on this paper: Prof. Ananda Wickramaratne, Dr. P. V. J. Jayasekera, Prof. R. A. L. H. Gunawardana.
2. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Medieval Sinhalese Art*, 1908 (Second Edition) New York, 1956, p. 51.
3. James Alwis' name appears in several different forms in print, most frequently as 'James de Alwis' and 'James D' Alwis.' 'James Alwis,' the orthographical form of his name as used by Alwis himself, however, has been employed throughout the present paper. (See especially the specimen of Alwis' signature reproduced in James Alwis, *Memoirs and Desultory Writings*, ed. A. C. Seneviratne, Colombo, 1939, facing p.1.) In this connection, cf. also Y. Gooneratne, *English Literature in Ceylon 1815-1878*, Tisara Prakasakayo, Dehiwala, 1968, p.ii.

in such a social ethos was set forth in unambiguous terms by an Englishman himself, Sir George Birdwood, in connection with English education in India, as follows: "Our education (i.e., English education in India) has destroyed their (i.e., the Indians') love of their own literature, the quickening soul of a people and their delight in their own arts and, worst of all, their repose in their own traditional and national religion. It has disgusted them with their own homes--their parents, their sisters, their very wives. It has brought discontent into every family so far as its baneful influences have reached."⁴ As Coomaraswamy pointed out,⁵ the predicament of the intellectual was even more serious and tragically ironic in Sri Lanka than in India; in Sri Lanka, again, it was a dilemma perhaps more excruciatingly felt by the Sinhalese than by the Tamils, and even among the former by cultured intellectuals of comparatively more refined sensibility (like James Alwis) than by those of cruder sensitivity whose education was motivated solely by material interests.

The first part of the present study constitutes an outline of the exclusively "English" (i.e., in two senses, 'conducted exclusively in the English medium of instruction' and 'showing a heavy bias towards English literature and culture in the school curriculum') system of education prevalent in the principal secondary schools and colleges in colonial Sri Lanka; the second part of the paper describes a gradually heightening movement of protest (often mild but at times fairly radical) against this 'English' system of education at least from the 1830s, while the third part is an analysis, based on the career and writings of James Alwis of the plight of the disillusioned, disgruntled English-educated intellectual who had sufficient insight, integrity and sensitivity to understand the socio-cultural and political forces at work and their effects upon the development of the personality of the intellectual during his own age.

I

The main outlines of the system of 'English' education thrust upon the Sri Lankans by their British conquerors during the 19th century—especially after 1833—are quite familiar and need not be reiterated here in detail.⁶ Briefly, this system was characterised by its religious (i.e., Christian) bias (and the consequent neglect and abandonment of, and

4. Sir George Birdwood in a lecture on English education in India, quoted by Coomaraswamy, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

5. *Ibid.*

6. For other accounts of the system of education prevalent in 19th century Sri Lanka, see Y. Gooneratne, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-39; Ranjit Ruberu, *Education in Colonial Ceylon*, Kandy Printers, Kandy, 1962; S. A. Pakeman, *Ceylon*, Ernest Benn Ltd., London, 1964, pp. 99-106; *University of Ceylon History of Ceylon*, Vol. III, Ed. K. M. de Silva, Colombo, 1973, ch. 4; *Education in Ceylon, A Centenary Volume, Part II*, Government Press, Ceylon, 1969, Chs. 31-40; and H. A. Wyndham, *Native Education*, London, 1934, pp. 33-66.

(often) contempt for, the traditional and indigenous religions, Buddhism and Hinduism. From the beginning of the 19th century, education (both English as well as vernacular) was considered to be an instrument of evangelisation. The Portuguese and the Dutch who had occupied the coastal areas of Sri Lanka before the British, too, had used education to attain similar ends. Not only private education but also state education was entrusted to Christian missionaries whose principal endeavour was to enlarge their flocks of Sinhalese and Tamil converts to Christianity. This aspect of contemporary education gave rise to little or no spiritual conflict in the case of James Alwis, who remained a devout Christian all his life; hence no further mention will be made here regarding the heavy Christian bias of 19th century English education.

The second significant characteristic of colonial education was the domination of English in the secondary and tertiary educational structure, both as the *principal subject* on the school curriculum and as the *most important medium of instruction* (with the attendant neglect of, and often contempt for, the vernacular languages, Sinhala and Tamil).

It was with the publication and subsequent implementation of the recommendations of the Colebrooke-Cameron Commission in particular that 'English' education found itself enthroned as the only economically and socially worthwhile form of education. However, as far back as 1801, the pecuniary advantages of acquiring an English education had (though somewhat deviously) been stamped on the minds of the people, for in that year Governor Frederick North had decreed that the only petitions that he would entertain would be those which had been translated into English at the Colombo Academy on payment of a fee to the translators who were the pupils of that school.⁷ The status of English as the sole state language of course secured for that language a dignity, authority and status which made a proficiency in the language a mark of high social status, prestige and superiority for its 'native' possessor both among the English government officials, businessmen, and planters as well as among the 'native' population.

From the early years of British rule, an English education had been made relatively exclusive. During the early stages the sons of *mudaliyars* and Kandyan aristocrats were accorded the high privilege of acquiring a knowledge of English; these scions of the nobility, having completed their English education, were as a matter of course appointed to prestigious government positions like those of court interpreters, translators and clerks (the higher civil servants being exclusively British).

7. "In November 1801, notice was given that in future His Excellency would receive petitions only in English and the petitions were to be translated into English at the Wolvendha! School, on payment of a fee . . ." — L. J. Gratiaen, "The First English School in Ceylon," *The Ceylon Antiquary and Literary Register*, Vol. VII, Part 3, Jan. 1922, p. 144.

The Colebrooke report set the final seal of authority on the establishment of English as the most important language in the Island. In his report on the administration, Colebrooke had made it obligatory for all native aspirants to posts in the government service (down to the humblest village headman and the schoolmaster) to possess a knowledge of English. In reviewing the activities of the government schools, Colebrooke found it a serious drawback that the schoolmasters had not hitherto been "required to understand the English language, of which many are wholly ignorant,"⁸ as a result of which "they (i.e., the schoolmasters) are often extremely unfit for their situations."⁹ He recommended, therefore, that "schoolmasters should . . . in all instances be required to possess a competent knowledge of English to enable them to give instruction in that language,"¹⁰ an obvious prelude to the making of English the sole medium of instruction in the future. Nor was this all: going further, Colebrooke deplored the lack of proficiency in English of the native administrative officers such as the "headmen of korles and castes" as being a hindrance to administrative efficiency: "The headmen at the seats of magistracy are generally acquainted with the English language, but the Medeliars and the headmen of Korles are often ignorant of it. In 1828 a regulation¹¹ was made that no native headman should in future be appointed who could not read and write the English language."¹²

Quite apart from the effects of the Colebrooke recommendations referred to above, English had even by 1832 in effect attained the status of the state language. It was the exclusive medium in which all official and commercial business was transacted; it was also the sole language of the courts of law and of legislation. It was not surprising, in the circumstances, that all parents who were concerned about the material advancement of their sons through lucrative positions in the government administrative hierarchy saw no alternative except to equip their aspiring offspring with an English education as a *sine qua non*, for Colebrooke had stipulated categorically that "a competent knowledge of the English language should be required in the principal native functionaries throughout the country."¹³

From the beginning of the British period, government administrators and Christian missionaries had united in the common belief that the English language would provide the golden key to western civilisation and culture as well as the smoothest pathway to the propagation of Christianity. Governor Edward Baines had declared in 1819: "I am of opinion that

8. G. C. Mendis (ed.), *The Colebrooke-Cameron Papers*, Vol. I, Oxford University Press, 1956, p. 72.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

11. G. C. Mendis points out, however, that "no such regulation, minute, rule or circular is available." *The Colebrooke-Cameron Papers* Vol. I, p. 48, footnote 1).

12. G. C. Mendis, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 48.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

instruction in the English language should be promoted and encouraged as much as possible, when the people would be enabled to come more directly at the evidence of Christianity than they are through the tardy and scanty medium of translations;" he was even convinced that "without any previous religious instruction, a knowledge of the English language will as a matter of course lead to Christianity."¹⁴ On the other hand, in 1824, Roberts, a Methodist missionary, held the view that the essential training for a Sri Lankan missionary "may be expressed in four words, i. e., A Thorough English Education."¹⁵

While the administrators realised the utilitarian value of English in the creation of a class of English-educated interpreters and translators to serve as vital links between the white rulers and the masses, the missionaries were compelled, as a result of popular demand rather than of choice to concentrate their efforts on the teaching of English themselves; this is clearly indicated by the following declaration of one of their number, George Baugh, in 1875: "English teaching schools have risen to the very highest demand; and as a consequence vernacular, or even Anglo-vernacular, schools have proportionately become unpopular. Although the English taught in our Anglo-vernacular schools be ever so good the natives withdraw their children as soon as ever any school is opened where English only is inculcated."¹⁶

The 19th century in general, and its last 65 years in particular, was thus an era when the English language reigned supreme; it also witnessed the gradual devaluation, denigration and neglect of the Sinhala language and literature, and the whole complex of cultural traditions that were closely associated with them, and even the threat of their ultimate destruction. Moreover, the use of English as the official language and as the medium of instruction in senior secondary public schools not unexpectedly brought in its wake not only conversion to Christianity but also a wave of cultural infiltration (and its close concomitant, linguistic, cultural, religious and spiritual alienation) which is often described as westernisation and anglicisation. The upshot of these developments was a deep sense (at least among some members of the bilingual native intelligentsia) of being alienated from their countrymen and of being separated from their rich indigenous cultural inheritance, of being cut off at the roots from their traditional languages, religions and ultimately from contemporary Sinhalese society. The depth and pathos of this feeling of linguistic and cultural "estrangement," as James Alwis termed it, probably varied from individual to individual in direct proportion to the sensitivity, intellectual calibre, bilingualism and biculturalism of the person affected. It was not

14. Edward Barnes to W. B. Fox and Benjamin Clough, October 29, 1819, quoted in Goonaratne, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6.

15. J. Roberts to the MMS Committee, Jaffna, Dec. 22, 1824, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 7.

16. G. Baugh to the MMS Committee, Galle, May 3, 1875, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 9.

surprising, therefore, that this feeling of being cut off from one's traditional cultural roots was felt most excruciatingly by people like James Alwis.

What was the much-admired and relentlessly-pursued "English education" like? The education imparted in these English schools and colleges was "English" in many senses of the word: the medium of instruction was English, the syllabuses of work were typically 'British' and in many cases borrowed directly from public schools in Great Britain; the textbooks prescribed for examinations were English classics mainly composed during the 18th century, and the manners and school traditions in vogue were those typically followed in British public schools and the established British universities like Oxford and Cambridge. It was no different from the type of education that was followed on the neighbouring sub-continent of India, where the English schools and colleges called for "a critical acquaintance with the works of Bacon, Johnson, Milton and Shakespeare, a knowledge of ancient and modern history and of the higher branches of mathematical science, some insight into the elements of natural history, and the principles of moral philosophy and political economy, together with considerable facility of composition, and the power of writing in fluent and idiomatic language an impromptu essay on any given subject of history, moral or political economy."¹⁷

Even the hours of commencement and closure of the English schools at the time were parallel to those adopted in British public schools, despite the obvious differences between Sri Lanka and Great Britain in climate and the number of hours of daylight. For instance, James Alwis describes how his *alma mater* "commenced at 10 a.m." and continued right upto 3 p. m., which provided "five hours for lessons, including half-an-hour for recreation and play."¹⁸

From their commencement all the leading English colleges (both state and missionary) in the Island borrowed or imitated the courses of instruction then well established in British public schools. The "Rules and Suggestions" governing the schools to be set up under the School Commission drawn up by Joseph Marsh, Headmaster of the Colombo Academy, said: "It is desirable that the system of classification and mutual instruction on which the English national schools are conducted, should be introduced into the schools so far as circumstances allow."¹⁹ In 1854, Andrew Kessen, then working out the syllabuses for Sri Lanka's first Normal school, requested Elijah Hoole to send him "a Programme of the Hours of Study in the various classes of our Westminster Institution, and also a copy of the class-books in use."²⁰

17. M. Edwardes, *British India 1772-1947: A Survey of the Nature and Effects of Alien Rule*, Sidgwick and Jackson, London, 1967, p. 119.

18. *Memoirs and Desultory Writings of the Late James D' Alwis*, ed. A. C. Seneviratne, Colombo, 1939, p. 18.

19. L. J. Gratiaen *The Story of Our Schools: The First School Commission 1832-1841*, Colombo, 1927, p. 8.

20. Letter from Andrew Kessen to Elijah Hoole, November 11, 1854, quoted in Coenaratne, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

The subjects taught at the Christian Institution at Cotta (established in 1828) included "Latin, Greek, Mathematics, Geography, History and the Bible, and for some boys, Hebrew."²¹ At the Colombo Academy, converted into a public school under Rev. Joseph Marsh in 1836, the 'general routine' in the lower school consisted of "Logic, Elements of English Law (Blackstone's Commentaries), Principles of Natural Philosophy, Astronomy, Singhalese, Latin, Greek and Hebrew," while "the subjects in the upper school were of a more advanced and philosophical kind. They comprised Paley's *Evidences of Christianity*, and Horace (Paulinae) . . . Tytler's *History*, Shakespeare, and English literature were taught on the classical side."²²

When the Central School in Colombo was opened it took over the normal students who were studying at the Academy. "The training they received is indicated by the syllabus of their examination in 1844. It was divided into 4 parts: scripture (theology), mathematics, Latin and English. The scriptural subjects were texts on the Divinity of Christ, sin, condemnation and justification before God, the whole of the book of Genesis, Exodus, Chs. I-XX and Joshua, Chs. I-LX; Paley, Chs. I-XIII, was set for natural theology; Euclid Books I-V and algebra for mathematics. Latin and English included Valpy's *Second Delectus*, pp. 62-82, *Paradise Lost*, Book V, lines 153-208, and a passage from Young's *Night Thoughts* on 'Procrastination.'²³

In 1848, the courses of study at the Academy included "English; the Pentateuch: the Four Gospels and Acts; Scripture History and Prophecy (Watts); Ancient and Modern History (Tytler), History of England, Greece and Rome; English Literature (Chalmers); Geography of the world, Physical and General, English Composition, Greek, Latin Grammar, and *Cicero de Officiis* (if any author)."²⁴ In the 1860's, the courses of studies followed by the Colombo Academy's 'senior' students were as follows:

Theology: Scripture, Paley's *Evidences*.

English: Thomson's *Winter*, *Rasselas*.

Herschel's *Introduction to Natural Philosophy*.

21. *The History of Royal College Written by Boys in the School*, Colombo, 1932, p. 44.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 54, 58.

23. H. A. Wyndham, *Native Education*, London, 1923, p. 42

24. *The History of Royal College*, p. 63. The text-books by Watts, Tytler and Chalmers referred to here were probably the following: Isaac Watts, D. D., *A Short View of the Whole Scripture History, with a Continuation of the Jewish Affairs, from the Old Testament Till the Time of Christ; and an Account of the Chief Prophecies that Relate to Him Represented in a Way of Question and Answer*, etc., London, 1732 (Fifth edition, pp. xii + 318, F. C. and J. Rivington, London, 1878); Alexander Fraser Tytler, Lord Woodhouselee, *Elements of General History, Ancient and Modern. To Which Are Added, a Table of Chronology and a Comparative View of Ancient and Modern Geography*, 2 vols., Edinburgh and London, 1801-22 (Third edition, 1805; ninth edition, "corrected and with considerable additions," 1844; further editions in 1846, 1851, 1854, 1855, 1857, 1858, 1862, 1866, 1872, 1875); Alexander Chalmers, *The Works of the English Poets, from Chaucer to Cowper*, London, 1810.

Latin: *Caesar*, Books IV and V; Virgil, Book IV.
 Arnold's Introduction to Latin Prose Composition.
 Greek: Demosthenes, Arnold's First Greek Book.
 History: Murray's *India*; Marshman's *Brief Survey of Ancient History*.
 Mathematics: Euclid, Algebra, Trigonometry.²⁵

At St. Thomas' College, established in 1851, the students had to undergo a very similar course of instruction, which included "Cornelius Nepos Virgil, Greek Delectus, All arithmetic, Algebra to Equations, General Geography, General History, Analysis of the Holy Bible, English Reading and Composition, the First Four Books of Euclid, Mensuration and Elementary Mechanics. The college students from these elementary steps proceed to the higher branches of mathematics and classics, Surveying, Mapping, Butler, Aristotle, Logic and a critical acquaintance with the Scriptures."²⁶ At Trinity College, Kandy, "an account of the term's work done in the first class of the upper school" around 1860 ran as follows:

Scripture: Lives of Saul, David, Elijah, and Elisha; Psalms 1,2,19,27,51, 91, and 103, Philemon, Hebrews, James and John.
Evidences of Christianity: Paley, pp. 1-103.
 Euclid, . . . Algebra, Arithmetic.
 Latin, Greek,
 Geography, History of India, History of England, Astronomy, English Grammar, Simple and Complex sentences, Marvell's Syntax.
 Poetry: 'Psalm of Life,' 'Excelsior,' 'To a Waterfowl,' 'Procrastination,' 'Paul Before Agrippa,' 'Lays of Ancient Rome,' Extracts from 'The Spanish Armada.'
 Drawing.²⁷

By 1838 (i. e., at the age of 15) James Alwis' own course of studies at the Colombo Academy included "English Grammar, Arithmetic, Geography, Algebra and Drawing," and he had "just begun to learn Latin and Geometry."²⁸ In 1840, Alwis received a certificate from his headmaster J. Brooke Bailey, which helps to throw further light on the nature of the course of studies he had followed towards the end of his school career and on his academic achievements at the time. The certificate stated:

Master de Alwis has a very good acquaintance with the English language, writing and speaking it with tolerable accuracy. His knowledge of Arithmetic and Geography is extensive. He has also a pretty good acquaintance with Algebra, Euclid, Latin and Greek. He writes a very good hand.²⁹

25. L. J. Gratiaen, quoted by Gooneratne, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-30.

26. *St. Thomas' College Centenary Number 1851-1951*, Colombo, 1951, p. 9.

27. V. L. O. Reimann. *A History of Trinity College, Kandy*, pp. 5-6.

28. *Memoirs and Desultory Writings*, p. 32.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

The syllabi of the three leading English colleges in the Island, given above, clearly set down the pattern that was to be imitated later by almost all the other colleges and senior secondary schools. The courses of studies indicate, quite clearly, a common bias towards the Christian religion, the classical languages of the west (Greek and Latin), western-orientated geography and history, logic and philosophy; more important, they also tended to neglect the national languages (Sinhala and Tamil) and their literatures, local history and geography, and Sri Lankan culture.

The principal method of teaching adopted in the English schools appears to have been the memorisation of large parts of the prescribed texts followed up by constant repetition of them. At Trinity College, for instance,

A great deal of time was spent in the teaching of correct English. Much poetry had to be memorised and recited. Passages from Macaulay were read and had to be reproduced, or lines from the *Paradise Lost* paraphrased. Each week an essay was written and this was ruthlessly criticised on the following Monday morning. The students were even expected to attempt English verse not to make them poets, but to teach them 'how to select words, the meaning and power of words, the dignity and style and the music of well-accented prose.'³⁰

James Alwis himself, referring to his studies in early childhood, describes the methods and techniques adopted by Mr. Dupy (whose private school Alwis attended in 1830) as follows: "So very careful was he to make me pronounce my words correctly, and with the proper emphasis, that he actually made me repeat after him each word some twenty times."³¹

Alwis' high proficiency in the English language, however, was not attained too easily. It was more the result of painstaking individual effort than of efficient teaching methods in school. In order to successfully compete with the Burghers to whom English was the home language from infancy, James Alwis and other Sinhalese students were compelled to "resort to means other than those usually employed by Englishmen or English-speaking Burghers," for in school "the Sinhalese boy who is bent on studying English (was) never taught anything beyond that which (was) enough for the English boy, viz., to read, i. e., to peruse what is committed to writing."³² In this unequal competition with their Burgher classmates, the handicapped Sinhalese boys had perforce to adopt numerous unorthodox and time- and labour- consuming expedients to keep pace with the more fortunate. Some of these expedients typically resorted to at the time have been described by Alwis himself:

30. Reimann, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9.

31. *Memoirs and Desultory Writings*, p. 3.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

Not having anyone to speak in English to me, at home, except Dunuwille, we agreed together that we should not talk in any language except English, and that we should correct each other, which we did. We likewise resorted to other plans. We went to all public meetings, lost no opportunity of hearing eminent advocates speak at the bar, or learned divines in the pulpit. . . We also composed "mock speeches" and recited them in each other's hearing. We committed to memory some of the best specimens of oratory by Brougham, Erskine, Curran, Philips, Emmet, Chatham and others. . . . We committed to memory the greater part of the following: Brougham's speech in Queen Caroline's case as well as Erskine's and Lord Chatham's addresses.³³

Further training in correct pronunciation and spoken English was accumulated by the practice of making "combined speeches," in which two or more students composed and delivered a single speech, each participant composing a single sentence when his turn came: "We agreed to make one speech as if one and the same man spoke, and on one and the same subject. We were to speak alternately, sentence by sentence."³⁴

The other stumbling-block in gaining a fluency in English was the lack of a wide vocabulary. Here, too, the way was tedious and thorny, involving incessant reading, for Alwis said: "With the object of increasing my stock of English words (of which I had at that time learnt upwards of eight hundred) I applied myself closely to read English books and, as I learnt more and more, the process of thinking in English became less irksome."³⁵

Not only were the courses of studies conducted solely in a foreign tongue; they were also quite unrelated to the social milieu which the pupils (especially day-scholars) had, perforce, to move and live in. For example, at the Colombo Academy, after 1859, the textbooks used for the teaching of History were Murray's *History of India* and Marshman's *Brief Survey of Ancient History*,^{35a} Tytler's *Ancient and Modern History*, *History of England*, *Greece and Rome*, Sri Lankan history being completely ignored. The same was true of Geography. No Sri Lankan Geography was taught, but the geography of the world, and of Great Britain and Europe were included. The classical languages of the East, Pāli and Sanskrit, of which Sri Lanka was one of the centres of excellence, were totally excluded from

33. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 75. See pp. 75-78 for a specimen of such a "combined" speech, an address to the jury in a murder trial, in which James Alwis and James Martenz participated.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

35a. The textbooks by Murray and Marshman mentioned here were probably the following: Hugh Murray et. al., *Historical and Descriptive Account of British India, from the Most Remote Period to the Present Time*, 3 vols., 1832 (Fourth edition, revised and enlarged, 1843); John Clark Marshman, *The History of India, from Remote Antiquity to the Accession of the Mogul Dynasty; Compiled for the Use of Schools* (Third edition, Serampore, 1842; fifth edition, 1860).

the curriculum of English schools, in contrast to the classical languages of the west, Greek and Latin, which occupied a prominent place. Even more serious was the exclusion of the mother tongues not only of the pupils but also of many of the teachers themselves; in most of the English schools not even the barest lip-service was paid to the teaching of Sinhala, let alone its rich and varied tradition of classical literature both in prose as well as in poetry. The traditional arts and crafts of Sri Lanka, too, were almost completely ignored, as were the indigenous religions, Buddhism and Hinduism.

Through this careful exclusion of almost everything that was native and indigcnous, an English school in the early and mid-19th century was inevitably converted into a breeding ground of alien cultural traditions, customs and manners; this was particularly so where, as in the principal schools like the Colombo Academy, St. Thomas' College and Trinity College, the majority of the pupils were boarders. For instance, at St. Thomas' (founded by James Chapman, Bishop of Colombo, in 1851), the scholars enjoyed "a diet of roast beef and plum pudding on Sundays, a custom which Bishop Chapman is said to have introduced from Eton... the College motto, *Esto Perpetua* was an Eton legend introduced into St. Thomas' at the very beginning of its career, while the school arms were the medallion of St. Thomas which appears on the cover of the magazine... Bishop Chapman had been a master at Eton under Keate, and his son-in-law."³⁶

The teacher-pupil relationship in the English colleges, too, was completely alien to a country where the traditional attitude of the pupil towards his teacher was one of great reverence, respect, humbleness and even complete subservience; at St. Thomas', again, "the members of the college were treated more like undergrads in a University than as school-boys. They were always addressed as "Mister."³⁷

Recreations and games, too, were exclusively British. The favourite games were cricket and rugby football. The traditions of the British Public School system were thus engrafted upon the local school system without any significant modifications or departures to suit the Sri Lankan context. The colleges had "their sixth forms and their prefects, their organised games and athletic sports, their debating and other societies, in some a house system, and their school songs (in English, of course) . . . To have a platoon of the cadet battalion was reckoned a status symbol, highly prized by college principals . . ."³⁸ The majority of the college and school principals themselves were, even by the end of the 19th century, British clergymen trained in British public schools.

36. W. T. Keble, *A History of St. Thomas' College, Colombo*, Colombo, 1937, pp. 5-6.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

38. S. A. Pakeman, *Ceylon*, London, 1964, p. 103.

II

The denationalising, de-ruralising, and intellectually and socially cramping results of the system of education prevalent in most of the British colonies manifested themselves in Sri Lanka too throughout the 19th century. The far-reaching consequences of the continuance of an ill-suited system of education borrowed from England and engrafted upon a radically different socio-cultural ethos were only rarely, if at all, anticipated or understood in all their seriousness during the first half of the 19th century, for the period between 1832 and 1860 was perhaps not long enough for the ill-effects of the system to emerge clearly to the surface. One of the rare, perceptive spirits whose intuition told him unerringly in advance what the ultimate outcome of the then-current system of education would turn out to be, was George Turnour.³⁹ Turnour, who was "both coffee planter and a student of Pali learning," and one of the early representatives of that "British civil servants' tradition of learned dilettantism"⁴⁰ in Sri Lanka, was one of the earliest translators of the *Mahāvamsa*. In the introduction to his translation of this ancient Pāli chronicle, George Turnour debunked in no uncertain terms the system of English education in vogue in the Island in the 1830s as a system which was exclusively geared to the production of "official translators" (instead of educated men). These translators, i.e., the typical products of contemporary education, were exposed by Turnour in their essential hollowness thus: "Their education, as regards the acquisition of their native language, was formerly seldom persevered in beyond the attainment of a grammatical knowledge of Sinhalese; the ancient history of their country, and the mysteries of the religion of their ancestors, rarely engaged their serious attention."⁴¹ The translators referred to by Turnour here were, of course, the cruder prototypes of James Alwis and numerous other English-educated Sri Lankans in the 19th century; indeed, James Alwis himself sought his first employment as a court interpreter in 1841.⁴² Like Alwis, but nearly a decade earlier, Turnour perceived that "the principal study" of this "upper" stratum of English-educated Ceylonese "was the English language, pursued not for its own merits" (i.e., the excellence of its literature, culture, etc.) but "in order that they might qualify themselves for those official appointments, which were the objects of their ambition."⁴³ The words of Turnour were indeed prophetic, when viewed with hindsight at the present day; in his comments regarding the inappropriateness of contemporary education Turnour thus

39. For a short account of George Turnour's contributions to Oriental scholarship, see the article by D. W. Wickramaratne in *Eminent Orientalists, Indian, European, American*, Madras, 1922, pp. 80a-80b.

40. E. F. C. Ludowyk, *The Story of Ceylon*, Faber and Faber, London, 1972, p. 232.

41. George Turnour, *The Mahāvamsa in Roman Characters, with the Translation Subjoined; and an Introductory Essay on Pali Buddhistical Literature*, in 2 Volumes. Vol. 1. Containing the First Thirty Eight Chapters, Colombo, 1837, p. v.

42. *Memoirs and Desultory Writings*, pp. 65-66.

43. Turnour, *op. cit.*, p. v.

initiated a whole tradition of radical protest against the colonial system of education which persisted for more than a century after the Colbrooke reforms — an alien, lop-sided system which enthroned the English language at the expense of the native languages, Sinhala and Tamil.

By mid-century, the sense of dissatisfaction and disillusionment foreshadowed by Turnour appears to have been shared by a sizeable section of the intelligentsia of the time, especially (and ironically enough) by the members of the English community then resident in Sri Lanka. George Barrow, a traveller in Sri Lanka in the mid-50s, recorded:

It was contended by some that, to do any good at all, or communicate any instructions worth acquiring or retaining, we must not only impart quite new knowledge to the native mind, but also impart it through a new medium; others, on the contrary, maintained that an education of this kind, imparted by means of English books and in the English language would at least be but a feeble and sickly exotic incapable of taking root in the native soil, much less of bringing forth any fruit.⁴⁴

This indicates how the early complacency that a typically “English” education of the Oxbridge and Public School type could be the “Ultima Thule” of the Sri Lankan youth had by this time given way to serious soul-searching, if not to complete disillusionment. In December 1853, for instance, a writer calling himself “Henry Candidus” wrote in *Young Ceylon*: “They give us a poor English education merely to suit their own selfish views, that is to say, they must have natives to fill the minor offices, and they train them up to do the drudgery.”⁴⁵

Yet another critic of the contemporary system of English education and its pitiful products, strange to say, was the Rev. D. G. Gogerly, the principal antagonist of the Sinhala Buddhists in mid-century, and the author of *Kristiyāni Pragnapti* (1848), that highly provocative anti-Buddhist polemical publication which played a central role in the Buddhist-Sinhala revival as well as in Buddhist-Christian controversy. James Alwis relates how, in a speech delivered by Gogerly at a public meeting in support of the Colombo Union Library, “the Rev. Gentleman expressed his sentiments on this subject to the following effect: ‘It was a fact also, that educated Sinhalese, in giving attention to English learning and literature, had entirely overlooked their own.’”⁴⁶ Later, in 1862, Gogerly printed a thousand English copies of a tract originally published in

44. George Barrow, *Ceylon: Past and Present*, London, 1857, p. 161.

45. Quoted in E. F. C. Ludowyk, *The Modern History of Ceylon*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1966, p. 128.

46. James de Alwis, *The Sidath Sangarawa, A Grammar of the Singhalese Language, Translated into English, with Introduction, Notes and Appendices*, Colombo, MDCCCLII (1852), p. ccxlviii.

Sinhala,⁴⁷ for, "knowing that the majority of the young Sinhalese who study occidental literature systematically neglect their own language, I fear that the Sinhalese edition will not be easily understood by them," a devastating statement which perhaps unwittingly boomeranged on Gogerly himself and his brother missionaries-in-arms who, more than anyone else, used 'English education' as an inducement for conversion to Christianity.

Thus, ironically enough, the first wave of self-examination and protest against the ill-suited and alien system of English education foisted upon Sri Lankans in the 19th century was the result of the misgivings expressed by representatives of the British Christian *raj* themselves: the members of the civil service, the missionaries and the travellers in the Island. These men initiated a tradition of protest which, from small beginnings, grew increasingly radical as the Sinhalese and the Tamils themselves joined its ranks taking up cudgels against a pernicious system which (they believed) was hampering their cultural development and identity, and (in the final analysis) the full flowering of their personalities.

James Alwis was probably the first of a long line of distinguished "natives" of Sri Lanka to denounce categorically the system of 'English' education that he himself had undergone through compulsion rather than by choice. He was to be followed by several others, including Ananda Coomaraswamy, Ponnambalam Arunachalam, Ponnambalam Ramanathan, Arumuka Navalar, Anagarika Dharmapala and Piyadasa Sirisena in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

According to a distinguished contemporary, C. A. Lorenz, the leading advocate of the day, James Alwis was "justly distinguished all the world over, especially in Europe," for his literary pursuits;⁴⁹ in the words of Sir W. H. Gregory, a Governor of Sri Lanka, he was "one of Ceylon's most distinguished men."⁵⁰ R. Spence Hardy of the Wesleyan Mission saw fit to "specially mention (the name) of the learned editor and translator of the *Silat Sangarawa*," as being "heard in the halls of science and literature along with those borne by men of world-wide reputation."⁵¹ Twenty years after Alwis' death, G. H. Perera, co-editor of the Sinhala newspaper, the *Dinukara Prakāsa*, made the following assessment of Alwis' place in contemporary Sri Lankan society: "As an Oriental scholar, a legislator, a speaker, a writer and a lawyer, the erudite advocate rendered yeoman service to the community of which he was a distinguished leader . . . The

47. The tract referred to here is Rev. D. J. Gogerly's *Kristiyāni Pragnapti*, which was published in English in 1848.

48. Gogerly to Elijah Hoole, April 1859, quoted in Goonaratne, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

49. G. H. Perera, *Verses and Stanzas by the Late Hon. James de Alwis with a Sketch of His Life*, Colombo, 1897, English Preface. (The text of this book is in Sinhala; the Preface, however, is followed by an English version).

50. *Memoirs and Desultory Writings*, p. 160.

51. R. Spence Hardy, *The Legends and Theories of the Buddhists, Compared with History and Science*, London, 1866, p. 227.

numerous useful and learned productions of the honourable gentleman are so widely known and appreciated both at home and abroad, that they serve to immortalise his name."⁵² John Murdoch, a leading contemporary missionary, recommending Alwis for the task of preparing a catalogue of the Sinhala, Pali and Sanskrit literary works of Sri Lanka, had this to say: "James de Alwis Esquire has written the best account of Sinhalese literature which has been published and is well known to Oriental scholars for his works on Grammar and Buddhism."⁵³ A petition sent by 667 Sri Lankans to the Governor in the same year said: "In the literature of our language Mr. Alwis cannot be excelled in Ceylon,"⁵⁴ while a memorial presented by 2252 inhabitants of the Western Province to Governor Macarthy indicated that the then-vacant seat in the Legislative Council should have been filled by "one who is intimately acquainted with the wants, habits, customs, feelings and literature of the Sinhalese; and there is none who possesses the above qualifications . . . in so eminent a degree as Mr. James Alwis."⁵⁵

III

At the beginning of the 20th century, Rev. A. G. Fraser, Principal of Trinity College, Kandy, described the typical products of 19th century English education as "men whose English-type education had kept them out of touch with their national culture," which led to "the frustration they felt at being neither English among the English nor Ceylonese among their own people."⁵⁶ Fraser's clear grasp of the tragic plight of the Sinhala-speaking student educated exclusively in the English medium in a thoroughly 'anglicised' atmosphere which bred contempt for everything that was native and traditional led Fraser, the man of courage, honesty and integrity that he was, to declare categorically: "A thorough knowledge of the mother-tongue is indispensable to true culture of real thinking power. More, a college fails if it is not producing true citizens; and men who are isolated from the masses of their own people by ignorance of their language and thought can never fulfil the part of educated citizens or be true leaders of their race."⁵⁷

The frustrated, uprooted and disinherited English-educated Sinhala youth, depicted so vividly in their different ways by Ananda Coomaraswamy and A. G. Fraser, finds his most typical embodiment in James Alwis (1823-1878). His comparatively short life of 55 years spanning the second

52. G. H. Perera, *op. cit.*, English Preface.

53. James de Alwis, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Sanskrit, Pali and Sinhalese Literary Works of Ceylon*, Vol. I, Colombo, 1870, p. xiv.

54. Quoted in *Memoirs and Desultory Writings* pp. 91-93.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

56. W. E. F. Ward, *Fraser of Trinity and Achimota*, Ghana Universities Press, 1965, pp. 53-54.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

and third quarters of the 19th century provides excellent material for a case study of the disinherited bilingual intellectual in colonial Sri Lanka whose tragedy lay (ironically) in his great bilingual attainment itself—in Alwis' case, an unusually brilliant command of oral and written English, an alien tongue, together with an equally deep knowledge and appreciation of Sinhala language and literature, especially of its great classical tradition, well buttressed by a familiarity with the two Oriental classical languages, Sanskrit and Pāli.

James Alwis towered colossus-like among his countrymen in mid-19th century in respect of education, powers of oral and written expression (in both English and Sinhala), sensibility and literary talent (both creative as well as critical). Perhaps only a perfect or near-perfect bilingual of James Alwis' rare calibre could have found the correct bearings (albeit rather late in life) in an age when there existed an unabating craze for English: "English! English! English! is all the rage now," wrote George Baugh in 1875.⁵⁸ Lesser men, the English-educated Sinhala youth who remained for ever ignorant of the rich storehouse of his own native language, literature and culture, and the Sinhala-educated Buddhist bhikkhu, Oriental pundit or vernacular schoolmaster, whose voices went unheard, were handicapped by limitations that were inherent to their personal situations: to the former, ignorance was anglicised bliss whereas to the latter group English education remained a bunch of sour grapes which could, for their offspring, perchance, turn out to be the promised golden fruit.⁵⁹

Though born and nurtured in a prosperous family⁶⁰ which at the time of his infancy and youth was still firmly rooted in the native soil and its traditional culture, James Alwis underwent an experience that he probably shared with hundreds of his countrymen, when in 1830 (at the tender age of five years) he was compelled to undergo a typically 'English' colonial education. It was an education imparted exclusively in the English medium, in a thoroughly 'westernised' environment of "a private school kept by Mr. George Dupy, an Indo-Eurasian, who was, I believe, the head clerk of Mr. Boyd, Commissioner of Revenue."⁶¹ This important stage of his life when Alwis was torn away from his traditional linguistic and cultural

58. George Baugh to the MMS Committee, Galle, March 30, 1875, quoted in Goonaratne, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

59. Cf. "The Sinhalese who went to the English schools established by government, adopted English ways of life without either assimilating them sufficiently or transforming the old ways of life and thought. They gradually lost sight of their cultural background while those who studied through the medium of Sinhalese absorbed little of the new ideas. Thus there was not sufficient blending of the old and the new. It might have been different had bilingualism been adopted and the two cultures been allowed to influence each other. Instead, this process drove a wedge into the Sinhalese society and divided it into two sections." G. C. Mendis, *Ceylon Today and Yesterday*, Colombo, 1957, p. 169.

60. Cf. "When I first knew my parents they were very wealthy, and lived in every comfort, perhaps more comfortably than our clansmen." *Memoirs and Desultory Writings*, p. 16.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

moorings was described by him later on in life in the following words: "When I was five years old I was taught Sinhalese at home by my mother, and occasionally by an ex-priest.⁶² Having soon after commenced to study English, I neglected my Sinhalese; and it is very remarkable I had not read beyond the *Vyasakara* until I returned to the study of Sinhalese in 1845."⁶³

The entire course of James Alwis' education from his fifth year onwards followed faithfully the general pattern described in part I of the present study. Having left the private school run by George Dupy around 1830, Alwis attended several other schools including "the Colombo Government Seminary, the Academy opposite the Kachcheri, Mr. Van Twest's school in the Pettah, and those of Mr. F. de Livera, the late District Judge of Colombo, and of the Rev. S. W. Dias, Sinhalese Colonial Chaplain."⁶⁴ During the whole of this period, (i. e., 1830-1836) he also attended "the drawing school kept in the Pettah by Monsieur Hypolite Sylvan" which (ironically enough) "proved of immense benefit" to him "in after life."⁶⁵ Alwis' father's failure in business in 1873, culminating in the loss of all his family fortune including their ancestral residence threatened a setback to young James' education; however, his father, in spite of his straitened circumstances, continued to fulfil his parental obligations by giving his son the best English education that was available at the time. In 1837 James was admitted to the public seminary started in that year by Rev. Joseph Marsh of the Church Mission. It was Marsh's school which subsequently became the Colombo Academy, the precursor of the present Royal College.

As far as can be gathered from Alwis' writings, the stultifying nature of the English education he had received was not greatly heeded by him at the time. He appears to have been, if at all, a docile conformist, which was perhaps made possible by the fact that being a child from a Christian family, the proselytising bias of contemporary English education did not arouse any resentment within him on the one hand, while, on the other, the vast treasurehouse of literature in his mother tongue continued to remain a sealed book to him. It was much later (after 1845, the watershed in Alwis' career, when he rediscovered his own linguistic and literary heritage

62. i. e., an ex-Buddhist bhikku, Batuvantudāve Devarakṣita one of the most erudite scholars of Elu, Pali and Sanskrit of the day, who became Alwis' "Pundit" later. Of Batuvantudāve, James Alwis said later: "I cannot adequately express the sense of my obligations to my Pundit, Batuwantudawe . . ." *An Introduction to Kachchayana's Grammar of the Pali Language*, Colombo, 1863, pp. cxxv-cxxvi. Also of. "I know not how to express sufficiently the value of the instructions and assistance. I have received from my teacher - Batuwantudawe, Pandit. His erudition, his intelligence, and above all that aptitude for teaching which he possesses to a greater degree than many others with whom I am acquainted, is beyond praise. As a first rate Pali and Sanskrit scholar - he stands foremost amongst his countrymen of the present day. And as a Sinhalese scholar, I can bear willing testimony to his being second to none in this Island". *Leisure Hours*, 1863, p. xiii.

63. *Memoirs and Desultory Writings*, P. 16.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

65. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

through painstaking self-study), as a result of hindsight and afterthought, and aided by a self-mortifying personal humiliation as an apprentice court interpreter, that Alwis finally achieved an adequate realisation of the baneful effects of the exclusive English education that he (like his fellow countrymen) had undergone in his youth. It was only then, in middle age, tragically enough, that Alwis achieved that all-important self-realisation which prompted him to castigate contemporary English education as "a most pernicious system of education now carried on among my countrymen."⁶⁶

The self-realisation, of course, came to Alwis far too late in life for him to undo completely the harm that English education had wrought upon his own individual personality; nevertheless, the personal experience was strong and far-reaching enough to compel Alwis to adopt an attitude towards contemporary westernised education that would have been at the time (i. e. , around 1860) termed unorthodox, 'reactionary,' rebellious, even treasonous, not only by the English overlords but even by his Sri Lankan compatriots themselves. Alwis was so deeply moved by the plight of himself and his similarly-placed countrymen educated exclusively in the English medium that he went on courageously to debunk the entire system of contemporary education in the forthright terms already quoted.

Alwis' anatomy of the contemporary socio-cultural situation is always reasonable and erudite, befitting his scholarly nature; he concedes that the craze for English was justified at a certain time (i. e. , at the beginning of the British reign in Sri Lanka) when, as the language of the administration and of commerce English was the sole pathway to preferment, the one overriding qualification in the rat-race for government employment:

The necessity for English-speaking men was so greatly felt that both the parents and teachers devoted their most earnest and exclusive attention in the education of the young, to teach them English. Without a knowledge of English in those days, the natives could not get any employment, and the Government could not be carried on without English-speaking natives. The proceeding was, therefore, justified by the exigencies of the times.⁶⁷

In the early days, as Alwis said, the Sinhalese and the Tamils were handicapped in the unequal competition with the Burghers for Government employment, since English was only a second language to the former. Alwis' quarrel was with the parents and teachers of his own generation, not with those of the earliest generation under colonial rule. The teachers, "parents and those who took an interest in the cause of education," says Alwis, "did not pause to reflect on a change as circumstances changed, *vires acquirit eundo*."⁶⁸ During this later, contemporary period, declared

65. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

67. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

68. *Ibid.*, p.27.

Alwis, the individuals above referred to "were led away, by the force of practice. They confined all studies to English. They stuck exclusively to English, even after Ceylon had been one-third of a century under British rule."⁶⁹ The development of Alwis' thinking here is quite clear; one-third of a century, it is implied, was surely adequate for a change-over from English to the indigenous languages. What was exasperating to Alwis was the fact, therefore, that "they (i. e., the parents and teachers of the generation immediately preceding his own) continued the practice even when a change was profitable to the people, and highly desired by the government and the missionary."⁷⁰ The blame for taking a jaundiced view of contemporary requirements is thus laid by Alwis squarely at the door of his own countrymen rather than at those of their colonial overlords and foreign missionaries.

James Alwis proceeds to analyse the contemporary educational situation further in his characteristically sober vein, adopting a tone of regret tinged with disillusionment with (and disgust for) past errors and an attitude of ironic detachment; in spite of his own close involvement with English education, he traces in clear outline the inevitable consequences of the neglect and lack of foresight that characterised the actions of his predecessors as follows: "The ill-effects of the system were soon felt, and yet no one noticed them until the Honourable George Turnour⁷¹ justly exposed the baneful system in his introduction to the Mahavansa."⁷² To Alwis, the purblindness of his countrymen even after the publication of Turnour's attack was inexcusable and tragic, yet true: "Still it would seem no sensible change took place for a long time. The only desire for a mastering of English Vernacular education (*sic*) was disregarded. Sinhalese was neglected."⁷³

The "baneful" consequences that followed the neglect of the vernaculars hinted at by a few individuals like Turnour before Alwis are now stated explicitly in an indictment that is damning and disconcerting: "Even amongst the higher classes a knowledge of their own language was confined to a bare ability to read and write, and that too with indifference. Even such scanty learning was given up in course of time, and I am grieved to record that there are numbers among the Sinhalese, who, whilst they are proficient in Greek, Latin and English, are unable to read a common Sinhalese manuscript or read the Bible in their mother-tongue, or take a deposition on the bench of a Gansabhava."⁷⁴

69. *Ibid.* (Emphasis added).

70. *Ibid.*

71. See above, Part I of the present essay, for George Turnour's remarks on English education in his introduction to the translation of the Mahavamsa.

72. *Memoirs and Desultory Writings*, p. 17.

73. *Ibid.*

74. *Ibid.*

There is heavy irony here, as well as caustic denunciation of the Sinhalese, for the reference to "the bench of a Gansabhava" sets in motion ironical reverberations related to Alwis' own career later on, especially to that tragico-ironical situation in which he found himself serving as a tongue-tied court interpreter (as will be described below).

However, in spite of the tone of despondency of the remarks quoted above, Alwis also perceived a ray of sanguine expectation for the future; for, having exchanged views on the subject with his contemporaries, he realised that a general and widespread cognizance for the need for a radical change of the educational system was gradually growing and crystallising amongst his contemporaries—that he was not a lone fighter, as he had earlier surmised: "The Sinhalese, I am glad to say, are now⁷⁵ beginning to feel the imperfection of the system of education imparted. Many a person has spoken to me on the subject. Often have I conferred on it with my countrymen, and I believe not without profit. The system must be changed."⁷⁶

Not only did Alwis perform his function as a representative of the central consciousness of his time and age by voicing a wide-ranging feeling of disgruntlement with contemporary education; he even made precise and concrete proposals for a thoroughgoing transformation of the educational system then prevalent. The alternative system that Alwis advocated, fairly comprehensive in its detail, was characterised by a greater emphasis on the study of the mother-tongue of the pupil—on the study of Sinhala and its literature—at least during the early stages of a pupil's school career. Not only had emphasis to be placed on the acquisition of a knowledge of the orthographic system of Sinhala—also, and very important, the texts to be utilised ought to be those elementary textbooks in Sinhala, Pāli and Sanskrit which had been traditionally employed, especially in the *pirivenas* and Buddhist temple schools. This latter proposal was an implicit recognition that Alwis accepted (by this time at least, if not from the beginning) the necessity and desirability of a traditional training in "Elu, Pali and Sanskrit" as imparted by the Buddhist monks in their traditional educational institutions: "More attention ought to be paid to the study of Sinhalese in the early stage of a boy's studies. Do this when the children are young. Let lessons in Sinhalese extend to *Vyasakara*, and insist also upon an ability to write a legible hand."⁷⁷ In other words, had James Alwis been familiar with today's technical jargon, he would have asserted that the

75. That is, around 1850, the time Alwis was composing the early parts of the *Memoirs and Desultory Writings*. The *Memoirs* appear to have been written during a period of about fifteen years. Page 124 of the *Memoirs* refers to 1873 as the time of composition; an event of 1875 is referred to on the same page. Some of the Legislative Council debates referred to in the memoirs took place in 1875. The section relevant to the present discussion, however, was probably written in 1862. Cf. *Memoirs and Desultory Writings*, p. 25: "At this time (1862) I almost feel ashamed. . ."

76. *Memoirs and Desultory Writings*, p. 17. Italics in original.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

“superstructure” of a Sri Lankan child’s education (which would be English) had to rest upon a solid “infrastructure” of a sound knowledge of his mother-tongue and its ancient literature. The period from 4 to 6 years of age would at the same time lay the foundation for a *bilingual* education, for the pupil would be expected, during this interval, to “master the English alphabet, and the first book of lessons. Beyond this, let him not attempt anything, except, perhaps, to be able to write a, b, c, d, & e. in his copy-book.”⁷⁸

As a result of the implementation of his proposals in the area of primary education, James Alwis envisaged a time when (by the age of six or earlier) the pupil would “master his Sinhalese.”⁷⁹ Thereafter, English would assume greater importance as a medium of instruction. Indeed, English could even be given exclusive preference if desired, provided that Sinhala was not being completely neglected. On leaving school, (i. e., at the end of the pupil’s secondary education), as Alwis advocated, the pupil should once again apply himself to an acquisition of his mother-tongue and its literature, by which Alwis meant “not simply to read and write it, but to understand all our classical writers, and to imitate the styles of composition suitable for different subjects.”⁸⁰ Alwis here adds an important corollary and forewarning: “Above all, my advice to him (i. e., the pupil) is, “Do not be guided by the rules of English composition, or what Englishmen set down as the best specimens of Sinhalese style.”⁸¹

Thus, at the latest by the time he came to write his memoirs, Alwis had convinced himself that the only profitable type of education for a Sinhalese pupil was a *bilingual* one; more, that he (the pupil) had not only to gain a proficiency in the reading and writing of both Sinhala and English (the mother-tongue and the state language respectively) but also to acquire a knowledge of, and a taste for, both English literature as well as classical and contemporary Sinhala literature.

To trace the origin and development of James Alwis’ thoughts on contemporary colonial education is to throw an important and interesting light on the plight of the Sinhalese intellectual in the 19th century, especially the Sinhalese belonging to a traditionally aristocratic family, whose acquisition of English (and the vast storehouse of literature, philosophy and ethics that the language gave access to) soon led him to frustration, disillusionment, and nostalgic self-reproach for having cut himself off from his vital socio-cultural roots. English education being highly

78. *Ibid.*

79. *Ibid.*

80. *Ibid.*

81. *Ibid.*

exclusive at the time of James Alwis (and also very expensive⁸²) and a symbol of social status and power as well as wealth, a rapidly-widening gulf was being created between a tiny minority of pupils educated in English in the English colleges and the *hoi polloi* whose education was confined to the Sinhala medium in the third-rate vernacular schools. More important, the clear-cut difference in the media of instruction in the two types of schools was manifested outwardly through "western" and "native" dress respectively. Only English-educated men could wear full or partial European dress (coat and pair of trousers, often with a waistcoat, shirt and neck-tie),⁸³ while the Sinhala-educated was forever condemned to wear one or the other of the forms of "native" costume all of which included a span of cloth in place of the pair of trousers). The English language was also the passport to a lucrative government post or to a place in the legal or medical professions and to the "westernised" or "anglicised" upper stratum of Sri Lankan society, the hallmarks of which were European dress, English conversation, western forms of food and drink, sports and pastimes, not to mention the consumption of whisky and other kinds of intoxicating liquor, ballroom dancing, horse-racing, gambling and club-going.

Thus the type of English education imparted in colonial Sri Lanka more often than not created a type of society which was fast dividing itself into two distinct social strata, cutting across the traditional forms of social stratification (like language, religion, race and caste). Thus within the same race, religion, village or even a single family the "westernised," "educated" individuals held themselves aloof from their neighbours and even blood-relations who were not as "well-educated" as themselves. This new middle class elite was "in many ways the most English of Asians, and more English than the English."⁸⁴

82. At the Colombo Academy (re-modelled by North) for example, "The sons of Moodeliars were particularly catered for." (H. A. Wyndham, *op. cit.*, p. 39); the Colombo Academy was established in 1836 "to educate sons of the upper classes of the Sinhalese in English, the Classics, Mathematics and Religion" (*Ibid.*, p. 41). In 1838, "the fees in the High School (of the Academy) (were) Rds. 8 per head", which was quite a large sum of money at the time. *Memoirs and Desultory Writings*, p. 29. When the St. Thomas' College Preparatory School opened in 1851, "the monthly fees for the school were 2s. 6d. to 10s. and those of the College, when it opened, were £3 to £5" Keble, *A History of St. Thomas' College, Colombo*, 1937, p. 6. In 1872, at Trinity College, Kandy, "Tuition fees were Rs. 10 for the upper school and Rs. 3 for the lower." Reinmann, *A History of Trinity College, Kandy*, p. 10. At the turn of the 19th century, "In the Royal College the monthly fees (were) Rs. 5 in the lower school and Rs. 10 in the higher school." A. Wright (Ed), *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon*, 1907, p. 223. In contrast to such exclusive schools, "In Government Anglo-Vernacular Schools a uniform fee (was) charged. In the first and second standards the monthly payment (was) 25 cts. per head for the boys learning English; in the fourth and fifth standards, 50 cts.; and in the sixth, seventh and eighth standards, Re. 1." *Ibid.*
83. Over the European dress, a piece of cloth was often worn by the English-educated 'natives'; this was probably the regular costume worn by James Alwis too. (See the photograph of Alwis reproduced as frontispiece in G. H. Perera, *op. cit.*).
84. B. H. Farmer, *Ceylon, A Divided Nation*, Oxford University Press, London, 1963, p. 51.

Such "black Englishmen" (in Sinhala, "*kalu suddo*") as they were to be called (especially by Anagarika Dharmapala and by the early Sinhala novelists like Piyadasa Sirisena and M. C. F. Perera) could continue living their rootless lives in a social context where the English language and western culture remained firmly enthroned, with the European masters in complete political control; the vast majority of the English-educated Sri Lankans up to the end of the 19th century without doubt belonged to this category. However, the more sensitive intellectuals of relatively refined sensibility and culture (as typified during this period by James Alwis⁸⁵) were compelled to explore their psychological predicament and to seek solutions and remedies. Such individuals, of course, were rare; one of the earliest individuals to achieve such self-realisation was Alwis. Moreover, Alwis was courageous enough not to yield to despair, nor to follow dishonestly the path of least resistance: that of disregarding his conscience and exploiting for personal profit the advantageous circumstances in which he found himself fortuitously placed, especially towards the latter part of his life.

The gradual, yet increasingly deepening sense of mortification and recrimination that Alwis had indubitably to suffer as a result of the cultural conflict outlined above during his maturing years reached its climax in an incident of excruciating personal shame and humiliation. Having completed his formal education at the Colombo Academy, Alwis was successful in obtaining a probationary appointment as an 'Interpreter Mudliyar' in one of the Island's principal law courts.⁸⁶ It was when Alwis assumed the duties of his first employment that he was confirmed in his misgivings about the real practical worth and efficacy of the type of exclusive English education that he had received in one of the best colleges in the Island. To his everlasting disgrace and ignominious self-debasement, Alwis discovered that his much-vaunted English education was little more than useless in the context of the wider contemporary society. This crucial incident which led Alwis to a complete and radical reappraisal of contemporary Sri Lankan education and to a deeply introspective analysis of the social forces at work in the contemporary socio-cultural milieu is perhaps best described in Alwis' own words; the following passage conveys with deep feeling tinged with self-irony and pathos the tragic and humiliating plight of the culturally disinherited intellectual in mid-19th century Sri Lanka:

Several days afterwards after consulting my friend Mr. Abeysinghe I went to the court. On being introduced to the Judge, I took my seat next to my friend, and on being bidden to do so, I rose on my

85. This type of individual, of course, was still a member of a minority group in the 19th century.

86. Alwis does not specify the court by name; however, Mr. Abeysinghe (by whose side Alwis describes himself as having been seated on this day) was employed in the Colombo South courts, presided over by Mr. W. C. Gibson, District Judge.

legs to convey to a party what the judge had to say. I could scarcely utter three words before I felt my inability to proceed. Mr. Dias prompted me, but the help thus proffered only added to my wild confusion. My tongue was tied, my head was in a whirl, and I sat down amidst the laughter of that class of men who generally take a pleasure in the failings of their fellow-creatures.⁸⁷

It was on this occasion, without doubt, that Alwis' thinking on the contemporary educational system and its sheer unsuitability in its context took a radical turn. Faced with this personal defeat, this public humiliation, Alwis did not indulge in nostalgic defeatism and despair as most others placed in such a dilemma would have done. Instead, Alwis took a firm, realistic hold upon himself. With characteristic humility and self-recrimination, he set out resolutely to set right, as far as was humanly possible, a wrong for which he himself was partly, though unknowingly responsible. Instead of glossing over his faults and limitations (as most of his contemporaries did), Alwis affirmed with admirable humility, courage and self-awareness: "I was, at this time, not sufficiently acquainted with Sinhalese so as intelligently to convey by it, even that with which I had some acquaintance."⁸⁸ Objective thinking led Alwis to examine critically his knowledge of his mother-tongue, in which he found himself seriously wanting: "My book learning, like that of many of my class, was such that my Sinhalese had not extended beyond the *Vyasakara*; and it is a fact I could not translate three lines of the easiest book from English into Sinhalese."⁸⁹ Next, Alwis with rare courage at once set about a serious study of the Sinhala classics, going back to his indigenous cultural roots and declaring: "My failure was one to my good, for I soon became sensible of my deficiencies, and at once resolved to abandon all idea, at least for the time, of becoming an interpreter, and devote my earnest attention to the study of the Sinhalese language."⁹⁰

Alwis' resoluteness expressed in the above quotation soon bore fruit, for, as is well known, within a few years he published a critical translation of the only authentic classical grammar of Sinhala, the *Sidat Saṅgarāva*.⁹¹ Moreover, Alwis attained such a proficiency in Sinhala grammar, composition, poetics and metrics as to be able to engage in the translation of Sinhala prose and poetry into English, and even to compose original prose and poetry in his mother-tongue.⁹² Furthermore, Alwis' lengthy and scholarly introduction of 286 pages to his translation of the *Sidat Saṅgarāva* proved to be *de facto* a comprehensive survey of the entire history and development

87. *Memoirs and Desultory Writings*, pp. 65 - 66.

88. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

89. *Ibid.*

90. *Ibid.*

91. *The S' dath Sangarawa*. . . , Colombo, 1852.

92. For Alwis' original writings in Sinhalese, see *Contributions to Oriental Literature*; or, *the Leisure Hours*, by James D' Alwis, Part 1, Colombo, 1863, and G. H. Perera, *op.cit.*

of the Sinhala language and its literature (prose and poetry) from the earliest time to Alwis' own day. This survey, based on careful reading and appreciation of the vast body of classical Sinhala literature spanning nearly ten centuries, was the first landmark of critical scholarship in Sinhala. In this detailed and perceptive critical survey Alwis used, for the first time in Sinhala, the modern western canons of literary criticism and appreciation, giving birth to a tradition of practical criticism in Sinhala.

From 1845 to the end of his career, the baneful effects of the exclusive English education that he had himself received in his youth and early manhood appear to have engaged Alwis' serious attention and condemnation. Alwis returned to his indictment of the system of contemporary education in his Introduction to the *Sidath Sangarawa* published in 1852. Here he reiterates in even greater detail than before the view that the contemporary craze for English was a result of the British domination of Sri Lanka, the language of the conquerors having then become "a language through whose medium they (i.e., the 'natives') are governed, and through which all adjudications in respect of their property, lives and liberties are made."⁹³ A situation thus arose, holds Alwis, in which "to learn the Singhalese, then, in order to become a proficient in that language was with many incompatible with the study of the English."⁹⁴ Alwis also describes, sardonically, how "a knowledge of the English conferred on the native privileges above his unlettered countrymen. This then was the great wealth which he sought to acquire, whilst his own language was neglected, merely as a necessary evil for the purpose of maintaining intercourse with his countrymen."⁹⁵ The result was cultural estrangement, a tearing apart of the individual concerned from his traditional socio-cultural roots; the snowballing effect of the catastrophic process over a period of time was the birth of a group of alienated, disgruntled and frustrated individuals without a firm foothold either in western European culture or in traditional Sinhala culture. James Alwis described the inexorable process as follows:

Thus estranged as it were from his own by the cultivation of a foreign language, each generation following the *habits* and feelings of that which preceded it, grew more and more neglectful; these habits and feelings in respect to their own language acquiring greater strength in their course, from the increased facilities afforded to them by the Government in the study of English.⁹⁶

The ultimate devitalising effect of the process just described has been stressed by James Alwis as well as by numerous contemporary witnesses of the 19th century. Sinhala was degraded to the status of the language of

93. *The Sidath Sangarawa*, Introduction, p. ccxiviii.

94. *Ibid.*

95. *Ibid.*, pp. ccxlviii - ccxlix.

96. *Ibid.*, p. ccxlix.

servants and household menials, carrying with it the mark of cultural inferiority. As Alwis said, the Buddhist priesthood now became the sole remaining repositories of Sinhala scholarship: "The study of Singhalese became thus confined to the priesthood."⁹⁷

James Alwis next proceeds to examine the validity of the current official policy regarding the use of English as the medium of school instruction. The practice of using English as the medium of instruction in schools, "with a view to make English the sole language of the natives," he finds to be "replete with more mischief than benefit," for "to acquire a thorough knowledge of the English it is absolutely necessary to speak, read and think in that language (English) exclusively," and "to reject and forget the Singhalese altogether," which, Alwis asserted, is "next to impossible."⁹⁸ The inescapable solution, therefore, was (it appeared to Alwis) the development of bilingual skills as opposed to the exclusive cultivation of English.

James Alwis' final comment on the contemporary system of English education is uncompromising and unequivocal, for he declared categorically: "It appears to us that a course of study conveyed by, and exclusively confined to, the English, is productive of far greater injury than real good."⁹⁹ Surprising as it may seem, James Alwis, one of the greatest masters of English in Sri Lanka,¹⁰⁰ and perhaps one of the most "westernised" or "anglicised" (in respect of education, dress, manners, and style of living) among 19th century Sinhalese, championed the cause of Sinhala language and literature, rhetorically questioning his compatriots: "Is it then right or just, that the national language of the Sinhalese should be neglected and discouraged?"¹⁰¹ Not only did Alwis pose this question to which the answer was self-evident; he himself proved to be the greatest exemplar of what he exhorted his countrymen to become — perfect bilinguals.

Having pointed in the correct direction to be taken by his countrymen, Alwis now commenced his attack on the second flank: he castigated the representatives of the British crown in Sri Lanka for their lackadaisical (if not hostile) attitude towards the native languages. Alwis pointed out that a knowledge of Sinhala was of supreme importance not only to the Sinhalese themselves but also to their colonial masters, if the latter were to carry out their wardship as 'benevolent' rulers with satisfaction: "It is indeed to be lamented that the English, who have now been more than half-a-century in Ceylon, and who have employed their talents successfully in nearly every branch of Oriental literature, should have yet failed to cultivate with success the Singhalese—a language which is the key to the heart of the

97. *Ibid.*

98. *Ibid.*

99. *Ibid.*, p. ccl.

100. C. "He had a stentorian voice and his Eng'lish was perfect. His eyes flashed . . . and he thundered forth his well-rounded periods." Quoted by Stephen A. Silva, in *Sunday Times of Ceylon*, December 7, 1958. See Goonaratne, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

101. *The Sidath Sangarawa*, Introduction, p. ccli.

native, and the knowledge whereof is of paramount importance to this settler in this island."¹⁰² The Europeans resident in Sri Lanka were clearly guilty of "inattention to the native language" in Alwis' view; but even more serious was the fact that "even the most favoured of the natives devote but little attention to the study of their own language."¹⁰³

In valedictory vein, James Alwis here concludes his introduction to the *Sidath Sangarawa*, outlining his own single-handed efforts to revive and to resuscitate his mother-tongue, which he sincerely felt was then on the decline (and perhaps threatened with extinction) at the hands of the alien British rulers, and his short-sighted anglicised countrymen. Alwis was aware that he himself was perhaps the first to attempt to defend Sinhala "against the slights which Europeans have heaped upon it."¹⁰⁴

The first step in Alwis' protest-cum-attack was the publication of several articles in the *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* on the subject of Sinhala, its history and literature;¹⁰⁵ the next, the publication of the translation (into English) of the *Sidat Saṅgarāva* (with its classic introduction of 256 pages) in 1852. These were quickly followed in 1863 by Alwis' translations, critical pieces and original compositions (in English and Sinhala) in two volumes entitled *Leisure Hours*, and by the translations of Kaccāyana's *Grammar* (1863) and *Attanugalu Vamsa* (1866) from the Pāli. In 1870 was launched Alwis' most ambitious enterprise, a three-volume *Descriptive Catalogue of Sanskrit, Pāli and Sinhalese Literary Works of Ceylon*, of which he was able to complete the first volume before his death. This projected *magnum opus* was compiled to enable "Oriental scholars of many nations" to gather "the intellectual pearls... from Lanka's storehouse of literature;" it was projected as a "description of the now fading, but rich, literature of the country."¹⁰⁶

By 1866, the year in which he published his translation of the *Attanugalu Vamsa*, James Alwis appears to have veered even farther away from an exclusively English-based type of education towards the traditional type vernacular education imparted in Buddhist *pirivenas* from time immemorial, in spite of the fact that Alwis was himself a devout Christian. Although Alwis never advocated going back *in toto* to the ancient Sinhala system of education, he spoke approvingly of the traditional system as having flourished to the satisfaction of the needs of Sri Lanka's citizens in its contemporary social context :

102. *Ibid.*

103. *Ibid.*, p. cclix.

104. *Ibid.*, p. cc'xii.

105. For a list of articles on Sinhalese language, literature and culture contributed by James Alwis to the *Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, see *Memoirs and Desultory Writings*, p. 155.

106. James D' Alwis, *A Descriptive Catalogue of Sanskrit, Pali and Sinhalese Literary Works of Ceylon*, Vol. 1, pp. v-vi.

Nearly every village in the country had a monastery; and every monastery in the kingdom furnished the nucleus of an educational establishment. There was no necessity to appoint teachers. They were identical with the incumbents of temples, and hundreds of educated priests resident in them. No payment was ever made by Government to the teachers, for the priests were maintained by the charities of the people, and the lands dedicated for the benefit of monasteries.¹⁰⁷

The tone of the passage in the context of his earlier attitude to colonial education indicates clearly where Alwis' own sympathies and preferences lay. The important place Alwis wished given to the textbooks traditionally used in vernacular Buddhist education (like the *Vyāsakāra*) has already been indicated.

Later still, in 1867, when he was a leading advocate of the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka, James Alwis reiterated his mature and well-considered views on the then-prevalent educational system in his replies to a questionnaire issued by a sub-committee of the Legislative Council on the subject of education. On this occasion, Alwis stated categorically as his opinion that "the quality of education imparted in this Island . . . is not, in my opinion, such as is adapted to the circumstances of this colony, or the condition of its Native population. *It is not productive of any real good to the great mass of the Singhalese.*"¹⁰⁸ Alwis further characterised the contemporary system of English education as one whereby "they teach children Latin, Greek, and the higher branches of mathematics, before they are able to write a decent letter in English or Singhalese, or to understand a page of any standard work in either of those languages."¹⁰⁹ This extract exemplifies once more that Alwis considered bilingualism to be the ideal form of linguistic achievement for Sri Lankan pupils in the contemporary social context. Here, too, Alwis went deeper than before in his anatomy of the plight of the Sinhala pupil sporting the badge of an exclusive English education (and a superior complex into the bargain); it was his English education, showed Alwis, that caused the alienation of the pupil from his traditional native environment, creating an unbridgeable gap between parent and offspring, brother and brother. The words employed by Alwis here, we note, are a clear index to the personal urgency of his feelings in this regard; the fate of an English-educated pupil follows an inevitable and predetermined course, which Alwis told the Commissioners, ran as follows:

107. *The Attanagalu Vansa or the History of the Temple of Attanagalu, Translated from the Pali with Notes and Annotations, etc.* Colombo, 1866, pp. lxi - lxii.

108. *Sessional Paper No. 8, 1867*, p. dviii.

109. *Ibid.*, p. div.

The very education which the natives receive, is calculated, under the peculiarities of a pernicious social system, to be of no real benefit to them. Hundreds of young men, who yearly leave the school, never return to their homes, their parents, and their agricultural pursuits.¹¹⁰

Alwis recognises here the *social* (as opposed to the *personal*) tragedy inherent in the situation. In this alienation of the educated youth from his parents, brothers and neighbours, from his culture, language and traditions, and in the final analysis from his native soil itself, James Alwis saw the seeds of future social discord and upheaval, of socio-cultural tensions and conflicts which threatened ultimately to destroy the very fabric of contemporary Sinhala society. The English-educated individual now appears to Alwis to be a mere caricature, a misfit and a laughing-stock among the majority of his countrymen, armed with a superiority complex and a few superficial western manners and customs, eating habits and a suit of western clothes: "Dressed in a smart suit of European clothing, they generally dislike to go back to their half-naked relations. Accustomed to the luxuries which their friends had provided them in towns during the years spent in school, they loathe the food of their rustic parents."¹¹¹ Nor was this all: these educated individuals were not only prevented from going back to their "rustic parents" and their traditional agricultural pursuits; ironically, they could not even find the type of lucrative government employment that they were led to expect when they had opted to study English, that 'Ultima Thule' of all their endeavours. It was a situation that was both ironic and tragic: "They therefore resolve to get a Government employment, but this they do not easily get; nor is it indeed possible to find employment for all the lads that leave the Seminaries of this Island."¹¹² The spectre of the educated unemployed had thus already raised its head as far back as the 19th century, but little was being done in spite of the warnings of James Alwis and many others of the time. The majority of these educated individuals apparently ended their careers as thieves and rogues, in Alwis' characteristic understatement: "Many are thus left to their own resources for their livelihood, which... is often earned in a manner which I cannot characterise as honest."¹¹³

Alwis' suggested panacea in this deplorable situation was as follows: "If children of the interior are enabled to receive a vernacular education, we shall not have to deplore the state of things which is referred to in the above extract."¹¹⁴ A vernacular education, according to Alwis, would not

110. *Ibid.*, p. dv.

111. *Ibid.* Also consider in this connection that Mr. Giffening, one of James Alwis' examiners at the proctors' examination, asked Alwis: "Why, man, do Sinhalese people try to become lawyers when their proper business is to cultivate their paddy fields?" *Memoirs and Desultory Writings*, p. 82.

112. *Sessional Paper No. 8, 1867*, p. dv.

113. *Ibid.*

114. *Ibid.*

however, provide a universal panacea ; the ultimate solution lay in weaning away the pupils from the mirage-like attraction, the mad craze, for white-collar government office jobs (together with the life of ease and luxury which went with them hand in hand). Conversely, ultimate survival rested on the inculcation of wholesome attitudes towards traditional agricultural pursuits and manual labour, coupled with a proper respect for Sinhala language, literature, and traditional culture. What was imperative was, in Alwis' words,

a suitable education, duly imparted, so as to bring up the children from their infancy to despise, what the Dutch taught the Sinhalese to look to, place and office; to acquire a taste for agricultural pursuits, and to learn all that may be useful to them in after life, to improve cultivation, and to increase food and the comforts of life... (this) would, I am satisfied, wean them (i.e., the children) from the contemplation or pursuit of visionary schemes to obtain Government situations.¹¹⁵

If Alwis strikes the characteristic note of the post-World War II radical politician and nationalist here, it only serves to throw into bolder relief his sensitivity to and depth of understanding of contemporary socio-political problems and developments ; Alwis here reveals himself not as an ivory-tower scholar-intellectual, but as an intelligent, educated citizen fully alive in his own age, well on his way to becoming a humane, progressive, and even radical political and social reformer.

It has been stated earlier in the present study that Alwis' attack on contemporary education was two-pronged or double-edged or, in other words, fought on two flanks simultaneously. First, of course, Alwis laid the major part of the blame for the deplorable and tragic cultural alienation of the English-educated Sinhalese at the door of Sinhalese parents and teachers. Secondly, the attack was directed at the foreign overlords of the Sinhalese. The attack on this second flank had perforce to be more subtle, devious and indirect than the one on the Sinhalese themselves, at a time when the English held firmly to the reins of governmental power. Alwis moves initially into a position of implied indictment of the British Governors, colonial secretaries and other 'white' administrators by pointing out that not only the Sinhalese themselves but also the British who sought to maintain their power in Sri Lanka would fail in their principal task if they continued to ignore and to even wilfully destroy the Sinhala language, its literature, and traditional Sinhala culture. In his introduction to the *Sidath Sangarawa*, for example, Alwis expressed his disappointment at the indifference and lackadaisical treatment that the Sinhala language had received at the hands of the British, describing it as "a language which is

the key to the heart of the native."¹¹⁶ The same sober, self-assured tone clearly percolates through the opening of Alwis' dedication of the translation of the *Sidath Saṅgarāva* to the Governor, Sir George William Anderson, with its implication that the good government of the Island rested on a clear understanding of "the native society" which in turn could be achieved only through a good knowledge of the native language, Sinhala :

Sir, the constitution of the native society in this Island, the habits and feelings of the Singhalese, their wants and grievances, their domestic and social relations, their traditions and customs . . . which constitute their national character, *can be understood but little without a competent knowledge of the medium through which they are perpetrated—the Singhalese or Elu language.*¹¹⁷

It is a plea which gains its effect by its characteristic restraint and the fine balance of a tone of self-assurance with a tone of respect for the colonial Governor's high office and authority.

Alwis next proceeds to point out in forthright terms that the Governors of the colony would be failing in their duty if they continued to look upon the Sinhala language with indifference, if not with sheer contempt: "To encourage therefore the study of Singhalese, amongst at least the European portion of the inhabitants of Ceylon, will not only be, it is confidently hoped, one of your Excellency's first endeavours, but, it is respectfully submitted, becomes a duty which cannot perhaps be too strongly impressed upon your attention."¹¹⁸

This theme of the deleterious effects of the English masters' ignorance of the language of the people whom they purported to govern "benevolently" Alwis develops at considerable length. He even hints that some of the misunderstandings that occurred during the 1848 disturbances could perhaps have been avoided if the British administrators at the time had possessed a better command of the native languages of their subjects. Referring to the British officials ignorant of Sinhala as individuals who cannot "correctly interpret the language of their (i.e., of the Singhalese) complaints, or the expression of their grievances," Alwis pertinently inquires: "And how often, indeed, does an ignorance of the native character, the habits and feelings of the people (all which spring as it were from their language) induce Europeans to act in a manner hostile to the general interests of the Island?"¹¹⁹

116. *The Sidath Sangarawa*, Introduction, p. cci.

117. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

118. *Ibid.*, p. vi.

119. *Ibid.*

Alwis ends his passionate plea on behalf of a square deal for his mother-tongue in a passage which conveys, in addition to the now-familiar indictment, an attitude of resistance and even proud defiance, based on Alwis' consciousness of the existence of a deliberate desire on the part of English rulers to crush and destroy the Sinhala language :

We have already seen how utterly impossible it is to uproot and exterminate the Singhalese as a language. It may be neglected — its classical authors destroyed and its books lost; but the language itself will continue in some shape or other. . . . Is it then right or just, that the national tongue of the Singhalese should be neglected and discouraged ?¹²⁰

The passage with its passionate rhetorical question is at once an appeal to the sense of fair play and the much-vaunted British code of justice and morals, as well as a proud affirmation of Alwis' belief in the viability and resilience of his mother-tongue.

Not only did James Alwis thus present an eloquent plea for a greater interest in Sinhala and its literature on the part of Sri Lanka's colonial rulers; he also took up arms against those among the colonialists who attempted to denigrate and to misinterpret and misrepresent the quality and achievements of Sinhala literature, in particular British administrators typified by Sir James Emerson Tennent. Tennent in his *Christianity in Ceylon* (published in 1850) had dismissed the entire vast body of classical Sinhala literature in the sweeping and over-confident statement that "their (i.e., of the Singhalese) country presents no vestiges of art, and their literature no achievements of mind";¹²¹ he had also referred disparagingly to the Sinhala classics as "the extravagant legends and unsatisfactory treatises written on ola's, and disseminated under the sanction of the Buddhist priesthood."¹²² Rev. R. Spence Hardy of the Wesleyan Mission (writing in 1864) expressed the opinion that "as to anything that might interest in the events of the passing time, or that comes home to every-day life, their literature is a blank; it has in it no popular element."¹²³ Tennent, Spence Hardy and many others¹²⁴ were of course repeating, parrot-like, the sentiments expressed by Macaulay in his famous minute dated February 2, 1835 on Indian education: "A single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia."

120. *Ibid.*, p. ccli.

121. J. E. Tennent, *Christianity in Ceylon*, p. 258.

122. *Ibid.*, p. 264.

123. R. Spence Hardy, *Jubilee Memorials of the Wesleyan Mission, South Ceylon 1814-64* Colombo, 1864, p. 261.

124. There were exceptions, of course. John Murdoch, addressing the committee of the Museum in 1834, said: "Though a comparatively small nation, the historical works of the Singhalese far surpass in value any produced in India."

James Alwis' defiant retort to Tennent and his ilk reflected his national pride in his native language and its rich literature:

Our language is by no means so imperfect as is insinuated there (i. e., in the works of Tennent, Spence Hardy, etc.). It is indeed owing to such erroneous representations that Europeans look down upon the Singhalese, as a language undeserving of encouragement or study. I shall not, however, dwell upon the injury which such representations are calculated to inflict upon young Ceylon; but I will venture to say, that much of the lukewarmness manifested by people in the study of Singhalese *critically*, has arisen, in a great measure from adopting the views of Europeans ignorant of our language, and unqualified to pronounce an opinion thereon.¹²⁵

The life-experience and literary career of James Alwis thus symbolise particularly well and clearly the plight of an "intelligent and cultivated" Sri Lankan intellectual educated solely in the English medium, who underwent a cultural-spiritual crisis, a conflict which was probably considerably widespread during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Alwis found himself, as we have seen, placed in a socio-cultural ethos in which an alien language (English) was being foisted upon the people by their rulers, a process which had as its inevitable corollary the gradual destruction of the indigenous language, Sinhala, which possessed an unbroken history and an invaluable literary and cultural heritage going back thousands of years. Alwis typified in his own individual career the plight of the culturally and linguistically alienated and disinherited intellectual not only in Sri Lanka but also in many other British colonial possessions in which the vernacular had been supplanted by English. The analogous cultural conflict was pronounced especially in 19th century British India¹²⁶

Fortunately, Alwis' own cultural and linguistic roots had not been completely severed (in spite of his English education), which made it possible for him to initiate a *native* tradition of radical protest against the contemporary system of English education through which he and his compatriots had suffered and continued to suffer. However, his protest was, significantly, limited and inhibited by the fact that being a devout Christian himself he never spoke out openly against the other great drawback of the contemporary educational system — its heavy Christian bias. Nevertheless, Alwis' initiation of a tradition of *native* radical protest had far-

125. *Leisure Hours*, Part 1, p. 78.

126. "We Indians 'became willing disciples of the new teachers . . . thoroughly anglicised in spirit', and learned to despise our own country at the same time that we called ourselves nationalists . . ." Ananda Coomaraswamy, *The Religious Basis of the Forms of Indian Society*, New York, 1946, p. 31. Sir George Birdwood remarked that the "sinister shadow" of English education involves a "slow poisoning of the spiritual life." Quoted in *Ibid.* Also cf. Prof. J. P. Suda, *The Indian National Movement*, Meerut, India, 1969, p. 70: "The spread of western education . . . inflicted a grave spiritual injury upon (the Indians)."

reaching repercussions, for his radical ideas were taken up and developed in even more radical and vociferous vein later on in the early and mid-20th century by such champions of indigenous culture like Ananda Coomaraswamy, Anagarika Dharmapala, Piyadasa Sirisena, John de Silva and Kumaratunga Munidasa.

The central cultural and linguistic conflict analysed above, and so well typified by Alwis' career was probably common to all British colonies of the 19th century; indeed, similar personal cultural conflict must, without doubt, have motivated such characteristic outbursts like Mahatma Gandhi's "I would not have a single Indian forget, neglect or be ashamed of his mother-tongue, or feel that he or she cannot think or express the best thoughts in his, or her own vernacular"¹²⁷ in which sentiments closely akin to those expressed by James Alwis emerge to the surface. Also, James Alwis would have recognised a kindred spirit in Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru, who confessed pathetically, much later: "I have become a queer mixture of East and West, out of place everywhere, at home nowhere,"¹²⁸ as also in Ananda Coomaraswamy, who declared: "In fact we have already fallen between two stools, and do not know our own mind."¹²⁹

SARATHCHANDRA WICKRAMASURIYA

127. Mahatma Gandhi, quoted by Tarzie Vittachi in *The Brown Sahib*, Andre Deutsch, London, 1962, pp. 70-71.

128. Jawaharlal Nehru, quoted by Ananda Coomaraswamy in *The Religious Basis of the Forms of Indian Society*, p. 32.

129. Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Ibid.*, p. 32.