

THE REAL POWER BEHIND THE THRONE: A DISCOURSE STUDY OF THE ROLE OF STUDENT UNIONS IN UNIVERSITY LIFE

ARJUNA PARAKRAMA

Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya

Introduction

University Student Unions have a long and chequered history in Sri Lanka: over the years their influence has extended beyond the environs of academe to national politics, and they have, either directly or indirectly, been involved in violence and intimidation – both internal and external to the university – during the past three decades. Though student union affiliations to external political entities are now less overtly visible than before, these umbilical ties still remain central to both the ideology and agenda of the unions. Currently, the importance of Student Unions within the university system cannot be minimized, yet little is understood of how precisely they wield this influence and/or win over the authorities to their point of view.

This paper studies the multiple yet interconnected ways in which university student unions influence and shape university discourse on discipline, welfare, official functions, trade union action, even appointments and other related activities. The main focus of the study is the Arts Faculty Student Union of the University of Peradeniya, but findings have been cross-checked with other university contexts through interviews with experts in the field and key informants.

Methodology and theoretical framework

This is a multidisciplinary discourse study and hence has focused on a set of qualitative interviews with students (past and present), teachers, administrators and other stakeholders in order to delineate the contours of the discourse on and about the Arts Faculty Student Union at the University of Peradeniya. This information is supplemented by detailed interviews with specialists in the

field from other universities and society at large. A total of 50 open-ended interviews have been conducted for the purpose of this paper.

In addition, as permitted and appropriate, the examination of university records and regulations has provided the background and empirical evidence of the influence wielded by student unions during the past twenty five years. The study is of a preliminary nature and should give rise to more detailed studies of a similar nature that compare the discourse of/on student unions across the university system in Sri Lanka and map these discourse patterns in relation to time.

This work is multi-disciplinary in nature and is informed by the post-structuralist historical discourse studies of Foucault, the sociolinguistic critical discourse studies of Fairclough, the ordinary language philosophical theory of Wittgenstein, and the cultural studies work of Spivak. The absence of politically-sensitive empirical discourse studies on contemporary subjects is a lacuna that this study seeks to fill.

Findings

Student Unions are ostensibly covered by university by-laws and regulations, but these are systematically observed in the breach, such as, for instance, in the maintenance and approval of annual accounts. Even in the recent history of the Arts Faculty of the University of Peradeniya, financial irregularities have been alleged but no one dares speak about these issues. The overriding discourse of the authorities is that enforcing these regulations is more trouble than it is worth, and that if any member of staff is perceived as a threat to the unions he

will be targeted. Student Unions have zero tolerance of opinions that differ from their own; the threat of violent disruptive protest hangs over anyone who dares to challenge their authority.

The argument that the university constitutes a unique sub-culture is propagated by the unions, and this is firmly institutionalized during the “ragging” of freshers which occupies three months of each academic year. However, this so-called sub-culture replicates some of the most conservative elements of the mainstream dominant national culture, often bordering on fundamentalism. This is best seen in relation to dress (especially in relation to females, where physical violence has been meted out with impunity), public behaviour, religious practices etc. Moreover, there are double standards and a lack of transparency in these practices and in explanations justifying them. Unions, which should represent all sections and categories of students, appear to serve mostly the dominant Sinhala Buddhist majority, as well as the group that has been “ragged” during their first year. This is a position that the authorities raise token objections against from time to time but permit to continue with promises to address the issue on the next occasion.

Most importantly, these internal university discourses are aligned to broader national platforms through the invoking of narrow and intolerant nationalist (even racist) rhetoric to support and justify the positions of the student unions vis-à-vis key issues (as related to cultural and political topics), and this serves to silence opposition from other students and faculty.

Another key finding area relates to discipline, where student union involvement appears to be increasing in various direct and indirect ways. In fact, the attitude of the authorities

towards students who have infringed university regulations clearly differs based on whether they have the support of the unions or not. Humanitarian reasons for reduction of punishments and the invocation of extenuating circumstances are invoked only when student unions intervene. In sharp contrast, opponents of the unions are provided little redress.

In this manner, pluralist, egalitarian and democratic discourse within the Arts Faculty of the University of Peradeniya is fundamentally eroded through student union rhetoric and administrative support discourse.

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