

Can Asians think?

It was with interest that I read the Article by Prof. Andrew Sheng on the above topic that was published on Monday the 26th of April 2010. Though I had thought of continuing with the series of articles on “A tale of two nations” this week, I had to abandon that idea and response to the article by Prof. Sheng as we have been discussing this problem for more than twenty five years in Sri Lanka mainly in Sinhala without being able to attract the attention of the scholars including University Academics. A few Sri Lanka scholars have responded to the idea of *Jathika Chinthanaya* as described by Dr. Gunadasa Amarasekera but have decided to ignore completely the concept of *Chinthanaya* for some reason or other. It may be that the Sociologists and other Social Scientists were not interested in the topic *Chinthanaya* as the articles were not written in the jargon of Social Sciences nor any of the other western sciences for that matter and published in newspapers without any quotations, footnotes, references or peer reviewing, and that as far as they were concerned the articles were only populist without any appeal to the scholars. However, we have been interested in this problem from the *Gaveshakayo* days in the University of Colombo. The term *Chinthanaya* was first used in connection with what we then called the *Yudev Chinthanaya*.

Prof. Sheng refers to an essay on the topic “Can Asians think” by one Prof. Kishore Mahubani published in 1998 long after I was unceremoniously relieved of my duties at the University of Colombo by that august body called the council of the University then headed by the present minister of external affairs who eloquently now refers to *Mahinda Chinthana*. Sometime ago in 1991 the then head of the University wanted to find out whether I taught *Jathika Chinthanaya* at the University of Colombo and I had to tell him that if all the others can teach *Vijathika Chinthanaya* then I should be able to teach *Jathika Chinthanaya*. Of course, he did not forget to ask me whether I wanted to continue to teach at the University of Colombo. When I was relieved of my duties none of the champions of human rights, the Marxists, Socialists of various shades at the University of Colombo said anything about my fundamental rights. However, I have now achieved my freedom through the courts of law in the country and *Chinthanaya* though with the adjective *Mahinda* has become a household name throughout the country.

The learned Professor, I mean Sheng, also refers to a book by Lim and Lim recently published on “Nowhere to Hide: The Great Financial Crisis and Challenges for Asia” that studies the current global financial crisis. In his article he refers to Capra who wrote on Tao of Physics in the early nineties. I have not read either Mahubani or Lim and Lim but read Capra who I thought was trying to sell Tao to the westerners to earn a quick buck. In any event neither *Jathika Chinthanaya* nor *Chinthanaya* was influenced by Capra though J R Jayawardane at that time was very much interested in what Capra had to say.

Prof. Sheng mentions at the outset that what Mahubani had meant was whether the Asians can think out of the western intellectual box? He concludes the article with the following paragraph. “If Asia is to take its rightful place in the world as equals with the West, there will have to much more original Asian thinking, not about parochial Asian values, but about values and practices that apply universally. I recommend this book by Lim and Lim as one of the beacons in that direction.” It is clear that Prof.

Sheng has not come to terms with the problem but he talks of much more original Asian thinking albeit about values practices that apply universally practices that apply universally. As far as we are concerned we identified the problem differently in the early eighties and our formulation was very much different.

We recognized as many others have done before and after that people of different cultures think differently. We formulated the concept of *Chinthanaya* (at that time Dr. Gunadasa Amarasekera had not come out with his ideas on *Jathika Chinthanaya* though after a seminar held in Ratnapura towards the end of 1986 these two currents came together at least as far as the public is concerned under the latter nomenclature.) in order to understand how knowledge is created. The knowledge as we identified was always created and not discovered and in this regard we were influenced by people such as Kuhn and Feyerabend. Our contribution was to say that knowledge is created relative to the culture, the sense organs and the mind based on *Chinthanaya* something more fundamental than the paradigm as formulated by Kuhn. It was clear that there could be a number of paradigms within a *Chinthanaya*.

The Asians cannot think originally in general based on the western Greek Judaic Christian *Chinthanaya* thus implying that we cannot create new knowledge in that *Chinthanaya*. The Asian students may be very good at passing examinations based on knowledge created in the Greek Judaic Christian (GJC) *Chinthanaya* and good at writing theses for higher degrees on some problem in the periphery of knowledge but when it comes to creating knowledge or thinking originally at the centre in that *Chinthanaya* I am afraid we are nowhere when compared to the westerners. Leave alone the Nobel Prize and the Fellowship of the Royal Society, London, how many Sri Lankans have published research papers in the "Nature"? (Please do not think that I value them but the current attitudes among the western scientists are expressed using these yardsticks.)

It does not mean that the Asians cannot think originally. We can do so provided we think in our own *Chinthanayas* but we are not allowed to think originally in our *Chinthanayas*. A *Chinthanaya* has its own logic, attitudes and an epistemology, and I would say that logic of both Catholic (an Asian *Chinthanaya*) and Hindu *Chinthanaya* is threefold while that of Sinhala Buddhist *Chinthanaya* is fourfold or *Catuskoti* or sometimes referred to as tetra lemma. Aristotelian logic of Greek *Chinthanaya* is twofold and no wonder that the Asians find it difficult to think in watertight compartments. For us either this or that is not applicable and if we find it difficult to separate powers in theory as well as in practise it is due to the fact that we do not think in either this or that terms.

The westerners with their Catholic *Chinthanaya* were not able to create western science and only after the so called renaissance which was a change of *Chinthanaya* from Catholic *Chinthanaya* to GJC *Chinthanaya* that they were able to create what is known as modern science which in effect is western science. The GJC *Chinthanaya* has other properties which we have described in articles (no, no, not research papers in prestigious international journals) mainly in *Irida Divaina* and *Vidusara*. For example based on our logics we find it extremely difficult to separate things and we very often get into a muddle when we attempt to do things the way westerners do.

If Sri Lanka is going to be the centre of knowledge we cannot do so by downloading knowledge from the west using so called Information Technology. We can be a centre (not the centre) of knowledge (there is no universal or objective knowledge) if we create knowledge in our *Chinthanaya*. It does mean that we would also be absorbing western knowledge into our *Chinthanaya* creatively without imitating what is created in the west. The Asians can definitely think as they have thought for millennia but not in the western *Chinthanaya*. We have to train our students from the very beginning and I hope the present government would take a step or two in that direction without leaving it to the next generation. It means that we have to create our knowledge from Economics to Physics and one may find that in our system of knowledge Economics cannot be separated from Physics.