

BOLGODA CHAT

The Era of Transformation

An interview with
Prof. Willie Mendis

Mahamendige Wilfred Joseph Gerard Mendis was born in Moratuwa on 7th day of November 1942. Popularly known as "Willie", did his entire schooling at the St. Peter's College Bambalapitiya, and excelled in studies, in debating and in leadership. In a school science event, young Willie was happened to meet satellite guru Dr Arthur C Clarke, without a clue that they would become colleagues four decades later at the prestigious University of Moratuwa.

"A particular memory of my many other hallmarks in the school career was the diversity of interests, one of which was in Sinhala Elocution, Oriental & Kandyan Dancing, and with the playing of oriental music instruments. All of which brought multiple awards at inter school level. The prime influencer in the same was Rev. Fr. Marceline Jayakody"

On completion of school career in 1961 with passes in the local & London advanced level exams, he was interviewed by senior Dons of the then University of Ceylon and admitted to its Engineering Degree program. In 1966, Willie Mendis graduated with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Civil Engineering. He was immediately posted to the River Valleys Development Board, in their river sluice construction site in Uda Walawe. However his first formal Appointment as an Engineer, was at the Department of Town & Country Planning of the Ministry of Local Government.

"It is here that I was given the baptism of Town & Country Planning when providing the engineering input to the country's pioneering ' Urban Redevelopment Project ' at Maligawatte".

From a Civil Engineer to a Planner

In 1969, he set off for a post graduate program in urban planning at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow UK, on a Colombo Plan scholarship. For the research dissertation, he opted to select a home-based topic on the then proposed Mahaweli Development Project that envisaged a massive land & human settlement scheme but polarised on power & agriculture. It also focused on the imperative to undertake planning education in a Sri Lankan University to uplift the meager ratio of one Planner for two million people. The dissertation proposed to start a post graduate program to follow an undergraduate program.

The Master of Science Degree was completed in 1971, and the University of Strathclyde offered a PhD extension. However, the employer instructed him to return to Sri Lanka and assume the duties as Assistant Government Town Planner.

"My ambition to develop the Planning discipline and profession became a reality in 1974 when I was permanently released by the Ministry of Local Government to join the newly established academic department of Town & Country Planning at the Katubedda Campus of the University of Sri Lanka, as a Senior Lecturer. In it I became actively associated in the launching of the M.Sc. program in Town & Country Planning. In 1979, I was appointed as the Chair Professor & Head of Department".

The particular publication of the " Colombo-Trincomalee Development Corridor " & of the " South India Sri Lanka Transnational Spatial Hub " became examples of Professor Mendis's scholarly & visionary Planning work. Consequently, on many occasions he was invited to be a member of delegations representing Sri Lanka, which included the culmination in the creation of UN-HABITAT in 1976 as the central global organization for human settlement planning & development.



Prof. M. W. J. G. Mendis

From Planner to an Administrator

In 1982, a meeting was held in his residence to establish a T & C Planning Association in Sri Lanka. Its stature was upgraded as the Institute of Town Planners Sri Lanka by an Act of Parliament No.23 of 1986.

"Thus, the transformation envisaged in Planning from academia to its profession, realized the proposition I made in my research dissertation at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, in 1971".

It was the above leadership quality that may have influenced the Court of the University at its meeting held on 20 June 1983 to duly declare Professor MWJG Mendis as the Vice Chancellor of the University of Moratuwa and for its Chancellor to confirm the appointment. Professor Mendis was the last Vice Chancellor of the UoM appointed following this procedure.

Korea's KIST started with a no-questions asked budget. This is not culturally possible in Sri Lanka. In this country, if no-questions asked, the first thing to come is corruption.



Vice-chancellor Professor Willie Mendis with Chancellor Dr Arthur C Clarke (in middle)

"University was a shrub jungle when I assumed the vice chancellor's office in 1983. No lights, no streets, nothing. The present canteen was like a shanty. Town planning includes land, people and economy. In that perspective, University was a settlement of 2000 people at that time. Yet the University didn't have a permanent Registrar or a Bursar. This was what I inherited".

He believed a university should have a culture. For that, it should have a corporate plan; how are the finances coming, how many students are there in 5 years' time, what kind of staff will be in need, etc. And the staff needed to be sent overseas for postgraduate training. Prof Mendis managed to get himself appointed as the Govt nominee to the US Education Foundation that awards PhD scholarships. Moreover, he invited all ambassadors to the university, to make them aware of this institute and secure scholarships and collaborations. Furthermore, the Commonwealth Association of Universities convened a meeting of fifty-two foreign vice chancellors at the UoM on his invitation.

Arthur C Clarke had become a trigger of success for UoM. Prof Mendis invited Dr Clarke to build his Center in front of the University. This was named as the Arthur C Clarke Center for Modern Technologies (ACCMT).

This was a time when the UK universities were facing brain drain of staff. The reason was insufficient income. They created incubators to remedy the situation. Going along the same way, Prof Mendis invited ACCMT to create incubators for UoM staff to

get involved. Furthermore, recognizing the importance of knowledge economy, he identified three key areas to be developed in the UoM; computing and IT, textile technology, and quantity surveying. The departments were formed and the heads were appointed. Through a massive Japanese grant, modern equipment and instruments were supplied to the mechanical and electronic engineering departments, while boats were purchased and the boat house was built for rowing.



Visiting the Maryland University with Prof Cyril Ponnampereuma (second from left)

"I would not have built the VC' office in the front. I would have left that space open instead. 52 acres are same as the extent of the American University in Washington DC. They're having 50,000 students, in part time and evening courses etc. Why cant UoM?"

Professor MWJG Mendis retired on 15th Sept 1988 upon completion of two terms as the Vice Chancellor of the UoM.

We took the train from Colombo to Jaffna for a CVCD meeting. This was 1988, and the height of LTTE rebellion. We wanted to show that we care for our colleagues.

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