

Poetry as a form of debate and discourse

This poetic lament, builds on Panduka Karunanayake's interpretation of Tagore's views on education and directly echoes Sasanka Perera's critique of the state of humanistic education, as envisioned by Rabindranath Tagore and revisited by Panduka Karunanayake. Just as the poem illustrates Free Education as reduced to a symbolic corpse, Perera argues that Tagore's ideals – the freedom to learn, freedom from ignorance and freedom from bondage - have been verbally celebrated but never institutionally sustained. Tagore's ideals have become slogans without substance, quoted in lectures and conferences but excluded from curricula, practice, and policymaking.

Perera names this a civilizational burden: our collective failure to give enduring institutional space to moral and philosophical ideals like humanism, ethics, and responsibility. The poem renders this same burden, embodied imagery. Free Education, once a proud vehicle for equity and transformation in a newly postcolonial state, is now left to die with dignity but no real care - its fate sealed by political pragmatism, bureaucratic indifference, and public exhaustion.

Both the poem and Perera's reflection ask the same urgent questions: what happens to the collective endeavors of higher education, when we only pay lip service to the values we claim to uphold in higher education? How do we reconcile the ways in which we grieve the systematic departures from the ideals of higher education and yet at the same time choose not to restore or protect them?
(English summary and interpretation below)

“ශෝක පණිවුඩ”

දරුණු පිළිකාවන්ට ගොදුරුවී
නිදහස් අධ්‍යාපනය රෝගාතුරවී
පිළිකා රෝහලටවත් යාමට නොහි
නුග ගහ යට ගල් බංකුවේ වැතිරුණු

සස්ට්පන් ගන්න මුදල් නොතිබේ
දුප්පතුන් ලුණුන් හැති කැඳ එවා තිබුණි
ආධුනිකයින්ද බෙහෙතක් සොයා තිබුණි
කිසිත් හැති කළ සේලයින් ඉස
ලුණු කැඳ වතුර පොවා තිබුණි
නිසි ප්‍රතිකාරයක් නොලැබේ
නිදහස් අධ්‍යාපනය රෝගියා මැරී වැටුණි
මල් වඩම් අනවැසි තරයේ කියා තිබුණි
පොඩි මිනිසුන්ගේ කරමනින්
කනත්තට යන අතරමගින්
සියල්ලෝම සෝක ගී ගයා තිබුණි

නිදහස් අධ්‍යාපනයේ චිතකය තනා
දහසක් බලාපොරොත්තු ගෑස් දමා
උන් උන්ම ගිනි දමා තිබුණි
සියල්ල අහවර වෙමින් තිබුණි
විෂයේ විශේෂඥයින්
සාතිශය සංවේගයෙන්
ශෝක පණිවුඩ පමණක් එවා තිබුණි

Darshana L. Weerawarne, PhD

Professor in Physics

Dept. of Physics, University of Colombo

Summary and Interpretation

This poem is a poetic satire of Sri Lanka's free education system. Here, Free Education is portrayed not as a policy or institution, but as a terminally ill patient - abandoned by the very society that once nurtured it. Afflicted by a severe and untreatable illness, Free Education lies not in a hospital bed but beneath a Nuga tree - a metaphor for how far it has fallen from dignity and institutional protection.

The free verse poem evokes a distressing image: though there is no money for diagnosis, no salt in the meager porridge, and no qualified physician, there remain untrained hands offering improvised care - a quiet testament to those doing what little they can to keep the system breathing. It is not a death by aggression, but by systemic neglect and slow erosion. And yet, when death arrives, it is met not with protest or resistance, but with ritualized mourning. A pyre is built not only from the decaying body of the system, but from the dreams and hopes of thousands it once empowered. Flames are lit by those who once claimed to defend it. In the end, all that remains are obituary messages - expressions of loss from policymakers and experts who acted too late, or not at all.