

History of the publication of the “History of the University of Kerala” Pleasant memories of my “Gurupranamam”

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My relationship with Prof . Sreedhara Menon commenced well before I joined as Vice Chancellor of the University of Kerala in 2000 where he was a registrar for a long time. I knew him fairly closely as a renowned historian. As a student of Kerala history and also while I prepared for various speeches and writings I used to refer his books on Kerala history again and again. Though not an expert in Kerala history I still feel that there are not enough objective historical writings on Kerala comparable with with Prof Sreedhara Menon’s books and essays. In many occasions he was a daring historian in that he was not afraid of the powers that be either present or past when it comes to saying unpleasant historical truths. I only heard about him as one of the most efficient administrator as the Registrar of the Kerala University and his name was well known even more than the Vice Chancellors who were in position during his period. Even with all this knowledge about his writings and administrative efficiency I did not get an opportunity to meet him till I became the Vice Chancellor.

My first encounter with him was an embarrassing experience for me. Immediately after joining as VC I had to attend a meeting in the Bank Employee’s Hall at Thiruvananthapuram organized by the DC Books. Only when I went there I came to know that Prof Menon was also a speaker in the function. I became very happy that finally I got an opportunity to meet and talk to a man I respected a lot. I went to him and introduced myself as the new Vice Chancellor. Immediately his mood changed and he appeared to get angry and uneasy. He said that he has taken a vow not to share platforms with Vice Chancellors of KU. He further revealed to me the reason as well. On the occasion of the celebration of the Golden Jubilee of the Kerala University, Prof Sreedhara Menon was entrusted with the responsibility of preparing the history of the University. He executed the responsibility in record time even without accepting or hoping for any remuneration from the University. But without any obvious reason the authorities decided arbitrarily not to publish the book. He said the Vice Chancellors were influenced by the powers that be in the University corridors and none including me will have the guts to publish the book. He even showed me the callus in his fingers that developed because of the intensity of the writing of the book.

Finally Ravi DC and others placated him and he addressed the gathering and narrated the story from the public forum as well. Sitting in the stage though I was not in anyway responsible for what happened in the past I felt as the Vice Chancellor that the University authorities did not Sreedhara Menon a scholar with such impeccable record as historian rather very crudely. I also took a decision then and there to get the book published come what may and at any cost.

As soon as I returned to the University I asked the Superintendent of University press about the incidence and surprisingly he produced before me the dilapidated first volume of the book that was printed in 1987 itself. I did not know that the decision was taken not to publish the book after the first volume was printed. I read the volume that day itself and found that the volume contained nothing controversial that might have prompted the authorities not to publish it. The matter of the second volume was fortunately with an officer in the University and I asked the Press Superintendent to take steps to immediately get both volumes printed as early as possible. By this time I came to know that Prof Sreedhara Menon was not doing well physically and I wanted to present him the copy before his health deteriorates further. I could finally get both the volumes printed. And it was one of the happiest moments in my life when I went to his residence and gave the volumes to Prof Menon. I still feel that as Vice Chancellor of Kerala University this is one the best accomplishment I realized in the University as Vice Chancellor and the greatest mission I have accomplished in my life. The submission of the two volumes of the History of University of Kerala to him was my “Gurupranamam” to this great historian and educationalist of Kerala

Prof Sreedhara Menon then told me that the history was not complete and there was with him the third volume on the history of the affiliated colleges under the University. Since the volumes were printed in a hurry there were a lot of spelling mistakes in them. Prof Menon in spite of illness did a proof reading of the already published volumes and gave me the matter for the third volume also for publication. Unfortunately I did not get time enough to publish a revised edition of the book in three volumes during my period. I think the material is still with the University and the authorities will take the initiative to publish all the three volumes as early as possible.

It may be pointed out that the History of the University of Kerala by Prof Sreedhara Mendon is the only authentic history not only of the Kerala University but also the advent of the higher education institutions in Kerala. I firmly belief that while examining the crisis of the higher education sector in Kerala it will be worthwhile re reading the History of Kerala University again and again since Prof Menon has meticulously recorded the strengths and weaknesses of our higher education sector in these volumes. Had the University published the volumes earlier I am sure that Prof Menon might have published the later history of the higher education institutions in Kerala as well.

I wish this great scholar, historian, administrator and educationalist more healthy and active days so that he can continue to throw light into the still unknown and un explored areas of Kerala history.

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