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MERVYN DE SILVA

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P. A: MOUNTING PRESSURES

Mervyn de Silva

Three stunning blows in quick succession have increased the pressure on President Chandrika Kumaratunga's "Peoples Alliance" (P.A.) administration. In the heart of Jaffna, capital of the island's northern province, a woman suicide-bomber killed 27 but failed to assassinate her principal target, Mr. Nimal Siripala de Silva, the Housing Minister, who was on an official visit. He was injured. A senior army officer and several policemen were among the casualties. In December, the P.A. had boasted that the army had taken full control of the Northern Peninsula.

T.V. in Colombo took pride in showing the Sri Lankan national "Lion" flag flying from the tallest building in Jaffna, the bastion of the separatist "Tamil Tigers". Jaffna had been liberated. The claim was fair. Not since the departure of an eighty thousand (80,000) strong Indian Peace-keeping Force (I.P.K.F.) in 1990 did Colombo's writ run in the northern province, virtually L.T.T.E. territory.

President Kumaratunga had special reason to be proud. For several months after she took office, first as prime minister and then as a popularly elected President in late 1994 she had made every effort to reach a negotiated settlement of Sri Lanka's harrowing 13 year ethnic conflict and L.T.T.E. insurgency. In doing so, she had won the admiration of the Tamil community, the respect of the large Tamil population in neighbouring south India (the state of Tamilnadu), the Indian government and the U.S.-led donor com-

munity. So the investors who had been attracted by the free market policies of the conservative U.N.P. would now remain. President Jayawardene's U.N.P. was the first South Asian government to abandon "socialism" and pin its faith in private enterprise and foreign investment.

The UNP however alienated the Tamils. All the Tamil parties which had abandoned the path of armed struggle and successfully contested the parliamentary polls in 1994, were ready to support the P.A. which could then claim a stable majority in the National assembly. So, her *bona fides* were beyond question when she ordered the armed forces to fight the L.T.T.E., take control of the northern province and re-establish a civilian administration.

Some two to three hundred thousand Tamils fled Jaffna when the Sri Lankan army seized full control of the northern capital, and later the Northern Peninsula. But a massive publicity exercise (a classic hearts-and-minds operation) saw thousands of Tamil refugees return to their homes in Jaffna, and its outskirts. An announcement that President Kumaratunga would make an official visit to "pacified" Jaffna was seen as the final blow to L.T.T.E. morale. Jaffna, the army claimed in leaflets and radio broadcasts, was safe and secure. But now it is unlikely that President Kumaratunga would visit the north for sometime. Nor perhaps would many ministerial colleagues of Mr. Nimal Siripala de Silva, who was lucky to escape an attack by a LTTE assassin.

TRADE UNIONS

The P.A. leadership had hardly recovered from the shock of the woman suicide-bomber in Jaffna when it received a bruising blow from a totally unexpected quarter — the trade unions. Since the Marxist Left has traditionally controlled the trade unions and all the Leftist parties are now accommodated in the Peoples

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Alliance, the larger, long established companies [the foreign included] have looked forward to "peace" on the "labour front". Right now the P.A. has locked horns not with separatist Tamil insurgents but Sinhalese workers in trade unions, at least one of which is affiliated to a long established political party the LSSP which is a constituent member of the P.A. What is more the leader of that party, is a Minister in President Kumaratunga's cabinet! An employer conversant with the Marxist theory on "the contradictions of capitalism" is now raising a few laughs in Colombo's posher clubs by identifying "the contradictions" in the socialist Peoples Alliance.

The immediate outcome of the present dispute is the closure of Bartleet Microdevices Ltd, one of the few large-scale high-tech industries in the island. It specialises in the production of "electronic hardware". A statement issued by the Presidential Secretariat accuses a U.N.P. member of parliament, Dr. Rajitha Senaratne of instigating the strike. Dr. Senaratne is President of the Independent Employees Union, "Independent" meaning it is not affiliated to any political party.

It was not Dr. Senaratne but Mr. Vasudeva Nanayakara also an M.P., who chose to answer the government. "We have to protest against the secretly produced document on the Bartleet dispute. The Independent Employees Union led by Dr. Rajitha Senaratne M.P. and the Democratic United Employees Union led by us, jointly conducted the strike at Bartleets. The strike was based on the legitimate demands of the workers and not out of any disruptive or vengeful motives". Almost casually, Mr. Nanayakara makes another remark which throws more light on what's really wrong with the P.A. "After the dispute was referred to an arbitrator

by the Labour Department the employees went back to work as is the usual labour practice. But the arbitrator never appeared or took part in settling the issue!".

The P.A.'s whizz-kid, Professor G. L. Pieris, the former Vice-Chancellor of the Colombo University, was largely responsible for the P.A.'s election manifesto, and probably, its more attractive slogans. Among these was "Accountability, Transparency and Good Governance". It is now transparently clear that the P.A.'s utterly inexperienced top-brass has a serious problem with "governance".

Finally, a devastating blow from an unlikely quarter. The S.L.F.P., the dominant force in the P.A., was founded by Mr. S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, President Kumaratunga's father, assassinated by a demented monk in 1959. His widow, Mrs. Sirima Bandaranaike became the world's first woman prime minister. She is President Kumaratunga's prime minister too. Right now she is in India on a pilgrimage. Accompanying her is Anura Bandaranaike M.P. her only son. Mr. Bandaranaike is a member of the U.N.P. and sits in the front row of the Opposition. While Sri Lankan politics gets curiously and curiously the P.A. seems to be losing its grip on national politics. □

LETTER

A Cry For Sanity

Volumes have been written about the ethnic conflict from various different angles as perceived by those writers. Politicians and media have lost no time in making capital out of such writings by quoting reference to them like the devil quoting the scriptures. Yet, the National Question still remains intractable.

Rule of law, democracy and human rights absolutely reject all forms of discrimination between man and man irrespective of caste, creed, race, religion and ideology. However the framers of legislation and constitutions have been utilizing their talents to find some sort of subtle but invisible, discrimination between man and man on the grounds of religion, caste and race in order to satisfy the vain glory of an articulate religious section (a small minority) at the expense of the vast majority of the people. They pretend to be blind that such belief despite its transient nature, has promoted division and produced dissension among the people resulting in the unwanted and unavoidable war bringing death, destruction and ruin to the entire nation.

The present political package (its timing and the nature of its passage) is the latest example of such an exercise. Obscurantism and obsequious attitudes resulting from 450 years of colonial rule have obstructed the creation of a healthy and just constitution from the Donoughmore days. This intransigence and obduracy still persist in the minds of the present framers.

Unless we are all prepared to rise above all petty, narrow and selfish consideration we will have no alternative but to perish. Religion is meant to be practised and realised and not used as an instrument to dominate or harm those of other faiths.

In this new era of transparency the legislators (framers of the basic law) should be able to see and discover their own faults and correct them as the last hope of devising a solution based on unity in diversity.

T. S. Kumaresan

Jaffna

The Great Devolution Debate

A. J. Wilson

ICES Colombo needs to be warmly congratulated for its consistently high quality productions thus living up to more than the expectations of its benefactors, Ford and CIDA. The volume to be discussed here is *Sri Lanka: The Devolution Debate* put together by Neelan Tiruchelvam and his colleagues with valuable contributions from G. L. Peiris, Lakshman Marasinghe and thoughtful pieces by Bertram Bastiampillai, Sumanasiri Liyanage, Sunil Bastian and Sasanka Perera, as well as the insightful Foreword by Regi Siriwardene. After such knowledge, what abysmal ignorance displayed by fringe groups of the extreme Sinhala "Intransigentsia". The vital question is. Is this "the great devolution debate" or "the great devolution debacle"? If this does not pass, nothing will pass and the island is destined to become a vast cemetery.

G. L. Peiris has become the harbinger of the decentralised state structure. Drawing pointed attention to the recommendations of India's Sarkaria and Rajamannar Commissions or centre-state relations and the need for "the powers of the Centre to be circumscribed", he stated "it is our intention in preparing this Constitution to go some way further than India..." (p. 9). In doing so, Professor Peiris has anticipated the trend in most postindustrial states, to distance themselves from an overconcentration and press the pedals on decentralisation thus striking a blow at the powerful vested interest of the Colombo bureaucracy. Once this fortress of reaction is demolished it can well be stated that Sri Lanka will be on its way to becoming the truly democratic socialist republic that it claims now to be. Peiris is also alive to the methodology of decentralised administration as practised in India and the Dominion of Canada. "We have

no devolution at all" deplores this modern day Abbe Sieyes, "decentralisation yes, local government no..." thus upholding what John Stuart Mill avowed in the heyday of utilitarian philosophy when he stated that "good government is no substitute for self government. It lacks the genius of place" etc., etc. Are we going to be the witnesses to the fall of the Colombo "bastille", the destruction of that redoubtable citadel of bureaucratic reaction, the tentacles of the Colombo octopus. It bodes well for the legatees of universal adult franchise.

Lakshman Marasinghe's informed reflections on "Some Thoughts on the Devolution Package" contain valuable insights into what ails our body politic. A longtime student of federalizing exercises, Marasinghe has studied the whole gamut from the Bantustans of South Africa to the more sophisticated units in a modern federal constitutions where power is shared and therefore makes sense to share sovereignty with regions or units. Therefore Marasinghe concludes that:-

it is difficult to perceive that ethnic conflicts could be resolved only by war. At the end of the conflict the government is well advised to provide a constitutional settlement which would provide the Tamil Community the social and political and economic goals which they tried to achieve through war (p. 19).

Sumanasiri Liyanage in a conciliatory essay "Towards a Compromise Solution" urges the need for moderation and a middle path solution to the conflicting demands of each community's *intransigentsia*. Liyanage suggests very sensible questions that might be asked instead of what can only be called the present self-stultifying ones. Thus he states "Instead

of posing the question whether there was/is a Tamil homeland let us ask the question where do the Tamil majority live in continuity? What is the geographical space that the Tamils occupy today." (p. 48) Liyanage suggests various pragmatic constructive approaches. Some of Liyanage's suggestions are eminently reasonable but politically they may not be feasible. Bastian's analysis of the land question is more an extrapolation of how this complex problem can be resolved. Sasanka Perera's examination of the education question is full of rich insights. He places his finger right on the spot where trouble lies ahead.

The essays by Bastiampillai, Thiruchelvam, Liyanage, Guhan, Bastian and Perera deal with a host of sensitive issues. Bastian and Perera deal with the difficult subjects of state land, the structure and content of education, etc. They suggest ways and means of overcoming or by-passing the almost entrenched position in these areas. It is possible that if the obstacles are overcome, the island state is well on the way to being an ordered polity. Thiruchelvam and Guhan really deal briefly with specifics and how impediments can be removed. In effect the *Debate* is a guide to restoring sanity and a welcome *vade mecum* for all men of goodwill.

The burning question is whether the Chandrika Proposals are a throw-away to federalism. The answer is definitely in the negative. A fundamental question is which branch of government is supreme, the Centre or the Regions? The Centre is definitely at an advantage. It is possible for the Centre to bypass the regions and deprive the latter of their powers. To achieve this, the Colombo Parliament (the Centre) would doubtless have to secure a two-thirds majority in Parliament and

or win a referendum. The Regions will in no way be a component of the amending process so that they could lose all their autonomy if two-thirds of Parliament and a majority of voters in a referendum vote for such a change. Likewise there are the two important controlling mechanisms, the Constitutional Council and the Devolution Commission. If sovereignty is to be located in this what might be defined as a new species of constitution, it might be said that it resides in these two new institutions. The Centre is vested with the responsibility of constituting the Constitutional Council. It is this body which in the ultimate instance is vested with the final responsibility. The whole exercise is reduced to a nullity if in a bi-racial country, the Centre which has always acted ethnically is empowered to choose the majority of the Council's members. As things stand this is the position and it is against this kind of clawing back, that the Tamil people have been fighting for 13 years against Sinhala majoritarianism. These same arguments apply to the composition of the Devolution Commission and the construction and composition of the Supreme Court which at the worst of times will be the handmaiden of the executive. Thus the Chandrika Proposals *ab initio* are devoid of any content of federalism. Neither the Tamil people nor their leaders can be expected to lead the Tamil people into a cul-de-sac which gives them with one hand and takes away with the other. Sir Kenneth Wheare might be the ultimate authority to give us a working definition of the terms "federal" and "unitary". Writing in 1951 and subsequently reaffirming his views in 1966 in his *Modern Constitutions*, Sir Kenneth stated

...In a federal Constitution the legislatures both of the whole country and of its parts are limited in their powers and independent of each other. Consequently they must not be able, acting alone, to alter the Constitution

so far at any rate as the distribution of powers between them is concerned. They are not subordinate to each other but they must all be subordinate to the Constitution. If the Congress of the United States, for example, could alter the Constitution as it chose, it could increase its powers at the expense of the states. To that extent the states would be subordinate to the Congress and the Constitution would be unitary, not federal. So also the Congress must not be subordinate to the states...

In the case of Sri Lanka, Parliament is supreme and can unilaterally alter the Constitution. So there is no question of federalism arising for not merely Parliament but the Constitutional Council, the Devolution Commission and the Supreme Court are supreme and have power over the Regions. It is up to the leaders of the Tamil people to either buy this pig in a poke and risk all the consequences therefrom or hope for the best and try and work it. It is a political decision that needs to be made.

Elsewhere in his *Modern Constitutions*, Sir Kenneth grappled with the same question of determining when is a Constitution federal and when is it not (p. 86).

...The principle of a federal government is that powers are divided between a government for the whole country and governments for its parts and that these governments are independent of each other within their own spheres. It follows from this that the amending process must be so designed that neither the central government acting alone nor the constituent governments alone can alter the division of power in the Constitution. It is usually considered best that some form of amendment which involves joint action by the central governments and the constituent governments should be adopted...

Under the Chandrika Proposals, it is clear beyond all reasonable doubt that the Parliament of Sri Lanka is the supreme legislature and that it can proceed to alter the entire structure of government without the cooperation of the Regions making it absolutely clear that Sri Lanka is a unitary state and that the Regions need not be taken into consideration when the Constitution is amended.

Then there are other provisions in the proposals which make it clear that the Centre is pre-eminent and has not taken regional sensitivities into consideration.

Subject 47 in the Reserved List (List 1) which is as follows:

National Archives and Museums, ancient and historical monuments, archaeological sites and records declared by law to be of national importance

is vested in the Centre to the exclusion of the region. As is well known, archaeological matters have been the subject of controversy and have been used as evidence to affirm the Sinhala postulate that the Sinhalese were the original settlers while the Tamils were the outsiders, interlopers and intruders. If the Centre is so insistent on having control over this subject there are alternatives for a compromise. The subject can be placed in the charge of a joint Commission comprising an equal number of representatives from the Northeast Region and Colombo. This could be the only way to avoid a deadlock on this sensitive question.

Likewise Subject 22 in List 1 is a reserved subject. This relates to airports, harbours, ports with international transportation, etc. On the face of it, this important subject is by and large in the control of the Centre in any federal system. But Sri Lanka has its own peculiar problems. Ports for example like Kankasanturai, Palaly

and Trincomalee can be declared free zones and be utilized as another way for the peaceful penetration and colonization of Tamil areas with Sinhala labour. When this subject is taken in conjunction with Subject 62 in List 1 which is "Industrial Development", then the implications for the free movement of labour are far-reaching and open ended. Again the device of Joint Commissions or joint control could be a way out.

Paragraph VII which deals with the subject of the Regional Attorney-General leaves much to be desired. Why is this officer appointed by the Governor not even in consultation with the Chief Minister? Will this officer be used by the Centre to interfere with the constitutionality and legality of regional administration and legislation? Why should not the appointment be vested in the Chief Minister and the Board of Ministers? Is there not a limit to the Centre demanding insidious opportunities for interfering in regional matters?

If the new system is to work without friction or deadlock, it is best that the flashpoints cited (above) be muted with acceptable compromises. It is better not to be wiser after the event than to think of the danger points before the exercise gets moving.

Thus there are four options available to the P.A. government

- (1) revise the Chandrika proposals in the light of the criticisms made
- (2) remain with the same proposal and expect hopefully that these will pass through Parliament and in a referendum
- (3) accept the Thondaman Proposal to cede control of the Northeast Province to the LTTE and work out the modalities
- (4) utilise the text of a proposal drawn up by a firm of London solicitors, Bates Wells and Brai-

thwait at the request of a group of concerned citizens for Sri Lanka in Britain. The proposals was titled "A Proposal for Peace with a Framework for the Constitution of the Union of Ceylon". Dated 20 December 1995 it was delivered to President Kumaratunga around this date by a Mr. Peiris. Nothing further has so far been heard and the assumption is that it is being considered. The significant advance in this proposal is that it has the okay from the Tiger High Command and it could well be a basis for negotiations. The Proposal briefly contains provisions

- (a) for a confederal structure comprising "two states each being internally autonomous...extending to the adoption by each state of its own internal constitution as e. g. size and structure of the legislature, frequency of elections
- (b) for a Central Council consisting of an equal number of representatives from each state to serve as a channel of communication and coordination between the two States. This Council will deal with foreign affairs, external defence and security of the Union, monetary policies including maintenance of a common currency and a Central Bank.

In short, the proposal is for a confederated union of two nearly independent states where the most important powers of government, foreign policy, defence and monetary policies are vested in a supra-sovereign Council. It is such a substitute for a sovereign state of Tamil Eelam that the Tiger High Command has postulated.

The Chandrika Proposals and that of Bates, Wells and Braithwaite could well provide the basis for negotiation.

In the end, once a constitution is adopted, it will gather a life and momentum of its own and may indeed transform itself into an institution which its framers never intended it to be. In Sri Lanka it has become an axiom of politics that neither Sinhalese man nor Tamil man trusts the other so that a constitutional framework designed to provide autonomy and devolution could well adapt itself to the prevalent political culture and end up as a tightly knit and centralised instrument. Good and richly insightful as the *Devolution Debate* might be, it is a matter for regret that no attempt was made to look into the implications of the Constitutional Council, Devolution Commission and the Supreme Court.

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JAPAN : The J R Factor

By Nihonjin

"Nahi verena varani — 'Sammanti' dha Kudacanam, Averaena ca sammanti — esa dhammo sanatano".

Hatred never cease through hatred in this world; through love alone they cease. This is an eternal law.

Mr. Tokihiko, President Japan Sri Lanka Business Cooperation Committee referred to the "historic initiative in advocating the renunciation of war reparations by Japan after second world war".

H. E. J. R. Jayawardene in 1952 at the San Francisco Peace conference quoted the words of the Buddha as above, and appealed to the victors to treat the Japanese nation magnanimously. Nor did it fall on deaf ears.

This incident was referred to many a time during Her Excellency's visit to Japan. The unfortunate part is that our delegation had straight faces, and maintained a stoic silence, when our Japanese friends referred to H. E. J. R. Jayawardene's plea in 1952. In Confucian circles our attitude would have been considered 'lese majeste'.

The President's visit was aimed at attracting investment and increased assistance from Japan. A gesture in the direction of accepting the noble sentiments expressed in 1958 would have gone a long way in breaking the ice with the Japanese.

Japan since 1976 has given Sri Lanka the highest per capita aid disbursement in Asia. This is the result of Sri Lanka's historic renunciation of reparation payment at the San Francisco peace conference. When President Kumaratunga visited Japan, and had her Foreign Minister sign grant aid and loan aid agreements worth 2,245 million Yen and 38,438 million Yen the act on the part of Japan was a continuation of the positive effort made since 1976.

In 1994 when the UNP was in office, the loan package was 36,415 million Yen. At that time the exchange rate was 90 Yen to the Dollar. To day it is 105 Yen to the Dollar. Therefore Japanese aid effort has been consistent. In fact if one were to look at the Jayawardene Hospital grant aid in 1979 to Sri Lanka, when H. E. J. R. Jayawardene paid a state

visit to Japan the grant was 8,500 million Yen, four times the cost of the dental hospital in Kandy. This is not in any way a comparative study in what President Kumaratunga was able to get as compared to President J. R. Jayawardene, but to emphasise that Japan has always had at the back of her mind the attitude a small country such as Sri Lanka had in 1952, when one of her leaders pleaded with superpowers to be lenient on a defeated nation, and at the same time waived all claims to reparations, despite being attacked by Japanese war planes.

This lack of acknowledgement by the PA leaders of an important landmark in Sri Lanka-Japan relations, would have been noted in Tokyo. Japanese society ie. government, business, cultural sector, work as an organic whole. Japanese culture demands a closing of ranks when it comes to the outside world. Unless one understands the word "gaijin" in Japanese, and the message it conveys to a Japanese mind then one would not get to terms with Japan. The lack of an appreciation of "Nemawashi", the need to prepare the ground, before a plan is broached, was certainly clear in the interaction between Japanese leaders and our side. This is what happened recently. At a time when Sri Lankans were playing ducks and drakes with Japanese Companies that had loaned money for projects here, and to be hauled before courts of law, is one aspect of an adversarial society, the Japanese certainly do not understand, nor appreciate it. In Japan a dispute is settled behind closed doors, round a table, far from the judiciary, particularly commercial disputes. Therefore when Endo the Parliamentary Vice Minister of MITI in his speech at the Business Cooperation meeting told our President, "further effort may be required on the Sri Lanka side, and hoped that the Sri Lanka side would attempt to improve the investment climate in our Country", this speaks volumes as far as the Japanese are concerned in regard to investment in Sri Lanka.

To begin with the Hilton dispute, then the effort by the PA government to hand over to P&O, a British firm parts of the Port of Colombo, which ever since the QE quay was built, was consistently financed and built with Japanese aid. I am sure the Japanese would have appreciated some discussions with them, before we went for Fortune 500 companies, with less than favourable terms.

The Vice Minister would certainly have had in mind the power crunch in Sri Lanka. Ikeda the Chairman of Nippon Koei in 1993 warned Sri Lanka of the impending power crisis, and advised the building of a coal fired thermal generation plant. The labour scene is far from satisfactory for Japanese investors. On the one hand a Minister promises to pass as law the workers charter, and on the other BOI sources contradict this. These discordant voices from the governmental ranks, will send signals to the Japanese, that all is not well, and good strong governance is not the strength of the Sri Lanka side.

Then above all, the NE conflict, would have been uppermost in their minds. The Japanese people abhor violence. After the second world war, the peace lobby in Japan is very strong. Japanese businessmen cautious as they are, will wait. If one observes how Japanese investments are pouring in to ASEAN countries, and today Vietnam, one of the main reasons given by them is political stability. Therefore a statement that we will settle our dispute ourselves, will not make the Japanese businessman to change his mind, and as Endo said "Japanese companies gave a priority to a guarantee of profits, when planning their investments". The instability both in government policy making, where decisions are chopped and changed, and Ministers contradict each other on policy positions, and general inaction all around, with doubtful statistics on inflation, and a restive labour market, can we expect Japanese investors to come here. If I were a Japanese, I would not come.

The Public Distribution System in India: A Few Key Issues

Neeraj Kaushal

A question has been asked time and again by policy makers and social scientists: Is the public distribution system (PDS) serving the objective for which it was set up? The question becomes more important at a time when foodgrains stocks in the godowns of the Food Corporation of India (FCI) are swelling: with a record 31 million tonnes in store and more being procured. There are reports of stocks rotting in the open or in stores. According to one estimate, over five million tonnes of wheat and rice have either got rotten or stolen from the FCI godowns during 1991-92 and 1993-94.

While the stocks are rising, ration shopkeepers are lifting much less from the FCI godowns than before. Off-take through the public distribution system has fallen by at least 32.3 per cent during 1991 to 1994. The irony is while the government has revamped and expanded PDS to backward tribal areas since 1992, the demand for ration appears to have fallen. The government has also allocated 3.12 million tonnes of foodgrains for these blocks. Assuming that the revamped PDS is working and the additional allocations are actually being picked up, off-take by ration shops in the rest of the economy would be even lower; over 47 per cent less than in 1991.

What is even more ironical is that the public is paying far more for the reduced quantity of ration in the form of direct or indirect taxes. The food subsidy bill of the government has increased by 82 per cent between 1991-92 and 1994-95.

This has raised two important issues. One, why aren't people purchasing from ration shops? Why are they buying from the market at a higher price, instead? Two, why is the government adding to the existing stocks, when the demand for PDS grains is declining? The present stock, without any additional procurement will meet the next two and a half years of PDS requirements. So why does

the government not release the excess foodgrains in the market, which will at least bring down carrying cost of food stocks?

According to the government, the offtake from ration shops has declined because the gap between the ration and market price of foodgrains has narrowed. The explanation, however, is rather weak. In normal circumstances, the consumer will buy from ration shop so long as ration price is even marginally lower than the open market price. Unless, of course, the quality of ration grains is so poor that it is worth paying some extra money to get better quality.

The real explanation, perhaps, lies elsewhere. Narrowing down of the gap between the two sets of prices closes a major leak from the PDS. The ration shop owner, who is often accused of diverting PDS grains to the open market, and pocketing the difference, may not find it worthwhile indulging in an illegal activity if the difference between the two is low.

Another factor responsible for low PDS off-take is that last year, in several parts of the country, the open market price was lower than the PDS price. This often happens at harvest time in the rural areas when the mandis are flooded with foodgrains. But early this year in several urban markets too, including a few places in Delhi, the open market price of foodgrains fell below the PDS price. In other words, far from providing foodgrains at a low price to consumers, the public distribution system artificially raised the price by hoarding huge quantities of wheat and rice and then releasing them in rationed quantities at higher prices.

Several research studies have shown that benefits from the PDS hardly ever reach the really poor. A study by Kirit Parikh shows that in the rural areas of four states, Punjab, Orissa, Bihar and UP, the number of people who do not

buy from the ration shops at all is as high as 98 per cent. That is, less than two per cent of the people in the rural areas of these states buy foodgrains from ration shops at all. In the rural areas of Haryana, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan less than 10 per cent of the people buy foodgrains from ration shops. The two groups together account for around two thirds of the rural population in the country.

The situation is only slightly better in the urban areas. In six states, Punjab, Bihar, UP, Haryana, Rajasthan and Manipur, the number of people buying anything from ration shops is less than 10 per cent.

According to Parikh's study, which is based on information collected from various National Sample surveys, two states most extensively covered by the PDS are Delhi and Kerala. As many as 87 per cent of the people in Kerala buy part or the whole of their quota from ration shops. Seventy four per cent of the pampered Delhiites also avail of the ration facility.

What do the poor get from PDS? A study by S. M. Jharwal shows that the public distribution system accounted for only 17.5 per cent of the rice consumption and 11.8 per cent of the wheat consumption of the poor. So who does the public distribution system actually serve apart from a few fortunate people in a couple of states? Is there a nexus between the Food Corporation of India and ration shop owners?

Besides, providing food security at affordable prices to the consumer, the government carries out massive procurement operations to give remunerative returns to farmers. The huge procurement of foodgrains at pre-determined prices, almost always above the open market price, by the government keeps the open market price of foodgrains artificially high. The biennial exercise of fixing procurement price of wheat and

rice has been used as an important weapon by most political parties in power to woo farmers through hefty unwarranted increases. Thus, although a small number of poor get to buy cheap foodgrains from ration shops, the PDS indirectly hurts them by keeping foodgrain prices artificially high. This is yet another way to subsidise the farming community, who being well off, is expected to mobilise rural votes for the party in power.

Even among farmers, it is the rich cultivators of Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, the three surplus states which contribute to over 85 per cent of the food procurement by the government, who get the real benefit. Most farmers in the rest of the country in any case have to sell their crop in the market.

It is true that the policy of high procurement prices is partly responsible for the conversion of India's food deficient economy to a surplus one. It is also true that the existing pile of foodgrains with the government will get depleted in case of two successive years of drought. So there is no scope for complacency. However, comfortable size of food reserves and reduced off-take does provide an opportunity to revamp the public distribution system.

The government has made an attempt to revamp PDS since 1992. It has launched a massive programme to create additional infrastructure for the public distribution system in 1775 blocks in backward and remote areas afflicted by poor infrastructure. The official meaning of revamp is an additional 50 paise subsidy per kilo for both wheat and rice in the revamped blocks. If official statistics are to be believed, over 14,000 new ration shops have been opened in these areas. As many as 38.64 lakh new ration cards have been issued in the revamped blocks. Schemes to deliver ration at the doorsteps of ration shops in these blocks have been initiated.

However, despite low price and the so called improved infrastructure, off-take through ration has reduced. This raises an important issue: was it worthwhile spending so much on revamping the PDS? Although it is too soon to discard the revamped PDS a failure, evaluation work on the effectiveness of PDS in the selected blocks indicate that it is not too effective. A field report by Madhura Swaminathan on the revamped PDS in a backward village in Thane district shows that 20 per cent of the

people surveyed did not possess ration cards. For most households purchases from the fair price shops were infrequent and insufficient in comparison with their needs. In the month before the survey only one seventh of the people bought rice or wheat from ration shop. The average purchase of foodgrains per person in the revamped village was only 9.5 kg: far less than the state's average of 24 kg per person. This is despite the substantial price difference between the ration and the open market price in the village during the period when the survey was undertaken. The main reason for the poor off-take expressed by the consumers was: insufficient supply, specially at a time when the manual daily workers had money. If this is the situation in a block where the revamped programme is in progress, one can imagine what the situation would be in other areas.

This shows that even the revamped public distribution system as it exists is not very effective. The relevance of the normal public distribution system also appear to be diminishing. Specially when a mere 30 per cent of the subsidy for wheat and 19 per of the rice subsidy is actually passed on to the consumer. The rest of the money goes into storage and distribution of foodgrains, carried out rather inefficiently by the Food Corporation of India. So PDS needs to be revamped, but not the way the government has attempted to do so.

To begin with, the government should take the following steps: One, it should allow private sector to store foodgrains thus ending government monopoly over this important economic activity. At present, under the Essential Commodities Act the private sector is not allowed to store more than a certain level. The government will, therefore, have to amend the Act.

Two, as storing foodgrains costs money, the government should impose an upper limit on the amount of foodgrains it should store, which may be around 15 million tonnes. Once the government stocks cross 15 million tonnes, government should start selling foodgrains in the open market. This will cut the food subsidy bill substantially and reduce damage of stored foodgrains.

Three, government should decentralise PDS. At present, it is entirely centralised. There are a few states which actively participate in PDS. Some even procure foodgrains. The Centre should

involve all state governments in this operation. More particularly, panchayats should be involved in this programme. Panchayats can monitor the functioning of PDS and ensure that the leakage is minimal.

Four, there should be a closer monitoring of the PDS. Consumer organisations should be asked to do the monitoring.

Five, special emphasis should be placed on implementation of revamped PDS in the selected blocks. This would be a test case of whether targeting of PDS is feasible or not.

Six, it is mostly left to the ration shopkeeper to lift foodgrains whenever convenient to him. Such an arrangement encourages him to pick up foodgrains at irregular periods so that the public have no alternative but buying foodgrains from the market. The ration shop owner then gets an easy opportunity to divert foodgrains to the open market and earn a higher margin. The government should increase the commission of ration shop owners, which is really a pittance at the moment, and impose high penalty if he is caught diverting foodgrains to the market. Also, foodgrains must reach the shops on specified dates every month to ensure regular delivery to card holders.

Notes:

1. Desai, Ashok: A Destabilisation policy, Business Standard, December 6, 1994.
2. It has been pointed by several economists, including Dantwala that procurement has the effect of raising the market price of wheat and rice. See: V. M. Rao: Beyond Surpluses: Food Security in Changing Context; Economic and Political Weekly, January 28, 1995.
3. Parikh, Kirit: Who gets how much from PDS: How effectively does it reach the poor? Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, April, 1993.
4. Jharwal, S. M.: Public Distribution System in India: An Empirical Study.
5. Brief For Economic Editor's Conference 1995, Ministry of Civil Supplies, Consumer Affairs and Public Distribution.
6. Swaminathan, Madhura: Revamped Public Distribution System: A Field Report from Maharashtra, Economic And Political Weekly, September 9, 1995.
7. Union Budget 1995-96.

Theological bases of social Injustice

Tissa Balasuriya

Since Just World Trust (JUST) gives a lot of importance to religion in the struggle for a just world, we have decided to publish the following commentary which examines the question of general injustice from a Christian theological perspective.

To suggest even the theme theological bases of social injustice would seem at first sight a contradiction in terms. For theology being the study of the divine-human relationship must necessarily foster justice and loving care for all, as God in Jesus is love. Yet history bears witness to a long unholy alliance of religion and social injustice.

Jesus is a most kind, loving and lovable of persons, a prophet crucified for his stand for truth, justice and respect for the human person. How is it then that Christians, claiming to be his disciples and propagators of his message, have been among the most intolerant, rapacious, unjust and cruel of peoples during the past 1500 years of human history?

Asians and Africans have witnessed over 500 years of exploitation by the European and North American Christian peoples. They were conquered by arms, ruled despotically, their wealth plundered by Christian victors, their economies transformed to further enrich the dominant, their religions despised, their places of worship destroyed — all that with a feeling of triumphant self-righteousness.

How did this sense of self-justification and evangelizing mission come about? It was due to the spiritual motivation and sustenance by the prevalent theology of the times. After the 4th century, Augustinian Christian anthropology taught that all humanity was fallen due to the original sin of the universal first parents, Adam and Eve. Their sin, communicated by human generation, barred the gates of heaven to all except the baptised. Eternal salvation was possible only through Christ and by membership of the Church. The Christian

mission was thus interpreted as one of saving the souls of fallen humanity. The Christians (mostly Westerners) had therefore the sacred duty of going to all corners of the world and converting others to Christianity. For this supreme purpose and service, it was fitting that the pagans be ruled by Christians, if need be by conquest. Hence holy wars, crusades. Other religions, considered false, had no rights. Their idols had to be destroyed. Thus, religious intolerance had a theological foundation and legitimation.

Spirituality Supporting Injustice

As the salvation of souls was the supreme goal of the Church, what was important in spirituality was the spread of the gospel. For this social injustice could be tolerated, sometimes even benefited from. Since the powerful Christians were Whites, this meant a sanctified White domination of other races. To racial oppression was added social and gender discrimination. Holiness of life was in obedience to the Church authority and laws. Thus feudalism and slavery were long tolerated. The injustices of capitalism and colonialism were not seriously opposed for centuries by most theologians and church leaders.

Since males were *de facto* dominant in society, they affirmed and confirmed their superiority in the religious sphere too. Theology was developed in such a way that the male was considered closer to the divine than the female. Woman was presented as weaker, temptress and inferior to man. An androcentric and anthropocentric view of the universe neglected Nature that supports human existence on earth.

This paradigm of a domination theology and spirituality prevailed and was

enforced in the Christian churches to our times from the 4th century Constantinian conversion of the Church and the Roman empire to each other. Even in modern times the thinkers who tried to rethink Christianity in relation to the original message of Jesus were repressed by the theological establishment of the Catholic Church. Thus, almost all the great theologians who led in the renewal of the Church at Vatican II had previously been suppressed or silenced by the Roman authorities.

Renewal

Thanks to the initiative of good Pope John XXIII, the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) endeavoured to change this thinking and practice in the Catholic Church towards a more open, tolerant and participative communion and community. The mission of the Church was rethought as the transformation of human society to be more faithful to the values taught by Jesus. The goal of the Church was interpreted as the bringing about of the kingdom of God on earth by a rule of righteousness. Social justice was deemed integral to the gospel of Jesus and the Church's mission.

During the 1960s and 1970s, efforts were made throughout the world to bring about a transformation of the Church towards this renewed understanding of the gospel. Many Christians participated in the movements for social reform in all the continents. Theology itself was developed in Europe and North America towards a more tolerant framework of freedom and justice.

Liberation theologies were developed particularly in the Southern Continents. The Blacks, beginning from North America, reflected on the gospel in terms of Black liberation from White domination.

The women's movements took their struggle for equal dignity and rights to the theological sphere also. Asian theology searches further for inter-religious understanding and global justice.

All these groups questioned the earlier dominant paradigm of theology and its assumptions and consequences. They built up new syntheses of Christian thinking that could be in open dialogue with other religions, and related actively to issues of gender and social justice. Thus, Christians participate actively in liberation movements as in Nicaragua, South Africa and the Philippines, as well as in the liberation movements of Blacks and women.

The spread of such teaching and praxis was seen as a danger to the ruling establishment in society and the church. Hence from the mid-1970s or so there has been a counter effort to prevent the spread of such trends. A sort of restoration was attempted from the later years of Pope Paul VI (1963-1978). This trend gained ascendancy in the Catholic Church in some areas of Church life during the present pontificate. Pope John Paul II took a strong stand against Communism, especially in his native Poland, and supports justice in his universal messages. However, there are conservative trends being affirmed concerning the need to convert the whole world to Christianity. Some authorities in the Vatican are trying to stem the tide of reform in the Church. They have the advantage of the appointment of bishops throughout the world.

Changing Fortunes of Christianity

In the Western countries, the growth of secularism is leading to a progressive unchurching of people. The numbers who frequent the church services in most of Europe is less than 10% of the population considered to be Christian. The clergy is aging; their number is declining rapidly; seminaries are being closed down or regrouped in clusters due to a severe drop in vocations. The mainline churches have very few new foreign missionaries from Western countries. Even traditionally Catholic Poland and Ireland are manifesting that they no longer take their politics and even

moral norms from the Church hierarchy, as recent electoral trends and referenda show.

On the other hand, the renewing churches or Christian groups are vibrant in several Asian and African countries. They are developing theologies that are more respectful of the other religions, that inspire social justice and gender equality and the care of nature. They work with peoples' movements that want an alternative approach to economy that is presently dominated by the TNCs and the international agencies like the IMF, World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Asian Christian dialogue with the other religions is leading to a radical rethinking of the presuppositions of the earlier dominant Christian theology. They are re-sourcing themselves by a return to the original Jesus, the gospels and early church tradition. They are reassessing the main themes of the dominant theological paradigm such as the human predicament and original sin, the nature of redemption, the personality, identity and role of Jesus the Christ, the role of the Church in salvation. They reaffirm the centrality of love and justice above mere legality and external religious conformity. The South Asian countries, especially India and Sri Lanka, are considered by the conservative church forces to be the epicentre of such trends.

Internal Conflicts

All these are leading to an intense theological debate within the Catholic Church and even conflictual situations in some churches. Those in power in the Church sometimes use ecclesiastical sanctions to suppress dissent and the raising of uncomfortable issues. Innovation may be suspected of disloyalty. Sometimes ecclesiastical sanctions are invoked in order to repress those who persevere in what is considered erroneous.

Spirituality is also invoked to contain this quest. It is argued that all Christians should accept the dominant theology as correct because it is the Church tradition; if it is questioned the simple faithful would be scandalised. It is contended that a

Christian must be humble, obedient to authority, conserve the unity and communion of the church, and not give room for others, especially the fundamentalists, to point an accusing finger at us.

Reformers may consider that their spirituality demands loyalty to one's lights, fidelity to the search for the truth in our circumstances, and even bearing any suffering for such a cause. Authenticity demands faithfulness to one's conscience. To traditionalists such standing for one's convictions may seem as being stubborn, obstinate, duped and estranging one from the community. The guardians of orthodoxy may judge that such views are erroneous and should be squelched in one way or the other.

Yet, invoking of Canon Law sometimes even without the due legal process, and threatening or imposing ecclesiastical penalties may not be productive of faith and goodwill. Dialogue within the churches seems to be as important as inter-religious dialogue. The latter seems not likely to progress far without the former. Or inter-religious dialogue may generate issues that need dialogue within the churches.

Those concerned with social justice have to recognise the nature of these issues and help bring about understanding in the process of commitment to social justice and the development of Christian theology and spirituality. There is a growing credibility gap between the more radical and traditional groups within the Church. Some are socially radical and conservative in expression of belief and worship. Asian churches particularly require a renewed more Christ-like Christian theology, but how is this to be brought about in this conflictual situation?

Social Justice while advocating social transformation for justice, has to include the rethinking of the bases of our religious beliefs and practices that would contribute towards a more just, peaceful and egalitarian society. The Sri Lankan background of many lively vibrant religions, social awareness and growing gender consciousness can help in this. We endeavour to contribute towards this cause by our discussion of intra-religious and inter-religious issues.



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Premadasa: The Vision Thing

C. Mahendran

What is it that made Premadasa gravitate to the United National Party, as opposed to the revolutionary left? The answer I think lies in his upbringing. Buddhist mores and catholic schooling, groomed him on a spiritual bent, that could not accept a pure materialist explanation of cause and effect.

Moving as he did amongst the down trodden in Kehelwatta early in life, inaugurating Sucharita, following Goonasinghe in the labour movement, would one think any thing but pull Premadasa towards the then vibrant left. No. He decided otherwise. The same happened to Lee Kuan Yew, a socialist when he was at the University. When the latter came into office he believed only the free market could deliver the goods. Premadasa was convinced earlier on, it was so, having associated with Dudley and J.R., but he was troubled by the paradox of free enterprise in a developing economy, neglecting the poorer sections of society, which amounted to the majority in the population. Sri Lanka and South Asia were full of this dichotomy. Premadasa wrestled with this problem. He had to seek a way out. His heart went out to the poor, who in his manner of thinking had no escape. The vicious cycle, whether one be an urban worker or a poor peasant, gripped then in damning them to a miserable world. How does one get out of the poverty trap? Is there a way? If so how can one lick this problem? These questions were uppermost in his mind. Thus on assuming office as Minister Housing and Local Government, he got his select band of officials to work on this problem. Being well aware of problems of governance, he was careful not to tread on others toes. So the experiment began with Housing. The million

houses of program, was the result. Premadasa fought tooth and nail in Cabinet to fund this incipient, and later a full fledged experiment, in community participation.

Here was a sector where the Government had to enter the field as a catalyst to identify and assist a community to face a problem. Thus the housing program began a process of deepening an awareness of limitations of community organisations. How does one keep the initial interest from flagging?

Thereafter to get a community to handle problems such as savings and credits, methodology, getting the job done, and getting the pro poor activists, to work with government cadres in a symbiotic relationship. These aspects, since Premadasa looked at them closely were amazingly successful.

The UNP lost the 1956 elections, and Dudley Senanayaka, seeing the organisational skill of Premadasa, mustered him, and with J.R. Jayewardene, revamped the UNP onto a well oiled Party machine. In 1960 Premadasa won the Colombo Central seat and thus began his career as a member of Parliament.

Premadasa felt that concern for human beings in the corner stone of civilization, but this concern, need not necessarily follow the Marxian way. Marx and the market in Premadasa's eyes did not mix. A man who read Mahatma Gandhi, Radhakrishnan, Tagore, John Ruskin, and C.E.M. Joad had made up his mind that the way forward, was to mobilise the poorer sections to action not in Marxist communes, but in Free Market Enterprise. Speaking on 200 industrial centres he said "this growth will go hand in hand with the acceleration of the work of the Janasaviya Trust Fund. It will be in complete harmony with the big

investor — small producer inter relationship".

His friendship with J.R. Jayewardene and Dudley Senanayaka, influenced his political thinking, wherein he saw the strength of the free market in building the economic foundations of a country. But he was troubled with the abject poverty, of the rural and the urban poor, constituting as it did the vast majority of our population. First as Deputy Minister and then as the Minister of local government, he honed in all that he had mastered during his formative years, and pushed through his ideas in developing the Colombo Central area. Infrastructure was developed to help the poor to become productive agents in a free environment. With the defeat of the UNP in 1970, Premadasa got another opportunity between 1970-77 to learn, and fine tune his thinking on the paradox of economic progress in developing countries, wherein, it led to the rich getting richer, and the poor had more children. Wherein did lie an answer to his question? He himself admits that he and the UNP did their homework between 1970 and 77, thus when J.R. Jayewardene with the able assistance of R. Premadasa won the 1977 election for the UNP, and ideology was in place to push the economic upliftment of the poorer sections of society, into gainful elements in an economically integrated whole.

As Minister of Local Government, Housing and Construction, and then as Prime Minister, he had his turf, and from the word "go" he got his chosen men, to implement his vision from August 1977. "Walking on two legs". "If I can become the voice of the voiceless millions". "What we need is not so much answers to our old questions, we must start to question our old answers". "Poverty does not have the luxury of leisurely solutions". "I consider it a crime to tolerate poverty in the economic life of the country".

A career officer, the writer was Ambassador in Japan and China before he retired from the foreign service.

These words were the clarion call for action, and Premadasa the great communicator, was able to sell these ideas, packaged as they were in, simple, earthy, and digestible form. From 1977 to 1993 Premadasa had the exceptional gift of an unbroken political regime; with a full scale opening up of the economy, and the Executive Presidency, within which he made use of his ability to sell a product that was in his eyes the way out for a country to practice what the government preached, in economic terms, without destabilising the political machinery, in coming to grips with poverty alleviation.

From 1977 the ideas he articulated were looked upon as a marketing professional would look at a "brand" that had to be sold. Thus his programmes such as housing, Gam Udawa, mobile secretariat, Janasaviya were packaged and marketed to the people. The Premadasa image too was packaged and marketed, which was acceptable to the vast majority of the people.

He began his program in implementing his dream with housing. From 1977-88 Premadasa used the housing program, and then poverty alleviation, as the key to have economic growth, with equity and national unity. The macro economic picture where the private sector had free rein in increasing total output, had to be matched by governmental inputs to help those who were most vulnerable. The trickle down syndrome did not appeal to Premadasa. It was slow, and fraught with danger. The million houses program was an innovative support based housing program, where the poor builder families, were at the center of their own development process. The government supports, strengthens and complements the mainstream. It will intervene only when individuals and communities cannot solve problems on their own. The government was the facilitator, and the family was the doer and decision maker.

Basic to this policy was the correct appreciation of the role of the poor, in their own development. The poor were being made subjects, unlike the earlier policy of treating them "objects" of the "dole". The proof that the Premadasa vision in implementation was working was seen that while incipient insurgent and terror were

manifesting itself all over from '86, development workers in housing, among the urban and rural poor, found themselves being received by the people with an overwhelming degree of trust and credibility.

The question did arise "after Premadasa, what next?" You are aware that the housing program is still there alive and kicking, and the support based policies, were part of the development process, and would be sustained by any successor regime "irrespective of party. As Prime Minister Premadasa was able to bring his ideas to the leaders of the commonwealth, and later the UN, whereby 1987 was declared the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless.

It was 1988 and thereafter Premadasa was to feel that his vision was, and will be a total reality, when the concept of Janasaviya was enunciated in the "Action Program on Poverty Alleviation" through people based developments. He saw, though he could not avert it, the crisis developing in the untrammelled free market policies, bereft of safety nets. The events in 1988, 1989 amply brought out the worst fears he had.

It was in November 1987 that the next significant event of the pre-1988 phase took place. That was the appointment of a Committee of eight high level officials, chaired by the then Governor of the Central Bank, to prepare within one month, an Action Program on Poverty Alleviation through People-Based Development. The report was prepared within six weeks. Its role is quite strategic in relation to subsequent developments. For one thing, it further clarified the methodological principles by critically generalising the participatory content of the housing experience for the larger issue of poverty alleviation. This was conceptualised under the label People-Based Development, which was defined as "fundamentally different in form and content from conventional development. In essence it;

- put people first, especially the poor and the poorest of the poor;
- considered human beings as the primary resource;
- was self-reliant and bottom-up;

- was culturally harmonious;
- could realize truly national scale and stability;

This was the nucleus of his campaign manifesto "A new Vision, a new Deal".

It is useful to remind ourselves of the richness and variety of the pro-poor policy package. There were the 1.5 Million houses program which had a natural kinship to the Janasaviya Program. There was the Presidential Task Force on National Land Utilisation and Distribution, set up in October 1989. This was an implementing commission. The Presidential Commission on Youth was also appointed in October 1989. The Presidential Commission on Finance and Banking, which among other key issues addressed that of credit for the poor, started working in February 1991. The Janasaviya Trust Fund, an organisation to complement the Janasaviya Commissioners; Department was started in 1991. There were the programs for restructuring sub-district level administration called Divisional Secretariats, and the 200 Garment Factories programs. The former was major attempt at administrative restructuring where the object was to devolve all administration — development as well as routine maintenance — to 301 Divisions. The idea was that citizens would not have to leave their division to get any of their needs looked after, be they infrastructure requirements, birth certificates, land matters or pensions. The Garment Factories were targeted to absorb the sons and daughters of the poor, mainly in remote rural areas, into permanent factory employment.

Not only did this fire his imagination as the beginning of a new "Social Contract" in Sri Lanka; the existence of men and women who thought like him, led to his laying hands on the IGSAC document entitled SAARC Moving Towards Core Areas of Cooperation September 1991. The Report contained three messages and one recommendation to the Heads of State;

Poverty and Setting

- Poverty in the region in the year 1991, based on the conventional "poverty line" estimates in countries, would be between 330 to 440 million. It is more likely to be in the higher range. There was a need

to take a critical look at the methodology of poverty assessment and the available statistics and assess its weaknesses in reflecting the real picture of the magnitude of the problem.

- Given the present trends in population and economic growth and in the absence of a concerted effort at poverty alleviation, the numbers are likely to increase substantially.
- The problems of poverty are further aggravated by various other social deprivations and discriminations from which the poor suffer as well as by the spatial inaccessibility of outlying, remote and distant terrain which prevent the delivery of social goods and services.
- The structural adjustment policies, which accompany the open-economy industrialisation strategy currently being adopted by most SAARC countries, are likely to put further strains on the poor, particularly in the shorter term.
- The conclusion was inescapable that the magnitude and complexity of the problem of poverty in South Asia is staggering. When coupled with the multifaceted crisis currently facing South Asian countries, the problem is becoming unmanageable. It not only puts democracy at risk, but also poses a threat to the very fabrics of South Asian societies.

Inadequacy of Past Development Interventions

- The conventional development interventions over the past fifty years, has resulted in a growth rate too low to have an impact on the levels of living and human development of the large number of poor. Though South Asia has achieved an average growth rate of 3.1% over the past ten years, while several other regions in the South have had negative growth, such growth has failed to "trickle down" or to be administratively redistributed to the poor, except in a limited manner. The magnitude of poverty remains unacceptably high.
- Excessive dependence on the State for every lead in development curtailed initiatives of the people. Obses-

sive preoccupation with State and organised Private Sector capital accumulation, as the driving force in economic progress, resulted in neglecting the capacity of the poor themselves contribute to the accumulation process directly. Concentration on industrialisation/modernisation, as the dominant paradigm of development, created dualities in the system and wide gaps between rural and urban levels of living as well as further polarisation within these areas. The poor, wherever they lived, faced the worst consequences of these processes.

- In making an overall assessment of the results of the adaptations made to "conventional" development wisdom by South Asian countries, however, there is evidence of a positive side, albeit a limited one, as far as the poor are concerned. These positive effects are;

- a) some of the benefits did trickle down to the poor in areas where there was a systematic emphasis on agricultural development and food productions;
- b) In a few South Asian countries, or States within countries, where there was consistent investment in social development programs, a significant level of human development was achieved, even by the poor, at low levels of income; and
- c) Where massive financial resources were available and the bureaucracy was committed and efficient, poverty was ameliorated through the "delivery of inputs" to the poor in selected sectors and areas.

- However, mere continuation of the conventional development pattern with marginal variations, greater efficiency in achieving these limited gains and ad-hoc consultation with the poor in the name of participation would not be adequate to reverse the process of poverty reproduction. The sheer magnitude and complexity of the task should not be underestimated.

- A closer look into the experiences on the ground points to a number of common and specific lessons on

what has been achieved through social mobilisation and participation of the poor in development. The lessons and achievements include the following;

- a) Building organisations of the poor is an essential prerequisite for poverty alleviation. Through these organisations, the poor can save and invest efficiently.
- b) Empowerment of the poor is the means to poverty eradication. Through empowerment, the poor can also assert the right to resources intended for them and enhance their dignity and self respect.
- c) Poor women can effectively overcome their double burden through the same process.
- d) The need for sensitive support mechanisms to catalyse the process of social mobilisation. A new kind of animator/facilitator who is identified with the poor and committed to poverty eradication need to be a part of these support mechanisms.
- e) Participatory monitoring and evaluation have to be built into the process, so that self-corrective action can take place as the process evolves.

Having read this document, Premadasa made it his own, and began a crusade in SAARC Summit to appoint an independent South Asia Commission on poverty alleviation. The terms or reference required the members of the commission, to clearly diagnose what went wrong with past attempts at poverty alleviation, draw the positive lessons from the ground, where the poor have been mobilised to contribute to economic growth, and human development, and finally to identify the critical elements, in a coherent overall strategy of poverty alleviation in South Asia. There was a realisation that just as poverty eradication was a sine quo non to build a market in a country, the same held good for the SAARC region. Premadasa became the guiding light behind this program in SAARC circles. While executing Janasaviya at home, he coaxed his South Asian colleagues that the billion mass market in South Asia would be a reality, if

poverty alleviation, in the way he had accepted it was implemented.

At the Dhaka Summit Premadasa had his colleagues accept the action plan. The SAARC Heads of State decision, made a major "political" commitment and established the "ownership" of a culturally relevant strategic thrust for moving towards growth, sustainable human development and greater equity in the South Asian Region.

It was recognised that the two parallel strategies — the Pro Poor and the Open Economy — which have shorter and longer time frames respectively, would need to be harmonised as far as possible right from the beginning, as the two processes evolve. Both strategies would need to be equally vigorously pursued if these countries were to respond to the multi-faceted crisis facing them.

The implementation of these strategies would require drawing on the many stocks of knowledge — traditional and modern — which was available to South Asian countries and gave greater technological choice. A great deal of research support, using innovative inter-disciplinary social science, giving modern scientific validation to traditional technology, action research methodologies, capacity building and the effective utilisation of existing research results would be required, if the goals of growth, human development and poverty eradication are to be achieved within a reasonable time frame. This more complex development response was also a pre-requisite

for the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic societies which are becoming unmanageable, and for the consolidation of the democratic transformations which are underway in South Asia. More specifically, the action plan of the SAARC Heads of State required that;

- Each SAARC country draw up a national Pro-Poor Plan in parallel with the Open Economy Strategy at the macro level and initiate a Social Mobilisation process at the micro level, for eradication of the worst forms of poverty within a ten year period. This Pro-Poor Plan is based on the assumption that the poor are efficient and can contribute to growth. The greater part of the poor do not need to be passive recipients of relief, welfare or social safety nets.
- As the parallel Open Economy and Poverty Eradication strategies evolve over different time horizons they have to be harmonised, to permit mutual reinforcement and to prevent further sharpening of the contradictions in Society.
- The experience gained and progress achieved with Pro-Poor Planning and the micro level Social Mobilisation that goes with it, should be shared among the SAARC countries in a process of experimental learning. Progress will be reviewed at subsequent SAARC summits.
- A new dialogue should be opened with "donor" Organisations/Governments, so that they could create an enabling international atmos-

phere that is supportive of this poverty eradication strategy in South Asia.

Premadasa was deeply troubled about the way the animators were losing enthusiasm in the entire poverty alleviation program. The bureaucratization of the program, and the dominance of government in this pro-poor efforts. His vision was to create the exact opposite, where the poor would be the subject, and not the government. Thus by 1993 he was wrestling with ideas, on bringing back the early enthusiasm that animated the Million Houses Program. He thought of involving SAARC in our national program would be a way out. But he had to contend with the establishment, used as it was to accepted norms of behaviour oblivious of Premadasa's phrase "What we need is not so much answers to our old question, we must stand to question our old answer". Just as he found out that there were superhuman hurdles in the political field, to have his ways of thinking, and Governance accepted, he found that the well to do in society were not committed in making the proper policy work. It was useless talking of big investor, small producer, unless the small producer, produced a product that was saleable, packaged and presented for a market. That input was lacking. The man who had mastered the art of selling a political product was being stumped by inflexible attitudes, and material mores.

How does one harness the collective genius of a people. If we do, we will blow the competition way.

BOOKS

Colombo: A Novel

By Carl Muller. Delhi: Penguin Books, 1995, 481 pp.

Reviewed by Robert Siegle

*Department of English,
University of Peradeniya.*

Carl Muller's big novel about the city of Colombo lives a life akin to that of its first chapter's protagonists, a pair of struggling young people who meet "Under the Umbrella" to kiss and pet. The hawkers, pervers, children, and

miscellaneous passers-by see them in their very public perch on Galle Face Green, each thinking a different judgment, no doubt, as they maintain the double focus upon each other and upon the world watching them. And I imagine Muller sitting on these pages, very publically "under the umbrella" with the city he clearly loves aware that those who pass through its pages as readers

will have any number of say about his passionate collage of Colombo's past and present realities.

And I mean "passionate" in both its sexual registers — Muller insists his city has a sex life even if it isn't always pretty to portray — and its metaphorical sense. Muller has raided the storehouse of books, cards, posters, and advertising

for this city, gathering its most intense moments over the last few centuries and using them to tell us where the city came from. These materials are the historical complement to the portrayal of "Colombo Nights," the longer section of the novel with its twenty-two chapters of contemporary life resonating against its historical and social contexts. Not much is spared in these chapters — Muller has little reticence out of respect for the sensibilities of the prudish, the chauvinistic, or the self-important among the city's readers.

And so it is easy enough to complain about *Colombo*. Its sensationalized sex, pessimistic politics, and histrionic history might well put off the pious, the loyal, the booster — any personality that believes in speaking only with kindness, charity, and forbearance. *Colombo* is not for such readers; it is more for those who can relate to the final line of a chapter about current problems, a line that follows a quotation of several pages from a 1994 letter to a newspaper chronicling the lower middle class gripes of the day. "Oh, oh, Colombo," the line reads.

The second "oh" functions to introduce both irony and agony to the subject, a dual attitude that overly earnest readers may miss in too easy an offense at Muller's free-ranging portrait of "their city."

The irony? The line sounds like a pop song, marking the hopeless gap between anything like a song or novel and the hopeless complexity of reality. The irony marks the measure of futility in lamenting the human impact in any westernizing Asian capital. It recoils from the pathos of so eloquent a letter, knowing how unfixable are its disappointments about Sri Lanka's capture by a moneyed and none-too-principled elite. Muller endorses the letter-writer's sentiment, apparently, by letting it stand with only the ironic awareness of how much worse the reality is than even this letter can report.

Hence the agony in "oh, oh Colombo" — that flinch which irony is meant to mask a bit. For Muller finds Colombo also a city of beauty, of human energy,

of so many dues of suffering paid by so many ordinary humans, and for centuries, of the crunch of lives in the teeth of social forces bigger than any one nation or leader.

I think the authorial energy drawn to the horror of child sex and child murder is emblematic of the complexity of Carl Muller's attitude. It's too easy to call it prurience or pandering... it acknowledges the thrill of unrestrained power that is the "kick" to pedophiles' mix of sexuality and physical dominance. But Muller also places such abuse in the context of a world in which individuals' sources of self-validation and well-being are desperately circumscribed and compromised..... so much so that sexual power over a replica of one's childself can become the only imaginable compensation for some victims of life in the twentieth century.

When the villains are Sri Lankan abusers, pimps, and delinquent parents, the effect is to register the extent to which the more vulnerable sectors of Sri Lankan society have been disfigured by the neocolonial era of local elites and economic dominance benefitting "developed" nations. When the abusers are foreigners, resonant with colonialism's national level of rape and murder, the incident serves to generalize this fable of cancerous damage to the soul. Then, perhaps, we approach the saga of an urban underclass and dispossessed rural immigrants crushed in the maws of multinational capital. No reader can get through Muller's scrapbook from the crime reports without flinching at the brutally physical experience of these representative cases.

Muller's fusion of historical chronicle and a journalism of sensation (as opposed to sensationalized journalism) achieves the realization that Colombo is a concoction — "an artificial city" as he calls it (413) — a text written when the pen of outside power has cut its lines into the blank text of the Sri Lankan coast, its heart being elsewhere — in Kandy, or Kotte, or Jaffna. A concoction ought not expect to have its roots in some authentic origin. If Colombo, was never anything but what others have made of Sri Lanka, and Carl Muller demonstrates beyond doubt the disastrously complicated nature of such

co-created palimpsests, when one culture after another rewrites the page until their scripts jumble together into something like a frenzied abstract, the chaotic hashmarks or ethnic shrapnel.

Which is a way of saying that Muller's Colombo isn't a problem with a solution. Or that it is a miasma of problems with too many solutions, ones that satisfy only one of a thousand interests or perspectives. *Colombo* doesn't see the city's problems as a function of ethnic divisions, though perhaps it takes a Burgher to imply, even, that Sinhalese-Tamil differences matter less than economic dislocation and the social disruption it creates. Muller cares more about the self-interest of politicians than their ethnic label, more about greed and the collective withering of compassion than about the intricacies of devolution's details or parliamentary jockeying.

Perhaps, that is, Muller is really taking his lead from the old Testament prophets who made themselves unpopular for the same reasons I've heard this book criticized. Namely, for exposing the collective loss of a people's finest sense of themselves and their values, and for reminding listeners of the history by which their fragile state has come to be. Colombo's history is that of a rough, hostile, usually exploitative collaboration among peoples, nations, and classes, and the city took shape during the transformation of the world from a collection of emerging nation states into the present day reintegration of us all into one global market of dubious commodities.

Muller has distilled into *Colombo* all that he finds disturbing about the effects of that transformation. I suspect one has to read his poem, *Sri Lanka: a lyric* (Kandy 1990), in order to know first hand the specifics of his great love for Sri Lanka. But the city's energy and vitality is unmistakable in Muller's novel, even if both its humane and perverse sides are clearly evident, even if equally evident is Muller's conviction that much is lacking in the quality of leadership the city has known — in its colonial masters, in its postcolonial leaders, its citizens, its visitors. We must all of us use this book to remind ourselves of the more wholesome chapters yet to be written in Colombo's history.

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THOMAS MERTON

Jeanne Thwaites

Thomas Merton of towering international fame is the most profound of the writers. He expresses himself, as always, with no-nonsense honesty and often poetic insight. When he visited Sri Lanka it was on his last journey — one that would end in Bangkok where he was found dead by electrocution. The visit to Ceylon was an important one because it provided one of the many factors that might have contributed to that death now usually considered to have been a murder though it is officially declared an accident. Merton's death was curiously convenient for he had made three powerful enemies.

First, the United States Government. Merton's stand against the Vietnam War was affecting the country's youth and had not made him friends in Washington D. C. When his Trappist Abbot forbade him to write on anti-war topics, he did so under another name — and everyone knew who it was because he was the only person saying those things that way. The C. I. A. is more than capable of dispatching such a dissident.

Second, the Catholic Church. Merton's critical religious writing had been so influential that Pope Pius XII had changed some tenets of the Catholic Church (Hidden Grounds 651/52). To some of his readers Merton was the Church. But now the monk was examining Asian religions and had become delighted with Zen buddhism,

Merton continued to make waves that were rapidly hitting gale force. At the age of fifty-four he fell in love with a young woman he met when he was a patient in a hospital. He did not see how that such a love could have come from anywhere but

God. While he did not consummate the relationship or expect to give up his life as a "solitary" monk, he did not avoid talking, writing or thinking about such a possibility. He wrote her passionate letters and sought her company.

He was therefore a nuisance to Catholicism much as Gandhi, who had done so much to liberate his people, also became a nuisance to them in his latter years. The Italian Mafia are Catholic and makes substantial contributions to Rome — which is not to say that their Church openly or even privately condones its activities. If the mob responsible for Merton's death, it would not have been the first time it would have caused the abrupt elevation to heaven of an earthly nuisance to Rome.

Third, and the least likely, the Buddhists. Buddhism is nonmilitant but its practitioners are not always so and nowhere more than in Sri Lanka has this been demonstrated. Merton went from Ceylon to India and then Tibet where he met with the Dalai Lama. The Tibetans promptly named him "the American Buddha." As he was a Catholic, the sobriquet did not amuse the narrower Buddhists outside that country.

Images quotes from Merton's diaries on his visit to Ceylon where he further embarrassed his church by having his supreme spiritual experience beside one of the Galviharas in Polonnaruwa not at some more appropriate place like St. Peter's in Rome. He wrote:

I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident

and obvious. The queer evidence of the reclining figure, the smile..... I now have seen what I was obscurely looking for (388).

Merton's Ceylon diary entries include a Zen comment: "What if the mind becomes one-pointed and the 'one point' is then removed;" humor: "I am afraid, I am afraid, I am afraid of silences said the Vicar General, 'I was afraid of those Trappists;" and inappropriate monk thoughts while looking out of a train window on the way to Kandy: "Girls is beautifully cool and wet....." (381).

A curious fact about the choice of writers for *Images* is that only John Henry Barrows from Michigan, and Ella Wheeler Wilcox from Wisconsin, are not from the north east and eastern United States.* It is possible, of course, that all the early 19th Century travelers were only from the East Coast, but after World War I it is not, and the later omissions seem outrageous. In the mid-20th Century, California was booming, and after World War II, air travel joined the whole world. Sri Lanka was no longer an obscure island south of India, if only because the movie producers had discovered its cheap labor. *Elephant Walk* (1954), *Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) and several other famous movies were made there. Californian writer Mike Wilson who won an academy award under another name for *Place in the Sun*, because he had been blacklisted for being a communist, was in Sri Lanka for months working on *Bridge on the River Kwai*.

* Harry Frank is mentioned as "returning" to Seattle (256), but it is not clear if Washington was his home state or whether he was headed there.

When I met him he talked about meeting other American writers while here. Did none of them write about the Island? Where also are the works of the many West-Coast Americans who are openly homosexual and who visit and/or live in Sri Lanka where they have gone because there is no discrimination against them?

After talking to Ian Goonetilleke about my thoughts in this regard, and sending him this manuscript in progress, he reiterated that he had only four months to put the book together and that I had missed its point. He chose those writings which he felt best described the affect of travel on the mind.

In my own context — that of colonization — a problem I also have with *Images* is that there are so many glowing descriptions of the physical beauty of the Island, that there is a feeling that they have won out over conversational exchanges, people-descriptions and political changes that were influencing many world travelers from the mid-twenties on. A repetitious quality to the descriptions invariably leads to skimming the text and when you skim you frequently mis-read. For example, a Sri Lanka English student in the University of California in Berkeley told me she found Mark Twain's excerpt racist. I explained that the beginning of Twain's description is written tongue-in-cheek, as I shall explain later, and it was obvious the student had not read more than his beginning. If a student of English won't read every word of a text I don't know who will, so I was surprised. I asked her if she had been skimming and she replied with a grin that she had: "I got bogged on the descriptions."

The editor calls Lucian Kirtland "refreshingly free of gossip" (332). Gossip would have served my purposes better. It also seems, from these accounts, that those writers who

were in an interminable ecstasy about flora and fauna also depersonalized people (the Ceylonese they encountered) — "scenery-first, animals-second, people-third" seems their subconscious choice. My own bias in making these comments is obvious. I am more eager to hear how these writers saw themselves in juxtaposition to the Sinhalese, Tamils and English, than the shrubs.

Additional writings in the bibliography's long list which I would have liked included are Jane Alden's "Buddhist wisdom of the East perceived beyond a colour-barrier set by the West" (1925) and Angela Daugharty's "The Veddhas of Dambana" (1963). I was also intrigued by Harry Frank's title "Clown in a Ceylon Circus" (1909) but that title is more interesting than anything he has to say. He gave no details about the experience.

An American Education

Almost all the Americans represented in *Images of Sri Lanka* had university degrees or, in the case of the women who did not, their husbands had. Some came with a job to do, some because they were curious about the island, and some were en route to jobs in other countries. When they looked at the way of life in Ceylon they were thus seeing it's poverty and luxury in counterpoint with their own more affluent American life styles and mind sets. This is true even of young Michigan graduate Harry Frank (1905) who spent fifteen months circling the globe with only \$104 for his Kodak camera expenses — also, Eugene Wright (1928), who swam to shore when the cargo ship on which he was assistant boatswain, was quarantined in Colombo harbor.

Harry Frank shows how deeply orientalism was ingrained in American youth a century ago. He is treated kindly by the poorest Sinhale-

se and accepts their gifts as his due: "a white man, whatever his station in life, is a tin god in Ceylon... Try as I would, I had not succeeded in making my daily expenditures more than ten cents" (261 and 164). Frank does not see hospitality given except as an honor to his white skin and makes cheaply cruel remarks: "prehensile coolies armed with heavy knives... a scrawny driver grinned cheerily and mumbled strange words of greeting" (260).

Eugene Wright arrived twenty-three years after Frank — that is in the late twenties when motor transport was available all over the world and more and better-informed young liberals were globe trotting. A Sinhalese shop-keeper becomes worried about him wandering around Colombo so fearlessly, invites him in, feeds him, and teaches him some Sinhalese words. Wright says, "He was thoroughly charming... escorted me outside the bazaar, politely refused to accept any money, and wished me the happiest kind of a voyage" (344).

Goonetilleke is, however, much more critical of Wright than Frank whom he describes as "full of warm exuberance" (257). Wright, he says, "displays a great gift for embellishing a tale" (340).

Two Self-Made Men — Henry Heusken and Andrew Carnegie

The only two first-generation American immigrants Henry Heusken (1856) born in Holland, and Andrew Carnegie (1878) born in Scotland, had experienced working-class poverty. Heusken was on his way to Japan as part of the new American Legation (99). Carnegie, the millionaire industrialist and philanthropist, was already one of the most famous men of the western world. Both came to Ceylon well-informed about its geography, culture and religions. They were relentlessly curious about

what was actually going on and when they looked at and spoke to the Sinhalese it was without sniggering asides. For example, like almost every other traveler, they comment on the native costume of the Sinhalese male. However, neither refers to the sarong as "feminine." To Carnegie, a Scot, it would probably have been no more so than the kilt, but he does not laugh at what is unfamiliar. Other writers chuckled at the curved tortoise-shell hair combs worn by many Sinhalese and particularly the loin cloth worn by fishermen and other outdoor workers. The Sinhalese were and are physically modest and when writings carelessly describe them as going "naked" it is as if they are entirely uncovered — thus reinforcing the missionary image of uncivilized sub-human jungle creatures. Heusken and Carnegie also do not dismiss the local languages as "mumbling" or "chattering."

Carnegie, however, always a businessman points out how money could be made in Ceylon. Forty years earlier, William Ruschenberger (1835), had also looked at the Ceylonese and seen them not as funny savages but as thousands of people waiting for Americans to sell things to: "a new and extensive mart must be opened for our manufacturers of all kind" (311). In 1994 I was to see his vision in action only it was the Australian manufacturers who were filling the Colombo supermarket shelves not the United States.

In one encounter with a Sinhalese guide, Carnegie mischievously quotes a famous but dreadful little American protestant hymn:

**What though the spicy breezes
Blow soft o'er Ceylon's isle,
Though every prospect pleases,
And only man is vile.
In vain with lavish kindness**

**The gifts of God are strewn;
The heathen in his blindness
Bows down to wood and stone
(139),**

which words are recalled by several other Protestants in the collection. Frances Scott Keyes (1926) admits somewhat contritely that it was her grandmother who was the author of the hymn (312). Carnegie's Sinhalese guide is irate and snaps, "the writer was a fool" (139) and says no American would believe such lies. Carnegie assures him they would and promises that if the guide would come to America he would take him to a meeting where he could see that for himself (14). Although the millionaire seems to be drawing attention to the difference between their fortunes he gives the man his address — a friendly, non-patronizing gesture, indeed. You can almost hear self-made Carnegie thinking, "Well, I got out of Scotland. If this guide really wants to get to America he'll find a way." He shows no concept of how much more freedom to travel an adventurous working-class Scot would have had than a working-class Sri Lankan.

Americans Meet the British Colonials

The first Americans arrived when there was open animosity between the United States and Great Britain. Rev. and Mrs. Newell (1813) did so while the countries were still adversaries in the War of 1812. Eventually, America and Britain became allies against Germany in the Twentieth Century and a most intriguing aspect of *Image of Sri Lanka* is watching this gradual change in attitude. At the same time one sees, as one does today, that the English had no idea that their colonial posturing was not being taken seriously by the visitors even those they chose to entertain. *Images* shows they were rewarded by politeness but inner

criticism. Non of the writings show a budding friendship between an American and an Englishman/woman and one senses that this was the choice of the Americans rather than of their English hosts.

Townsend Harris (1855) who stopped in Ceylon on his way take up the position of the first U. S. Consul-General to Japan receives particularly generous English hospitality but comments, "The Indian officers are, many of them, much better informed than those of Her Majesty's service. The latter talk only of horses, dogs, billiards and cards" (89).

Affluent globe-trotter Margaret Mordecai (1924) is as cynical after watching the young English at play up-country:

**In all other countries youths and
maidens love to be together
....their best amusement is just
to be together. In England on
the contrary, the moment
youths and maidens meet, they
must play some game... At no
matter what time we passed the
tennis court, they were jumping
and battling in perfect silence...
I always thought how different
it would be if they had been
Americans... the girls and boys
would have been sitting in couples
engaged in the old 'game
for two', which began in the
Garden of Eden (303).**

Mordecai thus aligns herself with "all other countries." Always, the Americans are conscious of their "American"-ness. E. Jackson (1869) is the most smug about what being an American is all about. He shrugs off a German Prince or French Count as an ordinary sight but "the presence of a live yankee — a citizen of the Great Republic — would assuredly be a noteworthy circumstance" (123).



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