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Pravada in contemporary Sinhalese usage has a range of meanings which includes theses, concepts and propositions.

A CITY AWAKENED!

An anthropologist once said that, in Sri Lanka's recent past, violent upheavals had always been preceded by periods of drought. This year too, we experienced a severe five-month long drought, but this ended in an upheaval of a different kind — a deluge that played havoc in metropolitan Colombo and in its outlying areas. Nearly 500 millimeters of rain fell in just nine hours; it was no doubt a downpour of historic proportions, one that experts say will occur once in 200 years. Yet its consequences, as those of the many minor floods that have been experienced in Colombo in recent times, exposed the vulnerability of what is euphemistically called 'urban development' to the unanticipated convulsions of nature.

Unplanned and haphazard urbanization is an unhealthy by-product of Third World development. Big cities like Manila, Bangkok, Mexico City and Calcutta are monstrosities of modernity where squatter colonies and begging babies exist side by side with Mercedes-Benzes and high-rise buildings. Unlike other big cities in Asia, Africa and Latin America, Colombo has hardly been a major industrial location and has thus managed to avoid their fate. It has not experienced the mass migration of villagers eager to escape from grinding rural poverty and isolation. And inside the city, the workings of the welfare state system for almost fifty years has maintained some kind of urban peace.

Nonetheless, Colombo has changed significantly during the past decade or so,

primarily due to a flood of another kind — rentier capital. Following the aftermath of economic liberalization in 1977, merchant capital realized the potential of real estate and moved swiftly not only to meet the rising demand for urban housing among the middle and upper strata of the *nouveau riche*, but also to create it. Private developers sought to hide the shoddy construction and architecture of their housing schemes, located in hastily filled swamps, with mock-Greek columns and names like Estoril, Windsor Castle or the Willow Terraces.

Thus the eighties saw urban development of the most unplanned kind — the filling up of water retention areas, the blocking of canals and waterways, housing projects in inappropriate and potentially hazardous locations and inadequate drainage facilities. Regulatory bodies like local authorities, the Urban Development Authority and the Low Land Reclamation Board, bowed meekly before the power of capital and allowed it to have its way. Not only that; they played another role in attempting to ensure urban peace by allocating tiny bits of land in prime areas — as for example along the Kirillapone canal bank — to shanty dwellers. All of these played their part in magnifying the consequences of this month's flood; droughts and floods, as we are only too well aware, do not have purely natural causes.

The state and public responses to such cataclysms are haphazard. The severity of a drought, for example, is usually



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recognized only when the water levels of hydro-power reservoirs begin to fall and urban consumers of electricity are forced to endure power cuts. Floods, meanwhile, have hitherto failed to elicit any kind of long term response; the state rarely goes beyond relief donations allocated by the Ministry of Social Services — probably because floods have been largely confined to rural districts well outside the bourgeois metropolis of Colombo. The June deluge in contrast appears to have shaken this pattern of official apathy to natural disasters. Unlike drought, this flood was no respecter of class privilege. It devoured the video-cassette living rooms of the upper-classes as effectively as it did the single rooms of urban shanty-dwellers. Coming as it did in a flash, it took not only its victims but the entirety of officialdom, both political and bureaucratic,

by surprise. This elite, whose activities have transformed Colombo and its suburbs into a post-modern nightmare, are only just now waking up to the consequences of their deeds.

The urban question is one of the most neglected, yet singularly relevant social problems in Sri Lanka. As is well known, one of the consequences of haphazard capitalist development is weak and vulnerable socio-spatial structures. Today, Colombo and its satellites are not cities but mere demographic entities — lacking the adequate provision of basic civic amenities like unpolluted pipe-borne water, public toilets, parks and recreation areas, efficient sewerage and waste disposal systems, clean and hygienic public markets and transport. As always, the poorer sections suffer the most: this is visually evident in the emergence of new symbols of urban affluence in middle and upper class residential locations, contrasting with the decaying infrastructures of traditional proletarian quarters of the city. Thus the multi-storeyed shopping malls and glossy dress boutiques of Colombo 3 and 4 stand in sharp contrast to the squalor and decadence of Dematagoda, Narahenpita and Kotahena.

The June floods dramatically exposed some of the major structural deficiencies of Sri Lanka's urbanization. The bureaucratic response to this may probably be the construction of new and better outlets for the angry flood waters that may visit us again, uninvited and unforeseen. What is urgently required, however, is a re-thinking about what Colombo is and ought to be, in terms of its needs as an expanding metropolis. This dictates planning, more planning and yet more planning; not the combination of corrupt speculators and contractors and the *basunnehe's* uninformed efficiency, which may erect buildings, roads and shopping malls in record time, but with little or no regard for their long-term socio-spatial consequences.

A similar time bomb is also ticking in the new suburbs of Colombo like Mattegoda, Ranpokunagama, Kaduwela, and Raddolugama. All these are large hous-

ing projects, each containing more than one thousand units catering to middle class needs, that have come up in the last few years. With real-estate sharks buying acres of property and selling them in tiny plots of 10 to 20 perches, vast middle class neighborhoods have been created in areas isolated from schools, hospitals, work places and other basic facilities needed by these households.

A vast majority of these housing-estate dwellers work in Colombo and send their children to schools in the city. But no sooner is the dream house bought and the family moved in, the realization dawns on the lucky house owner that people live not under a roof alone. Water, waste disposal and transport have now become the most acute problems in these icons of middle-class illusion. Imagine a colony of one thousand middle-class households without a good school despite the presence therein of hundreds of children, without a decent bus service to the city to which practically every soul travels every morning, without a properly-equipped hospital nearby, and without other civic amenities like public parks, markets and shopping centers. Thus the old *koriyawas* of Kirulapana and Narahenpita are being reproduced, but further outside Colombo. The deluge of June may have done us a good turn, even though it cost much in damage, loss and grief, if it succeeds in opening the eyes of the citizens of the capital to the dangers that are undoubtedly ahead. The play of market forces, however desirable or necessary in certain fields, cannot cope with the larger issues raised by urban development, the ultimate objective of which must be the creation of urban environments that satisfy the basic needs of all their inhabitants. The present combination of rentier capital, a corrupt and self-serving political elite and a subservient bureaucracy cannot ensure this. It needs to be pointed out finally that it is not only Colombo that faces these dangers; to judge from government pronouncements and the advertisements of property developers, equally haphazard developments are taking place in the other urban centers too.