SRI LANKA AT CROSSROADS

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Following is the text of the speech delivered at the launching of the book, **Sri Lanka at Crossroads, Dilemmas and Prospects After 50 Years of Independence,** *edited by S.T. Hettige and Markus Mayer, 2000, of the Centre for Sociological and Anthropological Studies University of Colombo, South Asia Institute-Colombo Office University of Heidelberg in Association with Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.*

The subtitle of this book, *Dilemmas and Prospects after 50 years of independance* I think points to some of the special features that distinguish this volume. *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads* is no doubt much smaller in size, but then it defines its scope and undertakes its task differently from the other similar work on Sri Lanka. The focus is on the hardcore problems that have emerged and defied solutions in the course of the five decades of development. In many of the chapters, the retrospective task, the survey of the past is directed at probing into the persistent problems. The chapters then turn to examine the directions in which the solutions may be found. This I consider the most challenging part of the book. It engages the reader at the level of the values and fundamental assumptions concerning the nature of development. And for me the chapters in which this engagement finds its strongest expression are those which deal with the ethnic conflict, and the discussion of culture and youth.

Before I deal with some of these chapters, let me make a brief comment on the total design of the book. In their two introductory chapters the editors emphasize that the issues they have selected focus on most of the key elements of development. They highlight four–the social, economic, political and cultural. The chapters cover the economy, the state, institutions and bureaucracy, the political system and the ethnic crisis, the changing gender roles, life opportunities for youth and the impact of globalization on local culture. I said the book encompassed "most of the key elements of development." Admittedly no single book, particularly a volume of about 230 pages can include all the important aspects of development. For example, Lakshman's volume includes science and technology-another key determinant. The sections on religion and civil society in the volume of *Dialogue* capture dimensions which go further than the treatment of culture in *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads.* But what Sri *Lanka at the Cross Roads* has been successful in accomplishing within a volume of its size is to produce an eminently readable analysis of the complexity and multi-dimensional character of the development process.

Here, I would lie to make a brief observation that applies to the methodology that has been followed in all the three works. In their attempt to provide a comprehensive view of development those works for the most part identify and analyze the different aspects of development separately and independently of each other. Each scholar applies the main discipline relevant to the subject matter he or she has selected–the economist deals with the economy, the political scientist with politics and so on. But even this presentation in which different components of development are brought together in one volume, brings to the reader the many faceted nature of development, its complexity. What is needed, however, is an analytical approach which goes further than a collective presentation or some selective cross-references to the other elements of development. The complex inter-relations between the social, political, economic, cultural have to be uncovered. And on this criterion *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads* goes further that the other works. Some of the chapters deal with cross-cutting issues–gender roles, youth. The related problems by their very nature have to be situated in the four contexts–social, political, economic, cultural. Mayer develops a multi-disciplinary framework of analysis to uncover the hard core problems that beset the life opportunities for youth. We need more of such development analysis and research which grapples with the problem of multi-disciplinarily. First we need it for the simple reason that without it we fail to address the complex interactions that all the time take place between an infinite number of variables in any human situation. Second, as a result of missing these interactions we impose patterns and interpretations on events and processes which are too incomplete and partial so as to be misleading. Such partial analysis may provide the wrong signposts for policy making and action on the key development issues. To develop a framework of multi-disciplinary analysis for development that is capable of consistent application, the exchange between the social science disciplines has to be more firmly structured and continuous. Policy makers need to be constantly reminded that there is a complex simultaneity in the total development process that there cannot be a significant lag or shortfall in any one essential element of development whether it be political, economic, social, cultural or environmental without it affecting and holding back the development in other critical parts. The scholars who have produced *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads* should take this multi-disciplinary effort further and develop the required analytical tools and methodology. The Human Development report with the multi-sectoral composite indicators it has developed provides some useful leads for such work.

I said that I found the political chapters the most challenging. This is not to give a lesser value to some of the other contributions which present a critical analysis and evaluation of past trends. In articles such as Abeyratne's on policy and political issues in economic growth and Swarna Jayaweera's changing gender roles, we have authoritative digests of the evaluations and conclusions that have come into the informed discourse on these subjects–some of them made by the authors themselves in their past writings. They are neatly presented and substantiated with well ordered statistical information for the entire period, and serve as instructive material for the student, the researcher and the inquiring reader. Mayer in his article on youth identifies the constraints which flow from the macro-level-the political, economic and ecological spheres. In doing so, he

gives primacy to the political culture of "winner takes all," the mismatch between education and available employment, the scarcity of natural resources. He then goes on to identify the constraints at the micro-level which restrict or enhance the opportunities for youth the rural marginalization in a Colombo-center economy and culture, the lack of social integration, and the lack of empowerment. In globalization and local culture, Siri Hettige enumerates the culture specific developments ranging from liberalization and the resulting consumerism to migration, tourism and television and discusses their impact on the national culture.

All of these writers revisit issues and problems that have long been the subject of discussion and controversy. Dealing with a survey of fifty years this is part of their assignment. With the exception of the chapter by Mayer, one critical comment that these articles invite is that they attempt to traverse too much terrain and could have gained with a more discriminating and selective approach. Mayer is able to be more selective by approaching his material through the analytical framework he has developed. There are, however, some other development trends of a far-reaching character which I would have liked to see included in the analysis. One of these is the demographic transformation in the country, the unusual phenomenon of a society which has come to the demographic crossroads which have combined a relatively low percapita income with ageing. Some of the chapters such as those on gender roles and youth cover some aspects of demographic change. But I think the scale and nature of the transformation warrants treatment in much greater depth. The demographic determinant will play a key role in shaping the future. It will have dramatic effects on such factors as the growth of the workforce and through it the growth of the economy. Other elements such as international migration will release powerful forces for social change; the rapid ageing population will result in sweeping changes in the structure of demand and call for new safety nets and social security systems. In the chapter on culture I would like to have had the perceptions of the author on another critical stabilizer in society the institution of the family and the challenges it faces with modernization and globalization.

Jehan Perera, Jayadeva Uyangoda and Thangarajah deal with different facets of the ethnic relations in Sri Lanka. The wording of the titles particularly the first two are well chosen to whet our expectation. Jehans "The Inevitability of Violence-the Centralized State in a Plural society," Jayadeva's "A State of Desire; Some Reflections on the Unreformability of Sri Lanka's Post Colonial Polity." All three are very thought-provoking contributions; they confront us with what have become the most intractable realities in each of the areas they examine. Jehan Perera begins with as analysis of violence in Sri Lankan society an analysis he acknowledges has relied heavily Thambiah's *Leveling Crowds*. Violence as he states has become "a conscious , even organized mode of conduct of mass politics on part of significant political actors and their agents." But why is this so ? why does the system which is democratic lack the in-built mechanisms for the resolution of conflicts that democracy itself engenders through its process of empowerment of a plurality of interests and social groups? The author ascribes the inherent propensity to violence to the majoritarian state and the centralization of power,and authority. This is essentially the critique of the

post-independence constitution–a critique which is widely accepted today. It established a political system which did not recognize the reality of sub-national identities and provide for an appropriate sharing of power. It is in the later sections that Jehan Perera grapples with the contemporary situation and explores the options available for the negotiation of a peaceful settlement. This section puts forwards many perceptive proposals. It contains an effort to reinterpret and reconcile the Thimpu declaration of the Tamil parties with the concept of a united Sri Lanka. It draws attention to some of the critical lessons to be learnt from the failure of past negotiations. It underlines the need to agree on a framework of basic principles to initiate a meaningful negotiating process and calls for a new vision of a decentralized state. I have no doubt all these would contribute to a fuller understanding of the conflict and the pre-requisites for its resolution.

Jayadeva begins by examining in some depth what he describes as the reform-resistant character or the status quo conservatism of the Sri Lankan polity. One might argue that reform resistance and conservatism are characteristics of most systems; but their sustainability lies in their capacity to overcome that resistance and adapt to changes both internal and external. Sri Lanka's polity did not possess that capacity. Not that the constitution did not undergo changes–the constitutions of 1972 and 1978 were significant changes, but as the author points out they strengthened the unitary, majoritarian state which was at the source of the conflicts that destabilized the polity. The terminology and the concepts he uses "the state of desire", "the politics of state possession", introduces new ways of perceiving a familiar political reality. The very term "desire" has many emotive meanings and communicates the way in which the competition to appropriate and control the state is motivated within multiple constituencies. But why does the majority act as it does? Why does it seem to be oblivious of its own long-term interests? Why has democratic institutions co-existed with a high degree of violence? The authors do not have all the answers to these questions, they introduce us to the paradoxes and open the inquiry which has to continue.

In Thangarajah's analysis of Tamil nationalism there is an originality of approach and a courageous analysis which is at once striking and challenges the reader. It is a thoughtful, and I daresay controversial, addition to the writing on Tamil nationalism. There is no doubt that both his factual account and his interpretation will be strongly contested, but the article could be the basis for a fruitful discussion and inquiry. Thangarajah traces the way the Tamil identity was constructed from the colonial period onwards. He argues that this identity grew out of an elitist unrepresentative base and that "the elite leadership narrowly constructed the rights of all Tamils in terms of the privileges they themselves enjoyed." There is this unusual and arresting comment at one point of his article "Simply put during the period leading to independence the Tamils constructed and constituted themselves as the 'demons' standing against the fair expectations of the majority for some necessary changes. They deliberately constructed themselves as enemies." All this is well integrated into his analysis of the later developments and what he calls "the re-emergence of a state that was overtly partisan as a Sinhala Buddhist state. The chapter also provides some insights into the way in which the mixed culture, in what is

now referred to as the border villages, broke down under colonization which came to be perceived as an aggressive appropriation of territory.

In all three chapters, the way the state was constituted is at the center of the problems. It seemed that the ethnic composition of Sri Lankan society made it well nigh impossible to design an arrangement for the sharing of power that resolved the conflict. It probably lay in the way in which the ethnic majority was constituted. In most multi-ethnic societies, the varying sizes of the ethnic groups that compose it are such that there is no overwhelming majority of one ethnic group. In the instances in which major asymmetries occur as in the case of Sri Lanka, instances where one ethnic group is in an absolute majority, the distribution of power in a manner which truly empowers the minority and protects it from subordination to the majority is an extremely difficult task. The concept of ethnic equality is often in conflict with ethnic proportionality. In our own multi-ethnic setting, realizing the values of equality of opportunity, creating a fully democratic society comprising self-governing regions, balancing equality with proportionality remain a daunting challenge. Finally, in confronting our problems, we need to reflect critically on what the authors present as a deep contradiction–the co-existence of democracy and violence. We are appalled by the growth of violence, as rightly we should be. But at the same time we must reformulate our question and ask how, while violence escalated in our society, the positive element which is the democratic system acquired an unusual resilience to persist and survive. Here then lies some positive strength from which we can draw sustenance for our future. Despite the deformities in our polity, we have also been able to create the public for a growing civil society. One answer to the asymmetries of power probably lies in both developing the political institutions as well as the processes in civil society which increasingly empower the people and in so doing transform and democratize the state. ∎

Programme for Alternative Learning

The Social Scientists' Association has initiated a new activity called *Programme for Alternative Learning* (PAL). The objective of PAL is to provide an alternative learning space for social activists, community workers and young intellectual practitioners. PAL offers a series of learning and skills building courses to enable participants to access and refine critical knowledge in specific thematic areas. PAL sponsored learning courses are designed to introduce participants to ideas as well as thinkers, practitioners and the major literature in each field.

PAL initiatives are crucially important from the perspective of civil society since they will not only strengthen its institutional capacity but also contribute to produce and sustain a new generation of active intelligentsia dedicated to democratic and progressive social/political goals.

Members of the PAL teaching faculty include resource persons drawn from the academic and activist community.

The first skills training programme under PAL was offered in March this year on *Editing in Style for Community and Academic Writers*. PAL has instituted its second knowledge gaining training course on *Ethnicity, Nation-State and Democracy.*

SSA and PAL are planning a series of other programs on areas as diverse as *Globalisation, Economic Development and Poverty; Feminist Theory; Peace Studies; Theory, Practice and Interventions in Human Rights; English Studies; Translation Studies etc.*