

CHARLES ABEYESEKERA (1926 - 1998)

Charles Abeyesekera, pioneer of Sri Lanka's human rights movement for democracy, inter-ethnic peace and social justice, passed away on April 03. At the time of his death, he was 72 years old, yet the most active member of a number of human rights and intellectual bodies, holding leadership positions. For the hundreds of men and women of all age groups working with him, Mr. Abeyesekera was a close friend, inspiring and visionary colleague, and, of course, the best co-worker. All these exemplary personal qualities came from deep within Mr. Abeyesekera's profound and unshakable political commitment to a future of peace, democracy, human rights and social justice.

Charles Abeyesekera was born in Matale. He received his early education at Matale's St. Thomas' College. Having won a government scholarship, he came to Colombo's Ananda College. He entered the University of Ceylon in 1944 on a Governor's scholarship. At Colombo University, Mr. Abeyesekera read Sinhala, Sanskrit and English for his degree. In 1949, he joined the Ceylon Civil Service. He retired from public service in 1977. Among his final postings as a civil servant were the Steel Corporation and the National Institute of Management, in the capacity of the Head of both institutions.

After retirement, he entered another phase of his public life, dedicating his time and energy to progressive intellectual activity, interventions into democratic politics and the defense of human rights. He worked briefly for the Center for Society and Religion, which provided a forum for dissent in immediate post-1977 years. Then in 1978, he was among Sri Lanka's progressive academics representing Colombo, Jaffna and Kandy to found the Social Scientists' Association, an institution, which was sustained largely on his intellectual energy and dedication. In 1983 Mr. Abeyesekera became the President of the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE) and he continued until his death to lead this activist body, singularly dedicated to inter-ethnic peace and democracy.

Having worked as an administrator for nearly thirty years under the shadow of political office-holders, he found, after retirement, his natural domain of work and active life in the public sphere. Thus began, in the late seventies, a long phase in his life of political and intellectual intervention. The worsening Sinhala - Tamil relations and Sri Lankan state's quick drift towards open confrontation with the Tamil minority, Authoritarian politics, the defeat of the left and working class movements, the gradual dismantling of the welfare state and the rise of the politics of ethnic extremism were the processes that conditioned Sri Lanka's intellectual life in the late seventies and early eighties. Charles Abeyesekera was among the few of the intellectual old guard who did not succumb to pressures of the narrow nationalism and populism that were gaining ground at that time, particularly in Sinhalese society. The anthology *Ethnicity*

and *Social Change* published by the Social Scientists' Association in 1983 inaugurated in Sri Lanka a scholarship of secularism and pluralism against a background of ethnic populism in the academia. Mr. Abeyesekera played a key role in preparing this anthology and helped make it available to the reader in Sinhalese, Tamil and English. Subsequently, he edited a number of scholarly publications for the Social Scientists' Association.

The early and mid eighties were the beginning of a long period of darkness for Sri Lanka. The violence unleashed against Tamils in July that year saw the country falling into an abyss of ethnic hatred and war. It was only men and women with humanistic conscience who felt outraged and spoke up when the Tamil people were subjected to large-scale human rights violations. Under Charles Abeyesekera's leadership, MIRJE actively intervened to defend the human rights of Sri Lankan Tamils and campaign for a peaceful settlement to the ethnic question.

Linking human rights work with society's larger political and social concerns for democratic modernity was, perhaps, Charles Abeyesekera's primary contribution to Sri Lanka's human rights movement. Abeyesekera's vision for modernity emanated from a number of sources, primary among them being the world of aesthetics. A man of immense culture and disciplined learning, his political convictions were deeply rooted in a philosophy of aesthetic pluralism. Only close friends might know of his decades - long and very close involvement in Sri Lanka's art and culture — cinema, theater, creative writing, painting and sculpture, music and folk art. His conception of political modernity was one also embedded in tolerance, pluralism, equality, justice and fairness. In the struggle for democracy, human rights and peace, Charles Abeyesekera saw the concretization of a personal conviction in humanistic aesthetics of a political kind.

Charlie, as friends and colleagues knew him, emerged in the late eighties as a towering figure in Sri Lanka's human rights and democratic movements. He was looked upon as *the* visionary by the younger generation of activists who found life's meaning in the struggle for the democratization of our society in all its spheres, from political structures to everyday life. He was a tireless campaigner for media freedom and freedom of expression. In recent years, he worked with a dedicated team of younger colleagues in a number of campaigns for free and fair elections.

During the past few years, Charlie has been active on a number of fronts. He worked with a range of civil society organizations that contributed to the political change of 1994. He was in the forefront of the campaign to seek justice for the victims of grave human rights violations, occurred particularly during the late eighties. Effecting democratic reforms in our constitutional and political structures was another of his concerns. He worked with a number of official and

civil society bodies in the effort to draft a new and truly democratic constitution for Sri Lanka. He also saw the urgent need for reforming the structural bases of the Sri Lankan state along a devolutionary direction so that the roots causes of the ethnic conflict could be politically addressed and lasting ethnic peace could be inaugurated. On President Kumaratunga's invitation, he joined the official delegation to negotiate with the LTTE in April 1995. His two visits to Jaffna in 1995 demonstrated the high esteem in which he was held by the Jaffna public. In the recent controversy on the devolution proposals, he worked tirelessly in the ideological front and at the same time collaborated with constitutional experts to refine further the details of the reform package. From 1995 to the end of 1997, he also functioned as the Chairman of the Official Languages Commission.

Civil society was Charles Abeysekera's main domain of activity. He believed in, and constantly, fought for the autonomy of civil society, because for him, the autonomy of non-state spheres of public life was a cardinal measure of modern democracy. Essentially a man of public life in its most civilized sense, Charlie's creed of peace represented the conscience of those who had the courage to be compassionate in an increasingly heartless society.

**Social Scientists' Association,
MIRJE,
INFORM, Yukthiya and Vibhavi Center.**
6th April 1998

A MAN WITH A HUMAN TOUCH.....

(An appreciation of Mr.Charles Abeysekera)

Last Thursday

Clad as usual in your
cotton shirt and trousers
and your distinct back strap sandals
as you ran down the steps and
peaked into my room ,sheepishly
noticing the auditor seated
not wanting to impose your presence
but at the door as you stood and said
" Sanjay would be joining us too -
hope every things' ready for the trip..."
and as I stood up ,in respect and responded
and as you quietly nodded with that
familiar smile on your face
and bade me goodbye...
I never imagined it would be the last
goodbye I'd say to you

And on that fatal Friday
as I in desperation your advise to obtain
attempted to locate you... to no success
and as I sat in my room
anticipating to hear those familiar footsteps
mount up the stairs... pausing for a moment
at my door for that calm , enveloping smile
I can never comprehend that at that very moment
You struggled on that hard , cold bed
Alone... battling between life... and death

And when the hard confirmation came
I did not know what to believe... how to believe...
that you were no more...

But then I saw you lying still, lifeless
Yet unruffled...

They accorded you a "hero's" funeral
with processions , orations and the rest
and as the fires consumed you I reflected
on the first time I met you
and how at the very inception of the privilege I had

of working under you I became a silent admirer of
the simplicity ,humility and deep commitment I saw in you

In a world of compromise , quest for personal gain
You stood out , true to your beliefs
counting not the cost... tirelessly
working for the day when freedom would reign
and human rights are acknowledged

A man with a human touch
with no partiality
a master... a father... a true friend...

I remember the days
when we'd sit round the lunch table
and you would chuckle and comment...
on our childish chatter... our ignorance
how you glued us with you antidotes
how you patiently listened, leaving aside everything
how you had an answer to every problem...

Often I wondered in the midst of such a hectic schedule
how did you remain unruffled ?
how did you find the time to show
you cared ?

Your absence has created a void
None can ever fill
(Life would never be the same again)
and though our hearts bleed the loss of you
we console ourselves that even for a short time
we were fortunate to have known you

Your labour was not in vain
Your tasks begun will be accomplished
We and the generations to come will
always salute you
and treasure fond memories of you

We miss You

Prameela Namasivayam