

There's a vivid, opaque color to Ceylon; you get an immediate impression of glow and warmth. Of utterly tropical villages. Of crashing surf and sumptuous sunset by the sea, of the inland smother of heat heavy with exotic spices and flowers. Suddenly the sky is purple, thunder rumbles, there's a down-pour and then sun again.

Coconuts, bananas, papayas, and bamboo falsely promise abundance. For along with its deserted white beaches, ancient Buddhist capitals, its sapphires and amethysts, peacocks and cobras, Sri Lanka grinds its inhabitants in poverty. Wages run \$20-\$30 a month and the annual per capita GNP is a mere \$160. Rural landholdings average less than three acres. It is a land of charming, cheerful, open people who face distinctly closed, cheerless economic prospects.

Driving into Colombo from Katunayaka airport is still like arriving in India 20 years ago; everywhere, the crumbling façades of colonial buildings, decrepit machinery, ancient motor vehicles. Four years ago Sri Lanka was freewheeling gently down a road signposted "Burma." Its destination seemed to be a tolerant, literate, egalitarian rural slumdom; but then, with the entry of the United National Party Government of Junius Jayawardene, the country made a 180° turn. Sri Lanka now finds itself pedaling furiously uphill toward a neon sign marked "Malaysia."

President Jayawardene's government, elected by an unprecedented 51 percent of the popular vote in 1977, is trying hard to throw off the mix of bureaucratic socialism and nonrevolutionary Marxism that has

so long stultified advance in the Indian subcontinent. Most investment is going into three major projects: (1) a huge irrigation-hydroelectric scheme to harness Sri Lanka's main Mahaweli River to achieve rice self-sufficiency, double the land under irrigation, settle the landless, and reduce dependence on OPEC oil; (2) establishment of a free trade zone north of Colombo near the airport to attract foreign investment; and (3) urban renewal in the greater Colombo area.

"Let the robber barrons come," Jayawardene has said—and he meant it. His liberalization of the economy has brought a rapid economic recovery with strong growth potential. With its government incentives and low-cost, well-educated labor, Sri Lanka has much to offer investors. An open, export-oriented economy is a valid strategy for this small country of 15.4 million people on 25,322 square miles of land. Asked recently what were his country's three main problems, the President replied, "Jobs, jobs, and jobs." But it may take several years before the benefits of this new economic liberalism start to be felt in villages already badly hit by unemployment and inflation. What will happen if prices, fed by the rising cost of OPEC's oil, just keep going up?

The world over, the people worst hurt by inflation are daily wage earners without land who have to buy their food. Many such sufferers live in Makandana, a village located an hour's drive inland from Colombo and the sea, where an 80 percent increase in bus and train fares in 1980-81 to meet soaring petroleum import costs has gradually put even

a bare subsistence diet beyond the range of many families.

Makandana, with 854 inhabitants, is a particularly poor village because it is what Sri Lankans call "a new colony," a community established in 1976 when 122 of the poorest, landless laboring families from 10 surrounding villages were each given one-eighth an acre of land on what had been part of a rubber estate. About 70 percent of Makandana's men work as casual daily laborers, planting, weeding, and harvesting rice for local landlords, picking coconuts, carrying loads—doing what is still called "coolie" labor (*kuli* being Sanskrit for menial laborer). Besides the cassava, jack fruit, papaya, vegetables, and the few coconuts they can grow in their tiny gardens, to eat the villagers need cash to buy food, especially their staple, rice.

Makandana's grim predicament takes place in one of the most beautiful natural settings on earth. The village itself seems timeless: mud huts, thatched with braided coconut leaves, earthen floors, often bare except for sleeping mats and a few cooking utensils, oil lamps. There are naked children with beautiful brown faces, hard-muscled, wiry men in loin cloths or sarongs, and lithe and graceful women wrapped in splendid greens, yellows, purples, reds. Yet over and over the villagers ask themselves, "What are we going to do?" Like anyone numb and paralyzed with depression, they seem unable to think beyond the question to any future.

Upali, the fishmonger, arrives on his bicycle each morning, announced

by the frantic gathering and meowing of the village cats. He rises each day at 3 A.M., takes an hour's bus ride to Colombo's fish market, and returns to Makandana by 9 A.M. with a basket of fresh fish, about 35 pounds, worth \$10. Until the bus fares rose, Upali could net at least 18 rupees or about \$1 a day. In mid-1981 he got half of that.

Wyman, the 38-year-old village chief, is one of eight better off villagers who commute to jobs in Colombo, where he is a carpenter at the university. Unable to afford the bus anymore, he is buying a bicycle on installments. He pays 52.50 rupees (just under \$3) each month. If he could buy it outright, a bicycle would cost 800 rupees; this way, paying interest, it will cost 1,200. The daily journey takes Wyman 90 minutes each way, if he pedals fast.

Mohan Somapala is also "better off." He has worked as a docker in Colombo port for 28 years. His union guarantees him a minimum monthly wage equivalent to \$21; with overtime he can usually make \$40-\$45. But now bus fare takes a third of this, and Mohan has become a heavy drinker. His eight children, including four grown daughters, all of whom have graduated from high school, try to help. The girls have learned to make batik, dazzling silks picturing snake charmers and elephants. They took some to a beach hotel at Mount Lavinia on the seacoast, offering the batiks to any tourists they could stop along the road, for \$5-\$6 each. When I talked to them they had yet to make a single sale.

"We need something to employ our youth," Mohan told me. "What cost a rupee a year ago now costs two and a half. How can people live?" He said his thatched roof leaks and he needs to replace it, but the price of palm has tripled since 1979. As we talked, Mohan took a handful of rice to feed the family's tame pet pigeon. Mohan's wife said it cost at least \$15 each week to feed a family of 10. She herself earns 10 rupees a day (about 60 cents), tapping rubber trees on a nearby plantation. On days it rains, there is no work.

Worst off is Tissa, 32, married with 4 children. He said, "I am without expectations and without hope." He

lost his job as a mechanic (along with 7,000 other railway and transport workers) for taking part in an attempted general strike in July 1979 and hasn't worked since. No one loyal to the Jayawardene government will hire an ex-striker, even though the strike was to demand more wages to meet higher food costs and nearly doubled bus and train fares. One of Tissa's fellow mechanics committed suicide.

Ranmali, typical of Makandana's women, goes to the market each day with her list but finds she can afford fewer and fewer of the items on it. One day I accompanied her to the market where she spent the equivalent of \$1.50 for a day's food. In rough dollar equivalents, this was: a slab of jack fruit, 5 cents; one coconut, 12 ½ cents; a fresh fish, 40 cents; salt 10 cents; beans, 7 ½ cents; dried onions and chillies, 10 cents; fresh chillies, 5 cents; and 2 kilos of rice, 50 cents. She could not buy, as she had hoped, matches, kerosene, sugar, or soap; her family would have to go without. Ranmali's husband, a landless daily laborer like three-fourths of the village men, has no permanent job. She herself tapped rubber, and a 16-year-old daughter earned \$12.50 a month in a Bata shoe factory in Colombo.

Most of the village women engage in some kind of cottage industry. Lace sells for 15 cents a yard. It takes four days to weave a coconut leaf mat which goes for \$1.50. A basket, which takes a day to weave, will bring 30-40 cents. This, besides cooking, cleaning, washing, raising fruit and vegetables, and selling some in the market, is no longer enough.

"To have a decent life in Makandana now," said Ranmali's husband, Jinnasena, "a family needs at least 800 rupees (\$44) a month." Few families make more than 450-500.

Out of all 122 families, only one man, Ranjit, 35, is prosperous. He's also the only villager to be stout and look well-fed. He went to Saudi Arabia on a six-month contract with a West German construction firm and now has \$1,250 in the bank. Ranjit is also the only villager to own a watch or a pair of trousers, a status symbol among the poor in Sri Lanka. Among the lean villagers, one would take him for a visitor.

"We ate much meat, rice, and chicken," he told me.

Ranjit hopes to go back to the Persian Gulf so he can save enough to open his own furniture shop. He would not like to stay in Saudi Arabia. "It was too hot and too much sand," he said. "You met people from all over the world. There were Germans, Turks, Pakistanis, Koreans, Thais, Indonesians, Egyptians, Africans, all kinds of foreigners. But the Saudis pay no regard to foreigners. If there's an accident on the road, the foreigner must pay the damages even if he is the victim. The Saudis like Muslims much, but not others."

In theory, the very poorest in Sri Lanka are subsidized through a food stamp scheme. In Makandana, the only families to qualify were those with only one wage earner and a monthly income of less than \$15—about a third of what it really took to live. Until 1977, Sri Lanka provided free food (rice for two meals a day) to all its people and nearly bankrupted the government. Now, faced with the rising cost of capital projects and weak revenue growth, President Jayawardene has taken the ax to most food subsidies, allowing the prices of imported rice, wheat, and sugar to rise to international levels.

The specter of Sri Lanka's 1971 insurrection, when thousands of well-educated, jobless, and disillusioned youth waged war for two months against impossible military odds, still looms large. The most urgent priority in the government's impressive campaign to restructure the island's economy is creating more employment. (Foreign countries who see in the new dynamism a chance that at least one country in the Indian subcontinent can reach economic take-off while preserving democratic institutions should be prepared to give Sri Lanka the fullest possible financial backing.)

As more than 250,000 international tourists, most of them Europeans, are now discovering, the island, with its cheerful people and perpetual sunshine well deserves its Arab name, *Serendib* (from which Horace Walpole fashioned the word, serendipity: the making of pleasant discoveries by chance). You may suddenly come upon an elephant,

tired from hauling timber, spraying himself with cooling water. Or see a huge white crane flying low over a plunging bright green terraced hillside with strange black cliffs and pines in the distance.

There are waterfalls, women washing clothes or bathing in rushing streams, squawking black crows, red earth, pink orchids, mossy stone Buddhas in damp caves, dancers, monsters, myths. Off in the jungles and mountains are fabulous ruined cities and moldering races, mysterious relics of a forgotten time and vanished race. Mark Twain, a 1896 visitor, was dazzled: "Dear me, it is beautiful! And most sumptuously tropical," he exclaimed. "Unspeakably hot." And in 1968 Trappist monk Thomas Merton observed of villages like Makandana how "the people, pleased with one another and happy dancing with children in their hands, dwelt with open doors."

Legend has it that the island (then known as Taprobane) exchanged ambassadors with the Roman Caesars. Down through the centuries, most foreign visitors have been captivated by Ceylon, calling it "an Eden," and marveling that its villages possessed "a magic aura" and "an echo from the remote past." One who bathes in this aura is British science-fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke (*2000: A Space Odyssey*), who came to Sri Lanka for a visit in 1956 and stayed. He titled his last book, a fictionalized treatment of the island, *The Fountains of Paradise*. Clarke, of course, spends most of his time in a comfortable suburban villa in Colombo, surrounded by the rest of the foreign colony. But Sri Lanka is a land of glittering hunger. (In Makandana, people now eat rice only once or twice a day, not three times as before.) Its villages are beautiful to look at, hard to live in.

Most early nineteenth-century American visitors (like their counterparts today) raved about the island's beauty, the charm and majesty of Colombo's great old Galle Face Hotel, built out on huge rocks with a roaring surf below. Indeed, to sit in a deck chair on its ramps, watching sunset ebb into nightfall as flaming torches light up the breakers and crashing foam below, is surely one of the world's greatest ways to spend an evening.

The missionaries, though they viewed the villagers through colonial lenses as "natives" and "heathen," saw beyond the appearance to the reality. One of them, Harriet Winslow, a missionary from Boston, wrote home in 1820 that the lower castes in the villages were not allowed to wear clothing above the waist and that "only a few are able to live on rice. Most of the natives have only one full meal a day.... They look very thin." Yet, even among the missionaries there is an odd colonialist detachment: in nineteenth-century reports of Ceylon, I could not find a single example of anyone asking villagers directly about their lives and problems. Enough is known, however, that we can assume hunger is nothing new to a Sri Lankan village.

The Christian missionary movement had, of course, great influence on Mahatma Gandhi, especially in his years as a student in London and as a young lawyer defending Asian immigrants in South Africa, where he launched his first campaign of "passive resistance." After his return at age 45 to India in 1914, Gandhi organized his *satyagraha*, a politico-religious movement of non-cooperation with the British which led to his repeated arrest and imprisonment for "civil disobedience." In his advocacy of social reforms, he began his famous "fast unto death" in 1932 in protest against official treatment of the "Untouchables." (Gandhi renamed them Harijans, or "the children of God," as they are known in India today.) He won his point after six days.

Gandhi's *satyagraha* (nonviolent noncooperation) revolutionized Indian politics. As he explained it, "I say, do not return madness with madness, but return madness with sanity and the whole situation will be yours." Gandhi became the symbol of traditional India, galvanizing masses into action as no other man in Indian history, and few men in any country. His economic ideas, however, tended to be archaic: he did not see how agricultural science and technology, the redistribution of wealth through land reform, and investment in power, transport, and irrigation could do more for the poor than merely clinging to traditional ways. (Jawaharlal Nehru was better fitted to transform India into a

modern state with his strong faith in science. His crucial failure, as we can see with hindsight today, was not to make agriculture his top priority.)

Gandhism and especially its emphasis on village-level, decentralized self-help is very much alive in India today. It deeply influenced the policies of two of Nehru's successors, Lal Bahadur Shastri and Morarji Desai, and Mahatma Gandhi continues to be by far India's most revered historical figure.

Gandhism arrived in Makandana in 1978 when thousands of young volunteers from what was known as the Sarvodaya movement came for three days to build Makandana's first road. Soon a preschool children's center followed, established in a hut that had been used chiefly to distill liquor, and a mothers' club formed to run it. A new 15-member village council was elected, with Wyman at its head, to plan Makandana's self-development. The Sarvodaya people supplied building materials, four trained carpenters and masons. Tools and equipment were donated and the villagers built 13 new brick and tile-roofed houses in 1980 and hoped to complete more than 20 in 1981. Also going up during my visit was a new community center where a low-priced cooperative store and food market would be opened. Most important were the skills and training such construction was giving Makandana's young men. Despite the poverty of the village, there was a strong sense of mutual help and community.

In each village where Sarvodaya goes, I was told, volunteers and a few salaried people with needed skills try to establish a clean and beautiful environment, pure water, minimum clothing, adequate food and housing, basic health care, an access road, some form of energy to boil water, cook food, and light homes, continuous education, and—what makes Sarvodaya so novel—encouragement for traditional Sinhalese culture.

In Makandana, what this meant in practical terms, was that a young professional musician, a 27-year-old named Siridiyas, was hired by Sarvodaya for \$7.50 a month to teach the village youth and children

classical dance, poetry, folk drama and songs. The movement supplied cloth and a sewing machine, and Siridiyas, who had picked up some tailoring, made costumes. This allowed Makandana's people to revive an old tradition of all-night dance performances given at the nearest Buddhist temple when the moon was full.

One morning, to my surprise, I was greeted in the village, not by the usual ragged, if cheerful, children, but by a crowd of little gods and goddesses in fantastic, brightly colored costumes. There were glittering headdresses—some shaped like cobras—and bells were tied to every ankle. One of Mohan's daughters had been transformed into the resplendent Hindu goddess, Pattini, and the fishmonger's son, usually clad in a rag, had become a dazzling Lord Vishnu, his face radiant.

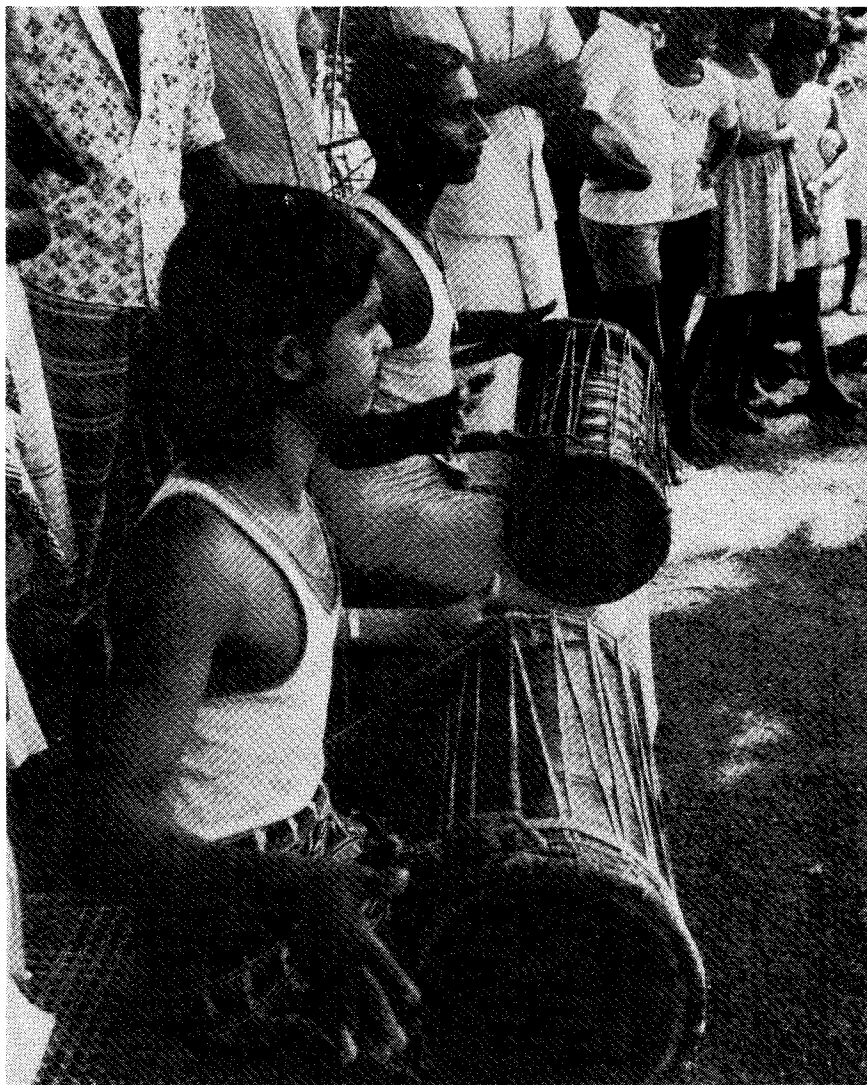
Siridiyas and another young man beat their long cylindrical drums with the palms of their hands. The youngsters burst into dance, moving, twirling, stamping, and gesturing with unexpected grace. They swept by in an ever-quickening rhythm, their costumes and shining brown faces flashing in the sun and shadow dapple of the village square. For a moment, as they danced, bare feet jingling in the village dust, Ceylon lived up to all its legends. You forgot the hunger and the desperation and saw only the splendor and the dream.

#### **Sarvodaya**

The word is Sanskrit for "the awakening of all." In 1958, ten years after Mahatma Gandhi's assassination in India, A. T. Ariyaratne, a young Buddhist science teacher at one of the best high schools in Colombo, led a group of students to a low-caste village to learn about conditions there and work alongside villagers to build latrines and dig wells. That was Sarvodaya's beginning in Sri Lanka; today it has become the largest nongovernmental organization in the country. Nearly one of every 20 adult Sri Lankans has been a Sarvodaya volunteer or beneficiary, and the

Above: *Siridiyas, the village musician, plays traditional Singhalese drums.*

Below: *practicing the stick dance.*





*Village dancers: boys dressed as Hindu gods perform, as Siridayas (center photo, far right) and girls with cobra headresses look on.*

movement has been expanded to more than 2,500 villages, more than one in every ten on the island.

Sarvodaya's numerical success has commanded a good deal of attention among professionals involved in international development. Outside of China, the mobilization of villagers on their own behalf on such a scale is rare. The idea that development can begin in villages through the collaboration of villages and technically literate people of their own culture is an attractive concept. Is there something to be learned from Sarvodaya of practical application elsewhere?

Skeptical, protechnology, I went to the Sarvodaya headquarters in Moratuwa village, just outside Colombo. I happen to feel that scientific farming techniques, irrigation, and rural electrification are the most sensible ways to show sympathy for the poor. Mahatma Gandhi, for all his compassion toward Untouchables, never pushed land redistribution hard enough so they could become something else. Perhaps if he had lived longer, India's development might have gone differently. As it did go, the emphasis on heavy investment in industry benefited principally urban workers and the Indian middle class.

Further, I distrust dogma and "charismatic leaders," having generally found movements professing lofty moral purposes to be partisan and intolerant of anything they disagree with. I was also conscious of treading a well-beaten path: A recent visitor to Moratuwa had been Swedish film actress Liv Ullman, and while I was there, I met several World Bank consultants, George McRobie, the late E.F. Schumacher's (*Small is Beautiful*) successor as head of London's Intermediate Technology Development Group, and Dr. Harold Dickinson of the University of Edinburgh, also a colleague of Schumacher. Dr. Dickinson, who had just toured the country, said Sri Lanka had a management, not a resources, problem. "If you had a Chinese commune in any of these villages," he said, "they'd be extremely prosperous."



Ariyaratne, Sarvodaya's founder and head, himself was disarming. True, around the headquarters buildings, set about a striking Buddhist pavilion, there were a good many pictures of him and Moral Majority-type slogans. I was braced for platitudes, but instead met a pragmatic, chain-smoking, well-read, and well-traveled man of 49, who said he had been a Marxist as a youth. He spoke of sensible things. Essentially, he told me, Sarvodaya, in accord with Buddhist principles, wanted to help the villages develop economically while keeping their cultural coherence and traditions. His organization would soon be working in 4,000 of Sri Lanka's 23,000 villages; its \$1.6 million budget was financed mostly from contributions from voluntary agencies, the largest donors being Dutch, British, and Canadian, though some help also came from the United States. There were, he said, 220 centers and nearly 8,000 full-time workers, who earn \$5 to \$15 a month (most about \$10). His hope was to transform Sarvodaya from a charitable body to a self-sustaining movement.

Ariyaratne's main organizing tool is what he calls the *shramadana* ("gift of labor") work camp. Sarvodaya workers, plus students, villagers and other volunteers, undertake a project in a target village. For instance, 100-200 people may widen a footpath in a gravel road, lined up—the men in white loincloths and the women in saris—passing tin pans of excavated earth from hand to hand. In the evening they hold discussions and some form of Buddhist cultural performance. Once the villagers are befriended, a preschool center is established, a mothers' club organized, and an elders' council elected to manage the Sarvodaya program and help spread it to neighboring villages.

Sarvodaya is also involved in irrigation works, agricultural research, education, training, and health care, all, Ariyaratne emphasizes, aimed at spiritual, as well as material, development. There is an emphasis on "appropriate" technology (such as methane generators to convert human wastes into cooking gas), water conservation techniques learned from the Israelis, windmills, and the use of traditional daub and thatch in home construction.



*Sarvodaya leader with Makandana villager.*

Sri Lanka is a Buddhist country whose monks traditionally provided the only teachers. Often Buddhist monks, many of whom today attend universities, are the key organizers in Sarvodaya village programs. This closeness to the core of village culture—its religion—explains in part Sarvodaya's success. Further, the help it provides, as in Makandana, is sensible and practical. For example, Sarvodaya provided a free set of tools to a trained carpenter on the condition that he train seven village youths in carpentry. As one of these apprentices explained, "Just now, with so many Sri Lankans going to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, carpenters earn good wages. What we need is the training, not the tools." A village mason was also hired at a modest wage to teach two Makandana boys to build houses with earthen bricks and tile roofing. Girls were taught to make batik, lace, and other handicrafts to sell.

Typically, the children at the day-care center must bring a matchbox full of rice each day—it's not enough to feed them but it gives their families a sense of contributing. During my visit, the children played with blocks, and said grace before eating a mid-morning snack of rice cakes, thanked their teachers for serving them, and were told an old folk story.

Among cottage industries initiated by Sarvodaya in several villages I

visited were an apiary, a dairy, a carpentry shop, a sawmill, ceramics and handloom weaving workshops, a shop to make rubber and coconut mattresses, and a balloon factory. The movement also has established several farms for research and training of young villagers in modern farming techniques.

Ariyaratne readily acknowledges that his movement was inspired by Gandhi. "The word, Sarvodaya, was first popularized by Mahatma Gandhi in India," he told me. "The Mahatmaji used this sanskritized expression to translate Ruskin's 'unto this last.' Later he broadened this to mean the concept of the well-being of all, *sarva* meaning all and *udaya* meaning awakening. It was Gandhi's answer to the Western concept of achieving 'the greater good of the greater number.' Acharya Vinoba Bhave with his world famous Bhoodan-Gramdan Movement, begun in 1951, propagated this same thought. We in Sri Lanka were inspired by both these men when we started our movement."

One striking difference, however, is Ariyaratne's attitude toward technology. He says, "Grassroots organization certainly needs outside support in three main ways. First, it needs capital to provide tools, seeds, cement, and other building materials and to provide subsistence

to villagers until they learn a craft and get returns from it. Second, it needs modern methods and techniques. A lot of research has to be done to bring science and technology to the rural level. Third, political and economic power structures have to be reorganized to give social justice to rural people." He feels villages should be given control over preschool and elementary education, maternity and child care, health and sanitation, irrigation, agriculture, small industries, cooperatives and housing, village access roads, and small bridges.

In his work, Ariyaratne also emphasizes Buddhist doctrine such as the "four noble truths"—respect for life, compassionate action, joy in helping others, and equanimity—and the "noble eightfold path"—right understanding, right thoughts, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

"When you go to a village in Sri Lanka today," he says, "and try to talk to people in terms of these principles they will understand you very well. But if you start talking to them in terms of productivity, credit, or in terms of other modern economic jargon, they will not accept you. It is a sad omission that in modern economic planning cultural and spiritual foundations of people have no place. This leads to a psychological situation where people neither become wholehearted participants of government programs nor do they belong to a cultural pattern which has a stability of its own."

To avoid this, Ariyaratna asserts, "a revolutionary change is needed." Not, he hastens to say, a revolution in the usual sense, but rather revolutionary change in three areas: (1) ideas and values; (2) technology, especially in education, agriculture, and cottage industries; and (3) in institutions, from the village up to the national level.

"How do you change them?" he asks. "You cannot change them by lectures, by seminars, by newspaper articles, by television speeches. You have to change them in a situational approach to the problem." His solution is to go to the villages and ask people what they need and want, to establish communication directly.

*Children wash their hands at pre-school.*

"We cannot meet at conference tables. We cannot meet as the boss and the obedient servant. We have to meet on equal terms. And that place is the rural village of Sri Lanka."

Interesting ideas. So are Ariyaratne's views on education and health:

"Education for us is synonymous with the total awakening of the personality of the individual." On health he may be on less solid ground, saying, "When we were children, we still remember that, for most of the illnesses for which we now rush for the doctor, there were very effective home remedies, both curative and preventive. We had a system of primary health care, but it was smothered out of existence by so-called modern systems of western medicine." Sarvodaya tends to promote *ayurvedic* (traditional herbal medicine), the wisdom of which is hard to see.

Where many have to part company with Ariyaratne is in his movement's opposition, like the Vatican's, to artificial contraception. I was told the Buddhist monks fear it would weaken the strength of the Sinhalese majority in relation to Sri Lanka's large Tamil minority of Indian origin. (One must differentiate, however, between recent Tamil immigrants and a Tamil population that has been on the island for centuries, maybe millennia.) One day, however, a government mid-

wife came on her bicycle to Makandana and said she went from house to house to discuss family planning in privacy. Despite lack of support from the Sarvodaya movement, she found that about 50 percent of the village women were acceptors. "The most popular method is vasectomy," she said, "usually after three or four children." She explained that this was "because of the financial incentive." (The government paid \$25 to \$50 a couple for each man or woman who underwent sterilization, a lot of money in the village.) Makandana's worst health problems were, she said, worms among the children, tuberculosis, and dental problems; the village had no history of malaria or cholera. The nurse-midwife seemed well trained; the government, at least, is putting its faith in modern medicine.

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Peculiarly, the Overseas Development Council in Washington (at least when it was headed by James Grant, who now runs UNICEF) gave Sri Lanka a generously high rating on its "quality of life index," chiefly because of its 80 percent literacy rate, high life expectancy (the average age at death is 63, though some claim 68), and universal free education and health care. Against these you have to balance the terribly low wages, comparatively high prices, the crumbling look of



most buildings, the lack of machine maintenance (few of the decrepit taxis have doors and windows that work), the general air of decay, and the lean, stunted, hungry look of so many of the Sri Lankans. The island, except for its stunning beauty, would not rate highly on any comparative "quality of life index" of mine.\*

One hopes the Colombo government's experiment works: its idea is to emulate Southeast Asia's development model, President Jayawardene's admiration for Singapore being well-known. He faces repairing an economic infrastructure that has been deteriorating for decades due to inadequate attention and investment. It means heavy expenditures for such long-term projects as the Mahaweli River Scheme. It requires releasing supposedly pent-up entrepreneurial talents and encouraging foreign investment to create more industry, earn foreign exchange, provide jobs, and supply consumer goods.

Optimism induced by economic liberalization (and paid for largely by foreign aid) was beginning to fade when I was on the island. Skeptics were asking whether Sri Lankans have the entrepreneurial drive even to approximate that of overseas Chinese who have been key to Southeast Asia's progress. (For example, compare mailing letters at the general post offices in Singapore and Colombo. In the first the efficiency would put an American post office to shame—no lines. In Colombo, the post office is a complete muddle: you stand in one of the many queues only to find it's the wrong one when you reach the window. Eventually, a young man appears who says he is a post office employee and for a small fee (bribe)

\* In a conversation with William Touissant, the American ambassador to Sri Lanka, I remarked how surprised I had been both at the poverty and the cheerful, open quality of the people. He said he had been, too. Indeed, Sri Lanka (whose people often still call it Ceylon) struck me as very much like the Asia I remembered from my first trip through it in 1959. Asia has prospered enormously in the past 22 years—but at some loss in the trusting friendliness an American used to encounter almost everywhere. Perhaps it's merely that the novelty has worn off.

gets your stamp for you and shows you where to drop your letter. In terms of efficiency, it rates on a par with Katmandu, another charming city where nothing works very well.)

Yet, success or failure by President Jayawardene may mean the difference between hunger and decent lives back in Makandana village. In the meantime, the help from the Sarvodaya movement is just about all Makandana's 122 families are getting.

Any attempt to assess Sarvodaya and Ariyaratne's thinking must first confront its glaring weaknesses. There is the attitude toward family planning already mentioned. Then there are certain Buddhist peculiarities in the movement. The poorest villagers on the island are fishermen, who often put out to sea on catamarans that are little more than rafts of logs tied together, with a tattered sail attached. The waves wash over them. Yet Sarvodaya does not work in fishing villages because fishermen violate the Buddhist principle of *ahimsa*, non-violence to all living things.

Further, there is too much emphasis on what I call Tinker Toy technology, the kind of mat-weaving, batik-making cottage industry that is simply no substitute for the small-scale engineering shops, fed by rural electrification, which have brought jobs and prosperity to the countryside of Taiwan and South Korea. The basic needs of Sri Lankan villagers cannot be met by handicrafts or casual coolie labor; Sri Lanka needs decentralized small-scale industry. (A Dutch agricultural economist, who had volunteered to do a survey for Ariyaratne, told me he found average village family incomes were 600-700 rupees a month, or about \$30-\$35. About 300 rupees each month, almost half the family income, went for rice and most of the rest for other food: tea, fresh and dried fish, sugar, pulses, vegetables, and two or so coconuts every day. An unexpectedly large amount went for sugar—nearly 160 rupees a month, or about one-fourth the family's income. Another 10 percent went for kerosene.)

On the other hand, the great strength of the Sarvodaya movement is Ariyaratne's recognition that human capital—health, education, life span—matters as much as

physical capital—transport, irrigation, electricity. Such belief receives support from the University of Chicago's Theodore Schultz, who received the Nobel prize in economic science in 1979.

Dr. Schultz, now 78, is perhaps best known for three of his many ideas about poverty, spelled out in *Transforming Traditional Agriculture*, published in 1964. At the time it made Dr. Schultz seem an iconoclast. He argued, first, that poor people were rational—something few would dispute today. Yet at the time the notion that peasants were irrational, tradition-bound, and unresponsive to economic rewards dominated. (We saw them as "the natives," people whose behavior was somehow different from our own.)

His second idea was that economic growth depended in very large part on the quality of human beings. From this came his third idea: since humans are rational, knowledge is constantly advancing, and conditions of life are in flux, people must learn to deal with "disequilibria." For example, because oil prices went up, Ranjit the carpenter gets a job in Saudi Arabia, while Upali the fishmonger, by spending more on bus fare, loses half his net profit. Change forces each of us to become an entrepreneur; even if we have nothing else, we must plan the use of our time wisely. As we learn from our past mistakes and take on entrepreneurial roles with greater effectiveness, our productivity rises, and with it, the value of human time rises.

Among the implications of these ideas is that formal education, especially technical education, increases in value. Another is that fertility naturally declines in a country as people learn to deal with disequilibria, for with increased ability comes an increase in the value of human time and the greater the value of human time, the more expensive it becomes, in a real sense, for parents to raise large families.

These ideas of Dr. Schultz have marked applications in countries like Taiwan and South Korea, but also in Indonesia and Malaysia, the models Sri Lanka wants to follow. Development comes, Dr. Schultz said in a talk I had with him in Jakarta just before I left for Sri Lanka, when



incentives and opportunities are created that appeal to the rational self-interest and calculation of the individual villager. When the villager learns to deal with disequilibrium, he must make new decisions, he can't just repeat old ones. Dr. Schultz warned that all modernization occurs unevenly, but added, "Most solutions to disequilibria within a country are found by people themselves, not by governments."

(He also said, "The colonial powers got kicked out but procurement to get cheap food to the poor city masses continues. You can't have centrally planned marketing and successful agricultural modernization. Countries with the strongest economic controls are probably very unlikely or too slow to make room for a more effective organization to use the new market forces.")

If you apply these ideas to Sri Lanka, even very loosely, you see a role for Sarvodaya in helping the poorest villagers through the difficult period of adjustment until President Jayawardene's policies begin to pay off. Not surprisingly, Sri Lanka's Marxists bitterly attack Sarvodaya for making more remote the possibilities of violent revolution.

Others, however, have been converted. Ariyaratne, for instance, provided me with an interpreter in Makandana who was introduced as "a Communist member of parliament in 1947," Harry Abeyagana-wardena, a charming old man. For the previous five years he had worked as an interpreter for the New China News Agency in Colombo but quit as a gesture of protest to the trial in Peking of Madame Mao. In flowing white Gandhian pajamas, Harry was an ardent idealist who believed the best form of rural social organization was the Chinese commune. Since I had recently been in China and found that Chiang Ch'ing was a widely hated figure, even in the rural communes, I tried to disillusion him, but without success.

Perhaps Ariyaratne's singularly most interesting contribution to development thinking is the importance he puts on Buddhist culture. Clearly, the fundamental cause of the social and psychological turbulence we find in villages today comes from the steady, continued, and as yet

steadily unpredictable, working out of the world's technological revolution. To adapt to technology—and the villagers ultimately have no choice but at least partly to adapt—requires a kind of cultural revolution. Something has to happen in their minds so they realize they've got to change their ways. Also they need the technological means to do it (and Makandana's people don't have those means yet).

The right kind of development should preserve the things of value in a culture. In the Confucian societies—Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea are prime examples—values seem to survive. In black Africa, where agricultural people practicing primitive slash-and-burn cultivation in the bush too often turned into a mass of uprooted and politically restive city laborers overnight, they often do not.

Selectivity in choosing those aspects of traditional culture to be preserved is essential. While keeping traditional values as they have been for centuries might be the surest way to keep social peace, it would mean little change at all, condemning villagers like Makandana's to perpetual hunger. Such selectivity is one of Sarvodaya's most attractive features. As noted, it has given strong emphasis to classical Sinhalese music, song, and dance (such as hiring the young musician for Makandana). On the other hand, Sarvodaya, while keeping to the central principles of Buddhism, strongly condemns caste. Although Makandana's 122 families are all low caste and caste is not as pervasive in Sri Lanka as in India, it still can be a serious block to social mobility (and Dr. Schultz's individual enterprise). Thus, the movement eases the villager's adjustment to change, new technology, and disequilibrium.

By contrast, a big weakness of American aid programs is that little or no funding ever goes to traditional culture; the whole focus is on technology. This has often opened our aid programs to charges from local religious groups that it promotes secularism and rejection of the old values. (Particularly in Egypt, where there are large numbers of fanatically fundamentalist Muslim youth, intolerant and deeply suspicious of the West, it wouldn't be a bad idea to use a little of the \$1

billion a year in American assistance to spruce up a few mosques.)

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When Dr. Schultz talks about everybody becoming an entrepreneur and Ariyaratne about change beginning with individual people in villages, they are both talking about what is now going on in most countries: the unconscious, obscure, but overpowering drives of millions upon millions of humble little nobodies are changing the world.

There are limits, however, to what genuine village-level, self-help movements can do. The villages need transport, electricity, and irrigation too. All sorts of people are looking into ways to introduce low-cost technology among low-income rural people who seek to improve their productivity and incomes. While the Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka is sometimes cited as an example of this, it cannot provide the solution in Makandana village. What the village needs is a little factory or engineering workshop to plug into the nearest power lines and employ enough men and women from the community, say 112—one per family—to get Makandana's economy on track. Agriculture can't do it: those one-eighth acre plots are too small, their soil too poor (rock shows through in many places) to do more than grow some fruit and vegetables, not rice or another staple.

Sarvodaya may be part of the answer in Sri Lanka but probably a rather minor part. When you ask Makandana's people who is to blame for their predicament, they invariably answer: "The government." It is also to the government they look, not Sarvodaya, for the main answers to their problems. Voluntary, participatory, self-help schemes can help villages adjust to technological change. But they should be viewed with clear-eyed skepticism, for the global technological revolution works in mysterious ways.

In Makandana, the villagers welcomed Sarvodaya's help in building better houses, training its youths in masonry and carpentry, paying a few village girls extremely modest wages to run the day care center, and so on. By hiring the musician, organizing a mothers' club and a

new village council, Sarvodaya had helped to instill a new sense of village dignity and community. But it was evident that every man and woman I met was well aware that it was ultimately up to himself or herself to find ways not to go hungry, not to stay ignorant or sick, not to let their babies die or live short, squalid lives. They were all aware of rapid technological change on the island and were watching what it could do for them and what opportunities would open up that they could grasp.

This awareness makes the present movement of technology to all villages kaleidoscopic and unpredictable, like a vast machine with 4.4 billion separately moving parts. A man like Ariyaratne, no matter how much good he does, still remains just one of those parts. Mahatma Gandhi inspired every Indian with his moral teaching but it's technology—nothing Gandhi did—that

is now radically changing their lives. And it will be technology that determines what happens in Sri Lanka too.

The make-or-break people in Sri Lanka as far as Makandana's villagers are concerned are policy-makers, bankers, investors, businessmen, managers, engineers, scientists, and technicians whom they will probably never see. The Gandhian-style idealists can help, especially to preserve traditional religious values and Singhalese culture while all the rest is going on. But no grassroots movement, whether Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka or Plan Puebla in Mexico, has yet made any sweeping national impact. I'd put more faith in Jayawardene's robber barons. So do the people in Makandana village.

(April 1981)

**Author's note**

The writings of A.T. Ariyaratne are available in *Collected Works*, with an introduction by Nandasena Ratnapala, published by the Sarvodaya Research Institute, 148 Galle Road, Dehiwala, Sri Lanka, and printed in the Netherlands.

An authority on the application of appropriate technology by the Sarvodaya movement is Harry Dickinson, Professor of Engineering, University of Edinburgh, Scotland. Also, George McRobie, Director, Intermediate Technology Group, 9 King Street, London WC2, England.

Further information on Sarvodaya itself can be obtained from its director, A.T. Ariyaratne, Sarvodaya Center, Moratuwa, Sri Lanka, and on Makandana village from Dewamullage Wyman, Leader, Council of Elders, Sarvodaya Center, Hill Crest Estate, Makandana, Mas Patha, Colombia, Sri Lanka.