

Sri Lanka and the Sarvodaya Model

P. D. Premasiri

The nature of the relationship between culture and development raises many interesting and important issues. Contemporary man appears to be heading towards the creation of a global culture, as a consequence of the universal influence of the knowledge base of the positivistic sciences, the associated technology and the closeness that has been produced by the development of modern means of communication and travel. The dominant development model that appears to be gradually conditioning a new global culture is the Western one, which is founded on materialistic ideology, secularism, consumerism, individualism and modern science and technology. In the context of this change certain questions of an evaluative kind seem to be raised in the minds of those who are given to critical and reflective thinking. Are any aspects of endogenous culture worth preserving or should all mankind uncritically and passively submit itself to the overwhelming influence of the growing global culture?

On the one hand it is argued that the attempt to impose alien models of development on traditional communities is detrimental to the preservation of their own cultures, which have traditionally maintained the cohesion and harmony of these communities. The consequence of the importation of an alien model of development is considered to be the impoverishment of the moral and spiritual basis of these societies. Despite the superficial appearance of affluence that the implementation of alien models of development produce, these societies are believed to lose their original stability as a consequence and ultimately become worse off than they were earlier. A monistic approach in the determination of development policy is therefore seen as ill-conceived by some critics on the grounds that adequate attention should be paid to cultural identity for a development process to ultimately bring about beneficial consequences to the community for whose sake it is implemented.

On the other hand, the Western experience of some of the consequences of the implementation of the Western model of development has resulted in scepticism about its validity even for Western man, not to speak of its universal validity. Such scepticism has made development theorists look for alternative models which may be derived from either some aspects of classical Western culture or from the Eastern cultures which are being undermined by the influence of Western ways of thinking. That everything is not well with the dominant concept of development today seems a reasonable opinion to hold.

The significance of the Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka may be recognized from both standpoints outlined above. Sarvodaya claims to offer an alternative development model which is rooted in Sri Lankan culture. It is therefore claimed to be more suited in the Sri Lankan situation to fulfil the aspirations of the Sri Lankan people in their development

effort. According to the exponents of the Sri Lankan Sarvodaya ideology, development in Sri Lanka should be viewed primarily as a return to the conditions of the glorious past in Sri Lankan culture, not the creation of a new socio-cultural order through the implementation of alien models of development. Sarvodaya makes the further claim that it offers an alternative model of development which has a universal moral appeal and invites the serious attention of development theorists in search of alternative models of sustainable development. The objective of the present inquiry is (a) to explain the ideological and cultural roots from which the Sarvodaya model of development is derived and clarify the basic principles underlying the Sarvodaya philosophy of development with reference to its implications for contemporary society, (b) to present the practical methods and devices adopted by Sarvodaya for the achievement of its development goals, and (c) to evaluate the importance of the Sarvodaya development model in terms of its practical achievement in the Sri Lankan context.

‘Sarvodaya’ means the upliftment of all or the welfare of all. The origin of the concept of Sarvodaya can be traced to Mahatma Gandhi’s thoughts on *svaraj* or self-government at the time India was struggling to gain independence from colonial rule. Gandhi gave a spiritual and moral interpretation to the concept of *svaraj*. The Gandhian social philosophy of non-violent means of social transformation was the central philosophy of the Indian concept of Sarvodaya. The Gandhian concept of Sarvodaya advocated true self-realization of the individual through dedicated service to the community, especially its weaker sections. Gandhi’s Sarvodaya concept was a social ethic for the welfare of all. It was developed into a movement to promote spiritual socialism by Gandhi and other spiritually inclined Indian figures like Vinoba Bhave and Jayaprakash Narayan.

The idea of a new social order ensuring independence, self-reliance, and self-realization by following the non-materialistic, spiritual path of non-violence, sharing and truth emerged with the Gandhian Sarvodaya movement in India. The concept of Sarvodaya as well as the basic elements of the Gandhian philosophy of development inspired A.T. Ariyaratne of Sri Lanka to provide leadership to a parallel movement in Sri Lanka. Ariyaratne saw important socio-economic principles in the Buddhist heritage of Sri Lanka which could be utilized to evolve a development model which in his view was much more desirable in the Sri Lankan context than those policies which Western-trained planners attempted to impose.

Buddhism was the principal cultural influence on Sri Lankan society before the imposition of Western values. Mahatma Gandhi himself admitted the influence of the Buddha, in addition to a few other spiritual persons who influenced his philosophy of non-violent social change. In keeping with the Buddhist tradition, the Sri Lankan Sarvodaya movement interpreted the term Sarvodaya as the awakening of all. For the goal of Buddhism is liberation of man from the miseries of existence through spiritual awakening and the overcoming of the veil of ignorance. While admitting his indebtedness to the Sarvodaya ideal of Mahatma Gandhi and the *Bhudan-Gramdan* action of Acarya Vinoba Bhave, Ariyaratne, the leader of the Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka, maintained that the interpretation of the deep meaning of Sarvodaya was ‘relevant to our

own Sinhala Buddhist culture', and that 'the philosophy that influenced us most in evolving our Sarvodaya concept in Sri Lanka is Lord Buddha's teachings'.

The goal of Buddhism is liberation from suffering in a very deep spiritual sense. The central problem of life according to the teaching of the Buddha is suffering. Its causes are craving and ignorance. The awakening of man to the noble truths of suffering, its cause, its cessation and the path leading to its cessation, ensures liberation and happiness. The awakening of the individual to the truths of existence is the only means of eliminating suffering. Ignorance and craving are not only at the root of the suffering of the individual but also of the suffering that mankind produces in social interaction. Buddhism rejects the view that man can overcome suffering merely by changing the order of things outside of oneself. Whether it is the suffering of the individual or the suffering of the society, an inner transformation of the individual is considered to be the effective means of overcoming it. As long as one's action is rooted in greed, hatred and ignorance it creates suffering for oneself as well as for others.

The enlightenment the Buddha is supposed to have attained consisted of insight into the dependent co-origination of things, the three characteristics of being, namely impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and soullessness, or the absence of any essence or substance to be grasped as one's own true self. There is nothing, according to this kind of spiritual awakening, to be grasped either in the outside world or within one's inner self. The awakening to these truths ensures the resolution of all mental conflicts of the individual. Such a transformation of the individual, involving the eradication of greed, hatred and delusion, results in complete freedom from all impurities and fetters of the mind. Persons who have attained such freedom are considered the most suitable to render the greatest service to mankind. The path to be followed to achieve this goal is characterized by the avoidance of the two extreme life-styles of sensuous indulgence and self-mortifying asceticism. The foundation for the Middle Way is an ideology which avoids a materialistic world-view. The Middle Way emphasizes the cultivation of wholesome thought, speech and action, a right means of livelihood and the development of right effort, mindfulness and concentration. The essence of the Buddha's teaching is that human beings can be freed from unhappiness only by cultivating non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion. Happiness cannot be attained by increasing one's wants but by spiritual discipline.

Although the teaching of the Buddha asserted that happiness could be attained only by cultivating an attitude of detachment and non-craving towards all empirical things, he did not ignore the material aspect of human living. Man is a combination of mind and matter. An individual is a psychophysical unit who constantly interacts with the mental and physical environment. Therefore, the human being has to satisfy certain material needs. However, the satisfaction of material needs may become an end in itself, resulting in limitless desires and craving, greedy competition and acquisitive tendencies, producing numerous psychological tensions and social conflicts. Buddhism therefore emphasizes righteous living (*samma ajiva*) according to which the economic life of man is required to be based on a moral and spiritual foundation. The supreme goal of Buddhism is nibbana, the absolute peace and tranquillity which is essentially spiritual in nature. Buddhism is

not opposed to material progress so long as it is achieved without dehumanizing man. Material progress that conduces to the increase of craving, mutual enmity and hatred, lack of contentment and peace of mind, is progress achieved through unrighteousness. Such progress is self-defeating in that its outcome is suffering, both in this world and the next (Buddhism believes in the continuity of life after death). Lack of concern for the well-being of others, miserliness and selfishness are considered manifestations of man's ignorance. The sharing of benefits is the foremost virtue. Non-injury and compassion towards all sentient existence are considered the inviolable foundation for spiritual progress. Man is viewed in Buddhism not merely as a biological phenomenon but as a samsaric being. There is a concept of summum bonum to be achieved, and all aspects of life should be ordered in conformity to the noble way which is conducive to the attainment of this goal. Economic well-being is subservient to man's moral and spiritual well-being. Buddhism considers contentment as the greatest wealth that a man can acquire. It does not measure human progress purely in terms of economic growth. It is not difficult to see that the adoption of alien models of development inevitably results in direct conflict with the cultural values and life-styles to which the Sri Lankan people have been accustomed for many centuries through the influence of Buddhism. According to Buddhism development signifies the growth of humanity in terms of virtue and wisdom. This is why the concept of bhavana occupies such a pre-eminent position in a Buddhist culture. The three fundamental virtues of Buddhist living are sharing (dana), moral living (sila) and development of mind and character (bhavana). Buddhist teachings consist of a number of tenets which could be used to formulate an effective critique of contemporary development policy.

The most serious attempt to formulate a development policy based on the Buddhist ideology and value system in contemporary Sri Lanka has been made by the Sarvodaya movement. The movement has rejected both the capitalist model of development, which encourages individualism, competition, consumerism and affluence, as well as the communist model of development through violent revolution and state-imposed institutional socio-economic structures. It conceives of man's participation in the process of socio-economic development as a vehicle for the ultimate spiritual perfection of man. From the point of view of Sarvodaya, 'Development is ideally and essentially the process of awakening of individuals, families, rural communities, urban groups, the nation and the world at large. This awakening has six major dimensions, namely: Spiritual, Moral, Cultural, Social, Economic and Political. There should be balanced progress along all these dimensions occurring simultaneously, although, at a particular point of time, one or more of the dimensions may receive greater emphasis'.¹

The Sarvodaya movement of Sri Lanka had its beginnings in 1958, when A.T. Ariyaratne, who was then a teacher at a leading Buddhist school in Colombo, organized some teachers and students of the school to work as volunteers in a backward village called Kanatoluwa.² Ariyaratne describes the first experiment of the gift of labour or the sharing of labour, which became a key concept and practical device in the Sarvodaya scheme of development as follows:

They sank wells, dug latrine pits, cleared home gardens and planted various crops, inaugurated a formal educational programme, organized literacy classes for adults, conducted health lessons and demonstrations, child and maternity care work, singing and dancing classes, and they even established a place for religious worship for the people.³

Ever since this initial venture into a programme of community service, the Sarvodaya movement evolved as the most influential non-governmental organization in Sri Lanka with a development strategy and programme of its own.

Speaking at the ninth Niwano Peace Prize award ceremony in Tokyo in his commemorative lecture, A.T. Ariyaratne outlined the Sarvodaya philosophy of Development in the following terms: 'Society is composed of individuals, families, village communities, urban groups, national populations and humanity as a whole. We are all living on one planet and are commonly subjected to the limitations imposed by non-renewable resources, ecological balances, climatic and temperature changes, environmental factors, psychological and social dependencies, physical survival, existence, and the awakening of every one of us is dependent on all other living and non-living entities of our planet. For the sake of building a practical programme we formulated the Sarvodaya Goal of the awakening of all in terms of six objectives, which are: 'Purna Paurusodaya or "Personality Awakening"; Kutumbodaya or "Family Awakening"; Gramodaya or "Village Community Awakening"; Nagarodaya or "Urban Community Awakening"; Desodaya or "National Community Awakening"; Vishvodaya or "World Community Awakening".'⁴

The Sarvodaya development concept starts with the individual. This is one of the fundamental premises in the Buddhist concept of development. The Sarvodaya philosophy seeks to achieve a two-fold liberation in every individual: 'First, within one's own mind or thinking process there are certain defilements one has to recognize and strive to cleanse. Second, one has to recognize that there are unjust and immoral socio-economic chains which keep the vast majority of people enslaved. Thus, a dual revolution pertaining to an individual's mental make-up and to the social environment in which he lives is kept foremost in the Sarvodaya Shramadana worker's mind and behaviour'. Sarvodaya conforms to the Buddhist principle that one who cares for one's spiritual well-being cares for others and one who cares for others cares for one's spiritual well-being.

Sramadana is the chief instrument through which Sarvodaya attempts to achieve its development goal. Sarvodaya recognizes four principles of personality development as the very foundation of Sri Lanka's Buddhist rural culture. They are the four positive Buddhist virtues of loving kindness (metta), compassion (karuna), sympathetic joy (mudita), and equanimity (upekkha). Sarvodaya considers the sramadana camp which it organizes in the village as providing the occasion to cultivate these virtues. In addition, it also provides the opportunity to practise the four cardinal virtues recognized in the social ethics of Buddhism, namely dana, the sharing of labour and skills for the benefit of others, piyavacana, pleasant language which creates wholesome social relationship, atthacariya, constructive activity, and samanattata, equal treatment of all involving a non-

discriminatory social attitude characterized by a sensitivity to the other person's feelings and interests. In a sramadana camp, volunteers who share the Sarvodaya ideology and the people of the village community of all ages join together to undertake some task such as building a road, repairing a village tank or constructing houses or a school building. A sramadana camp is an educative experience from which three major benefits are expected: (a) provision of a first-hand opportunity for rural and urban groups to meet in a beneficial manner, thus bringing about mutual understanding and confidence in the achievement of common goals; (b) after generations of inaction and dependence the rural communities are stimulated into a new life of self-reliance and self-help; and (c) the emergence of a new rural leadership which is not split by caste, religion or political commitments, but which has been trained for a new development.⁵

Sarvodaya's avowed aim is to develop the 23,000 villages of Sri Lanka in which almost 90 per cent of the Sri Lankan people live. It believes that a prosperous society can be achieved when villages are developed and village autonomy is established. Gramodaya or awakening of the village is one of the most important aspects of the Sarvodaya programme. At an annual conference of the movement held in 1966 a resolution to launch a Hundred Villages Development Scheme was adopted. Instead of development planning and policy being determined by a central authority, Sarvodaya believes that the people themselves at the grassroots level should do the planning. People in the village should be made to understand their own problems and to find their own solutions. They should be made self-reliant in all aspects of their lives. With the process originating from the sramadana camp, Sarvodaya seeks the participation of every villager in the solution of the day-to-day problems in the immediate local environment. Sarvodaya has introduced in the villages various organized groups under the name of haulas — the pre-school group, the children's group, the youth group, the mothers' group and the fathers' group — for this purpose.

The movement, which started with a simple community service project in 1958, had by 1978 matured into a massive organization. In 1972 the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement was incorporated in Sri Lanka by an Act of Parliament. The movement attracted the attention of Western donor organizations and monetary and other forms of assistance began to come in on a fairly large scale. The movement claimed to have some form of influence over 2,000 villages by 1978. The latest claim of the movement is that over 2,000 villages out of a total of over 8,000 villages which have had sramadana experience, have registered societies and democratically elected office-bearers carrying out the Sarvodaya development programme. It claims that the rest of the Sarvodaya villages are also on their way to such registration.⁶

Some idea of the extent to which Sarvodaya has grown can be gathered from the following:

1. Poverty Eradication and Empowerment of Poor: This programme is operated in 25 districts by 245 regional centres located in 2273 villages.

2. Early Child Development Programme: This programme operates in all districts. The special nutritional programme financed by the donor organization NOVIB operates in 7 selected districts.

3. Sarvodaya Rural Technical Services: For the last 16 years it has devoted its energies and resources towards provision of sanitation, housing and gravity water supply.

4. Rural Enterprises Programme: The objective of this programme is to provide financial assistance to rural folk in order to develop self-employment enterprises such as trade, agriculture and small industries.

5. Elders' Action Committee: The activities of this section are confined to performance of sramadana work with local and international groups. The promotion of peaceful coexistence among different ethnic communities has been given priority. Youth programmes and cultural activities at the rural level have been carried out by this section. The number of villages involved is 2,035.

6. Sarvodaya suwasetha Programme: The activities of this section are centred around 8 children's homes, 4 community-based rehabilitation centres, 2 elders' homes and 4 schools for disabled and handicapped children. It also offers a variety of other services to needy persons affected by calamities. The Savansahana, which is one of the most modern schools for the rehabilitation of deaf children, has residential accommodation for 100.

7. Sarvodaya Samodaya Services: The work of this programme is connected with the rehabilitation of drug addicts and other minor offenders referred to it by the law enforcement authorities.

8. Shanthi Sena: This section is organized for the development of youth with a view to enlisting their services towards participation in national development. It has 4,980 units with a participation of 54,499 youths nation-wide. They are concerned with the building of ethnic unity and the organization of cultural activities and activities connected with environmental preservation.

9. Sarvodaya Savings Scheme: Sarvodaya inaugurated in 1980 at the Kegalle Centre a Savings and Credit Society. Later on the programme was extended to 14 other districts, and it is operated from the headquarters in these districts. The Kegalle Society continues to operate as an independent unit. The number of accounts in the Kegalle society rose from 2,100 in 1980 to 17,736 in 1994 and the value of deposits from Rs.185,000 in 1980 to Rs.2,463,355 in 1994.

10. Income Generation Projects: Some of the projects run by Sarvodaya under this scheme are the Sarvodaya Vishva Lekha Printing Press and the Sarvodaya wheelchair project. The former is one of the most efficiently run income-generating projects of Sarvodaya.⁷

A study of the Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka reveals that it has been admirably creative, innovative and imaginative in evolving a philosophy of development which is truly indigenous. True to the spirit of Buddhist doctrine, from which it derives its inspiration, Sarvodaya gives priority to the spiritual and moral foundations of development activity rather than to economic growth and technological advancement. It emphasizes sharing and community and gives priority to the fulfilment of primary human needs. Although it solicits the assistance and guidance of experts and the educated elite, it recognizes the importance of decision-making from below. Sarvodaya advocates an intermediate technology, and environmental ethics consisting of reverence for life and nature. It seeks to achieve the right balance between material and spiritual well-being and conceives of the right type of development as leading to the establishment of a no-poverty and no-affluence society. It believes that these values that it seeks to promote are not alien to the rural culture of the Sri Lankan people. Sarvodaya adopts work-styles and methods of community organization which have an emotional appeal to the Sri Lankan villager. The village temple and the participation and leadership given by Buddhist monks figure prominently in all development activities organized by Sarvodaya.

The impact of Sarvodaya has undoubtedly been felt in rural Sri Lanka. The service it has already rendered towards the improvement of village life is commendable. Some of its concepts have had an influence at the national level as well. The gamudawa concept of former President Premadasa can be said to be a case in point. The practice of sramadana, the gifting of voluntary labour and skills for the upliftment of deprived communities, was introduced and popularized by Sarvodaya, and it is now commonly adopted by other organizations too as an effective mode of community service. The poverty alleviation programme of the previous government can be said to have been both conceptually and practically influenced by the Sarvodaya ideology. The Sarvodaya emphasis on janasakti (people's strength) may have influenced the janasakti concept of President Premadasa. Sarvodaya has also been successful in mobilizing the bhikkhu community, whose traditional role of giving moral direction to the lay community was gradually diminishing, to actively participate in the national development effort. Joanna Macy, who as a foreign observer studied various aspects of Sarvodaya activity in Sri Lanka, says: 'Interviewing scores of monks on the village scene, and observing these and many more of them at work, I was able to conclude that the role of the Sangha in Sarvodaya's grassroots development activities is extensive and significant'.⁸

The founder of the movement, A.T. Ariyaratne, holds that Sarvodaya has a universal message. The movement has established grassroots contacts with various villages abroad, particularly in Holland and Belgium. It is observed that there are striking parallels between the Sarvodaya concept of world awakening and recent developments in the West.⁹ Kantowsky points out the potential of Sarvodaya Development philosophy to have a universal influence as a result of changing perceptions about development among the people of the Western world:

In contrast to the late sixties, when redress of all societal evil was sought in a total revolution of the whole system, what we now see is the rediscovery of the individual. 'Voluntary simplicity', the power inherent in each of us to reject the persuasive message

of the mass media, has become a force that is backed by a major shift in public opinion. A Harris survey of a cross section of 1,502 adults revealed in 1977 that the American people have begun to show a deep skepticism about the nation's capacity for economic growth, and that they are wary of the benefits that growth is supposed to bring. Significant majorities place a high priority on improving human and social relationships and the quality of American life than on simply raising the standards of living.¹⁰

Critics of Sarvodaya have raised certain issues regarding its possible impact at the international level. The problem of the Sarvodaya philosophy of development being eclipsed by the overwhelming influence of the national policies pursued by governments, backed financially and even dictated by powerful organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, is a reality to be faced. Such policies lead to the creation of the very features that the Sarvodaya philosophy of development has rejected. They promote the values of an acquisitive society, driven by material incentives and alien life-styles. The effectiveness of Sarvodaya in challenging the new knowledge base of the positivistic science and secular systems of thought which seek to displace the structures of knowledge and wisdom of traditional societies is called into question. The younger generation is being exposed to the scientific and technological knowledge of the new industrial civilization. Sarvodaya's capability of having a significant impact on educated youth exposed to such modern knowledge, who consequently develop a sceptical attitude towards the holistic modes of thinking of the traditional culture, can be open to doubt. Sarvodaya has also been open to criticism on the ground that while advocating self-reliance it has been operating largely on the basis of foreign aid. The danger of the emergence of a bureaucracy maintained by the foreign funds received by the movement, resulting in the establishment of the very social relationships against which Sarvodaya was originally canvassing, has been a disturbing thought even to some sympathizers. The importance of building a self-reliant economic base for the implementation of Sarvodaya development policy has become a matter of the foremost importance.

The fact that Sarvodaya offers an alternative theory of sustainable development which has a special relevance to the endogenous Sri Lankan culture cannot be doubted. One may also maintain that if one objectively assesses its importance with enough insight and foresight, it is by far the most preferable alternative to promote in the Sri Lankan context. But the day when such a philosophy and practical programme of development will win wide acceptance in Sri Lanka, to the extent of moving political forces to adopt it through constraints imposed by popular will and making a real impact at the national level, does not appear to be near. One can only hope that the contradictions inherent in the current models of development practised in Sri Lanka and abroad will eventually bring about this result.

Notes

1. The Future Directions of Sarvodaya, Sarvodaya Shramadan Movement, Moratuwa, Sri Lanka, 1994, p.2.

2. Sarvodaya, Detlef Kantowsky, Vikas Publishing House Private Limited, New Delhi, 1980, p.40f.
3. The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, Hundred Villages Development Schemes, paper read at a regional seminar on the role of youth in development, Bangkok, 1971.
4. Ibid., p.4.
5. Sarvodaya, Kantowsky, p.48.
6. The Future Directions of Sarvodaya, Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, Moratuwa, Sri Lanka, 1994 p.4.
7. Annual Report of Sarvodaya 01.04.93-31.03.94.
8. Dharma and Development, Kumarian Press, Connecticut, 1983, p.66.
9. Sarvodaya, Kantowsky, p.157.
10. Ibid., pp.158-59.