A Case Study of a Trend Setter

by Jehan Perera

Sri Lanka is a South Asian country with a difference. Not only is it located strategically with the rest of the sub continent spread out before it; Sri Lanka's social, health, longevity and per capita income indicators are also ahead of its neighbours. With these advantages also come a vital difference in the philosophy and outlook of Sri Lanka.

South Asia is the home of several great world religions and of age-old traditions. But Sri Lankans are equipped to transcend the past. What worked once, but not any longer, is given up for what works today. A lesson taught by

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the Buddha may account for this pragmatic approach to life. The great teacher once said that if a person used a raft to get across a river, it would be a great foolishness to carry it along after the purpose had been served.

For instance, the relatively high educational levels in the country were a heritage of a once successful social-welfare-based strategy that the people were prepared to shed, once the purpose was served, like the raft in the Buddha's story.

After receiving independence. from the British in 1948, Sri Lanka offered a trend-setting example of a model social-welfare state. At the very commencement of its independence, the country's legislators voted in favour of a scheme of universal free education. Other social-welfare measures included a free health service and a subsidy on basic foodstuffs.

The Physical Quality of Life Index developed by a US think tank showed that in the mid-1970s the people of Sri Lanka enjoyed a quality of life comparable to that of the people of Washington DC! University textbooks on Development Economics invariably had a reference to Sri Lanka as an example of what a country with very limited economic resources could do for its people.

But Sri Lanka was also the first of the South Asian countries to move away from the hoary philosophy of the state-controlled economy to accept the promise of the market. More praiseworthy was the fact that the radical economic reforms that made Sri Lanka a trend setter amongst emerging economies, was not carried out by brute force upon an unwilling populace.

In Chile, for instance, a dictatorial government force-fed the economy with needed reforms at the point of the gun. By way of contrast, Sri Lanka's highly literate population went to the polls- and voted in, with a 5/6 majority, a political party that campaigned for an open-market economy.

The rapid economic growth that accompanied the switch-over to the free-market at the end of the 1970s lasted over 15 years. But today, the bright lights of the economy are dimmed. The country is going through a period that mystics have called the "dark night of the soul". Over the past decade the unresolved ethnic conflict ate into the vitals of society.

But in any crisis there is opportunity. The once booming stock market, that the New York Times rated as the hottest in the world just two years ago, is now less than half its value at that time. On the other hand, rich gains are there to be made when the economy picks up again. Hotels offer golden beaches and verdant mountains to foreign tourists at highly concessionary rates.

The question is, when will Sri Lanka turn the corner? The an swer is any time now. The foreign visitor to Colombo will be sur prised at the harmony that prevails between the ethnic communities. Sinhalese, Tamils, Moors Malays, Dutch and Portuguese Burghers and Borahs, Parsees and Sindhis work together, play together and intermarry. Where day to-day-living is concerned, the war seems far away, in the isolated

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north-east corner of the country. International opinion is highly valued in Sri Lanka and it is noteworthy that foreigners have never been targetted for harm.

But the war's invisible effects pervade the economy. Government money needed for infrastructure development gets diverted away to the warfront. Security checks are common in Colombo. There is a popular consensus in the country that the war

between the government and rebel forces must end. At the last elections the political party putting forward peace as its main campaign slogan won convincingly.

The new government has come up with a political reform package that has been hailed worldwide, particularly in neighbouring South Asia, as providing a trend-setting example of power sharing between majority and minority ethnic groups. There is international pressure on the conflicting parties to settle their dispute peacefully In addition, an array of peace groups, such as the National Peace Council, are working hard to break down the wall of mistrust that keeps the conflicting parties separated.

Ethnic conflicts are breaking out with greater frequency in all parts of the world. Most of the current wars in the world are internal. The primary issues are those of governance, often involving the pursuit of autonomy or self-government for certain regions or groups. What is at issue are group and community rights and not just individual human rights. It would not be overly optimistic to say that Sri Lanka is well on its way to giving the world an example, and a text book case study, of how such conflicts can end.



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