

THE LANKAN PARADOX

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New Thinking has at least two meanings in the current Lankan context. The first would be a general meaning - innovative, creative ideas or thinking. The second is more specific - that of new thinking in socialism - of which Gorbachev's new thinking is the most important and visible component.

New Thinking in both these senses is vitally important to us in Sri Lanka today. In the first place, the Sri Lankan crisis, or should I say the Sri Lankan catastrophe, is the starkest evidence that there is and was something drastically wrong in the old thinking. It's the old thinking, attitudes and practices that lead us down this precipice. Therefore the case for new thinking is self evident.

But there is also a need for New Thinking in a more specific Gorbachevian sense. Why so? My own understanding of Gorbachevian new thinking leads me to believe that the centre piece of it is the notion of an integrated, interdependent world. Gorbachev's new thinking holds that the world is integrated, that it's component parts stand in a relationship of interdependence with one another. This understanding of the integrated character of global reality leads Gorbachev to search for common solutions. Gorbachev's new thinking holds that there are certain issues and problems that transcend the class struggle, the struggle between the

two systems - socialist and capitalist - and even the ideological struggle. A case in point is of course the danger of Nuclear war. The ecology is another. Gorbachevian new thinking therefore transcends the search for the defeat of the other and the victory of one's own side. It seeks instead, a balance of interests of all the parties concerned. So this notion of common problems, of a common search, of the abandonment of zero sum games marks a centerpiece of Gorbachevian new thinking.

Common Search

Sri Lanka today faces a crisis of survival, similar to the danger Western Europe faced from the prospect of Nuclear war or that the globe faces from the spoliation of the environment. In this crisis of survival, the politics of destructive criticism, of negativism, of unilateral advantage and confrontation for the sake of confrontation, merely exacerbate the crisis. What is needed is our understanding of the commonality of our problems; that the problems are not simply those of this or that class or party. This crisis threatens almost all of us and future generations too. Therefore the search must be, not so much for the ousting of one and its replacement by the other or for some political gain, but for a balance of interests. We must engage in a common search for a common solution. In

that sense the new paradigm in socialism, the paradigm inaugurated not only by Gorbachev but by Fidel in his reflections on religion and Deng Xiao Peng in his economic experimentation, is of fundamental relevance to us in Sri Lanka. It's not merely relevant but imperative if we are to survive as a society, and as a country.

New Alignments

What's surprising, paradoxical and appalling is that while Sri Lanka has been facing new problems and while all of us have been engaged in new practices, there has not been a corresponding new thinking. At least since July '83 Sri Lankan politics has been characterised by confrontations and alignments which were non traditional. The main axis of fissure was, not so much between Government and Opposition or bourgeoisie and proletariat or Right and Left, between those who are Sinhala chauvinists and those who are non chauvinists. With the commencement of the first APC in 1984 and the tentative, sporadic, contradictory search for a political solution, the main line of division shifted to an adjacent space, mainly between those who stood for a negotiated political settlement based on the devolution of power and those who stood against it.

These are new lines, new contradictions and new antagonisms that our society and polity have witnessed - at least from July 1983. In consequence of this, political parties, classes and personalities have undergone displacement from the traditional spaces they occupied. The parties of the left and sections of the UNP, for instance, converged in support of the Indo Lanka Accord and the system of Provincial Councils, albeit for different reasons. This is the best example of what I'm saying.

The upsurge of the Polpotist insurgency of the JVP further dramatized the new political align-

ment in Sri Lanka. The defeat of the JVP was not so much an achievement of the UNP, as it was the outcome of a struggle waged by a variety of anti fascist forces at various levels.

a good enough reason for us to have given rise to New Thinking. That is at the level of the **structure**, of the **formation**.

The conjuncture of Post July

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We have therefore had new practices. The Left parties and groups for example have been doing things, have had to do things and adopt political positions that have been quite unorthodox. So also the UNP. But unfortunately these new political practices, these new political alignments have not been reflected in new political and economic thinking. So it's really very, very paradoxical. Sri Lanka which has seen a very unusual political crisis which gave rise to political responses even anticipating the new thinking of Gorbachev, (such as those of Vijaya Kumaranatunga) has not given rise to any conceptual revolution. I have not yet been able to explain this hiatus between actual experience, actual practice and its reflection in policy. Even those parties and groupings which engage in new practices seem to have a great deal of trouble in explaining this at the level of political and economic philosophy.

Braking Mechanism

There is, to use a Gorbachevian phrase, some kind of 'braking mechanism' at work somewhere Sri Lanka should have been the cradle of new thinking as far as the Third World goes. Because while we have been part of the Third World in one sense - in an economic sense - we have been, at political level, almost European. Though we have been heading towards the Third World norm of authoritarianism and dictatorship over the last 20 years, we certainly are not a classically Third World society or polity. This in itself is

83 in Sri Lanka should, most certainly have caused a crystallisation of New Thinking. Sri Lanka should have been a lighthouse, as it were, for the left and progressive and democratic movements in the continents of Asia, Africa and Latin America. But this doesn't seem to be the case. The new political practice was reflexive. But new political thinking also has certain pre requisites which we do not possess. Take the Soviet example. Isaac Deutscher had predicted that the rising educational and cultural level of Soviet society would produce this kind of thinking in the Soviet Union. We on the other hand have not witnessed such an advance in educational and cultural standards. That is to put it mildly.

Furthermore I think that the Soviet Union, since it was a super power, had to construct a whole network of think tanks - the Soviet Academy of Sciences is the most obvious example - to compete with the U.S.A. Most of the new thinking eventually came out of

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these various academic and research institutes that the Soviet Union has set up. Even within the Soviet Communist Party, despite the stagnation, there were certain minimum levels of political literacy that had to be obtained in order to accede to the leadership.

And of course none of this can really be abstracted from the richness of Russian culture, particularly its literary culture.

None of these factors obtain in Sri Lanka. We have had a drastic decline in our education system - at least since the onset of the media wise and district wise standardization, but probably dating back to the imposition of the Sinhala Only Policy in 1956. So we have not had the social forces necessary to give rise to or push for new thinking. Gorbachev has not only those elements and forces mentioned above, but has a support base in the literary intelligentsia of the Soviet Union. Here the kind of social forces that will support New Thinking are so thin on the ground, so as to be limited to a handful of persons, within and outside the system. Lenin wrote a 'New Tasks; new forces'. Here we have plenty of new tasks, but no new forces!

New Thinking and the New Thinkers

Had Sarath Muttetuwegama survived, he may well have been the foremost new thinker as far as the Marxist Left in Sri Lanka goes. But if we take the record as it stands, Vijaya Kumaranatunge stands out certainly as the pioneer of a new political practice and a new political discourse in Sri Lanka. He did not have the time and perhaps the necessary intel-

lectual formation to conceptualize his new thinking. But certainly he was an outstanding new thinker within Sri Lankan politics.

At the strictly intellectual level the late Dr. Newton Gunasinghe was our foremost new thinker. His

analysis of the ethnic problem and the polarisation of forces as early as 1984 is unsurpassed to date as a piece of theoretical writing on the Sri Lankan crisis.

What is particularly striking is

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the near total lack of new thinking in the centre and traditional left formations; I mean in the SLFP, the centrist opposition party and in the traditional left parties including a younger party like the NSSP. That is really most worrying. Because the British Labour party, by contrast to the SLFP, has been able to engage in a great deal of New thinking under Neil Kinnock. Their new party programme is evidence of this. Certainly the split off from the Labour Party, the SDP, catalysed this process. But you do not see any such phenomenon as far as the mainstream opposition goes in Sri Lanka.

As far as the opposition is concerned, I see new thinking emanating only from three quarters – the Sri Lanka Mahajana Party, the Liberal Party and from some individual of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). In the traditional left parties, Hector Abhayavardhana and Sumanasiri Liyanage of the LSSP and possibly D. E. W. Gunasekera of the CPSL have been engaged in new thinking.

Within the Tamil movement there is no new thinking at all visible. Certainly K. Padmanaba, leader of the EPRLF, in his practice, combined socialism and humanism, but there wasn't any kind of output at the theoretical level. Therefore, as far as the Tamil movement goes there's a marked lack of new thinking or any kind of self criticism – which is a prerequisite for new thinking.

Within the intelligentsia there are a few scattered examples. But cer-

tainly nobody who can measure upto the standards of vigour and originality set by Newton. I must mention Reggie Siriwardena and A. J. Gunawardena as new thinkers. But nobody else I'm afraid. None who spring readily to mind.

What is sad from the point of view of a committed Marxist like myself is that it's the UNP that has shown a capacity to produce some element of New Thinking in this crisis. Certainly J. R. Jayawardena was a new thinker in the looser, more general sense of the word, in that he broke with the old conservatism of the UNP and turned it in a modernised, dependent capitalist party. So if we are using simple letters, then certainly Jayawardena was a new thinker. But that itself was a considerable achievement in terms of political modernisation.

Going beyond this there are few elements of new thinking visible in some of the initiatives that the new incumbent has taken or had been forced to take. One obvious example is Janasaviya. Certainly Susil Siriwardena is a conscious advocate and practitioner of New Thinking. The APC too is an example of New Thinking and it's Secretary Bradman Weerakoon is certainly a New Thinker within the framework of the Establishment. The land re-distribution programme carried out by the Land

and secondly to engage in a dialogue with the Tamil extremist the LTTE, are the most dramatic instances of new thinking in operation.

I think it was an example of new thinking when a party like the UNP with a Sinhala Buddhist base agreed to dialogue with the Liberation Tigers – the most extreme expression of Tamil nationalism. This is very significant. Imagine the leader of Israel agreeing to a direct dialogue with the PLO or Margaret Thatcher agreeing to discussions with the Provisional IRA! This cluster of Presidential initiatives – Janasaviya, the withdrawal of the IPKF, the attempt to dialogue with the LTTE, the APC, the land redistribution programme of the Land Task Force, the mobile Presidential System, the mobile Ministerial services – all add up to a picture of, what I have called elsewhere, non Marxist Gorbachevism, or to be more rigorous a capitalist Gorbachevism, in a Third World context. This is quite new.

The Search for Economic Consensus

There's a definite need for economic new thinking in Sri Lanka today, in two senses. Firstly in terms of the kind of economic model or economic strategy we should adopt. Secondly in terms of managing the current – and deepening – economic crisis while securing a balance of interest between the various social forces. As

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Task Force is another example of new thinking. Charitha Ratwatte and his work both in the National Youth Services Council and the Rehabilitation Commission is another fine example. But perhaps Above all else the two efforts made by the President, firstly a successful attempt to send off the IPKF

concerns as economic model there has been quite a lot of excellent criticism of closed economic thinking in the pages of your journal. So I won't spend time talking about that. But we have to be very careful that we do not fall prey to 'the economic common sense of the bourgeoisie'. I'm using 'common

sense' in the Gramscian manner. That is a great danger. I see that happening in the socialist world and the ex. socialist countries of Eastern Europe.

The economic model that the socialist movement in Sri Lanka should propound and popularise

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and indeed which should become accepted by the dominant parliamentary parties as well, is one which may very loosely be described as that of a mixed economy. But I think one has to be more specific than that. By mixed economy I mean an economy which has multiple forms of ownership. This would include private and public ownership. By public ownership I mean not only state property but also collective property, co-operative property and the ownership of economic assets by local bodies ranging from Provincial Councils to Municipal Councils, Pradesheeya Sabhas etc. The mixed economy also entails economic devolution in two senses i.e. transfer of economic power and resources from the privileged to the underprivileged and from centre to periphery. An important aspect of economic New Thinking is to abandon the equation of the market with capitalism and of the state sector with socialism. However, I don't see why the public sector cannot be streamlined and rationalised. There is no need to do away with the public sector as a whole. We must realize though, public sector has been the source of a good deal of economic parasitism. In that sense quite a lot of fat has to be cut away. We must try to combine the market mechanism with a **streamlined public sector which is meritocratic**. I think there's also room for elements of broad indicative planning on the French mode.

New economic thinking today would mean nothing less than a common approach that has to be evolved by both government and the opposition to the economic catastrophe that we are facing. Here I would boldly advocate an economic consensus. The search for economic consensus has to

be predicated on the understanding that we are all in the same boat – all classes and parties in Sri Lanka. If the economy goes into a tailspin there would be no beneficiaries. Therefore there has to be a common collective effort at economic fire fighting.

However it must be understood that a search for economic consensus would involve trade offs. The government and the dominant classes – the capitalist and bureaucratic layers – would have to agree to certain measures on their part while the representatives of the working classes and the opposition would also have to agree to certain concessions, perhaps in the realm of labour discipline. Waste, corruption, parasitism should be the targets of the opposition and the trade union movement for the duration of this 'special period' (to use Fidel's phrase). They can help rationalise the economic system

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which will remain capitalist in this present period. But certainly they can extract concessions in terms of economic policy, where their own vital interests are safeguarded.

This idea is not original. I base it on the thinking of the Italian

Communist Party which advocated the notion of a **historic compromise** to the crisis facing the Italian economy and industry in the 1970's. That kind of historic compromise, that search for economic consensus, of economic crisis management in which the dominant classes also significant sacrifices and concessions; where the burden of the crisis is not transferred to the working peoples – all of this would be the concretization of economic new thinking today. Why not hold an Economic Roundtable Conference. an Economic A.P.C, for this purpose?

Building Blocks

New thinking in Sri Lanka today has to have two basic building blocks. One is **pluralism** and the other is **solidarity**. We must understand that we have to recognise the distinct identities of national, ethno religious communities in Sri Lanka as well as the right of diverse ideological currents and political organizations to be able to function peacefully. In that sense we need political structures that can contain and express these multiple and often contending identities. So the recognition of pluralism and creation of political structures which can facilitate it in a non destructive fashion, is one basic building block of the new thinking.

But while we are pluralist, while we recognize our distinct and separate identities, we must also engage in a search for that which

is common. I do not mean a search for an illusory Sri Lankan identity but at least for a sense of a community of human suffering; and of common shared human values, ethics, and morality. Here I would prefer to use the term **solidarity** – solidarity among individuals and within and between communities.

This solidarity should also be a transtate, transnational phenomenon. It should be internationalist.

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If we are to understand the failures, the deviations and the betrayals on the part of the Sri Lankan left, one of the most important dimensions is that from its inception in 1935, the Left never undertook a conscious ideological struggle against populism and in fact was subsequently subsumed by populism.

Tasks

New thinking in Sri Lanka will have to be more than a purely national phenomena. We can't reach the goal of Lankan new thinking without going through the circuit of global or international thinking, because it is only if we understand how things are out there – for instance that Federalism is not tantamount to seperation in any civilized country in the world – that we will be able to come up with solutions and design structures that can manage the existing conflict in Sri Lanka. It is only if we absorb the new currents within socialism and progressive democratic movements in the world that we will be able to remove the road blocks that are our ossified discourse now constitute. So we must find a way of transnationalising of our thinking. of making the currents of new thinking the world over accessible to the Sri Lankan youth – both Sinhala and Tamil. That is certainly one of our main tasks in terms of popularising the new thinking.

We must wage a relentless struggle in the realm of ideas against any kind of barbarism and advocate a secular-democratic, modernist thinking in politics and concerning socio-cultural issues. This is of course part of that which in classical Marxism is known as the struggle for the completion of the bourgeois democratic revolution. This involved, at least as far as the Russian Marxists were concerned, a relentless fight against Populism. That is very much on the agenda for Sri Lankan left. If

one of the most important dimensions is that from its inception in 1935, the Left never undertook a conscious ideological struggle against populism and in fact was subsequently subsumed by populism.

So there are many tasks in the realm of propaganda, and also of historiography. The whole fight for a secular historiography free from

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semi religious myths such as the Vijaya myth, is a very important task for our intelligentsia.

We are severely handicapped by the phenomena of the migration of the bilingual intelligentsia of our country over the last several decades. Those are the people who could have contributed greatly to preventing the outcome that we are now faced with. In a way I see it as some kind of moral or social crime. Perhaps I'm being a bit too extreme.

lowering of standards, the erosion of professionalism, in all our institutions without exception. The origins of this go back to the 'suicidal Language Policy of '56. But the process was accelerated after 1970. The 70's saw the twin phenomenon of district and media wise standardisation in University admissions and the over politicisation of our institutions. Recruitment was on the basis of political affiliation and patronage. This continued under the UNP. As a consequence of these two phenomena, our institutions have been attacked by a kind of cancer or Leukemia namely that of mediocrity. What we are witnessing today is a product of all of this. The damage we have done to ourselves far exceeds the damage done to us by the Tigers! What is taking place is nothing

less than a process of intellectual (and professional) desertification. The problem then is how do we reverse this desertification? How do we roll back the desert? How do we hold back this process of societal and civilizational decay? What and where are the resources, by which I mean the human and social resources, that we can tap and harness in order to make this desert bloom? We must look beyond the current crop of wars and conflicts, to these basic, pro-

We must look beyond the current crop of wars and conflicts, to these basic, profound civilizational challenges, specially as we reach the close of the 20th century. If we fail to do so, I fear that we shall suffer the fate of the village in Leonard Woolf's Baddegama, overrun by the jungle.

Intellectual Desertification

I would like to conclude by focussing attention on what I consider to be the most fundamental problem that we face. I fear that we are undergoing societal decay. This is mainly as a result of the

found civilizational challenges, specially as we reach the close of the 20th century. If we fail to do so, I fear that we shall suffer the fate of the village in Leonard Woolf's Baddegama, overrun by the jungle. ■