

Our media have failed

A. J. Gunawardena

A. J. Gunawardena, currently Director, Institute of Aesthetic Studies, University of Kelaniya, writes what he calls cultural criticism. He contributes regularly to an English daily newspaper. He also writes screenplays for films.

You ask me what new thinking there is in the field of culture. I don't find any. And the little that tries to make itself felt is swiftly ruled out of court. This is most disturbing because culture has a vital function to fulfill in civilizing society, and making life meaningful for both the individual and the collective. Our chief problem, I think, is our incapacity or unwillingness to appreciate the fact that we are part of a rapidly expanding global scheme. We cannot therefore hide behind a self-erected curtain and screen ourselves off from the globalization process. Unless we come to terms with this reality, I don't think that we can make the best use or even good use of the cultural resources available to us.

Take the media, which are an essential and central component of contemporary culture. Increasingly, I find the media – specially the electronic media – being invested with responsibilities for which they are essentially unsuited or inadequately suited. In our public rhetoric about the media, we lay great stress on their pedagogic and educational functions. We seem to believe that TV, radio and video provide the total and final solution to all our problems – ethnic, religious, linguistic, economic or whatever. We think that we can teach people all kinds of skills and expertise overnight by the use of these media. We think that the best of all possible worlds is about to dawn as a consequence of the application of the mass media. But this, I'm sad to say, is only a dream, an unintelligent dream. It is equally unintelligent to dismiss the media as

dangerous modernist interventions. Each medium has its merits and its weaknesses; its potentialities and its limitations. We must learn to look at them from the perspective of our historical experience while learning from other countries.

I have always maintained that the only way in which we can counter the impact of larger cultural forces from outside is by cultivating excellence in our own culture and arts. I am happy to report that Melina Mercouri, the great Greek actress who till recently was Minister of Culture in her country, holds the same view. In a recent interview with a US news magazine, she openly declared her objections to the

creation of a democratic, tolerant, open-ended polity in our country. I'm not implying that the media are irresponsible by any means. But their responsibility has not been the kind of responsibility that looks upon problems holistically and approaches them systematically. We have so many medium and long term problems which have to be resolved if we are to survive into the 21st century as a national entity or polity.

Our media have not initiated the right kind of discourse which looks at things in the long view. Everything we do in this country is for the short term—ad hoc, patching up, getting by. That, unfortunately, is also the general characteristic of our media. When I say media, I don't mean only the newspapers or the radio. I mean all modes of cultural communication – the theatre for example. Look at our theatre. People talk about an efflorescence in our theatre, of the great energies that are evident in our theatre. But to what end are these energies used? To make simple declarations on the stage.

Our chief problem, I think, is our incapacity or unwillingness to appreciate the fact that we are part of a rapidly expanding global scheme. We cannot therefore hide behind a self-erected curtain and screen ourselves off from the globalization process.

dominant role played by American culture. But she was quick to admit that American films were "great". "What we can do is try and improve the quality of our own films", she said. That I think is new thinking, forward looking thinking. What she means is that we must come to terms with the actuality that we are living in and make the necessary changes in our cultural strategies and practices.

Not asking the right questions

I feel that the media have not really addressed themselves to the task of countering devisive forces, to the healing of wounds, to the

Not to bring about insight, understanding, awareness. Not to honestly confront ourselves and our problems. To put it in a nutshell, I would say that our media have failed to ask the right kind of questions.

Lack of Professionalism

You ask me to pinpoint the causes of this situation. I would say that lack of professionalism is a principal factor. You don't find in our country genuine professionalism directed towards the achieving of excellence, and the cultivation and maintenance of standards. Professionalism is very rare in our country; it is the excep-

Contd. on page 8

tion, not the rule. Respect of professionalism is absent. This is due to a complex of reasons which have to do with our history, the history of the media, and the socio-economic circumstances surrounding them. Ultimately, I would say, it's the lack of a kind of culture which really embodies the values of professionalism.

I have a small anecdote which might shed further light on this matter. When Ravi Shankar came here for the first time in 1960, I interviewed him in my capacity as a staff writer in the 'Daily News'. I asked him what he thought the future of music in Sri Lanka was likely to be, with specific reference to North Indian classical music and classic music in general. The Maestro said that he could not speak affirmatively and confidently about its subject. "Your people don't have Sadhana", he said. Sadhana is devotion or application or commitment. This was 30 years ago. I think Ravi Shankar has proven prophetic in his remark.

New thinking and achieving of excellence

New thinking is vital in the field of culture if we are to relate ourselves, without losing our identity, to the constantly changing reality around us. Culture should work to reduce causes of tension; to downplay abrasive confrontations and promote those situations which contribute to the liberal acceptance of the fact that we are living in Sri Lanka at the end of the 20th century; that we are not an isolated segment or an isolated entity; that we are part of a global system.