

THE TASK OF NATION BUILDING

by
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Any attempt to speculate on the prospects for the coming decade must begin with an understanding of the crisis situation that Sri Lanka finds itself in. A realistic appraisal of the political failures of the past and their causes as well as an appreciation of the global economic factors at play today, becomes very necessary.

Generally speaking history does not move backwards, history goes forward. But Sri Lanka is in a very precarious situation. At the time of independence we should have set ourselves the task of building a nation. If we had an understanding of history we would have realised that there had been no real nation state before 1948. We had a bureaucratic British state which unified the country superficially. The ancient dynastic state was an apology for a state.

The state is really the predominant institution of nationhood. When the production and the exchange of commodities is limited, where commerce is limited the links between groups of people even those who speak the same language or perhaps who practice the same religion, are extremely feeble or do not exist at all.

To think therefore that without the development of transport a vast area like 25,000

square miles could have been united, is I think to indulge in a lot of fantasy. There was no Sri Lanka before the British. Earlier we had little kingdoms scattered around the country ruled by monarchs, because there were no other political structure that was possible in those conditions.

In 1948 if we had realized that we had to bring a nation into being that we had to unite the different ethnic, religious and caste groups that existed in the country in a unified nation we would have set about that task. But instead of that we assumed that a nation has already come into existence that the state that the British had left behind was the last word in constitutional achievement.

The over emphasis on swabasha deprived the younger generations of a modern education which would give an understanding of the world around us. It cut them off from the explosion in knowledge and the unprecedented advancement in science and technology that was then taking place.

World Capitalism

The internationalisation of world capitalism has already taken place. Today no part of the world can separate itself from this process of internationalisation. The best illustration is the present experience of Vietnam. Vietnam fought the

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mightiest imperialist powers and defeated it. Vietnam which has a powerful Marxist movement, a people who had an experience of sacrificing the present for the future, having struggled for tens of years to build up an economy, particularly some kind of industrialised economy through the accumulation of capital produced from the land; found themselves a couple of years ago really in a state of semi-starvation. Today the Vietnamese have had to change approaches and to seek to come to terms with international capital. This has now been followed by the experience of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

An open economy is necessary today. But what goes for an open economy in Sri Lanka has not resulted in the importation of capital and technology on a scale that can build up our economy. We cannot rely on the capitalist market to determine the direction and the pace at which our economic develop-

ment will take place. There has to be some kind of compromise with international capital because it is in a strong bargaining position. It is not impossible to find the compromise that will not be entirely to our disadvantage.

In practical terms this compromise must be based on a recognition that the wealth of our country lies on our land and in our waters. We have to devote all our strivings to find new advances in technology and new lots of capital to diversify our agriculture, increase its productivity and provide us with processing skills that can find entry into the markets of the world. This can only come from the application of science to agriculture and fishing.

I don't think self sufficiency was ever a realistic goal — certainly not in the modern world. Self sufficiency was never a Marxist concept. It was the aim of early capitalism that is mercantilism.

Certain types of domestic industries like textiles can do with a protected market. Similarly, I think industries which are not highly mechanized could do with a lot of protection. But we are in a world in which today productivity does not merely flow from the application of human labour. Productivity comes from the direct application of science and technology and in such a situation if we do not have science we cannot compete with production in the world outside.

The cost of production in an industry must have direct relationship to the cost in similar industries elsewhere. If therefore, the productivity of labour in our country is much lower than that of other countries, the

actual surplus that we can get out of production will be small. And today industry requires the investment of vast quantities of capital, amounts of capital we cannot accumulate from our agriculture.

This brings us to the question of Multinationals. I think there is a certain misunderstanding of the role of multi-nationals in different areas of production, permitting multinational intrusion into our markets where we have an alternative of producing goods ourselves would be an act of dis-service to ourselves. In such areas we must resist the attempts by multinationals to come in. But in a place like Moneragala, which has been virtually barren for long decades and which has produced very little of even the food that the people of those areas need, large investment of capital and the proper choice of crops can raise the standard of living of the people. Sugar production at Moneragala is not a very good example of the application of high technology. But we must admit that for the first time a crop has been grown in vast areas of that district which has brought to considerable number of people a living income.

If we have an alternative to the Multinationals then there is no need to resort to them, but I don't think we have an alternative. We have to provide incentives for foreign capital to come and really employ labour because we have a surplus of labour that is not employed.

All this is a very far cry from socialism but we can't think of socialism through our own efforts in the next ten or fifteen or twenty years. We have a long way to go before we think in terms of any qualitative change,

but of course there may be other alternatives. We do not know what is going to come out of the changes that are taking place in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. I expect a vast explosion of productivity in those countries and an accumulation of capital which provided they retain their same ideological confidence can be of great assistance to countries like ours.

We have to recognise that Marx spoke of socialism as a remedy for the over production that took place in capitalist countries. He was not thinking of socialism as a means of developing the economy in backward countries. But a whole series of accidents has led to a situation in which capitalism cannot develop in our countries on the one hand, and on the other there is no way of drawing the masses into the fight against the conditions of starvation and penury that prevail today except in the name of socialism. So, socialism is still an ideological concept and an optimistic forecast for the future. But we must not make the mistake of promising the people that on the morrow of forming a government we can build a socialist society.

The time has come to do a little bit of turning inwards to understand ourselves, our own history and the history of the world around us.

Recent experience should have emphasised for us the inadequacy and impotence of traditional speculation concerning the cosmos.

In fact if we stick to the past and believe that our introspection alone will produce the solutions to our problems then I think we are asking for trouble.