

The Crisis in Western Technology

There is in the Western World today a crisis in technology. This crisis has produced fresh thinking on the role of technology in the human and technological sphere. It is also throwing up new propositions on alternate technologies and alternate lifestyles. In the Sri Lanka case our traditional technology has been rapidly displaced by an imported modern technology which has had very little organic interaction with the traditional one. The imported technology although originally British is now drawn from a multiplicity of sources. Further there is a new emphasis locally on low technology, mainly because high technology is beyond our reach, because of its expense, which in turn is caused by the fact that we are at the receiving end of an exploitative relationship.

With this questioning of the effectiveness of technology in the West and the questioning on the appropriateness of technology at our end, there are pressures for us to assume a high degree of boldness in our technological postures—we should no longer take technology as sacrosanct or virtually God-given in a prepacked form but should question its fundamental roots.

Economic development is not possible without the introduction of better methods, and improved technology and equipment. But the degree of betterment needs to be within reach of the small producers as well and to satisfy the needs of the mass of the people; and all parameters must have immediate social relevance.

Many authorities, particularly in the West, point out the fact that while the Western nations are undergoing a situation of intense questioning as far as its technology and institutions are concerned, the Third World is attempting to imitate some of the very features that the Western nations question.

In the article 'Trojan Horse' by A. K. M. Reddy, concluded in this issue on page 29, the dangers of accepting the Western technology without question were highlighted.

Accompanying technologies are also certain lifestyles and our questioning in the technological sphere must therefore naturally relate to a questioning of life styles and associated features of society. In his article Reddy emphasised this aspect too as quoted "Scratch any piece of technology and you will find the values and aims of the society it was designed to serve. For technology is like genetic material—it carries with it the code of the society which conceived it".

It is therefore by being aware of such viewpoints that we ourselves should engage in an internal dialogue about the shape of the technological future of the country. Such questioning cannot for obvious reasons be limited to only questions of technology but should extend to the entirety of the socio-technical interphase of which technology is only one part.

THE TROJAN HORSE

In the first part of his article Professor Reddy asserted that "the pattern of industrialization adopted in most developing countries over the past few decades has only accentuated the inequalities and the sharp polarization of their societies into haves and have-nots When capital and energy intensive, labour-saving western technology is introduced into a developing country in which capital and energy are scarce and manpower is plentiful, the limited capital and energy tend to concentrate in large urban plants (and luxury goods) and shy away even more from the rural economy (and the goods and services for mass consumption). At the same time, the growth of employment becomes increasingly restricted by the capital and energy-intensive metropolitan sector. The result is a sharpening of the contrast in living standards, opportunities and outlook between the urban rich and the rural poor. It is western technology, therefore, which has in developing countries, been the instrument of buttressing the polarization into dual societies".

He argued that western technology could turnout to be a Trojan Horse insofar as it sustained and consolidated the elites of developing countries.

For an illustration of alternative technologies, he took the case of fertilizer which could be produced synthetically from oil or coal, or organically as stabilized sludge from the anaerobic microbial fermentation of sewage and cattle wastes. The typical village scale biogas fertilizer plant was contrasted with a large scale capital intensive project. This is illustrated diagrammatically on page 29 where Part II of The Trojan Horse appears.