

# Sri Lanka in the Twenty First Century: A Future Perspective

By Ariya Abeysinghe

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As a society, we have been moving from the old to the new. And we are still in motion. Caught between eras, we experience turbulence. Yet, amidst the sometimes painful and uncertain present, the re-structuring of Sri Lanka proceeds unrelentingly.

I will deal with this theme using the resource base: land, man, water and environment. This is an attempt as a pragmatic person, to express some comments on what Sri Lanka would be or should be like in the 21st century. It was John Maynard Keynes, the great economist who said:

"The power to become habituated to his surroundings is a marked characteristic of mankind".

Today we are living in an era where the world is being transformed from an industrial society to an information society. We in Sri Lanka are trying to take a long leap from a predominantly subsistence agricultural society, through a quasi-industrial stage, to an information society of the 21st century. Well-known American writer and renowned businessman, John Naisbitt, in his book "Mega-trends-Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives" - says:

"The new source of power is not money in the hands of a few, but information in the hands of the many".

Knowledge, unlike other forces in the universe, is not subject to the law of conservation. It can be created, it can be destroyed and it is synergetic - that is, the whole is usually greater than the sums of the parts.

This is why the well-known Management writer Peter Drucker commented:

"The productivity of knowledge has already become the key to productivity, competitive strength, and economic achievement. Knowledge has already become the primary industry, the industry that supplies the economy the essential and central resources of production"

In an information society, then, value is increased not by labour, but by knowledge. Karl Marx's "Labour Theory of Value", found at the beginning of the industrial economy in Europe, cannot be applied to Third World countries and societies like ours any more, in this context. Therefore, it must be replaced with a new "Knowledge Theory of Value", because in an information society value is increased by knowledge - a different kind of labour. In the words of MIT's David Birch "thinking business" is becoming an important business.

## Futurology

With these general remarks, I would like to take a brief look at

the recent writings on Futurology and consider some of them in the current context of Sri Lanka. In recent times, the main futurology conceptions of the radical problems of social development were examined by Georgi Shakhrazov in his book "Futurology Fiasco". Herman Kahn, William Brown and Leon Martel's "The Next 200 years - A Scenario for America and the World" is considered a Bible of Western futurology. As the founder of the Hudson Institute, Kahn was one of the first to compile medium and long-term forecasts. His famous book: "The Year 2000" tries to focus what the world will be like on the threshold of the 21st century. Words like "paradigm", "post-industrial society", "space bound scenario", "managerism", "social engineering", "people's capitalism" are some words used by futurologists in these writings. Herman Kahn's creation has been dismissed by some as a "pseudo-Utopian" world of the future.

Kahn divided the world into "developed", "Communist Asia", "coping nations" and "backward nations". We would, using his jargon, be categorized as a "coping nation". According to his Hudson Institute futurologists, some of the factors that could impede or even halt the development of the developing countries like Sri Lanka are "excessive destruction and damage to indigenous social structures, moral or traditional beliefs and character; the generation of excessive expectations; harmful or excessive exploitation by foreigners; political and social unrest and other strains caused by the foreign presence itself; misplaced benevolence and harmful fashions and ideologies". The quote just given reminds one of a sanctimonious sermon demanding the poor

wait patiently whilst the masters take care of their lot, and threatening them with unpleasant consequences if they make any attempt to take care of themselves. He goes on to say that intellectual labour will become a mass profession in the 21st century.

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### What will the 90's hold?

Let us look at some of the opinions of what we can expect from the 1990's and how mankind will arrive at the year 2000. A great number of opinions on that topic have appeared recently. They are expressed not only by futurologists and forecasters, professional foretellers of the future, but also by politicians, journalists and publicists. Although there is a great deal of variation in approaches and many nuances in these views, several points can be distinguished on which the majority of commentators agree. The forecast of the prospects of the economics of the developed capitalist States consists of increases in difficulties in all the major economic aspects – a slump or very low rates of growth of productivity, an increase in inflation and unemployment, stagnation or a deterioration in the living standards of working people etc. Some theorists therefore, suggest an increase in State control over economic processes and the introduction of some elements of planning as a way out. Even great economists like Galbraith, Paul Samuelson and many other pillars of American economic thought have called for Centralized State intervention in the market economy. In the opinion of the French sociologist M Bolle de Bal, the economy of Europe in the year 2000 will be a combination of market and centralized planning and of private and social enterprises

– changes in the economy will lead to various models of neo-capitalism. English economists, Rabi and Winkler, have worked out what they call a "corporatist" scenario which presupposes State control over industrial complexes with the

retention of private ownership of the means of production. The scenario envisages economic protectionism which will allow the weak branches of the economy to be protected from competition with the aim of maintaining full employment.

Projections of the future based on the present political situation by a group of specialists under the Chairmanship of the American economist, Wassily Leontieff, for the U.N. depict the following picture:

- the share of the developing countries with a market economy in the world gross product will be 22% in the year 2000 compared to 11% in 1970;

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***The "Green Revolution" cannot ever succeed without a "Blue Revolution". The water resources in Sri Lanka need to be developed systematically. By 21st century water may become just as scarce and as expensive as oil is now.***

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- their share of manufacturing industry will increase from 6% to 17.5%;
- the share of countries with a "centralized planned economy" will increase from 23% to 27% in the world gross product and from 22% to 29% in manufacturing industry respectively, while the share of the industrially developed countries with a market economy will be reduced

from 55% to 51% of the gross world product and from 70% to 49% of the manufacturing industry.

The authors of "The 1980's Project" (Rich and Poor Nations in the World Economy – McGraw-Hill Company, New York 1978) came to the conclusion that:

"Progress towards global equity, defined as movement towards the closing of gaps between regions, nations and classes, requires a relative slowing of growth in the North and/or resource transfers to the South of a scale and sort that are almost unimaginable given contemporary politics and values".

The prominent Indian economist, Kalyan Dutta, in his "Third World Countries: Struggle for New Economic Order (1979)" said that the optimal development model for these countries is the socialist model. His views are shared by a significant number of economists and sociologists of several Third World nations. There are also several national, regional and international institutions like a Club of Rome, the Trilateral Commission, the Dakar and Vienna Clubs with the aim of seeking effective methods of "diagnosing" the

impending period.

One of the determining features of social consciousness in our times is an **active attitude to the future**. It means, though, that modern man, like a new Prometheus, no longer waits passively for events; that his will for self-assertion is growing. And with it comes the need to foresee what it is that threatens him so that he can resist the elements with open

eyes, challenge fate and do everything to steer events in the desired direction.

In the words of **Fred Polak**: "Without careful and artful exploration... the future is blind. But... without well-chosen and scientifically clarified goals the future is void, at least as a meaningful future." (Fred L. Polak - *Towards the Goal - Mankind 2000* - Oslo 1970). The American economist **Robert Bundy** states that research of the future is characterized by:-

- (i) the belief that the future cannot be predicted but that it can be invented,
- (ii) the study of alternative futures rather than a single line of the future,
- (iii) a major focus on historical causality, rigorous methodology and strategies for social intervention; and
- (iv) inter-disciplinary studies in recognition of the complexity of modern social forces".

(Vide **Robert Bundy** - *Images of the Future*, New York 1976 p. 67)

The development of the economy is necessary to create comfortable conditions for the existence of man. Technical progress is necessary in order to free man from heavy and thankless labour. Knowledge must be increased so that people can adapt to nature better and we need to master new worlds so as to expand the boundaries of our knowledge. Justice in social relations is necessary so as to promote high morals, and in so doing to promote a deeper exposure of man's true nature.

**Proposal for Sri Lanka**

In this background what are the prospects for a country like Sri Lanka in the 21st century? Let me deal with these prospects from several angles.

They are:

- The problem of population and resources, or life support
- The problem of bridging the gap between "haves" and "have-nots" or the problem of

poverty and social under-development

- The problem of protecting the natural environment or the ecological problem
- The problem of safeguarding the "spiritual environment" or ethology.

In discussing the problems and issues involved under such sub-theme I hope to correlate to land, man, water and environment, particularly to the Mahaweli Accelerated Programme.

**Life support**

Our population in 2000 will be 25 millions compared to 15.5 million today. This would mean that the land-man ratio would be: 1:56 compared to 1:032 at present. The increase in population and the creation of new towns, cities, villages would mean that the demand for food would increase. The Mahaweli Programme is the largest - and the only - source to meet any increased demand for food. The Mahaweli Project could be developed on the foundation of a small farmer economy. Agricultural productivity is constantly increasing in the Mahaweli areas and it is the best answer to the "prophets of hunger". A Japanese scholar **S. Shibata** shows how groundless the conclusions of such prophets are. If the existing area of arable land can produce more by way of greater use of inputs and better forms of management, then we will be able to meet the challenge of hunger and scarcity.

As **S. Shibata** points out the gloomy prophets' claim that the minimum area required to feed one person is 0.4 hectares. This means that the existing area of arable land on the planet can feed a maximum of 8 billion people. But in Japan, where three times more fertilizer is used per unit of agricultural area than in Western Europe and four times more than in the USA, only 0.055 hectares is required to feed a person. Even if this figure is increased to 0.1 hectares, it becomes possible to feed 32 billion people, and it is

to be hoped that agricultural science will make further progress. These figures probably need to be adjusted because the quality and productivity of the soil is by no means identical in all parts of the globe. But this Japanese scholar is right in principle: the future potential of the green revolution is the agricultural sector which has not yet been realised, or even revealed. Up to now, agriculture has developed mostly in industrial countries which can invest heavily in the production of fertilizer, modern agricultural technology, pesticides, fodder, animal husbandry complexes, land reclamation etc. A rational and pragmatic approach to the problem of population explosion is not population planning but to create the ability and willingness in the people to work to obtain needs. This, then is what the Mahaweli Programme is trying to achieve.

By the 21st century, Mahaweli Development Zone would be the most developed agricultural zone in Sri Lanka. Its scope would extend to all 103 major irrigation schemes and other river valleys. This integrated agricultural and social development would bring about centres of agro processing, manufacturing, service industrial activities. Tourism, urban development and housing would spring up in a new hydraulic civilization that would be born in the Mahaweli area. The eco-climatic conditions will radically change in favour of the so-called Dry Zone. I foresee Trincomalee as a growth centre more important than even Colombo and Mahaweli commodities would flow to the world through Trincomalee,

There is also growth in minor and medium irrigation schemes. By the 21st century the eco-systems in the village irrigation system would be rehabilitated. The micro eco-system needs to be re-afforested in order to bring about adequate socio-economic development and this sector will, by the 21st century, contribute to the socio-political growth in Sri Lanka.

The "Green Revolution" cannot ever succeed without a "Blue Revolution". The water resources in Sri Lanka need to be developed systematically. By 21st century water may become just as scarce and as expensive as oil is now. The cost of bringing water to land and even purifying into fresh and drinking water would be very high. Excess use of water would be wasteful and in some, soil acidity could increase if water is not well managed. Water management would be an essential part of agricultural development and planning. By the 21st century and inter-disciplinary, integrated development of water resources would become vital and an integration of land, water and environment authorities with in one single Ministry would be seen. A functional rationalization would result over time.

#### Poverty and Social Under-development

Several writers have written widely on the pauperization and not proletarianizing effects of the Colonial economy on the peasantry. Pauperization is the process of impoverishment of the peasant which is accompanied by a constant decline in real income and often loss of land ownership. But there is no qualitative change in the structured portion of the agent, as he returns to the land as a tenant or a settler. Loss of ownership does not necessarily mean loss of access to land as a cultivator. The availability of access to land via tenancy (or through resettlement) coupled with the absence of a wage employment pull, powerful enough to absorb the "landless" peasant, perpetuates the circle.

Proletarianization essentially involves a qualitative shift in the structural position of the agent. The separation of the producer from the means of production is total and irreversible. He has nothing but his labour power to sell, through which alone he could obtain a wage for subsistence. For a peasant to become a proletarian

he must be effectively separated from land and deprived of all means of possessing land or any other means of production.

Could this happen to any of our settlement habitats by the 21st century? I do not think our peasantry would ever proletarianize unless they become victims of an urban trap which will strive to prevent. Our whole philosophy is to create a free contented, land-owning, peasantry, who should be prevented from getting caught in the pauperization trap, through the adverse terms of trade between the urban and rural sectors. It is vital by the 21st century that a free peasantry movement be established which could federate to form a National Farmer's Association controlling the economy and even putting the urbanized plantation and trade unions on the run. I foresee the emergence of a peasant movement through which our future political leaders would emerge. They would demand better treatment by way of input

housing projects will only create temporary satisfaction. People need a way of survival and it's only land and water, that can offer a salvation and not concrete buildings. Urbanization, proletarianization and industrialization which make man an appendage of a machine and a servant of a Capitalist should not be encouraged to intrude into the rural sector. Whatever has to be done has to be selective, purposeful, objective and work within the rural framework. The ability of the arable land to absorb the "injections" of civilization in the form of chemical fertilizer, pesticides and insecticides cannot continue for ever, uncontrolled. There is a need to keep the rural atmosphere free from contamination and to keep rural water ways free from pollution. Some Ecologists who have visited Sri-Lanka with preconceived ideas have written volumes on the Social and Environmental Effects of Large Dams, particularly those of Mahaweli. Firstly, they have been written by them on

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supplies, commodity prices. New land tenure laws will have to be formulated and outmoded agrarian laws will have to be discarded. A new Agricultural Credit Policy will emerge to meet the exploitation by non-formal credit suppliers and the rigid commercial banking credit policies. The 21st century will see the emergence of a new and progressive peasantry in the agricultural sector of Sri Lanka.

The Mahaweli Programme would offer the lead in this regard.

#### Ecology Problem

Today there is an urgent need to save the environment which we inhabit. This need is dictated not by moral considerations, but above all, by the requirement of survival. Ecology covers social, cultural, economic and environmental components. Urbanization of the rural sector through superimposed

heresay or visits to a few areas directed by own cynics who want to discredit Sri Lankan development projects. Talking from academic wonderlands, these ecologists are trying to prevent us from developing our land, producing cheap electricity, (which is a sine qua non of development), and giving land to our landless. Mahaweli Project has been a subject of much dissections. Kotmale and Victoria projects resulted in relocating a large mass of our own people who sacrificed their ancient homelands to allow reservoirs to be built and agreed to go to areas like Kalawewa (System H), Giranduru Kotte (System C), Dimburatewa (System B). This is the only known mass transmigration in the recent history. Under development processes, resettlement becomes inevitable. In Ghana, Volta Dam

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saw the evacuation of some 78,000 people from over 700 towns and villages, Lake Kainji in Nigeria displaced 42,000 people, the Pa Mong project in Vietnam uprooted 450,000 people, China's Three Ganges Dam Scheme will displace 1,400,000 people. In Phillipines 40 new dams would affect 1.5 million people. Unlike other countries our Mahaweli resettlement programmes escaped what ecologists called "human misery". It was Sudan's Southern Regional President, Abel Alier, who said "If we have to drive our people to paradise with sticks, we will do so". Luckily, our people accepted to go in search of paradise in the name of the next generation. They were never driven by sticks, but by willingness and self-sacrifice. Lack of compensation and inferior land, ignoring of ethnic differences, inappropriate housing, creation of slums, the loss of land, loss of wild life, the problem of water losses, the high incidence of water-borne diseases, notably Malaria, are some issues raised by ecologists about high dams. Mahaweli in the 21st century will escape most of these issues, because we have planned it well, taking into consideration ecological issues. We have paid very high compensation to those who lost lands; we have resettled them in fertile lands; we have given them appropriate house which they themselves have built; we have not created slums in the rural sector; we have created natural wild life corridors for our elephants and wild life sancturies; we have prevented siltation by peripheral development, reforestation, banning chena and tobacco cultivation. Salinisation would be prevented by better water management and crop selection.

Forestry is an impartial item under ecology. The wood balances 1986-2000 points out to a possibility of a shortage of industrial wood and fuelwood in the 21st century. The forestry has dwindled over the years to 25% of the land

area from about 50% in the 1950's. The industrial wood situation reveals on oversupply of 41,000 m<sup>3</sup> sub/a in the whole country during the years, 1986-1990. Without Northern Dry Zone, this will turn to a deficit of 42,000 m<sup>3</sup> sub/a. During the 1990's, the deficit is expected to increase rapidly. This situation cannot be improved by new plantations, because the growing period of sawlogs is minimum 15 years. New plantations will be productive only after the year 2000. Of the regions, only up-country and Northern Dry Zone will have a clear surplus of logs.

### Ethology

Safeguarding the "spiritual environmental for the benefit of the generation to come is important in the 20th century. At the present stage, globally, ecoproblem is centred round the need to take urgent measures to slow down the processes, which are poisoning people's spiritual world and leading to an increase in coercion and hatred. It is more acute today, because those who spread spiritual infection now have powerful technical means at their disposal, so that various kinds of spiritual infections can reach epidemic proportions if urgent measures are not taken. In this sense, similar terms to those used for ecology are applicable "ethospasm", "ethothreat", "ethocatastrophic".

To my mind, the source of pollution of man's spiritual world is class exploiting society. The saga of human civilization has created a dual process - the enrichment of culture and its harmonization, and the other, the accumulation, of all kinds of spiritual dirt and poison produced by the forces of reaction and regress. The "cult of the yellow devil" making money absolutely predominant in the consciousness of the people resulted in distorting the humanist nature of man. Drugs, heroin, liquor, black money, commissions, bribery, corruption, lethargy, phonography, have intruded into society, making

the human an inhuman being. No amount of "genetic engineering", "mass psychotherapy", "cultural planning" can solve this.

The problem of terrorism deserves special attention. The concept itself originated from a very long time ago, and various forms of individual and mass terror were practised in ancient times. Conservatives accuse revolutionaries of inhumanity and cruelty. In fact, it was always those forces about the leave the arena of history, which first resorted to terror. This is what happened in France in 1792, in Russia in 1917. The democratic movement has always contained a strong anachistic streak, which remains and is responsible for fruitless efforts to solve certain problems by means of terror.

Character is destiny. Character is that on which the destiny of a nation is built. One cannot have a great nation with men of small character. If we want to build a great nation for the 21st Century, we must try and train a large number of young men and women who have character. We cannot climb the mountain when the very ground at our feet is crumbling. When the very basis of our structure is shaky, how can we search the heights which we have set before ourselves?

### Conclusion

We are living in the time of the parenthesis, the time between eras. It is as though we have bracketed off the present from both the past and the future, for we are neither here nor there. Although the time between eras is uncertain, it is a great time and yeasty time, filled with opportunity. But in the time of the parenthesis, we have extraordinary leverage and influence - individually, professionally and institutionally - if we can only get a clear sense, a clear conception, a clear vision of the road ahead.

Then we will all say to ourselves, "My God, what a fantastic time to be alive". ■