

□ We are caught in a Valueless limbo □

A Participant in the 1971 insurrection Susil Siriwardena can speak first hand on the area of Rehabilitation. He is currently Chairman of the National Housing Development Authority and Commissioner of Janasaviya.

Susil Siriwardena

I think that today Sri Lanka is going through a civilizational crisis. By civilizational crisis I mean, a crisis or a process of shock and change that is so extraordinary and unusual in both depth and scale, as to shake a whole society out of the conventional mindsets and stereotypes that it is used to applying in day to day thinking and activities. If we look back with detachment, at the high points of this crisis during the last decade, when social contradictions have burst open (like the Eelam war or the Southern insurgencies), there are fairly clear signs of systemic collapse and disintegration. Another sign of this is the disintegration of values, of the old value system. We are caught in a period of transition. The old values that we are used to, are no longer tenable in existential terms. The terms of reference, the terms of existence of those values have changed. But the new values to replace those old values have still not been born, have still not been clarified. So you are caught in a limbo where you have to live without values. Therefore today we have to search very very committedly for new values. We have to strive to retain a degree of internal discipline in our life, in our thinking, in order to maintain a degree of wholeness and the kind of integrity that we need, if we are going to have mastery to understand the problems of our society. It's only if we can understand these problems, that we will be able to find the answers because then we will not mistake symptoms for causes.

Another very important manifestation of breakdown in values is the breakdown of a moral edifice. That is fundamental to all our prob-

lems. We don't have a moral code, a moral base to our thinking, our actions, our human and social relationships. Today we are not in control of the process that we are caught up in. The processes are controlling us. Hence the level and magnitude of alienation in our society today.

The Search for new values

How should we be searching for new values and new morality? This is the most important question – the process and the method by which we seek for new values, new criteria, a new moral edifice. Here we need to focus very clearly on internal factors i.e. all factors internal to the context one is talking about and the structure one is working within. For example, if we are talking about Sri Lankan agriculture, the questions to be asked have to be derived from within that sector. The problems of the dry zone are totally different from the problems of the hill country wet zone. The problems of the hill country wet zone are the problems of landlessness and how to raise the productivity of the limited land that is available. The problems of the dry zone are not problems of landlessness, but of scarce water and soil moisture. The poor in the dry zone are a landed poor. So alienating land to the poor in the dry zone is no solution.

I'm not saying that we only need the internal factor; that you should romanticise this and say that everything can be done through internal factors. There is a need for external factors, for external stimuli, for external comparison and so on. There is a very clear need for that. What I'm saying is that we have to take the specificities of each situation into account. And also when we are trying to look for answers, we should consider the past and pre-

sent experiences relevant to the particular situation. The specific conditions of the situation under consideration should be the main landmarks and the guide lines of our thinking. And a thorough understanding of those specificities is a pre-condition for understanding and further theorising about conditions in those situations.

The concern with the internal factor is not an obsessive one or a limitless one. The very concern for the internal factor produces an understanding of the limits of the internal factor. It's through recognition of the limitations of the internal factor that one relates to external factors. For example take the case of technology. Look at the dry zone rainfed farming. In the short term you can't introduce a whole complex network of tanks or a complex network of that hydraulic civilization that we read about. That means that we will have to compensate for the limitations we experience today in dry zone rainfed farming by adopting other possible technologies. So once one has identified the limits of the internal factor, then one ventures far and out looking for parallel systems which will complement the internal.

Janasaviya is, I would argue, a very very strong candidate for representing what is new and what is nativist to Sri Lankan thought and action. In terms of the search for that new civilizational – moral – valuational framework, Janasaviya is a very rich case of those complex and multiple strands which go to make up a new way of thinking. Janasaviya is large enough and big enough and complex enough to encompass all areas – political, moral, psychological, economic, social, cultural and so on. Janasaviya is also an attempt to reverse decades of Sri Lankan history which is top down, bureaucratic and rule bound in moral psychological terms. So Janasaviya is a fundamental

attempt at reversing all the thinking of the past which moves us, whatever the rhetoric, away from the inner most lives of people. In that sense Janasaviya is a discovery of people in all their richness and multi dimensionality. I think that never before in our history have we discovered the people in these terms. There would have been a relationship with the people, a perception of the people during the pre-colonial times when we were independent. But the perception of the role of people in society in the Janasaviya paradigm is very very different from the perception of the role of people in a feudal way of thinking, in a feudal paradigm.

An attempt at democratization.

This brings us to the whole question of democracy, of democratic thought and action. The appreciation and understanding the value and significance of Janasaviya is directly in terms of democratic values. Because in Janasaviya every human being, particularly the poor who were always being taken for granted, who were leading non human or semi human existences, really become aware of their own identities and of their true self worth, may be for the first time of their lives. They begin to re-discover their humanity, reassess their humanity and begin to function as full human beings – what we would call the "whole person". Through that process they would graduate to the mainstream of production. So from a situation of more or less extreme deprivation and alienation, within a very short time, a reversal takes place in their whole lives. It's as if they are reborn to themselves, the area they are living, the society and the community. This is a new mobilization, a new democratisation that is taking place at the ground level.

Janasaviya is perhaps the first of those totalistic articulations of empowerment, of enrichment, of helping people to stand up on

their own feet. I said in a totalistic sense because in our recent history there have been many attempts at similar democratisation. For example the Paddy Lands Act of 1958 was a significant attempt at democratization of a sub sector. Then there is the experience of land reform in 1972 and 1976 and also very significantly the experience of free education. Another major step in democratization was the Million Houses Programme. But all these took place within very specific sectors; they were not multi sectoral. Janasaviya is multi sectoral; it cuts across all the sectors in the development structure and hence it is much larger, much wider and much comprehensive than any one of those sub sectoral exercises in democratization. Janasaviya is multi sectoral and focusses very clearly on the poor; it has got a quality and a character which puts it in a class and a category by itself. This is what distinguishes it from other attempts at democratization however significant, valuable or successful they were.

Stereotypes and Labels

Today I think it will be a mistake to think in terms of clearly distinguishable systems. The lesson that we have to learn is that development is a result of a mix, a complex mix of all systems. Take the whole dichotomy of the private and public sectors. If you try to box those two things separately and say should development be private sector based or public sector based it will be wrong. There are certain things which would probably work better in the public sector and certain things that would work better in the private sector. So one has to have a new way of thinking where you draw from both and get the correct kind of it. This is where stereotypes are dangerous; labels are dangerous because they do not facilitate clarity of thinking and tend to oversimplify things. The most important thing is to retain the primacy of democracy; retain the primacy of people –

people's freedom and people's identities. If the systems that we are fashioning, that we are discovering, that we are working with, help us (both internally within ourselves, our own lives, our work as well as externally in society) to feel a greater and greater sense of space for people, greater and greater sense of participation, involvement, self fulfilment and satisfaction for people, that obviously is the right system. And that is the direction in which the society should move. If we can design the course of our social engineering and our social development in that direction, the labels wouldn't matter and we would get a new kind of community based, people based society and development where people matter. And where people matter, all the other things that go with people like environment and the resource base would get protected and conserved. I can't think of people based, people oriented development where the environment would be damaged or destroyed. I mean the two things don't go together. So where the effects and the processes are humanising and are in the direction of enriching human beings and their lives, inevitably they would also result in the enrichment and the creative development of the environment and all the things that go to make society and social life.

I see Janasaviya as something which has got tremendous undiscovered, unrealised potential in terms of a concept, in terms of a perspective, in terms of a philosophy, in terms of a value system, and in terms of practice. As Janasaviya evolves, we are rediscovering more and more new potentialities and new depths within Janasaviya. That is completely consistent with the nature of Janasaviya because it's a case of people who are conscious, who are searching and who are struggling are learning from their own experience. I, for one, think that Janasaviya is a tremendous resource for learning.

An Alternative

Janasaviya is already playing a significant role in democratizing society. Let's compare the situation we were in October 1989 and the situation today. In October, 1989 were we not living in a context where the future was very uncertain, where there was no hope in terms of democratic values, where there was very little hope in terms of democratic values, where there was very little hope in terms of the sustainability and the growth of democratic values. There was very little hope. Today we find that there is a lot of hope. Of course it would be an exaggeration to say that Janasaviya is the source or the prime source of hope. At the sametime it would not be an exaggeration to say that Janasaviya has won public confidence starting with the poor who were the beneficiaries of Janasaviya - that is 155,000 families.

In this sense Janasaviya certainly constitutes an alternative, a very proximate hope that binds all the poor in this country. Here is an attempt to reverse that flow of resources, and the flow of activities frontally. Here an attempt at restructuring society is taking place while placing us at the centre of our own development process. Here is a case where Government and non Governmental organizations are trying to participate in the process of the people rather than inviting people to participate in the processes of governmental or non governmental organizations.

Not only the poor but anyone who feels, anyone who thinks deeply of his or her society can participate in this process in many ways. I think even to ask a question about Janasaviya, even to show concern for a poor family and to actively assist a poor family is a part of Janasaviya in that sense. In that sense Janasaviya is concern for the poor and the burdened.

There is a very close link between Janasaviya and the ongoing process of devolution and decentralization. In fact the very premise of Janasaviya is that you evolve and decentralise - right down to the level of the individual person. The poor families and the poor people cannot stand up on their own feet, cannot join the mainstream of production, cannot become productive unless they have decision making power, unless they have authority to make decisions and translate their decisions immediately into day to day practice. That means devolution, that means decentralization, giving space to people and empowering them to organise locally for their own betterment and mobilise their own resources in case they wish to do so and so on. So there is a one to one connection between Janasaviya and decentralization and devolution. Janasaviya is a case of successful decentralization and devolution.

Old Thinking and New Thinking

Finally we come to the attitudes of the elites towards Janasaviya. That perhaps is the element of this society that is most conservative. They are not used to trusting the people, trusting the poor. Their perception of the role of the people in society is different. Their approach to the problems of the people is not a democratic, participatory approach but a top down one. Therefore they have a hostile attitude towards Janasaviya. I see this conflict between the elite and Janasaviya as a conflict between old thinking and new thinking. We have to bring about a change in these old attitudes in this old perception because an aware, enlightened bureaucracy is a need of the hour. This struggle against these old attitudes and approaches is an important aspect of our struggle against old thinking and in our attempt to create a new thinking. ■