

**THE SARVODAYA SHRAMADANA MOVEMENT  
IN SRI LANKA**

“The ideal state must be composed of ideal men:  
men without greed, hatred and ignorance.”<sup>(1)</sup>

Osamu Muro\*

It was in the year 1958 that twenty-seven year old Ahangamene Tudor Ariyaratne, science teacher at Nalanda Vidyalaya (a leading Buddhist high school) in Colombo, took his students and some other teachers to organize a workshop at Kanatoluwa, a very backward village some 100 kilometers away from the capital. They sank wells, dug latrine pits, cleaned home gardens and planted various crops, organized literacy classes for adults, conducted health classes and demonstrations, child and maternity care work, singing-dancing classes, and even established a place for religious worship for the village people, something which had never been accepted by the local Buddhist clergy before. “Kanatoluwa was a hive of activity”, recalls Ariyaratne in a report given later. “Hundreds of villagers from far and near visited the camp. Surrounding villagers in particular had the shocking experience of seeing men, women and children, led by this group of teachers and students who were supposed to be from a higher stratum of society, living and sweating with the so-called outcastes whose very sight had made them tremble only a couple of days before. The lectures, discussions and meetings held every evening made Kanatoluwa a real school of life – young and old ...”<sup>(2)</sup> This workshop – which might be called “study-service” in the present educational jargon – was organized by Ariyaratne more than two decades ago in his attempt to give the urban élite an insight into the reality of life of some of their low-caste compatriots in the rural area and “to build a psycho-

---

\* Professor, Institute for International Education, Towa University

logical bridge to close the gap between these two classes as a first step towards total integration of the two groups.”<sup>(3)</sup> The first workcamp held in Kanatoluwa is remembered as the initiation of what later became known as the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka, which many people concerned with development believe is one of the very few successful cases in rural community development efforts in the non-communist world of today.

It is widely known that the term “Sarvodaya” was used first by late Mahatma Gandhi as early as in 1908, when he paraphrased John Ruskin’s “Unto This Last-Four Essays on the First Principles of Political Economy” and gave his paraphrased paper a Gujarati title: “Sarvodaya (the Welfare of All)”. It is also known that Gandhian Sarvodaya movement was followed by Vinoba Bhave (who initiated Bhoodan (or Land-Gift) movement) and later by late Jayaprakash Narayan (who passed away in 1979). And there is little doubt that Ariyaratne was deeply influenced by the Indian Sarvodaya; in 1959 he visited Vinoba Bhave in India and was inspired by the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and the examples of Vinoba and J. Narayan. Yet Ariyaratne considers Sarvodaya Shramadana in Sri Lanka to be a unique experiment. Even the name of the Movement itself is said to have a different range of meaning for Sinhalese-speaking population. As Ariyaratne explains, “Sarvodaya” means “Awakening of All” – not “Welfare of All” – and “Shramadana” means “Sharing of Energy and Labour”.

The group of part-time volunteers of urban origin with Ariyaratne as their “Convenor” continued to organize and participate in Shramadana camps in backward rural regions over week-ends and during school holidays. Between 1958 and 1966, it is claimed that they organized Shramadana camps in hundreds of rural sites. In 1966 the working arrangement with the Government came to an end. Up until then the Movement had been provided with Government assistance in the form of transport, tools and implements for its own projects. Under such circumstances the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement had to seek other sources of support. Ariyaratne writes: “For the first time in 1967 we approached private individuals and donor organizations for support. Our work spoke

for itself and we received a good response".<sup>(4)</sup> From then on the Movement was able to expand its activities being helped largely by steadily increasing financial aid from Western agencies. It was able to develop from an itinerant voluntary group participating in Shramadana camps with only limited scope of work into a non-governmental agency with "Shramadana" as its genuine technique to initiate the "Sarvodaya" development programme in backward villages. The Movement grew into a full-fledged rural development programme.

The performance of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement as a rural development programme since has been impressive, especially if one takes into consideration its non-governmental nature. To celebrate the Mahatma Gandhi's Birth Centenary in 1969, the Movement launched the "Hundred Village Development Scheme". For this Scheme Sarvodaya started its own training programmes by drawing promising youths from the villages. For this purpose the Movement established a few training centres, including one exclusively for training young Buddhist bhikkhus, with the financial assistance from several European agencies. Encouraged by the success of the Scheme in most of the 100 villages and by the increasing outside help Sarvodaya in 1976 expanded the project into "Thousand Village Development Scheme". The now target has been far exceeded. By the end of 1979, Ariyaratne claims, some 3,400 out of the total 23,000 Sri Lankian villages "have received the Sarvodaya message and experienced at least one of the basic activities."<sup>(5)</sup> Meanwhile, the Movement has established one "development education centre" in each of the nation's twenty-two Districts, where not only young village leaders but also varieties of technical people, if of a middle level, have been being trained.

Rural development is not a new concept. Many — in fact, nearly all — governments in the third world have undertaken one kind or another of rural development programmes in the past — some of them as early as since the 1950s. They have been providing the programmes with material and technical resources, often assisted by foreign aid agencies. Yet, very few of these programmes have been successful. Then what is the secret of the success of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka? As

the present writer sees it, there are a number of factors that appear quite unique to the Sri Lankian Movement, which might explain its success as a rural development programme.

First of all, the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement is deeply rooted in the spiritual culture of Sri Lanka, particularly in its rural areas. Instead of blindly pursuing the Western type of modernization, which the governments of the developing countries thought – and still seem to think – to be the only way for national development, the leader of Sarvodaya believes in the country's traditional values embodied in its Buddhist culture. Thus Sarvodaya has been trying to re-awaken the village people to their unique traditional values such as: "Loving Kindness", "Compassion", "Sympathetic Joy", and "Equanimity" as individual virtues; and "Sharing", "Pleasant Language", "Joint, Constructive Work" and "Equality" as the virtues at the group level.<sup>(6)</sup> "Many people believe that 'development' is economic, social and political," Ariyaratne says. "We consider it to be not only economic, social and political but also cultural, spiritual and moral development."<sup>(7)</sup>

Such revival of Lanka's traditional values suggests the denial of unlimited material greed of "craving", which Buddhism taught was the root cause of all human sufferings. Buddhist philosophy and time-honoured standard of rural life provide the answer and indicate where the satisfaction of needs ends and greed begins. Thus the people of Sarvodaya villages came up with what they call "Ten Basic Human Needs" which they strive to satisfy: 1) a clean and beautiful environment, 2) a clean and adequate supply of water, 3) minimum clothing requirements, 4) a balanced diet, 5) a simple house to live in, 6) basic health care, 7) simple communication facilities, 8) minimum energy requirement, 9) total education, and 10) cultural and spiritual needs.<sup>(8)</sup> To secure these basic needs Sarvodaya tries to fully utilize every resource available at each local community level: natural, technical and more than anything else human. A Shramadana camp itself is an indispensable means in securing some of these needs, especially total, basic education. In this sense, the Movement is a truly self-reliant effort for development.

Thirdly, unlike most of the rural development programmes in other

developing nations, which are always planned by the central governments and executed in a top-down manner and by bureaucrats who are hardly rural-oriented people, the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka is pursued by the village people themselves who are re-awakened to their potential power through their Shramadana efforts and assisted by Sarvodaya workers. It is a bottom-up, grass-roots undertaking. Its development activities — i.e. those activities to satisfy their needs — are always planned and carried out by groups of villagers, such as the pre-school group, children's group, youth group, mothers' group and farmers' group, coordinated by a gramodaya (or Village Re-awakening) Council in which every group is represented.<sup>99</sup> In short, Sarvodaya is a rural development programme with full participation of its beneficiaries who are prepared to share whatever they possess with others.

The space available to the writer does not allow him to elaborate the Movement's development activities in detail, but what has been mentioned above may help explain the reasons for the successful experiment of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement as a unique rural development undertaking.

Critical observers often point out that the Movement's success owes itself greatly to the continuous input of financial aid from abroad. It is true that the Sri Lankian rural development has been assisted rather generously by a number of non-Lankian aid organizations, such as the World Assembly of Youth, NOVIB (the Netherlands), Friedrich Nauman Stiftung (Germany), 11-11-11 Campaign (Belgium), OXFAM (U.K., Canada and the U.S.A.). However, there are good reasons for these foreign non-governmental agencies to willingly assist the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement. After more than two decades of development assistance which was directed to government development programmes and projects of Western-oriented concepts and which, largely for that very reason, more often than not turned out to be failures, serious aid organizations have discovered at least one sound development effort undertaken by a non-governmental group of people in an Asian country and found it worthwhile to assist. The present writer is inclined to believe, in this connection, that if the developing nations hope to avoid

falling into the blood-thirsty communist hands, they should learn from the experience of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement which has been striving for a non-violent social and cultural revolution.

But perhaps Sarvodaya is more than a model for the developing nations to learn from. For Sarvodaya's human-centred development concept which places emphasis on its cultural, spiritual and moral aspects, may very well be what the present over-industrialized countries like Japan should look towards. It is by no means surprising that the Sarvodaya philosophy is rapidly growing in popularity in Europe and North America.

### References

1. Ariyaratne, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 17. 2. 1978 Issue.
2. Ariyaratne, "The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement: Hundred Villages Development Scheme." Paper read at Regional Seminar on the Role of the Youth in Development. Bangkok; ECAFE (SF/YD/ExJn), 1971.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. Ariyaratne, Interview with Muro, Tokyo, November, 1979.
6. Ariyaratne, *Whence? Wherefore? Whither?* Colombo, Sarvodaya Office, 1963.
7. Ariyaratne, Interview with Muro, Tokyo, November, 1979.
8. *The Basic Human Needs and Their Satisfaction*, Sarvodaya Development Education Institute, Moratuwa, Sri Lanka, 1978.
9. Ariyaratne, "Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement for Social Development in Sri Lanka"; Paper presented to UN Economic and Social Council/UNICEF Meeting on the Situation of Children in Asia with emphasis on basic services (E/ICEF/ASIA/8), 1977.

### Editorial Note

This article is prepared by Prof. Muro as a report of a lecture for SSRI Open Seminar by Mr. Ariyaratne, founder and leader of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement.