

# **WIDER**

RESEARCH  
FOR  
ACTION

**TOWARDS A PEACEFUL  
SRI LANKA**

**SIX INTRODUCTORY SEMINARS  
FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

CARLO FONSEKA

WORLD INSTITUTE FOR DEVELOPMENT ECONOMICS RESEARCH  
OF THE  
UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSITY

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**World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER)**  
(A research and training centre of the United Nations University)

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To

L.J.

*Facilitator, par excellence*

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## PREFACE

By its mandate the World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER) concentrates on economics, but as part of the United Nations University its perspectives are wider than economics. Indeed, this book conforms precisely to the aims set out in the Charter of the United Nations University.

During the past decade or so Sri Lanka has been in the throes of a multi-faceted societal crisis. One aspect of the crisis had to do with coexistence between Sinhalese, Tamils and Moors — peoples with different languages, cultures and social systems. Another aspect involved peaceful relations between Sri Lanka and India. A third was concerned with the enforced maintenance of peace and security in the country, under a prolonged period of emergency rule and arising out of emergency rule was the inevitable question of human rights violations. Yet another aspect was the state of the economy with a mounting foreign debt, widespread unemployment and an erosion in the living standards of the poor. A fifth aspect was connected with environmental pollution, deforestation and the ecological implications of massive irrigation works such as the Mahaveli Development Scheme. These extensive environmental alterations raised questions about the appropriateness of the science and technology that was being deployed to shape economic development in the country. A particularly disconcerting aspect of Sri Lanka's societal crisis was the virtual abrogation of civilized human values in the country manifested by a tendency to resolve public and private conflicts through the ultima ratio of the gun.

Over 50% of Sri Lanka's population of about 17 million are under 25 years of age and many young Sri Lankans were deeply involved in the societal crisis engulfing the country. University students in large numbers were in the forefront of various agitational movements. Almost all of the country's nine universities with some 20 000 students were closed for about two years. Sri Lanka seemed to have reached an impasse. The situation called for some responsible reconstructive action.

The pretence that Sri Lanka does not occupy a special place in my scheme of things would be wholly unconvincing. But Sri Lanka is not without special interest, even exceptional interest, to all concerned with development economics. In the early 1970s Sri Lanka surfaced as a country whose values of life expectancy, infant mortality, adult literacy and fertility deviated significantly — and happily — from their expected values for a low-income developing country. With respect to these social indicators Sri Lanka was in fact a statistical outlier. In 1977 the Overseas Development Council

under the direction of Morris D. Morris devised the Physical Quality of Life Index (PQLI) which could be used with some measure of per capita income to judge human welfare. The PQLI purports to estimate how well a society satisfied three measurable criteria: life expectancy, infant mortality and literacy. One of its obvious uses is for making comparisons of social welfare across nations. In the early 1970s for a per capita GNP of \$179, Sri Lanka had a PQLI of 82 (out of a maximum possible score of 100). For comparison, 42 low-income countries with an average per capita GNP of \$155 had an average PQLI of 40; and high income countries with an average per capita GNP of \$4404 had an average PQLI of 92. Concerning Sri Lanka's spectacular performance on the PQLI scale despite its low per capita GNP Morris mused: "If countries having per capita incomes of more than \$179 and PQLIs of less than 82 could duplicate Sri Lanka's experience, 1.6 billion people would be affected".<sup>1</sup> The implication was that Sri Lanka showed to many developing countries the picture of their possible future development.

Unhappily, in the 1980s Sri Lanka came to be afflicted by multifarious troubles most of which were recognized as mainly economic in origin. What went wrong in Sri Lanka which attained Independence in 1948 as a relatively prosperous and peaceful country? For four decades since Independence Sri Lanka has sought to solve its economic problems by alternating between "democratic socialism" and "socialist democracy". For more than four decades Eastern European countries like Hungary and Poland had resolutely tried out the "command economy" version of the socialist formula, and are currently engaged in shifting to a market economy. Professor Janos Kornai, a distinguished authority on the political economy of socialist systems, is a passionate advocate of the need for a radical shift from a "command economy" to a "free economy" in Hungary. In my preface to his book titled "The Road to a Free Economy",<sup>2</sup> I had occasion to refer to a range of problems common to command economies: a persistent excess of macrodemand over macrosupply, a domestic monetary "overhang", inflation (open or repressed), shortages, overvalued exchange rates, currency inconvertibility, unbalanced budgets, unprofitable public enterprises, pervasive consumer and producer subsidies, a wrong structure of relative prices and a general misallocation of resources. Perceivers of the obvious will see at once that for several decades many of these problems have been endemic in many developing countries too. So they have been

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<sup>1</sup> Morris David Morris, *Measuring the Condition of the World's Poor*, 1979, Pergamon Press, New York, p. 64.

<sup>2</sup> Kornai Janos, *The Road to a Free Economy*, 1990, W.W. Norton & Company, New York.

in Sri Lanka. But of course overlapping similarities between maladies do not abolish overriding differences between them. Each country must therefore work out from its specific symptomatology its own diagnosis and apply the appropriate remedies.

In 1988 I invited Dr. Carlo Fonseka, the medically qualified Professor of Physiology in the Medical Faculty of the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, to come up with a diagnosis of the malady afflicting Sri Lanka's body social and a prescription for reconstructing a stable peace in the country. This book embodies his response to that challenge. As often happens in times of total societal crisis, his response has been to go back to the anatomy of the human condition, and to try and engage the people of Sri Lanka in a dialogue on the nature of their nature — human nature — the nature of their knowledge, their rights, their world and on their past, present and presumptive future. The book contains the material of an introductory course of six seminars ostensibly intended for Sri Lanka's university students. It is clear, however, that they are aimed not so much at university students as at a wider educated public. He addresses the issues he raises essentially from the standpoint of a mind trained in the natural sciences, pure and applied, biology and medicine.

Understandably, as a professional teacher he lays great store by the value of education. He evidently believes that human beings become responsible citizens in proportion to their understanding of the nature of their nature, knowledge, rights and the planet they inhabit. His major premise is that given time, education and method, human reason could supply the understanding necessary to build a stable peace. By the mandate of the United Nations University we must share his optimistic premise and great expectations. The very notion of miraculous cures goes against the grain of this book, but those for whom it is intended are sure to find its approach challenging.

Lal Jayawardena  
Director



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book owes its existence to WIDER. It was planned, drafted, reformulated and finalised at WIDER. To the Director of WIDER Lal Jayawardena, I am especially indebted. He started me off with a clear formulation of what he wished me to do by way of Research for Action in the context of Sri Lanka's societal crisis. He provided excellent working conditions and unflinching moral support. He served as a critical sounding board. His expert guidance helped me — a man from the narrow world of medicine — to survive sanely for over two years in the wider, maddening world of development economics. Even as I prepared the seminars that comprise this book, I realised how necessary it was — to paraphrase a famous injunction — for the educator to become educated.

The staff at WIDER were unvaryingly helpful. I sincerely thank all of them. Ms. Ileana Ganz cheerfully processed successive versions of the seminars with compassion and understanding — virtues singled out for praise in the seminars.

This book severely tested the loyalty of my friends. Even the severest critics among them have been warmly encouraging. All of them said that the project was worthwhile. They survived the ordeal of wading through the elementary, didactic, repetitious, controversial, rambling seminars which grandiosely sought to prescribe for *Homo sapiens*. As acts of pure friendship, they suggested changes, indicated shortcomings, deleted banalities, corrected mis-statements, moderated over-statements, blue-pencilled untactful statements and improved my English. The flaws that remain are entirely my responsibility. Above all, my friends strove to minimize the hostility with which the book might be greeted by people unused to having their certainties called into question. My friends are few, but they are true. I am deeply grateful to them. None of them will be named. None of them approves of everything I say in the seminars. At a time like the present when tempers are easily frayed, unconventional opinion is more likely to draw blood than reasoned refutation. The least I can do for those who have helped me, is to spare them the risk of guilt by association.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1987 there were about 20 000 students in Sri Lanka's nine universities. These students included the bulk of the intellectual cream of the 3.5 million people between the ages of 15 and 24, out of a total Sri Lankan population of nearly 17 million.

Students in Sri Lanka gain admission to universities entirely on the results of a fiercely competitive written examination. Because of the cut-throat competition to gain university admission, the more highly motivated students in particular tend to concentrate heavily and almost exclusively on their examination subjects during their pre-university period of about three years. And given the structure of the examination system in Sri Lanka, the pre-university education of students virtually boils down to a process of cramming their heads with as many facts as can be squeezed in. In the event, the aspiring university students in Sri Lanka actually have very little time to read anything on which they will not be examined. Moreover, facilities for enlarging their general knowledge are not readily available to most of them. Even the minority of pre-university students who have become proficient in English and have thereby acquired access to a wide literature unavailable in Sinhala and Tamil, rarely have the time to press their advantage into the service of their general education.

Nor does travel play a significant role in broadening the minds of Sri Lankan students, because the great majority of them simply do not have the opportunity of travelling outside the little island where they were born and bred. As a matter of fact, free travel even between the Tamil-dominated north and the Sinhalese-dominated south of the island has become quite restricted for a decade or more.

So it is not surprising that most students entering the universities in Sri Lanka should do so with their heads filled with small details of their narrowly-specialized subjects, and little else by way of background knowledge and experience. During a quarter of a century's experience of university teaching in Sri Lanka this impression has become reinforced in me with each passing year. But over the years in ever increasing numbers, university students in Sri Lanka have become increasingly drawn — or driven — into active politics. This is quite natural because, for one thing, Sri Lanka is a parliamentary democracy whose citizens become eligible to vote at 18 years of age. For another, medical and engineering students apart, the prospects for rewarding employment and social mobility after graduation are bleak for most of the rest of the student population. For the majority of students therefore university

education becomes a futile, frustrating, costly experience. The first expression of that sense of frustration often takes the form of anti-establishment politics. The interest evinced by university students in politics is certainly not to be decried, because youth is spontaneously attracted to the ideals of free enquiry, free speech and social justice. The involvement of university students in politics could help in creating an active and enlightened citizenry in the country. Moreover, such involvement could induct them early into the complex nature of the rights and wrongs of burning public issues. It could make them realise that humankind has still to devise a politico-economic system that can cope with the never-wholly-satisfied demands for social justice of millions of human beings with different values, motivations, expectations, endowments, ambitions and means. They could learn from a study of the experience of countries like the Soviet Union and China that the violent overthrow of an oppressive regime is not necessarily followed even decades later by prosperity, peace and liberation for the common people. They may come to realise that nowhere has an ideal society been created in one fell swoop. Regrettably, many of the most politically active university students in Sri Lanka seem to be acting in accordance with their reading of a single script which evidently decrees that the power to change the world comes only from the barrel of a gun.

This book offers them another script to read. It is the outcome of an attempt to combine a description of the modern world, an assessment of Sri Lanka's place in it and a strategy for building a peaceful society in Sri Lanka. Inevitably it is coloured by such training as I have in biology and medicine and is unashamedly prescriptive. The destiny of the people of Sri Lanka is considered as a fragment of the vicissitudes of *Homo sapiens* the biological species struggling on earth to escape suffering and to extract some joy out of life. To take such a tack which deliberately eschews the drama of colourful historical personalities is to embark on an unexciting story lacking immediacy and a certain superficial human interest. But the aim of this exercise is not to entertain; its aim is to maximize the hope for peace in Sri Lanka. If the script is as dry as dust, the justification must be that it is primarily aimed at the quintessence of organised dust: the human brain. Perhaps more to the point, the vast terrain of the present enquiry cannot be briefly surveyed except at a level of compressed abstraction.

The material presented here is divided to form the substance of a course of six introductory seminars addressed to university students in Sri Lanka. Hence the text is devoid of references and footnotes, but a list of the books on which the seminars are mainly based is appended to it. The seminars aim at presenting a series of elementary propositions which an ordinary university teacher, with

perhaps more than an ordinary interest in public issues, carries in his head. The propositions are not original; some of them are classical and only too well-known. What is attempted here is to organize them under the rubric of the modern scientific outlook.

The manner of exposition adopted is pedagogic and didactic. The underlying aim, however, is not to preach a conclusive doctrine, but to bring students to see for themselves how the arguments for the case being made proceed from major premises to conclusions. Implicit in the approach is a conception of education as a process of learning to think for oneself under the guidance of a teacher until one can dispense with the teacher. Implicit also is the assumption that the proper function of a university teacher is primarily that of inculcating habits of critical thinking in students, and of giving them a sense of the canons of rational discourse and of the scope and limits of human knowledge. Nevertheless, in the context of Sri Lanka, where many university students are quite well-informed about their specialized subjects and deficient in general information, a somewhat liberal dishing out of information was considered desirable. But habits of critical thinking are more important than a fund of mere information even to judge the extent to which the major goals presented in these seminars are valid, relevant and cogently pursued. The goals are to spread awareness, propose solutions, give warning of calamities to be avoided and hopefully offer a vision of a peaceful society.

Although the course of six seminars has been planned to unfold itself in a logical sequence, each seminar has been conceived as a more or less self-contained unit. This has necessitated repetition of the major ideas of the programme. Repetition is, of course, sound pedagogical practice. As any experienced teacher will confirm, an important idea has to be repeated at least three times before it takes hold of the mind of the average student.

The first seminar entitled “Our Problem” seeks to identify the nature of the multi-faceted problem — social, economic, political, religious, ethnic and environmental — confronting Sri Lanka, as part of the modern world.

The problem must be solved if Sri Lanka is to survive as a viable peaceful state. Tautologously, it is better to base the solution on knowledge rather than on ignorance. But what is knowledge? The second seminar considers this question.

Granted that human knowledge must minister to human well-being, it becomes necessary to decide what constitutes human well-being. This requires an exploration of the nature of human

nature, and such an exploration is attempted in the third seminar. From a detailed examination of human nature, fundamental human needs which must be satisfied for human fulfilment and well-being are identified.

In the fourth seminar an attempt is made to derive statements about fundamental human rights from an analysis of human nature and human needs. Because all humans share the same biological nature and are born equal in dignity, it is argued that human rights must necessarily be universal. The role of the state in the maintenance of human rights is considered, and several levels of rights are recognised.

The world is the stage on which we must willy-nilly act out our lives, pursuing happiness and avoiding suffering, as best we can. Accordingly, the fifth seminar attempts a broad survey of the state of our world from the standpoint of Sri Lanka.

The final seminar reviews Sri Lanka's past with the aim of understanding the present in order to provide prescriptive guidelines for the envisioned future, based on the conceptual groundwork laid in the preceding seminars.

The first draft of these seminars was written in Helsinki in 1989 — the cataclysmic year that froze the Cold War, shook Eastern Europe out of one-party communist rule and saw murderous mayhem in Sri Lanka. Only the mental climate of the oasis of peace and stability that is Helsinki made it possible to imagine the prospect of a stable peace in Sri Lanka, even as it passed through a phase of madness, in the literal sense.

The first draft was expanded and greatly improved as the result of detailed comments from a few friends. The final version, incorporating various amendments to keep the text abreast of very recent events, one treading upon another's heel, emerged in May 1990. Modifications were made, however, right up to the time when the book went to press. One does feel a certain nostalgia for those less hectic times when university professors could draft their seminars — once and for all!

Helsinki,  
June 1990

# Towards a Peaceful Sri Lanka

## 1. Our Problem

### *Current World View of Sri Lankans*

As a matter of universally observable fact, humans endeavour to avoid suffering and to pursue happiness. By their very nature they do so on the basis of some world-view or philosophy. The world-view of the vast majority of the people of Sri Lanka derives from Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity or Islam. Religions preach the oneness of the human family, the virtue of universal love and the value of peace on earth. Through the long centuries of recorded history religions have been civilizing and stabilizing influences in society. They have, according to their best lights, promoted education. They have inspired art, literature, music — and charity. They have provided spiritual comfort to countless millions of humans. But wherever in the world whenever organized religions have actively involved themselves in politics, they have often proved to be among the most divisive and pitiless of forces in society. Too easily has religious zeal been channelled into violent conflict. Too often has it fuelled hatred and fomented and justified war. Reliance of the vast majority of the people of Sri Lanka on Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam for moral guidance did not prevent Sri Lanka from becoming in 1989, literally the bloodiest place on earth. One important aspect of Sri Lanka's multi-faceted societal problem is how to deploy the grip that religion as a social observance and ideological omnipresence has on its people to rebuild a peaceful society.

### *Need for a Fresh Outlook*

Precisely because religion is a force that strongly influences the personal and social behaviour of many humans, secular rulers have often tried to use it for the furtherance of their own good, which they have habitually identified with the general good. To the extent that religions have allowed themselves to be bent by rulers to serve secular ends they have suffered moral devaluation. A religion used by a secular power to serve worldly ends is sooner or later compelled by circumstances to defend actions of the secular power which are repugnant to the core values of religion such as unselfishness, justice, peace and belief in the inherent dignity and intrinsic worth of every human being. When the clergy of a religion are obliged to become regular apologists for the misdemeanours of secular rulers, they cease to command the moral allegiance of ordinary people. In theory the

moral value of a religion should not depend on the behaviour of its clergy, but in practice that is what happens. One lesson of history is that whenever priests collaborate closely with kings, religion as a moral institution tends to decay. In any case, if religions are to survive as a moral force in the modern world, they have to transcend politics. They have to influence public life by standing above it. They have to purify themselves of the inessential accretions of their blood-stained past. They have to come to terms with modern knowledge. Indeed, modern times call for a new philosophy of religion; perhaps even for a new philosophy of life.

### *Role of a Philosophy*

A philosophy serves to systematize our thoughts and to discipline our feelings. Our thoughts and our feelings are products of the workings of our brain. A great deal of life-preserving behaviour in both animals and humans is reflex in nature, and does not involve conscious thinking. Such behaviour is the expression of inherited responses to various kinds of stimuli acting on the body. The consciously pursued ends of human action, however, are largely governed by our passions, desires, emotions and feelings. Reason in the form of purposeful thinking influences human behaviour almost entirely by directing the choice of appropriate means for achieving desired ends. To say this is not to imply that an end which is passionately desired may not be entirely rational or that some rational end may not be passionately pursued. So the clearness of distinction between passions determining ends and reason dictating means may be blurred especially because ends and means are often intertwined. In general foul means tend to lead to foul ends. Well-known historical examples show that when a self-selected group resorts to the practice of murdering those whom it chooses to dub “enemies of the people”, as the means of pursuing its vision of a just society, what emerges is just a murderous society. Reflection on such examples raises the general question whether fair ends could ever be achieved by foul means. One celebrated prescription for creating a good society advocated a preceding foul period of avarice and usury as a necessary pre-condition. Could such foul means possibly subserve a good end? To consider such questions is to philosophize about the nature of justice and happiness and suffering.

### *The Supreme Human Value*

The avoidance of suffering and the pursuit of happiness presuppose LIFE — necessarily the most precious reality for the living. There is reason to believe that in spite of their almost infinite variety, all organisms inclusive of human beings had one common origin. The unity of all life on earth is a truth, at once transcendent

and awe-inspiring. The diversity of life is a fact, palpable and incontrovertible. But what is life? A simple question, easier asked than answered. At all events, humans — unlike living viruses — cannot live without food. The food of humans and animals is necessarily derived from either plants or animals. For humans and animals, unlike plants, cannot synthesize their food from basic raw materials. So it comes about that animals as well as humans subsist on food derived from some other forms of life. But for each species, its own form of life must be deemed its dearest possession. By that standard, for humans, *human life must be the supreme value*. It follows that murder must be the worst of all evils. Men who can indulge in premeditated murder without any compunction in pursuit of wealth or power must be regarded as psychopaths. Puzzling out the motivations of those whose schemes for the pursuit of power include mass murder is basically an exercise in psychiatry. Just as there are psychopathic killers among humans, there are also humans who would rather die than kill. They represent the other end of the range of human behaviour. Why should there be such a wide range of variation in human behaviour? That is a matter for the human brain to sort out, and it is to a brief consideration of the general role of the human brain that we now turn.

### *Role of the Human Brain*

Evidently, all that lives seems destined to die. Until they die, organisms stay alive by choosing between different courses of action. By definition, a wrong choice made by an organism hastens its death; a right choice promotes its survival and well-being. In organisms with brains, the brain is the instrument by which choices are made. The brain of each individual scans the environment continuously and computes the answer to a recurring question: “What is the best thing to do in the given circumstances to stay alive?” The brain’s answer is promptly translated into action. Staying alive preserves not only the individual; it also preserves the species to which the individual belongs. The human species is divided into innumerable groups and sub-groups, and not infrequently, the maintenance of the continuity of the group to which a given individual belongs may take precedence over the survival of the individual and the wider interests of the species. The genetic survival of one’s group may entail altruistic individual sacrifice. By definition, altruistic behaviour benefits the group at the expense of the individual. The smaller the group, the stronger the altruistic bonds between its members tend to be. Many parents would face death in order that their children may live. Parents may embark upon risky pre-emptive defensive attacks in order to save themselves and their offspring. This may well be a biological imperative. The family is the largest social unit which has a solid instinctual basis. Altruism comes most easily and



naturally in the family setting. None of this is to say that the individual is to be regarded as a readily expendable entity in society. Voluntary altruistic sacrifice by an individual is one thing; liquidation of an individual by society is quite another. There are two aspects to the life of each individual, the social and the private, and one aspect is not less to be valued than the other. Though gregarious, humans are not driven by natural impulse to subordinate themselves wholly to society. That is why the forces of religion, law and education have to be commissioned to promote the common good. A society that attempts to subordinate the individual wholly to the public purpose is unlikely to flourish. For a society can blossom only through the flowering of individuals who derive their fragrance largely from their capacity for altruism. There is little doubt that social conditioning can motivate or enhance altruistic behaviour in humans. Examples of persons who have freely chosen to lay down their lives for their friends are only too well known. Some biologists have argued that there is an element of self-interest in the altruism of those who sacrifice their lives for the sake of their family or friends or ethnic group. What is the basis of that argument? Such altruism — so it is contended — serves to promote the welfare of the altruist's *own* group (in-group) over that of another (out-group). To that extent such altruism is selfish. In any case, the capacity for suicidal altruism is not uniquely human; many members of ant, bee and wasp colonies defend *their own* nests to the death. But there are well-documented rare examples of humans who have spontaneously sacrificed their lives for the sake of total strangers during calamitous events such as earthquakes, floods and ethnic pogroms. Why a human brain should ever decree such *genuine* altruism is a biological conundrum. Speculating about this conundrum, does not serve our present purpose; leaving it on one side, let us now focus on another aspect of brain function of deep significance to the human condition. This aspect is its myth-making capacity.

### *Sinhalese Mythic Charter*

A remarkable characteristic of the human brain is its capacity for believing without conclusive proof, for trusting without verifying. Using this capacity, humans acquire from the social environment in which they happen to grow up and live a set of beliefs, or a philosophy, or a myth to guide them. It offers them ready-made answers to fundamental questions like the following: Who are we? Where did we come from? When did we come? What kind of world are we in? What is our place in it? What is our ultimate destiny? To these questions, the appropriate philosophical response of the people of Sri Lanka with an eastern heritage might be expected to go something like this: “We are the Atman that is Brahman pervading Nature through eternity and our destiny is unitive knowledge of that

Reality” or a variation on that theme. But the mundane answers to these ultimate questions that Sinhalese children in present-day Sri Lanka learn from their social environment are both less obscure and less sublime. A mild caricature of them might capture more effectively something of the spirit in which they are inculcated. Who are we? We are the Sinhalese, the descendants of an Indo-Aryan king whose father was a *real* lion. Where did we come from? From North India. When did we come? On the very day the Buddha finally passed away. What kind of world do we live in? In Sri Lanka, the land of the Sinhalese, the noblest country in the world, sanctified by three visits of the Buddha. What is our place in it? Supreme, especially over the calculating, crafty, miserly Tamil interlopers of South Indian origin, our despicable historical enemy. What is our ultimate destiny? To preserve Buddhism and preach it to the world. And we were specially chosen for that task by the Buddha himself who, even as he lay dying, entrusted our primeval ancestor and our country to the special protection of God Sakka, the king of the gods, who delegated the job to God Visnu.

### *Tamil Mythic Charter*

The answers to the same questions that children of the other major ethnic group in Sri Lanka — the Tamils — learnt in times past were neither nearly as unanimous nor quite so categorical as the foregoing. But in recent times they have been reformulated and articulated with a resounding militancy. Who are we? We are Tamils, the inheritors of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, the world’s oldest civilization. Where did we come from? From South India. When did we come? Long before the Sinhalese did because we had only a narrow strip of sea to navigate. What kind of world are we in? In our homeland Tamil Eelam, upon which the murderous Sinhalese barbarians have encroached. What is our place in it? Supreme — intellectually, culturally and scientifically — over the innumerate, dull-witted Sinhalese whose reproductive prodigality has reduced us to a minority. What is our ultimate destiny? To preserve Saiva Siddhanta and to pursue with the majestic ferocity of tigers the Dravida Munnetra Khazhagam vision of the Tamil domination of Asia.

To some descendants of the lion race and to Tamil Tigers, their mythic charters have proved to be heady wines which intoxicate their brains.

### *Profile of Sri Lankan Polity*

Apart from the Sinhalese and Sri Lankan Tamils, there are Tamils in Sri Lanka who work mainly on the tea and rubber

plantations. They were brought by the British in the 19th century and early 20th century. They are called “Indian Tamils”. As a cultural group, they differ significantly from Sri Lankan Tamils and even from the Tamils of South India, whom they left several generations ago. Until a decade or so ago, they were the most neglected community in the country during this century. Theirs is probably the lowest standard of living in the country, although their labour contributes the largest fraction of the country’s foreign exchange earnings. They were disenfranchised in 1949 and have only recently won citizenship rights after a prolonged struggle. Their educational and medical facilities are meagre and their housing is substandard.

The third politically influential ethnic group in Sri Lanka comprises the Moors. They are people mainly of South Indian origin amalgamated with remnants of Malay, Persian and Arab merchants on the basis of religion. Most of them speak Tamil. In the past they tended to identify themselves with the Sinhalese or Tamils depending on the region of the country where they lived. Recently they have tended to emphasize their separate ethnic identity and their remote Arab connection. The wave of Islamic resurgence sweeping the world has not by-passed Sri Lankan Moors who are Muslims by religion.

The Burghers comprise a small group of descendants of the Portuguese and Dutch settlers who intermarried with Sinhalese and Tamils. English settlers who intermarried with the earlier Portuguese and Dutch settlers also contributed to this group. They are mainly English speaking. Many ethnic Sinhalese and Tamils who never intermarried with the Portuguese, the Dutch or the British, nevertheless took European names, usually upon converting to Christianity. This explains why many people in Sri Lanka who are not classified as Burghers bear names like Perera, Mathew, De Silva, Medonza and Fonseka, to list just a few.

Thus the people of Sri Lanka divide themselves into various groups on the basis of ethnicity, religion and language. The majority are Sinhalese (74%) by ethnicity and Buddhist by religion. The non-Sinhalese (26%) are Sri Lankan Tamils (12%), Indian Tamils (6%), Moors (7%), Burghers, Vaddas and others. Buddhists make up 69% of the population. The non-Buddhists are Hindus (16%), Christians (8%) and Muslims (7%). These groups have co-existed in Sri Lanka, as different human groups usually do, in a state of competitive interaction with each other. Every now and then the competitive interaction has broken out into open, violent conflicts. During the last one hundred years or so, for example, violent conflicts have occurred between Sinhalese and Tamils, between Sinhalese and Muslims, between Tamils and Muslims, and between Buddhists and Christians. Antagonisms based on economic disparities in society

have been intertwined with most of these ethnic and religious conflicts. On occasion class antagonisms cutting across ethnic and religious groupings have produced confrontations between organized labour and capitalist interests. Conflicts based on party-political rivalries cutting across social classes have also contributed largely to the recent violence in Sri Lanka.

### *Local and Global Symptomatology*

Recent happenings in Sri Lanka are symptoms of the deep-seated socio-economic malady visibly overwhelming its citizens. These symptoms include callous and wanton destruction of human life, political terrorism, senseless destruction of public property and a breakdown of law and order; economic malfunction, a mounting national debt, seriously inadequate employment opportunities and a growing disparity between the rich and the poor; widespread undernutrition and a high incidence of preventable illness; deforestation and environmental damage; ethnic conflict and religious strife; an alarming increase in the frequency of alcoholism, heroin abuse, violent crime, accidents and suicide.

In our wide world as a whole the realities are even more portentously malignant. Its population is increasing by at least 80 million every year despite the prevalence of widespread malnutrition. There is destruction of its forests on a massive scale with consequent extinction of innumerable species of animals and plants, which in turn disturbs the equilibrium in the biosphere. There is environmental pollution with toxic waste and radioactive contamination. As a result the air, soil and water of the earth are becoming inimical to human health. There is a gradual warming up of the atmosphere which may produce disastrous alterations in global weather patterns as well as an invasion of land by ocean. In a word, the spectre of ecological catastrophe is haunting the Earth. As if trapped in a tragedy of its own creation, humankind appears to be on a path leading inexorably to an ocean of misery and pain. Is there no way out of this self-destructive fate?

### *The Way Out*

The way out surely is to devise and live by a sensible philosophy appropriate to our times. Obviously, the more reliable the knowledge, and the better tested the experience on which a philosophy is based, the more efficacious it is likely to be as a guide to living. Sensible living requires constant adjustment to a changing environment which may necessitate modifications in our traditional set of beliefs. Such modifications are called for because of advances in our knowledge and wisdom. The test of the usefulness of such

modifications is the extent to which they enable us to adapt successfully to the changing world. Today the life of humankind is greatly influenced by scientific inventions such as the printing press, radio, television, telephone, cassette players, motor vehicles, tractors, aeroplanes, fertilizers, pesticides, vaccines, antibiotics, contraceptives — and lethal firearms and diabolical weapons of war. Although well-meaning social reformers have been preaching the virtues of the simple pastoral life to poor people in Third World countries there is little evidence that the poor in Sri Lanka or elsewhere are enthusiastic about a simple pastoral life. On the contrary, they are vigorously pursuing the paraphernalia of modern life which the advertising mass media are insistently imprinting upon their consciousness. But it is not so easy to live a modern life without a modern outlook. And in order to fashion a modern outlook, it is necessary to take cognizance of current concepts about the origins of Man, human rights, the genetic code, the working of the brain, the digital computer, nuclear energy, the transnational corporation, the exponential growth of population, the ecological balance — in short, the material and conceptual apparatus of modern cosmopolitan culture. As we advance in knowledge and wisdom we ought to discard quite deliberately the vestiges of primitive ideas such as untouchability and casteism and heathenism as well as barbarous practices like feet-binding and genital mutilation of females which have persisted through the force of tradition. Like all the rest of humankind, we the people of Sri Lanka, have to be open to new information and perspectives if we are to adapt creatively to the changing world, and make the most of what human life on earth should be and could be. Today many of us are struggling merely to survive.

### *Exploration of The World*

The struggle to survive compels most of us to look at the world strictly from our own point of view as seen from the here and the now. For us in Sri Lanka the “here” is the island of Sri Lanka, about 66 000 square kilometres in extent with about 17 million people. To learn that the total land area of our planet is about 148 100 000 square kilometres and that its total population is over five billion (5 000 000 000) is to realize what a tiny part (0.0004%) of Planet Earth our country constitutes and how numerically insignificant (0.003%) we are among people on Earth. Does this mean we are devoid of significance and dignity? Not by current enlightened opinion as reflected in the accredited tribunals of humankind such as the United Nations. We are significant because we belong to the human family. Membership of the human family endows us with dignity and entitles us to certain inalienable rights. The acceptance of these concepts embodied in the “*Universal Declaration of Human*

*Rights*” by the United Nations of the World in 1948 was perhaps the most epoch-making social achievement of humankind in this century. To no one’s surprise, these rights have not yet been fully translated into practice. A period of 40 years is only the blinking of an eye in human history.

Because we are an island people, our world view tends to be insular. The way to broaden our view is to explore the wider world around us. Imagine that we escape from our geographical prison and embark on a voyage of discovery. If we travel directly south from Sri Lanka, we may be tempted to conclude that we are indeed the be-all and end-all of the universe. For it is only when we reach Antarctica that we shall see land again — an uninhabited land filled with ice. If we travel westward we shall have to sail very far before we at last reach Africa, where humankind probably had its origin. Exploration of the huge continent of Africa will give us insights into the mind-boggling diversity of human lifestyles. If we travel far enough in an easterly direction we shall reach China, the home of an ancient civilization with over one billion people and ultra-modern Japan with over 100 million. From them we shall have much to learn. And we shall realize that there is no advanced culture in the world that has not borrowed useful elements from every available source. The broadening of our outlook brought about by our travels may induce us to regard the sum total of human culture as the common inheritance of humankind.

### *The Indian Reality*

Geographically, then, in the south, west and east Sri Lanka is rather well isolated. But if we travel north, even in a primitive fishing boat, we shall quickly bump into the reality of a subcontinent with over 800 million people: India. For what separates Sri Lanka from India is a mere 20-mile strip of shallow sea. This gap was narrow enough to have encouraged repeated invasions of Sri Lanka from South India in the past. Nor were the invasions unidirectional. Between the ninth and the twelfth century A.C. armies from Sri Lanka navigated the gap on more than one occasion, to wage war in South India. The consequences of some of those wars were disastrous to the Sinhalese. Resurrected fearful memories of destructive invasions of Sri Lanka from the ancient South Indian kingdoms of Cola and Pandya are capable of generating nativist scare talk among many Sinhalese to this day. The habit of fear seems to condition the attitude of many of us to India. Perhaps our fears are the natural result of Sri Lanka’s smallness when compared with India’s bigness. Given conflicting versions of post-independence India’s record of relations with Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Goa, possible dangers to Sri Lanka from India can be plausibly imagined.

If there are dangers, they are best averted not by terror and impulsive behaviour but by rational action based on informed judgements. One antidote to our primitive fears about India is simply to remember that the South Indian kingdoms of the Colas, Pandyas and Pallavas disappeared centuries ago. The present Republic of India is surely not the modern re-incarnation of those South Indian kingdoms. Those of us who are genuinely tormented by the fear that India has set its sights on promoting the establishment of a puppet state in the north of Sri Lanka can derive some comfort from the following thought. If one thing constitutes a nightmare more than another to the Central Government of India, it is the prospect of the triumph of linguistic nationalism in South Asia. For that would fuel the disintegration of the Republic of India itself. The reaction of the Government of India to secessionist tendencies in South India based on linguistic cries has been uncompromisingly negative, if not positively hostile. The Indian nightmare about the triumph of linguistic nationalism works to Sri Lanka's advantage. If we pander to our worst primitive fears, however, and habitually work on the assumption that India is a hostile threat to Sri Lanka, the assumption certainly risks being turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy. What a people assume to be true, they may unwittingly bring to pass.

The geographical fact of the closeness of India to Sri Lanka is the clue to understanding many events in our history. For one thing, it is not at all surprising that the ancestors of the Sinhalese (and the Tamils) came to Sri Lanka from India, to be precise, *mainly* from South India. For another, it is easy to see how Buddhism (and Hinduism) could easily have spread to Sri Lanka from India. Moreover, it becomes clear how likely it is that Sinhalese (and Tamils) have inhabited this country for a very long time. To refer to the peoples who colonized Sri Lanka from India over 2500 years ago as "Sinhalese" and "Tamils" may be misleading. Their identity components such as language and religion could not have sharply separated them into two distinct groups at that time. If the traditional account of the colonization of Sri Lanka by Sinhalese is to be believed, the original Sinhalese could not have been Buddhists, because by that account Buddhism came to Sri Lanka about 200 years *after* the arrival of the original Sinhalese. In any event, given the geographical contiguity of South India to northern Sri Lanka, the original Tamil-speaking people had a statistically better chance of colonizing Sri Lanka before the original Sinhala-speaking people did so. But statistical probability only tells what was more likely, not what actually happened. There is no conclusive proof that the Tamil-speaking people colonized Sri Lanka before the Sinhala-speaking people or that it was the other way round. Not that modern Tamils would acquire an automatic prescriptive claim to Sri Lanka if conclusive evidence turns up that their progenitors had colonized

Sri Lanka before the progenitors of the Sinhalese. If the prescriptive claim to land accrues to those who happened to be first on the spot, Sri Lanka belongs neither to the Sinhalese nor to the Tamils but to the Vaddas. As to this matter, the only sensible attitude to adopt is that Sri Lanka belongs equally to all its citizens, be they Vaddas, Malays, Burghers, Moors or others.

### *Human Culture*

Because of the proximity to India, we should not be surprised to learn that Indian influences — religious, cultural, social, political — have permeated through Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, mainly because of the Sinhala language, and the persistence of Buddhism, Sinhalese culture appears to be recognizably distinct from any variety of contemporary Indian culture. But one insight that modern comparative anthropology provides is that the bewildering varieties of human culture really represent variations on a few biological themes. Humankind appears to be genetically programmed to produce a culture because cultural behaviour has survival value. Humankind is a world-wide species. Obviously, cultural behaviour suited to survival in, say, the tropics will be unsuited to survival in the North Pole. The same is true even in regard to some details of human anatomy and physiology. To give a striking example, the white skin is an adaptation to living in northern regions of the globe, related to the synthesis of vitamin D in the skin. That is why white skins become protectively brown in the tropics. There is little doubt that the original roots of ethnic and cultural diversity must have been largely determined by local environmental pressures. Current scientific opinion subscribes to this view and to its corollary that the diversity of cultures enriches humankind. The endorsement of cultural rights among fundamental human rights by the United Nations is in accordance with this outlook. In the modern world the principal barrier between different ethnic and cultural groups is the lack of opportunities for frequent interaction on a wide enough scale, and the unavailability of means of free and easy communication. Given modern methods of learning languages and computerized techniques of instant translation, humans belonging to different cultures should before long be able to communicate freely with each other. When that day comes enrichment of the quality of human life by cultural interaction will become commonplace, and human fellowship will grow. Instead of declining, the diversities between cultures in regard to aspects like food, dress, music, dance and arts and crafts could flourish from cross-fertilization and mutual enjoyment.



## *Value of a Broadened Outlook*

But to return to the mental voyage we embarked upon: such a voyage will certainly help to expand our intellectual horizon and imagination. It will also induce us to examine ways of life followed by other humans living in other climes. If there were only 1 000 humans living in the world today only three would be Sri Lankans. There is no reason to suppose that Sri Lankans are more — or less — intelligent than the rest of humankind. Hence there is no reason to suppose that the three Sri Lankans would have nothing useful to learn from the experiences of the 997 non-Sri Lankans concerning the business of adjusting themselves to current global conditions. The insights we gain from the experience of others may well improve our chances of survival, self-fulfilment and enjoyment of life. At any rate, if nothing else, our journey would have convinced us that our customs and habits are not the eternal laws of Nature! Indeed, during our travels, we are sure to have come across stable, relatively non-violent societies with habits which seem to us to be contrary to human nature itself! And we may well have discovered that only very primitive societies tend to be full of the rectitude of their own customs. During our travels, we are also likely to have encountered attitudes to life very different from ours. If we examined them carefully we would have noticed that each of them had a certain coherence and internal consistency. Most of us, of course, would not have accepted any of them as superior to our own. Coincidentally we would have discovered that, by and large, other people were also not inclined to accept our outlook as superior to theirs. The insights gained from our travels would have tended to make us less dogmatic about the superiority of our own culture; they would certainly have taught us the need for tolerance.

Our exploration of the world would have influenced not only our thinking, but also our feelings by showing us that, the world over, people react to death, disease, hunger, cruelty, pain and loneliness very much as we do. Our feelings, emotions, passions and desires are primarily self-centred. The impulse to be self-centred is not necessarily harmful or undesirable. If we do not feel for ourselves, who would feel for us instead? But if we feel only for ourselves, our relations with other humans are unlikely to be wholly cordial. And common sense tells us that good, cordial relations with others is a prime necessity for survival in our over-crowded world. So our attitude to life, while permitting us to be self-centred to the extent that is necessary for us to live and enjoy life, must also make provision for a policy of live and let live. Our philosophy of life need not, for example, enjoin us to love other people's children as much as we love our own. Nevertheless, the philosophy of parents who from a love of their own children come to have a caring attitude towards

all children would promote fellowship. In like manner our love of our mother tongue, should encourage us to understand the love of other peoples for their own languages. Such a universalizing of feeling would promote harmony and peace in the world. Human beings become happy, secure and contented when they are able to live with dignity as fulfilled persons. This requires, above all, that society should be so organized that everybody is enabled to enjoy those rights which humankind under the leadership of the United Nations, has come to recognize as human rights. What this implies is that we wish to secure for all other humans the very things we consider good for ourselves and to make others avoid what we consider bad.

### *Current Realities and Needed Responses*

Sri Lanka exists today as part of a rapidly changing, globally interconnected world which is economically, environmentally and politically interdependent. The major problem confronting the people of Sri Lanka is how to contrive to live together in peace, harmony, freedom, health and security. The solution of this major problem requires action on several fronts. It has to be done in a piecemeal manner. We have to learn to think of other ethnic groups, not as entities to be dominated or exploited, but as members of the human family — *Homo sapiens* — who are equal in human dignity and have an equal right to live fulfilled lives. Caste is still not quite dead in Sri Lanka; its death agony is proving to be inordinately long. In some parts of our country, with the sanction of religion, some humans continue to be regarded as “untouchables”. This shows how religion can be bent by the socially powerful to serve their earthly needs. The collaboration between leaders of organized religion and the holders of secular power for mutual material advantage is only one ugly aspect of the hypocrisy that permeates much of our socio-economic and cultural life. Again, in our society, men routinely dominate over women; therefore in economic, social and political life, women’s needs receive attention only after those of men have been duly satisfied. Class differences based on large disparities in the distribution of income and wealth persist and in some ways have become worse during the recent past. The operation of three separate but related factors — gross inequalities of wealth, unequal access to education in English and covert and overt casteism — is largely to blame for the perpetuation of a vicious circle of elitism in the country. The most practical and effective way of breaking this circle is by the provision of a good education in English to all students. This is, however, discouraged by some members of the elite who, having benefitted themselves from a good education in English and having procured a good education in English for their children, accuse the rest of the English-educated minority in Sri Lanka of

constituting a set of rootless, unpatriotic sahibs incapable of identifying with the national psyche and ethos. Whether or not this accusation is valid, there is no end to the public demand for more and better English. Sadly, the prospects are not bright for the overwhelming majority of those seeking to improve their lot through a sound higher education because among those who aspire to university education, there is room for only about 1%. The problem to be solved in regard to differences in ethnicity, caste, sex, religion and social class is how to prevent such differences from being exploited by some humans to their private advantage. The solution of these problems will not come overnight and it will require profound changes in some of our ingrained habits of thinking and feeling.

The more one thinks about it the stronger becomes the conviction that in the end, our vision for a peaceful Sri Lanka has to be based on two perennial virtues: understanding and compassion; more specifically, an understanding of the world based on the best available knowledge and a compassion for all members of the human family. For as the recent history of Sri Lanka has shown, people can be brave, courageous, loyal, self-sacrificing and generous as members of a narrow group, and yet wreak havoc on others and bring destruction to themselves, if they are devoid of understanding and compassion. Compassion, to be sure, is not a function of pure reason. Its rationale, on occasion, may even defy rational analysis. That does not make compassion less real as a motive force of desirable social change. Understanding is an entirely rational activity. It comes from knowledge. But what is knowledge? Let us see.

## 2. Our Knowledge

### *Coping with Existence*

Above all, our knowledge must promote our survival. It must give us the capacity to choose the right means of avoiding suffering and pursuing happiness. It must enable us to adjust ourselves to our environment in a purposeful way. These assertions merely embody a judgement about the final purpose of human knowledge. They do not imply that in judging the truth or falsehood of a given proposition, human survival, suffering and happiness are relevant criteria to be applied.

When humans eventually die of old age, they do so presumably because the human organism cannot go on repairing itself indefinitely. Premature death may be due to natural causes such as illnesses, earthquakes or floods or to homicide or suicide. A moment's thought will show that in order to survive until death occurs from old age, it is necessary for us to be in harmony with our physical environment, with other humans and with our own selves. Speaking schematically, we cope with our physical environment by means of Science; intimate personal relations apart, we interact socially with others through political, economic, artistic and sporting activities; and we try to come to terms with our own selves by means of Religion or Philosophy.

### *Nature of Human Knowledge*

The brain is the organ that mediates all our relationships. Science, Politics, Economics, Art and Religion are all products of cerebral activity generated in response to events in our physical and social environment. All of these activities influence the lives of all of us; one or other of them may come to dominate the lives of some of us. Each of them will promote effective adjustment to the extent that its cognitive content corresponds to the true nature of the world; that is to say, to the way the world really is, as opposed to what we believe it to be. Our judgements concerning what we believe to be the true nature of the universe including ourselves, constitute the sum total of human knowledge. Our judgements are based on our perceptions, which are also mediated by the brain. Our perceptions depend on the workings of our sense organs like the eyes and ears. These perceptions are not as objective as they were once assumed to be; they are strongly conditioned by several factors including the very theories about the world we happen to believe in. Moreover, the very act of observation may alter what one is observing. "Seeing is believing", says a proverb. "Appearances are deceptive", warns an adage. This adage implies that there are differences between our

obvious perceptions of phenomena and what careful scrutiny discloses about their content. To take a simple example, we may see the appearance of water in a desert or on a hot road, even in the absence of water. This example is an instance of an optical illusion. Again, under certain circumstances, we may think we see, say, tigers in the absence of tigers, or hear voices when nobody is speaking. These two examples are instances of hallucinations. Our liability to experience illusions and hallucinations implies that our sense organs do not always provide us with an accurate picture of our world of everyday life. It is unnecessary for our present purpose to postulate that what the world is really like is very different from what it appears to our senses; that is, that *all* is illusion. It is enough to note that we know from experience that our senses are not always wholly reliable. Accordingly, practical prudence demands a rational justification of our judgements which are based on our perceptions because of the fallibility of our senses. In our everyday life, we trust our senses while recognizing the need to verify their reliability whenever a doubt arises.

Human knowledge, then, is a product of the human brain. The human brain has evolved as the principal instrument of self-preservation and perpetuation of humankind. All available evidence indicates that for about 99% of their time on earth, humankind has survived by hunting animals and gathering plant produce for food. So the human brain must have evolved mainly as an instrument for subserving activities such as hunting and gathering food, mating and child-rearing. These are activities involving medium size objects moving at moderate speeds in three dimensional space. It is not surprising therefore that our perceptions are most accurate when we are observing medium size objects moving at moderate speeds. Indeed, for purposes of surviving, escaping suffering and pursuing happiness in this world, it seems unnecessary for the human brain to be able to perceive and comprehend the behaviour of the world of subatomic particles or of colossal galaxies.

### *Models of the World*

The brain promotes our survival by enabling us to anticipate the future and to take appropriate action to adjust ourselves to coming events, in the light of our past experience. This requires an understanding of how Nature works and how its parts are interrelated. In order to gain such an understanding the brain tries to construct a model of the world or some part of it, with explanatory and predictive powers. As of now, a model or theory to account fully for the working of the whole universe is not available. What we have are numerous models or theories to explain diverse phenomena in the universe, especially on Planet Earth. These models or theories

put together by the collective intellect of humankind, and stored for ready reference in the encyclopaedias of the world constitute the sum total of human knowledge. It is true that our present knowledge has given us a great deal of control over our physical environment; even so our knowledge is full of imperfections and inaccuracies. Human knowledge is really the compendium of the collective experience of humankind, which is handed down from generation to generation. As such it should be the birthright of every human being. But, it may be asked, how much is the accumulated knowledge of humankind which is stored in encyclopaedias worth? Is there such a thing as objective knowledge that all reasonable humans must accept? Do encyclopaedias merely describe the appearance of things and not the 'reality' behind them? Such questions are worth raising. Consider the following statements:

1. The universe began to expand with a big bang about ten billion years ago.
2. Planet Earth goes round the sun.
3. There are 92 naturally occurring elements on earth.
4. Human beings are made out of some 22 of the 92 elements.
5. There are 193 living species of monkeys and apes of which one is Man, self-styled *Homo sapiens*.
6. The universe was created by Almighty God.
7. Man does not have an immortal soul.
8. Science gives us absolutely certain knowledge.
9. There is no such thing as a peaceful road to socialism.
10. Hatred is never appeased by hatred.

Which, if any, of the above statements are true? If any happen to be true, how can they be *known* to be true? This is not the place to embark upon a detailed examination of the truth or falsehood of each of the above ten statements. Suffice it to say that hundreds of books have been written about some of them, without reaching any finality about their truth or falsehood. Sad to say, millions of people have been killed for not believing some of the above statements. Millions of others have been killed for believing them. Torturing or killing people for believing or disbelieving something is an aberration of human behaviour that has caused untold suffering to humankind. This is a cause of avoidable human suffering that a broad, humanistic, scientific education will decisively help to eliminate. For such an education can sensitize us to the fallible nature of human knowledge; it can give us an insight into the scope and limits of the human brain as an instrument for acquiring knowledge.

## *How the Brain Works*

Because our knowledge is a product of our brain, some understanding of how the human brain works may serve to throw light on the nature of human knowledge. At this point, an old philosophical question will pose itself: Can the brain understand its own working? The history of medical science provides an affirmative answer: the attempt of humankind to understand how the human brain works has certainly helped to promote human survival and to reduce human suffering. So it has been fruitful. Although the understanding is far from complete, in principle the human brain can understand how the human brain works!

Study of how children's thought processes seem to work has provided insights into one basic way the human brain may operate. Children appear to regard all events they experience as being "caused by" some living agent. This is natural enough. They cannot help noticing that almost everything that happens to them by way of being fed, clothed, washed and moved about, is brought about by — or caused by — other people. As they grow up they realize that they too can push and pull things and cause them to move. From such observations it is but a short step for them to infer that whatever happens in the world is brought about by or caused by agents very like the ones they are familiar with, namely, persons. By and large, the same thought patterns persist into adulthood. That is why in every known human society from the most primitive to the most scientifically advanced, many people believe that natural phenomena such as earthquakes and floods, famines and epidemics, are caused by a variety of spirits and gods, conceptualized as persons. Thinking in such personalized terms seems to be the easiest and most natural way for the human brain to make sense of the world. At the first level of approximation, the human brain appears to believe that all events are caused by some living agent or other, natural or supernatural. The concept of causation discussed by philosophers of science is a recent acquisition of humankind. As yet it is an acquisition confined to a small minority of humans.

The inherent tendency of the human brain to identify "causes" of various "effects" leads us to a variety of primitive certainties about all sorts of things. This tendency clearly has survival value because, to the extent that the causes of scarcities of food and water, the causes of illnesses and the causes of antagonizing other people are correctly identified, beneficial corrective action can be taken. The primitive certainties concerning matters of vital interest to us are products of our method of brain-working, and these certainties guide us in our day to day life. We begin seriously to question these certainties only when we encounter strong evidence

that our certainties are leading us to avoidable disadvantages and maladjustments. Even under such circumstances, rarely do we totally abandon our primitive certainties. Instead we try to modify them so that they are no longer demonstrably false. Tradition dies hard because humankind is innately conservative. Nor is accumulated wisdom wholly unreliable. After all, the reality of occasional illusions and hallucinations notwithstanding, the maxim that “seeing is believing” is a sensible guide to action.

### *Concept of Causality*

Given the way the human brain works, it is not surprising that humans should be constantly searching for and researching the “causes” of earthquakes, floods, tornadoes and droughts; the causes of disease, infirmity and human suffering; the causes of poverty; the causes of wars and revolutions and violence. Looking for cause and effect relationships appears to be what the human brain is constantly doing. If it cannot find rational causes for observed effects it is not slow to assume that there must be extra-rational causes at work. And the standard of proof demanded by the average human brain to validate its assumptions is easy to satisfy. Looking for cause and effect relationships is essentially the process of trying to find out whether a surmise, guess, conjecture or hypothesis — call it what you will — concerning an observed phenomenon is correct or incorrect by putting it to the test of practical experience. This process involves figuring out testable logical consequences of the surmise, guess, conjecture or hypothesis and taking steps to find out whether or not those logical expectations are fulfilled in practice. Consider a simple example from real life. An infant cries; hearing the cry its mother surmises, guesses, conjectures or hypothesizes that the cause of the infant’s crying is hunger. She then figures out that the way to test the correctness of her hunch is to feed the infant. She offers the infant her breast. The infant feeds and stops crying. The mother concludes that the cause of the infant’s crying on that occasion must have been hunger. She can never be absolutely sure, though, that the infant cried because of hunger; it might have cried to express its desire to indulge in the comforting pleasure of sucking! However that might have been, the way the mother behaved on this occasion is a very human form of behaviour. So was the style of reasoning she employed. Let it be said at once that the method she used to solve the problem of her baby’s crying on this occasion, is also the method of scientific enquiry — the scientific method. It involves observing, reasoning and testing. But scientists usually reason more carefully and test more rigorously than the mother did in our example. What is more, when scientists use the technique it is given a suitably impressive name: *the hypothetico-deductive system*. In this technique a hypothesis is formulated, its observable consequences



are deduced and observations and experiments are carried out to see whether what should happen, if the hypothesis is correct, does in fact happen.

Since cause and effect relationships seem to bind the world together for humans, let us see what the concept of causality really implies. If a given sequence of events is perceived by the brain on one or two occasions, it seems naturally inclined to expect the same sequence to be repeated on future occasions. If the same sequence of events is experienced on several occasions, the brain appears to form the habit of confidently expecting the sequence to be repeated on all subsequent occasions. The logic of the brain seems to go like this: A and B have been found together and never separately; therefore, when A is found again, B also will be found. This logic is not peculiar to the human brain; it is a kind of physiological inference that is practised even by animals. For example, cats and dogs and chickens often run towards people who habitually feed them. Needless to say, all sequences of events that occur in their environment are not perceived with the same interest by either humans or animals. Sequences that they are inclined to notice with special interest are those which have significance for their survival and well-being. The physiological inferences or inductions which animals and humans make may occasionally prove to be disastrous. For example, from repeatedly experiencing the sequence of the appearance of a human hand followed by the arrival of food, chickens appear to infer that a human hand will always bring them food. They do not live to learn the lesson that one day a human hand will bring them not food, but death. One benefit that knowledge confers on humans is to restrain their impulse to pass quickly and easily from the particular to the general. Why is it rash to pass too easily from the observation of particular instances to universal generalization? After all, is not science itself based on such a logic? If it is, then is scientific reasoning faulty? Let us see.

The essence of the concept of causality on which scientific thinking is based is that, because two events have been invariably conjoined in the past, we are justified in expecting them to be *necessarily* conjoined in the future. The assumption underlying this expectation is that invariant conjunction implies causal connection. The question is whether such an implication is justified. Because an event B invariably follows an event A, does it necessarily imply that A “caused” B? Because thunder invariably follows lightning does it imply that lightning “caused” thunder? Because day always follows night, and night always follows day, does it follow that night “causes” day and day “causes” night? Surely not! We conclude that A is the cause of B, if and only if B always follows A and, apart from the fact of sequence, A is in a critical sense, *necessary* for B

to occur. However, we can never actually observe a “causal link” between A and B. Thus we cannot prove the existence of a causal link by actual observation. Logic cannot be invoked to prove the existence of such a link, because the point at issue is a matter of hard fact (an empirical matter) and is therefore independent of logic. The existence of an actual link in a presumed cause and effect relationship, then, cannot be proved. As the next best thing, our expectation of the same “causes” to produce the same “effects” has been justified on the premise that “Nature is uniform” or that “there is order in Nature”. But what does it really mean to say that Nature is uniform or orderly? As a little thought will show, it is only another way of saying that the same “causes” produce the same “effects”!

Does extensive past experience of having observed a given cause invariably producing a particular effect, justify our certainty that in the future too the same cause would produce the same effect? Experience shows that it does not. Until recently, for example, a disease that completely and irreversibly damaged the kidneys of a person, invariably caused the death of the person in a few days. After the invention of the machine which can perform some of the functions of the kidneys, it has become possible for a person to live without kidneys. Thus, past experience does not permit us to infer what our future experience is necessarily going to be like.

### *Limitations of Induction*

In view of the foregoing, the question that arises is whether there is no justification for basing a universal conclusion even on numerous, carefully observed particular instances. If there is in fact no such justification, does it mean that the validity of scientific laws which are generalizations based on the careful observation of particular instances — on the so-called inductive method — is not certain? The matter merits consideration. Let us consider two events A and B. Let us suppose that many instances have been observed in which A is followed by B, and no instances have ever been found of B occurring without being preceded by A. Scientific reasoning assumes that a sufficient number of carefully observed instances of this sequence, will make it increasingly probable that A is always followed by B, and that in time the probability can be made to approach certainty. Not only in science but also in daily life such inductive reasoning is used whenever we generalize.

The logical problem of induction is to prove that the proposition ‘A is always followed by B’ can be rendered certain by a knowledge of instances in which it happens. Quite simply, according to current probability theory, the probability of a universal statement being true is zero, whatever the observational evidence. The stock

example used to illustrate the limitation of induction is as follows. For thousands of years in Europe it had been observed millions of times, without a single exception, that swans were white. Therefore the generalization that “all swans are white” was made. Among Europeans this generalization had the character of a universally valid law of Nature. However, when Europeans discovered Australia, they found black swans there, thus showing that even a generalization based on millions of observations, may turn out to be false. The conclusion is inescapable: no finite number of observations, however large, can logically entail a universal generalization. If generalizations based on millions of observations are not wholly reliable, how could it be otherwise in the case of generalizations based on a handful of observations? For instance, consider the case of revolutions in history. These have been very infrequent and complex events, which often defied accurate observation and documentation. Moreover, the element of chance, the fortuitous concurrence of events, contributed largely to the final outcome. Therefore those who make sweeping generalizations based on the few revolutions that have occurred, must not be surprised if such generalizations are not rich in predictive power. The more innocent they are of the limitations of inductive reasoning, the greater will be their faith in the validity of their generalizations and their eagerness to act upon them.

### *Uncertainty of Scientific Knowledge*

Because of the astounding success of scientific technology in changing the world, many people intuitively believe that scientific laws must be utterly certain. This is emphatically not the modern scientific view. It is now widely realized that scientific laws expressed in the form of universal generalizations cannot be logically derived from the observations on which they are based. In a word, inductive reasoning cannot establish universally valid laws. And scientific method consisting of observation, reasoning and experimentation cannot lead us to absolute certainty. At the very best, it can only give conclusions which are probably right. Our conceptual framework has to be based on the realities of the physical world. Such knowledge as we have, has been acquired by experience, and not by exercises in logic. If even carefully practised scientific reasoning cannot give us absolute certainty, how could it be otherwise with alleged cognitive activities like crystal gazing, necromancy, intuition and revelation? And ancient history which was largely based on fallible human memory, merits credibility only in its broadest outlines.

In spite of its limitations humans use inductive reasoning, that is, arguing from the particular to the general, both in science and in everyday life. So it is important to inquire into its degree of reliability. We live in a world of constant change and have constantly

to adjust ourselves to the changes that occur in Nature. The question is how the brain mediates in the process of continuous adjustment to the changing external world. By virtue of its capacity for believing without proof, the brain simply assumes the premise that Nature is uniform. Because this assumption involves an act of faith in what is not indubitably demonstrable, the premise that Nature is uniform is, categorically, a myth — perhaps a *rational myth*, but no less a myth for that reason. That Nature is uniform does not mean that Nature does not change; it means that the changes which occur in Nature are governed by some constant laws. This implies that at least in principle the changes are foreseeable. If these constant laws can be discovered, then we should be able to anticipate future changes, with the confidence that what we expect to happen will come to pass. Has humankind succeeded in discovering such laws or at least a principle that will enable the discovery of such laws in the future? The answer is that to this day humankind has not found a principle, which will guarantee us against the possibility of error. It follows that all human knowledge must be more or less uncertain, inexact and incomplete. This sober conclusion is based on the accumulated, tested experience of humankind. It can be countered only by the sophism that it is absurd to say that “the only certainty is that there is no certainty”. To have to invoke the “liar paradox” to defend fake certainty is perhaps in the fitness of things! If a man declares that ‘all men are liars’, is this statement true or false? Think it over.

If scientific method is theoretically incapable of yielding absolutely certain knowledge, it may be wondered how science in practice has proved itself to be an enormously successful problem-solving activity. The explanation is that for understanding the world to the extent that is necessary for us to adjust ourselves to it, and to change it in ways beneficial to us, we do not need sweeping generalizations of universal validity. In order to avoid much suffering and pursue some happiness we do not need principles which have the power to plumb the depth of meaning of the universe! By acting on mere hypotheses, no matter how they came to be formulated, humankind has not only survived but has also thrived in this world. For instance, although we cannot predict all sub-atomic events accurately with our current knowledge, we have learnt how to harness the energy inside atoms in the form of nuclear energy. Again, not all is known about the nature of viruses, but that has not prevented us from eradicating small-pox. The hypothetico-deductive method which is the one that scientists actually follow in their investigations, has proved to be remarkably useful for the solution of specific problems.

As humankind advanced in knowledge, by pooling their collective experience, they developed inferential habits which have

led them more often to true expectations than to false ones. In its widest sense, our search for knowledge may be regarded as our attempt to develop inferential habits which lead us more often to true expectations than to false ones. Such inferential habits have turned out to be the most reliable basis of our adjustment to the environment. Upon them our very survival and well-being depend. Such validity as these inferences have, must depend on some characteristics of Nature which are not logically necessary. But statements embodying these characteristics cannot be rendered certain by arguments based on experience, because experience has shown that past experience is not an absolutely sure guide to the future.

### *Status of Scientific Knowledge*

The foregoing considerations lead us to an important question: What precisely does scientific knowledge amount to? Basically scientific knowledge has two aspects: description and explanation. In describing the world or restricted parts of it, science relies on the evidence of the senses. The world appears to our senses to consist of innumerable separate things. Between some of these things there are similarities. Based on these similarities science uses different classificatory schemes in its descriptions. The most useful classificatory schemes are the ones which best serve human needs and interests. The form of knowledge that classifications represent has no intrinsic objectivity. Classificatory schemes are regularly revised in the light of new knowledge. Most of them are too schematic to be quite true; they merely serve as maps to guide our thinking.

The other — and more important — aspect of scientific knowledge consists of a set of theories or hypotheses or models (the terms are interchangeable) seeking to explain the workings of restricted parts of the world. The final goal of science is a single model or theory that would account for the universe as a whole. In actual practice, a model or hypothesis is a representation of a conceptual framework in terms of some entities, with a set of rules that relate the entities to the observations which have to be explained. A sound scientific model has three essential characteristics:

- (1) it explains a large number of observations in terms of a small number of entities, that is, it simplifies;
- (2) it makes definite predictions which can be tested by future observations, that is, it is testable;
- (3) it stands up to rigorous testing, that is, it is not easily falsified.

For example, the old theory that everything in the universe is made out of earth, air, fire and water seeks to explain the

apparently multifarious composition of the universe in terms of just four entities. So it fulfils the criterion of simplification. It also makes empirically testable predictions; for example, according to this theory even a piece of iron must consist of the above four entities. Testing shows that the theory is demonstrably false in regard to the composition of the piece of iron. In regard to water melon, needless to say, the theory will prove to be partially true, because water melons consist largely of water. By contrast, the hypothesis concerning gravitation which relates the force with which bodies attract one another to their mass and the distance between them, not only passes the test of simplification but also makes predictions about such phenomena as eclipses of the sun and moon which can be tested by observation. These predictions have turned out to be remarkably accurate.

Theories, hypotheses and models are only ways of explaining various things that happen in the world such as floods, epidemics, wars, inflation, suicides, whatever. It is important to realize that a scientific model or theory or hypothesis is *always provisional*. That any theory is universally valid can never be proved by any number of observations, however large. That is to say, no matter how many times the results of experiments agree with it, there is no guarantee that the very next observation will not contradict the hypothesis. On the other hand, just one single observation that does not fit is sufficient to disprove a hypothesis, formulated as a universal generalization. For example, the generalization that all flying animals are birds is falsified by the discovery of even a single bat, which is a flying mammal, not to speak of millions of mosquitos, which are insects, not birds. But a single observation or even several observations that do not fit, do not invalidate a hypothesis formulated in probabilistic terms. For instance, the generalization that heavy smokers are ten times more likely than non-smokers to develop lung cancer is not falsified by the discovery of several 80 year-old men who have smoked during every waking hour for the whole of their adult lives without developing lung cancer. Why not? Because the hypothesis does not say that all heavy smokers will develop lung cancer. What the hypothesis implies is that for every non-smoker who develops lung cancer, there will be about ten heavy smokers who will have the disease.

Merely because many observations agree with a given hypothesis we cannot conclude that the hypothesis must be true. Nature is so diverse that it is very easy to invent a hypothesis and underpin it with examples discovered by diligent searching. For instance, evidence can often be found to support the hypothesis that a given house is haunted: creaking doors, flickering lights, mysterious disappearances of food and so on. But the contrary hypothesis that

the same house is not haunted can also be shown to agree with many facts: that doors creak only when the wind blows, that electric lights in the house do not flicker and so on. Clearly both hypotheses cannot be true, although each can be shown to agree with several observations.

If absolute certainty is not attainable by scientific method or any other method like intuition or revelation, does it follow that all theories — scientific, metaphysical, religious, revelational — are entitled to the same intellectual status? The reasonable answer must be a categorical no. It is true that we do not know *everything* we wish to know, but we do know *something*, and we know some things better than we know other things. To take an example from medical science: we do not know the cause of high blood pressure in about 95% of patients suffering from it, but we do know that one cause of high blood pressure is kidney disease. Moreover, we know that severe high blood pressure, if untreated, will kill most patients within a few years. Even such imperfect knowledge enables us to prevent avoidable suffering and premature death.

It is important to realize that sciences such as physics, chemistry, medicine, anthropology, psychology, economics and political science use the same methodology. They make observations, formulate hypotheses and test the hypotheses in various ways. Nevertheless, experience has shown that the conclusions of physics and chemistry — the so-called exact sciences — have greater predictive power than the conclusions of, say, medicine, economics or political science. What is the explanation for this difference in predictive power? The answer is that in the exact sciences it has been possible to base conclusions on *controlled experiments*. In a controlled experiment all other things except the factor under investigation are kept constant. For example, physicists have conducted experiments to find out what happens to the volume of a gas when its pressure is changed. They discovered that whenever the pressure of a given volume of gas was doubled, its volume became halved, provided all other things like temperature and humidity were kept constant. They concluded that within the limits of their experiments, the volume of a gas is inversely proportional to its pressure. Repeated testing has shown that this conclusion is true. Hence the conclusion enables us to predict with great confidence that in the future too, if the pressure of a given volume of gas is doubled, its volume will become halved, provided all other things are kept constant.

It is only rarely in medicine and hardly ever at all in economics and political science that it is possible to carry out strictly controlled experiments. Predictably therefore the conclusions of

medicine, economics and political science have much less predictive power than those of physics and chemistry. Curiously enough the science with the most spectacular predictive power — astronomy — does not conduct controlled experiments at all; its conclusions are entirely based on observations of naturally occurring events. Its predictions such as those concerning the time of occurrence of eclipses of the sun and moon and the appearance of comets have been remarkably accurate. Why? Because all other relevant things except the position of the celestial bodies under consideration have remained constant over the period of observation. The world of economics and politics is extremely complicated. Millions of people are involved in their operations; “all other things” are never constant. Little wonder then that the laws of economics and politics hold true only on the average. That is to say, their predictive power is low.

### *Usefulness of a Scientific Approach*

At the present stage of our history, humankind is not in a state of absolute ignorance and our immediate aim is not the attainment of absolute enlightenment. Our modest aim is to progress from less reliable to more reliable knowledge. The advance of knowledge is largely a matter of the stepwise elimination of error by trial, that is, the gradual revision of previous knowledge. And experience has taught us that the most reliable method of eliminating error is the technique of empirical enquiry. Let us consider an example. For many thousands of years people believed that heavy objects fall to the ground at a faster rate than light ones. It seemed reasonable to believe, say, that if a 10 kilogram iron ball took one second to reach the ground when dropped from a certain height, a one kilogram iron ball dropped from the same height at the same place would take 10 seconds to do so. The observation that light objects like feathers, dry leaves and wisps of cotton wool fall to the ground more slowly than heavy objects like rocks and stones thrown into the air or fruits and nuts plucked from trees, supported this belief. Later actual experiment showed that if a 10 kilogram iron ball and a one kilogram iron ball are dropped together from the same height, they reach the ground almost together. Still later, after the vacuum pump was invented, it was shown that a feather and an iron ball dropped from the same height in a vacuum fall at the *same* rate. This shows how error is gradually eliminated by empirical enquiry and thereby knowledge is made more accurate.

As in real life so in science, it is not by first observing all the facts about a problem under investigation and then applying inductive reasoning to the interpretation of the assembled facts that the problem gets solved. Once a problem is solved it is of course possible to describe the process by which it was solved in such a



way as to make it appear that the solution was reached by inductive reasoning. In fact scientific papers are traditionally written in the inductive style. But both in real life and in the act of scientific discovery, it is not by the use of classical inductive reasoning that problems are solved; rather, it is by the use of the hypothetico-deductive method that problems are solved. In this process various possibilities to account for a given phenomenon are considered. Each imaginable possibility serves to generate a hypothesis. Then predictions are made from each hypothesis, and these are put to the test of observation. The final test of scientific truth is therefore empirical: do the predictions from the hypothesis match the observed facts? If the predictions do not match the facts, the hypothesis fails the test; that is, it is refuted. Thus the process of testing a hypothesis is — simultaneously — an attempt at refuting (or falsifying) it or confirming (or corroborating) it. The implications of refuting a theory, however, are quite different from the implications of confirming it. Refutation of a theory kills it, but even repeated confirmation does not make it immortal. Refutation is conclusive; confirmation is always provisional. Thus absolute certainty is unattainable by humankind; that is, *all human knowledge is permanently doubtful.*

### *Case for Scientific Medicine*

Perhaps it is now time to ask whether an enquiry into the nature of human knowledge such as we have undertaken, is of any practical importance. The matter is most profitably considered in relation to some specific problem, shall we say the problem of human health and disease. Consider, for example, the following question: Since all human knowledge is doubtful, is there any good reason for choosing one system of medicine instead of another? To be specific: Are there any rational grounds for preferring scientific medicine to, say, faith-healing? Let us see.

The first relevant consideration in deciding the issue, has to do with the general outlook of the two systems of healing. Modern scientific medicine takes explicit cognizance of the reality that all human knowledge is to some degree doubtful and therefore provisional. Faith-healing is based on immutable preconceived notions concerning the existence of spirits which are presumed to be capable of causing and curing human disease. Modern medicine knows that there are many things it does not know, and is constantly on the alert to learn more. Faith-healing has no such epistemological problems. Faith-healers are cocksure. Scientifically trained doctors are cautious. On general grounds therefore a rational person is more likely to be drawn to scientific medicine than to faith-healing.

The second relevant consideration is that the theories of scientific medicine are capable of being empirically tested and conclusively refuted. In contrast, the theories of faith-healing are incapable of being empirically refuted; they can be rationalized in terms of their theoretical framework, against all manner of objections. The truth or falsehood of a system of medicine whose theories cannot be conclusively tested cannot ever be known. What cannot be known, however, may even be false. Hence the theory of faith-healing may be totally false. This is another rational ground for preferring scientific medicine to faith-healing.

A third relevant consideration is that the theories of modern medicine are not only testable, but also have been severely tested. Only theories that have withstood rigorous attempts at falsification survive for more than a few decades in modern medicine. The theories of faith-healing have been fixed once and for all and have survived unchanged because they cannot be strictly tested. Any rational person should prefer a system of medicine whose theories have been severely tested to a system whose theories cannot be so tested.

A person trained in the evaluation of evidence would not prefer faith-healing to scientific medicine, merely because faith-healers may be able to show some empirical support in its favour. Such support may include instances of faith-healers curing patients who could not be helped by scientific medicine. In cultures with a belief in a given form of faith-healing, believers suffering from symptoms which are purely psychological in origin, may in fact be cured by faith-healers. This only proves the efficacy of suggestion, not of the healing properties of the cognitive content of the particular faith. That is why equal benefit can come from faith in one God as in Christian belief or in 330 million gods as in popular Buddhist belief. Apparent empirical support can always be found for almost any system of medicine. This is so because the human body has a marvellous natural system of defence and healing which is quite capable of overcoming in time a variety of illnesses or injury. Thus there are many diseases which cure themselves after a period of time without any treatment or in spite of any harmless and useless treatment. If self-curing diseases like the common cold, chicken-pox, influenza, mumps and so on are treated by any form of faith-healing, the patient will almost always get cured, in spite of the treatment and not because of it. Those ignorant of the self-limited, self-curing nature of these diseases, will in all honesty and innocence attribute the cure to faith, because the cure followed the ministrations of the faith-healer. In so doing they are merely confusing consequence with sequence.

Thus there are indeed rational grounds for preferring scientific medicine to faith-healing (or any other currently available system of alternate medicine, for that matter). This is not to say that there are no shortcomings in scientific medicine. There are plenty of them and scientific medicine knows what the shortcomings are. What fatally condemns faith-healing to a modern intelligence is its cocksureness about the validity of its vague, untestable theories.

### *Case for the Scientific Outlook*

Even as rationality should lead us to choose scientific medicine over any other currently available system of health care, it should also induce us to opt for the use of accurate observation, logical reasoning and controlled experimentation as the most reliable path to knowledge about the world. Although, admittedly, science cannot give us indubitable knowledge, the scientific enterprise itself, though prone to error, is basically rational. The rationality is inherent in the scientific process itself, that is to say, in the possibility of approaching greater accuracy and completeness by conscious, rigorous error-elimination. Each time new attempts at falsifying a scientific hypothesis by new experiments fail, the hypothesis survives and our confidence in it is increased. If the attempt at falsification succeeds the hypothesis is revised, amended or even discarded. The history of science is, indeed, the history of revisionism. The only certainty that modern knowledge has to offer is that modern knowledge is at best only probable and not certain. There is no doubt that, as of now, humankind does not have a method by means of which it is possible at least in principle to achieve absolute certainty. In the world of modern knowledge only the stupid and the ignorant feel absolute certainty and are ready to justify the irreversible act of killing others who do not accept the primitive certainties of the killers. Political leaders who ordered indiscriminate mass murder in the past in the name of scientific socialism were neither imbued with the scientific spirit nor inspired by the socialist ethos. There is evidence that some of them were motivated by the lust for blood and power and a longing for luxurious living. Those who became their tools and dupes and executed their orders included idealistic, politically-innocent youths, alienated, frustrated victims of the socio-economic system seeking quick redress and psychopathic characters in search of the thrill of violence and dangerous living. But this digression is not part of the present epistemological story! Another digression which is not part of the epistemological story is desirable at this point. It is important to realize that although the sciences are very valuable to humans, all things valuable to humans are not sciences. Love and friendship, for example, are not sciences. That does not mean they are not valuable or that they are not reliable guides to action.

The principal practical lesson that modern knowledge has to teach is that working hypotheses are the only guides destiny has to offer humankind stumbling in the dark towards enlightenment. The great modern epistemological precept must be: *Replace your dogmas with working hypotheses!* The very concept of entertaining a working hypothesis carries the implication of the possibility of error. Dogmas breed fanatics and fanatics are prone to sacrifice human life to vindicate their dogmas. Working hypotheses breed tolerance and tolerance conduces to longevity. But is a long life the ultimate good? In order to seek an answer to that question we must inquire into the nature of human nature.

### 3. Our Nature

#### *“Human Nature” Defined*

Our knowledge of our nature — human nature — must be the foundation of our approach to life. Our efforts to escape suffering and to pursue happiness which do not take serious account of the nature of human nature, cannot hope to approach their goals.

First, let us try to be clear what exactly we are to understand by the term “human nature”. For our present purpose, human nature signifies the combination of biological, social, moral, cultural and historical factors that makes humans to behave in the ways they do. A preliminary question will arise and must be disposed of: Is it at all possible for humans to properly study humankind spread over space and time, with the object of discovering whether different humans behave in the same sort of way when they find themselves in similar situations, and formulating a theory which has explanatory and predictive power? Since humankind is part of Nature, there is, in principle, no reason why human nature cannot be the subject of scientific enquiries. And empirical knowledge of the fundamental structure of our nature obtained from such enquiries must form an integral part of the philosophical basis of an effective guide to living. Without such knowledge opinions that support one approach to life have no more validity than those that support another. Already enough empirical knowledge is available about the biological, social, religious and aesthetic aspects of human behaviour to permit the formulation of working hypotheses concerning different aspects of human nature.

Living in our times, we should be particularly concerned with the behaviour characteristics of the five billion or so humans currently crowding planet Earth. Whether the behaviour of contemporary humans represents the expression of our real species nature or is only a preterminal pathological aberration of it, is a relevant question which must be faced. By way of answer, suffice it to say that if enough is known about the evolutionary history of a species, it should be possible to account for its contemporaneous behaviour, even if it is aberrant, in terms of the interaction between its genetic inheritance and current environmental circumstances. For a species behaves in the ways it does largely because of patterns of adaptations built into its genes. It is programmed to grow and develop in a highly specific way. The behaviour program is transmitted from generation to generation in the genetic code of the species. The species behaves in the ways it does because such patterns of behaviour have paid off in the struggle for survival in the past. That a set of behaviour patterns has paid off in the past is no guarantee that it

will pay off in the present or future. Rapidly changing circumstances could well make inherited behaviour patterns hopelessly inappropriate. The incapacity of a species of living organisms to adjust themselves to changing circumstances has led inexorably to one sequel: extinction.

### *Varieties of Human Behaviour*

The expression of human nature as it has been recorded in history, and as it manifests itself in contemporaneous human behaviour, is unbelievably diverse. To begin with an extreme example: some humans ritualistically eat the flesh of their enemies; thus cannibalism is a recognized form of human behaviour. In some parts of the world, custom still requires a widow to immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre. Millions of humans still think it is wicked to eat pork; others would rather die than eat beef. Some humans drink urine in the belief that it is a source of divine insights. Some do not work on Saturdays because they believe it is sinful to do so; others will not indulge in games on Sundays for the same reason. Marital customs and patterns of sexual behaviour are bewilderingly diverse. Although monogamy is the commonest form of marriage, some societies practise polygamy and others practise polyandry. Incest within the nuclear family is a taboo in almost all known societies. Adultery too is a taboo in most societies. Taboo or not, adultery is a recognized form of human behaviour in every known society, although some societies stone to death a woman — but not her partner — found guilty of adultery. Some societies permit consenting adults to practise homosexuality in private; others permit open homosexuality.

Violent behaviour is known in almost every human society. Killing in war is endorsed by most humans in all societies. Summary execution of those considered “traitors” by a human group is a common practice. Killing in self-defence is almost universally condoned. Killing in defence of one's property also is permitted in some societies. Suicide is a form of human behaviour known in almost every society. The attitudes to each of these forms of behaviour varies a great deal in different cultures.

### *Ubiquity of Xenophobia*

When it comes to matters like forms of social organization, food habits, marriage customs, child-rearing practices, initiation ceremonies, religious worship and modes of artistic expression, the patterns of human behaviour are incredibly various. So much so that almost all human groups find social intercourse with strange outsiders or members of “out-groups” very difficult. So it comes

about that xenophobia, that is to say, one human group's instinctive dislike of members of out-groups, is almost universal. Among primitive people xenophobia, at its mildest, takes the form of a grudging tolerance of members of out-groups; at its worst it expresses itself as outright, summary murder of members of out-groups. In modern times rich tourists are welcome in most countries and tourism has certainly helped to diminish xenophobia. Human groups totally devoid of xenophobia are probably non-existent; within human groups there are a few individuals who do seem to be able to experience a sense of universal human kinship. Exceptional humans have claimed to have been able to experience a sense of oneness with all sentient beings. In general the more isolated, uninformed, and untravelled the members of a human group are, the more xenophobic they tend to be. The most effective antidote available against xenophobia is a broad, humanistic, scientific education. If history is taught as the story of humankind, children will realize that almost all human groups have contributed to civilization. From biological studies they will realize that all humans share the same genetic code and have the potential to contribute to civilization. Such insights could generate a respect for all humans as members of the same great, widespread family.

### *Common Characteristics of Human Behaviour*

The extremely wide range of manifest human behaviour naturally raises the question whether there are in fact behaviour patterns that are common to all known human groups. In other words, are there regularities of behaviour that stem from the very nature of humankind? To be sure, all human groups indulge in activities such as feeding, mating, rearing of offspring, speaking, writing, helping, caring, fearing, hating, fighting, commanding, obeying, learning, exploring, inventing, playing, singing, dancing, sleeping and worshipping. The question is whether there are common patterns of behaviour underlying these activities which obtain in all known societies. Concerning this matter, the following broad generalizations seem to be reasonable.

#### *1. Hierarchic Structure*

Every human group is principally concerned with the business of surviving and perpetuating itself. In order to do so it needs material resources. These are not unlimited. Therefore there is a competition among members of the group for the available resources. Every human society deals with the problem of distribution of resources through its political system, that is, through its method of social organization. Tribes without formal rulers are known, but no societies are known without some arrangement for the

maintenance of social order in which elders exercise control at least over the youngest members. Modern nation-states, of course, are organized on a hierarchical or rank-ordered basis. In these states those in the higher rungs of the hierarchy have greater access to the available resources, than do those in the lower rungs. In other words, the distribution of resources is unequal, often grossly so. During the past few centuries the concept of equality has come to be publicly valued as an ideal, but private behaviour has generally failed to conform to this ideal. Humans are observably unequal in their capacity for dominance, and in every society the more dominant ones have had greater access to resources than the less dominant ones.

## *2. Co-operative Behaviour*

Co-operation for mutual benefit and for the survival and interest of the group is the basis of all human societies. By co-operative endeavour all societies have learned communication by speech, the use of fire, the use of tools and at least elementary farming. Children receive special attention in all societies. Altruistic behaviour, that is behaviour of an individual in such a way that it has the effect of promoting the welfare of others in a group, at the expense of the altruist's own welfare, is known in all societies.

## *3. Symbols and Language*

All human groups create and attach themselves to symbols which represent for members of a given group specific objects, ideas or processes. The language of a group is pre-eminently its most important symbol system. What sets humans apart from animals is their capacity to communicate by symbols. Language is the symbol system which makes it possible for technologically complex societies to develop; it can also be used to generate behaviour which can destroy such societies. Language is the medium of cognitive knowledge; it is also the medium of nonsensical superstition. All societies develop a culture, a code of ethical behaviour and a system of worship. Religion is a fundamental feature of all human societies. According to a recent estimate four out of every five humans alive believe in a religion. This is understandable. Humans find themselves in a mysterious world and given their self-conscious brain, they need to make sense of their existence. Religions fulfil this need for most of them and religions can do so because of the capacity of the human brain to believe without strict verification. What is more, humans have to come to terms with death, and on the subject of what happens at death and ever after, science has no comforting wisdom to offer. At some point along the line empirical knowledge fails each of us, and at that point religious faith provides consolation to most of us. The consolation evidently comes from the act of faith itself and not



from its factual content. That is why religious consolation is equally compatible with theism and and atheism; with belief in an immortal soul and with denial of such a belief! What is undeniable is that there is a program in the human brain for metaphysical thinking. The operation of that program brings religion to the centre of the social existence of the vast majority of humans, although over a billion humans in today's world profess no religion or are atheists. The non-religious and atheists are not necessarily non-metaphysical, however. Many of them live at least as serenely as the religious, but unlike in the case of the truly religious, their metaphysical thinking renders them incapable of professing beliefs that do not fit with nature. Some atheists profess a purely personal religion which is compatible with modern knowledge.

#### *4. Competition and Conflict*

Many of the things most desired by almost all humans are in short supply. This results in struggles over the distribution of these scarce resources. These struggles take the form of competition or conflict. Conflict often leads to actual fighting. Fighting behaviour of one form or another is observable in all societies. Historically, fighting has served to establish territorial borders between various human groups. Within a given group, violence or the threat of violence has played a part in establishing patterns of social dominance. The extreme form of intergroup violence is war. Wars have resulted from ethnic, religious, economic and nationalistic conflicts. Those who have been victims of racial, religious, political or economic oppression have often been compelled to have recourse to violence as the defence of last resort.

#### *5. Aesthetic Activities*

All human societies have tried to come to terms with the mystery of their existence and the nature of the enigmatic forces that affect them by means of various forms of art — poetry, painting, narrative, dancing, drama and music. The best art that humankind has produced through the long years has uplifted and enlightened humans and helped them to understand themselves better, and to communicate with each other in an emotionally sensitive manner. Good art has provided societies with interpretations of themselves. It has enriched human emotional life. It has elevated the human spirit. It has promoted civilized conduct.

#### *6. Pursuit of Excitement*

The pursuit of excitement and mental stimulation of one form or another is an invariable feature of all human societies.

Excitement is derived directly or vicariously from activities such as competitive sports, gambling, games of skill, political campaigns, theatre and drama. Even war provides a deadly variety of excitement which seems to appeal to many humans. In different ways, acquiring knowledge, grappling with intellectual problems, indulging in argument and debate and participation in religious rituals provide excitement and stimulation. The experience of religious ecstasy appears to have a particularly exciting and stimulating effect. By far the commonest way of seeking excitement and stimulation has been by the use of a variety of naturally occurring substances like alcohol, tobacco, opium, and hemp. Pharmacologically, alcohol and opium are not stimulants of the brain, but in many humans they produce effects which are highly prized by those who become addicted to them. Through the ages alcohol has been widely used, indeed, abused. Almost every known society appears to have discovered it independently. Some societies have actually worshipped alcohol as a god. Drugs that act on the brain have played an important role in the religious practices of many societies. Under certain conditions, certain chemicals (called hallucinogens) produce in some humans what they have described as profound mystical experiences.

Thus behind the facade of manifest diversity there are basic characteristics of human behaviour discernible in all human societies, from the small-scale pre-industrial (tribal) societies to the most technologically advanced industrial states. The superficial aspects of the ways in which a given group of humans feed, mate, rear children, speak, write, fight, play, sing, dance, worship and do the various other things that humans do, often differ from the superficial aspects of such activities of other groups. These superficial differences account for the diversity of human cultures. The important point is, however, that different human cultures are much less diverse than they superficially appear to be, because they represent various expressions of basic human nature. Humans are genetically programmed to create cultures. And every culture has social traditions which are primarily concerned with the non-genetic transmission of information from one generation to another. To say this, of course, is not to pretend to lay bare the black box of any specific culture, and show how its cogs and wheels turn. The human genetic code is contained in the sperm and the ovum which fuse at conception to produce the living blueprint of a new human. This blueprint decrees that the human who finally emerges shall have the capacity to use language, to make rules regulating social and sexual behaviour, to explore the world, to seek a meaning and purpose in existence — in a word, to behave culturally. The human genetic code makes humans gregarious, but not completely so. Although essentially a social being, a large part of a human's life is in fact

spent privately outside communal life. As much as one third of a human's lifetime, is spent in sleep; of the waking hours, too, the time spent in carrying out many physiological functions and the time spent in some forms of aesthetic enjoyment or in just sitting still, is usually time spent privately. Small wonder then that most humans are not much interested in the public life of their times. They do not live out their lives by executing a sequence of rigid social behaviours decreed by their genes. They can, in the expressive modern phrase, do their own thing. They can do so because they are endowed with consciousness — a concept which merits a special word.

### *Role of Consciousness*

An estimated 250 000 pairs of genes regulate the growth and development of a human. Some 10 billion nerve cells make up the human brain. The human genes controlling social behaviour express themselves through the human brain. The important problem is to assess the extent to which human behaviour is determined by the genes; in more familiar language, to assess the extent to which it is governed by the instincts. There are good grounds for hypothesizing that humankind emerged in Nature at the point in evolution when instinctive determination of behaviour became decisively subordinated to behaviour learned through the medium of the brain. The genes carry a program to produce an all-purpose device called the brain which permits intelligent adaptation to a diverse variety of terrestrial and even celestial environments. The quintessence of humanity resides in the human brain. The brain endows humans with the capacity for reflective self-awareness, symbolic reasoning and virtually unlimited imagination. These are capacities that permit the creation and manipulation of symbols, at once the source of human diabolism and saintliness, hysteria and rationality, war and peace. The pity of it is that by means of symbols, humans are capable of converting otherwise harmless humans into objects of hatred, to be tortured and killed with a good conscience.

For all its wondrous powers, the human brain is not a foolproof instrument. It is liable to illusions and hallucinations. On occasion it may become deluded to the point of actual lunacy. Even otherwise, its judgements are often erroneous. But it does have a built-in self-correcting mechanism in the form of reflective self-awareness or consciousness. By virtue of this mechanism, the human brain can think about its own thinking. When it knows something, it not only knows it but also knows that it knows it. When it does not know, it is aware of its ignorance. This particular faculty of the human brain is different from the faculty of instrumental intelligence which humans share with animals. Instrumental intelligence merely enables the manipulation of objects to satisfy an organism's

physiological needs. Self-awareness or consciousness of the sort that the human brain has permits understanding, that is, acquiring insight into the very nature of things. This faculty enables humans to judge that they are set apart from Nature of which they are a part. It also enables them to know that absolute certainty is beyond human attainment. It makes them acutely aware of the tenuous nature of their existence on earth, of their liability to suffering and of their march towards death. Hence their very existence presents a riddle to humans which they must solve in order to achieve inner harmony. So it comes about that by their very nature, humans endeavour to make sense of the world in which they find themselves, without knowing whence they came or why.

Lacking a preordained genetically programmed set of instincts to guide their behaviour with mechanical precision, humans need a philosophy of life, or more simply, a map of their natural and social worlds to guide them through life. Their philosophy offers an explanation of the meaning and purpose of life. The basis of the explanation could be religious, astrological, political, miraculous, or scientific. In so far as all explanations ultimately involve faith in what is not demonstrable, categorically speaking all explanations are, indeed, mythical. To be sure, as of now only a minority of humankind is guided by the scientific myth, if only because only a minority of humankind has had the opportunity of acquiring a proper scientific education. Nor is this a cause for wonderment. Although the earliest human remains that have been discovered are about three million years old, *Homo sapiens* is usually credited — in an easy-to-remember round figure — with about one million years. Religion is as old as we know anything about mankind's mental history. Science as organized common sense is perhaps 3 000 years old, but as a potent social force which moulded humankind's ideas and institutions, it is hardly 300 years old. The serious application of science to industry began only about 200 years ago. In the history of *Homo sapiens* the modern scientific outlook came to be formulated very recently indeed. Up to now it has been acquired only very slowly and imperfectly by a microscopic minority of humankind. So a scientific philosophy has necessarily to be a thing of the future. For the philosophy of a group derives its validity from the consensus of the majority of the members of the group. There is no known human group that does not have a philosophy of life or world-view or frame of orientation or a map — call it what you will. The compelling human need for a guiding philosophy explains the ease with which humans under stress fall under the spell of misguided, irrational, absurd or even plainly insane systems of belief or ideologies, especially when they are couched in religious or nationalistic terms. To an agitated mass of people, a simple theory that links up all of society's current turmoils and explains them in

terms they can readily grasp, becomes compellingly persuasive. The death and destruction that such a theory may bring about do not seem to matter to the group under its spell.

### *A General Theory*

Having briefly surveyed the diverse behaviour characteristics of humankind, let us now see the extent to which they can be understood in terms of a general theory. Humans have lived on earth for about a million years. Until they learned farming about 10 000 years ago, they lived by hunting animals and gathering food. For something like 99% of their existence therefore humankind has lived as hunter-gatherers. In the hunting-gathering stage, humans are presumed to have lived in small groups or tribes consisting of less than about a hundred members. Hunting was done almost exclusively by men; gathering food was done largely by women. Primitive hunting was a group activity which required close co-operation and a strong sense of relatedness among the men of the tribe. The symbol-making capacity of their brains enabled them to plan their hunting strategies by the use of language. Such discussions would have helped to promote unity among members of the tribe. The regular hunt provided the hunters with stimulation and excitement. It also gave them the sense of satisfaction that comes from effective participation in a worthwhile public task. When men went hunting, the women stayed at the home base and looked after the children and gathered edibles like fruits, nuts, tubers and honey from the neighbourhood. For the hunting males, the typical hunting expedition would have been long and exhausting. Given their primitive weapons, many expeditions probably ended in failure. The gathering of food by the females was likely to have been a more predictably successful enterprise than hunting. Hence it is a fair speculation that it was the labour of females that kept the tribe regularly fed; less regularly the males provided high quality animal proteins. On days the men came home exhausted and frustrated, they would have especially relished the leisurely contact with their mates and children. They would have played with the children and told them exciting stories about the hunt. There is some evidence that our ancestors, decorated the walls of their cave-homes with drawings of animals. Examples of cave-art which have survived indicate a well-developed aesthetic sense. Dance and song which are expressions of the innate human sense of rhythm, would also have been part of the social life of our primitive ancestors.

From the foregoing it is evident that the life of our hunting-gathering ancestors was essentially a social or communal one. Natural selection would have favoured the survival and reproduction of individuals whose innate propensities facilitated social behaviour.

During the long hunting-gathering stage of human evolutionary history, fighting between tribes and among members within a given tribe, was likely to have been minimal. Intertribal wars to defend hunting grounds were probably rare if only because the area available for hunting was practically unlimited in relation to the total number of humans on earth at that time. Social dominance within a given tribe was probably established without physical violence because the tribe was really like an extended family consisting of close kin.

In the hunting-gathering stage women were mainly concerned with child-bearing and child-rearing, and with gathering food; men with hunting and defence. But there would have been some overlap of functions. Particularly in the face of danger to offspring, women would have fought with the kind of grim determination that mothers are capable of under such circumstances. The men probably monopolised certain tribal functions. For example, they would have presided over councils; decided the forms of religious rituals; controlled exchanges with other tribes. All these male activities probably did not amount to a domination of men over women. What probably prevailed was close co-operation for nurturing children. The general domination of men over women in the form of patriarchy was to become feasible only at a certain level of complexity of socio-economic organization, and was to be a thing of the future. In the hunting-gathering stage of human social evolution, the natural division of labour that prevailed would have obligated a man to defend himself, his family and his tribe. In time his family and his tribe would have become the natural objects of his devotion.

In consonance with the above reconstruction of human social evolution is the speculation that naturally occurring catastrophic events such as earthquakes, floods, forest fires and epidemics would have terrified our hunting ancestors. They did not understand the nature of such events and they could do nothing to prevent them. Their symbol-making, explanation-seeking brains would have driven them — even as we are driven — to represent with symbols the devastating, powerful, invisible forces responsible for the catastrophes. Later they — like most of us — would have come to worship in a religious mode those very symbols and submit themselves to their protection, even as the subordinate members of a tribe submitted themselves to the protection of the all-powerful dominant males of the group. Primitive religion probably began in some such way.

It is surmised that humans learned farming about 10 000 years ago. At that stage, the tribes had to adopt a more settled way of life than obtained during the hunting stage. This transition was necessitated by the need for fertile land and a ready supply of water

for farming. This transition added another entity to be secured and defended: a well-marked territory. Hence, with the dawn of agriculture, the tribe developed into a territorial society. And the tribe began to get “rooted” in a particular area of land to which its members became strongly attached. Thus was born the feeling for a “homeland” or “motherland” or “fatherland”; the place where a human has an inalienable birth-right to live without anybody’s permission. Historically, alterations of the boundaries of homelands have almost invariably involved wars.

### *Evolution of Human Sub-groups*

With successful farming, food became plentiful and one human’s labour produced more food than what one human required for consumption. This advance made it possible for some members of the tribe to devote themselves full-time to religious, medicinal and artistic activities. As food became plentiful, the tribes also increased in size. When the tribes were small — as they had been for 99% of humankind’s existence — the unity of a tribe was guaranteed because everybody in the tribe knew everybody else. When the tribes became very large, however, it became impossible for everyone in a tribe to get to know everyone else personally. At that stage, devices invented by the symbol-making capacity of the brain — language, religion, customs and so on — served to unite members of a tribe into cohesive social organizations. In a word, the culture of a tribe united its members. A culture unites members of a human group by giving them an identity which makes them recognizably different from members of other groups. Therefore the very cultural devices which enhanced unity among members of a group also concurrently emphasized differences between groups. Thus arose the distinction between “us” and “them” and therewith began the separation of humankind into various ethnic groups. As the populations increased and spread over the surface of the earth adapting to different degrees of sunlight, temperature and humidity, they came to differ more and more from one another in physical appearance as well as in language, religion, customs and habits. These physical and cultural differences tended to sharpen the xenophobic feelings of different human groups. Even so, it remains an eminently feasible proposition for a fertile man drawn from any randomly selected culture to co-operate with a fertile female drawn from any other culture to beget and nurture a fertile member of the species *Homo sapiens*. And human fertility, as we shall presently see, has had a major impact on human social history.

## *Consequences of the Population Explosion*

According to the best guesses, before the dawn of agriculture some 10 000 years ago, the total number of humans on earth probably did not exceed about a million. After agriculture became well-established, the world population is estimated to have increased to about 100 million. There is evidence that by 1800 A.C. there were about a thousand million (or a billion) humans in the world. In 1930, there were about two billion. The world population became four billion in 1975. If present birth-rates continue, in the year 2000 A.C., at least six billion humans will inhabit the earth. This phenomenal increase in population has forced large numbers of humans to live under grossly overcrowded conditions. It must be remembered that for no less than 99% of their existence, humans lived in groups of less than 100 individuals. In other words, the biological evolution of humankind has not adequately equipped humans to live in huge aggregations of thousands and millions such as inhabit modern cities. The overcrowded, cosmopolitan, metropolitan modern life strains our inherited behavioural tendencies to the breaking point. Considering our evolutionary history, it is no wonder that there is so much ethnic and religious strife, crime, political turmoil, labour unrest and youth revolt in modern societies. Why? Because biologically we are still equipped only for small "in-group" relations. The Soviet Union, for example, contains about 90 different ethnic groups many of which were arbitrarily incorporated into the Union. The recent emergence of "national fronts" to advance ethnic, linguistic and cultural causes is not to be wondered at. They were bound to emerge as a biological imperative as soon as the habit of fear of these groups began to fade under the impact of glasnost. Had humans possessed only mechanically operating instincts instead of learning brains to guide them, ethnic conflicts in the world might well have been worse. Because of the intrinsic nature of the human brain there is a chance to learn how to compensate for the inherited biological inadequacies. Unfortunately, up to now, most humans have not had adequate opportunities of becoming systematically educated for living in multi-ethnic societies. This deficiency is one factor that facilitates ethnic conflicts and violence. A brief look at the politics of violence is not out of place at this point.

### *Politics of Violence*

As human populations increased and multiplied, there occurred concomitantly a competition among the various human groups for the scarce resources of the world. The groups themselves expanded and developed into nations. Within a nation too there was a similar competition for the same scarce resources. In no known society have all members received equal shares of all available



material resources. On the contrary, almost everywhere, a minority has had a greater access to goods and services which has enabled them to live more comfortably than the rest. What is more, the comfortable minority has generally enjoyed greater political power than the rest. Thus slave-owners have been more comfortable and more powerful than slaves; feudal lords than serfs; owners of capital than wage-labourers. Through the ages slaves, serfs, labourers and otherwise disadvantaged and underprivileged humans — the underclass — have struggled to better their condition. They have sought to increase their share of income, wealth and power. Their struggle has never been easy and only rarely successful, because the powerful minority — the ruling class — has resolutely resisted it. In this class struggle the division of wealth and privilege has been challenged by the underclass and defended by the ruling class. On occasion the struggle has expressed itself violently as sporadic acts of terrorism, a slave revolt, a peasant uprising, an urban insurrection or even as a full-blooded revolution. In modern industrial societies the class struggle sometimes assumes the form of legal battles over entitlements; more often it expresses itself in various forms of industrial action, especially strikes. There can be little doubt about the importance of the class struggle as a motor of social change in recorded history.

Political violence, particularly in the form of barbaric acts of terrorism, has become such a stark fact of life in the modern world that the roots of violence in human nature merit exploration. Human violence is a very complex phenomenon and any attempt to account for all forms of violence — that is, the pursuit of self-interest of a person or a group by the use of force or intimidation — in terms of one root cause is a futile exercise. The motivation of interpersonal violence is often quite different from the motivation of intergroup violence or war. So far as the politics of violence is concerned, it is relevant to note that in humans, as in animals, there is an inborn capacity to react to threats to their survival or vital interests with rage and attack. Such behaviour, in its proper context, is potentially life-preserving and therefore biologically adaptive. For example, the survival of humans will be threatened when they cannot obtain the basic necessities for bare subsistence. In those circumstances those who can will not hesitate to secure what they need from those who have. And those who have resources will defend themselves and their resources with counter-violence. This is a form of the class struggle.

If human violence expressed itself only in unarmed combat, it would not have posed a major threat to the continued existence of humankind. It is the use of weapons — wooden clubs, pieces of rock, iron bars, spears, arrows, guns and bombs — that has made human conflicts unbelievably devastating. The invention of nuclear

weapons converted war into a confrontation with the potential for mutual extermination. Threats to survival occasioned by the need for the bare necessities of life are by no means the only releasers of human violence. Most of the violence in the modern world does not in fact originate from the abjectly poor and malnourished fighting for bare necessities. The abjectly poor and malnourished are not strong enough to fight. Most of the violence in today's world derives from the defence of other "vital interests" of humans. These may include not only one's family, friends, near kin, nation and property, but also one's sense of identity, language, religion, homeland or motherland. If necessary humans may, and often will, use violence to win their freedom and defend their sense of dignity. Organized intergroup violence or war is a culturally conditioned phenomenon. It can be conditioned by symbol systems such as religion or nationalism. Perhaps this is the place to examine the biological basis of nationalism.

### *Nationalism and Tribalism*

The basis of nationalism is an inherited human propensity to form social "in-groups". The culture in which a human grows up strongly influences the ideas, ideals and aspirations he or she will acquire. In generating a nationalist ethos, which is only an elaboration of tribalism or the herd instinct, a culture builds on the inherited human tendency to form "in-groups". Since for 99% of their evolutionary history humans have led a tribal existence, the strength of tribal or nationalist feeling is only to be expected. It is rooted in human gregariousness. The solidarity it engenders would have had high survival value to our tribal hunting ancestors. After the advent of farming, tribes with a strong herd-instinct would have succeeded in acquiring and defending fertile territories. Victorious tribes would have claimed exclusive use of acquired territories and come to regard them as their homelands. If the need arose they would have fought to the death in defence of their territories. Such experiences would have enhanced the emotional attachment of a tribe to their homeland or motherland or fatherland.

The nation-state as we know it today is a very recent development in human evolutionary history. Small wonder then that "tribal feelings" are often more powerful than "nationalist feelings". This explains why narrow subgroup feelings such as "caste" or "regional" feelings emerge from time to time even in the heat of national liberation struggles. Tribal and nationalistic feelings lend themselves to easy arousal and manipulation. During the past 200 years nationalism has perhaps generated more violence, cruelty and barbarism than any other human emotion. In 1935, the Nuremberg racial laws deprived Jews of German citizenship and forbade them

to marry or have sexual relations with "Aryans". Not long after, German nationalism terrorized, tortured, exterminated and incinerated some six million Jews simply because they were Jews. Hundreds of thousands of Poles suffered the same fate. German nationalism was fascist; so it also exterminated thousands of German communists and socialists as enemies of the German Nation.

Narrow ways of thinking and feeling associated with tribalism served a purpose in the ages of scarcity and primitive farming. They are no longer necessary or desirable because of the increase in efficiency for good and evil brought about by scientific knowledge. By rational social organization and the use of modern techniques it is now possible to produce enough goods and services to maintain in health all humans living today. A fierce struggle for survival is no longer necessary. Even so, too many humans living today are obliged to struggle for survival, because a few in all countries have much more than they need to live in material comfort and security, though perhaps much less than they crave for. Love of money as a possession is a morbidity that manifestly afflicts the rich more severely than it afflicts the poor. Hence large scale co-operation between the rich to alleviate or improve the condition of the poor is not readily generated. And conflicts between the rich and the poor continue to disrupt societies.

In looking for a way out of this impasse, it is well to take note of two facts. First, modern technology has made it possible to prevent humans now alive from struggling for subsistence, although this may not apply if population growth continues unabated; second, modern technology has made it possible for a human conflict to produce death and destruction on a devastating scale. Given the current human situation, humankind has more to gain from large-scale co-operation than from large-scale conflict. Because modern warfare is so devastatingly destructive, prudence if not humanitarianism, enjoins co-operation. The need for co-operation is more widely recognized now than ever before. Already there is a substantial degree of international co-operation at work in various spheres of activity. Some spectacular successes have been achieved. The conquest of small-pox which scourged humankind for centuries, is perhaps the most dramatic success of large-scale co-operation. It was achieved at a cost of some \$300 million, which is less than the world's daily military expenditure! There is new hope at present that a rational estimate of self-interest is inducing healthy changes in thinking and feeling, at least in some percipient leaders of nations. Reduction in the gross economic inequalities that prevail in the world will significantly improve the fate of millions otherwise condemned to short, unhealthy, unfulfilled lives. Regrettably, instinctual behaviour patterns change but slowly. Habits of

attachment to what people already possess are infused with strong emotions which are almost impervious to reason. Since, however, learned behaviour has increasingly replaced instinctual behaviour in humans, our capacity to change behaviour is greater than in animals. For that reason, well-informed humans are probably better equipped to change more rapidly and decisively than those who have not had the advantage of a broad, humane, scientific education. Unfortunately, education is often a weak countervailing force against passions like rivalry, vanity, power-drive and greed which are deadly facilitators of conflict. But even in despair it is to education that humankind has to turn to grapple with the facilitators of conflict.

### *Facilitators of Conflict*

There is strong evidence that certain conditions tend to provoke intertribal or intergroup conflict and violence, particularly in situations where material resources are scarce. In such situations a vast increase in the number of individuals in different human groups is an almost invariant prelude to the genesis of intergroup violence. The development of contiguous territories each inhabited almost exclusively by a single ethnic group appears to arouse intergroup hostility from sheer lack of familiarity. The creation of armies or bands of professional killers and the manufacture of weapons which kill at a distance have been potent facilitators of human conflict. Gross economic inequalities between human groups lead predictably to predatory violence. Deliberate fanning of nationalistic feelings by propaganda can easily provoke and maintain intergroup violence particularly in situations where material resources are in short supply.

No doubt, rational human intervention can radically change these conditions for the better. In principle, excessive increase of population can be controlled; multi-ethnic societies can be created and nurtured; armies can be disbanded; the manufacture of weapons can be outlawed; gross economic inequalities between human groups can be reduced; nationalistic propaganda can be stopped. But all this presupposes a strong desire to build a stable, peaceful world. Sadly, at first sight, the passions which seem to motivate the behaviour of those who emerge as political leaders appear to be primarily concerned with the dramatization of their own superiority, in the name of national superiority. But the passions in question are not uniquely those of political leaders; they are common human passions. If only leaders were governed by those passions, it might have been possible for ordinary people to avoid their influence. That is not possible because these passions touch the hearts of all of us. That is why leaders often instinctively *follow* the masses.

Acquisitiveness is one passion which appears to play an important role in the motivation of contemporary political behaviour. Acquisitiveness or greed is the passion to acquire as much wealth as possible, or, what comes to the same thing, as much access as possible to the use of resources, through the exercise of political power. This passion is often the outcome of a feeling of insecurity about the future and its object is usually to achieve economic security for oneself and one's family. In practice, acquisitiveness leads to the excessive accumulation of resources in the hands of a few at the expense of a dispossessed majority. Such accumulation is certainly not a recipe for social stability.

Rivalry is another human passion with profound political implications. Political rivalry has become notoriously vicious in recent times because of the destructive power of modern weapons. In times past, dynasties have come to grief and kingdoms have been brought to their knees on account of rivalries between the sons of a sultan or king. In many countries adapting to parliamentary democracy, the leaders of political parties behave in ways which suggest that they would prefer to see their country literally ruined than to see their rivals succeed.

With rivalry go envy and vanity. Modern news media add fuel to the fire of rivalry. In former times one could simply avoid meeting one's hated rivals by staying out of their way. Nowadays television brings one's rivals in all their triumph and glory straight into one's home. This apparently aggravates the fierce determination of unscrupulous politicians to harm their rivals, even by the use of hired assassins, if they can get away with it.

Power-drive is one of the strongest of human passions. It influences the behaviour of almost all humans prominent in public life, and not only in politics. It appears to be an insatiable passion which, in many leaders, seems to grow with practical experience of exercising power. Power-drive is an essentially normal human impulse which becomes undesirable only when its exercise leads to the infliction of cruelty and suffering on others. Directed at human minds and hearts, power-drive has been an important element in the psychological make-up of many benefactors of humankind.

Though not completely gregarious like ants or bees, humans congregate together from time to time for the pursuit of common objectives. On occasion the capacity to act in unison takes the form of a mass movement. Humans who make up a mass movement do not always behave as they would if they were alone. Foot-ball crowds, rock-star fans and political rallies are the striking modern examples of mass behaviour. Their main characteristics are a palpable

solidarity, a loss of inhibitions and a sense of intense emotional excitement. Sheer love of excitement may well be the driving force of mass movements and crowds. Love of excitement may also induce some humans to consume alcohol. Whatever may be the motive for imbibing it, alcohol is a potent releaser of human violence. According to one study, in the United Kingdom in the recent past, alcoholic intoxication was a factor associated with 45% of woundings and assaults, 50% of murders, 66% of suicide attempts and deaths and 62% of serious head injuries.

Fear and hate are emotions which influence political behaviour. Humans usually hate what they fear and fear what they hate. Fear and hate play a large part in the lives of ignorant humans; fear of the unknown is a familiar human experience. Fear may become an obsession and provoke horrendous violence directed against those who are feared. Collective fear of one human group felt by another often leads to preparations for war with the object of preserving peace. If the past is a reliable guide, almost always preparation for war leads to war. Preparation for nuclear war may well be the rule-proving exception.

### *War and Suffering*

War has been one of the constants of recorded human history, if not of human nature. War is possible only because of the symbol-making capacity of the human brain. To each group engaged in war the opposite group consists of a pack of hated symbols called "enemies". In the Nazi doctrine, for example, a group of humans was reduced to a symbol: hated Jews. As such millions of them could be exterminated with a good social conscience. To take another shocking example: the Buddhist priest credited with authorship of the source book of Sri Lanka's ancient history the *Mahavamsa*, opines that humans who do not believe in Buddhism are no better than beasts and may be killed by the million without incurring guilt. He reduced non-Buddhists to a symbol: expendable beasts! The Compassionate Buddha, of course, is not to blame for this debasement of religion by the author of the *Mahavamsa* who belonged to the religious institution called the *Mahavihara*, the material interests of which he was, no doubt, obliged to promote. Which institutionalized religion, for that matter, would win the hearty approbation of its founder? The founders of religions have sought to bring peace to the world; their followers have fought wars in the name of the founders and added to the load of human suffering.

It is true that in our world many hundreds of millions of humans suffer avoidable pain, premature death, oppression, cruelty and torture. At another level, human suffering may derive from the

sense of cosmic loneliness that a tiny individual human may feel in our unimaginably large, and largely insentient universe. And there is a philosophical view widely prevalent in Sri Lanka that human suffering emanates from the complex aggregate structure of 'being'. In this view suffering is inherent in the very nature of human nature. In any case, there is little doubt that a large part of the avoidable suffering of humankind can be relieved by a more equitable allocation of the world's resources to certain specified ends. There are a few affluent countries in the modern world where a majority of the population live in health, comfort and security. In every country there are people whose lives are filled with material abundance, personal freedom and pleasure. Many of them have also had ample opportunities to be egotistic, self-centred and acquisitive. Some have had everything that money can buy. But money has not necessarily brought happiness. And over the years, evidence has accumulated that affluence is not a sufficient condition for human happiness. Even affluent humans are not immune from loneliness, anxiety and depression. So the search goes on for the necessary and sufficient conditions for escaping suffering and attaining happiness.

### *Celebration of Self-interest*

The unrestrained, enthusiastic and successful pursuit of wealth by many humans during the past 200 years or so has reinforced the belief that by their very nature humans are selfish, egotistic and acquisitive. In the West it came to be generally believed that the way to increase the wealth of a nation is for individuals to pursue vigorously their private interests and passions. It was assumed that selfishness was both natural and bound to be rewarding. But there is ample evidence that humans can also be unselfish, altruistic and generous. Human evolutionary history shows that the capacities to co-operate, share, help and make sacrifices that benefit others are part of the human behavioural repertoire which can, in appropriate circumstances, be powerfully activated. Within the family setting, the altruistic, generous and expansive impulses of most humans receive full expression. Many humans are capable of extending their kindly feelings to a greater or lesser degree, beyond their family, to their immediate kin. Not so many are able to be kind to all members of their ethnic or religious group; fewer still to all members of their nation, and very few to humankind as a whole.

The hypothesis that selfishness is the essence of human nature and that human social organization must be built on that reality gained intellectual currency in the Western World during the past 200 years. According to this hypothesis, all that is necessary for a well-ordered world to emerge is the pursuit of wealth by individuals motivated by self-interest. It was implied that one's

highest duty was to increase one's wealth and pursue one's pleasure, without being caught violating the penal code. This philosophy has been challenged from time to time, and historically the most powerful critique has come from socialists. The present state of the world is largely the outcome of the relentless pursuit of wealth by those who had the power to do so. Because the present state of the world is precarious, alternative hypotheses are receiving fresh consideration by reflective humans even in modern affluent societies.

It is relevant for our present purpose to consider why the unrestrained pursuit of wealth by humans does not lead either to social peace or to individual inner harmony. Obsession with the selfish pursuit of wealth translates itself in practice to a compulsive desire to have everything for oneself. A society devoted to the pursuit of wealth tends to convert all values into measurable wealth. If wealth is a society's measure of an individual's worth, the more one has the more becomes one's sense of public and self-worth. The attempt to acquire as much wealth as one can, necessarily sets one against the world. In the single-minded pursuit of one's pecuniary self-interest, one will, if need be, deceive one's customers, exploit one's subordinates and destroy one's competitors. Sooner or later such pursuit will involve the covert or overt use of force or intimidation of one form or another. One becomes envious of those who have more than one has and afraid of those who have less. The unrestrained pursuit of wealth leads to the accumulation of wealth — capital — in the hands of the successful few. These few will come to constitute a separate subgroup or class in society — the rich class or ruling class. The unsuccessful majority come to form another subgroup or class — the poor class or underclass. A struggle between these two classes will ensue for a bigger share of the social product than each class enjoys at any given time. On occasion the struggle may assume violent forms. Thus the unrestrained pursuit of self-interest — an enterprise which is but one remove from violence — is incompatible with social peace. It necessarily generates social unrest. And a situation of general social unrest is hardly conducive to individual inner harmony.

### *Real Needs of Humans*

In the context of our present purpose, the above discussion brings us back to a crucial question: What are the conditions that are both necessary and sufficient for humans to escape suffering and attain happiness? To offer a comprehensive answer to that question is not within the competence of natural science. But in real life, we have to act on the best hypothesis, without dogmatically believing it. As a working hypothesis we may presume that our efforts



to escape suffering and attain happiness will not succeed unless the objectively valid needs of human nature (as opposed to the possibly illusory, subjectively felt ones) are satisfied. Such a presumption necessarily raises another question: What are the *real* needs of human nature? In seeking an answer, the evolutionary epic is our best source to turn to. A look at what humans have been doing during their million years of existence should help us to figure out real human needs.

Above all, humans have endeavoured to survive, that is, to maintain the continuity of human life. They have succeeded in doing so against all manner of odds. The need to maintain our continuity, to preserve human life, must be the most fundamental human need. In order to satisfy their need for maintaining their continuity humans, like all organisms, have to establish a harmonious relationship with their physical environment. Their life and sanity are both utterly dependent on their physical environment. For example, without oxygen from the environment humans cannot survive for more than a few minutes. That is obvious. What is not so obvious is that they cannot retain their sanity, if they are totally insulated from all environmental stimuli for long periods. Self-evidently, it is from the environment that humans derive all the materials — food, clothing, shelter and so on — which are required to satisfy their need to survive. But mere survival has not been the principal concern of individual humans. Individual humans, in their separate ways, have sought to realize their human potentialities. To do so they need, above all, a sense of security of person. In other words, humans need protection from environmental hazards ranging from polluted water to nuclear radiation. They also need protection from attack by living organisms. The attacks can come from any living organism ranging all the way from the AIDS virus to an insanely inhuman human. Humans obviously cannot realize their potentialities in social isolation. Human offspring have a long period of utter dependency on adults during which they need, not just care, but affectionate care. In helpless old age too humans need care, even as they need care when they are sick. The longing for love is a very human passion. The need for affection is, indeed, a fundamental human need. Depending as they must on their brains rather than on their instincts for survival and well-being, humans need to acquire a sound knowledge and understanding of the world in which they live. But for the knowledge that humankind has collectively acquired over the ages, many humans living today would have died in their infancy. Malnutrition, disease and suffering would have been even more widespread than at present. The sheer struggle to survive would have vitiated the urge to actualize human potential. Hence, the understanding that comes from objective knowledge must be reckoned a real human need.

With no intention of romanticizing it, a stylized picture of the round of daily life of our hunting-gathering ancestors may be reconstructed. It has been generally assumed that their life was “nasty, brutish and short”. Their life may have been short, but the judgement that it was “nasty” and “brutish” is only a fanciful supposition. At any rate, for nearly a million years humans evolved to live in small groups into which they were fully integrated. In the life of the tribe each human participated meaningfully and creatively. Membership in the tribe gave them a sense of belonging, rootedness and relatedness. For the men, active participation in the hunt probably satisfied part of their need for excitement and stimulation. The round of child-bearing and child-rearing kept the women meaningfully occupied until the men returned from the hunt. And when they did return to their home base from an exhausting hunt, our hunting ancestors must have greatly appreciated the freedom and leisure for which they would have felt a deep need. For at last the men were then free to spend time doing their own thing in their own separate family units. The women too would have appreciated the freedom and leisure of their men. For otherwise the immense burden of child-rearing would have been wholly theirs to carry. Viewed in this evolutionary light humans seem fundamentally to need: *continuity, protection, affection, belonging, knowledge, creative activity, leisure, excitement and freedom.*

The items above do not form a ranked list in order of priority. While every one of them is equally a real human need, some are, obviously, basic. If the basic ones are not satisfied the others will not even be felt. The need for continuity is basic. In order to continue to live, a human needs food, and a hungry human will be preoccupied with one thought: food. Equally basic is the need for protection. If a human is constantly menaced by a death-threat, all other needs except the need for continuity become irrelevant until the basic need for protection of life is satisfied. So it makes sense to arrange human needs in a kind of hierarchy, starting with the need for continuity and ending perhaps with the need for freedom. But this hierarchy of needs is by no means rigidly fixed. On occasion, the last on the list may prove to be the first. There have been many humans for whom the need for freedom proved more pressing than the need for continuity and protection. They have preferred death to slavery and have died fighting for freedom. In the very act of dying they must have been satisfying a real human need! And this brings us to the subject of *satisfiers* of needs.

### *Satisfiers of Needs*

The fundamental human needs seem to be the same in all cultures. Nevertheless, the ways in which they are satisfied vary

enormously from culture to culture, and in a given culture, at different times. In other words, each culture adopts different styles to satisfy the same fundamental human needs. A culture, in fact, derives its distinctiveness by its choice of basic needs satisfiers. A consumerist society will satisfy needs in one way, an ascetic society in another. But both societies are concerned with the satisfaction of the same human needs.

Within a given culture the ways in which individual humans satisfy their fundamental needs show great variation. One man, for example, may satisfy his need for belonging by joining a group devoted to the care of the sick; another may do so by joining a lynch mob or a murder squad. In their separate ways both are satisfying the same human need: the need to belong and to relate to others. Why one man chooses to satisfy his need for belonging by joining a group devoted to the care of the sick and another chooses to satisfy the same need by joining a murder squad derives largely from the difference in social conditions in which they grow up and live. To take another example: some humans may find satisfaction of their need for excitement and stimulation and creative activity by pursuing scientific research or music or drama. Others may seek excitement in the abuse of alcohol or heroin or cocaine, or even in stalking and gunning down those whom they hate. Again, the differences are largely determined by differences in social conditioning. Probabilistically — not deterministically — violent environments tend to breed violent humans. Violence, of course, need not necessarily be physical. Verbal violence could occasionally be more crippling than the physical variety. But to pursue such matters at this stage would be distracting. For now the important point to note is that the same needs may be satisfied in diverse ways.

### *Long-term Strategy for Survival*

Enough has been said to indicate why humans can behave so differently even when they are satisfying the same fundamental human needs. The net outcome of these variations in human behaviour has been to bring humankind to the brink of extermination and planet Earth to the verge of ecological devastation. For the behaviour of some humans may lead to a nuclear war and so to the end of humankind. Although that conceivable nuclear consummation has now receded, the reckless behaviour of humankind continues to endanger its long-term survival on Earth in other ways. Overpopulation, environmental pollution, profligate exploitation of material resources, destruction of natural habitats are all gradually making Earth unlivable to humans. Humankind now holds its survival in its own hands. If humankind is to survive, humans have to learn to think and feel as a family and act as a family

in the vital interests of the family as a whole. The stark practical problem that humankind has to solve here and now is clear enough: What must be done to ensure the continuity of human life on Earth? Again, the working hypothesis on which we must act must be: Take steps to satisfy the fundamental needs of all humans without damaging the environment. Happily, there is now a growing awareness of the importance of the environment for human survival.

Genetic variation is the basis of organic evolution. No two humans are exactly alike. Each human is the unique expression of a specific interaction of the human genetic code and the physical environment. Yet all humans have reason to wish to escape suffering and pursue happiness — in their separate ways. Each human is differently endowed. Yet all deserve to realize their human potential to the full. The global problem is how to arrange the world order to accommodate such an astounding degree of human diversity. In a current phrase, we have to think globally and act locally. Ideally, policies on vital issues affecting humankind as a whole ought to be decided by a supranational organization of humankind. Such policies should be based on the best available collective knowledge and wisdom of humankind. In rhetorical terms, their aim should be to set the spirits of humans free to realize their full potential. In practical terms the aim should be to provide equality of opportunity to all humans to develop in their separate ways.

Since for no less than 99% of their evolutionary history, humans have lived in small tribes, they are still biologically equipped to function easily and at their best, only in small groups. To understand this is to see the compelling reason for as much devolution of authority as is compatible with modern social and political organization. One function that does not belong to the duly constituted authority in a human group is the imposition on the group of a particular conception of happiness that everybody shall pursue. Given that no two humans are exactly alike, it follows that their conceptions of happiness cannot be assumed to be identical. That is why a just authority has no business to impose on a society, a particular conception of happiness. Because of human interdependence, what a just authority should seek to do is to organize society for the production and distribution of instrumental or primary goods like food, clothing and shelter, which everyone attempting to avoid suffering and pursue happiness will require for healthy survival. But how is the authority — or government — in a given society to be set up? It is to this question that we now turn.

## *Case for Democracy*

Given that the human way of life is social and that humans are not instinct-driven automatons like ants and bees, their conduct in society requires some degree of regulation by an external authority. Government is the supreme regulating authority. Its prime function is the maintenance of order for the common good. During the long period of tribal existence of humankind the governance of each tribe naturally devolved on its strongest, shrewdest adult member who became its chieftain, leader, head or king. As societies expanded and became more complex monarchy emerged as the most natural form of government. Bitter wars of succession and the hereditary character that monarchy came to assume contributed to its gradual decline. The absolute nature of the power that kings exercised by alleged divine right came to be challenged by radical, rationalist thought. What replaced monarchy was some form of oligarchy, that is, rule by a minority. Oligarchy took the form of aristocracy, theocracy or democracy. Aristocratic rulers were chosen by birth; theocratic rulers by virtue of religion; democratic rulers by virtue of wealth.

Democracy based on universal adult suffrage is only about a century old in the history of humankind. In theory, democracy based on the principle of one person one vote is committed to the concept of political equality. In practice, however, in societies with gross inequalities of wealth, democratic rulers come to be elected largely on the basis of the economic resources they can command. As a moment's reflection will show, although the vast majority of voters in a democracy do not belong in the wealthy class, the vast majority of the decisive rulers who get elected do. This is because in a society with gross inequalities of wealth, part of the wealth of the wealthy is devoted to winning the electoral support of the majority. If nothing else, the wealthy have a massive capacity for mass propaganda. Universal suffrage notwithstanding, in a society with gross inequalities of wealth, democracy in practice becomes an oligarchy of the wealthy.

Although capitalist societies claim to be nothing but democratic there is a theory that full democracy is intrinsically incompatible with full-blooded capitalism. According to this view, the capitalist system survives in democracies because capitalist democracies are capitalist first and democracies afterwards; more explicitly because democracy in practice has been an oligarchy of the wealthy. Quite obviously in democracies it is those who have economic power or serve the purpose of those with economic power, that acquire political power. In capitalist democracies the major holders of economic power constitute only a microscopic minority of the population; yet it is their will that holds sway. They use the

apparatus of the state more to serve their ends than to serve the public purpose. Through their ownership of the mass media — newspapers, magazines, radio and television — they carry on a pervasive propaganda on behalf of their interests. Through their control over the educational system they transmit their ideology to each upcoming generation. They set up the courts and appoint the judges who can be depended upon to uphold the capitalist system almost as a matter of conviction. By their generous support of the traditional institutions of religion they seek to elicit in them a pro-capitalist orientation. Thus, according to this view, the state in capitalist democracies is really the instrument for the dictatorship of the minority ruling capitalist class (even as the state in communist countries has become the instrument for the dictatorship of the minority ruling communist party). The inference is inescapable: capitalist states represent an oligarchy of wealth; communist states represent an oligarchy of power. The implication of this correspondence is stark: wealth = power.

Even so, democracy based on universal suffrage with periodic free and fair elections, parliamentary procedures, relatively independent judiciaries and constitutionally limited executives must be reckoned at least as the least unsatisfactory way hitherto invented of organizing government. Why? one may ask. First, because it enables all adult humans to have a say in the selection of their rulers. For democracy does enable people to select and replace their rulers from time to time through their vote. Next, because democracy provides a technique for peaceful change. Finally, because democracy has the potential to take a society in the direction of maximum satisfaction of human needs. Indeed, when democracy based on universal suffrage was first introduced, alarmist voices perceptively predicted that under its impact, the self-interest of the poor majority would lead to state interference with inequalities of wealth in society. To some extent this prediction has come true. And to the extent it has come true, the rich have lost some of their wealth to the poor in the form of social welfare.

The goal of equal access for everyone to all goods and services cannot be on the democratic agenda of humankind at present. The goal of providing basic minimum needs in food, clothing, shelter, education and health care could be and should be on the agenda. To emphasize a point previously made: the goal of democracy should be to provide differently endowed humans with an equal chance to become fulfilled according to their unequal and different talents. For the attainment of this goal the provision of equality of educational opportunity is vitally important.

In multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious societies if the dominant group accords a special status to its own language and religion, the minorities will come to feel that democracy based on universal suffrage translates itself in practice to a tyranny of the majority. This can be avoided only by guaranteeing to every human certain rights which the collective conscience of humankind as expressed through the United Nations, calls "human rights". What are human rights? The question warrants a separate discussion.

## 4. Our Rights

### *Rationale of Rights*

Our rights — human rights — have to do with the common desire of humankind to avoid suffering and to pursue happiness. Humans are born in consequence of humankind's biological drive to maintain their continuity. From birth onwards humans seek conditions that are conducive to the avoidance of suffering and the pursuit of happiness. For parents, the provision of the conditions sought by their offspring is a natural biological function. The offspring enjoy what is provided for them by their parents as part of the natural order of things. In providing for their offspring parents are simply satisfying their need for continuity. They see in their children the image of the future of their kind. When resources are available the physical needs of children are routinely satisfied. This is not to imply that mere satisfaction of physical needs is the essence of parenting. Children do not thrive on milk alone; they also need love and care. But the present point is that although children's needs are supplied when resources are freely available, when there is an acute scarcity of resources the priorities of survival often tend to discriminate against young children (as well as against the elderly and the disabled). Indeed, even infanticide — especially of females — has been resorted to by societies in the past, in order to balance population with available resources. So it comes as no surprise in today's world with an ever increasing population that there should be millions of children who have been abandoned by their impoverished parents or guardians. This is not to say that all abandoned children have had impoverished parents. Whatever the reason for abandonment, most of these children become victims of exploitation, malnutrition, violence, sex and drug abuse. Realization of the horrible conditions under which millions of children live today, has prompted the United Nations to initiate steps to draw up a *Convention on Children's Rights*. When ratified, such a Convention would represent a formal recognition by the international community of the duties of human adults to the children they have begotten. Children take for granted the facilities provided for them by their parents. They rightly come to regard those facilities as their birth right. The natural drive of parents to provide for their offspring, and the natural expectation of progeny to be provided for by their parents, are entirely in accord with humankind's need to perpetuate themselves. These impulses derive from the human way of life, which we must briefly consider next.



## *All Rights are Social*

The human way of life is essentially social. To survive and to thrive and to reproduce themselves, humans have to co-operate with others in society. For unlike amoebae, humans cannot reproduce by just splitting themselves into two. A completely isolated human represents a dead end. All this implies that no individual can do without society. But for a society, there is no indispensable individual. It follows that the interests of a society as a whole must take precedence over the interests of any individual. This means that at some point the special interests of the individual in society must give way to the general interests of society. There is no other basis on which a stable society can be fashioned. This is not to say that the individual exists solely for the benefit of the state. Rather, it is to emphasize the axiom that the state does not exist solely for the special benefit of a given individual. The state must endeavour to provide for all citizens certain conditions which are necessary for them to escape avoidable suffering and to pursue possible happiness. Those conditions represent the substance of human rights.

## *Hierarchy of Rights*

Even as the interests of a state — the public interest — must take precedence over the interests of the individual, so must the collective interest of humankind take precedence over the interests of nation-states. In today's world, economic, political and environmental factors interact at a global level. And humankind is poised to embark upon a goal-directed trajectory of evolution, instead of relying upon the blind interaction between biological impulses and environmental hazards. If they fail to use their intelligence to develop rational strategies necessary for human fulfilment, the alternative may well be human extinction. Sustained and purposeful international co-operation has now become a necessary condition for the survival of humankind. There are hopeful signs that this elementary truth has at last penetrated into the consciousness of the leaders of powerful nation-states.

Axiomatically, individuals or groups of individuals or individual nation-states should not be entitled to rights which compromise the well-being of humankind as a whole. This is now generally acknowledged and the objectives of some states have been deliberately modified in accordance with global environmental requirements. For example, some nations have agreed to limit the use of chemicals which damage the ozone layer and contribute to global warming and acid rain. These nations are sacrificing a short-term selfish advantage for a long-term global advantage which all nations would share.

The state claims the moral allegiance of its citizens on the basis of the rights it grants them. And citizens extend moral allegiance and legitimacy to the state on the basis of the rights they enjoy. If a state grants to a subgroup of its citizens rights that it denies to another subgroup, it cannot hope to win the allegiance of the group which feels discriminated against. A group that feels discriminated against cannot be expected to acquiesce in their disadvantage without protest and resistance. Indeed, they may feel that their sense of dignity impels them to resist the government in regard to the matter in question. In order to remove their perceived disadvantage, they may wish to organize themselves into a movement to replace the government by legitimate means. And the consensus of humankind as reflected in proclamations of the United Nations, endorses their right to do so. In fact this is what pluralistic, multiparty democracy is essentially about. The right of a subgroup within a state to organize themselves to capture state power by non-violent means, is frequently emphasized by opinion-makers in the mass media nowadays. Implicitly a state ruled by one party which does not permit the existence of other parties, is coming to be regarded as a violator of a human right.

From the foregoing it is evident that the subject of human rights has to be considered at several hierarchically ordered levels:

- Level 1: rights of humankind as a whole.
- Level 2: rights of nation-states within the international community.
- Level 3: rights of groups of individuals within a nation or across nations.
- Level 4: rights of individuals.

### *Derivation of Rights from Needs*

One possible approach to the subject of human rights is to try and derive them from the fundamental human need for: continuity, protection, affection, belonging, knowledge, creative activity, leisure, excitement and freedom. As a prelude to such an exercise, it is instructive to explore how these fundamental human needs might have been satisfied during the long hunting — gathering stage of human evolution which occupied 99% of humankind's time on earth. Consider first what might have been a typical male's life story. During infancy and early childhood his need for continuity, protection and affection would have been amply satisfied by being breast-fed and cared for by his mother supported by the rest of the small tribe. As he grew up he would have explored the forest with his peers and played at being hunters. By adolescence he would have been tutored by the adult males of his tribe about the realities of

jungle life and he would have accompanied them on hunting expeditions. Such activities would have served to satisfy his need for knowledge, belonging and excitement. As he matured and acquired hunting skills he would have had opportunities to participate creatively, that is purposefully, in the life of the community and such participation would have served to satisfy further his need for belonging, excitement and creative activity. In the fulness of biological maturity, he would have fathered offspring and experienced the satisfactions that come from parenting. When he was not engaged in communal hunting, he would have had the freedom to spend his leisure in his own way, with his mate, offspring and friends. In times of sickness and injury he would have received the support of his tribe, which virtually comprised his extended family, satisfying again his need for continuity, protection, affection and belonging.

As to women, there is reason to believe that during the long hunting-gathering stage of human evolution it was they who were mainly concerned with the gathering of food when they were not engaged in functions of child-bearing and child-rearing. Their principal satisfactions would have come mainly from motherhood and mothering. It does not follow therefrom that mothering should be the main vocation of all women at present and in the future, any more than that the equivalent of hunting should be the main vocation of all men. But it is reasonable to suppose that as an otherwise undistracted mother, adequately rewarded and respected by society for her important role, a mother of those days would have found life deeply satisfying. If human happiness is indeed predicated on the quality and intensity of human relationships, the mother-child bond — potentially the strongest human bond — in full bloom would have been a great source of happiness to a typical mother of those days.

The child who begins life as an intrinsic part of the mother's body remains an extension of her for the first few years of its life. The human infant is absolutely dependent on the mother or a caring adult for its survival and well-being. Almost always the biological mother is best. She is needed not solely as the source of nutrition; she is needed basically for emotional security of which feeding is an important part. Ideally mother and child should be together until the child can survive on its own. That is how it originally was in Nature and that arrangement was and is good for the mother and good for the child. What is good for mother and child is good for society. This simple truth has profound implications for the subject of human rights.

## *Ideal and Reality*

Under the complex conditions of the modern world, huge numbers of humans simply do not have opportunities of satisfying all their fundamental needs. This is probably an important contributory factor to the prevalence of widespread frustration and turmoil which characterizes the modern world. Programs for social reconstruction must seek to create the conditions necessary for the satisfaction of the fundamental human needs. And the gamut of human rights — civil, social, economic, political and cultural — can be understood as an approach to creating those conditions. In addition to previously acknowledged rights such as those of speech and religion, rights to basic subsistence, education, health care and participation in decision-making have now been recognized. Because all humans unarguably share the same species nature — human nature — it seems rational to postulate as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* does, that all humans are born equal in dignity and rights. Every human would readily agree that he or she should be entitled to the whole range of human rights. Most humans would have little difficulty in extending those rights to their immediate kin. Extension of those rights to all members of their ethnic group would not be so easy, but consideration of the advantages of group membership would probably suffice to grant the extension. Extension of the whole gamut of human rights to all citizens of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-lingual state has almost never been granted by members of the numerically dominant group, without severe conflicts. In the end, only the realization that the long-term consequences of gross inequality in rights would prove dangerous to the temporary beneficiaries of such inequality, seems to compel most humans to subscribe to the universal applicability of human rights. Why is it that benevolence to out-groups does not seem to come naturally to most humans? The reason is not hard to discern. For nearly a million years natural selection enhanced the human tendency to the development of in-group loyalties, that is to say, ethnic loyalties. So ethnic loyalty comes naturally to humans. Only exceptional humans appear to have been able to see beyond the blind operation of natural selection, and envision their own welfare in the context of the welfare of the whole species: humankind.

### *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*

One inescapable lesson of history is that if certain basic rights are denied to large numbers of humans over a long enough period, those so oppressed will, eventually, rebel. The Preamble to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* articulates this perception quite explicitly when it declares that:

“...it is essential, if Man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law”.

During the past four decades, more than at any other period in recorded history, there has been a remarkable concern with human rights on the part of humankind as a whole. Various intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations and certain nation-states have evinced a sustained concern about human rights. Historically, this concern was provoked by the gross violation of human rights by the fascist powers — especially Nazi Germany — during the period of the Second World War. During that war an international order was negotiated in 1942 between 26 states allied against the fascist powers. This agreement was further refined by the 51 states which participated in the San Francisco Conference in 1945. The essential principles that emerged are contained in Article 1 of the United Nations Charter to which almost all sovereign states in the modern world are now committed at least in theory. On 10 December 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations — the nearest approximation to the collective conscience of humankind — proclaimed the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* as “a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations.” A brief look at some events connected with the proclamation of the Universal Declaration will not be out of place here.

No matter how it began, the Second World War came to be fought by the victors under the rallying cry of human rights, including such rights as political self-determination and freedom from ethnic and religious persecution. In 1945 the United Nations Organization was formed as a body to promote these rights by peaceful, lawful methods. The spectacular advances in communications and transportation technology contributed enormously to the extent of endorsement of human rights declarations by the United Nations, as the United Nations Organization came to be called. By the 1950s the technology was available by which people in almost every region of the world could be immediately informed of events occurring in other regions. Violations of human rights could be — and gradually came to be — exposed for the whole world to see. Leaders of countries in which gross violations of human rights occurred came to incur international opprobrium. They were held accountable for such violations and were obliged to explain the circumstances that provoked them. Even barbaric, bigoted, unenlightened and tyrannical leaders evidently do not relish being so regarded by the rest of the world. Consequently, whatever their true motivations or feelings might be, leaders of almost

all nation-states have committed their countries to the endorsement of human rights proclaimed by the United Nations. Often enough, however, their actions have mocked their pious official commitments.

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* is a short text of some 30 articles. It proclaims that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights; that everyone has the right to life; that no one should be held in slavery nor subjected to torture; that all are equal before the law and are entitled to its protection; that everyone has the right to freedom of thought conscience and religious opinion, peaceful assembly and association; that everyone has the right to work, and to social security, to form and join trade unions, to rest and leisure, to an adequate standard of living, to medical care and to education. The *Declaration* asserts that motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. With hindsight it can be seen that these rights have been formulated as if to subserve the fundamental human need for continuity, protection, knowledge, creative activity, leisure and freedom. Plainly, neither these rights nor any other conceivable rights can ensure the satisfaction of the human need for affection, belonging and excitement. When duly exercised what these rights can do is to remove hindrances to the satisfaction of all real human needs, in so far as state action can remove them. As an elaboration of the concept of human rights, in 1966 the United Nations adopted two *International Human Rights Covenants* concerned with economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights. The right of all peoples to self-determination, to freely dispose of their natural wealth and resources, to freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development are among the rights defined in the *Covenants*. The *Covenants* also stressed the equality of men's and women's rights. Women's rights conceived of as an aspect of human rights merits special consideration.

### *Women's Rights as Human Rights*

Although Article 1 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* proclaims that all humans are born free and equal in dignity and rights; and Article 2 declares that everyone is entitled to all human rights without distinction of any kind such as sex; and Article 3 asserts that everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person; the world over an incredibly large number of women are denied the freedom of choice to control their lives and bodies, are denied equality and dignity, are discriminated against because of their sex; and are compelled by circumstances to live under grave threat to their life, liberty and security of person. If the preceding long statement is an eye-opener, consider the evidence.

The threat to the life of females begins even before birth. By a procedure called amniocentesis it is now possible to determine the sex of an embryo in the womb of a woman. In many parts of the world information so obtained is used to abort selectively and specifically female embryos. In many countries, during childhood girls receive less food, care and attention than boys do — even from their own mothers. Such is the force of social pressure and conditioning in favour of the male of the species! Female infanticide has been practised by many communities for centuries. As the result of selective relative neglect, more girls than boys die in early childhood. More girls than boys are physically and mentally maimed by malnutrition. In many cultures, parents spend more liberally and willingly on the education of sons than on the education of daughters. In many cultures females are educated for the sole purpose of becoming submissive, sacrificing, self-effacing wives.

Throughout the world the hazards to the life, liberty and security of women are unbelievable for societies with any degree of civilization. Violence directed against women may take the form of anything from murder and battering to rape and incest. In the U.S. wife-beating is the commonest cause of injury to adult women. In India where women are sometimes burnt to death or buried alive for not bringing a large enough dowry, eight out of ten wives can expect to get battered at home by their husbands sometime or other. The list of cruelties and tortures women have endured because of their sex is long and appalling. Even mutilation of their genitalia as a guarantee of their chastity, is not a thing of the barbaric past. At bottom their suffering at the hands of men has been largely due to the crude biological fact that in sheer, brute, physical strength men in general are superior to women. There is little doubt that this biological fact was the original basis of patriarchy. The hunting male, in contrast to the gathering female, evolved as a killer, predatory or defensive. This probably made him more prone to violence and he has used physical power to control, subdue, dominate and generally exploit the female. In more general terms this is an aspect of the exploitation of the weak by the strong. The natural tendency of the strong has been to control and use the weak for their own purposes. That is the crux of patriarchy which regards women simply as a part of a man's property. In unobvious ways patriarchy forms the basis of many religious laws and practices. It generates social practices which confine women to the home. It prescribes double standards of morality for men and women, to women's disadvantage. It accords more rights to men than to women as if that was part of the natural order of things. The rights of men, as opposed to the rights of women, have been built on the might of men. The preceding statement is as true as it is trite. The theory and practice of human rights may be regarded as an attempt to counter the

triumph of might. Beyond all doubt, the full realization of human rights by women requires nothing less than the dismantling of patriarchal society. The *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* adopted by the United Nations in 1979 is a step in the right direction.

It is one thing for a country to endorse human rights charters and covenants proclaimed by the United Nations; it is quite another to respect them in practice. In general, powerful nations and powerful groups within nations, have been great advocates of human rights except when observance of human rights went against their self-interest! It is difficult to resist the conclusion that the major obstacles to the enjoyment of political and economic rights in modern times have been posed by the principal beneficiaries of the *status quo*: the ruling elites of the USA and the ruling elites of the USSR. The record of U.S. intervention in the political and economic life of South and Central America has been no better — and probably worse — than that of the USSR in Eastern Europe. But as with individuals so with nations, the potential for moral improvement is never exhausted, and one hopes that nations which loudly proclaim their commitment to human rights will soon come to believe their own rhetoric and match precept with practice.

### *Right to Self-determination*

Perhaps the key concepts underlying the edifice of human rights are those concerning liberty, equality, material welfare and self-determination. Of these concepts the last is the one which has eluded precise definition and has occasioned much controversy. There is, of course, no argument that people who are subjected to colonial domination by a foreign power are entitled to self-determination, in the form of outright independence from colonial rule. Whether or not people living in a geographically distinct area of an existing sovereign state, who are dissatisfied with the government of that country should have the right to secede, and set up a separate sovereign state, is a matter on which there is a great deal of disagreement. In the United Nations there has been general opposition to the recognition of self-determination or autonomy by a human group, if it aspires to secession. The overwhelming consensus has been on integration combined with protection against discrimination, and the right to maintain the group's language, religion and culture.

According to the United Nations Charter, all states are sovereign and independent. All states are equal with respect to legal rights and duties. All possess equally the rights of territorial integrity and self-defence and all are equally obliged to avoid interfering in



the internal affairs of other states. The Charter obliges states to avoid the use of force or the threat of its use in their relations with other states except in self-defence. Intervention by an external state either to support a people struggling for self-determination, or to support a government seeking to oppose the struggle, is almost invariably considered illegitimate. Only if a dominant group resorts to methods of mass killing smacking of genocide, would it be considered that there is a case for the international community to intervene. Within a sovereign state, self-determination for a subgroup of citizens signifies their right to control local matters like culture, education, health services and policing. National matters such as defence, foreign affairs, international trade and finance are to be left to the central government. Internal self-determination in this sense is synonymous with local autonomy. At present international law seems to be very vague with regard to the degree to which a subgroup of citizens in a state is entitled to autonomy. Particularly is this so, where members of the subgroup claiming self-determination are geographically dispersed among the dominant population. Regarding this matter, the struggle of the Tamils of Sri Lanka to exercise their right to self-determination provides an illuminating current example. According to the latest census (1981), of the 2.7 million Tamils in Sri Lanka, about 1.3 million live *outside* the Northern and Eastern Provinces, dispersed among the 11 million Sinhalese. By 1976 the Tamil claim to self-determination had assumed the form of a demand for carving out a separate sovereign state called Tamil Eelam encompassing the Northern and Eastern Provinces of the island, which add up to about one-third of its area. Unsurprisingly, this demand elicited hardly any support from the non-Tamil population of the country. As a matter of fact, the demand has not been endorsed even by a majority of the Tamils in Sri Lanka. The *armed* struggle to set up a separate state was and is being prosecuted by a committed group of guerilla fighters. While fighting for the right of Tamils to self-determination, the guerillas have ruthlessly violated the human rights of Tamils who have dared to disagree with their vision of a Tamil Eelam. They have summarily executed Tamils willing to settle for a substantial measure of regional autonomy within a single Sri Lankan state. If such behaviour is not the expression of a degree of psychopathy in their leadership, it must be due to a pathetic innocence concerning the theory and practice of the concept of human rights. And this seems a convenient point at which to say a word about the right to much-needed education.

### *Right to Education*

The right to education receives detailed consideration in the *Universal Declaration*. Understandably so, because the single most significant division in the modern world is that between those in

possession of specialized skills obtained through education, and those who lack such skills. The *Universal Declaration* proclaims that free universal primary schooling should be available everywhere in the world. It also declares that secondary and higher education should be accessible on the basis of merit, rather than on wealth or station. The quality of education is also addressed: “Education should be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding and tolerance and further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.” The implicit assumption here is that the answer to humankind’s future development will be arrived at by education — or not at all.

There is an increasing international tendency to condemn states that violate human rights. Perhaps Utopia may come to be defined as the place where the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* is implemented to the letter! As we have previously noted, there is often a wide gulf between the formal recognition of human rights by a country and their realization. The implementation of declared rights has indeed fallen far short of the widespread verbal commitment to rights. Economic, political and social factors have contributed to this outcome. For example, in many Third World countries millions of children never go to school for the simple reason that funds are not available to provide schools. Long standing intergroup competition, prejudice and mistrust also interfere with the implementation of human rights in some societies. For instance, people in the upper social classes may feel threatened by the educational advancement of people in the lower social strata, and so they may covertly sabotage the educational services. Or schemes of admission to institutions of higher education may be manipulated to favour one group over others. All this indicates the crucial importance that people attach to education in the modern world. Education is valued not so much for the satisfaction that comes from knowledge and understanding, as for the wealth, prestige and power that it can potentially bring. The privileged value education because it facilitates the perpetuation of their privileges; the underprivileged value it because it opens the road to privileges. The right to education and to equality of educational opportunity are therefore jealously guarded and strenuously fought for by people who have become sensitized to their value. To take an illustrative example from Sri Lanka: perhaps the single most potent factor that fuelled the militant Tamil youth movement before 1983, was a scheme of standardization used by the Ministry of Education between 1970 and 1977. This scheme of media-wise standardization in practice made it more difficult for ethnic Tamils than for non-Tamils to gain university admission. This was deeply resented by Tamil students seeking university admission.

## *Governments and Human Rights*

Human rights are enjoyed by citizens primarily in relation to their national government. A government derives its moral legitimacy largely from the extent to which it protects human rights. The concept of human rights can be used as a strategy for limiting the power of governments. All rulers would like to continue in office indefinitely. It is safe to assume that all rulers are likely to abuse governmental power to promote personal advancement. Such abuse needs to be curbed in the public interest. Citizens enjoying the full range of human rights set out in the *Universal Declaration*, would constitute a powerful countervailing force against the abuse of governmental power by rulers.

Exasperated by the complications of modern government, some have seriously argued that the answer to the social dissatisfaction and turmoil evident in many modern metropolitan societies, is to relapse into the decentralized, non-bureaucratic, communitarian societies of a by-gone golden age. There is no doubt that in such societies, the individual did have a secure and significant place and enjoyed a wide range of satisfying personal relationships. In the hunting-gathering stage humans were perhaps even better integrated into their small societies than during the stage of primitive agriculture and village life. The hunting way of life provided ample opportunities for the satisfaction of the deepest human needs. But it would be foolhardy to believe that modern humans could, would or should relocate themselves at an earlier stage of their social evolution. It is true that the huge increase in human populations, the trend towards urbanization and modernization, and the direction of economic development during the present century have all combined to sever many humans from their supportive communities. The anonymity of overpopulated modern cities and towns has certainly reduced the majority of their inhabitants to the status of cogs in a huge wheel. The answer to this predicament, is not a regression into the past. Rigorously maintained human rights provide a feasible means of conferring some sense of dignity to millions of ordinary humans. Human rights are the bulwark against the deadening impersonality of the modern bureaucratic state.

### *Implications of Concept of Human Rights*

The concept of human rights provides the basis for a comprehensive ideology, incorporating biology, economics, politics, ethics and law. Implementation of certain human rights permits the possibility of economic development based on social justice. Implementation of certain other human rights is likely to promote creative participation of citizens in the productive process. Human

rights open up lines of communication between a government and citizens and could serve to impose checks and balances against mismanagement and corruption. By resolutely pursuing their rights, citizens could strive to acquire the provision of basic civic services. The dispossessed and the disaffected in a society could use their human rights as the basis of their agitation for redress.

The guarantee of a peaceful stable society resides in the enjoyment by all citizens of certain minimum rights without which they cease to be human in a significant sense of the term. The right of all citizens to a certain minimum standard of material well-being in return for a dutifully discharged social responsibility, must be thoughtfully implemented by all societies pursuing long term stability. This may require the curtailment of the special privileges of a few in the short run. It may also require that the distribution of available scarce resources be guided by considerations of equity, rather than by unregulated competition between private interests. Humans are endowed with the capacity to use reason in order to attain desired ends. The way a group of humans will act to achieve a given end, depends not only on their material circumstances, but also on the whole system of their desires, with their relative strengths. In the modern world the overriding desire of humankind should be the maintenance of the continuity of humankind on planet Earth. This requires protection of the Earth's environment. The maintenance of the continuity of humankind imposes duties on individuals, groups of individuals and on nation-states. Duties and rights are correlative. Individuals, groups and nation-states can be expected to discharge their duties in regard to global environmental protection, only to the extent that their own rights have been recognized and implemented by the international community. If human rights — civil, economic, social, cultural and political — are not universally recognized and implemented, it is idle to expect universal co-operation for global environmental protection.

Equipped with modern knowledge, humankind has reached a stage in their evolution when they can obtain a more plentiful supply of their material requirements through co-operation rather than through cut-throat competition. The conduct of politics by war using nuclear weapons, will lead humankind only to universal death. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* by the United Nations represents the collective conscience of humankind in search of peace and social justice. It is also a charter of human dignity. To grant the rights spelt out in the *Declaration* is to treat humans as dignified beings. It defines a common standard by which to judge how a given government is treating its own citizens. By means of radio, television, telephone and jetplane, it has now become possible to scrutinize and instantly report to the world violations of human rights in any corner

of the world. Economic instruments of persuasion and coercion are being increasingly deployed by the international community to restrain governments guilty of human rights abuses. Something worthwhile has been achieved in the very recent past, which gives a glimmer of hope for the future of human rights.

### *Problems in Implementation of Rights*

Some have argued that for a society as a whole the enjoyment of economic rights is of paramount importance and should take precedence over all other rights. They have argued therefrom that if the provision of a minimum level of material well-being to all citizens requires the suppression of civil and political rights, such suppression is justified. As to this argument, it is necessary to make clear which of two things is being talked about. On the one hand, to argue for the necessity to suppress the civic and political rights of citizens for whatever reasons is to seek to justify tyrannical rule. The necessity to suppress the civil and political rights of a people in order to provide them with a minimum level of material well-being has never been convincingly demonstrated. On the other hand, it is possible to imagine societies where, restriction if not suppression of certain civil rights currently recognized, may be justified in the public interest. Consider, for example, a society in which citizens have the right to own unlimited amounts of wealth. At any given time, this right will be actually enjoyed only by a few. If the provision of a minimum level of material well-being to the rest of society requires the restriction of the right to own unlimited amounts of wealth, most people would consider such restriction both rational and fair.

Another problem connected with the implementation of human rights has to do with rivalry and competition between nations. The sense of rivalry and the wish to dominate over others, influence the behaviour of nations no less than that of individuals. Leaders of most nations still appear to think and feel in ways which were perhaps appropriate to the hunting stage of our social evolution when the weapons to hand were bows and arrows. In this nuclear age, such ways of thinking and feeling are fraught with hazards. Humans — as individuals, groups or nations — must somehow learn to indulge their love of competition, domination and victory without violating human rights. Foul play in a soccer match represents a violation of human rights! Fortunately soccer players do not carry nuclear weapons and almost always accept the referee's rulings; so no great harm is done when human rights get violated in a soccer match. But in war games involving the use of nuclear weapons the outcome could spell the end of humankind.

The change of outlook required by humankind to ensure the universal observance of human rights is not easy to achieve and will occur only gradually. Such a change is essential as a matter of enlightened self-interest. If agents of education in all fields, formal, non-formal and informal not only comprehend intellectually, but come to feel in the marrow of their bones the supreme importance of respecting universal human rights as the condition necessary for the future survival of humankind, the requisite change can be substantially achieved in a decade or two, if full use is made of the science and art of modern methods of mass communication. Given the present state of our world, that prospect may be the only enduring hope for humankind. But what is the present state of our world? Let us see.

## 5. Our World

### *Possible Catastrophes: Nuclear and Ecological*

Our world — Planet Earth — is the only viable home humankind has in the universe. It is estimated to last another 4.5 billion years. Nobody can say with certainty how long humankind is destined to survive. But of one fact there is little doubt: humankind has acquired the capacity to exterminate itself from the face of the Earth. A few years ago, the global arsenal contained the equivalent destructive power of about three tons of the high explosive TNT for every human living at that time. If this arsenal explodes, there would be no survivors to see what really happened to the world. A nuclear cataclysm could occur as the result of a misjudgement, misperception or misreading of a given situation by one nuclear power confronting another. Or it could result from a mechanical, operational or communicational error in the computer systems which control and command nuclear arsenals. If the global nuclear arsenal explodes, humankind will end with a big bang! At last the utter futility of a deterrent nuclear war seems to have taken hold of the minds of superpower military strategists. Consequently, the danger of a global nuclear war breaking out as the outcome of a superpower conflict seems less likely today than it was in the recent past.

The danger that now seriously threatens humankind is a more insidious one than a nuclear holocaust. If we continue to pollute the air, soil and water of the Earth with noxious gases, toxic wastes and radioactive fall-out, the odds are high that humankind will become a mortally threatened species within the next century. More humans are being harmed by environmental pollution today than ever before. Destruction of the world's forests, soil erosion, extinction of plant and animal species, damage to the ozone layer which protects us from cancer-causing ultraviolet radiation, global warming, acid rain and nuclear debris in space, are all making the world unfit for human habitation. Regrettably, because of the technical nature of the danger, only a microscopic minority of humankind is equipped to appreciate the gravity of the impending catastrophe. The causes of the danger are global in extent, and the defence of common natural resources like the oceans, the ozone layer and the forests, requires global responsibility and action. For several decades the battle for human survival was waged in earnest only by vanguard soldiers like the Greens, who were generally dismissed as cranks. At last the leaders of the big industrial powers have become sensitive to the reality of the impending calamity. To sensitize them it took a severe drought in the USA, the deaths of thousands of seals in the North Sea and the wilting of acres of forests in Europe. It is almost beyond doubt that the long-term survival of humankind

in health and comfort is jeopardized by certain far-reaching environmental changes already under way. If certain environmental support systems are irreversibly upset humankind, given their biological constitution, will soon be fighting an unwinnable war for survival on Planet Earth. Certain human activities during the past century or so have, albeit unwittingly, dangerously upset the equilibrium of some vital natural support systems. These activities occurred primarily and largely in the rich industrialized countries. The profligate use, even abuse, of fossil fuels is only one obvious example. As of now the consequences of those activities on the environment are bound to affect the poor countries more adversely than the rich countries. Agriculture, fishing, forestry and mining from which the overwhelming majority of the poor of the world derive their livelihood and income, depend directly on the environment. Therefore, in the event of gradual environmental ruin, more poor humans will suffer much earlier — and more severely — than the rich. By some perhaps unduly pessimistic accounts, humankind is already engaged in a losing battle against their ecologically-induced extinction.

### *Emergence of the Modern World*

How on earth did humankind arrive at its present perilous predicament? With hindsight some of the factors that have been at work seem deceptively obvious: reproductive prodigality, ignorance of the ecological implications of industrialization, greed and carelessness in the pursuit of material wealth, widespread poverty, rivalry and lust for power. Let us try to see how by the interaction of these and other factors the modern world has come to be divisible today into three mutually non-exclusive groups: the First World, the Second or Socialist World and the Third World.

Around the year 1500 A.C., from which the modern period in human history is generally reckoned, there were six centres of power in the world: Ming China, the Muslim Ottoman Empire, the Mogul Empire in India, Muscovy, Tokugawa Japan and a cluster of states in West-Central Europe. Then, as now, states strove not merely to be rich and powerful, but to be richer and more powerful than other states. And — as always — they were subject to the inexorable law of flux and change. Consequently, the relative power positions of states have not remained fixed for long: powers have risen and fallen. Although factors such as geographical location, military prowess, national morale and the calibre of its leadership, certainly influenced a state's attainment of supremacy, the long-term retainment of its power position has been critically dependent upon the economic resources it could muster for its purposes. Of the six centres of power that existed around 1500 A.C., it was the European



states which rose to dominate the world during the next four centuries. During that period Europe witnessed the rise of empirical science, the celebration of intellectual freedom, the practice of political pluralism and the emergence of a tendency to explore the world by sea. The rise of science spawned an armaments industry and power went to those who had the better guns. It is easy to believe but difficult to prove conclusively that these were the societal characteristics that enabled the Europeans to dominate the world. The present world order is largely the outcome of the territorial and economic expansion of Europeans during the past five centuries. They gradually came to occupy most of the habitable land in the American continents, Australia, New Zealand and parts of Africa. They made colonies of large parts of Asia. They did so initially by military means; they consolidated themselves by introducing economic, political, cultural and religious institutions. Ever thereafter there has been a net transfer of economic resources from the rest of the world to the lands controlled by Europeans and their lineal descendants who comprise the white segment of humankind. According to a recent estimate whites who make up some 35% of the world's population control about 55% of the world's habitable land. To see this reality in perspective, it is relevant to recall that when the white European populations increased rapidly in the 18th and 19th centuries, they had large uninhabited areas of the globe to colonize. And in the 20th century, the brown, black and yellow peoples have multiplied at a much faster rate than the whites, and have few uninhabited areas left to colonize.

### *European Influences on Sri Lanka*

For our present purpose, we must look at the world from the standpoint of Sri Lanka. The first European Power which exercised its influence on Sri Lanka was Portugal in the 16th century. At that time Portugal was a country with a relatively small population and limited resources. Even so, its armed ships, its fire-power and the ruthless pugnacity of its soldiery enabled Portugal to sail round the Cape of Good Hope and conquer and commercially exploit the maritime regions of Sri Lanka from 1505 to 1658. This Portuguese connection irrevocably drew Sri Lanka into the vortex of the world of global commerce and rivalry. In 1658 the Dutch displaced the Portuguese from Sri Lanka, and were in turn displaced by the British in 1796. In 1815, the British took possession of the whole island of Sri Lanka and governed it until 1948.

By the year 1815, European states such as Portugal and the Netherlands had fallen from the front rank and five major states had emerged: Britain, France, Russia, Austria and Prussia. Of these, Britain succeeded in establishing the largest empire the world has

ever seen. Sri Lanka became a part of this empire. Resources extracted from the colonies helped Britain's industrialization. The industrial revolution based on the steam-engine first became consolidated in Britain. By the 19th century, Britain was the world's paramount military power and its most advanced capitalist economy. By the second half of the 19th century, the process of industrialization had spread to other parts of Europe as well as to the United States of America. As the 20th century approached, uneven economic development in different parts of Europe provoked fierce rivalries between the European Powers. There was internecine competition for additional territories in Africa, Asia and the Pacific. Each Power ruthlessly pursued its self-interest unrestrained by religion or morality. It was tacitly assumed that ultimate victory and success went to the fittest state, in accordance with the laws of Nature. This anarchic competition engendered frequent international conflicts and crises which were usually settled by the use of force or intimidation. Behind these ephemeral conflicts, fundamental long-term shifts of economic power were discernible. By the turn of the 20th century, the United States of America which spanned a huge continent, as well as the vast Czarist Russian Empire, had begun to industrialize. Germany industrialized rapidly and rose to the rank of a world power. In Asia, Japan gradually acquired the position of economic and military pre-eminence. In the face of such shifts of power and influence, Britain found it increasingly difficult to defend its global colonial interests.

### *First World War and its Aftermath*

For our present purpose, it is not necessary to recount the complicated story of fear, miscalculation, misinformation, failings in communication and the imperatives of military planning which led to the outbreak of the First World War of 1914 to 1918. The assassination of an Austrian archduke by a Serb in Sarajevo in 1914, provoked an Austro-Serbian conflict which escalated into a World War. In this war Germany, entering the fray ostensibly as Austria's ally, eventually launched separate attacks on Russia, France and Britain. In the last year or two of the war the USA became involved in it by supplying material aid to the Allied Nations (Britain, France, Russia and Italy). Japan performed minor naval escort duties for the Allied Nations and thereby enhanced its position and possessions in the Pacific. When the First World War ended Germany had been defeated. Austria-Hungary had disappeared as a geo-political entity. A revolution in Russia had inaugurated the first socialist state in history. Britain, France and Italy though victorious in the war, had suffered devastation. The scale of death, destruction, waste and havoc wrought by this war was unprecedented in the history of war. The Allied victors fixed the responsibility for the outbreak of the war on Germany. They wrote a guilt clause into the peace treaty — the

Treaty of Versailles — and ordered Germany to pay a sum of over \$100 billion as war damages. Germany signed the harsh treaty in 1919 because the only alternative to signing was fighting another war. That war was fought 20 years later in the form of the Second World War. But in the run-up to the Second World War, fascism arose in Western Europe and triumphed in Germany, Austria and Italy. Indeed the Second World War can justly be regarded as a war perpetrated by fascism. It is pertinent to examine how it came to be fought.

### *Rise of Fascism and the Second World War*

At the end of the First World War Germany was in a state of utter economic and social ruin. The Social Democrats who took charge of the country and declared it a republic, failed dismally in the task of social and economic reconstruction. In 1923, Germany stalled on its reparation payments and the French seized the industrial Ruhr to extract payment. Hyperinflation set in and reached incredible proportions and seriously undermined the German socio-economic system. The Great Crash of the capitalist system in 1929 severely affected Germany. For salvation the German people turned to a megalomaniac who preached fascism in the form of Nazism. To say this is not to suggest that Nazism was the expression of a single deranged mind. If it was a form of insanity, then it was a malady that afflicted the collective German psyche, for Nazism had a wide appeal across the German nation. At that time fascism presented itself as a third alternative distinct from both capitalism and socialism. To the workers fascism insisted that it did not stand for capitalism; to the capitalists it insisted that it did not stand for socialism. Whatever its propagandist slogans, in practice Nazism espoused the cause of German national glory, big capital and the victory of the Aryan Man. It was viciously anti-Semitic; implacably anti-communist; unashamedly anti-intellectual; resolutely anti-liberal; and sickeningly anti-feminist. It had no patience with parliamentary democracy. It was authoritarian. It really represented the terrorist dictatorship of big capital. Its mission was to make the world safe for big capital. In alliance with some other fascist forces in the world, Nazism led directly to the Second World War.

In the Second World War, Germany and its allies, namely, Japan and Italy — the three Axis Powers — confronted the Allied Nations which included Britain, France, the Soviet Union and the USA. The war swept across five continents and led to the slaughter of over 50 million human beings, 20 million of whom were Soviet citizens. It maimed tens of millions and caused unimaginable destruction of property and incalculable waste of productive resources. Some of the outcomes of the Second World War were

neither intended nor even remotely foreseen. Germany was vanquished and divided into two parts: West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany) and East Germany (German Democratic Republic) which are currently in the throes of reunification. Profiting from huge grants and loans from the USA, West Germany emerged as the star economic performer in capitalist Europe. As a result of the Second World War, Japan was devastated and demilitarized. Today it is an industrial giant and has one of the world's highest per capita incomes. The British Empire disintegrated after the War. Asia and Africa were decolonized and, as a part of that process, Sri Lanka was granted Independence. Eastern Europe came under Communist rule at the end of the war. At present Eastern Europe is in turmoil and it has begun to experiment in a drastic way with various modifications of its economic and political organization. There has been a decisive rejection of one-party communist rule in Eastern European countries.

### *Nuclear Age and Cold War*

Perhaps the most sinister event connected with the Second World War was the inauguration of the nuclear age. What aggravated matters was the collapse of the collaboration between the Western countries and the Soviet Union soon after the end of the War. In 1945 the war in the Pacific ended after the USA dropped atomic bombs on Japan. Soviet leaders perceived this use of atomic bombs as an attempt by the USA, not so much to end the war as to frighten the Soviet Union into making concessions in the post-war organization of the world. To counter this perceived threat they felt impelled to acquire a rival nuclear arsenal of their own. This rivalry between the USA and the Soviet Union generated the Cold War which has held sway with varying intensity up to date. The USA-dominated North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Soviet-dominated Warsaw Pact represent the military alignments of the Cold War. This arrangement divided Europe into two camps, with only a few countries like Switzerland, Ireland, Sweden, Finland and Yugoslavia in neither one camp nor the other. A large part of international politics since 1945 has had to do with the Soviet-American Cold War rivalry. With the precipitous de-escalation of superpower rivalry and the undreamt of changes which occurred in Eastern Europe in 1989, the NATO and Warsaw Pact arrangements are presently in the melting pot. There seems no doubt that the Cold War, in its old form has ended. That it has really ended in all its diverse ramifications is doubtful. It is most unlikely to end quite so abruptly. The Cold War catalysed the formation of industrial complexes, political elites and military and civilian bureaucracies not only in the USA and the Soviet Union, but also in many other

countries. They all have lives and needs of their own that are not likely to rest in peace for a good while to come.

### *United Nations Organization*

A salutary outcome of the Second World War was the birth of the United Nations Organization. With all its limitations, over the years it has grown in moral strength and influence and has become something more than a global talking-shop. During the Second World War, the term “United Nations” came into use to denote the alliance of countries that were opposed to the Axis Nations. Later the term was chosen as the name of the international organization which came into existence in 1945. It was created with the express purpose of maintaining world peace and security, developing friendly relations among nations and encouraging cooperation in solving international economic, social, cultural and humanitarian problems. The USA, UK, Soviet Union and China (the “Big Four”) met in 1944 and drafted the preliminary proposals of the United Nations. The Charter of the United Nations was formally signed and came into force in 1945. There were 51 original members. Among them was India although it was still a part of the British Empire. Sri Lanka was admitted to the United Nations in 1955. Today with a membership of some 160 states, the United Nations includes almost all the sovereign nations of the modern international system. The states comprising the international system vary enormously in size, population, economic development and military strength. The Soviet Union, for example, covers one-sixth of the world’s land surface whereas Singapore is only a few hundred square kilometres. China’s population is one-fifth of the world’s population, whereas the Republic of the Maldives has only some 100 000 people. As a matter of fact, about 30 of the countries of the United Nations have a population of less than 200 000; each of another 30 have one million or less. Theoretically, all states are sovereign and independent; all possess equally the rights of territorial integrity and self-defence. All states are equally obliged to avoid interfering in the internal affairs of other states. Since the adoption of the United Nations Charter, states are obligated to avoid the use of force or the threat of the use of force in relations with other states, except in self-defence.

### *Post-Second World War Period*

The United Nations injunctions concerning non-interference and the non-use of force have been violated often enough. It has been estimated that since the Second World War, about 40 million humans have been killed in various wars. Some 95% of these wars have occurred in developing countries, with foreign powers interfering directly or indirectly in most of them. Complete isolation of the

internal affairs of states from their external environment has become virtually impossible. On the pretext that a major conflict anywhere may threaten peace everywhere, big powers and international organizations take an active interest in major conflicts within and between sovereign states. Moreover, in recent decades, the international news media have apparently come to regard it as part of their professional duty to report and comment on whatever they judge as being newsworthy, wherever it occurs. Thus it has come about that nowadays governments of sovereign states cannot indulge in coercive activities without attracting intense global scrutiny. If the government of a state deals with its citizens in ways which appear to external observers as constituting violations of human rights, it will predictably elicit censure from one or more quarters. International pressure may be brought to bear on that government to conform to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. If the state in question is a member of the United Nations, the inconsistency between its commitments and practice will stand exposed for all the world to see. The moral force of such censure is greatest if it emanates unanimously from the United Nations. For example, the South African government argued for decades that its policy of apartheid is a purely internal matter. The international community, however, saw it as a violation of human rights and therefore a matter for legitimate outside interference. The ruthless effectiveness with which regimes in South Africa pursued their racist policies for several decades in scorn of world opinion, was the despair of those who believed in the power of moral force to change the world. Political events that have occurred in South Africa during the past few months may have restored their faith somewhat. At last some respect for human rights has begun to emerge gradually but surely, even in South Africa.

### *International Relations*

A powerful state which plausibly claims that it intervenes in another in order to prevent genocide or a massacre of a minority, not only escapes international censure but may even win praise for its trouble. In such situations, the intervening state usually seeks the diplomatic approval of other states or of some international organization before it actually intervenes. Or a state may take the initiative in urging the United Nations itself to intervene in the matter. Often enough, a powerful state intervenes in the internal affairs of another, not for humanitarian reasons, but for its own economic or strategic advantage. For instance, if an internal conflict in a given state is likely to jeopardize the security or the alliance interests of a major state, it will almost always intervene. The Soviet military intervention in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968 are clear cases in point. In these instances, the proffered justification

was the perceived threat to socialism. If a big power has reason to suspect that a small country's policies pose a threat to its interests, it is likely to deal harshly with the country in question. The way in which the USA has reacted to Vietnam, Cuba, Grenada, Libya, Nicaragua, Iran and Panama in the recent past illustrates this point. A big power may well use the pretext of an ongoing political, ethnic or religious conflict in a small neighbour to intervene in its affairs. One predictable result of such intervention is the achievement of the political, economic or security objectives of the big power. For example, there is reason to believe that India's recent intervention in Sri Lanka was largely motivated by its own geopolitical interests. Thus, however passionately a small country may believe in the sanctity of the concept of national sovereignty, in the present state of the international system, it must fashion its foreign policy with circumspection. In a just world, big powers would not react to small sovereign states whose foreign policies they happen to dislike, in the way that big powers have actually done. One working hypothesis to account for such behaviour postulates that the power elite in every state is prone to use the coercive power of the state, not so much to serve the public interest of the state as to perpetuate itself in power. This motive is invoked to explain the political behaviour of the holders of power in internal and in external affairs. In any event, a small country with a giant neighbour must somehow adjust itself to the foreign policy imperatives of the neighbour or risk more direct domination. Modern Finland is an example of a relatively small country with a population of about five million, which has maintained its independence, integrity, neutrality, constitutional democracy and market economy, while sharing a long common border with a huge communist superpower. Having fought two bitter wars with the Soviet Union in 1939 and 1944, Finland has pursued a foreign policy which, for over 40 years, has apparently not aroused Soviet anxiety or suspicion, even during the hottest phases of the Cold War. This says something for Finnish diplomacy, for it succeeded in winning Soviet confidence at a time when the Soviet Union was almost obsessively concerned with ensuring its absolute security.

### *Foreign Intervention*

Some states in the current international system are highly vulnerable to foreign interference and control. This is so because the governments of some sovereign states are obliged to rely on foreign funds and arms to protect themselves even from their internal enemies. It is no secret that states like the USA, the Soviet Union and China supply arms and funds to some governments struggling for survival, to selected opposition groups, or to rebel groups in foreign countries. On occasion a big power may provide military

advisers or even combat troops. For example, the USA sent troops to Vietnam, the Soviet Union to Afghanistan, Vietnam to Cambodia, Syria to Lebanon and India to Sri Lanka and the Republic of the Maldives. In such ways some sovereign states have become “penetrated” by more powerful ones. Overt or covert military support apart, even the official disbursement of economic and technical aid facilitates the intervention of the donor state in the internal affairs of the recipient, for such aid often involves the imposition of conditions by the donor on the recipient. If the conditions are not complied with, the aid would not be forthcoming. When a recipient state complies with such conditions unwillingly, it is accepting interference as a hard fact of life.

As we all know, ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural frontiers do not necessarily coincide with territorial boundaries of nation-states. Accordingly, there can be cross-border ties and bonds of various sorts. In a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious state, a minority group which feels oppressed and organizes a movement to fight for reform is likely to receive covert and overt cross-border support from kindred groups. In recent times the Naga tribes in the north-eastern border of India have received support from China. Tamils in northern Sri Lanka have found a source of financial, logistical, military and moral support and a haven of refuge in the Tamil Nadu state of South India. Ideological loyalties that transcend traditional loyalties to clan, tribe or nation have been potent facilitators of extraterritorial solidarity. For example, Roman Catholicism, the Communist ideology, Dravida Munnetra Khazhagam ideology and Islamic Fundamentalism have not been respecters of territorial boundaries.

Destabilization through the encouragement of revolt is a recognized method that big powers have sometimes used to control other states. The technique of destabilization or subversion has been to organize, support and direct disaffected elements in the subverted state and use them to establish a client regime. The client regime is then used to further the interests of the big power. Nazi Germany subverted Czechoslovakia in 1938-39; the Soviet Union subverted Poland by its secret non-aggression pact with Germany in 1939; the role played by the Central Intelligence Agency of the USA in subverting Iran in 1953, and in subverting Chile in 1970-73 and overthrowing the duly elected Chilean president of the time is well-known. But intervention in the affairs of foreign states for whatever reason is an expensive business, and sooner or later every big power has realized that the returns were not worth the investment. There is reason to believe that the USA and the Soviet Union may have now reached that stage and have begun to be selective in their foreign commitments. However, in this matter the USA seems to be the



beneficiary of an unusual circumstance in the current international order. In past rivalries between states, the one which emerged dominant was at once both militarily and economically superior to the others. That is to say, military and economic competition proceeded simultaneously. This has not been so for the USA. Its military rival — the Soviet Union — poses no economic challenge to it at all at present. Its economic rival — Japan — actually supports American military hegemony. So does the capitalist world. In 1987, for example, the central banks of ten countries (Group of Ten) lent some \$120 billion to the USA almost for the asking. Economic power has certainly shifted in the capitalist world from the USA and UK to Japan and West Germany; but the USA remains the undisputed military leader and is palpably rewarded for it.

With this broad review of some of the international activities of powerful governments as the background, we are ready to consider the activities of non-governmental organizations in the modern world.

### *Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)*

A remarkable feature of the contemporary international system is the increasingly important role that non-governmental organizations — the NGOs — are playing in international affairs. The various Green, Peace, Human Rights and Women's movements have acquired a degree of moral influence that governments can no longer ignore. The service that Amnesty International has rendered on behalf of human rights, for example, has been acknowledged, celebrated and honoured. The humanitarian functions performed by the International Committee of the Red Cross have been widely appreciated. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament is on the verge of bearing fruit. Green Movements have even begun to acquire significant political power. Typically, though, NGOs do not seek to capture state power. They aim rather to change the relationship of the state to society so that the state becomes more responsive to social demands. Women's Movements devoted to the themes of non-violence, peace, holistic approach to development and ecological balance are bound to play an increasingly important role in the immediate future.

### *Transnational Corporations (TNCs)*

The Transnational Corporations (TNCs), that is to say firms with the same directorate which conduct business across at least one national border, are unarguably the single most important category of NGO in the modern world. By the end of the 1970s there were some 11 000 of them with about 82 000 subsidiaries. So TNCs are

very much a part of the current socio-economic reality. They are the principal agencies of international trade. By their operations they have effectively converted the world into a single global market — the international economic order. Today it is not sensible to accept the need for international trade and reject TNCs. For Sri Lanka which is very much a part of the world economy today, the rejection of TNCs is not a practical proposition. The only relevant question is how to adjust to them to Sri Lanka's maximum advantage. The enormous power and influence of TNCs are based on their command over technology, capital, marketing and access to markets. They control much of the know-how in practically every important field — electronics, electrical goods, aircraft manufacture, pharmaceuticals and computers, to name only a few. In fact most of the world's patents are the property of the TNCs. According to a recent estimate, the value of their annual production is some \$850 billion. The conventional attitude of many Third World radicals to TNCs is that they are nothing but agencies used by the First World countries for the economic exploitation of Third World countries. A recent calculation has indeed shown that in the recent past the annual profits of TNCs from their operations in developing countries alone amounted to about \$100 billion. Since 1965, however, about 75% of foreign direct investment by First World TNCs has gone to other First World countries. Cross-investment between First World countries has increasingly become the trend. Moreover, TNCs are not entirely a First World phenomenon. Several Third World countries like Brazil, Mexico, South Korea and India also have their own TNCs. Exclusive exploitation of poor Third World countries for the benefit of former imperial masters has not been the major activity of TNCs in the recent past. But neither are TNCs in business mainly to develop host countries. Their professed aim is to maximize profits. They have not always proved to be a barrier to economic development of the host countries. The rapid development of countries like Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea depended heavily on TNC participation. It is true that the relationship between a powerful TNC and a host Third World country is almost always unequal and in favour of the TNC. But recent evidence suggests that TNCs themselves are increasingly co-operating with Third World governments for mutual advantage. The sensible attitude for a country like Sri Lanka to take is to accept TNCs as a fact of life and press them to fulfil what they profess to do, namely, help to develop the economy by bringing in capital and technology and creating employment. TNCs have, of course, a proven capacity for bribery and corruption, currency speculation, inflicting environmental damage, imposing health hazards and even destabilizing governments by commercial manoeuvring. Poor host countries of TNCs must at all times be mindful of these dangers. In favour of TNCs it can be said that they bring together managerial

teams of men and women of different nations whose loyalty to the TNC they work for is at least as strong as their loyalty to their native lands. In a world plagued by national chauvinism, the internationalism of TNCs is a positive force for harmony. This internationalism also has implications for the political economy of the world, a subject to which we now turn.

### *World Bank and IMF*

Even before the Second World War ended, an international conference was held in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, USA in 1944 with the express goal of building a rational international economic order. Although 44 nations participated, the enterprise was largely under the leadership of the USA and UK. The Soviet Union, as the sole representative of centrally-planned economies, played more than a nominal role in the proceedings. A major concern of the conference was to avoid the recurrence of anarchical national and international economic competition, which was identified as the fundamental cause of the Second World War. Two institutions — the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the so-called Bretton Woods institutions — were created for the accredited purpose. The World Bank was to be a pool of money for post-war reconstruction and long-term development projects. The IMF was to act as a global central bank, accepting deposits and making loans to countries having problems with their international balance of payments, that is, to countries which are consuming more in imports than they are sending abroad in exports. Thus the IMF was intended by its founders to be an international co-operative bank. But over the years it has changed its character, and now it is almost indistinguishable from a private commercial bank. In any case, the Bretton Woods era was brought to an end in 1971, when the USA as a palliative to the glut of dollars in the global economy formally abandoned the convertibility of dollars into gold. They were also made inconvertible on demand into yen or marks or any other international reserves.

Presently, 152 countries are members of the World Bank and IMF. Unlike in other international organizations, in the case of the Bank and the Fund, the relative voting power of each country is a weighted one, reflecting each country's economic strength. Up to 1989 the five biggest contributors to the IMF were the USA, Britain, West Germany, France and Japan, in that descending order. To nobody's surprise, in 1990 Britain's place was taken by Japan and West Germany which share the second position. Britain and France now share the third position. The American contribution to the fund capital of the IMF is nearly 20% of the total. Hence the voting strength of the USA has remained nearly as potent as that of the

next four leading members. It continues to have veto power over major decisions. The five biggest borrowers in 1989 were Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, India and Chile. In 1989 China ranked as the ninth biggest contributor and the eighth biggest borrower. Although it participated in the preliminary discussions, the Soviet Union did not join the World Bank and the IMF at their inception in 1946. For years it consistently criticized the Bank and Fund as instruments of American domination over developing countries. Recently, however, the Soviet Union has strongly hinted that it wishes to join these institutions. In 1947 the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) was formulated for the conduct of international trade. The World Bank, IMF and GATT constitute the institutional framework in which the global economic order operates. They have sustained and promoted the global capitalist order. They have benefitted the First World, arguably at the expense of the Second and Third Worlds — a division of the world we must briefly examine now.

### *First, Second and Third Worlds*

At the end of the Second World War, the USA accounted for over one-third of global economic output and had a huge trading surplus. Through a scheme of economic and military aid, the USA was able to stimulate the recovery of Western Europe and Japan. Dollars spent abroad in connection with the global role of the USA, returned to the USA in the form of purchases of American goods and services. In recent years, the USA has run up a huge external deficit in its balance of payments which is matched by the surpluses of Japan and West Germany. The military role of the USA as the defender of the capitalist world from a possible attack by the Soviet Union has obviously paid off, for it has earned huge subsidies from the rest of the capitalist world. What will happen to the American economy when the Soviet Union ceases to be perceived as a menacing threat by its doctrinaire enemies remains to be seen.

The first centrally-planned or non-market economy or socialist economy went into business in the Soviet Union in 1917. If control of the government of a state by a Communist Party is used as the criterion of demarcation, approximately 35% of the world's population spread over some 30% of the earth's surface belonged to the Socialist World or Second World until the communist regimes in Eastern Europe rapidly collapsed in 1989. China is a low-income socialist country which is a nuclear power. It is one of the five permanent members of the Security Council of the United Nations. It has embarked upon an ambitious program of economic growth and seems destined to emerge as a major global power in the 21st century.

The First World and the Socialist World of yesteryear apart, there is a large subgroup of nations comprising about 50% of the world's population. They are all included in the Third World. Underdevelopment, that is, failure of a country to realize its full economic potential, has been — and is — the dominant characteristic of the great majority of Third World countries. Nearly all of them have a history of a period of colonial rule by a European power during the past 500 years. The history of colonization accounts for a large part of the underdevelopment of most Third World countries. Conversely, the developed countries achieved their early development partly by the exploitation of the countries they colonized. Broadly speaking, the development of rich countries has been causally related to the concurrent relative underdevelopment of the poor countries.

The territorial and economic expansion of Europeans from the 16th to the 20th centuries coincided with the transition of European society from feudalism to capitalism and the emergence of a global economy. Particularly in the early stages, the commodities that sustained the global economy were produced largely by the labour of those who inhabited most of the countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America which now belong to the Third World. At first European colonialization involved plunder, pillage and slavery more than legitimate trade and investment. As a result of these processes, an enormous amount of wealth was transferred into Europe from Asia, Africa and Latin America. In these imperial ventures the Europeans behaved no worse than did the Ottomans, the Moguls, the Chinese and the Japanese in their times of expansion. Nor were the South Indian predators of the ancient Sinhalese Kingdom any worse than other systematic plunderers. The European imperial exercise proved to be more effective than that of previous expansionists because of their superior naval and military technology. What is more, their period of colonial expansion coincided historically with the development of capitalism in the world. From the earliest period of European colonization, the colonized countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America were drawn into the world market generated by capitalism. They also became participants in the international division of labour which emerged with the spread of capitalism. This aspect became a very striking feature in tropical agriculture and in the mining industry. Different countries tended to specialize in the cultivation of tea, coffee, sugar, cocoa, groundnuts, rubber, coconuts, sisal and jute. Certain other countries specialized in the mining of gold, silver, copper, aluminium and so on. Such “monocultural production” is a hallmark of underdevelopment. The most fertile lands in colonized countries which were originally devoted to staple food crops were often virtually expropriated by the colonial powers and diverted to production of cash crops for the world market. Such diversions of land use certainly

contributed to the prevalence of malnutrition in many underdeveloped countries. Perhaps a more important contributory factor to malnutrition has been the phenomenal increase in the population of underdeveloped countries. It has been estimated recently that over 40% of all Asians living now are under 15 years of age. This has been mainly due to benefits derived from modern technology and medicine. More people survive now in underdeveloped countries than they did previously, and a proportion of them become malnourished because economic growth has not kept pace with population growth.

Tautologously, colonial exploitation of a country must impair its development in some sense. That the state of underdevelopment in *all* currently underdeveloped Third World countries has been the direct consequence of colonialism is a matter on which there might be inconclusive debate. Freedom from colonial exploitation has not proved to be a sufficient condition to ensure economic development. Thailand, for example, escaped direct colonization but remained relatively underdeveloped until very recently. However, almost all underdeveloped countries in the world today have had a recent colonial history. And in the post-colonial period, their terms of trade with developed countries have tended to perpetuate the state of relative underdevelopment of most Third World countries.

Today Third World countries have a diversity of ideologies, political structures and resource endowments. A few of them belong to the Socialist World in the sense defined above. A handful of Third World countries like South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan have succeeded in industrializing themselves — the Newly Industrialized Countries or NICs. By far the most affluent countries of the Third World in terms of per capita GNP are those which belong to OPEC — the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries. This group of 13 Third World countries of which seven are Arab, quadrupled the price of oil in 1973 and doubled it again in 1979, and thereby acquired massive financial resources. To be precise, in 1970 the price of a barrel of crude oil was \$1.73; in 1974 it cost \$11.25 and in 1981 \$35.01. In real terms this represented a seven-fold increase. It was justified on the grounds that the price of oil had been maintained at artificially low levels previously. Predictably price hikes of such magnitude had profound economic repercussions elsewhere, especially in the developing countries. These were mitigated to some extent because many citizens from some developing countries including Sri Lanka and India, were able to find temporary gainful employment in the newly prosperous OPEC countries. It is indeed high time now to zero in on these two Third

World countries — Sri Lanka and India — which are of utmost concern to us.

### *Indo-Sri Lankan Relations*

Sri Lanka's claim to fame in the international system is that it is a Third World country with a high physical quality of life. In the early 1970s even when its per capita GNP was less than \$200, it had a relatively high life expectancy, a low infant mortality rate and a high literacy rate. Sri Lanka's giant neighbour, the subcontinent of India, also belongs to the Third World and in a practical, physical sense constitutes Sri Lanka's immediate external world. For better for worse, for richer for poorer, Sri Lanka is destined to live with India as its neighbour. It is appropriate therefore to take a good look at this giant neighbour. Physically India is the seventh largest country in the world. (Sri Lanka is 111th.) In population, India ranks second after China. (Sri Lanka is 44th.) One out of every six people on Earth is an Indian. After achieving political independence from Britain in 1947, India consciously fashioned its policies on the pursuit of democracy, secularism and non-alignment. Although about 80% of India's population is Hindu by religion, and religion as a social observance is tangibly alive among Indians, India has resolutely remained a secular state and does not accord the foremost place to Hinduism among religions. It has a federal constitution with a high degree of devolution of power to its 25 constituent States. India opted for a mixed economy with a dominant state sector devoted to industrialization. What has been the outcome of its policies? By 1964, India had become the tenth most powerful industrial country in the world. At present, outside of the centrally-planned economies, it is second only to the USA in its number of professional and technical personnel. It is potentially the world's lowest cost producer of many high technology goods including a light combat aircraft which it is currently building. From motor vehicles to computers to pharmaceuticals, India possesses the technical know-how to manufacture virtually every industrial product. It is also a major exporter of brainpower even to the most technologically advanced countries. In recent years, the rapid growth of food production has changed India from a major importer of food, to a country with growing food reserves. In spite of all these impressive achievements, like many other Third World countries, India continues to be plagued by communalism, religious fundamentalism and poverty. Despite the increase in cereal production, malnutrition persists because of maldistribution. Perhaps by a perverse allocation of resources, India has also grown into the fourth largest military machine in the world. Its armed forces number about 1.5 million. It is believed that India possesses the men and materials required to assemble atomic weapons at short notice. It is immersed in nuclear weapons and ballistic missile

programs. It has leased out a nuclear powered submarine and acquired Soviet-built long range reconnaissance aircraft. Recently it ranked as the world's largest arms importer and it has also formulated plans to export arms. It is building a formidable bluewater navy.

Why? India's neighbours like Sri Lanka wonder and diligently search for an answer. Is it fear, even paranoia, about an external attack? India's independence in 1947 began with a bloodbath and a traumatic dismembering of the sub-continent of India into India and Pakistan. Three wars fought in 1947, 1965 and 1971 have failed to settle the division of the disputed mountain area between India and Pakistan. Since independence India has also fought a war with China, which some Indians regard as the real threat. The Indo-Pakistan war of 1971 led to the breakup of Pakistan and the transformation of East Pakistan into Bangladesh. That event established Indian hegemony in South Asia and reinforced India's self-image as the natural leader of the Third World. At any rate, India now has the self-confidence and the military muscle to demand what it perceives as its rightful place in the family of nations. Evidently it has no intention of leaving the stewardship of the world permanently in the hands of the contemporary Western powers. With such a perspective, India was one of the founding fathers of the Non-Aligned Movement way back in 1961.

India has a coastline which is some 5 000 kilometres long. Its geographical location makes it a critical factor in military operations in the Indian Ocean region. Accordingly, one of India's consistent foreign policy objectives has been to get the United Nations to declare the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace. With India's strong backing, in 1971 Sri Lanka sponsored a United Nations resolution to make the Indian Ocean a Zone of Peace. The stated objective of the resolution was to keep the Indian Ocean free of superpower naval deployments. The USA has consistently opposed this resolution which up to date, has not been translated into concrete action. Somehow Sri Lanka has been unable or unwilling to convene the conference on the Indian Ocean to promote the concept. India has explicitly expressed its displeasure about Sri Lanka's inertia on the matter.

Clearly India appears to be pursuing the objective of becoming a global military power. Why? one may wonder once again. The principal clue, surely, to understanding India's militarisation is to think of the huge multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-lingual, densely populated, poverty-stricken subcontinent that is India. These characteristics make it intrinsically and explosively unstable and vulnerable to foreign subversion intent upon promoting instability.



Its border disputes with Pakistan and China are literally inflammable. In that context, a professionally-trained, well-equipped, large army is a prime necessity both for containing internal revolts and for deterring foreign subversive interventions. In addition, and understandably so, India no doubt desires to be taken seriously by a world which takes seriously only dramatized military superiority or formidable industrial power. Finally, it is possible that the power drive of an Indian elite determined to use the coercive apparatus of the state to pursue the objective of commercial supremacy in the region, is also marginally at work. In any case, speculating endlessly and inconclusively about India's deep motivation for militarization does not alter by a jot the hard fact of its militarization. But India is a vibrant democracy with a truculently independent press, and the most hostile and uncompromising critics of India's militarization are found in India. In any case, until a just world dawns, small countries located near a giant neighbour must learn to devise strategies for adjusting themselves to the reality of their mightily armed neighbours. Past relations with a giant neighbour traditionally leave bitter memories in small nations. Images of "hereditary foe" die hard. But such images are essentially negative in their impact. In the modern world of economic, technological and cultural interdependence, cooperation for mutual benefit should be the foreign policy objective of states, big and small.

### *Third World in the Post-World War II Period*

The decade of the 1960s saw the emergence of a host of countries of the Third World, striving for political independence and eager for economic development. For a while, it appeared as if the Third World might be a wave of the future. It found political expression in the Non-Aligned Movement which was formally inaugurated in Belgrade in 1961 with the participation of 25 states. Yugoslavia, India and Egypt provided leadership. Today the Non-Aligned Movement has a membership of over a hundred nations. It sponsored the setting up of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in 1964 as the Third World's principal organ for the articulation of its economic interests, and for negotiating with developed countries. With much passion and some cogency, Third World countries have tended to explain their underdevelopment almost entirely in terms of the colonization to which they were subject. For Europeans the past five centuries have been a period of expansion, economic growth and prosperity. For others with the notable exception of the Japanese and the Thais, they have been a period of being colonized. Accordingly, Third World countries have pressed for development aid from the industrialized countries almost as reparation for colonization. In 1960, using their

overwhelming numerical majority in the United Nations which operates on the principle of one country one vote, the developing countries engineered the adoption by the General Assembly of a resolution urging developed countries to disburse at least 1% of their GNP as development aid. When this did not materialize, the developed countries were urged in 1970 to contribute at least 0.7% of their GNP as development aid. In the period from 1970 to 1985, developing countries campaigned vigorously for a more equitable New International Economic Order (NIEO). These moves have been singularly unsuccessful. If anything, they appear to have hardened the attitude of the developed countries to the economic plight of developing countries. This may have been partly because it was the OPEC countries (which also belong to the Third World) that took the initiative in pressing for the NIEO. For one thing, the sharp oil price increases ("oil shocks") imposed by the OPEC countries and exacerbated by the Transnational Oil Companies were largely blamed for the aggravation of the economic problems of the poorest developing countries during the period after 1973. For another, many non-oil-producing developed countries also had difficulties in adjusting themselves to the "oil shocks" and were therefore not disposed to be overly generous with aid. The aid that is given to developing countries has often proved to be a means of tying the developing countries to the economies of the rich ones. Aid usually takes the form of loans for buying equipment or raw materials and consumer goods from the donors. Such aid generally becomes a burden to the recipients. The OPEC countries gave substantial amounts in aid to many countries most badly affected by the "oil shocks". In 1977, for example, about 3% of OPEC combined GNP was given as aid to developing countries whereas the industrialized countries which belong to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) gave only 0.3% of their GNP as development aid that year. The aid that OPEC countries gave was at least partly motivated by various political considerations, as aid-giving often is. Even the substantial amounts of aid given by the OPEC members, however, were not sufficient to offset the developing countries' higher import bills for fuel. Many of them were obliged to resort to borrowing on an unprecedented scale. The bulk of the huge revenues accumulated by the OPEC countries was invested in the industrialized countries. In the event, the NIEO did not materialize.

Since 1960 the developing countries as a group have improved their living standards at rates they had never previously attained in their recorded history. China and India, for example, witnessed dramatic improvements in their life expectancy, infant mortality rate, literacy rates and per capita incomes. From 1973 to 1980 the growth rate for the Third World as a whole, as estimated

by the World Bank, averaged an impressive 5.4%. In the 1980s, however, the growth rate fell well below this level, but there were wide disparities between different sub-groups of Third World countries. The Asian NICs like South Korea and Taiwan continued to perform remarkably well. The OPEC countries as a whole continued to be affluent until the 1980s. One sub-group of Third World countries became noteworthy because of their huge international debts. This sub-group included the low-income commodity dependent countries mainly in Africa as well as the middle-income manufacturing countries in Latin America.

The largest sub-group of Third World countries consists of about 130 commodity exporters. These countries experienced a fall in their export earnings and this was aggravated by a substantial increase in their debt service payments. Many of these countries sustained slow rates of economic growth, rapid rates of population growth, falling living standards, high levels of unemployment, inflation and widespread malnutrition. In some countries these unfavourable effects have been associated with ethnic conflicts, civil wars, military coups and gross human rights abuses. Their social and political instability has often posed a threat to international security. Sri Lanka belongs in this sub-group of Third World countries. In order to set the context for exploring a suitable development model for Sri Lanka, a brief survey of the current state of the global economy may prove useful. To such a survey we now turn.

### *Political Economy of the First World*

The huge deficits of the USA in its balance of payments and its budget are identified by some as the major current problem of the global economy. Paradoxically, the USA, the leader of the First World, is also the largest debtor nation in the world. The deficits of the USA are associated with low national savings. But there is no evidence that the USA is in a hurry to take appropriate corrective action. Moreover, the dollar remains strong despite the huge indebtedness of the USA. Perhaps the explanation is that as defender of the First World against imagined attacks from the Soviet Union, the USA is confident that Japanese and German surpluses would continue to flow into it. These surpluses are likely to flow into the USA until the countries of the First World realize that they have no further need to be defended from the Soviet Union by the USA. And that realization is already under way.

That the acknowledged leader of right-wing liberal capitalism — the USA — is also the largest debtor nation in the world suggests that something is seriously amiss in the underlying

socio-economic system. The proclaimed objectives of the capitalist system are the pursuit of economic growth, full employment and free trade. These objectives are no longer being achieved with much success. In capitalist Europe alone 18 million workers are currently unemployed. Neither investment nor economic growth can any longer be reliably depended upon to reduce unemployment. Inflation has become endemic and capitalist economies deliberately use unemployment to control inflation. Meanwhile indiscriminate economic growth is gravely damaging the natural environment. What is more, even in the most affluent countries there is a disturbingly large number of miserable people some of whose most basic material human needs are unsatisfied. For example, in the USA some 38 million people have no health insurance in a country where medical care is largely private and hugely expensive. Catering to the ever-growing demand for high technology medical care has imposed severe resource constraints even on the once-renowned socialized health care systems in capitalist Europe. Housing in some of the inner cities is considered appalling by standards of affluent societies. All of this plus the widespread prevalence of the abuse of hard drugs especially in countries like the USA, suggest that right-wing liberal capitalism is overripe for reform. It is true that during the past few decades, given the global imbalances, capitalism has worked well for most of the people in capitalist countries for most of the time. But capitalism does seem to suffer from an intrinsic deficiency. It has no effective mechanism for harmonizing the private aims of capital with the social needs of the community. The postulated mechanism — the invisible hand — is invisible today possibly because it disappeared after the 18th century when its operation was first perceived. One explanation for the endemic inflation, chronic unemployment, wide inequalities in income distribution with its social consequences and periodic economic depressions seen in capitalist economies is the deficiency referred to a moment ago. The rational treatment for a deficiency disorder is substitution therapy. Doses of critical governmental intervention must supply the needed harmonizing mechanism. And this seems an appropriate point at which to focus briefly on the results of one example of massive governmental intervention in development, at least by the administration of a huge dose of capital at a critical period.

In the first 15 years of the post-Second World War period, the USA spent some \$20 billion with the aim of promoting the recovery of the war damaged economies of Western Europe and Japan. Mainly as a result of this European Recovery Programme, the Western European Countries re-emerged in the 1960s as a formidable economic power. This period saw an integration of the world economy and an explosive growth of world trade. An European Economic Community gradually took shape. According to current

plans, 12 nations comprising the European Economic Community are expected to merge into a single market of 320 million consumers by 31 December 1992. A primary objective of this enterprise is to lay the foundation for an economically united Europe which is better equipped to compete with the USA and Japan. The economic merger is seen by some analysts as the necessary pre-condition for the political union of Europe and the restoration of Europe to the status of a global power. This merger is fraught with grave economic implications for Third World countries.

### *Reforms in the Socialist World*

In the Socialist World too, economic and political reforms are visibly under way. They are particularly evident in the Soviet Union in the form of perestroika or restructuring. The necessity for perestroika is interpreted by polemicists in the capitalist world as proof of the economic, political, social and moral failure of socialism. Indeed, some have roundly declared that the USA has won the Cold War and that capitalism has triumphed over socialism. Soviet theorists insist that the Soviet Union's socio-economic system ensures that every citizen is socially protected. They claim that the state constitutionally guarantees and practically procures for every citizen education, medical care, employment and security in old age. There is evidence that the system did indeed succeed in achieving very impressive rates of growth in the 1950s and 1960s. The confident prediction of some Soviet leaders in the 1960s that socialism would soon overtake capitalism was clearly based on an extrapolation of that trend. It is now freely admitted on the basis of experience gained in the 1970s and 1980s that the command methods of management developed during the process of industrialization and rebuilding of the economy devastated by war, are not efficient for the production of the sort of goods in great demand in affluent societies. Perestroika is said to be concerned with transforming the Soviet economy to cater to the creature comforts and consumer demands of the citizens, whose basic needs have been duly satisfied.

With the benefit of hindsight some defenders of socialism have argued that socialist methods of production were anyhow bound to fail in Russia and China because at the time these methods were introduced into these countries, they were largely agricultural countries of poor peasants. They were certainly not advanced industrialized countries of urban workers. Socialism, it is argued, was logically destined to follow industrial capitalism, not feudal agriculture. In support of their thesis, they cite the success of socialist methods of production in East Germany, which was an industrialized country before it went socialist. In purely material terms, the performance of East Germany while it lasted compared well even

with that of some well-developed capitalist states like Britain. But it is obvious enough that East Germany's political system was constricting and unfree. Some of the most skilled of East Germany's citizens who recently fled to West Germany declared that they had left not because their lives were uncomfortable but because they were unfree. It would appear that they abandoned comfortable slavery for the vagaries of free enterprise!

### *The Scandinavian Model*

The Scandinavian countries as exemplified by Sweden and Finland appear to have evolved a socio-economic system which provides a decent standard of living to the population as a whole, guarantees personal liberty and security and encourages participatory democracy. Through broad public participation in various areas of economic and social life, the system seeks to promote economic efficiency and egalitarianism in such fields as education, health care, social security and housing. The Scandinavian Model certainly seems to work reasonably well for the 20 million or so Scandinavians endowed as they are with ample natural resources. That it can be successfully applied to countries with much bigger and more heterogeneous populations less endowed proportionately with natural resources remains to be empirically tested.

### *Current Global Economic Realities*

What is patently clear from the foregoing general survey of different economic systems is that for all their brainy brilliance humankind has yet to discover a satisfactory solution to the seemingly simple problem of production, distribution and exchange. Because the passions, desires, emotions, feelings, objectives, motivations, expectations, endowments, means and circumstances of millions of humans are so variable there cannot be universally agreed upon answers to three simple questions: What kinds and quantities of goods shall we produce? How shall we produce them? What shall be their distribution among different individuals? The pure capitalist answer is to rely totally on free enterprise. The pure socialist answer is to rely entirely on rigid central management. Neither model has worked very well in practice. Circumstance has therefore compelled socialist countries to resort to greater use of private initiative for small-scale activities. Circumstance has also compelled capitalist countries to resort increasingly to central planning in large-scale activities such as the management of the production and distribution of energy. Economically today's world is plagued by financial disequilibrium. Politically it is invigorated by the climate of glasnost, perestroika and detente. This salubrious climate is propitious for the restoration of global economic

equilibrium, if the political conscience of the world's rich countries wills it.

The annual budget deficit of the USA is about \$150 billion; its balance of payments deficit is of the same order. Sooner or later the external deficit of the USA will have to be corrected if a crisis in the confidence of the dollar is to be averted. It is estimated that the NATO-related expenditure of the USA amounts to about \$150 billion annually. This represents about half of the defence budget of the USA. If the commitment of the USA to NATO were relaxed the budget deficit and balance of payments deficit could be substantially reduced but it would still leave an external deficit of about \$150 billion. This is equivalent to about 8% of world exports. The task of global macroeconomic management is to correct the deficit without precipitating a recession in the global economy. In a rational world this would be done by a massive transfer of funds from countries with surpluses to developing and socialist countries for the creation of an effective demand among them for goods produced by the USA. But the rich countries seem unwilling to work out such an arrangement.

### *Development Model for Sri Lanka*

In today's world, developing countries like Sri Lanka have no satisfactory model of development which they can mechanically imitate. The wise course of action for each developing country would be to work out and follow the path appropriate to its stage of development in the context of its historical and cultural experience. The imposition of the heavy bureaucratic apparatus of socialism on a largely agricultural country such as Sri Lanka is likely to be as disastrous as an immediate embarkation upon heavy capital intensive, high technology industrial investment. Much can — and should — be learned from the experience of other countries. What must be resolutely avoided is the mindless application of an ideological formula or the blind imitation of a rigid model. Countries that are now industrially advanced had attached great importance to agriculture in the earlier stages of their development. And for poor countries afflicted by malnutrition, the sensible policy to follow initially is surely to encourage agriculture and grow more food. Countries that are now developed had also invested heavily in literacy and technical education in the earlier stages of their development. It is an observable fact that no technically well-educated population is poor. The crucial role that modern technology plays in increasing productivity is beyond dispute. Hence poor countries would do well to invest in technical education. Needless to say, education is not the whole answer to all of society's problems. But few of society's problems can be solved without appropriate education.

In the context of our world, Sri Lanka is small. Although soaked in blood in the recent past, much of its famed beauty still lingers. At a time like the present it is necessary to remember that its traditional values include non-violence, reverence for nature and a concern even for the weakest living organism. An understanding of the insights provided by modern knowledge and of the capacities of modern technology could help in the revival of those values. Excessive riches for the few at the expense of the basic human needs of the many cannot revive those values or generate a stable peace. Economic activities that will damage the environment will neither keep Sri Lanka beautiful nor make it a fit place for future generations to live. Concepts such as economic and political democracy, social justice based on observance of human rights, and environmental conservation should fashion the future development of the country. Whatever specific form a development program assumes it will have to be based on policies designed to:

- (1) bring population growth and food production into a sustainable balance;
- (2) head off runaway climatic change, prevent biological impoverishment of the country and minimize damage to the ozone layer;
- (3) organize production and arrange distribution so that basic human needs such as food, shelter, clean water, education and elementary health care are available to all;
- (4) induce respect for human rights.

It now remains for us to consider these policies in relation to our past, present and future.



## 6. Our Past, Present and Future

### *The Gruesome Present*

How and why has Sri Lanka come to be what it is today? Where is it tending to go? In what direction should it be guided? To the last question a categorical, non-controversial answer can be instantly given: towards a peaceful state. With an estimated murder rate of over 100 per 100 000 of its population, Sri Lanka became in 1989 literally the bloodiest place on earth. The rage for murder in the country has been generated and fuelled by several inter-related conflicts: between ethnic groups; between India and Sri Lanka; between the haves and have-nots; and between political parties and alliances cutting across ethnic groups, religious affiliations and social classes. Guiding Sri Lanka towards a state of stable peace is therefore a gigantic task.

### *The Distant Past*

To begin with, let us see whether a long look into the past can give us some clues to understanding the present and some guidelines for fashioning the future. Even as modern theoretical physics teaches, the sharp division of time into past, present and future is not absolute. The past is not dead and gone forever. It could be vibrantly alive in the memories of some of those now living and profoundly influence the present and the future. So it is sensible to look for clues in the past, but given the way the human brain works, it is easy enough to see just the sort of clues one is consciously looking for. Why is that so? Because our acts of observation are strongly conditioned by our theories about the world. What one fancies one sees often lies in one's eyes — or more accurately in one's brain. The act of historical observation especially is notoriously subjective and tendentious. And human history has been so diverse that it is only too easy, first to invent a theory and then to “prove” it with apparently plausible examples. Hence it comes about that recorded history is often not so much a factual account of what actually happened in the past, as what the historian believes he can persuade others to believe about events and persons connected with the past. If this is so even in the case of modern historians attempting self-consciously to moderate this propensity, how could it have been otherwise with the author of the *Mahavamsa*, the chronicle of Sri Lanka's ancient history? As the conclusion of each of the first 36 of its 37 chapters explicitly declares the *Mahavamsa* was written “for the serene joy and emotion of the pious”. A treatise written by a cleric to give joy exclusively to the pious is unlikely to have recounted history as it really occurred. As we shall see, the *Mahavamsa* was composed at a time when the ancient Sinhalese kingdom was plagued

by invasions from South India. In writing the *Mahavamsa* the author synchronised early myths about the origin of the Sinhalese with legends about the Buddha and incorporated them into the earliest and least reliably known part of the story of the Sinhalese. The resulting synthesis was probably calculated above all to give the Sinhalese a consciousness of a special Buddhist destiny of the island and of a role as inheritors and defenders of Buddhism. History shows that every human group has accepted as social truth ideas which are incapable of empirical verification. It is a common practice for a human group to invent a fantastic story which sets it apart from all other groups. Such stories serve to make every tribe “the chosen race”. Such stories are myths. Every nation has and indeed needs myths — be they religious, political or scientific in nature — to sustain it. It is a plausible inference that the author of the *Mahavamsa* sensing rightly or wrongly that the Sinhalese were mortally threatened by South Indian invaders wrote it to provide a cause and a creed to promote the survival of the Sinhalese. Also, advancing the cause of the author’s own religious institution — the Theravadin *Mahavihara* — which was engaged in internecine doctrinal rivalry with the Mahayanist *Abhayagirivihara*, may well have powerfully motivated him. In writing it he — deliberately or unconsciously — ignored even the cardinal Buddhist value of the sanctity of life, because of his perception of the overriding claims of the very survival of his ethnic group and religious sect — “race and religion”. Whether or not such a stance was necessary or moral in the abstract is not for us to judge today. There is no denying, however, that myths which may have been serviceable in the sixth century A.C. may not be serviceable at the end of the 20th century. Myths too are liable to become obsolete with the advancement of knowledge. The myth of the special Buddhist destiny of Sri Lanka and of Sri Lanka being the exclusive land of Sinhalese Buddhists, is now demonstrably eroding the claim of Buddhism as a civilizing influence, the reputation of the Sinhalese as a cultured people and the national honour of Sri Lanka.

Despite its mythopoeic character the *Mahavamsa* is indispensable for obtaining an understanding of Sri Lanka’s past by which to illuminate the present. As with all accounts of history, particularly ancient history, its assertions must of course be treated with critical caution. And one must be mindful of the natural tendency to invoke history only when it is going one’s way, although — given the way the human brain works — mindfulness does not always restrain this tendency.

We often forget that by its very nature our knowledge of what happened in the past is incapable of verification by direct observation. Suppose you doubt that water boils at 100°C at sea-level, you can verify the matter by doing a suitable experiment. The same is true of any *matter of fact* in physics or chemistry, biology or medicine. Suppose, however, you wonder whether the Buddha ever visited Sri Lanka even once let alone three times, there is no way of settling the matter conclusively one way or the other. It certainly cannot be settled by conducting an experiment. Unarguably what is paraded as historical fact is by its very nature incapable of direct verification; hence it must have a lower order of reliability than, say, biological fact. The reason is simple: quite literally history cannot be repeated. Our traditional knowledge of ancient history is largely based on the testimony of those who directly observed the events, retained them in their memories and recounted them to others, who in turn retold them to yet others. At last someone wrote down his version of what he had heard and remembered to some purpose or other. Hence knowledge by memory was largely the foundation of knowledge concerning the ancient past. Because of the notorious fallibility of human memory it would be most unwise to believe such “history” in the mode of absolute certainty. In spite of this, “history” is often invoked to judge right from wrong, moral from immoral, just from unjust. Those who passionately believe that history is on their side are prone to feel justified in acting first on the basis of their historical beliefs, and judging the morality of their actions by how they feel after. When used to justify political action, history becomes a powerful motor force for change. As has happened too often, history can be used to fabricate “hereditary enemies” out of otherwise harmless neighbours and burn them to death. So we cannot be too careful in reconstructing the past as accurately as we can. And if a carefully reconstructed history does show that two nations or ethnic groups have been “hereditary enemies”, what then? The answer is that there is no inexorable historical law which decrees that they must remain enemies for ever. “Hereditary enmity” is not transmitted through our genes and the implied “law of hereditary enmity” does not operate as rigidly as, say, the “law of gravity”. And let us remember that by understanding the nature of gravity, humankind has learnt how to transcend even the law of gravity. The study of history plays a crucial role in understanding the nature of “hereditary enmity”. One problem about understanding history is that we cannot be sure that we have got even the “facts” right. Owing to the intrinsic unreliability of recorded history, it is prudent to have recourse wherever possible to more objective disciplines like geology, geography, anthropology, ethnography and archeology for the purpose of reconstructing a country’s past. And if a nation’s current

behaviour is not wholly explicable in terms of a past so constructed, insights gained from modern biology are not to be disdained. Human beings have a demonstrated capacity for introspectively understanding their behaviour. And some of our intractable current problems such as ethnic conflict, revolt of youth, industrial strife, drug abuse and organized violent crime have much to do with the mass psychology of group behaviour.

### *The Indian Connection*

There is little doubt that geologically Sri Lanka was an extension of the south-eastern part of the Indian mainland. It became separated from India in the remote past as part of the process of continental drift. Today only a few miles of shallow sea separate southern India from northern Sri Lanka. This Indian connection has exerted and continues to exert an overwhelming influence on Sri Lanka's destiny. India shaped and continues to shape Sri Lanka's history. The various peoples inhabiting Sri Lanka, the religions they profess, the languages they speak, the clothes they wear, the foods they eat, the systems of medicine they practise, the forms of music they listen to, the rituals they perform, the monuments they built, the statues they sculpted, the caste systems they observe — all these and more have the indelible impress of Indian influence. The dominant culture of Sri Lanka is that of the Sinhalese and Sinhalese culture is essentially Buddhist. Buddhism being of Indian origin it is logical enough to suppose that a Buddhist culture must be Indian in character. But Buddhism and the culture it gave rise to virtually disappeared from India many centuries ago and survived in Sri Lanka as a living tradition. Accordingly, though of Indian origin, Sinhalese culture is not a replica of any extant variety of Indian culture. In any case, too much must not be made of superficial cultural differences for all human cultures have a common biological core. The enthusiasm that peoples of all cultures display for such inventions of modern scientific technology as cars, radios, television sets, videos, cameras, watches, calculators, cookers and washing machines — to name just a few — will serve to abolish the superficial differences between cultures. It will be interesting to see what will be left of cultural differences after the mass of people belonging to different cultures acquire the inventions of scientific technology. One's mother-tongue will probably survive as one's principal identity component, but it would be distracting to speculate on this matter at this point. So let us revert to our glance at the culture of the ancient Sinhalese. Perhaps its most impressive artifact was represented by the mighty irrigation works — the reservoirs or tanks. These tanks — the basis of Sri Lanka's ancient hydraulic civilization — are reckoned stupendous engineering feats by any standard. These tanks contributed to the agriculture-based wealth and prosperity of the

ancient Sinhalese kingdom which periodically attracted organized plunderers and looters particularly but not exclusively from South India. Thus, geography decreed that the “hereditary foes” of the Sinhalese too came from India; especially from the Tamil South Indian kingdoms of Cola, Pandya and Pallava. In much later times, even the British who conquered Sri Lanka invaded it from India! To this day, mortal fear lying in the deepest recesses of the subconscious minds of many Sinhalese is induced by India: its 50 million Tamils in Tamil Nadu, its Transnational Corporations spreading their tentacles over South Asia, its burgeoning military might and its recent immigrants to Sri Lanka personified by the Indian labourers on the plantations. And to many Sinhalese the conclusive proof of India’s predatory intentions concerning Sri Lanka was provided by the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) consisting of tens of thousands of soldiers who arrived in Sri Lanka in 1987 under the terms of an Indo-Sri Lanka Accord. The IPKF was pointedly compared by Sri Lankans hateful of its presence to a mythical army of monkeys (‘vanara hamudawa’) believed to have invaded Sri Lanka in pre-historic times and vanquished its equally mythical demon-king!

### *The Peopling of Sri Lanka*

Ethnographic surveys have furnished evidence that during prehistoric times several large-scale movements of people took place from West Asia across India towards Eastern lands. It is surmised that those movements must have brought the original Vaddas as well as the Sinhala-speaking and Tamil-speaking people to Sri Lanka. In later times Sri Lanka as an ever-green, well-watered tropical isle located on the highways of trade between India and China attracted peoples from Arabia, Africa, China and Malaya to its shores. Some of them made the island their home. And there is good evidence that in more recent times, wave after wave of immigrants from India broke upon the island and made it their home.

Even today the question of who first colonized Sri Lanka remains an inflammable issue. The first thing that requires to be said about the matter is that by its very nature it is a question incapable of being conclusively answered. For the question of who was first on the island concerns an intrinsically non-repeatable event. Nobody who was on the spot and gained knowledge of it by direct observation has left a well-authenticated record of it. Every answer to the question that anyone can give today has to be an inference and an inference regarding a matter of empirical fact yields only a possibility and not a certainty. Too often is it forgotten by those who labour to establish that one or other ethnic group first colonized Sri Lanka, that the point at issue is a matter of empirical fact and

that *direct observation is the only sure method of ascertaining facts*. No amount of ingenious surmise can provide an incontrovertible positive answer to the question: Who first colonized Sri Lanka? The only valid answer to the question is: We do not know. What we do know is that there is archeological evidence to warrant the conclusion that, for thousands of years before the so-called Aryans are assumed to have arrived in the island from North India some 2 500 years ago, Sri Lanka had been inhabited by people with a settled form of agriculture.

### *The Aryan Myth*

There is reason to believe that *Homo sapiens* learned farming at least about 10 000 years ago. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that of the many bands of immigrants to Sri Lanka, those who came about 2 500 years ago must have also known the rudiments of farming and agriculture. These immigrants probably arrived in tribes or clans. They established themselves along the banks of rivers like the Malvatu Oya, Mahaveli Ganga and Valave Ganga in different parts of the country. The rivers supplied the water they needed for agriculture. Rice was their staple crop. These numerous settlements had the character of self-sufficient, self-governing agricultural communities whose chieftains probably guided the plough themselves. The most powerful of these colonizing tribes was known as the *Sinhals* — the people of the lion race. The language they spoke was Sinhala which had affinities with Prakrit, a language of Eastern India. Although there are authorities who argue that primitive Sinhala was not an Indo-Aryan language, in the 19th century it came to be classified as an Indo-European or Indo-Aryan language along with languages such as German and Sanskrit. It was speculated that native speakers of Indo-Aryan languages such as German, English and Sinhala had had a common racial origin. They were given a name: “Aryans”. And it was firmly decided by the Aryans that the Aryans were inherently different from and by nature superior to the rest of humankind including Dravidians who spoke Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and so on. Furthermore it was asserted that the same blood flows in the veins of all Aryans. From this primitive, inaccurate and emotional belief it was not a long road which led to the 20th century Nazi policy of prohibiting by law the mixing of Aryan blood with non-Aryan blood through marriage, and to the other horrors of full-blooded Nazism. If the assertion that the *same* blood flows in the veins of all Aryans is taken literally to mean that there are no differences whatsoever between the blood, of say, the Germans and the Sinhalese, the assertion is palpably false. To take one familiar example: whereas the blood of about 15% of Germans is Rhesus negative, the blood of only about 5% of Sinhalese is Rhesus negative. Leaving aside the differences between the blood

of Aryans and non-Aryans, it should be obvious to anyone that the same blood does not flow even in the veins of all Germans; about 85% of them have in their blood a chemical substance (Rhesus antigen) that 15% do not have.

If the assertion that the same blood flows in the veins of all Aryans is only a rhetorical statement to signify an exclusive racial origin for Aryans, then an appropriate rhetorical counter to it might be to roundly declare that the *same* blood flows in the veins of *all* members of the species *Homo sapiens* be they Sinhalese, Tamils, Moors, Burghers, Vaddas, Chinese, Iranians, Finns, Eskimos, Baluchis, Veps or whoever. In support of this rhetoric it can be validly pointed out that with the usual precautions, inter-racial blood transfusions are no more hazardous than intra-racial ones.

None of this is to suggest that there are no biological differences between different racial groups. To conjure up in one's mind's eye pictures of a white German, a yellow Chinese and a black Nigerian is to perceive at once how different humans can be in physical characteristics. In fact humans are classified into different racial groups mainly on the basis of physical characteristics such as skin colour, texture and colour of hair, body weight and body proportions, finger-prints and blood composition. Most racial traits have adaptive usefulness in the climates in which they occur. Biological differences in combination with cultural characteristics naturally divide the human family into subgroups. Within a given subgroup (in-group) members generally co-operate with each other when competing with those outside the group (out-groups). Based on biological differences and past experience, different human groups harbour anxieties and fears for their continuity and protection. These in-group fears typically afflict ethnic and religious minorities. Research conducted by the United Nations University has identified over 900 minorities who feel so endangered.

In Sri Lanka, Tamils (18%), Moors (7%) and even Sinhalese (74%) have perceived and expressed fears for their continuity and protection. Many Sinhalese feel that although they are the majority in Sri Lanka, they are reduced to a small ethnic minority in relation to all the Tamils in Sri Lanka, South India, Malaysia, Singapore and Fiji Islands. The Sinhalese fear that their Buddhist culture may be overwhelmed by the Hindu culture of the Tamils who, they believe, are firmly united by the Dravida Munnetra Khazhagam vision. They also fear the Tamil domination of Asia through activities like those of the "*We Tamil*" movement. Sinhalese Buddhists are also apprehensive about resurgent Islamic Fundamentalism which has evoked enthusiasm in many parts of the world, including Sri Lanka. Partly to allay their fears, the Sinhalese made Sinhala the state

language and Buddhism the foremost religion in Sri Lanka. These measures in turn have generated fears in Tamils and Moors for the continuity and protection of their cultural integrity as national minorities in Sri Lanka. Whether or not these fears of the Sinhalese, Tamils and Moors are well-founded — and be it remembered that ill-founded fears often provoke irrational behaviour — the Sinhalese by majoritarian rule have been able to take steps which have excluded the minorities from the equality of rights recognized in the *Universal Declaration*. The “*We Tamil*” movement, and ‘Islamic Fundamentalism’ which many Sinhalese fear, are in no position, or anyhow in no position yet, to deny human rights to Sinhalese Buddhists.

Governments routinely assume the validity of majoritarian rule. But insensitive, authoritarian rule by majorities could push minorities to the margins until, “as a last resort” they have recourse to armed rebellion. One possible authority to which minorities could appeal is the United Nations, but as of now it is ill-equipped to solve problems of minorities within states. Within the United Nations system, the protection of rights of minorities has been the responsibility of the Human Rights Commission. A Non-Governmental Organization called the *Minority Rights Group* based in London has concerned itself with problems of minorities. It has been recognized by the United Nations and so there is a space for fruitful activity. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was proclaimed in 1948 but it was only in the 1970s and 1980s that a shared responsibility for *individual* human rights became a global concern vigorously promoted by Human Rights Organizations and independent mass media. Perhaps the 1990s will see a similar concern with rights of minorities. The greater the number of minorities or in-groups in the world, the greater also is the potential for competition and conflict. To the extent that the size of in-groups becomes larger, the chances for co-operative and peaceful existence increase. One may wish that the whole human family constituted one unit with all the binding characteristics of an in-group! But that is another story from which we must get back to the history of ancient Sri Lanka, essentially a story of fighting between various in-groups.

### *Founding of Anuradhapura*

It was the ruler of one of the numerous self-sufficient agricultural communities of those times who founded in the north central region of the country, in the fifth century B.C., the first big city and capital of the Sinhalese Kingdom, called Anuradhapura. As recounted in the *Mahavamsa*, the founder of Anuradhapura had to vanquish in battle no less than eight of his uncles in order to



establish his supremacy in the region. That the founder of Anuradhapura had to kill eight of his uncles in order to establish his hegemony in the region implies that the political system which prevailed at that time consisted of numerous communities, each under the control of a petty ruler. That was indeed the pattern of social organization which also prevailed in communities of *Homo sapiens* in many other parts of the globe at that time.

The *Mahavamsa* account of the history of Sri Lanka suggests that each of the kings and queens it lists ruled over the whole island. This is factitious and fictitious. The real situation in the country was quite different as indicated by the following turn of events recounted in the *Mahavamsa* itself. In the middle of the third century B.C. a grandson of the founder of Anuradhapura had become its ruler. He had established ambassadorial relations with the reigning Emperor of India of that time. According to the *Mahavamsa* the Emperor bestowed on the ruler of Anuradhapura the dignity of kingship, by a special investiture. This story is totally uncorroborated in the rich Indian historical material pertaining to the Emperor. It might well have been an invention of the author of the *Mahavamsa* to legitimise Sri Lanka's connection with the Indian Buddhist tradition. However that might have been, the story serves to illustrate the verity that the king who ruled at Anuradhapura was not the undisputed ruler of the whole of Sri Lanka. For although at the second investiture described in the *Mahavamsa*, the ruler assumed the grand title of *Maharaja* (literally "great king"), the petty rulers holding sway over various other regions of the country were not disposed to acknowledge the self-proclaimed Maharaja's suzerainty over the whole country. More important is another aspect of the story, particularly if it contained a modicum of truth. If the rightful ruler of the Kingdom of Anuradhapura of the time submitted himself to a second investiture at the behest of the Indian Emperor contemporaneous with him, the implication must be that then — even more than now — India could, when it so wished, impose its will on tiny Sri Lanka. This is an unpalatable truth which hurts our pride, but we are constrained to swallow our pride, if not the truth. Indian foreign policy in recent years has made it unmistakably clear that India is not disposed to tolerate what it perceives as threats to its security from Sri Lanka. Some of the measures that the government of Sri Lanka adopted after 1978 in relation to the ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamils were so perceived by India. These included frequent visits by American and British warships to Colombo and Trincomalee; the employment of military and intelligence personnel from Israel and Britain; obtaining assistance from Pakistan for training Sri Lanka's security forces; and the expansion of broadcasting facilities of the Voice of America already in place in the Western Province to the north-western seaboard of

Sri Lanka. Whether or not any or all of these posed a real security threat to India is arguable. But they were so perceived and responded to by India. The outcome has not been pleasant for Sri Lanka. Prudence surely dictates that in the future Sri Lanka should ensure that it poses no threat to India's security. But back again to the story of ancient Sri Lanka.

### *Coming of Buddhism to Sri Lanka*

The Mauryan Emperor of India who bestowed kingship on the ruler of the Kingdom of Anuradhapura happened to be a benevolent one, at any rate after he had embraced Buddhism. According to the *Mahavamsa* he sent his son to Sri Lanka with the message of Buddhism where it received royal acceptance and patronage and became established as the State Religion. Authoritative Buddhist scholars have opined that the official "establishment" of Buddhism in a country with all it implies goes against the grain of the Buddha's teachings. Whether or not that is so, it is clear from the *Mahavamsa* story that within a century after Buddhism had been "established" as the State Religion of Sri Lanka, it was deployed to wage a holy war in which millions of humans were killed. One can, of course, readily discount "millions" as poetic hyperbole, but incredibly, according to the *Mahavamsa* (Chapter XXV), the military leader from the south of Sri Lanka who waged that war against Tamils in the north of the country, carried in his spear a relic of the Compassionate Buddha. Mercifully, one learns that his spear served merely as the royal standard, and not as an instrument for violating the first precept of Buddhism. One also gathers that the war was waged without the consent and against the will of the military leader's father who was a king of the south of Sri Lanka in the second century B.C. When his son was still a boy, the king had solemnly asked him to swear that he would never wage war against the Tamil king who ruled the north of the country. According to the *Mahavamsa* account, with an insolent impertinence the boy had refused to do anything of the sort. After his father's death, he declared himself king and went on to achieve his heart's desire of liberating the north from Tamil rule. To his eternal credit, he is said to have felt deep remorse after his victory, because it had wrought the death of millions of human beings. At that point in the story, the author of the *Mahavamsa* invents an argument calculated to banish remorse from the military leader's heart. The argument provided early proof of the degrading influence on otherwise decent human behaviour that organized religion can exert, when it involves itself in politics. The major premise of the argument is that while only fully committed Buddhists are complete human beings, non-believers in Buddhism are no better than beasts. Now among the millions killed in the war, there had been only one fully committed

Buddhist; another had been a half-committed one. Therefore — so the remorseless logic went — only *one and a half human beings* had been slain. Accordingly, the military leader was assured that “the slaughter of a great host numbering millions” (as he erroneously thought) would not hinder his path to eternal bliss. One gathers from the *Mahavamsa* that the military leader was much comforted by this argument. At all events, by his victory over the Tamils he had become the king of the whole of Sri Lanka. He appears to have spent the rest of his life building stupas to honour the Buddha and mansions to house the *sangha* (the Buddhist clergy). The greatest of his *stupas*, the magnificent *Ruanvelisaya*, built in the second century B.C., stands to this day as an embodiment of beauty and sublimity. On a night lit by a full-moon *Ruanvelisaya* acquires a palpable spiritual dimension. The tranquillizing effect it has on the beholder comes from the contemplation of the nobility of its dome-like solid structure, enshrining the relics of the Buddha. *Ruanvelisaya* was perhaps the supreme expression of the homage to the Compassionate Buddha by a man of overweening ambition, doubtless tormented by the thought of the human cost of war. The Buddha’s reverence for life was unconditional and all-embracing.

### *Case for a Secular State*

The association between kings and priests, that is to say, between state and religion has been a constant feature of most kingdoms in the past. By preaching morality, religion directly supports the maintenance of law and order, and rulers have gratefully acknowledged and adequately rewarded the help they receive from orthodox, subservient priests. Indeed, in the earliest tribal stages of human existence, one and the same person is believed to have combined the roles of king and priest (and medicine man). Even at present, in polities which do not recognize the distinction between the secular and the religious, as for example Iran and Saudi Arabia, the state is by definition religious. In ancient Sri Lanka too there was identification of the State with Religion. This necessarily involved religion in politics. As the blood-stained history of religion amply testifies, the involvement of organized religion in politics nearly always devalues religion and hardly ever sanctifies politics. Therefore those who value religion as a source of moral guidance, spiritual consolation, even transcendence, must resolutely resist the cynical collaboration between rulers and priests for mutual benefit. In modern times if religion is to serve a higher and nobler end than the crass material welfare of its adherents, it must distance itself from the state. The modern State should be secular, if only to promote the greater glory of Religion. That is the only way to protect religions from being manipulated and thereby debased by secular rulers. When a state has to undertake the protection of a religion one may assume

that the religion in question, or at least its clergy are in an advanced stage of moral decadence.

At this point a question poses itself: Is modern Sri Lanka a secular state? It is clearly not as its Constitution does not separate State from Religion. It has ministries to promote Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. The state constitutionally confers the foremost place to Buddhism on the grounds that the majority of the population (69%) are Buddhist. To accord the foremost place to Buddhism is to imply that a lower status accrues to other religions. This means that the religious minorities in Sri Lanka suffer a lower status precisely because they are minorities. It can be cogently argued that giving the foremost place to one religion over all others in a multi-religious society is not in consonance with the spirit of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* to which Sri Lanka is a signatory. Because England which is widely regarded in Sri Lanka as an exemplary democracy recognizes a particular brand of Christianity as its state religion, some Buddhists ask why it is undemocratic for Sri Lanka to accord the foremost place to Buddhism. The connection between state and religion in England is an unsavoury relic of the past which survives because it is wrongly assumed that it does no harm. British Muslims, for example, complain bitterly that the English common law which affords protection against blasphemy exclusively to Christianity, unjustly discriminates against Islam. In 1985, the Law Commission in Britain unequivocally declared that in a multicultural society there could be no justification for granting the protection of the law to one religion and not to another. So the intimate connection between state and religion is creating problems in modern multireligious Britain. It also created a problem for imperial Britain in relation to the implementation of Article 5 of the Kandyan Convention of 1815 which guaranteed protection for Buddhism. At that time dogmatic Christian opinion vehemently protested that this Article committed the Christian British Crown to protect “pagan” Buddhism. Thereupon a human bond solemnly entered into was indecently violated for the greater glory of state-protected Christianity!

### *Ethno-political Relations in Ancient Sri Lanka*

One reads in the *Mahavamsa* that in the second century B.C. no less than 32 Tamil kings had to be vanquished by the military leader from the South before the country could be politically unified. The multiplicity of kings is additional evidence that in ancient Sri Lanka, the country consisted of numerous small communities governed by petty rulers. It is also evident from the *Mahavamsa* that Tamils have been in Sri Lanka from at least the third century B.C. And the *Mahavamsa* account indicates that those Tamils who became

kings in Sri Lanka ruled justly for the most part, and had reserves of support among the Sinhalese.

Historians have concluded that the *Mahavamsa* was written in the sixth century A.C. or later. Buddhism came to Sri Lanka in the third century B.C. During the 900 years or so which elapsed between the establishment of Buddhism and the writing of the *Mahavamsa*, there were scattered Tamil settlements in the northern plains of Sri Lanka. For the most part the Sinhalese and Tamils would have been indistinguishable from each other and they were probably bilingual. There was no taboo against miscegenation, and intermarriage between Sinhalese and Tamils was not uncommon particularly among kings and queens. And it says something for the lack of racial prejudice in a much-married Sinhalese queen of ancient Sri Lanka that no less than three of her five husbands were Tamils. There were Tamil kings who were patrons of Buddhism which flourished in South India until the fifth century A.C. or even later. Hindu gods were worshipped — and are worshipped — by both Tamils and Sinhalese. There have been long periods of peace and harmony between Sinhalese and Tamils. How then did the Tamils come to be cast for the role of the implacable hereditary foes of the Sinhalese by the author of the *Mahavamsa* and by his passionate devotees among contemporary Sinhalese? Why, moreover, has there occurred a murderous fratricidal conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils in the post-independence period? But before exploring this question, a little needs to be said about the biological role of religion.

### *Religion and Biological Survival*

Apart from providing insights into the nature of early Sinhalese-Tamil conflicts, the *Mahavamsa* shows how splendidly serviceable religion can be for purposes of mundane biological survival and warfare. Up to about the fifth century A.C. Buddhism had maintained a hold in South India. In the fifth and sixth centuries three militantly Hindu kingdoms arose in South India, namely, the Colas, the Pandyas and the Pallavas. Under the impact of this militant Hinduism, Buddhism gradually disappeared from South India. Concurrently, the irrigation-dependent, agriculture-based wealth and prosperity of the Sinhalese kingdom in the northern plains of Sri Lanka proved to be an irresistible predatory target for the militant Hindu kingdoms of South India. Armies of one or other of these kingdoms were in the habit of invading and ravaging the Sinhalese kingdom from time to time. In the sixth century A.C., for example, six Tamils successively ruled at Anuradhapura. The invading Hindu Tamils plundered the cities, destroyed the *dagabos*, desecrated the temples and removed their treasures. With the rise of Hindu Tamil

militancy in South India, the Tamils in Sri Lanka too probably became increasingly conscious of their identity components: the Tamil language and Hindu religion. They are likely to have felt a sense of cultural kinship with the inhabitants of South India. Manifestations of such tendencies would have earned for them the deep suspicions of the Sinhalese who would have regarded them as supporters of South Indian invaders. It is reasonable to suppose that to the author of the *Mahavamsa* contemplating the destiny of the Sinhalese kingdom in the sixth century A.C., the outlook for its very survival would have seemed pretty grim. The Sinhalese nation would have appeared foredoomed. If the Sinhalese were to be saved they had to be united to face the Tamil menace. But how was one to unite the Sinhalese, whose kingdom was nothing but divided against itself? The author of the *Mahavamsa* seems to have instinctively divined the populist answer. The war-cry had to be: 'Not for Kingdom, but for Buddhism'. With mind firmly made up, he took up his mighty quill-pen (or whatever) and wrote the *Mahavamsa*. A charismatic young man of extraordinary aggressivity from the southern Sinhalese kingdom of Rohana (now called Ruhuna) was made its hero. He dressed him up as a ruthless military leader of granitic power and cast him for the role of Defender of Buddhism. And as already noted, at 36 places in his magnum opus, he declared that he is writing it for "the serene joy and emotion of the pious". One function that religions have served is to have persuaded individuals to subordinate their self-interest to the interest of the group. And groups have been and are interested above all in long-term survival, economic security and victory over enemies in this world. Like other religions, Buddhism too performed this biological function in the past, as the *Mahavamsa* story amply demonstrates. But from this excursion into biology, it is time to return to our review of our ancient history.

### *Politico-socio-economic Structure of Ancient Sri Lanka*

If the *Mahavamsa* formula worked in the second century B.C., it did not prove to be uniformly effective in uniting the Sinhalese thereafter. Even in ancient Sri Lanka, the *Mahasanga* itself was split into some 18 doctrinal factions. The most vicious, protracted and unedifying conflict was between the Theravada School of the *Mahavihara* and the Mahayana School of the *Abhayagirivihara*. As official protectors of Buddhism kings necessarily became involved in these disputes. This led to official persecution of one School or the other depending on the fervour with which kings took sides in doctrinal issues they were not always intellectually equipped to comprehend. In any case, the ancient Sinhalese kingdom had established itself in the north-central dry zone of Sri Lanka, not because of the religious fervour of its rulers, but because of the technical brilliance of its irrigation engineers. The extensive irrigation

network permitted the growth of numerous agricultural communities which were regulated by a caste system and controlled by petty kings and influential priests. The Sinhalese caste system, unlike its Indian prototype, did not have the buttress of religious sanction. For unlike Hinduism, Buddhism did not sanction the caste system. However, caste was patently the basis of social stratification in Sinhalese society. The Sinhalese royal families claimed to be of the *ksatriya* clan and to maintain the purity of the clan Sinhalese kings, when necessary, acquired their queens from South Indian royal families. In other words, they evidently placed a higher valuation on caste than on ethnicity. Far better to marry a high-caste Tamil than a low-caste Sinhalese, seems to have been one of their marital axioms. If it is true that strictly applied rules against intermarriage are the tell-tale sign of racism, the Sinhalese have been singularly non-racist. But caste-prejudice has strongly influenced their social relations over the centuries. The Buddha's condemnation of the caste-system was unequivocal and almost vituperative. Nevertheless, caste crept even into the Buddhist clergy who live by claiming to preach what the Buddha taught. These tendencies represent the triumph of biology over religion: for 99% of its existence *Homo sapiens* lived in small tribes and casteism is simply a survival of evolutionary tribalism. The natural propensity of *Homo sapiens* is to feel cosiest when relating to a small in-group like a tribe or caste. It is true that the Buddha comprehended intellectually and responded emotionally to the oneness of humankind; indeed, to the essential unity of the phenomenon of life on earth. That the least enlightened of his present-day followers who number tens of millions cannot do likewise is surely no cause for wonder. Biological insight gained from the evolutionary perspective suggests that the utopia of ethnic harmony is not round the corner. It is not moral perversity but intellectual immaturity that prevents the mass of humankind from taking the steps required to reduce the suffering engendered by their having to live in a world which has become populated too rapidly with too many humans belonging to too many ethnic groups.

To digress: in 1948, there were just seven million of us in Sri Lanka; today there are about 17 million and if present trends continue by year 2000 there will be at least 19 million. Having to fit our evolved behaviour to such a densely packed milieu strains it to breaking point. Since the emergence of the nation-state and the proliferation of the means of mass communication, the "in-group" to which human beings relate easily has tended to become the group of people who speak the same language, profess the same religion, read the same newspapers and watch the same television programs. Nevertheless very many humans are still incapable of transcending their loyalty to their caste. In Sri Lanka under the impact of democratic ideals, caste is visibly dying. It is also being

actively killed by enraged members of socially disadvantaged castes. However, it is not rage but understanding that will enable humankind to come to terms with their inherent tendency to feel a narrow in-group loyalty. To emphasize a point made a little while ago, it was by understanding the real nature of gravity that *Homo sapiens* could transcend it and even reach the moon. Likewise the journey to the caste-free utopia of ethnic harmony will also require understanding of the real nature of ethnic and caste loyalty. As of now only one jejune generalisation on the subject seems warranted: it will take long for the mass of humankind to understand that loyalty to their species is a more enlightened attitude to cultivate than loyalty to their ethnic and caste groups, however strong the primitive biological imperatives might be.

But to return to the survey of Sri Lanka's ancient past: its recorded history from the third century B.C. to 1500 A.C. is essentially the story of dynastic power struggles and endless succession disputes. There was incessant warring between petty rulers who controlled different regions of the country. Court intrigues brought premature death to many kings. Rival clans fiercely contested the kingship. It was not at all unusual for a claimant to the throne to cross over to South India and return with an army of mercenaries to stake his claim with the force of arms. Nor was warring confined to rulers. As already noted, there were also bitter disputes between rival Buddhist sects based on doctrinal niceties in which kings, counsellors and the populace took sides. As if these fissiparous tendencies were not enough, the Sinhalese kingdom was also occasionally involved in wars with South Indian kingdoms either in self-defence or in the pursuit of a dynamic foreign policy. Then, as now, the balance of political forces in South India exerted a decisive influence on the turn of events in the northern part of Sri Lanka.

The ancient history of Sri Lanka is perhaps most easily understood in terms of a state which consisted of several loosely-structured caste-based feudal polities. Rarely were these united under a strong king who could effectively subdue the reign of provincial rulers and — in the phrase of the *Mahavamsa* — “raise his umbrella over the whole island”. Arguably, periods in Sri Lanka's history during which a monolithically united Sinhalese nation, single-mindedly professing Theravada Buddhism had effectively administered the whole island through the medium of only the Sinhala language must have been very few. And it is only an exaggeration of the truth to say that the very ideology of seeking to unite the Sinhalese into one entity sharing an allegedly specific biological nature (Aryan), speaking a common language (Sinhala) professing the same brand of religion (Theravada Buddhism) and holding sway over a whole country (Sri Lanka) — *the ideology of*



*jathiya, basava, agama, rata* — was a 19th century invention. To substantiate this assertion, it suffices to point out that the very concept of an Aryan race arose only in the 19th century. The names of kings of Sri Lanka who indubitably succeeded in establishing anything like effective political control over the whole country in its 2500-year-history can be rattled off in one short breath. The rulers of the Anuradhapura kingdom tried hard to exert control over the whole country but almost none of them had the administrative machinery required to impose their rule on strong-willed petty rulers of territories distant from the capital. In particular, rulers of Ruhuna in the south routinely behaved as if they were kings in their own right. To this day many overly ambitious and otherwise misguided sons of Ruhuna seem to draw inspiration from this tradition.

### *Decline of the Sinhalese Kingdom*

Powers rise and fall and the ancient Sinhalese kingdom was no exception to this rule. The capital city of the Sinhalese kingdom shifted from Anuradhapura to Sigirya to Polonnaruwa to Dambadeniya to Kurunegala to Gampola to Kotte and to Kandy. This enforced shifting of the capital tells the story of the decline and fall of the Sinhalese kingdom. But in the meantime the Sinhalese variety of the species *Homo sapiens* has not declined at all. They have increased and multiplied and are now threatened by their reproductive prodigality and by their beliefs that remain unchanged while the world is changing. Major factors which contributed to the decline of the ancient Sinhalese kingdom were the incessant internal divisions and sub-divisions of the kingdom and the recurrent attacks of South Indian invaders. By the middle of the 13th century, the complex irrigation network which sustained the kingdom was in a state of chronic disrepair and there is evidence that the malaria mosquito had begun to thrive in the abandoned tanks. The power of this mosquito is not to be underestimated. Even in the 1930s it proved to be a formidable enemy of re-settlement in the Dry Zone. And even today it is a leading cause of avoidable morbidity and premature mortality in several districts in the Dry zone.

The cumulative effects of internal divisions, South Indian invasions and malaria caused the gradual decline of the ancient Sinhalese Kingdom and by the middle of the 14th century a powerful Tamil kingdom had emerged in the northern part of the country. This Tamil kingdom exerted a relentless pressure on the Sinhalese who gradually drifted to the southwest of the island. The 15th century saw the last Sinhalese king who ruled over the whole country. But by the last quarter of the 15th century, Sri Lanka consisted of three independent kingdoms — the Kingdom of Kotte, the Kingdom of Kandy and the Kingdom of Jaffna.

It is true that there have been periodic conflicts between the Sinhalese and Tamils over the centuries. But these conflicts have not been primarily “race conflicts” or “ethnic conflicts”. Strong cultural, religious and — especially at the royal level — marital ties have existed between the two groups. There have been Sinhalese in the armies of Tamil kings and Tamils in the armies of Sinhalese kings. As we have already noted, in the most celebrated war in Sri Lanka’s history — the one between the Sinhalese military leader from the South who successfully challenged the Tamil ruler of the North in the second century B.C. — the battle cry of the challenger was based primarily on religion and not on ethnicity. The *Mahavamsa* story suggests that the vanquished Tamil ruler commanded great respect and popularity among Sinhalese Buddhists. Though not a Sinhalese, he drafted Sinhalese into his army and did not exclude them from its highest-ranking posts. Again, though not a Buddhist, he manifestly showed great respect for Buddhism and gave alms to Buddhist monks. By the time he came to be slain in a duel with his Sinhalese arch-rival, he had ruled in the north of the country for some 44 years, passionately dispensing his own special brand of justice to friend and foe, cow and bird. But he had to go because his challenger’s life’s ambition had to be achieved! After slaying his Tamil rival, the Sinhalese conqueror honoured him with a spectacular funeral in which both Sinhalese and Tamils participated. At the very site the Tamil ruler fell down dead from his elephant, a monument was erected by the Sinhalese victor to honour the memory of his brave, just rival. By royal decree silence was enforced in the vicinity of the monument. According to tradition this decree was honoured in the observance for over 2000 years. This story probably tells a truth: for a long period of time Sinhalese and Tamils have lived together in Sri Lanka, more often in a state of mutual respect than of gut hatred. In support of this hypothesis, there are other items of more recent evidence. The last four kings of the Kandyan kingdom were Tamils. Some of the major Sinhalese aristocratic families have South Indian forebears. Some of the Sinhalese Kandyan chiefs who were signatories to the Kandyan Convention of 1815 signed their names in a Tamil script. In view of all of the above, how are we to account for the hatred between the Sinhalese and Tamils that the whole world has seen in the recent post-colonial period? The whole world sees it today because of the miracle of modern audio-visual telecommunication. And if the consciousness that humankind is watching serves to restrain the murderous behaviour of Sinhalese and Tamils, *Homo sapiens* will be the better for it. In any case, it is worthwhile to see whether the scale of the recent explosion of ethnic hatred is at all explicable in terms of the country’s colonial history.

## *Colonial Antecedents of Current Sinhalese-Tamil Conflict*

The Portuguese were the first European nation to exert their power on Sri Lanka. They arrived in the country in 1505. They controlled only a small part of the country, namely, the western, southern and northern seaboard. Their last stronghold in the country was in Jaffna which they had captured as the independent Kingdom of Jaffna. This fell to the Dutch in 1658. During their stay in Sri Lanka, the Portuguese were mainly concerned with the exploitation of its wealth, chiefly cinnamon. Their presence introduced a fresh ethnic stock (Portuguese) and a new religion (Catholicism) to Sri Lanka and thereby added further dimensions to the multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-cultural character of Sri Lanka. The Portuguese also drew Sri Lanka into the vortex of global commercial rivalries where it has remained ever since.

The Dutch who displaced the Portuguese also controlled only certain coastal parts of Sri Lanka. They were mainly concerned with the commercial advancement of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) which had the powers of a sovereign state. They initiated the plantation system and capitalist commercial relations, rationalized the judicial system and tried without much success to establish the Dutch Reformed Church. Like the Portuguese, a significant number of them made Sri Lanka their home. So the Dutch, too, contributed to the ethnic and religious diversity of Sri Lanka.

The British displaced the Dutch in 1796 but it was in 1815 that they gained total administrative control of the whole island. It was under British rule that the administration of the whole country was centralized and came to be continuously controlled by one political authority for over a century. The British could do that because they conquered Sri Lanka at a time when they were the strongest military power on earth. They possessed the military machinery to impose their political will expeditiously and unconditionally. The British consolidated themselves in Sri Lanka during a period in the 19th century when the study of the nature of race was in its heyday in Europe. Various race theories emerged at this time including the theory about the inherent superiority of the "Aryan race". Under the combined influence of evolutionary theory with its concept of "the survival of the fittest" and of ethnographic-linguistic studies, the British generally came to believe in the inherent superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race over all others. The high-minded among them seem to have strongly felt a moral obligation "to civilize" their subject peoples. In Sri Lanka the British found diverse groups of people speaking different languages and worshipping different gods. The British administrators of the island evidently regarded the different groups as different "races", each with

its own language, religion, laws, habits and customs. The result was that by the end of the 19th century the “races” and their subdivisions recognized in Sri Lanka by the British included the following: (1) Sinhalese (divided into low-country and up-country), (2) Tamils (divided into Ceylon and Indian), (3) Moors (divided into Coastal and Inland), (4) Burghers (divided into Portuguese and Dutch), (5) Malays, (6) Vaddas, (7) Eurasians, (8) Europeans, (9) Parsees, and (10) Rodiyas.

After consolidating themselves in Sri Lanka the British administered the country initially as a single unit of five provinces. Executive and Legislative Councils controlled by the Governor were set up. Representatives of various groups were appointed by the Governor to the Legislative Council. In 1833, for example, he appointed one low-country Sinhalese, one Tamil and one Burgher. In 1889, members were added to represent the Kandyan and Moor communities. This was not necessarily the implementation of a premeditated policy of “divide and rule”; it might well have been the implementation of a policy which sought to protect the identities and rights of different in-groups miscalled “races” or communities. The concern of the British “to civilize” subject races explains at least partly their concerted attempt to convert to Christianity the indigenous people whom they considered “heathens”. In pursuit of this proselytization, the British missionaries of that time launched a campaign to downgrade and discredit Buddhism. The British claim that they were members of a superior race with a superior civilization based on Christianity provoked an anti-Christian, anti-Western counter-reaction from Sinhalese Buddhists. There was a parallel counter-reaction on a more modest scale from Hindu Tamils too. This cultural assertion was directed against the common enemy: the British. However, even during British rule, hostilities were developing between the Sinhalese and Tamils. These hostilities were generated and fuelled by various factors such as the Aryan-Dravidian divide, the effects of the exercise of universal suffrage in Sri Lanka on ethnic minorities, the special position certain minorities enjoyed under British rule and the failure of the economy to keep pace with the increase of population. On each of these something must be said.

### *Influence of Race Theories*

When the idea of the inherent superiority of Aryans over other races gained currency in European thought, Sinhalese nationalists reinterpreted the *Mahavamsa* story of the colonization of Sri Lanka by the Sinhalas as an Aryan colonization from North India. Colonizations of Sri Lanka from South India were regarded as colonization by inferior Dravidians. Under the influence of the “Aryan myth” some Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalists went so far as

to identify themselves with the British imperialists, because the British were also classified as Aryans. They professed to feel consoled that Sri Lanka was governed by an “Aryan nation”. And they affected to feel distinctly superior to Dravidian Tamils. This Sinhalese communalism was, needless to say, resented by the Tamils. There is reason to believe that the germs of “Tamil Eelam” originated at least in the minds of the Tamil elite in the early 1920s as an emotional reaction to this rising tide of Sinhalese communalism. In 1923, a large number of Tamils resigned from the Ceylon National Congress and formed the Tamil Mahajana Sabha.

### *Impact of Universal Suffrage*

Another factor that contributed to the growing tension between the Sinhalese and the Tamils in the 20th century was the introduction of universal suffrage to Sri Lanka by the British in 1931. The principle of “one person, one vote” was acceptable to the Sinhalese who, by a wide margin, formed the majority. The Tamil minority feared that the practice of universal suffrage in Sri Lanka would discriminate against them. Indeed even the Sinhalese Kandyan community felt apprehensive about being overwhelmed by low-country Sinhalese. The Tamils in particular explicitly demanded an electoral system that would guarantee the rights of minorities. Some sort of federal system or regional autonomy was the solution they proposed. In support of this proposition it was pointed out that the Tamils succumbed to foreign rule in the 16th century as the independent Kingdom of Jaffna. Hence, it was argued, the Tamils were entitled to regional autonomy when foreign rule ended. However, before Independence was granted to Sri Lanka in 1948, the Tamils agreed to be content with constitutional guarantees of their civic and political rights and the implicit understanding that Sinhalese and Tamil would be made the official languages.

### *Special Position of Minority Groups*

From about 1850 to about 1950, two minority groups, namely, Burghers and Tamils, gained positions in the state services out of proportion to their numbers in the population. Let us consider first the case of the Burghers. Never in their history in Sri Lanka have the Burghers accounted for even 1% of the total population. Yet, from the middle of the 19th century to about the 1920s, the Burghers dominated the medical and legal professions and the bureaucracy. For example, the first, second and third principals of the Ceylon Medical College which was founded in 1870, were all Burghers. In 1875, of the 33 students in the Medical College no less than 16 were Burghers. How did that come about? Were the Burghers favoured by the British? There is no evidence that they were. Their

success was due to two main reasons. First, because of their heritage of Western culture, they found Western medicine quite acceptable; to the other ethnic groups it was alien, and therefore initially less acceptable. Secondly, English was the medium of instruction in the Medical College and the Burghers who had learnt English quickly were at a distinct advantage. No unfair practice was involved in their preponderance in the field of medicine — or in the other fields for that matter.

Between the 1870s and the 1920s, the Sri Lankan Tamils (in contrast to the Indian Tamils) also secured employment in the colonial administration in numbers that exceeded their proportion in the total population. This was conspicuously so in the professions, especially medicine, engineering and accountancy. How did such a state of affairs emerge? Was it the outcome of a deliberate British policy of divide and rule? Or were highly placed Tamils over-solicitous about the welfare of their kinsfolk at the expense of other communities? Or were the Tamils an exceptionally self-succouring ethnic group? Or was jiggery-pokery at work on an organized scale? All of these theories have had their committed exponents. However, without recourse to conspiracy theories it is possible to explain the success of the Tamils in terms of certain specific historical and sociological circumstances. By far the most important of these was the role played by the Christian missionaries in Sri Lanka. In the first two decades of the 19th century, Christian missionaries in the form of English Anglicans, British Methodists, British Baptists and American Methodists arrived in Sri Lanka to spread the gospel. The colonial administrators do not appear to have welcomed them, but they were obliged to tolerate them, especially the Anglican missionaries. To serve as nurseries of proselytization, the missionaries set up schools, particularly in the south-west coastline and in Jaffna. The American missionaries who came to Sri Lanka were not wholly trusted by the colonial governors in those days, no doubt because America had successfully rebelled against the British Empire in the late 18th century. Accordingly they were sent to do their missionary work in the less salubrious northern part of the island. In consequence the Tamil areas of the country came to be well provided with schools teaching in English. Nor was that all. The Sinhalese resisted Christian proselytization in a more determined fashion than did the Tamils. In the second half of the 19th century, Sinhalese Buddhists entered into polemical public debates with Christian missionaries who repeatedly provoked them with the taunt that Christianity was superior to Buddhism. In the event, Christian missionaries found themselves more welcome in the north of Sri Lanka than in the south. The hopes of missionaries of rapidly Christianizing Sri Lanka were not realized, however. As these hopes receded the missionaries, with government patronage and aid,

embarked on the business of providing education in English to those who could pay for it. Such education too was more enthusiastically received in the north than in the south. And in the north the education system under the direction of American missionaries, placed emphasis on science and practical subjects like accountancy and book-keeping. The outcome of these developments was that in relation to their total population, a high proportion of Tamils became proficient in both English and science. This facilitated their entry into professions like medicine, engineering and accountancy. And over the years, they industriously consolidated their educational advantage. The operation of a virtuous circle can adequately account for their high visibility in some professions.

There was also a special reason that strongly motivated them to invest in education. The natural climate of the arid dry zone of the north imposed serious limitations on agricultural activities. Large scale commercial activity was concentrated in the southern parts of the country. Accordingly, entry into the professions was the main avenue of social advancement available to Tamils. So education was highly valued, and assiduously and systematically pursued. Predictably this brought them enviable results — wealth, power and prestige — and therewith the equally predictable envy and resentment of communities less favoured by circumstance. Curiously and significantly, the least favoured group and educationally the most disadvantaged group in Sri Lanka, was also Tamil; they were the Indian Tamils on the plantations. At any rate, the educational gap between the Sri Lankan Tamils and the other communities has been gradually closing over the past decade or so and now it is virtually non-existent. So far as employment in the state sector is concerned, in 1980, the Sinhalese with 74% of the population had 85% of all the jobs; Tamils with 18% of the population had only 11%. In medicine, engineering and accountancy, however, the Tamils still have a degree of representation in excess of their proportion in the population. This success has been largely the reward of discipline and hard work; partly it is a lag effect of earlier patterns of high achievement. Medicine and engineering are precisely the fields coveted by elite groups of all communities and there is no doubt that during the past two decades, the Sinhalese used state power to restrict the entry of Tamils into these professions. It was justified on the ground that thereby a historical imbalance was redressed. To continue to do so on one pretext or another would be to sacrifice merit to ethnicity. In this age of technocracy such a step would be a retrograde one. Those who are prone to put ethnicity above merit are likely to proceed by putting their religion or caste above ethnicity and end by putting the interest of their own families above everything else. In multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-cultural societies, the

subordination of educational achievement to other considerations is a sure-fire way of converting competition into conflict.

### *Effects of Slow Economic Growth*

During the first half of the 20th century the Sinhalese were becoming apprehensive about the growth of Tamil numbers, power and influence in the country. This fear was generated by several factors. First: during the 19th century, hundreds of thousands of Tamils from South India had descended upon the Island to work on the British tea plantations. Second: large numbers of Tamils from the north and east of Sri Lanka had moved to the south and west to work in government service, business enterprises and the professions. Third: many Indian immigrants had gravitated to the cities from the plantations and entered petty trade, domestic service and the casual labour market. In the 1920s and 1930s when recurrent economic crises resulted in high levels of unemployment and associated distress, it was easy enough to blame the Tamils and, as a solution, demand their removal from the scene. Thus from around 1920 onwards communal tension between the Sinhalese and Tamils gradually built up especially in the bigger cities. It was contained so long as the British ruled the country. In less than a decade after the British left, communal violence broke out between the Sinhalese and Tamils. The estrangement grew under the impact of events perceived by the Tamils as constitutional body-blows they suffered. In 1949 a large number of Indian Tamils who had had voting rights under British rule were summarily disenfranchised. In 1956 Sinhala was declared the only official language of the country. In 1970 a scheme of standardization was introduced which had the effect of reducing the number of Tamil students gaining university admission. In 1972 Buddhism was constitutionally accorded the foremost place among religions in Sri Lanka. These measures have been interpreted by the Tamils as a systematic, premeditated, well-orchestrated assault on their rights by the majority Sinhalese. Over a period of four decades the conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamils escalated to the point when it became a regional issue with geopolitical and international implications. Indian intervention added a further complication to an already complicated situation. To date the problem remains basically unresolved. Resolution of the conflict requires a substantial devolution of power to the Tamils as the fulfilment of a just demand, and as the price of a lasting peace and stability.

### *Sinhalese-Tamil Conflict and Indian Intervention*

After Sri Lanka attained Independence the Sinhalese Buddhists who were the cultural underdogs during four and a half



centuries of Western, Christian, European domination, began to assert their cultural identity. They sought political redress for perceived discriminatory disadvantages they had suffered under the period of European rule. Adjustments were made in regard to language, religion, education, employment and land settlements. These proved to be disadvantageous to the minorities, especially to the Tamils who regarded them as constituting a threat to their ethnic and cultural integrity. Their repeated attempts at obtaining by constitutional means a measure of autonomy for the predominantly Tamil-speaking regions of the country failed. Periodic large-scale violence directed against Tamils by the Sinhalese pushed the Tamils to the northern and eastern areas of the country where they felt more secure. This served to enhance their geographical concentration and psychological solidarity. Finally in 1976, mainstream Tamil political opinion resolved that the survival of Tamils as a national minority required nothing less than the setting up of a separate state called Tamil Eelam encompassing the Northern and Eastern Provinces of the country. There is reason to believe that this call for the creation of a separate state by mainstream Tamil politicians was largely rhetorical and tactical. In any case, by 1977 the call had not won the support of a large percentage of Tamils in Sri Lanka. Of the 1.25 million Tamils who lived outside the Northern and Eastern Provinces, the Indian Tamils (0.74 million) had explicitly dissociated themselves from the demand for separation; the rest (0.51 million) had not even been explicitly asked for endorsement. In the Northern and Eastern Provinces, Tamils constituted something like 65% of the population. At the general election held in 1977, only 48% of the voters in those provinces voted for the Movement which sought a mandate for the creation of a separate State. Thus, by 1977 only a minority of Tamils in Sri Lanka had pledged electoral support for separation. This could not have escaped the notice of mainstream Tamil politicians. Their cry for separation was clearly a worst case scenario. They finally demanded total separation because demands for a measure of regional autonomy had repeatedly failed. All along the line they were ready and eager to settle for a satisfactory measure of devolution within a single state.

In the meantime beginning in the 1970s, several youthful militant Tamil groups had launched an armed struggle against the Sri Lankan State in pursuit of their vision of an independent sovereign State of Tamil Eelam. With each failure of the mainstream Tamil politicians to arrive at a political solution to “the ethnic issue” — as it came to be called — the influence of the militant groups appeared to increase. They gradually displaced or physically exterminated the traditional mainstream leaders of the Tamil people and arrogated to themselves the power — in the most accurate idiom — to call the shots in Tamil politics. Despite the internecine conflicts

between various groups for dominance, their armed struggle for Tamil Eelam won the support of increasing numbers of Sri Lankan Tamils resident in Sri Lanka and overseas. Especially after the pogrom against the Tamils by the Sinhalese in 1983, Tamils also received moral, logistical and financial support from caring people in South India and even from personnel of the Indian intelligence services. The Sri Lankan government attempted with varying degrees of success and at great economic cost to suppress the armed struggle waged by Tamil militants. When hard pressed by the Sri Lankan armed forces which were nearly 100% Sinhalese by the 1980s, tens of thousands of Tamils fled to South India as refugees. It was at that stage that India intervened to help resolve the conflict on the basis of regional autonomy for Tamils within a single Sri Lankan state in terms of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord of July 1987. By this Accord the government of India changed its role from that of mediator to that of arbiter in the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict. The terms of the Accord went a long way towards fulfilling the aspiration of Tamils for a measure of regional autonomy and recognition of Tamil as an official language. But that was not all. An annexure to the Accord made provision for setting up a “joint consultative mechanism” for ensuring that:

- (i) the presence in Sri Lanka of foreign military and intelligence personnel will not prejudice Indo-Sri Lanka relations;
- (ii) Trincomalee and other ports will not be made available for military use by any country in a manner prejudicial to India’s interests;
- (iii) the Trincomalee oil tanks farm will be developed as a joint venture between India and Sri Lanka; and
- (iv) facilities set up by foreign broadcasting organizations in Sri Lanka will not be used for any military or intelligence purposes.

That the provisions in the annexure have precious little to do with the sufferings and aspirations of the Tamils of Sri Lanka is unmistakably clear. They are all foreign policy concessions which — to put the lightest construction on it — India insistently sought and anyhow got from Sri Lanka. In view of the circumstances under which the Accord came to be signed, some analysts have contended that for India the Accord was really an exercise in what is often called “coercive diplomacy”. A few weeks before the Accord was signed, Indian military air-planes had invaded Sri Lanka’s airspace to drop food supplies to beleaguered Tamils.

There is no simple hypothesis which neatly fits all the known facts concerning the Indian intervention in Sri Lanka. The standard

hypothesis by which exponents of Indian policy seek to justify the intervention is that India's national self-interest requires:

- (1) the prevention of the emergence of a separate state in the north of Sri Lanka based on Tamil ethnicity and the Tamil language; and
- (2) a measure of regional autonomy for the Tamils of Sri Lanka within a United Sri Lanka,
  - (i) to stop the exodus to India of Sri Lankan Tamils fleeing periodic slaughter by Sinhalese civilians and armed forces; and
  - (ii) to assuage the sentiments of 50 million Tamils in South India solicitous about the safety and rights of their ethnic and linguistic brethren in Sri Lanka.

Deducible from this hypothesis is at least one observable consequence. If the hypothesis has even a semblance of truth, India cannot and will not grant official recognition to a separate state of Tamil Eelam. To date India has not done so; that is to say, the hypothesis has not been falsified. But it goes without saying that like all hypotheses, it may require revision, amendment or total rejection in the light of future events. And if one reason why the IPKF came to Sri Lanka in terms of the Accord, was to prevent the emergence of a separate State of Tamil Eelam, then the Sinhalese who vehemently opposed the presence of the IPKF in Sri Lanka were, arguably, misperceivers of Sri Lanka's own best interests. For in the matter of preventing the emergence of Tamil Eelam there was a perfect congruence of interests between the governments of India and Sri Lanka. This implication was quickly perceived by the most fiercely militant group of Tamil separatists — the Tamil Tigers — who were, in due course, to fight the implementation of the Accord tooth and nail.

It is probably true to say that the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord of 1987 was deeply resented by most Sinhalese, who regarded the way it was negotiated and transacted as an infringement of the country's sovereignty. Nevertheless, candidates of the party which entered into the Accord, so far from being decisively rejected by the voters, actually regained power in the presidential and parliamentary elections held in 1988/89.

Initially the reactions to the arrival of the IPKF in Sri Lanka under the terms of the Accord were totally different in the north and south of the country. In the north the IPFK was deliriously greeted with flowers and sweets by many Tamil women and children who evidently regarded the Indian soldiers as saviours sent by Mother India. For about six weeks all went merry as a marriage bell. But

the most fiercely militant Tamil separatists who abhorred the Accord because it shattered their dreams of a sovereign Tamil Eelam set out to wreck the implementation of the Accord. Soon they became embroiled in mortal combat with the Indian soldiers who had come to keep the peace between the ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. In the event, the Indian soldiers stayed to fight the longest war in the history of the post-independence India. Their war was with the Tamil separatist guerrillas, during the course of which thousands of Tamils died. The IPKF lost over 1 500 men and nearly 3 000 were seriously injured. When they finally left 32 months after they came, there was a general sense of relief in Sri Lanka. With the IPKF gone, the militant separatists openly revived their passionate dream of a Tamil Eelam encompassing the Northern and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka. Of the 2.7 million Tamils in Sri Lanka, about 1.3 million live outside the Northern and Eastern Provinces and this cannot be a source of strength to the separatists. Hitherto the separatist guerrillas have ruthlessly murdered Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and Indians who have dared to obstruct their path to Tamil Eelam. Nor have they hesitated to execute even erstwhile comrades in arms who gave up the mad pursuit. Given their objective of acquiring one-third of the area of Sri Lanka as the sovereign homeland of the Tamils, the fight before them will be as hard as it will be long. More realistically, the surviving members of the mainstream Tamil political Movement which in 1976 originally raised the cry for the creation of an independent Sovereign State of Tamil Eelam, as well as several militant groups, have demonstrated a willingness to accept regional autonomy for Tamils within a single Sri Lankan State, in terms of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord.

In the south of Sri Lanka the Accord and the arrival of the IPKF precipitated widespread civil unrest generated by various groups opposed generally to the Accord or specifically to the Sri Lankan architect and signatory to the Accord or to both. The implementation of the Accord was flawed and fouled by conflicts and tensions between ethnic groups, between political factions, and between Sri Lanka and India. In the context of the virtual total breakdown of law and order that ensued, the extremist Sinhalese nationalists represented largely by unemployed, embittered, alienated, militant Sinhalese youth, attempted to topple the government of Sri Lanka on a variety of grounds. Their principal demand was the abrogation of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord of 1987, mainly because it commits Sri Lanka to granting a measure of regional autonomy to the Tamils. These extremists certainly succeeded in creating murderous mayhem, social chaos and economic ruin before the government succeeded in subduing them in late 1989. At this stage of our enquiry, it is appropriate to focus on the evolution of the socio-economic structure they set out to destroy.

## *Emergence of Welfarism*

The granting of universal suffrage to the people of Sri Lanka by the British in 1931 had a profound effect on the shaping of the socio-economic development of the country. The mass of the people used the vote with such shrewdness to serve their self-interest, that politicians who wished to maintain themselves in seats of power were obliged to interfere with the inequality of incomes and wealth distribution in favour of the underprivileged majority. From 1931 to 1947, that is to say during the phase just before Independence was granted, heavy expenditure was incurred by the government on health, education, food subsidies and a program of irrigation works in the country's Dry Zone. The program of irrigation consisted in the restoration of the water tanks of the ancient Sinhalese kingdom and the establishment of peasant settlement schemes in the irrigated regions. The phase from 1931 to 1947 included, of course, the period of the Second World War in which Sri Lanka became involved as a colony of the British Empire. As in Britain in Sri Lanka too, the war period saw massive state intervention in food distribution and delivery of health care which led to a significant improvement in the nutrition and health of the people. Also during the war period, large-scale use of DDT effectively controlled the incidence of malaria in the country. The crude death rate had gradually fallen from 37 per 1000 in 1935 to 14 per 1000 in 1947. By the time the 152-year rule of the British ended in 1948, state sponsored social welfare had become standard state policy in the country. In 1948 the people of Sri Lanka had a life expectancy of 50 years, an infant mortality rate of 92 per thousand live-births and a literacy rate of 58% — memorable because they were remarkable for a poor colonial country in those days. These figures seemed to prove beyond doubt that active state intervention on behalf of general social welfare did nothing but good.

## *Political Independence and Economic Dependence*

When Sri Lanka became politically independent in 1948, after nearly 450 years of various degrees of domination successively by the Portuguese, Dutch and British, its economy had acquired a dual character. One segment, namely the plantation sector (mainly tea, rubber and coconut) was dominated by expatriate owners and was linked to international markets. The extant physical infrastructure — the system of roads, railways, communications and port services — had been developed for and was geared to the special needs of this segment. The other segment of the economy which involved the bulk of the rural population was basically subsistence agriculture, fisheries, mining, simple manufactures, handicrafts and services. So unproductive was peasant agriculture that the bulk of the country's

food requirements had to be imported for over two decades after Independence. In the pre-war period and up to the mid-1950s, surpluses generated in the plantation sector were enough to pay handsome dividends to the investors as well as to pay for social welfare. The system worked satisfactorily enough and at the time of gaining Independence Sri Lanka's per capita income was one of the highest in South East Asia. There were, however, wide disparities in income distribution within the country. Peasants in the hill-country and Dry Zone and immigrant Indian labourers working on the plantations were among the poorest. Collectively they accounted for the majority of the population of some seven million in 1948.

At Independence power passed from the British to a ruling elite derived from among the English-educated, propertied members of the different ethnic groups: Sinhalese, Tamils, Moors and Burghers. Among them, despite communal differences, a semblance of political unity was apparent at the time Sri Lanka gained Independence. Below the ruling elite was a heterogeneous middle class the upper stratum of which had attained its social position by gaining entry to certain professions (civil service, medicine, law, engineering, university teaching) through an English-education. The lower middle class accounting for a large proportion of the population included the clerical employees of the public and mercantile sectors, Buddhist priests, practitioners of indigenous medicine, school teachers, rich traders and rich peasants. The organized working class was represented by workers on the plantations and in factories processing products of agricultural origin, and by workers in services such as the transport services, hospital, postal and port services, and electrical and telecommunication services. Out of a total work force of some 1.5 million in 1948, about a million were plantation workers. The rest of the population was largely made up of poor peasants, landless labourers, low-income fishing families and rural artisans.

During the four decades since Independence the population soared to nearly 17 million. The social position of the English-educated, propertied, ruling elite was somewhat eroded. Elements of the lower middle class displayed a remarkable upward social mobility. These changes have been wrought principally by the use of the vote. The pressure of the growing population on limited resources continually increased during the post-independence period and the welfare state was stretched to its limits. The welfare state in Sri Lanka has been essentially an exercise in buying off social discontent in order to stabilize political authority. So long as the economy could maintain the growing population at the quality of life sustained by subsidised food, free health care and education, the system worked. However, as an exporter of primary products

heavily dependent on the vagaries of the fluctuating international market, the stage was reached when the state could no longer sustain the expanding population at the level of welfare they had been accustomed to, while retaining the old patterns of production, distribution and exchange. What were these patterns? Let us see.

### *“Democratic Socialism” and “Socialist Democracy”*

Since Independence two patterns of production, distribution and exchange have been alternately tried out in Sri Lanka. By their practitioners they have been labelled “democratic socialism” and “socialist democracy” respectively. The former is private enterprise oriented. It is a variety of what is now called “market socialism”. Socialist democracy relies heavily on central planning and state control of the economy. It is a variety of what is now called “bureaucratic socialism”. Whatever their definitional characteristics might be, neither of them has worked satisfactorily to increase Sri Lanka’s productivity sufficiently to satisfy the rising expectations of the growing population. This is the hard reality that underpins the patterns of political behaviour and conduct of the people of modern Sri Lanka. Of late modern Sri Lanka has become a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-lingual, multi-cultural, caste-conscious, poverty-stricken society-in-a-hurry, many of whose citizens have acquired a taste for the consumer goods that citizens of advanced industrial countries enjoy. A small but significant proportion of Sri Lanka’s citizens were able to indulge their taste for these consumer goods, by virtue of their positions of privilege and power. The large majority who could not so indulge themselves appeared to experience a mounting sense of frustration. Among them was a small but significant proportion of young adults, in whom this sense of frustration found expression in political violence which brought mayhem to the country in the recent past.

### *World Bank-IMF Intervention in Sri Lanka*

The recent past has surely been the worst of times for Sri Lanka in living memory. The question poses itself: How possibly did the country reach the present impasse having started off as a relatively prosperous, peaceful country at the time of gaining Independence in 1948? Is there a hypothesis which can explain why necessarily it had to come to this state? At Independence Sri Lanka enjoyed a favourable balance of payments and had a sizable current account surplus. At the end of 1989, its foreign debt amounted to \$5.2 billion and its current account deficit to \$521 million. In the immediate post-independence period the government of Sri Lanka pursued a program of import-substitution industrialization and took steps to set up factories for the production of cement, paper, steel,

sugar, caustic soda, vegetable oil and textiles. At about the same time it sought the advice of the World Bank (IBRD) concerning a suitable program of economic development. The Bank sent a mission to Sri Lanka in 1951 and in 1952 the mission issued a long report (over 800 pages). Its principal recommendations were clear and straightforward:

- (1) encourage the investment of private capital, local and foreign;
- (2) promote the development of light industries but avoid government management of factories;
- (3) gradually eliminate food subsidies.

The Bank pledged to follow with interest the action taken by the government in connection with the report of its mission and to help in the future development of the country.

Broadly speaking, the economic history of post-independence Sri Lanka is the history of periodic resolute implementation and periodic not-so-resolute resistance to the implementation of the recommendations of the World Bank. The period from 1970 to 1977 was one of vigorous and even doctrinaire resistance. During part of this period the United Front Government which came to power in 1970, pursued the goal of 'socialist democracy' on the standard premise that the public interest is best served by state-ownership and state-management of the commanding heights of the economy. Foreign-owned tea and rubber plantations and factories were nationalised. Ownership of land by a family was limited to 50 acres for dry land and 25 acres for paddy land. Strict controls were imposed over imports, foreign exchange flows and foreign travel by Sri Lankans. It was a period of subsidies, stringent rationing and queues, largely necessitated by an unprecedented increase in the price of sugar and rice in the world market. A youthful insurrectionary misadventure in 1971 in which thousands were killed disrupted and seriously impeded the government's development program. The "oil shock" of 1973 greatly aggravated the country's economic problems. In the meantime egalitarianism was stridently preached but for the ruling elite there were gaping safety-valves from the rigours of the experiment in nascent socialist democracy. If it was ever united by the ideology of socialist democracy, by 1975 the United Front Government was openly disunited; and by 1976 it was not even a front. Its constituent parties were virtually routed out of parliamentary existence in the general election held in 1977.



Unsurprisingly, the best help for Sri Lanka from the World Bank and the IMF has come during periods of resolute implementation of its advice, tendered no doubt in accordance with their best theoretical tenets. From 1953 onwards the World Bank and the IMF have intervened to a greater or lesser extent in Sri Lanka's economic policies. Beyond any manner of doubt, their intervention has been most pervasive in the period after July 1977. The government which took office in July 1977 and was re-elected in 1988/89 has endeavoured to follow the advice of the Fund and the Bank with resolve and even daring. The proffered justification for doing so has been that in the context of the current global economy of which Sri Lanka is willy-nilly a part, the consequences for the country of not following their advice would be even more disastrous than the consequences of following it. At any rate, by 1978 Sri Lanka had achieved remarkable social progress for a low-income developing country with a per capita GNP of around \$200. Life expectancy (68 years) and adult literacy (78%) were relatively high and rising. Nutrition was barely adequate. Mortality and population growth rates were declining. These gains had been achieved during a period when growth averaged about 3% per annum. But the welfare system was under strain and it eroded palpably during the 1970s owing partly to the "oil shock" of 1973, and the unprecedented rise in the price of rice and sugar coupled with a fall in the price of tea and rubber in the world market. The economy could not generate the output and the exports required to provide the numbers and types of jobs sought by the growing army of young, educated Sri Lankans. The high level of unemployment (20%) was undoubtedly the most serious problem demanding a solution.

In order to solve the problem, the government which took office in July 1977 embarked on an outward-looking, growth-oriented development strategy based on a standard "stabilization program" of the IMF. As always, the basic ingredients of the stabilization program involved:

- (i) liberalization of foreign exchange and import controls;
- (ii) devaluation of the country's currency;
- (iii) domestic anti-inflationary programs such as abolition of food subsidies and imposition of wage controls;
- (iv) encouragement of private investment, local and especially foreign; and
- (v) reform of public enterprises through privatization, joint ventures with foreign participation and reorganisation of management.

The package of conditions is called a “stabilization program” because its declared objective is the stabilization of the balance of payments. The balance of payments deficit is seen as the consequence of an excess of imports over exports of goods and services. Stabilization is intended to restore equilibrium.

Admittedly the program of stabilization and adjustment could not be satisfactorily implemented, because from 1977 onwards the ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamils escalated to unimaginable levels of ferocity and barbarity. As a result internal security costs soared to unprecedented levels. Curiously enough, during this period food subsidies fell from 5% of GDP in 1978 to 0.7% of GDP in 1987; over the same period military expenditure rose from 0.7% of GDP in 1978 to 5% of GDP in 1987. On the face of it, it looks as though what the government saved on the food subsidy it has had to spend on military operations. In this context it is interesting that according to a recent United Nations study, the first \$200 million which an “average developing country” spends on arms would:

- (i) add 20 infant deaths per 1000 live births;
- (ii) decrease life expectancy by 3 to 4 years; and
- (iii) result in 13 to 14 fewer literate adults among every 100 of the population.

This formula ought to fit the case of Sri Lanka; if it does not, it is worthwhile to discover by an empirical study, why it does not. But even in countries without ongoing ethnic conflicts or civil war the stabilization and adjustment programs of the IMF have acquired a reputation for precipitating a sharp deterioration in the living standards of the poor at least in the short-run. The typical IMF policy package consisting of abolition or drastic reduction of food subsidies, cuts in welfare expenditure, abolition of price controls, imposition of wage controls and devaluation of the currency of the borrowing country, must hurt — it cannot be otherwise — the poor. Considering that the IMF policy package also includes reduction of trade barriers and encouragement of private investment, it is not difficult to see for whom the policies work better and for whom worse. Indeed, IMF-policy-induced food riots have been a recognized form of civil disorder in the recent past. In its defence the IMF points out that when a country finds it necessary to borrow from the IMF for whatever reasons, what lies before the mass of its people is anyhow a period of severe austerity and suffering, with or without IMF intervention. Furthermore, it contends, a country negotiates a loan from the IMF freely and in full knowledge of the conditions attached to the loan. The IMF claims that its stabilization and adjustment policy package is prescribed as a short, sharp surgical operation with

the hope and confident expectation that the post-operative deterioration in the living standards of the poor will be improved quite soon. In the event, the expected improvement did not occur in Sri Lanka. In 1988 it was found that after a decade of stabilization and adjustment Sri Lanka's unemployment problem remained unsolved and intractable. Deterioration of the welfare services had had an adverse effect on the once outstanding health indicators. Food consumption had declined among the poor and malnutrition had become a serious problem especially among very young children. Admittedly, because the country had been wracked by violent ethnic and factional conflict for over a decade since 1977, the socio-economic deterioration of the country during the same period cannot be causally linked to the IMF stabilization and adjustment program. However, there is evidence from many other developing countries too that the standard stabilization packages of the IMF are usually very hard on the poor. For example, the World Institute for Development Economics Research of the United Nations University sponsored a study of the experiences of 18 developing countries (including Sri Lanka) which had implemented stabilization policy packages of the IMF in the 1970s and 1980s. The study concluded that the policy packages were usually hard, sometimes very hard, on the poor of borrowing countries. A study carried out by UNICEF on the social effects of the stabilization and adjustment policies of the IMF came very much to the same conclusion. Indeed, UNICEF publicly pleaded for "*adjustment with a human face*". By this was meant an adjustment program that pays attention to the health, nutrition and educational requirements of the most vulnerable groups in poor countries borrowing from the IMF.

So far as Sri Lanka is concerned the stabilization program implemented for more than a decade has dismally failed to make the country go even in the general direction of "stabilization" intended by the IMF. Instead what has demonstrably happened is that Sri Lanka's economy has become more strongly integrated into the international economic system. This is the reality with which Sri Lanka is stuck. And it is from this reality that the future has to be envisaged.

### *Options for Future Socio-economic Development*

There is wide agreement that unemployment is Sri Lanka's major socio-economic problem to which the ethnic and factional strife is largely traceable. The prospect of a stable peace in Sri Lanka turns crucially on the solution of the unemployment problem. Today more than ever before, the international economic system is defiantly and boastfully capitalist. In this context Sri Lanka which has been experimenting alternately with "democratic socialism" and "socialist

democracy” has to face up to the question: Can capitalism develop a Third World country like Sri Lanka? And if capitalism cannot, what can develop it? It clearly cannot be the kind of centrally-managed or command economy which socialist countries themselves are currently discarding after decades of experimentation, because of its proven incapacity to satisfy modern consumer demands. Perhaps it is no longer relevant to pose the question of development in terms of capitalism versus socialism. To talk of feudal, pre-capitalist and traditional forms of production in Sri Lanka is not very meaningful in the modern world. To be sure, there are different forms of production and diverse ways of making a living, but today they are almost all integrated in one way or another into the capitalist world economy. Today the relevant question to answer when formulating a development strategy for Sri Lanka’s future is whether the strategy needed to solve its unemployment problem requires more state participation or less; more industrialization or less; and more foreign investment or less. Given the socio-economic situation with which Sri Lanka is stuck, it seems inevitable that the direction in which it has to move in search of employment in the immediate future is in the direction that leads to further integration in the global economy.

The history of development in Sri Lanka since Independence has conclusively shown that private capital on the scale necessary to increase productivity significantly is not available in Sri Lanka. Such capital as is available is still at the mercantile stage of development. That is to say, entrepreneurs are more inclined to look for quick profits from buying and selling operations, than to invest in long-term industrial ventures. A dynamic industrial capitalist class with a declared mission of industrialization has not yet emerged in Sri Lanka. That is perhaps the main reason why the government has been obliged to intervene in a big way in the process of capital formation mainly by borrowing from foreign sources.

### *Reliance on Foreign Investment*

It has been estimated by orthodox economists that Sri Lanka must grow at least 7% annually during the 1990s if its unemployment problem is to be solved within a five-year period. A well-tested development strategy which has enabled several developing countries to reach such a high growth rate has been one based on export-led industrialization driven mainly by foreign investment and involving international sub-contracting arrangements. Foreign investment should not be suspect merely because it is foreign; and economic advantage should not be sacrificed for self-reliance. The trend in the world today is towards reshaping economic arrangements into larger units like the European Economic

Community. The need to survive economically, if nothing else, must compel Sri Lanka to consider co-operation with regional neighbours in South Asia, particularly India. Investment funds in the 1990s will have to come from countries like Japan, South Korea and Hong Kong which have huge balance-of-payments surpluses. Japan is currently Sri Lanka's largest donor. But potential investment funds in these countries are available in the private sector and will not be channelled to developing countries as official development aid. The way to obtain investment funds therefore is to devise strategies to tap the surpluses available in the private sector. This basically means providing a hospitable climate for secure, profitable investment. This implies a persistently undervalued exchange rate to keep Sri Lanka competitive in today's global economy. Foreign investors, of course, will endeavour to create and extract as much surplus as they can, but some of it will be retained as payments for rents, royalties and taxes. Other major benefits will include wages and salaries paid to workers, dividends paid to local shareholders, and the creation of physical assets like factories. Economists who argue that Sri Lanka has the potential to reach growth rates of 7% per year in the next decade are quick to point out that such an outcome depends crucially on IMF-World Bank support. Realistically, they also point out that reliance on such a strategy of development will lead to no immediate improvement in the income distribution in the country. Indeed, it is feared that income distribution may even get worse in the short-run. However, it is contended that the quick improvement in employment opportunities combined with the welfare programs already in place should alleviate temporary hardships.

### *Limitations of Orthodox Economics*

The development scenario for the 1990s envisaged above is based on current orthodox economic thinking. But current orthodox economic theory seems incapable of coming up with an effective prescription for curing endemic inflation, chronic unemployment and periodic recession. Industrial activity is causing world-wide environmental deterioration. The world's natural resources are being rapidly depleted. Even as capitalism is claiming victory over socialism in the Cold War, large pockets of poverty and deprivation persist in the most affluent of societies. Modern technology promises virtually unlimited production, but the most basic human needs of millions remain unsatisfied even in rich countries. Sustained economic growth, full employment and free trade are the declared economic objectives of capitalist societies. But in several developed capitalist countries there are high levels of unemployment; protectionist barriers to free trade are on the increase; and where it occurs, sustained economic growth is seriously damaging the environment.

Some analysts have come to the conclusion that full employment as traditionally conceived is really a thing of the past. For example, in 1982 the ILO estimated that a thousand million new jobs will have to be created by the year 2000 A.C. if full employment is to be achieved the world over. No one doubts that the target will not be reached. In Sri Lanka unemployment, especially youth unemployment, has been a chronic problem in the past few decades. If widespread unemployment is likely to be a dominant characteristic in future societies, it is neither equitable nor efficient to distribute livelihoods through a mechanism — the job market — which automatically excludes millions of people. The prospect of the inevitability of unemployment of such magnitude calls for a re-examination of the economic foundations of society and the very purpose of social organization.

### *A New Approach to Socio-economic Development*

From the evolutionary biological perspective, every species on earth appears to be primarily governed by one motivation: perpetuation of itself. For humankind too, parenting is what life is mainly about. Even so, economic life in the modern world is organized as if humankind's most important business is transacted in factories, offices and laboratories rather than in homes and fields. As every schoolchild knows, those who do the real work that keeps life going — home-making, bearing and rearing children and training them for life when they are young; cooking and preparing food; caring for and nursing the sick and the old, in short, the work that the mothers of the world have traditionally done or have been forced by others to do — is precisely the type of work that is least rewarded in the modern economic system. At last there appears to be recognition in many parts of the world of the sheer economic injustice of this traditional social arrangement. It has not yet been suggested that mothers should receive a statutory wage, but a just social system must surely not exclude the work done in the household from adequate reward and recognition. The recognition of the importance of the work done in the household to the business of living, provides a point of departure for essential social reform.

Economics, above all, should be concerned with human welfare and not with the mere production and distribution of wealth. And human welfare involves far more than production and consumption. To reiterate a matter of the utmost simplicity: humans have a variety of physical, mental and spiritual needs. They require food, clothing and shelter in order to survive. For mental and emotional well-being they need the opportunity to experience love, friendship and camaraderie; and the opportunity for artistic expression and enjoyment. Spiritually, human beings need to achieve

a genuine harmony within themselves. Even as they continue to live in subconscious dread of their own death, they have to come to terms with the awful fear that death may snatch a loved one from them without warning. Many humans also have a religious sense and a longing to probe and apprehend the Ultimate Reality that may be behind the passing flux of the sensory world. To the extent that these fundamental human needs are fulfilled humans approximate to a state of happiness; to the extent these needs are unfulfilled, they suffer. The purpose of social organization should be to provide humans with the conditions necessary for the fulfilment of their essential needs. Modern human rights have really grown out of evolved human needs.

To digress briefly: the problem of how human rights are best realized in a given society is a matter of the utmost complexity. This is so for several reasons. First, in regard to providing material things such as food, clothing and shelter there is often disagreement about what is scientifically and technologically correct and feasible, even among intelligent, informed people with no special interest to plead. For example, was the massive accelerated Mahaveli scheme designed to increase food and energy production, the best project to have been undertaken in Sri Lanka, and if so was it implemented in accordance with the best scientific knowledge available? Next, disputes often rage over the social and political institutions that would best promote the best interests of society. For example, is the institution of an Executive Presidency a better or worse arrangement than the system of a Cabinet Government? Again, there are always constraints on resources, and the best way of distributing scarce resources finally becomes a matter of party politics. Considerations of this sort, pointedly, constitute the decisive justification for a multiparty democracy with periodic free and fair elections based on universal suffrage. For democracy is a people's license to act in an enlightened — or not so enlightened — way. But from this digression let us return to economic matters.

### *Implications of Sustained Economic Growth*

Sustained economic growth as measured by an increasing GNP is the conventional way of assessing economic development. But an increasing number of modern economists who tend to think globally about economics, are now convinced that sustained economic growth on an indefinite basis is not desirable in our finite planet. Continued population growth combined with continued exploitation of the natural environment is unsustainable and will almost certainly result in catastrophic climatic changes and biological impoverishment of the earth possibly within the next century, if present trends are not arrested soon. Given these trends, the time

has come for Sri Lanka to try and find ways of meeting its peoples' needs without destroying its resource base. A serious effort is also necessary to move from the use of fossil fuels to renewable energy sources, especially solar energy.

Of the raw materials of economics — land, labour and capital — land is crucial in Sri Lanka. Our food comes mainly from the land and nearly half of our population earn their livelihoods directly from it. Land must no longer be regarded merely as an economic resource to be productively exploited. Next to people, no more precious resource than land exists. Its fertility, its ecological integrity, even its beauty must be maintained indefinitely. The whole concept of ownership of land may have to be replaced with a form of stewardship. Degradation of the land by intensive methods of competitive commercial production must be resolutely resisted. Land tenure and the power structure it sustains will require drastic modification for the purpose of providing livelihoods to those who cannot find jobs.

#### *Case for a Guaranteed Minimum Income*

This brings us back to the problem of unemployment. If full employment in the traditional sense is unlikely to be available on a wide scale in the future, what is the feasible solution to the problem of unemployment? Of one thing there can be little doubt: societies that continue to link incomes exclusively with jobs cannot expect to survive peacefully for long under circumstances in which large numbers of people are going to be without jobs and without income. As always, the jobless poor will regard society as unjust and not deserving of their moral allegiance.

The subject of unemployment and the poverty associated with it has engaged the attention of economists of the highest eminence. A few of them have argued the case for an *unconditional* guaranteed basic minimum income to every citizen who wishes to work and cannot find a job. What is proposed here as a working hypothesis is a scheme for providing every citizen seeking employment with a guaranteed basic minimum income as a *conditional social entitlement*. Such a scheme merits serious consideration in Sri Lanka where the unemployment problem has proved to be the most intractable and incendiary problem of the past few decades, in the context of a rapidly growing population. It goes without saying that at all events everything possible should also be done to prevent population expansion from outstripping available means of subsistence.



A scheme to grant a minimum subsistence to every citizen is not really new in Sri Lanka which has a long record of state commitment to a minimum social entitlement for every citizen. Sri Lanka's comprehensive program of food subsidies, health care and education is the equivalent of a guaranteed minimum income. The *Janasaviya Program* (Poverty Alleviation Program) being implemented currently is Sri Lanka's latest experiment — commendable in principle — in providing a guaranteed minimum income to its worst-off citizens. It is an ambitious project, which seeks to address the inter-related problems of poverty, unemployment, landlessness and malnutrition.

In considering the case for a guaranteed minimum income, it must be borne in mind that in Sri Lanka the state has been and is the major employer. As chief employer the state has hitherto provided relatively well-paid jobs to a sizable proportion of those seeking employment. About 20% of the country's workforce, however, remains unemployed. What most unemployed young men and women in Sri Lanka seem to consider unjust and intolerable is that a government professing to represent and to serve *all* the people should provide well-paid employment to only *some* of the people, all of whom, moreover, may not even be the best qualified for the jobs they hold. What happens in the private sector of Sri Lanka's mixed economy by way of employment and emoluments does not seem to generate such strong resentful feelings among the unemployed.

It is, of course, axiomatic that a just state should strive to treat all its citizens equitably. Unemployed young men and women in Sri Lanka seem to feel strongly that they have a right to *an equitable share of the work paid for by the state*. Indeed, Article 21 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* proclaims that "everyone has the right to equal access to public service in the country". Meaningful exercise of this right necessitates provision of some form of paid employment or at least a guaranteed minimum income to every citizen seeking employment. If this principle is accepted, the crucial question that arises is the following. What is the most economically efficient way of achieving this objective in terms of a theory of justice, conceived of as a set of social arrangements which minimizes envy?

So far as state employment is concerned two principles should guide action:

- (1) recruitment to government service should be on the basis of clearly defined objective criteria, and not on the basis of political patronage;

- (2) wherever possible employees should be hired on a part-time basis in order to promote an equitable distribution of the work paid for by the state.

Broadly speaking, in all fields that do not require long years of highly specialized training, work paid for by the state should be on a part-time basis. For example, teaching, nursing, general medical practice, transport, postal and scavenging services lend themselves quite easily to part-time employment. A recent survey in Britain showed that women make up about 45% of the workforce and 40% of them work part-time. A similar trend should be promoted as a matter of state policy in Sri Lanka.

The experience of communist countries in which there was virtually no unemployment for several decades suggests that the provision of full employment by the state is a factor that inhibits productivity. In the long run the reduction of productivity associated with full state employment tends to lower the general standard of living in the country as a whole. The fall in the standard of living then becomes a cause of social unrest. Incredibly, demands of Soviet miners on strike recently included adequate supplies of soap, sugar and toilet paper. These shortages may have been caused at least partly by the economic inefficiency associated with guaranteed full employment provided by the state. The experience of communist countries also indicates that provision of artificially cheap food interferes seriously with food production. This is another compelling reason for phasing out Sri Lanka's policy of providing subsidized food and replacing it with the provision of a guaranteed minimum income for services rendered. Such a scheme is not only easier to administer than a scheme of subsidized food, but is also more likely to stimulate trade and promote economic growth.

Part-time employment in most fields would provide most citizens with an income only just sufficient to meet basic living costs. Those working part-time for government would therefore be compelled by circumstances to supplement their income by working in the private sector or informal sector. Incentives should be given to the private sector to provide such employment. The net result is likely to be an increase in productivity for the benefit of society as a whole.

Thus the policy of providing only part-time work in government service wherever possible as a strategy for providing a guaranteed minimum income to the workforce has several merits.

- (1) It promotes an equitable sharing of the work paid for by the state and that in turn would be in the interests of social justice and social peace.
- (2) In so far as part-time work in the government service is likely to induce most people to work in the private sector also to supplement their income it is more likely to increase productivity in the country.
- (3) By providing a guaranteed minimum income to all citizens seeking employment it will abolish poverty.
- (4) It will help to break down the stark distinction between the “employed” and “unemployed”.
- (5) It will encourage flexible working patterns.

In any case, working part-time may well become the norm of the future. Such an arrangement may have some unintended beneficial consequences too. For example, the burdensome, unpaid, important household chores may come to be more equitably shared, and the female half of the population may come to feel that they at least are living in a juster world than previously. Also, many fathers working part-time may spend more time with their children and discover the joys of parenting. And even the generation gap may finally be closed!

#### *Desirable Guiding Principles for Economic Development*

If the strategy of export-led industrialization driven mainly by foreign investment fails to materialize in Sri Lanka, circumstances will compel the realization that the way out of the economic impasse is certainly not by further integration in the international economy. We may then come to realize that development in Sri Lanka will have to be:

- (1) primarily geared to meeting basic human needs, material and non-material;
- (2) primarily based on Sri Lanka's own resources, material and human;
- (3) primarily motivated by our traditional values of mutual help and sharing in community; and
- (4) primarily non-injurious to our environment which is part of the global environment.

If present trends continue, by the year 2000 A.C. Sri Lanka will be more crowded, more polluted, more liable to violent social disruption and less ecologically stable than it is today. Serious stresses involving population, resources and environment are clearly visible on Sri Lanka's horizon at the beginning of the next millenium.

In our tragic age when both religious and secular gods have failed to lead us to a stable peace, one rational tack to try is to probe once again the depths of our own nature — human nature — for a guiding light to the future. Such introspection confirms that the human brain is indeed the lamp that organic evolution has bestowed on humankind for enlightenment. The collective human brain by means of precise thinking which it has honed over centuries, has given us knowledge and therewith the power to change the world for our benefit. Because it knows that it is fallible, the brain has evolved the corrective device of scientific method, which regards all knowledge only as a set of working hypotheses requiring constant critical scrutiny. It has given us insights into our deepest needs. It has enabled us to devise and put to the test various ways and means of fulfilling our needs. It gives us faith in our capacity to learn — however slowly — from past errors. Numerous past stupidities notwithstanding, it sustains our hope for a better future. The more *Homo sapiens* uses its brain power to understand *Homo sapiens* and the world, the more chance there is that the future will bring a stable peace.

The conditions necessary for a peaceful Sri Lanka to emerge — multiparty democracy with periodic genuine elections, devolution of power, secularism, cultural literacy, relevant education, satisfaction of basic needs, individual freedom, respect for human rights, cultivation of tolerance and the scientific outlook, breaking the momentum of population growth, liberation of women from patriarchal domination, sharing of prosperity, environmental protection, harmonious relations with the rest of the world — have been alluded to and discussed at greater or shorter length. An attempt has been made to demonstrate that these measures are predicated on the needs of essential human nature fashioned by the evolutionary history of *Homo sapiens*. The quest has been long, arduous and circuitous, and we have at last reached the end of the final seminar, though not the end of the quest!

### *Understanding and Compassion*

And at the end of this final seminar we come back to an idea we touched on at the end of the first: the indispensability of understanding and compassion for moving towards peace. These seminars have been more concerned with raising consciousness than with proposing a specific political program for the achievement of desirable goals. They have focussed more on where to go than on how to get there. One aim has been to see whether exploration of our biological nature could give us a map by which to guide our future. Another has been to devise a general scheme that would include the elements of human social and political behaviour and

provide an intelligible account of the interconnections of these elements. Such understanding is necessary if reforms are to have a rational basis. Such understanding, moreover, provides a basis for implementing reforms with some confidence that they would have a predictable effect on future social circumstances. Such understanding, though not a sufficient condition, is a necessary prerequisite for devising any effective program seeking to guide Sri Lanka towards a peaceful state.

When all is said and done, the capacity for suffering is the one thing that is common to all humans. Our collective brain has given us the power to reduce greatly the sum total of human suffering: suffering caused by disease and poverty, oppression and torture, bigotry and cruelty; and even suffering resulting from the experience of cosmic loneliness. Compassion for suffering human beings is perhaps the most ennobling of human emotions. For compassion often motivates liberating action. Even as science belongs in the realm of understanding, so religion belongs in the realm of compassion. Understanding and compassion are the elements which must combine to mobilize the people of Sri Lanka for the implementation of a program for alleviating human suffering through the realisation of human rights. Such a program has the potential for generating peace with social justice. And if justice — that is to say, the social arrangements that would minimize envy — will not bring a stable peace, nothing will.

### *Conclusion*

It is well to conclude this series of seminars by summarizing the main ideas they sought to present.

- (1) Guided by their brain, humans endeavour to escape suffering and to pursue happiness.
- (2) By what has proved to be its most reliable cognitive mode, involving observation of events, rationally guessing possible causal relationships between them and practically testing the guesses to see whether they are true or false, the collective human brain has accumulated a set of beliefs — scientific knowledge — some of which are uncertain, others more or less certain, but none absolutely certain.
- (3) Because absolute certainty has eluded humankind, systematic doubt of any belief is warranted, and therefore the articles of faith — or myths — by which humans live have to be working hypotheses subject to revision in the light of fresh evidence that may turn up.

- (4) Scientific knowledge provides the most rational and useful working hypotheses currently available to humankind, for the purpose of creating the conditions required for reducing suffering and increasing happiness.
- (5) As a working hypothesis, human happiness on earth may be regarded as the by-product of the fulfilment of the needs of humans for continuity, protection, affection, belonging, knowledge, creative activity, leisure, excitement and freedom.
- (6) Much avoidable human suffering and violence derive from the inability or unwillingness of those who control economic resources and exercise political power in all the countries of the world, to permit the creation of the conditions necessary for the satisfaction of the needs of all humans for continuity, protection, affection, belonging, knowledge, creative activity, leisure, excitement and freedom.
- (7) The goal of organized political activity of concerned citizens of the world should be to impel governments of nations severally and collectively, to implement policies that will enable all humans to enjoy what the collective wisdom of humankind has spelt out as human rights, because enjoyment of those rights is necessary for the satisfaction of the needs of humans for continuity, protection, affection, belonging, knowledge, creative activity, leisure, excitement and freedom.
- (8) The means employed to ensure the enjoyment of civil, economic, social, cultural and political rights by all humans must not inflict irreversible ecological damage on Planet Earth, or pollute its soil, air and water.
- (9) A world in ecological balance inhabited by citizens enjoying the full range of human rights is likely to be a happy one; and of all possible worlds, a happy one has the best chance of being a peaceful one.
- (10) Because a happy, stable, peaceful world will not emerge spontaneously, and because humankind can make their own history, education should be primarily devoted to generating the social, economic and political conditions necessary for the enjoyment of human rights by all and the care and maintenance of Planet Earth.

And so, as ever, but now quite literally, the do or die prescription is:

Compassion for Fellow Humans!

Reverence for Mother Earth!

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