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In current discussions in Sri Lanka about ways out of the political crisis in which the country has been for more than four years now, the name of Ahangamage Tudor Ariyaratne and the Sarvodaya Movement of which he a leader, often crop up for, Sarvodaya alone seems to many to be capable of neutralizing the tensions in the country and providing constructive forms of co-existence. Such hopes are not just founded on the spectacular peace marches and actions of the movement in recent years. ; they are based above all on the results of the ever expanding grassroots work carried out by Sarvodaya since the end of the 1950s in the villages all over Sri Lanka. Today, in 1990, the Sarvodaya Movement's invaluable contribution to Sri Lanka lies in its distinctive capacity to unite people of all ages, ethnic groups and political affiliations from the grassroots up throughout the country. This ability is derived from its philosophy which is based on common values and real village experience. It is sustained in the trust that Sarvodaya has built up over a period of 32 years as a non-partisan and non-denominational movement among the people it works with; and finally it is made effective by an organizational infrastructure which reaches down to the remotest and poorest in the villages.

Early beginnings : The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement was founded in 1958 by Ariyaratne, then a 27 year old teacher at the Buddhist Nalanda College in Colombo. Inspired by Gandhi and his disciples Vinoba Bhave and Jayaprakash Narayan, he further developed the originally Gandhian Sarvodaya concept “for the welfare of all.”. The name of his movement he explains as follows; 'Sarvodaya' signifies a thought and 'Shramdana' the implementation of that thought. In the initial years this concept was given practical expression above all in the form of one week voluntary community service, the so-called Shramdana Camps, in which students from the towns helped the inhabitants of particularly backward villages to improve their infrastructure; access roads were improved, irrigation ponds and canals cleaned, brick wells constructed, public buildings, schools and temple compounds repaired. But right from the start the changes of consciousness and behaviour that took place in all the participants in the course of a work camp were much more important to the movement than the concrete, visible results of such mutual endeavours. These changes were fostered systematically through group exercises and by meditating together. Individually, everyone was expected to consciously cultivate the fundamental Buddhist attitude of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy as well as equal regard for all living beings without distinction, while socially, generosity, friendliness, constructive cooperation and equality were practiced.

Between 1958 and 1966 more than 300,000 volunteers participated in hundreds of such activities and 'Shramdana' became a household word in the discussions about self-help in Sri Lanka. The government recognised the movement in 1965 as a public charity. But the further expansion and professionalism of its work was only made possible when foreign donors also became increasingly aware of its developmental significance and started promoting it in 1972. In the same year, Sarvodaya was legally incorporated by an Act of Parliament.

Sarvodaya is one of the largest Non-Governmental organizations (NGOs) in the Third World, without, however, having fallen victim to a hydra-like bureaucratism, a danger frequently to be observed in similar cases of expansion. A six member commission appointed by donors from Canada, Holland, Norway and Britain, expressed the overall opinion in the assessment they made in September 1987 that the achievements of the movement within the past years had been quite remarkable and the confidence of the foreign promoters was justified; Sarvodaya was utilising the funds 'effectively and in the interests of the rural poor in Sri Lanka.’’

A 1990 Evaluation states that “its non-violent approach survives in spite of adverse, trying and dangerous conditions, as well as provocation to depart from its long term development path. In a country at war, it is a beacon, a different model. It must be supported in spite of and because of the problems of encounters. There is no other Sri Lankan alternative.”

The starting point for all rural development work continues to be the “Shramdana Camp” that is organized at the request of the villagers by Sarvodaya helpers, the purpose of such actions being the elimination of specific shortcomings thereby inspiring the confidence of all concerned in their capacity for mutual self help. Once a new “psychological infrastructure” has been created through Shramdana, i.e. the “sharing of time and effort”, through camp life with its promotion of community spirit as well as the morning and evening group meditations, what is now known in Sarvodaya as the “building of a social infrastructure” then follows : the villagers begin to organize themselves into five different groups, based on age or occupation, viz. groups of children, mothers, young people, farmers and elders and so plan specific measure like a pre-school and the requisite provision of meals, a community centre or even tentative steps towards co-operative utilisation of natural resources, agricultural implements and irrigation facilities.

Thus it is that the movement tries to operate with decentralized organized societies spread uniformly throughout the whole country. A total of 3226 full time workers at the national level and in district, divisional and gramadana centres cover 8,200 villages. They are backed by 4739 pre-school teachers who constitute a full time volunteer presence in 3,168 villages. About 70% of these workers are female.

Despite the high level of violence that existed in the country between 1985 and early 1990, 6647 young people and 202 monks received community leadership training and 7996 young women were trained to organize and run their own village pre-schools. In addition, 1278 village leaders attended courses in basic management. Vocational training in carpentry, masonry, agriculture and other skills reached another 2541 village youth.

Between 1985 and 1990 a total of 20,718 Shramdana camps ranging from one day to two weeks were held and engaged 1,472,256 people. In 1986-89 alone the value of work done was approximately Rs 11 million with Sarvodaya contributing about 10% and the villagers the balance 90%.

Of course, these figures do not include all the Shramdana work that is done by other agencies as a result of the popularization of Shramdana by Sarvodaya. Indeed, Sarvodaya's most important contribution to the alleviation of poverty and the betterment of the quality of life in Sri Lanka are its success in bringing concepts such as Shramdana, village awakening, community gathering and people's participation in development within the mainstream of the country's development vocabulary.

Peace efforts : Towards the latter part of the 1950s and subsequently on several occasions up to 1983, whenever communal violence erupted in a localized way or generally, the Sarvodaya workers came forward fearlessly and organized relief, rehabilitation and reconciliation programmes.

When violence reached alarming proportions in 1983, the Sarvodaya workers called a Conference of civic leaders of all races and religions. A historic document named “A People's Declaration for Mutual Peace and Harmony” was adopted, which highlighted the symptoms of general degeneration in Sri Lanka, and analysed the causes thereof. It also promulgated an action programme for peace and harmony. A Long Peace Walk was organized : limited Peace Walks ranging from 6 to 36 miles were also made with large popular participation. Shanti Sena (Peace Brigade) has been set up, which organizes inter-community living and exchange. The latest programme for peace is the “people's Peace Offensive (PPO) which is an active intervention by organized groups of peace loving people into a situation of armed conflict.

Their purpose is to both heal human relationships and empower people to stand together in the midst of fear, hate and mistrust. In addition through its network of centres in the North and East, Sarvodaya distributes food, medicine and temporary housing material to those who have fled their homes and villages. Through activities as these, the Sarvodaya Movement led by Dr. Ariyaratne is playing a dynamic role in the transformation of Sri Lanka.

