

Social justice is considered to be the panacea for racial harmony, socio-economic problems and political instability in Sri Lanka today. But the road to social justice is not so smooth as most of us think. It is rugged and rocky, making the movement snail-paced as the past history shows. Nevertheless, the pace should be stepped up since Sri Lanka, as a Democratic Social Republic, can give a mandatory push to the renovated caravan. The freedom without fear and the peace that embraced the community after the dreadful 30-year civil war can make the caravan move even faster. All the signals are that it is happening right now, and to a great extent.

Social justice has now become an over-used term in the vocabulary but its meaning and purpose has not lost its glamour and attraction though some manoeuvring beneficiaries often use it to discredit the dispensers of justice.


The political philosopher John Rawls,

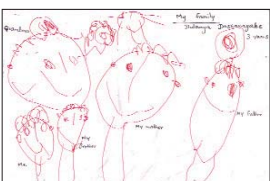


MOTHER


A priceless statue
Of pure love and joy
A drop of clear water
To satisfy the thirst for love
A gleaming bright lamp
In the dark depths of despair
An enormous shady tree
Protecting us from the world
A golden ray of sunlight
Shining down on earth
Helping the little plants grow
And making the flowers bloom

BY: MAHISHA JAYAKODY





Dulanya Dassanayaka
3yrs



Naveen Dassanayake
6years

4 influenced by the utilitarian insights of Bentham and Mill, social contract ideas of Locke, and categorical imperative ideas of Kant, expressed in his book, A Theory of Justice (1971), that "Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason justice denies the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others". Governments, in his opinion, are the trustees holding representative powers for the benefit of all citizens as no one can take it for granted that all citizens

Road to social justice is rugged and rocky

are reasonable, and any failure on the part of governments in their responsibility and duty to provide for the welfare of the citizens is considered illegitimate.

According to Rawls, the basic liberties are (a) freedom of thought (b) liberty of conscience as it affects social relationships on the grounds of religion, philosophy and morality (c) political liberties (freedom of speech, the press, assembly and representative democratic institutions (d) freedom for liberty and integrity of the person and (e) rights and liberties covered by the rule of law.

To mete out social justice has become a complex and drawn out problem because of the diversity of races, religions and political groups in Sri Lanka with their equally divergent ideologies and aspirations.

Of the Sri Lanka's population of 21,128,772 on July 2008 (est.), 73.8% are Sinhalese, mostly Buddhists; 7.2% Sri Lankan Moors, mostly followers of Islam; Indian Tamils 4.6% and Sri Lankan Tamils 3.9%, majority of whom are followers of Hinduism; and Others 0.5%.

History tells us that all these ethnic groups lived harmoniously up to the occupation of Sri Lanka by the Dutch, Portuguese and British (1505 - 1948). It was during this period that cracks on the fabric of the society began to appear due to their commercial activities based on trade and collection of revenue besides the "divide and rule policy" adopted by the British.

Where racial harmony is concerned, the then leaders of ethnic groups, especially the Tamils, fought for independence with the Sinhalese leaders as a compatible and solid group though they had their differences, but things began to change during the first years after independence (1948). Firstly, the political status of immigrants who worked on up-country tea plantations, and secondly, the Sri Lankan Tamils' struggle for freedom and equal status. The Ceylon Citizen Act of 1948, The Indian and Pakistani Resident's Act No 3 of 1948 and the Ceylon Parliamentary Elections Amendment Act 48 of 1948 disenfranchised this minority group. The gap between the Sinhalese and the Tamils widened.

The Sinhala Maha Sabaha led by SWRD Bandaranaike and the Tamil Congress of GG Ponnambalam joined the United National Party (UNP) formed by DS Senanayaka. Though this coalition fought for independence as a united front, the leaders of the three parties later led their own parties separately in opposition to the government of the UNP. Bandaranaike having later reorganized his party under the name of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party. To add to

more, the Marxist Sama Samaja Party led by NM Perera, Colvin R de Silva and Philip Gunawardena, which grew out of the Youth Leagues in 1935, joined in the fray. In 1949, a faction of the Ceylon Tamil Congress broke away to form the Federal Party under the leadership of SJV Chelvanayagam. A momentous post-independence development, it set the agenda for Tamil exclusiveness, replacing the conciliatory Tamil Congress, as an aggressive political party to fight for the rights of Tamils.

The Sinhala Only Act, 1956, making Sinhala the official language, which forced the majority of Tamils and even most of the senior Sinhala public servants to retire, and the abrogation of the Bandaranaike -



Chelvanayagam Pact, 1957, which provided for Regional Councils, due to intensive pressure from the Sinhala majority, understandably incensed and further alienated the Tamils from the Sinhala community.

President Mahinda Rajapakse has now given an assurance to allow regional autonomy within a unitary state. The use of Sinhala and Tamil as official languages has been given more emphasis by requiring Sinhala public servants to learn Tamil and vice versa. The medium of instruction in schools will also be in Sinhala, Tamil and English and the students given the choice of selecting the medium to follow their courses of study.

There is no doubt that significant challenges loom large with the reconstruction of the North and East now taking pride of place. Development programs have already been executed in the East to a great extent, and it is time to reconstruct the North with the greatest speed possible as these people have undergone untold pain and hardships over the years.

It is said that schools are being built or renovated (the Vakkarai Maha Vidyalayam - the most modern and advanced school in the district - is an outstanding example), police stations and Courts of Law set up, electricity restored, services in hospitals extended to cover both indoor and outdoor treatment, and bridges, ferries and roads rebuilt. Fishing industry has been greatly lifted by removing the restrictions attached to fishing, and agricultural activities by provision of improved facilities and support.



Nevertheless, speedy action is needed to resettle and rehabilitate the displaced persons now living in camps undergoing extreme hardships. It is a relief to learn about the assurance given by the President to do so before the end of this year. It has to be accepted, however, that clearing of land mines and provision of infrastructure (roads, bridges, ferries, electricity, water supply and suitable housing) have been impediments to speedy conclusion of this project caused by the prolonged civil war resulting in an unprecedented disaster of great magnitude.

The government is not only involved in the North and East but also in other poverty-stricken villages of the country in order to stretch the arm of justice all-round. It is heading for a surge in optimism for stronger economic growth. During the last five years, the poverty-stricken Southern Province has cut its poverty in half, from 28% in 2002 to 14% in 2006-7, according to the World Bank.

Gemi Diriya (the strength of the village) is a classic example of poverty reduction in rural communities, improving the livelihoods and quality of life of people. Since its inception in 2004, it has touched the lives of about 900,000 poverty-stricken people in over 1000 villages in the Southern and Sabaragamuwa provinces. It gives priority to youth, women and the most vulnerable groups in its decision-making and taking over responsibility for the projects.

World Bank's project leader Meena Munshi says, "Gemi Diriya is enhancing people's livelihoods and ensuring better quality of life".

Gemi Diriya will be extended soon to cover two more provinces - North Central and Central. By 2016, it is expected to benefit 7 million persons in 5000 villages, according to the World Bank, which supported the first phase of the program with a US \$51.0 million IDA grant and another 75 million US dollars was given in September this year.

The government should rally all its resources and energy to reconstruct the North and East, and raise the socio-economic status of poverty-stricken villages in other parts of the country as well to show that the arm of justice is well and truly touching every corner of the country as far as possible.

The writer is a freelance journalist and author.