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# POVERTY AND PEOPLE'S POWER, SELECTED WRITINGS OF G.V.S. DE SILVA

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The reissuing of the selected writings of G.V.S. de Silva by the Social Scientists' Association will enable a new generation of readers to be acquainted with the writings of one of the country's finest economists and social scientists. This book was first published by the Social Scientists' Association in 1988 under the title, *The Alternatives Socialism or Barbarism*. It was edited by the Late Charles Abeysekera. The present volume contains three additional essays. Given the quality of his writing, it is indeed a pity that he wrote little. Most of his important writings are contained in this volume.

G.V.S. de Silva expressed his ideas with a simplicity that characterized his style of living and demeanour. He subscribed to the philosophy of simple living and high thinking. His simplicity of life was exemplary. He was an economist and statistician who preferred to be considered a social scientist as he approached economic issues in a political economy perspective. His life's work was characterized by an overriding concern for people's welfare, especially the well-being of the rural poor. He was a theoretician who was able to think outside the box, challenge conventional wisdom, apply theory to particular contexts and adapt these to specific conditions. He applied his theories in social experiments and contributed to policy formulation.

I was privileged to have been a student of G.V.S. de Silva. He was one of the best teachers of economics. His clarity of thought and precision of expression is without equal. In teaching economic theory he never confused students with extraneous diversions, nor mixed political ideology with economic principles. His lectures were always systematic and logical expositions. As a teacher he was humble, would never pretend he knew everything and was willing to admit to his students that he was not well-versed in any particular aspect that they may question him on. He was always prepared to explain any particular aspect of his lecture that a student required clarification on or discuss issues after the lecture.

His clarity of thinking, logical development of an argument and simplicity of expression are illustrated in the first chapter of the book, "The Economics of Devaluation". The lucidity and simplicity of his exposition of the devaluation of the rupee in 1951 is a classic analysis of an economic mechanism without the use of economic jargon such as demand and supply elasticity. The analysis is broader than

the conventional economic analysis as his primary concern was the impact of devaluation on the well-being of people. His application of economic theory in the specific trade and economic contexts of the country is not limited to the narrow confines of its impact on the external trade performance and balance of payments (that he does) but extends the exposition to cover its impact on society and concerns of social justice. His ultimate criterion was whether "it is injurious to the economic well-being of the major section of the people of the country." This has indeed been the touchstone and objective of his writings and his life's work.

His 1973 monograph "Some Heretical Thoughts on Development" (chapter 3) was a seminal work that is one of his important contributions to development thinking. Although at the time of its publication the ideas may have been heretical, there has been greater acceptance of these with the recognition that conventional development strategies have been unable to alleviate poverty and inequality and achieve household food security.

The central theme of this work was the advocacy of a reversal in the urban bias to development strategies. His revolutionary perspectives advocated a virtual abandonment of the city that he characterized as a parasitic one incapable of being really productive. His strategy was to subordinate the town to the village for the emancipation of both; the elimination of the urban-rural dichotomy and the overall development of the country. He proposed that all developmental resources be moved to the rural economy. He conceived the problem of development as "leaping out of the morass of endemic stagnation. It is the problem of changing an archaic mode of production, and releasing our productive forces from the shackles that bind them." (76). The rural-based development strategies he advocates in this and other chapters are forcefully expressed.

The detailed analysis of "Bhoomi Sena: A Struggle for People's Power" (Chapter 6) provides an insight into G.V.S.'s conviction that rural development cannot be achieved by democratic governments with vested interests in urban development supported by a bureaucracy similarly biased. The essence of this analysis is that that the tribal adivasis relied on people's power for their development. People's power became a corner stone of his thinking on rural

development. This is clearly evident in the earlier cited work *Some Heretical Thoughts on Development* and more so in his theory of social change that he put into practice. Social change, he believed, could be effected, not through governments, but the countervailing collective actions of the people.

In "Social Change" (chapter 7) G.V.S. re-examines Marxian theory in the light of the experience of communist countries and puts forward his conceptualisation on how social change occurs. In this essay he re-examines the experience of communist countries to evolve a theory of social change. This is perhaps his most theoretical piece of writing.

G.V.S. was however, much more than a theoretician. He was very much a practising economist and social scientist with a social conscience that guided his actions. Not satisfied with being a theoretician, he devoted his time and energy to set up an experiment in the processes of change to confront the social relations of production in the Sri Lankan countryside. He played a leading role in the formation of the Participatory Institute for Development Alternatives (PIDA) in August 1980. PIDA and its "Vision for Social Development" (chapter 8) reflects on the early results of their countervailing power interventions. PIDA's social experiment explored the possibility of the poor organizing themselves in the societal space available to them to fight for their own interests. In this chapter he outlines the manner of using People's Power as a countervailing force for self-development of the rural poor.

PIDA's vision was to bring out the creativity and the potential of people as the means as well as the end of development. "It is essentially an endogenous process which stems from the heart of each society" (204). It is one "that cannot be delivered to the people as a package from outside." (204). This strategy argues that, "Development can acquire its full meaning only if rooted at the local level and in the praxis of each primary community." Development, it contends, is primarily a people's endeavour and must commence in the first instance at the local level where they work and live.

It makes the important point that no development model is applicable universally and that "the richness of development consists in its variety and plurality of patterns deeply ingrained in the culture and tradition of each society." Self-reliance, participation and countervailing power are central components in the development process as conceived by PIDA social activists. The process of development envisaged by PIDA requires that the disadvantaged, oppressed and

poor people "investigate, analyse and understand the socio-economic reality of their environment, in particular the forces, which create poverty and oppression and build up the confidence and capacity through organised efforts to contend with such forces."

This volume contains three papers not included in the earlier volume. These are two articles he wrote for the *Daily News* and one that was published in the *People's Bank Economic Review*. The chapter on New Incentives for the Paddy Farmer is a proposal to improve the terms of trade to paddy farmers in favour of farmers by a new currency that would be more valuable than the rupee. The paper also brings out his intellectual humility when he concludes, "In this brief outline many questions are bound to have been left unanswered (some probably not even thought of). This is only a suggestion and not a blue print."

The final chapter contains the third paper a challenge to the conventional definition of economics as the science of economising scarce resources made popular by Lionel Robbins. He argues that such a perspective is shallow and inappropriate and that the earlier concept of political economy was a more appropriate and holistic approach. This perspective implicitly also reflects G.V.S.'s thinking, not as an economist as such but more broadly as a social scientist, who viewed problems of society not within the narrow confines of a single discipline but as issues that had to be approached from a humanistic perspective.

His foremost contribution to policy was the drafting of the Paddy Lands Act of 1958. This was a revolutionary piece of legislation. It embodied principles that ensured security of tenure to paddy farmers, provided incentives for the adoption of improved technology and methods of cultivation and a framework for the organization of paddy cultivation, through cultivation committees. It was too revolutionary a change in the social and political milieu of the time. It was flawless in concept and detail, yet the success it achieved was partial owing to the limited political will, violent opposition from vested interests, feudal nature of society and limited administrative capacity of the government.

This volume reflects the vision of G.V.S. de Silva as a social scientist who was always guided by his social conscience. Even though there have been vast economic and social changes since these papers were written, their clear exposition and broad vision make it a must read to all those who are interested in developmental issues. ■

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