

Women in the Plantations...

ers have been kept for more than a century. This is likely to widen the workers' opportunities for gaining social and economic mobility, while easing the surplus labour problem on estates. The possession of land and housing, may give a worker-family a sense of security, identity and perhaps independence. It may also break the links between the estate and

the household, which partly account for the subordinate position of women in this sector.

However, be it their right to own a house and land, or their labour-mobility, or the emergence of a new 'open' system of labor relations, all these possibilities will depend to a large extent on the ethnic issue, and the acceptance of these progressive measures by the majority Sinhalese community. ■

Three Days in Paradise

by Vinod Moonesinghe

I first met Singapore in 1986. It appeared to me then, as the dream of Sri Lanka's 1940's nationalists: a modern city built on tropical swamps, a St. Petersburg of the South. I visited the island again in February this year. Six years on, the place didn't seem quite such a utopia.

Singapore, like Hong Kong, is one of the Four Tigers; unlike Korea and Taiwan, the two Megalopolitan Tigers have developed on the basis of free trade, an important consideration in view of the IMF/World Bank-imposed conditions on Sri Lanka. How does one prosper on non-protective free trade? The answer probably lies in viewing Colombo, in isolation, from the hinterland: take the Metropolis out of the rest of the island and you have a Singapore in the making. The population of Greater Colombo (Negombo to Panadura, Bambalapitiya to Oruwela), is about that of Singapore; the area provides Sri Lanka's answer to the South-East Asian city state, with Port, Airport, Industry and Commerce.

Vinod Moonesinghe is a member of the Sri Jayawardanapura Kotte Urban Council and a Vice President of the SLFP Kotte Balamandayala.

All the ingredients are available in Colombo, save one: the political will. One of the major similarities lies in the persons of Lee and Premadasa. Both might be said to have come from the insurgent constituency, in a situation where the insurgencies were crushed. However, there is a crucial difference in that Singapore detached itself from its hinterland, while Colombo has not (except in a social and cultural sense). Indeed, given the conditions imposed on Colombo from outside, one should be surprised at the lack of a Colombo-centred separatist movement: an independent Colombo could continue to exercise economic imperialism on the hinterland, while having none of the responsibilities of feedback to the rural areas. Such, after all, was the fate of Singapore after its break with Malaysia.

My first impression of Singapore, was of awe. Here was Birmingham (Edgbaston) recreated in the tropics. Here was what Colombo should be: a city rising out of the marsh in European splendour. The difference is that Singapore is greener than any European city, greener than the Colombo Municipality. It was also very clean, comparing even with Zurich, that cleanest

of European cities. It did lack some of the chic of Europe, no central plazas preserved over hundreds of years. The Raffles Hotel is a preserved monument, a distinction never granted to the Galle Face Hotel, or even to the Dutch building that stood on the site of the present Hotel Oberoi. Colombo has a far greater preservable archaeology than Singapore but, with the exception of a few buildings (The VOC office in Pettah, the Wolvendahl Church, etc.), makes few attempts to preserve its history. Our historiography always harks back to the 'Golden Age' of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. The state of the Ambalama at Pitakotte junction, or even the Rampart at Etul Kotte, attest to the lack of interest in artifacts of less than seven hundred years ago; the Mission House at Christian College (the Bangalawa of the Bangala Junction) was unceremoniously pulled down in 1978, even though it served as Alma Mater to Don David Hewavitharana (aka Dharmapala).

What struck me most about Singapore was not the Tower Blocks for housing the proletariat (an utter abomination for anyone who has lived in one, →

THREE DAYS ...

Corbusier or no Corbusier), nor the grand shopping complexes, nor even the fantastic roads. It was the niggling little things that pointed to a great deal of forethought. It was the fibreglass seats in the bus shelters, the clearly labelled public toilets, the extensive drain systems with the ubiquitous holes (to provide for soil drainage) in the concrete slabs lining the storm drains. The omnipresent aura was one of caring for the population: a desire to fulfil the basic human necessities of shelter, of nourishment and of relieving the bladder.

Hong Kong is considered by many, in advance of Singapore. But, just imagine trying to relieve a bursting bladder in Hong Kong : one longs for the comfortably sign-posted lavatories of Singapore. I found myself in a terrible predicament awaiting the island ferry hovercraft in Hong Kong and had to retreat to a McDonald's eatery to save myself: there was not a public lavatory in sight.

The disposal of bodily waste is considered of high priority in civilised society. Indeed, I would posit that the degree of civilisation of a given society could be measured, by the access, provided to the public, to lavatories. On this index, Sri Lanka would be rated very low indeed: we hide our lavatories away, public toilets being well nigh extinct.

Perhaps the fact that Singapore is ruled by Chinese has something to do with it (Hong Kong being administered by English civil servants, in their ivory towers, who require no public toilets). The Chinese revere their urine and their faeces. Piss and shit provide the nutrition to the soil that is so necessary after thousands of years of cultivation. Sri Lankans seem to prefer the Urea, the Phosphates and the NPK from abroad (imported anaesthetic being better than local anaesthetic), so our bodily wastes are just that, wastes.

In Singapore, domestic waste ('garbage') goes to a central incinerator which provides a significant proportion of the City's energy needs. In Greater Colombo, the wastes are just burnt or used as landfill.

Another significant aspect of Singapore was the universal use of four national languages, English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil. In Sri Lanka, we have three national languages, spoken by more than 10% of the population proficient in that tongue. The ubiquitous four-language street name boards are even more refreshing than the name boards in Switzerland, lacking the latter's universal use of the Roman script.

Go out to Jurang (claimed from the marshlands) and you see a dedication to popular education, unheard of in the rest of Asia. You see Jurang Bird Park and the Science Centre (paltry by European standards, but gigantic by South Asia's). The Colombo Museum and Zoo, are nothing in comparison.

The buzz-word in Singapore was 'people'. A capitalist state, a police state, a corporate state, looking after its people. The Vision is irresistible.

An interesting article was published in the *Daily News* of March 26. This was based on an interview with Dr. Toh Chin Chye, formerly Singapore's deputy premier. According to him, the ruling party strove to assure all citizens of a job and a home:

"We realised that a 'socialist' line would be more appealing to achieving this objective. The state becomes 'provider', assuring everyone of an education and giving everyone the opportunity to be upwardly mobile."

This ideology was the key to Singapore's development (as opposed to economic growth). It should be noted that the role of the state outlined by Dr. Toh, is not at all the prescription of the World Bank, but more akin to the bi-

partisan policy of Sri Lankan Governments in 1956-77.

The overwhelming impression I received of Singapore in 1986 was of a state that cared for its people; this impression was not echoed by Hong Kong or Taiwan, certainly not by Sri Lanka.

So, why was I disappointed in 1992? Perhaps, it was a difference of viewpoint: in 1986, I stayed in the posh Holland Village area, but in 1992 in the less plush Al Junied district. Perhaps, but

The differences were not in the macro projects. The Mass Rapid Transit (MRT), still a building in 1986, is a complete system rivalling the Zurich F-bahn. The sea-land reclamation projects I had seen from the air six years ago, were now flourishing communities. The streets were just as wide and impressive. What was the difference?

My first impression in 1992 was of Television. The quality of TV was obviously down. The good (mainly British) TV programmes I had seen in 1986 were missing. Instead, there were those horrible American game shows ('You have just won US \$ 50,000'). The Chinese - language soaps were dreadful: young people in offices falling in love with one another, over and over again (apparently an official propaganda campaign, of which more later). The young people were all Chinese.

The lesson of my second visit to Singapore, was of the ethnic tensions existing there. The ethnic discrimination is not as obvious as in Sri Lanka (our TV commercials are as lacking in subtlety as our ethnic discrimination: bang the viewer on the head with a huge hammer), but it is there.

In the MRT stations, I saw wall posters advertising the virtues of having children. The 'average family' depicted →

THREE DAYS ...

was Chinese, with three children. The background is that fewer and fewer professional women are marrying, those marrying having fewer children. It is not widely known that Singapore has an official Eugenic policy: the state wants (Chinese) professional level people to get married and have large numbers of children, to increase the average IQ of the population. Hence the 'office' soaps.

Consider, why is it necessary to have Mandarin as an official language? The majority of the Chinese speak Cantonese (the Guangzhon dialect). I first came across the phenomenon of Mandarinisation while a student in England. A fellow student, a Singaporean Chinese, informed me that she had been told by the Singapore authorities that she was pronouncing her name wrong (the Chinese ideographs are pronounced differently in Cantonese and Mandarin), and she was ordered to spell it differently in Roman script (imagine someone called *Pratapasinha* being forced to spell his name *Pratapasiha* in Roman script).

Modernization aimed at converting the Chinese population to their 'traditional' (Confucian) values: discipline, veneration for ancestors, and acceptance of laid down moral values.

The most dramatic let-down was, in the atmosphere of decline. The pavements had many open manholes, covered with plywood sheets. Many of the excellent storm water drains were blocked with refuse. In fact, the atmosphere was similar to that I experienced in England in the mid-70's, of a country past its prime.

I found the key to the new situation in Government propaganda: these trumpeted new prestige building projects which were to commence. Earlier, the Singaporeans just got on with it. How similar to Sri Lanka, this 'will be' propaganda!

These projects symbolised a distancing from the masses on the part of the state: they were not for common use, but for attracting foreign capital. So why announce such projects on the propaganda machine? Is it because Singapore finds it difficult to attract

capital?

According to Dr. Toh:

"... once you open up the market forces via socialism (or with a pale pink version of it), the concept of the state as sole provider, no longer works; time now to let the free-market ideology of supply and demand take over - the success story of Singapore."

The role of the state in bringing about the rapid development of Singapore has been very little talked about. It now appears that there has been a change in that role, as described by Dr. Toh above.

The Singapore 'miracle' was based on a compromise between the needs of the masses and the needs of capital, with the state as arbiter. It seems that this compromise is now crumbling in favour of capital, so that the less beautiful aspects of the Singaporean state emerge much more openly, with the fetters off.

Night Watch

Awake for hours and staring at the ceiling
Through the unsettled stillness of the night
He grows possessed of the obsessive feeling
That dawn has come and gone and brought no light.

Vikram Seth