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People and Places

The Sophisticates of South Asia A Stroll through Colombo

by S. Bari

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COLOMBO is a surprise. People look so much like Bengalis that you are lulled into a false sense of security. Then they open their mouths and what comes out is definitely not Bengali. It sounds more like pebbles being shaken around in an earthen pot.

Words begin to surface, vaguely familiar. These are the Sanskrit forebears of Bengali words, transformed by centuries on this island into Sinhala. Many of the people of Sri Lanka came from Bengal, and were also transformed by the green island and an aggressive educational policy into a charmingly sophisticated populace.

Far from the agonizing self-questioning of the Northeast, Colombo basks in a busy haze of good manners. From trishaw-driver to government minister, everyone is unfailingly polite. The trishaw driver will unblushingly ask for five times the normal fare the minute he perceives you are easy bait, but he will dupe you with all the polish and elegance of a finishing school graduate, in English worthy of the Queen. The minister will tell you, "Our relations with India are very good," with such a suave smile and such a flourish of courtly manners that you will believe him.

Until, of course, the man in the street takes you for a local and begins babbling to you in Tamil or Sinhala. "I'm not Sri Lankan," the traveller explains. The eyes of the other narrow slightly, imperceptibly almost. That polite smile straightens out over so slightly. "You are Indian?" The question is nearly always accompanied by a suspicious tilt. This visitor hastily replies, "No, I'm from Bangladesh." Phew. That was close.

During a rushed chat in the corridors of the imposing Bandaranaike Memorial Conference Hall, Bradman Weerakoon explains the root of the anti-Indian sentiment. As presidential advisor on foreign relations, he is at home on this topic. "When the peacekeeping forces were here, there was naturally a kind of fear. People felt the sovereignty of the country was at stake," he says. "And that's not all, according to Mohan Samarasinghe, a journalist at the city's leading English-language daily, 'We have this big neighbouring country peering over our shoulders all the time,' he observes. 'Of course it leads to resentment. Doesn't it happen in Bangladesh?' You bet.

Colombo is quite aggressive in its attitude, though. It plans

to benefit in a big way from the possible preferential trade agreement in the region. Weerakoon waxes enthusiastic over this prospect: "Intra-regional trade could be a boost to all our economies, there is not enough being done right now in this field." India, in this context, is a huge market of hungry middle-class consumers — and Sri Lankans are eager to sell.

With its tea packaging, Sri Lanka could definitely go a long way. Shops are tinkling with exquisite porcelain: little elephants and turtles with tea in their china bellies, finely crafted teapots and inviting sugarpots, embossed bags bursting with aroma. Too bad world tea prices are down.

What Lankans are banking on (literally, banks are making funding easier to obtain) is the garments industry. Colombo is actively seducing industrialists, offering tax incentives and other goodies to lure them into the garment trade. One third of the country's foreign exchange earnings last year came from the textile and garments sectors.

Bangladesh's so far unrivalled position is largely thanks to cheap labour. Our wages may be lower, but as a businessman noted at a press conference on the topic, "Sri Lanka has a better-educated work force to offer."

A consistent educational programme has always been Sri Lanka's trademark. With a literacy rate now near 90 per cent, it ranks at the top of the South Asian region, along with the Maldives. When we took a stroll along the beach down Galle Road, a little boy trailed

along beside us. He was selling paan, and he spoke impeccable English. He was literate in Sinhala and Tamil. He is part of Sri Lanka's educational success story. So why is he selling paan at the age of twelve?

"We have so many internally displaced, and the economy is not doing as well as it used to," regrets Dr. Neelam Theerachelvum, a researcher at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies. "The war may be far off in the Northeast, but it is cutting into our budget. It's as if we have been stalled along the way to progress."

A close look at Colombo seems to reflect that statement. Though there is a lot of hustle and bustle with the Expo 92 fair coming up, essentially Colombo is waiting for the Tamil secessionist movement to die down. "Nothing much is happening on a large scale." This insight is shared by an aspiring travel agent who is huddled over a beer in a run-down beachside restaurant. "No one has any money, and the young people all prefer to leave for America or Australia. I would if I could afford it," he mourns into the frothy mug.

No wonder no one has any money. The government certainly doesn't. In a country where close to ten per cent of the central government's expenditure was on education, this figure has now fallen to six per cent, as defence costs skyrocket.

Colombo is pretty, and well-kept, and refreshingly uncrowded: it is also crawling



Monks chatting in a Colombo temple compound.

with security. Here a tank, there a soldier, everywhere an unfronted danger. Along major thoroughfares, police roadblocks are a common sight. They rarely stop anyone; their presence is assumed to be enough. And they are much more efficient as speedbreakers than any number of bumps.

As an unexpected but unsurprising dividend of all this security, crime has dropped in Colombo. There are the usual pickpocketings and robberies, but violent crime is something out of the ordinary. Women are relaxed in this city, even after dark.

Most Sri Lankans attribute this also to a general attitude towards women. Sexual harassment is unusual; machoism is not very 'in'. Women in public do not arouse the kind of eye-popping curiosity that they still suffer in Bangladesh. People wear jewellery, and lots of it, quite casually. Women wearing gold wait at bus-stops at ten p.m. as unconcernedly as if it were midday. Remarkably one member of the group from Bangladesh. "That's what I call a civilized country."

Respect for women is related to tolerance in general. Along the airport road, a run-

ning show on multiculturalism greets arrivals. The road winds through scattered hamlets and indifferent forest. Under one tree sits a pink-faced Madonna with a neon halo around her head. The next tree shelters a gleaming Buddha hiding demurely behind lace curtains that someone has carefully drawn, presumably because the Lord needs His sleep just like the rest of us. Check-by-jowl with this shrine is a garishly painted mosque, its compound walls decorated with camels. It was a lesson in secularism.

Most of the people we chatted with, from government officials hunted down during intervals in the conference to kebab vendors on the beachfront only too happy to proffer a political opinion, were against partition. The very idea seems an impossibility: Ghias the Tamil Muslim who sells dried fish was the most succinct: "Why should we separate? Of course, this is a prejudiced poll since we didn't come across any Tigers.

President Ranasinghe Premadasa has aggressive rural development policies that are not always popular. "He has no class," sniffs one matron of society. But that is mild compared to allegations of rigging and corruption.

One hot morning, we found ourselves at the heavily guarded office of a government-line daily. The journalists had story upon story of official corruption. "This has never happened before in Sri Lanka," muttered one unhappy writer. "He is poisoning the system."

But he does not have a pleasant task. A village-to-city trek has already begun. Street-dwellers are taking up residence on the once sparkling avenues of Colombo. In order to stop this, Premadasa is concentrating on keeping people in the villages and bringing employment to them. The 200 projected garments factories are nearly all in the countryside.

Colombo's one million people are none too eager to swell their ranks. The city's chief charm, especially in comparison to so many Asian capitals, is its unhurried and sparsely populated streets. White colonnaded buildings remind one of what Calcutta was once like. If Bangladeshis are the warm rustics of the region, Colombo is home to the sophisticates of South Asia.

Of course, the best thing about Colombo is the exchange rate. There are so few places where the currency is less than the Bangladeshi Taka! After trips where your thousands of Taka become something like 5.3 dollars, it was dangerously exciting to be in a country where your buying power actually expands.

So we were able to shop to our heart's content and return home with seven kilos of fruit. Your best bet is passionfruit tea. Something tells me they don't make any in Sylhet.

Global Village Guru Sees Space Odyssey to Mars

Harold Pieris writes from Colombo

Mars is the next frontier, what the Wild West, what America was 500 years ago. Mars is where the action is going to be in the next thousand years.

THE legendary science-fiction writer and space prophet, Arthur C. Clarke, who lives in Colombo, Sri Lanka, believes Mars is the next frontier in mankind's Space Odyssey.

"Mars is the next frontier. What the Wild West was, what America was 500 years ago, Mars is where the action is going to be in the next thousand years," the author of "2001: A Space Odyssey" tells *Depthnews* in an exclusive interview.

Mr Clarke is now "gardening" on Mars with his computer, a Commodore Amiga 3000 which has in it stored a programme developed in California by Virtual Reality Laboratories. He is "farming" and "colonising" inside Mt Olympus, the largest known computerized projections of Mt Olympus, at about 90,000 feet three times the height of Mt Everest.

The computer is able to display actual maps of Mars taken by NASA's Viking probe. Mr Clarke orders the machine to photographically transform, piece by piece, the martian landscape in to forests, oceans, farms and condominiums.

He acknowledges that we are not going to have space stations like the "Orbiter Hill-ton" seen in the movie "2001: A Space Odyssey," even less a moon base in 2001.

Mr Clarke says at the moment there is a debate. The moon is closer and that we have to go back there. But he doubts whether it will be ever on a large scale. The moon probably does not have any water, he says.

"But Mars — there's no doubt about it, because Mars is a relatively benign environment. It has everything you need."

Mr Clarke's current work will result in a book (his 77th) entitled "The Snows of Mt Olympus: A Garden on Mars." This summer he launched his 76th book "How the World Was One: Beyond the Global Village" which is an History of Telecommunications.

It was Mr Clarke who first conceived in an article he wrote in the October 1945 issue of the *Wireless World* magazine how a fixed satellite 14,000 miles above Earth could instantly connect every

point on the globe. The book sums up the whole history of telecommunications, ending up with Cable News Network (CNN) live in television. In a chapter of this book on telecommunications, Mr Clarke says that today's makers of communication satellites are now busily unbuilding the Tower of Babel 23,000 miles above the equator.

He adds: "To quote from Genesis 11: And the Lord said, Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them."

"On that first occasion, those words were a warning of disaster. Today, they should be a message of hope, a description of the future that lies within our grasp," says Mr Clarke, optimistically.

Mr Clarke, who lives in Colombo, has always seen the immense potential of space technology in the field of education. The Chancellor of Sri Lanka's University of Moratuwa ("our local mini-Massachusetts Institute of Technology" as he calls it) has spoken of the "electronic tutor."

He says he welcomes distance education, even though it's been rightly said that the best classroom consists of along with the pupil at one end and the teacher at the other. "Unfortunately there's now a great shortage of teachers — not to mention logs," he notes.

Distance education, he says, is not new. It started in the Australian outback about 50 years ago, when children whose nearest neighbour might be a hundred miles away, were linked to their teachers by radio. The system is still operating — now updated with satellites and computers.

He talks of TV's "Sunrise Semesters," "The University of the Air" and the "pocket tutor" which will give the student total flexibility and complete freedom of choice in space and in time. And he sees myriads of "invisible colleges" operating through the global communications networks. But he still believes campuses will exist where hundreds or thousands of students and instructors will meet in person.

Though he sees the establishment of more and more global classes at the advanced and graduate level through a video confrontation system involving professors, computers, and students scattered around the world, Mr Clarke says electronics can never completely convey all the nuances of personal interactions. "Nor should it attempt to do so," he says, "nothing that one cannot teach chemistry, physics, engineering without laboratories."

He says the assertion that "any teacher who can be replaced by a machine, should be" is very unkind. The same verdict applies to any university, "however ivy-covered its walls are," he adds.

Mr Clarke is not in favour of setting up an international agency like the United Nations to assure that developing nations are not left behind in reaping the benefits of space exploration. He is emphatic it is not necessary at the moment.

"I am not in favour of setting up more organisations. There are already several international organisations, and within the UN system, UNESCO (UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) should be doing this function."

"Let's try to work the institutions we have and only create new ones if it is absolutely necessary," he says.

Mr Arthur Clarke says 1991 was a difficult year for him involving several medical emergencies and the race to finish his longest book, "How the World Was One: Beyond the Global Village."

But he has recovered and in March, did three open-sea scuba dives, the last down at 100 feet around a beautiful wreck seven miles out of Colombo.

He hopes to see 2001 "even on a wheelchair." Mr Clarke celebrating his 75th birthday at his hometown, Menehead, Somerset, England, in July, joked, "In no way will I be in UK on December 16, my exact birthdate."

Elaborate preparations were made to celebrate his birthday this year which incidentally coincided with the International Space Year 1992. — *Depthnews Asia*



Vendor in a Colombo street—also a clean sight.



President Ranasinghe Premadasa and Mr. Kumar Devapura, Chairman of Tri-Star Garments inspect one of the garment factories opened under the programme to set up 200 garment factories in the outstations.

The Indian who Made it First to the House of Commons

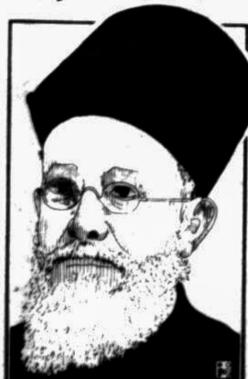
David Spark writes from London

ASIANS in Britain are celebrating the centenary of the election of a nearly-forgotten MP, Dadabhai Naoroji.

In the general election of July 1892 Naoroji became Britain's first Asian MP, with a majority of five votes after a recount. He was elected as a Liberal for Finsbury Central in London and held the seat until the 1895 election.

Naoroji saw himself as representing not just the Finsbury electors but 250 million Indians then under what he regarded as expensive British rule. He researched the facts of this expense and, in his book *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India*, explained what he called the drain theory.

A century ago, in July 1892, Bombay-born businessman Dadabhai Naoroji was elected to the British parliament as Liberal member for Finsbury Central in London. A great political and social reformer, he helped form the Indian National Congress and campaigned for Home Rule in India. Gemini News Service profiles a "Grand Old Man" who became the first Asian MP in the House of Commons.



DADABHAI NAOROJI Gladstone said: 'I know Mr Naoroji very well and I know Lord Salisbury by sight, and am bound to say that, of the two, Lord Salisbury is the blacker.'

tion of railways. And they left Indians poor. Naoroji applauded, however, the British interest in

Elphinstone College, Bombay, and was the first Indian to be appointed a university professor. He was also the first to be a professor in Britain, at University College, London.

He came to Britain in 1855 as a businessman with the first Indian firm in Britain, but resigned because he did not want to be involved in opium trade.

Later he went into business on his own account in Liverpool. However, his main interest was reform, especially in India. In 1885 he helped found the Indian National Congress, which grew to become the biggest anti-colonial movement in the world.

The following year, a fortnight before a general election, he was selected as Liberal candidate for Holborn in London, not a seat he could hope to win.

In 1887, he was selected for the more winnable Finsbury Central but had to fight hard for the right to stand. Two Liberals defeated in the elec-

tion vote disputed the candidacy, but both backed him in the 1892 election campaign. The Maharaja of Baroda lent 20 carriages to help get voters to the polls, and Naoroji narrowly defeated his Conservative opponent.

Meanwhile, he had become nationally known through a remark by the prime minister, Lord Salisbury, disparaging him as a "black man". Liberal statesman William Gladstone retorted: "I know Mr Naoroji very well and I know Lord Salisbury by sight, and I am bound to say that, of the two, Lord Salisbury is the blacker."

The Leeds Mercury said on his election: "The most interesting victory... was that which made Mr Naoroji famous because of Lord Salisbury's cruel and vulgar remarks. The news of his success was received with great enthusiasm."

The Bristol Times commented: "It is certainly an odd choice for an English constituency to make. It Mr Naoroji supposed to represent our Eastern Empire of Finsbury? Is he the first link of a chain of home rule for India?"

Naoroji told the House of Commons in his maiden speech: "I stand here in the

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