

# The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka

## Early Years

The *Sarvodaya Shramadana* Movement in Sri Lanka was started by A.T.Ariyaratne in 1958. Ariyaratne at that time was a young teacher teaching science in a prestigious school in Colombo. The early beginnings of this vast movement were holiday work camps in villages which Ariyaratne organised with the help of his students. In the very first project that Ariyaratne organised he selected a remote, outcaste destitute village. The participating students were asked to live with the poor villagers in their huts, share their meals and share their work. The students helped the villagers dig roads, plant trees, dig wells and helped them with other activities. They learnt first hand the problems and concerns of the poor villagers, their hopes and fears, and the constraints they faced. The students learnt the meaning of ‘*shramadana*’, the giving of one’s time and labour as a gift. ‘Dana’ is difficult to translate for it is more than ‘giving’. In the process of giving ‘*dana*’ the giver also achieves self-respect and self-esteem, and also a sense of peace.

‘*Shramadana*’ is part of the culture and tradition of Buddhism, and in Sri Lanka Buddhism is the dominant religion of the people. The ‘*shramadana*’ idea caught on with the young students who came from Buddhist families and a Buddhist background. Within a few years the ‘*shramadana*’ idea of working in poor villages spread to hundreds of schools wherein thousands of school children participated in week-end village camps to share and donate their labour for development activities that the villagers identified.

The message of ‘*shramadana*’ is not new to Buddhist people. They have heard of ‘*dana*’ in various Buddhist forums and activities since the time of Buddha 2500 years ago. Ariyaratne used the concept and language of ‘*dana*’ to reach the hearts of the Buddhist people, and to ignite their interest in helping the poor villages.

In the early years of his pioneering work, Ariyaratne visited India to learn about *Gandhian* philosophy and work. He was much influenced by Vinoba Bhave and his *Sarvodaya Bhoodan* movement – *sarvodaya* meaning ‘the welfare of all’, and ‘*bhoodan*’ meaning the ‘gift of land’. Vinoba Bhave was walking from village to village, holding meetings and persuading the richer farmers to donate a part of their land as gift to the landless and the poor. After his India visit, Ariyaratne renamed his movement and called it the *Sarvodaya Shramadana* Movement. He successfully combined tradition, culture, religion, and spirituality for the development of rural communities with special emphasis on the poorest of the poor.

## *Shramadana* camps

The word ‘*shramadana*’ has had a magical effect on the largely Buddhist people of Sri Lanka especially in rural communities. In 1999-2000, 3,000 volunteers participated in development projects through the *shramadana* camps. Through *shramadana* there has been the building and repair of houses, digging of wells, construction of latrines, cleaning of irrigation canals, cleaning of temples and sacred sites, planting of trees, growing of food crops, weeding and harvesting of paddy, etc.

The *shramadana* camps provide opportunities for true leadership to emerge in rural communities. These emerging leaders truly represent the aspirations of the people.

The *shramadana* camps enforce a strict code of self-discipline, a time table which provides for 6 to 8 hours of hard physical labour, 3 to 4 hours of interaction with others

through discussion, dialogue, song and dance. Through these interactions an integrated program of education, health, economic activities and local government emerges. The top-down approach is reversed. The village community does its own thinking, planning and putting it into action.

To the people of Sri Lanka '*ashramadana*' has a profound meaning and significance as a positive force for the liberation of individuals and society. It also means removing social and economic injustice, and liberating human beings so that they could participate constructively in the activities and development of the community as a whole.

Agnieska Komoch, a recent visitor from Europe to a *shramadana* camp in the village of Samagipura, gives this account of her visit to Samagipura, a new village in northern Sri Lanka, made up of Singhalese, Tamils and some Muslims whose former villages had been engulfed in land slides: "The purpose of the three-day shramadanaa camp was to introduce the villagers to the concept of pooling resources and working together for the common good; to improve the road leading to the central part of the vilage; and to start on building a multipurpose centre for a pre-school, library and the community building..... Our work consisted of widening the road by at least a meter, digging a water ditch and filling the holes with the surplus dirt. As Vinya Ariaratne (A.T. Ariyaratne's son) explained to us later, often the government gets "mobilised" and improves the road after such village action. It was an amazing experience performing backbreaking work alongside small children and grandmas..... The general feeling was that everybody gave what he or she could and we appreciated each other's work. Our sweat was the same and the work we did was the same.<sup>1</sup>

Buddhist values of loving kindness (*metta*), compassionate action (*karuna*), unselfish joy (*muditha*), and equanimity (*upekha*) are the inner core values of the *Sarvodaya Shramadana* movement. It is these traditional Buddhist values which inspire, motivate and weld the community together.

### **Village Level Organisation**

The village work starts with a preliminary survey of the village. After the survey and some preliminary discussions, the following village level organisations are formed for village awakening and development work:

1. Children's groups – below age 14 years
2. Mothers group
3. Youth group
4. Farmer's group
5. Others - including teachers, government officials, artists, crafts people etc.

These 5 groups meet on different days of the week, and all the groups meet together once a week.

*Shramadana* (see next section)

Social empowerment takes pride of place among the programmes within the Sarvodaya Village Development Process. A great effort has been made to change the conceptual and psychological aspects of society addressing the areas of poverty, sustainable life styles, war and violence. This is done through community capacity building, early childhood development programmes, disaster management, development education, bio diversity and environment conservation and special projects according to the needs of villagers. The main vehicle for this work is the network of Shramadana Societies in almost all the districts of Sri Lanka, including the conflict areas of the North and East.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://sarvodaya.org/Library/dana/DanaKellog/Workcamp.htm>

By the beginning of 2000, the *Sarvodaya Shramadana* Movement was working in 11,400 villages. To help these villages, over a period of time, national level specialised institutions have been created such as the Early Childhood Development Institute, Rural Technical Services, Legal Services, *Sarvodaya* Enterprise Development Services, etc. Several thousand villages have established their own *Sarvodaya* Village Development Banks staffed largely by local trained women.

### **Role of Buddhist Monks in the *Sarvodaya* Movement**

The '*bhikkus*', the Buddhist monks, play a key role in the success of the *Sarvodaya* movement. When a new village is to be introduced to *Sarvodaya Shramadana* work more often than not it is the '*bhikku*' who approaches the villagers, and organises the public meeting to discuss their problems. These meetings are generally organised in the premises of the Temple, and the Temple courtyard is used for community cooking and eating.

The *bhikkus* play an important role in launching *Sarvodaya* activities and in creating the right atmosphere. They use religious stories and religious terms familiar to the community to convey Buddha's ideas of self-reliance, of '*dana*', of compassion, and of '*maitreyi*' – all important in preparing the minds of the people. It is in the minds of the people that self-reliance, courage, and fearlessness must come together before communities and nations can change their behavior and relationships.

The *bhikkus* have their own *Sarvodaya Bhikku* Association. They they are held in special respect and their access to government officials and other important persons makes it easier for the proposed activities to be undertaken by the *Sarvodaya* movement in villages. Ariyaratne however cautioned the monks against becoming too dependent on powerful figures "Remember the politicians can get other folks transferred, but they can't transfer you, the worst they can do is put you in jail, but jail is made for people – you just continue your work there". And he reminds the *bhikkus* that the real power is with the people "Don't feel you must curry favor with the MP. Just go to the people and work with them. That's where the real power is".

The development activities of the '*bhikkus*' has had a profound effect not only on the villagers, but on the *Sangha* itself. The understanding of *Dharma* has widened in helping and involving village communities for village development, and the process has mutually benefitted the *Sangha* as well as the village communities.

### ***Sarvodaya's* Concept of Poverty and Development**

In a talk that Ariyaratne gave at a meeting to discuss the UNDP Human Development Report (1997) he explained his concept of poverty and *Sarvodaya's* methods of dealing with, and eradicating poverty. I quote Ariyaratne at length because he spells out clearly the differences between the westernised international agencies' approach to poverty and its eradication, and the spiritual approach of Buddhists, Gandhians and other such groups.

In the first place the concept of "poverty" as used by these macro organisations and national leaders and politicians is a very limited way of looking at the lives of people. In our concept of a good life, even those in the so-called developed world are "poor" in many respects. We do not see the problem as one where one set of people who are "rich" are trying to do something for others who are "poor".

“We see the problem as one of the “development of All”. The present criteria used to distinguish between the “poor” and the “not poor” are based either on income levels or food consumption (minimum calorie intake). With the conversion of practically everything under the sun to money terms there is no doubt that income is a significant indicator of the quality of life a person may lead. Likewise food is an essential requisite. But life is not simply what money can buy, and food while essential, is not all that there is to life. Our national and international planners when they use these criteria and submit plans to eradicate poverty as they conceive it are only planning for a dismal and limited future for the vast majority of people on Earth. They are essentially saying “You fellows are very badly off. You have no drive. You make no effort to improve yourselves. You are waiting for handouts. You have not acquired any skills. You cannot all live like us. But we will make your life a little bit better.” There is also a lot which is left unsaid. e.g. “We are now very worried whether we can continue to live as we do without making your life a little bit better.”

“We at *Sarvodaya* do not believe in one kind of life for the rich and another kind of life for the poor. We believe in a world where there is neither “poverty” nor “affluence”. The problems of definition arise largely for those who are far removed from where the real action is. To our workers at the village level there is no difficulty of recognizing the “poor” and the “affluent”. We find both in the communities in which we work. Our development activities include both. We believe that the “poor” are rich in some respects and the “affluent” are poor in some other respects. That is why our development programmes include both. We do not believe that “poverty” can be eradicated in isolation.”

“This is an important consideration and I would like to expand on it. In the first place “food” is not all there is to life. In our work with the people in the villages they have identified what their basic needs were. It certainly includes food, housing, health, water, clothing, energy and communication facilities. But more than four decades ago, we realised that their number one priority was the “environment”. If at all people live close to and with the environment they are the so-called “poor”. Contrary to popular belief they like to take care of it. Among the other basic needs they identified were education and spiritual and cultural needs. We believe very firmly that resources should be utilised to meet these expressed basic needs of people. It is not sufficient to simply meet their food requirement or their housing requirements or their health requirements, etc. in isolation. Most poverty eradication programmes of the state and international organisations are characterised by their narrow sectoral approach. Far from co-ordination and integration of such efforts, it is not unknown for them to work at cross purposes and indeed even “fight with each other”. The “poor” by whatever definition need a total package.”

“The basis of such a total package is not charity for the poor. An essential foundation for such a package is enormous respect for the poor. They may be illiterate. They may dress poorly. But it is a gross mistake to think that they are not educated. They may not be educated in the narrow conventional sense. But they have a wisdom acquired through living in their environment. They have a good idea of what they want. They have their own well articulated priorities which of course may not match those of national planners. We believe that the poor should decide what should be done to improve their quality of life. Intervention programmes should support such efforts. Intervention programmes should not impose on the poor what some remote group has in its wisdom decided what is best for them.”

In describing the *Sarvodaya* approach, Ariyaratne said “We concentrate first on what they may do by themselves to improve their lot. They may need more labour to accomplish a chosen task such as improving road access in which case we speak to adjoining communities who may send volunteers to help them. They may lack some equipment in which case we supply them or borrow from somewhere. They may lack skills in which case we train them. In each case we support what they have decided upon.”

“Others may have doubts as to whether appropriate decisions will be taken. It is here that cultural, moral and spiritual considerations apply. While many inroads have been made unto the psyche of our people we find that they (villagers) are still conscious of their traditional values. It has to be awakened and supported. That is what we in Sarvodaya are dedicated to do”

“To deal with poverty it is not only important to empower the poor, but simultaneously to ‘de-empower’ the affluent. Ariyaratne emphasises ‘it is essential that the affluent be educated to accept the need for a life style which is capable of being sustained. Most scholars agree that the present ‘globalisation’ will make the poor even poorer.”

“We look at development as an Awakening process for ALL – *Sarvodaya*. This awakening has to begin with oneself with every individual, then extend to the family, the country, the nation and the world. The awakening must be an integrated whole where spiritual, moral, cultural, social, political and economic aspects of life are included.”

And at the end of his talk, he told his UNDP audience “Please admit your failure to eradicate poverty. At least at this late hour give up your will to control the poor. Give them freedom and space to awaken their potential. They will show you the true path to sustainability, contentment and happiness”.

Sarvodaya Shramadana has a different vision of development. It emphasises not only what should be happening out there but also what is happening within.

Joana Macy who worked with the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement explains the Movement’s different approach to development – “Your village may boast of having a post office, telephone, electricity, but that is not what constitutes development. Development is in your head and in your mind”.

### **The Buddha and his Dhamma**

In the Buddhist perspective as also in several other spiritual movements ‘development’ is an ‘awakening’ process. The awakening is in all aspects, spiritual and ethical as well as social and economic. The Buddha’s discourses consists of advice as to how this awakening is to be achieved.

The Buddha in his very first sermon asked his ‘*parivrajakas*’ ‘why do men not mind enslaving and dominating others? Why do men not mind making the lives of others unhappy? Is it not because men are not righteous in their conduct towards one another?’

And the ‘*parivrajakas*’ answered in the affirmative.

Continuing the Buddha asked “Is not ‘*dana*’ necessary to remove the suffering of the needy and the poor and to promote the general good? Is not ‘*karuna*’ (loving kindness) necessary to be drawn to the relief of poverty and suffering wherever it exists. Is not ‘*uppeka*’ (detachment) necessary for sustained endeavor even though there is no personal gain. Is not love for man necessary?”

And he continued and said “I go even further and say love is not enough. What is required is ‘*maitri*’. It is wider than love. It means fellowship not merely with human beings but with all living beings. Is not such ‘*maitri*’ necessary?”

More than 2500 years ago Buddha told his ‘*parivrajakas*’ “All that we are is the result of what we have thought. If a man speaks or acts with a pure thought happiness follows him like a shadow that never leaves him” . He also added “Let a man overcome

anger by love; let him overcome evil by good; let him overcome the greedy by liberality, the liar by truth”.

“Whatever happiness there is in this world arises from the desire for happiness for others; whatever suffering there is in this world arises from the desire for happiness for oneself. What need is there to say more? Just see the difference between the world-lings who work for the benefit of themselves and the *Buddhas* who work for the benefit of others” - *Shantideva*

The Buddha taught that a religion which does not preach equality is not worth having and that religion must not tolerate oppression.

## **Religion and Development**

The *Sarvodaya Shramadana* Movement shows how ‘religion’ and spirituality can serve as a basic resource in development. The focus of the *Shramadana* movement is to make human life more meaningful for the giver and the receiver, and although the Movement involves the development of economic activities, its core consists in the unfolding of one’s capacity of giving and sharing. It is in the awakening of the self, in the transformation of the person that its strength lies. As Ariyaratne points out ‘the chief objective of *Sarvodaya* is personality awakening with the effort of the individual as well as with help from others.’”

Development in the *Sarvodaya Shramadana* Movement has been the outcome of spiritual awakening and of realising one’s inner resources and strength. It is not enough to proclaim *Sarvodaya*’s philosophy of ‘*dana*’ and ‘awakening’, it has got to be lived as well.

While ‘development workers’ of international agencies view religion and spiritual awakening as irrelevant or even a hindrance to the development process, the experience of the *Sarvodaya Shramadana* Movement clearly shows how significant spiritual awakening is to development, to dealing and overcoming one’s sense of fear and powerlessness, and thereby getting the strength in solving one’s problems of poverty and achieving economic growth.

Development in western industrialised societies has been measured in terms of GNP, growth rates, per capita income etc. whereas in *Sarvodaya* (and other spiritual organisations) development is primarily concerned with one’s ‘awakening’ and inner growth, which leads to other social and economic changes and achievements as well.

The *Sarvodaya* Movement has used Buddhist concepts and has updated them in terms of village needs and concerns. For instance, *dana* which over the centuries became identified with the giving of alms to the *Sangha* or the Order of Monks was further interpreted to include giving of one’s time and skills and energy for the good of the community. Giving in any form is encouraged – the rich farmer is encouraged to donate his land for road building or other community purpose, a skilled worker is encouraged to donate his skills, and a poor person whatever he or she can spare. As one of the *Sarvodaya* workers explained “of course her family is poor and of course we do not really need her little bit of rice or betel leaf. But in giving it, she has a new idea of herself”.

*Karuna*, that is compassion, is another important Buddhist concept that *Sarvodaya* has used. The greatest obstacles to compassion are anger and hatred. If we truly want to learn compassion, we should consider our enemies to be our best teachers said the Dalai Lama. For a person who cherishes compassion and love, the practice of tolerance is essential.

Buddhist *dharma* emphasises four principles of social behaviour which *Sarvodaya* has used as pathways to community awakening. In addition to *dana* wherein people become

alive to their capacity of giving and receiving from each other, other principles include *priyavachan*, that is pleasant speech. *Sarvodaya* has emphasised the importance of language that is used to promote respect and a sense of equality.

Another principle is *samanatmatha*, that is social equality. Ariyaratne started his movement in a poor outcaste village reminding his workers and villagers that discrimination is a moral outrage, and it was rejected by Buddha himself. The fourth important principle of social behaviour mentioned is *arthacharya* or constructive work. The *Shramadana* camps of the *Sarvodaya* movement share labour and are awakened to their potential and capacity of self-reliance.

Other key words in Buddhism used by the *Sarvodaya* movement are '*Muditha*' that is joy in the joy of others. '*Metta*' as loving kindness. '*Upekha*' as equanimity, doing one's duty without being concerned about results - success or failure. In discussing '*Upekha*' one *Sarvodaya* worker said "*Upekha* is dynamite. It is surprising the energy that is released when you stop being attached.. You discover how much can be accomplished when nothing is expected in return".

The *Sarvodaya* movement has been able to integrate spiritual development with social change. By the method and means adopted, it has helped restore a person's sense of pride and self-esteem, as well as that of the village community. The earlier feeling of humiliation and of powerlessness vanishes with the collective sense that is generated, and in the process establishes right relationships within the community. The methods that the movement has adopted link the communities with the Buddha's *dhamma*.

### **Looking forward**

In 2000, Vinya Ariyaratne, a medical doctor, took over from his father as the Executive Director of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement. "The challenge we are facing", he said "is to make the transition from a movement headed by a charismatic leader to a more professionally run organisation. We need to look at new ways of doing things but without losing any of our values."

The focus on the training of the *bikkhu* is an indication of how determined Sarvodaya is to keep its roots in Buddhism. A meeting of 600 monks in 2001 to discuss social issues, especially in the context of the then continuing war, decided to set up training programmes for monks on socio-economic aspects of development and the use of information technology in the promotion of spiritual values and community leadership.

An effort is being made for more financial independence in the villages through the development of the Sarvodaya Economic Enterprises Development Services (SEEDS). There are now 2,398 Shramadana Societies which are carrying out economic programmes, including savings banks, and there is a greater emphasis on linking up with markets, on business management and on research to improve the effectiveness of the work. Nevertheless, modernisation does not mean that Sarvodaya remains less true to the philosophy of A.T. Ariyatne, whose genius lay in utilizing the dormant Buddhist philosophy and providing action giving flesh and blood to Buddhist ideas and culture.

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