

# RESURGENCE

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# Giving Energy

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It does not require oil, gas, coal or nukes; it empowers people not machines; it is *shramadana*. Literally meaning the giving (*dana*) of human energy (*shrama*), this source of power is widely used in rural Sri Lanka. In more than two thousand villages over the past twenty-two years that is how roads have been built, irrigation canals dug, markets and meeting halls erected. Note the name: neither the purchase of energy through tariffs, taxes, tolls, nor the forced conscription of human labour, *shramadana* is rather its free gift — *dana* denoting both gift and the virtue of generosity itself, the supreme and most meritorious 'perfection' in the ancient Buddhist tradition of this land.

OVER THE CENTURIES the notion of *dana* had become largely identified with alms-giving to the Sangha or order of Buddhist monks. It was almost forgotten that, long before the colonial rulers came with their Western ways, the great irrigation systems, that had made of this island the 'granary of the East,' were constructed and maintained through the voluntary sharing of human energy. This

was recalled, however, as a glory of the past that could be reappropriated, when in 1958 a young Buddhist schoolteacher organized the first *shramadana* work camp in one of the island's poorest, most backward communities.

The campaign launched then, by A.T. Ariyaratna and his friends, has grown into a national movement for rural development. Sarvodaya Shramadana, its name meaning the 'awakening of all' through the 'giving of energy,' is now the largest non-governmental programme in the country. While its activities have branched out into many forms, from preschools and craft centres to alternative marketing schemes, *shramadana* remains a central feature. The financial aid from foreign countries that has poured in in recent years, affording handsome headquarters, training centres, motor vehicles, has been attracted by the movement's energy on the grass-roots level — a vitality which springs from *shramadana* and which money cannot buy.

Any day, any week, there will be several *shramadana* work camps underway around the island — one or two may go on for months, but most occur on

Sundays, when folks are free from jobs and school. You can cut a two-mile road through the jungle on three Sundays, if you rally enough people. And 'people' does not mean just able-bodied men, but children, too, and mothers and grandparents, everybody can contribute. If you are not big and strong enough to wield the heavy mamoty or to loosen, lasso and pull over a palm tree, you can rake the dirt or carry the kettle of hot sweet tea that goes the rounds. Except for the elephant borrowed on the first Sunday to haul out the heaviest trees, all the power is people power. There is no roar of bulldozer or drill to compete with the music that blares from the loudspeaker set up in the temple compound — or with the laughter. Toward the temple's open preaching hall pots full of rice and curries, with fresh banana leaves tied on for tops, are carried from each household. Come noon, you leave your tool, converge there with the others for a co-operative meal and the traditional Sarvodaya 'family gathering.' You can sit then on a straw mat, as the hottest part of the day slips by, sharing the curry a neighbour cooked and the songs and prayers and talks which follow.

Then it is back to work, to see if we all can finish the section of road as far as the paddy field before we quit until next week or next month's Sunday *shramadana*. As you collaborate to lever up some roots, you may find yourself in a team with someone you hardly know. He may be from the other side of the village and from a caste different from yours. But you work together now, learning to know and trust each other's strength; and, as you heard done in the 'family gathering' and as you were urged there to do, you call him *malli*, brother.

Shramadana campaigns proved so effective in organizing villagers, that in the mid-60s the government conducted some



EXCAVATING THE HOSPITAL LOTUS POND



**CUTTING THE JAMBURELIYA ROAD**

of its own. It even briefly formed an office of National Shramadana Service. According to Sarvodayans, they were not very successful. Those camps, they say, lacked both discipline and laughter; people did not sing together or call each other brother and sister, or begin to take charge of their own work. When the project is one the villagers want — and know they want, having chosen it, additional rewards can be unnecessary, and even counterproductive. The two-mile road that will connect the village of Jambureliya to the Colombo road means an hour's less walk to buses and schools, two hours less wait when a doctor must be fetched. That meaning can be present in each shovel load of dirt — along with pride in the doing of it and gratitude for each other.

Last Sunday's shramadana in the hill town of Avissawella was one of a series to clean and beautify the grounds of the district hospital.

A committee of long-term patients had asked local Sarvodayans to help them

organize an action, get the trash picked up and a pretty lotus pond constructed by the front entrance. Unlike cutting a road or digging a canal, this had no economic merit, no one's livelihood or convenience would be benefited — yet the spirit was the same. The long line I joined, to pass down the pans of dirt excavated for the pond, was hot, sweaty, and high-spirited. Ten and twelve year-olds, including a little girl on my left in a lacy pink party-dress, kept up the pace and younger children raced the empty pans back to the diggers. Young bucks, in stylish Sunday bell-bottoms or more sensible in sarongs, showed off a bit, tossing and twirling the pans to each other, while sari-ed ladies in their sixties joined the brigade too, for shorter spells. So did patients from the hospital and nurses in starched white saris, neither group showing concern for the fresh red soil that would spill on them. To my right I slung the dirt to a public official from the Ministry of Health. Discovering my interest in Buddhist philosophy, he

engaged me in a disjointed discussion of the no-self doctrine. "Ah, see," he said, half-joking, "with every load of dirt, I wear away the illusion of ego."

Veteran Sarvodaya organizers say that it is sometimes questionable whether the actual work accomplished in a camp is worth the amount of time, effort and frequent subsidiary costs, which are required to set it up. What is considered definitely worth the price, however, are the other results of shramadana. These are manifold and nonmaterial. They are reflected in the Sarvodayan saying, "We build the road and the road builds us." If the villagers now have a road, where there was no road before, they have also that which the road built — a new sense of unity across the caste, class and political barriers that so frequently fracture village life. A widow of forty with three children, having moved to Markandana two years back, had decided to leave and seek elsewhere to settle. Now, after the village's first shramadana, she and her family choose to stay. They have friends now, she tells me, and it is a better place to be. After shramadana in the village of Galapitemadana, the young people now draw lots each week, to select the house where they will work together — fixing the well or repairing the roof.

The road, then, also builds a new sense of power and possibility. This is evident in the local Sarvodaya *haulas* or committees that often constellate in the course of the first shramadana or two — youth committees, elders' committees, or committees of mothers to start a pre-school or community kitchen. The collective action, combined with the fresh respect it breeds for manual labour, can generate a personal commitment to the development of the village that no government programmes or foreign aid projects appear able to duplicate. Public reforestation schemes, for example, often founder because villages neglect the seedlings, let goats and cattle eat them. But when undertaken as shramadana, with the sense of ownership and responsibility that brings, the plants are watered and protected.\*\*

## DRUGS AND THE THIRD WORLD

A couple of dozen multinational companies dominate the world's commercial drug production — an industry that is worth more than \$50 thousand million a year. But, perhaps inevitably, the industry produces what is profitable, not what is needed. A quarter of the world's population are exposed to tropical diseases and more than half of these suffer from debilitating diseases. But they are too poor either to buy the drugs to combat the disease or to improve their living conditions to reduce the risk of infection. They do not represent 'effective demand' in the world marketplace.

Multinational drug companies mount aggressive sales campaigns in both First

and Third World to sell, overpriced — and often little needed — drugs. Doctors are bombarded by salesmen and their literature — the US drug firms spend three times as much on sales promotion as on research. Hoffman-La Roche quoted Sri Lanka a price for valium that was 70 times the price charged by an Indian company. Tetracyclin antibiotics were being sold in India, Pakistan and Colombia for four to ten times their price in Europe.

Five United Nations Agencies are now working together with third world nations to fight this 'drug colonialism'. The first step is for each nation to prepare a list of basic drugs that will address the most important health problems — in India,

just 116 drugs, less than one percent of the branded drugs on sale there, could meet basic drug needs. The second is to buy them in bulk and buy and sell them under their generic name (eg aspirin) not their branded name (eg. Aspro). The third is to encourage local drug production including an assessment of the role traditional, locally grown drugs and herbs can play in meeting basic health needs. Although no national programme to improve health will achieve much without addressing such vitally related questions as the causes of malnutrition and poverty, this concerted move by UN Agencies and some Third World nations is an encouraging step forward. (Information from a 70 page booklet 'Drugs and the Third World' by Anil Agarwal and available from Earthscan, 10 Percy Street, London W1P 0DR for £1.50/\$3.00).