

BOOK REVIEW

***Towards a Sane Society* by Siri Hettige (Sarasavi Publishers: Nugegoda, Sri Lanka, 2015)**

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Prof. Siri Hettige's latest book, *Towards a Sane Society* goes on record as a pioneering contribution to understand the multifaceted problems that the society is facing today with special focus on Sri Lanka. The book is a collection of articles subscribed by the author to a weekly column in the Daily Mirror over the period from April 2013 to mid-2014.

Revisiting Eric Fromm's book entitled *The Sane Society* published six decades ago, Hettige analyses how the modern societies have become insane by unequal development, unsustainable consumption, poor governance, increasing inequality, conflict, unrest, violence and social injustice in contrast to the publicly articulated goals such as equitable development, good governance and social justice. Fromm, a leading psychoanalyst, philosopher and social analyst, in his book posed a pertinent question; whether an entire society could be afflicted by a pathological condition that prevents it from functioning in a sensible manner. He argues that the social, political and economic conditions prevailing in both capitalist and socialist blocs had impeded to achieve contended, peaceful and satisfying lives. Hettige asserts that the question raised by Fromm decades ago is still valid considering the insane characteristics of the modern society.

The world has undergone unprecedented transformation in the backdrop of globalisation and technological advancements during the past several decades. Free flow of goods, services and human capital has interwoven the countries across the world. These flows are facilitated by modern transport and communication technologies. Meanwhile, the open economy trade regimes coupled with fast developing

technology have enabled a large number of countries to accelerate economic growth, to reduce poverty and ultimately improve the quality of life. In spite of these promising socioeconomic achievements, many countries face multi-dimensional problems today manifested by social injustice, poor governance and environmental degradation. Modern societies are increasingly incapable of finding satisfactory solutions to these myriad of problems, according to Hettige. He, therefore, points to the need to address these social crises through public policy reforms, enhanced democratic participation and wider public discussions.

The articles in the book numbering sixty seven are divided into ten crosscutting themes; i.e. global context, development, governance, social welfare, ethno-religious conflict, youth, education, health, environment and transport. In approaching these diverse and inter-related issues in the context of Sri Lanka, Hettige draws on his vast teaching and research experience in Sociology and allied disciplines.

The neo-liberal economic reforms adopted by many countries over the last several decades and the revolution in information and communication technology have transformed the social and economic landscape across the globe dramatically. The present pattern of global development cannot continue without leading to unprecedented environmental, social and political crises. Hettige, therefore, emphasises that the civil society groups and socially and environmentally concerned intellectuals should play a catalytic role in arresting these adverse trends by mobilising public opinion, as much cannot be expected from governments, private enterprises or profit-motivated professional groups.

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The book starts with an analysis of the global context. The neo-liberal economic reforms have led to diminished role of the state in regulating economic, social and cultural processes that increasingly unfold across national boundaries. While the mobility of unregulated financial capital across the globe has created income opportunities to millions of people, its adverse consequences on environmental and social sustainability are unprecedented. Distribution of wealth across the world is highly unequal. The continuing intra-national conflicts and international disputes are a major threat to peaceful coexistence of communities and nation. The author also emphasises that nationalism continues to prevail despite the fact that countries are increasingly integrated in economic terms. This has given rise to militancy in different parts of the world. The increasing dependency of poorer countries on foreign capital of rich countries is also a disturbing trend, according to Hettige. Science is crucial for national development, but people remain wedded to religion in the absence of secular education and secular state. As regards governance, the author notes that protection of human rights is vital in a democratic society.

The book critically examines the challenges faced by Sri Lanka in pursuing development. In spite of the prime role of knowledge in accelerating economic development in the modern era, it is not considered as an important source of power and influence in this country. Very low priority is given for Research and Development (R&D) which is critically important in promoting a knowledge-based economy. The education system needs to be revamped to make it more skill-oriented rather than examination-oriented as at present. Instead of producing new knowledge and knowledge-based products, we have become voracious consumers of all kinds of imported knowledge products, Hettige laments. The worsening ethnic and political divisions since Independence have prevented building up of intellectual resources which would have laid a strong foundation for a knowledge-driven economy. The absence of technology-intensive industries compels the highly educated and skilled youth to migrate overseas worsening the shortage of human resources. Eventually, the services sector, rather than the knowledge-based production sector, has become prominent in the economy. The author also points out the perils of spending beyond means, both by the government and households, which have led to accumulate their debts to unsustainable levels.

The author draws the attention of the readers on several unresolved issues regarding governance. Politicisation of almost all government institutions has hampered good governance. Consequently, the citizens

of the country are polarized between those who seek personal benefits on the basis of political loyalty as against those who seek access to public resources on the basis of merit. Also, there is widespread public perception regarding corruption in all areas of public life. Physical infrastructure development is overemphasised in public investment plans while there is dire need to improve education and health services. The alienation of the elite from masses is also a disturbing feature in the society. Those who have power and resources take advantage of the opportunities for self-interest, instead of displaying a sense of social and moral responsibility. The author asserts that frequent protests on diverse issues are a manifestation of institutional failures. Public institutions should be held responsible for social responsibility, going beyond the conventional financial accountability. Local governance is neglected and marginalised in Sri Lanka reflecting the top heavy nature of the central government. This prevents, inter alia, the development of technical and professional capabilities at the local government level.

As regards social welfare, the widening income inequality between the rich and the poor in Sri Lanka is a major concern amid much emphasis given to inclusive growth in the current policy discussions. Increasing social disparities manifest most starkly in the basic needs such as food, health, education, housing and transport. The gap between the real economy and the money economy continues to widen as private and public investments go into consumption-oriented sectors such as construction, tourism, telecommunication and trade. The available space for the government to increase social expenditure on health, education and welfare is extremely limited due to several factors including heavy debt service commitments and wasteful expenditure. Evidence-based policy reforms in the health and education sectors are needed to improve the quality of life. Priority should be given to promote productive employment opportunities in agriculture and manufacturing sectors.

According to Hettige, Sri Lanka has failed to meet the challenge of managing ethno-religious differences so as to create a conflict-free social and political environment ensuring public order. A major reason for this failure is our continuing preoccupation with ethnic and religious identities at the expense of wider concerns of citizens. The situation appears to have worsened in recent years with national politics becoming more communal and sectarian. This is not conducive for sustainable development and collective well-being of citizens. Seeking immediate solutions beyond ethnicity and religion, therefore, is imperative. Reconciliation, in its diverse forms, is a pre-requisite for peace and political

stability. The author, however, is doubtful whether the country's political leaders will rise up to the occasion.

The book addresses the problems faced by the youth highlighting the root causes linked to the country's education system and economic structure. A national survey on youth conducted a couple of years ago reveals that nearly one third of the young people wish to leave the country. This reflects the widespread hopelessness among Sri Lankan youth. Around 1.6 million Sri Lankans are estimated to be employed abroad. The vast majority of them are between 20 and 35 years of age. The country has lost such human resources for productive employment locally. Many factors other than higher income levels overseas have contributed to the exodus of youth. Young people get frustrated when they are deprived of opportunities to develop their potential and participated in the decision-making processes. The authorities have failed to reform the education system to deal with the youth problems. The dropout rate is higher at the secondary level compelling many youngsters to end up in the poorly-paid informal sector. The author argues that the state and non-state institutions should play a catalytic role in resolving the challenges faced by the youth.

The next section of the book on education, in fact, is a follow-up of the preceding discussion on the youth. Recalling his interviews with a cross section of undergraduates in the University of Colombo, Hettige points out that they are disillusioned about school education despite they have reached the top of the education ladder. Most of them revealed that their school teachers did not attempt to relate what they teach from the textbooks to the real world. The school education system is preoccupied with memory testing examinations leading to increasing dependency on private tuition. It prevents acquiring useful life skills and other competencies. These shortcomings in the education system have given rise to many socioeconomic problems in the country. Hence, the author reiterates that revamping the general education system is an urgent need.

Health, which is the focus of the next section in the book, goes hand in hand with education in not only fostering the people's quality of life but also in building up human capital resources essential for the country's economic growth. The poor countries have become increasingly vulnerable to communicable diseases such

as Ebola and HIV/AIDS. Increasing urban population has given rise to diseases like Dengue. Many countries, including China, are affected by pollution-related diseases due to rapid industrialisation and urbanisation. Careless use of toxic chemicals in agriculture has posed severe health threats. Contamination of food chains and waterways is also a major health hazard in many developing countries including Sri Lanka. The spread of unhealthy food habits, often propagated by multinationals, is a health menace in both developing and developed countries. In order to overcome these complex health problems, the author emphasises that coherent public policies based on multi-faceted approaches should be implemented.

The book contains several interesting essays on environment which is very much related to health discussed in the previous section. Hettige argues that sustainable development as it is practiced today is a myth as the widely applied linear economic growth model does not support such development. Western pattern of development is fast spreading in the developing world causing dire repercussions on the natural environment. Externalities of economic growth have caused environmental pollution and climate change with devastating ecological and social effects. While it is unrealistic to expect a complete reversal of globalisation, which is the root cause of environmental crisis, the author stresses the urgent need to strike a balance between globalisation and localisation of economic activities so as to ensure environmental sustainability.

The book concludes with the section dealing with transport. The number of vehicles has increased exponentially in recent years calling for continuous expansion of the road network. Apart from road congestion, this has given rise to pollution problems, as in the case of other emerging economies. The government needs to take a bold policy decision to shift from the present emphasis on road transport to railways and other environmentally-friendly modes of transport.

In this remarkable book, Prof. Siri Hettige approaches the complex social challenges with a critical and objective mind articulating the prospects and challenges in achieving a sane society. It is a valuable source of knowledge for researchers, scholars, policymakers and general readers alike.