

The challenge is to search for justice and dignity

by Gamini Dissanayake

At a time in human history when the world is deeply troubled by sounds of discord and divisiveness; when so many in the human family continue to stagger under the burden to hardship and deprivation; and when the inventiveness of man is so often transformed into a threat, rather than nurtured as a hope, there is perhaps no greater cause than the effort to build a better world.

There have never been instant solutions to complicated problems. If we can identify some common ground, if we can try to lay our fingers on the more fundamental issues as they concern us, then we would be able to reach out towards an inner core of understanding. As the German poet and dramatist Goethe said: "The question to ask is not whether we are perfectly agreed, but whether we are proceeding from a common basis of sentiment". Sentiment is an emotion, an instantaneous reaction much more important than economic theory or strategy, because if we base our actions on a "common basis of sentiment", we would be able to reach our objectives, although theoretically the obstacles may appear to be insurmountable. This common basis of sentiment must be derived from discerning and comprehending a broad sweep of practical realities as an essential step in our progress towards attainable possibilities.

Two of those realities are crucial. First, the degree and extent of human deprivation endured by people across vast tracts of what are now commonly described as the countries of the South is ugly and intolerable but eradicable. Second, if attempts are not mounted with a due sense of urgency — both domestically and internationally — to eradicate deprivation, the resulting social explosion will incalculably damage the fab-

ric of international society. Each of these realities is important as the other. In moral terms, the fact that grim poverty co-exists with conspicuous opulence is unconscionable. Whatever set of beliefs one brings to bear on an examination of the disadvantages that afflict more than two-thirds of the world's population, the "common sentiment" of all men of goodwill can only be revulsion. For who but the cynical and unfeeling can accept a situation which restricts part of the human family to marginal living while opening vistas of ease and comfort to the other? Who but the totally uncompassionate can tolerate a structure of relationships which provides one segment of the human family with the luxury of choice, while denying to the other the option of creativity? Who but the wantonly selfish can take pleasure in perpetuation, side by side, of advantage, progress and stagnation, hope and despair?

The moral imperative alone is strong enough to serve as a basis for condemning the world's inequities. Let us remember too that the acceptance of institutionalized disadvantage will not and cannot be permanent among those worst affected. One does not have to dig deep into history to find examples of the "wretched of the earth" revolting against the wretchedness imposed on them. Examples from contemporary records abound. Every such revolt, while initially a matter of domestic concern, sooner or later affects the global equilibrium. The moral imperative and the strategic imperative thus intersect, making development in all its dimensions as important as a moral issue as it is political, diplomatic or strategic. Few see this correlation. Pope John XXIII understood and stood in awe of it before many others did. He synthesized the issues into a single sentence of great clarity when he said almost two decades ago that "development is the new name for peace". The agony of deprivation is a starting point of turbulence, and the peace and security of mankind urgently require that the agony must abate.

In Sri Lanka, three decades after independence the country was almost ripped apart by an uprising the magnitude of which, historically is too early to

The Hon. Gamini Dissanayake is Minister for Land Development and Mahaveli Development in Sri Lanka. Prior to becoming a Member of Parliament, he lectured at the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Sri Lanka. He is a lawyer and an active trade union member.