

An article in the newspapers a couple of weeks ago caught my eye. One reason was the stunning revelation that 67 per cent Sri Lankans do not have pure drinking water. The other was the announcement of an integrated plan for river basin management, to ensure safe drinking water, in addition to other benefits such as prevention of floods due to silting.

One thinks of parched Africa when one speaks or hears of the lack of safe drinking water. Not Sri Lanka with its 103 rivers which drain the land, rising crystal clear in the central hills and diverging in all directions to reach the sea.

Rainfall is adequate in the central and western provinces. In fact, as it happened recently, some of these areas get too much rain. The Dry Zone is watered during the dry months by irrigation systems - the result of the hydraulic capability of ancient peoples of the country, starting in pre-Christian times. These reservoirs and canals have been further developed.

More than half the population drinks unsafe water

Water there may be, adequate for cultivation, unless a severe drought grips the land, but safe drinking water is not available island-wide. Thus the incidence of water borne diseases.

Infant mortality, however, which is traceable, in large measure to unsafe water, is on the decline. In 1978 the rate per thousand was 37.1; in 1998-13.4 per thousand and in 2000 - 13.3.

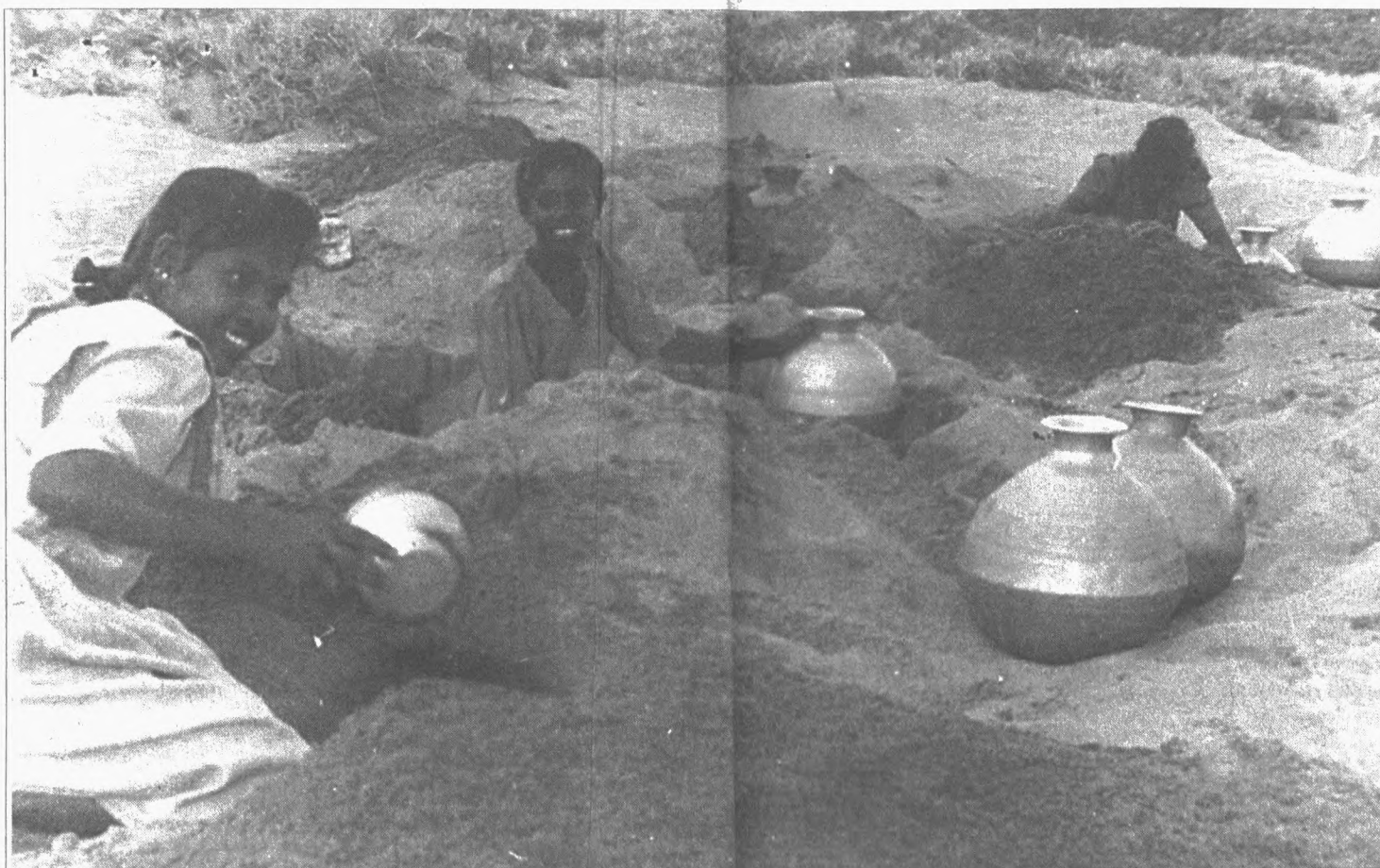
The shocking revelation of the inadequacy of safe water was made by Executive Director of the Mahaveli River Basin Division of the Mahaveli Authority, P. Samaraweera, at a workshop conducted for officials at the Galewala Divisional Secretariat, to create awareness of the work to be undertaken by the River Basin Management Authority (RBMA) set up in 2002.

This is the news item I read which both interested and surprised me, the surprise because of the pronouncement that more than half our population do not have access to safe drinking water.

I remember that most affluent village homes had two wells - one for drinking water and one for bathing and washing of clothes. As a kid I was almost in love with the drinking water well at my maternal grandparents' home. It was such a tiny well with friendly moss and ferns growing around it. The bottom of it was seen clearly and one knew if one fell in, one could stand up and keep one's nose above water. If this happened, however, grandmother would be much more concerned about the pollution of the water than the near drowning of an errant grandchild.

The bathing well was different. Its water which came right to the top was menacingly deep bluish in colour, the bottom never being seen. Reputed to be a coconut tree in depth, one kept one's distance from the well on its cemented apron and conse-

Safe drinking water



quently hated baths, even though one of the several visiting or in-house women would do the drawing of water and soaping one until only one's eyes were visible in a suds whitened body.

One also remembers the sight of village women, eternally with either a child or a pitcher of water on a hip. In Anamadua where fifty years ago we spent our school holidays, women walked miles to get their water. The same or worse in places like Hambantota.

So, come to think of it, there is a grave scarcity of water in some areas of the country. Perhaps the lack of safe drinking water is due to the non-boiling of water; sheer lack of know-how, which is hard to believe, in this day and age, or lack of firewood and high price of kerosene that makes women shortcut hygienic imperatives.

A project to ensure safe drinking
Water P. Samaraweera elucidated the project. The 103 river basins in the Island have been demarcated to five regions. The Mahaveli is one of them. A pilot project, coordinated by the River Basin Management Authority (RBMA), has been set down, and is being implemented with research and awareness creation initially prioritized.

The Mahaveli Authority will coordinate the project, drawing in all relevant government departments, NGOs and beneficiaries living within the river basins.

The principal aims of the project will be to supply safe drinking water to colo-

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nization schemes, villages, and townships; and conservation of river basin natural resources, to name but two: freshwater fauna and silt and sand. The latter concern will include prevention of soil being washed away wastefully to sea and also prevention of silting at mouths of rivers, causing stagnation of water at the confluence of a river with the sea, which leads to flooding.

Another officer of the RBMA drew attention to the fact that government departments and NGOs work on the two aims mentioned above, "but individually, as it were". "We will draw in religious teachers, village leaders and of course village and divisional officers, specially Samurdhi Officers."

This last is highly commendable. A going back to the concept of the village: its wewa or communal well, the temple, the school. Added now, government officials who are stationed in these villages and townships to see to development and betterment of people's quality of life.

Some of the vast amount of aid received by our Prime Minister may go into projects like the river basin management plan.

Honesty and dishonesty

Unanimously, every single Sri Lankan hopes the money will not flow into private pockets. We are confident it will not all

flow north and east. These areas of course have to be developed. The people there, who have suffered much more than others in the country, deserve a better life and hope for the future, even though their so-called sole representatives gave the Tokyo meeting a miss.

Doubts are justified. Did we ever have a strike by doctors lasting days and probably going into weeks? The on-going strike is to demand personal benefits. How could people who have benefited by free education all through their lives up until they emerged with MBBSs turn a steel cold eye on suffering patients and sit around eating and drinking and planning to hold out, notwithstanding Hippocratic oaths and plain simple humane feelings.

Public servants of then were admirable. I talk not of fifty years ago but as recent as say twenty five. Even an eraser from an office was not taken home. The hint of a gift of say a bushel of rice was roundly refused and the offering subordinate black-listed.

A story I heard proves my point that government officials holding responsible posts even two decades ago were honest. The government servant of fifty years ago, all of them I make bold to say, were like the political leaders of the time - D S and Dudley Senanayake, to name but two.

This official had mortgaged his house having to pay very high medical bills for his parents in addition to bringing up six children. To get a license (I don't exactly remember for what) a would-be licensee showed a suitcase, he carried in which wads of notes were stacked. The person who told me the story feared that the official he was with - having the power to grant the license - would have a seizure at the attempted bribe. He screamed the briber away. He could so easily have solved his money problems by a stroke of his pen, but no, the attempted bribe boomeranged on the would be briber. What did the official get in return? A clear conscience and the knowledge that he was serving his country like he should.

It is very different now. We hear of rich people holding positions of power being the worst offenders. They smile into the public camera and ooze humanity while their bank balances grow disproportionately. No wonder they earn curses. Wicked it may be, and completely unreligious, but one wishes the curses come true in the case of these bloodsuckers.