

Features

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Seminars that fool the Public and mislead Governments

By A. T. G. A. Wickramasuriya

"Talking Shop while the coast erodes" was the title of the editorial in a popular local newspaper of July 1985. It is a paper which among other news of the day, carried a weekly page on Science and Technology relating to subjects needed to meet the challenges the country faces, both of natural and human levels, and even more to arrest the deterioration that is continuing to take place, even more increasingly than in the past decades. Following are the first few lines from the editorial mentioned above.

"Floods and earth slips have now been followed by an unprecedented attack by a turbulent sea on the southern coastal areas. 'Sea erosion' has hitherto been a comfortable subject to be discussed at seminars and other such verbal fiestas of technocrats, but suddenly the full savagery of the sea has for the first time been underlined by the series of incidents along the coast. A 40 foot wide strip of land has been gobbled up by the ocean at Hikkaduwa leaving only a large crater behind, while the number of those who have been rendered homeless had yet to be compiled.

It has taken the savagery unleashed by an angry sea to bring home to the country the full dimensions of the problem which has continued to be a plaything among those who engage in the seminar game in spite of warnings dating back a decade."

Many of our scientists and technologists have availed of this opportunity to express their experiences and views on such topics. Some among us have even kept copies of certain articles of special interest to us, or the country in general. I am aware that the Institution of Engineers, Sri Lanka (IESL) too, have maintained copies of such articles in the library for reference. There is no doubt that these articles enable the exchange of views on many controversial subjects, without having to comply with formalities, restrictions, etc expected from members of certain organisations in their publication. In the case of the IESL, I regret to state that even though one of its main "aims and objectives" is to encourage original research and the study of the development and conservation of the resources of Sri Lanka, which was complied with in the past, is not so at present, as may be gathered from what follows later, in the article.

Past

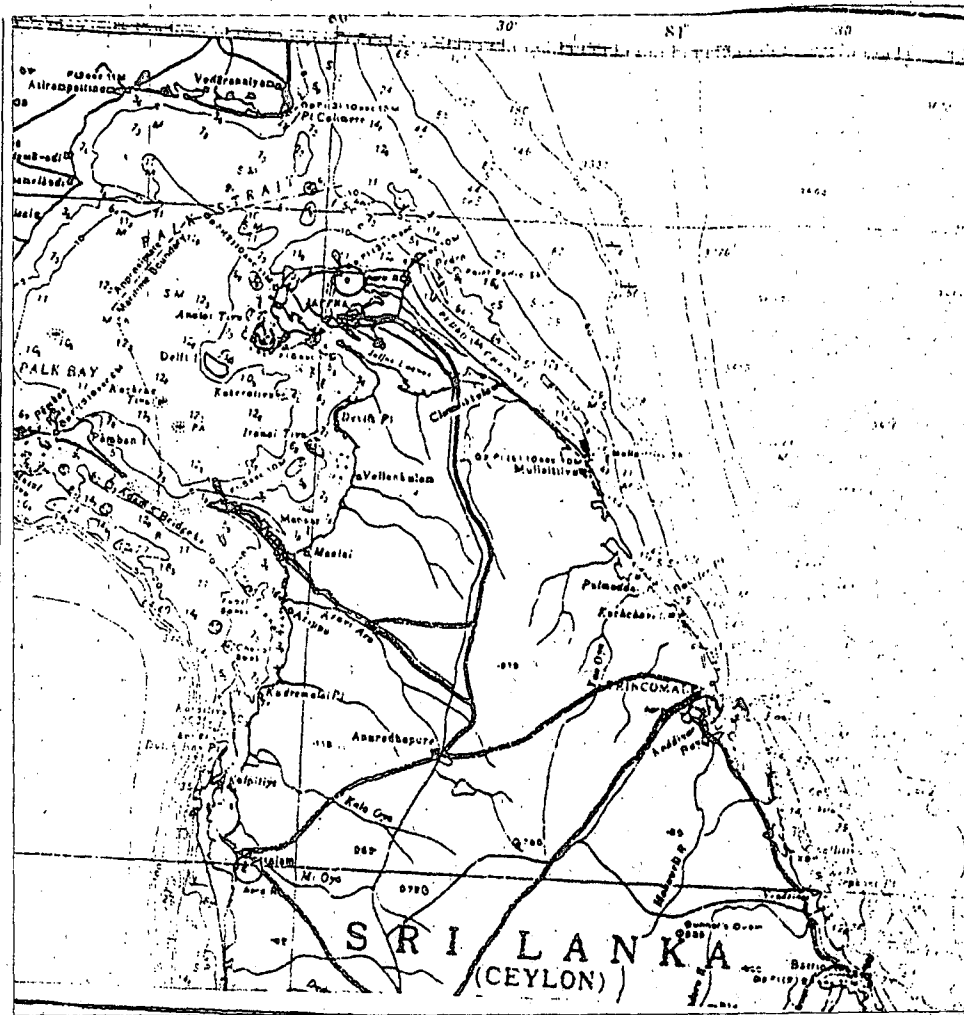
I have been a member of this Institution (IESL) since the late 1940s. From time to time I have presented papers and taken part in discussions at this Institution. My paper of 1964 was supported by fourteen photographs of observations made by me in the field and on hydraulic models, eight maps and a list of 15 references to publications of basic importance to the topic of my paper, viz: "A new view of land formation and erosion along the coasts of Ceylon!" I am aware that my paper was referred and highly commended by no less an engineer of distinction relating to land and water - the late Mr. S. Arumugam. Another paper was in 1983 and titled "Coastal Engineering, Development and Research in Sri Lanka."

In that article I have made reference to a public seminar that was conducted by the Institution on 25th May 1982 on 'Development Activities and Coast Conservation Act.'

The seminar was chaired by Prof. D. S. Wijesekere who was elected President of the Institution in 1992. To all intents and purposes the seminar was a success. I have with me a tape recording of the entire proceedings. In 1987 I was awarded the Prof. E. O. E. Pereira Memorial Prize for my paper on "Prospects for Harnessing Wave Energy and Marine Resources in Sri Lanka." A copy of the paper and the photographs appear in the transactions of the Institution for that year. I have also with me a video recording of the studies I have done on a hydraulic model of the site where such energy could be harnessed. This video recording too was shown to the audience during my presentation.

Present

The most recent example of the manner in which seminars are conducted can be gathered from the one that was held on the 31st August 2002 at the BMICH, and organised by the IESL. It was in connection with the proposal to link Sri Lanka with India consequent to a meeting between the Prime Ministers of the two countries in December 2001. The site contemplated was along 'Adam's Bridge.' In this connection I wrote an article which was published in the Daily News of 20th February 2002 titled, "Scope for a Multi Purpose Road and Power Development between India and Sri Lanka." The July 2002 issue of the IESL News, which is a monthly publication of the Institution published a notice of a seminar to



be held on the subject of the governments proposal on 31st August 2002.

On the 24th July 2002, I indicated to the IESL my desire to present a paper at this seminar and also stated that the above project is complex and involves several sectors of development and challenges, as maybe gathered from the enclosed article." (published on 20th February 2002 and mentioned above). In particular, I wish to draw the attention of the organising committee of this seminar to the sub paras under the sub heading "Conference and Papers". In these sub paras I have referred to a conference held in India as well as Japan, and attended by me as the delegate from Sri Lanka. The seminars are of relevance to the present subject.

I received the following reply from the Institution:

"We are indeed pleased to note the interest shown by senior engineers such as you in the activities undertaken by the Institution. Whilst it will not be possible to accommodate you as a speaker at this seminar we will certainly value your participation at the seminar. We have requested the organising committee to ensure that you receive an invitation to the seminar together with other senior engineers.

We note from the copy of the article attached to your letter that you have addressed the various aspects of this major project over a very long period of time. We are confident that your experience and knowledge will add great value to the much younger engineers of the present day in their development and furtherance of this project.

As indicated to you your article from the CDN of the 20th February will be reprinted in the SLEN of September 2002.

I thank you once again for your interest.

Yours, faithfully,
Institution of Engineers Sri Lanka

Sgd.

Russel de Zilwa

Executive Secretary

cc. Chairman - organising Committee - India Sri Lanka Joint Seminar."

I thanked the organising committee and Mr. Russel de Zilwa in particular for the letter. This made me to come prepared to the seminar in the hope of contributing even the little I could on what I considered the most important technical aspects, which appear to have been overlooked in the papers listed for presentation by the principal speakers. I refer to the growing imbalance between the land and the sea, in and around Adam's Bridge. These were quite evident from the large scale air photos and other visuals etc. which could have been seen and understood even by the public who were among the audience.

Papers presented

Seven of the eight papers listed for presentation at this seminar were handed over to the audience just before the commencement of the proceedings that day.

The paper and presentation by Eng. (DR) A. De Silva on "Design Concept of the Bridge" is commendable. It had information and was based on a preliminary investigation of the reef viz. Adam's Bridge.

Eng. R Rajah Kulendra "suggested a four lane highway and a two lane rail track as being necessary to achieve the desired result."

The presentation by Mr. Sydney Xavier on "Techno-Economic Feasibility" draws atten

objective as a component of the link proposed at Adam's Bridge.

Discussions

The discussions commenced at 4.30 p.m. on that day, and was chaired by the President Elect of the Institution. I wish to state that although I indicated to him in the customary manner that I wished to speak, he kept ignoring me upto the last few minutes. I cannot think of any reason for the discrimination shown by him, except that he was aware not only from my article of 20th February 2002 as well as from my previous article both to the Institution and the press, that my intention was to highlight the subject of Global Warming and the adverse impact the rising energy of the sea would have on the coastal areas of Sri Lanka.

Secondly, that my answer to this adverse situation was to harness the energy of the sea to develop power, a much needed requirement of the country. The development of power is a topic that has been debated and continues to be debated year after year. However, within the short space of just five minutes that he was prepared to give me as against unlimited time given to the previous speakers, I did not hesitate to refer to the important aspects of my views as loudly and clearly as possible.

Among these were references to global warming, harnessing of wave energy and last but not least, that the Institution of Engineers was not competent to make any recommendations to the government or the public on the basis of seminars such as this, which was attended by only a very small fraction of the 7000 mem-

bers of this Institution. The said article appeared only in the October SLEN as a letter to Editor. No mention is made of the connection it had with the seminar. Why?

Let me conclude by referring to an article titled "Dirty Tricks" appearing in the "Ecologist", Vol. 200 No. 3 May/June 1990 by Prof. Jim Jeffry. He is the Professor at the Department of Chrysalligraphy at the University of London. His article begins with the following abstract.

"The UK Department of Energy and the Central Electricity Generating Board have slowed down power research and development and wave power has been deliberately sabotaged to prevent these renewable sources competing with nuclear power. The development of a wave power device which could produce significant amounts of electricity cheaper than could a nuclear plant was stopped by a blatancy cynical campaign run by the authorities which control the research and development of both renewable energy sources and nuclear power in Britain."

No time was given at the seminar, to discuss the adverse impact Global Warming was having on Sri Lanka's coastal region including its surrounding sea bed as can be identified from air photos and maps.