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Privatisation: how it affects the poor

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It is no secret or surprise that about 80 per cent of the Sri Lankan population is poverty-stricken. Many middle-class households have a monthly income averaging Rs. 5,000:-, perhaps double that if the female also works.

Most households have "modern" amenities - electricity, running water, a telephone, and use gas as a cooking fuel. At current rates and prices, and only if the household practices frugal consumption of these amenities, the monthly expenditure will be:

Electricity	Rs. 1,500
Water	Rs. 300
Telephone	Rs. 750
Gas (incl. delivery charges)	Rs. 700
Total	Rs. 3,250

As home-ownership is rare as it relates to the labour and middle-class, a family's monthly output to rent a room, annexe, or tiny house is anything from Rs. 2,000 - Rs. 6,000 -, even in the suburbs. A former servant of mine who visits me from time to time pays Rs. 2,000 - for half a room in Kottawa with six month's rent in advance.

Having paid the monthly bills, as indicated above, what then is left for food, clothing, medical attention, and recreation? The mind boggles! Most families cannot afford essential proteins, and subsist on two frugal meals a day, generally the same food twice a day, a pot of rice with a tastily cooked vegetable curry and a mallun - occasionally devilled sprats or dhal.

These are the lucky ones. The poorest of the poor barely manage a meal a day. Their hunger satisfied with a sweet up of tea without milk. Many mothers feed their hungry children with plain toastpan and plantain or bun and plantain; sometimes one bun is shared between two children.

And yet, the cost of public utilities keeps, rising whilst monthly salaries remain unchanged, leaving families with less and less money at their disposal for food and other essentials. IMF-World Bank recommendations are designed to cause and create severe hardships on the masses, this is a sinister trend. When huge loans are negotiated from the World Bank, IMF makes conditions - that subsidies be removed and State institutions privatized. We have seen multinational corporations then enter and gobble up the State institutions, e.g. Shell Gas, Suntil, Laugfs Gas, Mondo, Lanka Bell, and so on. And then, in systematic and frequent leaps and bounds, increase prices of such services and commodities such as the telephone and gas, blaming world prices etc.

The multinational companies are squeezing us dry and making life hell for the people of this country.

My personal way of objecting to ever-increasing prices is to give up all of these services and commodities. I gave up my cellphone and Suntel telephone (and have yet to receive my IDD refundable deposits from the two companies) and when my stock of gas is over, I am converting to kerosene and firewood. There are simple single burner kerosene cookers available for Rs. 750, and a firewood burner made out of clay is available for Rs. 300 with provision for cooking 2 utensils, designed to channel heat economically.

I have reduced my monthly electricity bill from nearly Rs. 4,000 to Rs. 1,000 - simply by switching off unnecessary security lights and room lights. I have stopped watching those steamy soaps on TV and restrict watching TV to local and World News. I spend more time reading by daylight, writing on social issues, gardening, and looking after my pets. I feel fitter because I am in bed by 9 pm and find I eat less when I am not in front of the Idiot box, watching boring American sleaze and all those horrid, monotonous commercials.

I save on petrol because I use my car only for shopping in the Mt. Lavinia area which has all the well-known super-markets. I also use three wheelers from my own neighbourhood. I resigned from all the clubs I was a member of, and instead patronize the Mt. Lavinia Hotel close to me, when I need a place to relax and feast my eyes on the ocean. I use the vendors from my neighbours who supply me fresh vegetables and fruits, "keera", and fish. A bakery-products man brings me freshly baked bread, rolls and cakes. The newspapers are delivered, and I have subscriptions to various magazines delivered by post.

The idyllic life without any dealings with multinational companies who are the big bad wolves at our doors, milking is dry.

Lessons to be learnt

1. Support Sri Lankan industries and buy locally grown and locally crafted products. Be Sri Lankan buy Sri Lankan.

2. Avoid over-consumerism. Spend only on what you really need and have savings for a rainy day. Be thrifty.

3. Lead simple lives, free of excesses, and practice your religion faithfully, be it Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, or Islam. Appreciate nature and its many bounties.

4. Instead of constantly criticizing State institutions, see what you can do to minimize demands on State-provided services, e.g.

- Dispose of most of your garbage in your own premises by burning, burying, composting etc.
- Don't rush to govt. dispensaries, hospitals, for small ailments that can be treated at home. Practise good hygiene and good nutrition to avoid unnecessary ailments like colds, diarrhoea, infections.
- Use ayurvedic treatment rather than, rely on Western medicines which are potentially harmful in the long run.
- do not waste water. A household can manage with 13 units of water a month - Rs. 70. Monitor your meter, and check your consumption so that waste can be avoided.
- Do not waste electricity, for a month or two monitor your meter daily.
- Support Telecom and pay your bills on time.
- Pay all your utility bills on time - water, telephone, electricity, annual municipal rates. Non payment of bills, delayed payments, impose heavy burdens on State institutions.