

Social indebtedness to our farmers

by Neetha S. Ratnapala

"To look back to past civilization is the best way to improve present day trend of thought, and what has been handed down to us from a civilization of many years is the crystallized result and handiwork of years of pioneering experience".

Chiang-Kai-Shek

Sri Lanka, the granary of the East, lost its splendour, and the meaning of the reference with the failure of our farmers to reach their goals. But alas they have given us what all Sri Lankans were yearning for, praying to the rain gods for a bountiful harvest. **So the granaries are full once again.**

The story does not end here with its beautiful conclusion or reaping of the harvests. A worse fate seems to lurch over their heads - would the rich harvests give them what they sought to achieve or ruin all their expectations. This won't be merely a farmer's tale. It's a tale for which all Sri Lankans would be responsible. It's a fate we all will have to endure, and it will be a story for the future as well. Therefore Sri Lankans all over the island will have to share in the plight of the farmers of this decade.

The farmers are desperate. They are unable to reap the fruits of their hard

labour. They are unable to meet their debts on toiling with their land. They are unable to make ends meet as they are stuck in the swamps of indebtedness. A worse destiny awaits them with the next harvest. Their faces are not lit up by the thought of a beautiful harvest as it should be the case. A ray of hope is so distant from them. Farmers who are our lifeblood, who give us our staple food, who are supposed to be kings when they undo their muddy loin cloths and get into clean clothes.

How could we as countrymen extend our support and goodwill towards our farmer community at this hour of need? Suggestion vary. But how practical would these suggestion be? As a rice consuming nation Thailand sets a good example. The fashion there, is to enjoy rice at main meal times. Everyone big and small takes pride in enjoying the meal of Thai rice. The restaurants and eating houses throughout the county have rice and serve rice even at / for breakfast.

The schoolchildren are served rice with a curry of vegetable, chicken or omelette and gravy with red or green chillie sauce as their morning meal from their preschool age. At school children learn to enjoy a meal of rice instead of a useless quick snack, very often stuffed with over boiled or stale

meat or vegetables. The infants are fed on rice porridge cooked and consumed as Kniji or mixed in vegetable soups. Super markets cater to a taste in rice porridge, packed, ready to cook ginger rice porridge is a favourite with the older folk. Rice is an essential ingredient in their soups and desserts as well. Thus thailand encourages its people to preserve their identity through rice as it does through their unique Thai Language.

Going back to our own past glory our ancient kings had dreams of making the island self-sufficient in rice. Some like Dutugemunu, Parakaramabahu the Great, Parakaramabahu VI achieved this.

The citizens rallied round such kings who gave meaning to their existence through economic, religious and literary revivals. Let not this dream fall apart by not meeting with the challenges of abundant harvests. Despite the bountiful harvests there are many without a proper meal of rice per day. There are the hopeless farmer families that live in hope of a reasonable solution to their stocks of rice. It appears that the state alone cannot handle this situation. Then what is the role of all right thinking Sri Lankans? The farmers are an integral part of the social structure. They need the care and pro-

tection of the larger society. Their preservation is our salvation. It is but timely that everyone turns his / her attention to the burning issue of the farmer's plight.

The guaranteed price at Rs. 13 does not seem to help them. The bumper harvests have virtually brought disappointment to the farmers who are eagerly awaiting a solution to the sale of their produce. Would it lead them to utter despair or even drive them to suicide in certain instances of heavy indebtedness. Solutions have to be found either from below or above.

Paddy purchasing on a GPS and stacking or storing of paddy for future use appears unwise in view of another approaching harvest. Quick distribution should be the answer. In the absence of such a network of distribution the farmers are in a quandary. The idea to find markets abroad for the excess produce should have been a state policy, or policy of Farmer Protection Societies before the arrival of the harvest. Let not such mistakes be repeated.

All leading hotels and restaurants in the island should be geared to a national food drive where rice consumption at all meals in different forms is encouraged. All eating houses at work places should be encouraged to use

rice at all meal times with an attractive package. All public hostels should be accommodated in this drive. The Parliament canteen and Sravasthi should set an example by sharing in this national drive through consuming rice and rice based meals.

Essay competitions have generously referred to the staple food and achieving self-sufficiency in rice and calling Sri Lanka an agricultural country. The dream has come true - therefore it's the day of everyone, young and old to enjoy the fruits of labour of our farmers by sharing in the consumption of rice which would boost the economy and the country's economy through a cut of the much valued foreign exchange spent on imported wheat and wheat-based products. It's not at all pleasing to the eye or the mind to see sometimes date expired, or nearing expiry - on labels of imported breakfast cereals, when children can quite confidently and patriotically begin the day by enjoying a morning meal of country rice.

It is but obligatory to rally round the farmer at this grave hour of crisis and save his extinction, or should their dawn be distant?

'Nay' we hope with the dedication of the Prime Minister to protect the farmer.