

Why this wanton destruction of invaluable assets?

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A decade or so ago the country had several engineering workshops complexes in both the public and private sectors, where engineering services and manufacturing activities of large scale were being carried out. While in those a considerable amount of employment and training opportunities for Sri Lankans were available; some of these facilities even exported their products.

With the Open Economy and unpatriotic business interests taking toll of these national assets we are now forced to be scanning the ocean's horizon for foreign goods and services to arrive draining away our limited foreign exchange mostly hard earned by our village womenfolk doing the meanest household chores in foreign countries.

This way within the last twelve months two (may be more) such national assets worth billions have been/is being disastrously disintegrated. One is the heavy workshops complex of Lanka Machine Leasers Ltd (formerly of the Irrigation Dept's Mechanical Branch, which maintained over a thousand heavy earth moving and other machines and plant) and the other, the latest, the manufacturing complex of Lanka Loha Ltd., the former State Hardware Corporation.

While there appear to be several questionable reasons behind these national disasters, one reason adduced to these is said to be the excessive age of the machinery etc. in these complexes. The writer, who had been the CEOs at both of these organisations and made operational financial turn arounds has had the opportunity to examine the production machinery of the then successful Kolonnawa Govt. Factory in Sri Lanka and of the then Triumph Motorcycle Factory in the U.K. and was impressed by the yeomen service their machinery, more than 30-years-old at both places were giving at reasonable competitive cost while modern machinery were freely available in the market. Thus the age of the machinery could not be a serious matter for the ingenuity of our workforce. As has been revealed by the media on govt. investigations some of the movable and immovable assets of industrial and commercial organisations that had been privatised have been shrewdly disposed of by the new owners and the govt. made an ass. It is surprising that conditions of privatisation have left room for the new owners, to whom the establishments are handed over to make them viable and earn profits, to rundown the establishments sapping the organisations assets and finally to dispose of the remains

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making a total fortune, that truly should have gone to the State's coffers. Apparently the above two organisations also have faced this disaster in similar ways by indifference of design, adding to the growing dependence of the nation on foreign countries for our related needs.

One reason for permitting this sort of disaster is likely to be that the govt. officials handling these matters have not been competent enough or rather lethargic to visualise the diversely employable value of the machine and plant assets etc. of these establishments for the benefits of the country. Perhaps IMF/World Bank conditions may have been the guidelines, but the local conditions in a poor country like ours would have been taken into account if knowledgeable and patriotic technical personnel had been in those teams. Why while these national disasters are taking place, the many professional organisations, both technical and related non-technical, have been deaf and dumb is perplexing.

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Today everybody wants to join the IT bandwagon or is more interested in making a fast buck through taking tourists for a ride or selling the self respect of our national womanhood as aforesaid. If this trend grows the fate of the true backbone of technology capability, particularly engineering, of our nation will soon be sealed. It is thus a pity that the safeguarding of the national assets like the above that enable development of national capabilities and nurturing of the more inherent potential are being not only overlooked but evidently also channelled towards ultimate total extinguishing of the flame of the national technology capability torch.

While we are supposed to be undergoing technological modernisation diversely paying dearly for it, there is no need to become "suckers", and succumb to the plotting of exploiters and opportunists, who are destroying our national technical and other assets as aforesaid to make a fast buck. There is a doubt as to whether or political decision-makers and advisors in these regards are knowledgeable enough in safeguarding national technological assets both a material and human resource. Whether our technological experts are courageous enough to intervene when paths detrimental to national technological capability development are taken by authorities is another grave issue. There is no doubt technology,

professionalism and political interests are rarely compatible, but still whether our professionals were initially responsible, even partly, for the functional breakdown of these several victim organisations is another factor that needs self-searching and corrective action even at this late stage. professional bodies should take a high responsibility in this respect.

At worst these workshop complexes worth billions could have been turned into training centres for giving the practical innovative training for multiplying ingenious human resources referred to above covering a wide area from craftsman to postgraduate engineer level by, where necessary, upgrading the facilities. The Government need not do entrepreneurial work but should be regulators and facilitators that build the ladders for the potential technological achievers. The above is one avenue for it.

It cannot be said there was an absolute need for the PERC to have to let the State Hardware Corporation to be thrown to the wolves even if it could not produce material goods to make a profit. The complex could have been complementarily utilised for the development of human resources both for local needs and for export by modifying the process and working system. It could have been maintained in the same way as education training colleges, nursing schools, agricultural training centres or even as military academies, where the human resources for the country's economic development and service maintenance of the practical nature are produced, and where opportunities for the development of technological expertise and specialists for local requirements and even for export could be created.

Also State organisations like engineering faculties, National Engineering Research & Development Centre, some govt. engineering related departments with ambitious programmes but without the ware-withal which are dependent on scarce treasury funds, are always in need of facilities like those that are being vandalized as cited above. While saving these engineering complexes for the said purposes, they could serve multi-purposes in

solving national technical problems such as the local processing of Eppawala rock phosphate, environment friendly and self sustaining Urban Garbage Disposal etc. without being pawned to foreign countries or the ADB/IMF/WB; developing and exploiting our own talents.

It is understood that at both the above institutions certain parts of the facilities are still available and are being sold to anybody to make money in the process of this infrastructure disaster. Perhaps the Government or other State institutions like those mentioned above that are badly in need of but unable to procure some facilities, should rush and save what is left of the former government property and equip themselves to boost their capabilities to fulfil the objectives for which they have been set up. The country has capable and dedicated technical personnel to rise to the occasion.

It is to be hoped that of the three dozen loss making government institutions on the card for closure presently will be thoroughly examined to ensure that only non-speculative resurrections even by the private sector are allowed. Where not feasible, they be not exterminated disastrously like the above but the possibility of alternative utilisation for the nation's total economic benefits rather than just for rupees and cents, be intelligently analysed before abandoning hopes.

Without bending too much to the dictates of the international lending agencies, the Government should also tap non-bureaucrat, patriotic and knowledgeable professionals for factual analysis and recommendations for the saving of our national assets like the above.

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