15 · Prawn Farm

IF YOU WERE to draw a map of the homeland that Tamil separatists want to establish in the northern third of Sri Lanka, its southern border would run not too far from the prawn farm that an American biologist named Dale Sarver had been hired to build and manage about sixty miles up the coast from Colombo. Sarver's prawn farm was one of Asia's most ambitious aquaculture projects. It stretched between two traditional Sri Lankan fishing villages, one Tamil, the other Sinhalese, in an uneasy no-man's-land of salt scrub, marshes, and lagoons.

On a soft sand beach near the farm, villagers had whittled the trunk of a palm tree into an ominous point and had painted it white to mark the boundary line between the two settlements. Mostly, the two villages ignored each other, focused as they were on their larger adversary, the sea, but occasionally the two would have a go at each other, knives in hand, around that shiny white totem.

When I met Sarver, my first year in Sri Lanka, I thought it would be instructive to see how a development project like his coped in the midst of a civil war. Yet, while Tamil militants sometimes used one of the villages for smuggling weapons and the Sinhalese villages in the area were hotbeds of JVP extremism, the farm was largely on the peripheries of any fighting. It was, however, in the center of another kind of conflict. This was the war against chronic

underdevelopment and poverty, a contest that played a large role in feeding ethnic tensions. "Do you think we'd have this war if we had the general economic prosperity that you have in America?" the heir to a brewery fortune asked me one night at a Colombo party. His blue-blazered friend added: "So few jobs, so much unemployment. Everybody wants to satisfy their own community first. It is natural, no?"

Arriving in Sri Lanka for the first time, I shared the conventional wisdom about Third World development favored by bureaucrats, economists, and bankers who saw the problem as one of insufficient investment capital, technology, and professional expertise. Put in money and ideas, send in technicians and experts, and it would only be a matter of time before development took root and flourished.

But gradually I began to doubt that pat formulation. Sri Lanka, for example, was awash in development dollars, receiving more foreign aid money per capita than any other country in Asia, half its annual national budget. And Sri Lanka had many engineers and scholars scattered about the world, so the country's problems with development were certainly not a matter of intellectual inferiority or a lack of indigenous expertise. The problem also did not seem to be a function of the punishingly hot climate, inherent native indolence, the distraction of the island's beauty, or any of the other racist saws that an earlier, less enlightened era used to explain away impoverishment. This was, after all, a culture that had built an awesome hydraulic civilization during its Golden Age that had turned ancient Lanka into the granary of Asia. What, then, could explain why its current level of development was so mystifyingly low?

Located on 1,000 sun-blasted, salty acres, the prawn farm was the kind of relatively low-tech, labor-intensive project that should have had very pleasing prospects in Sri Lanka. The flat akaline marshland of the site and the presence of a nearby lagoon fit the required specifications to a tee. The company building the farm, a Sri Lankan-owned consortium, was well capitalized and equipped to take on the project, and had experience as well, having cut its teeth on large-scale contracts it had as part of the Mahaweli Development

Scheme. Although past approaches to development in the country had always focused on large public-sector projects, the Western-leaning Jayawardene government was eager to support a private-sector initiative like the prawn farm in hopes that it would generate jobs and foreign currency. Accordingly, the prawn farm received a special presidential endorsement and preferential status at customs to cut through red tape.

Each pond at the farm was about ten acres square, arranged like ice-cube trays on either side of a narrow dirt road. A network of feeder canals circulated fresh water from the lagoon into the ponds through a series of locks and concrete gates.

Inside Sarver's air-conditioned office, in the trailerlike building that functioned as the project's headquarters, there was an aerial map of the farm, courtesy of the Ministry of National Security, which had stopped giving aerial maps out—shortly after Sarver got his—as a precaution against insurgents. On this map the portions of the farm already completed made the area look like a quilt of giant rice paddies, the most compelling icon in Sinhalese culture and one of the earliest forms of agriculture known to man. One could easily imagine how a relatively unsophisticated technology like shrimp farming could be grafted on top of the cultural fabric and how it would then thrive.

"That's what I thought, too," Sarver said to me in a characteristic growl. "You learn pretty quick around here that nothing is as simple as it should be."

A biologist in his late thirties, Sarver had come to Sri Lanka four years before at the invitation of the farm's owners to manage its construction and to guide it through its initial operating stages. His predecessor, who had originally conceived of the project, was an eccentric British anthropologist who had fled the country, half crazed by the inertia and frustration he experienced trying to get the thing off the ground. Other Westerners involved with the project had also not lasted long. Two New Zealand investors had pulled out after an attack on their house in Colombo during the 1983 riots.

Sarver was the personification of American can-do, his up-front manner of doing things a vivid contrast to the prevailing culture of

indirection and obliquity. This was an approach that proved counterproductive at first. But even the most culturally sensitive demeanor wouldn't improve the project's performance or dissolve the resistance and inertia he had encountered.

On the surface, the government could seem persuasive in its commitment to development efforts like Sarver's. But frequently that persuasive rhetoric rang hollow. That morning of my second visit, for example, Sarver had just been notified that three years after making a commitment to lease two pieces of land critical to the project's completion, the government was now reneging, after caving into complaints from factions in the neighboring villages.

Most of these objections were in fact merely efforts on the part of certain groups within the villages to shake down the farm for more money, even though each village as a whole would stand to lose significant income if these protests drove the farm away. Sinhalese farmers on one side of the farm were saying that they still had leases on the land, despite the fact that no one had cultivated it in over eighty years. On the other side, in the Tamil settlement, villagers were alleging that the farm had dried up its wells, destroyed a cemetery, and spewed poisonous toxins into the air, and that "magic dust" had caused a drought—all charges rooted in the pervasive suspicions toward business organizations in the minds of uneducated, easily manipulated villagers. Although the land in question was too salty for growing anything and too flood-prone for habitation, the village now said it wanted it for grazing, for future expansion, and for the women of the village so they could use it as a toilet on their way into the jungle to gather wood.

It was unsurprising that the local politicians were quick to pander to these doubts and suspicions. Worried about the JVP or the Tigers—a local UNP leader was killed and castrated just the night before I arrived—the local government agent had issued a stop-work order on the farm. The issue would now be referred to a ministry in Colombo for further hearings and deliberation, where it would be either strangled in red tape or resolved along the path of least resistance—in the villagers' favor.

Sarver suspected that the villagers' newfound resistance reflected the increasing influence of a faction of amnestied Tamil militants returning to the village after release from government internment camps. No matter how useless the land was to them, the militants were claiming that the farm was an attempt on the part of the government to nibble away at the "Tamil homeland."

But whatever the specifics of the case, it was an example of a casual attitude toward contracts. "They always leave themselves a back door so they can get out," Sarver explained. "You spend years filling out the forms—so many forms they could choke a horse—and then the government gets a complaint and they say, 'What to do? What to do?' I told them what they could do. They could shove it, that's what they could do. 'Homeland' my ass. That land is a goddamn swamp."

Sarver's bosses, however, were more worried than he about the possibility of personal retribution. We drove out on a high point of land and watched the women from the village bathe in the pools of collected rainwater that had formed where holes had been dug for the aborted ponds. "According to our original projections," he told me, "that land should already be in production. Instead, it's the country's biggest bathtub and toilet."

Another objection to the farm seemed to lie in the fact that high-caste groups in the villages would be deprived by the farm of a cheap, easily exploited pool of labor and a needy market for moneylending. With steady work and upward mobility, the lower castes would no longer be beholden to the old feudal hierarchy.

The fact that most jobs at the farm required manual labor upset the sensitivities of the upper-caste villagers, too. "All these guys want to do is grow their fingernails long," Sarver explained, referring to the habit that symbolized exemption from low-status manual toil. "Then they want to sit behind a desk all day and grow shrimp in little teacups. I had one guy whom I made get down in the mud just as everybody else does when they first start out and he started getting hysterical. 'What if people see me working?' he cried." Sarver also explained that the nephew of the village headman expected a supervisor's job right off the bat and a motorcycle on which to get around the farm. But when he wound up with a job several notches lower

down, and a pedal bike as well, the taunts of his village cronies made him lose a great amount of face and he quit—issuing a blanket death threat to anyone who had anything to do with the farm.

Caste conditioning was obvious in the Tamil village next to the farm, which I visited later that day. Though it was a vivid, timeless place, the village was badly in need of some kind of economic infusion. Passed over for any development but a government clinic, it reeked of squalor and abjection. Many of the villagers wouldn't talk to me, because, as one of them explained, "I was not from there." But those who did talk voiced a battery of complaints about the farm: that it was exploitative and multinational (though, in fact, it was wholly Sri Lankan-owned); that they had been sold out by Sinhalese politicians (the agreements were actually with their own village elders); and that the farm was taking the best land in the whole area (by all measures it was a swamp with little value for anything else). Soon, however, I got to the core of the problem. "Our men don't want these laborer jobs," one Tamil named Nal told me. He admitted that the term "our men" meant those in his caste group. "They have studied. Some of them even have their A- and O-level certificates. They deserve better. Now they only have work in their fields for us at that farm. We cannot do that. And neither can our women. Our women cannot do that kind of work either." And what about the overall benefit to the community as a whole? Wasn't that something to think about in assessing its value? Nal stared at me blankly.

At the farm, high-caste workers were unable to accept orders from lower-caste superiors. Caste also made it hard for Sarver's workers to absorb the idea of being rewarded on the basis of merit and abilities, something most Westerners take for granted. "They look at a job and see absolutely different things than we do," Sarver explained. "Work here is a matter of fulfilling a role, having a title and a position detached from what you produce or how you perform. A job here is about fulfilling obligations on the surface with little sense of the substance underneath it.

"The main point of my job is to get them to change their values, to recognize that their rewards on this job should be based on what they produce and the decisions they make, and not on their titles

and backgrounds. But that is asking a lot—it goes completely against the grain. You just can't be part of this culture psychologically and do the kind of jobs we have here. It takes a flexibility of mind we would take totally for granted but one they simply don't have."

Sarver and I had planned a trip for the next morning along the coast road toward the local *kachcheri*, or district offices. Despite the backing and blessings of the central government, Sarver had to get approvals at the local level and from every one of the many ministries regulating the project in Colombo—more than a dozen. Not only were these agencies frequently conflicting, but each was paralyzed by bureaucratic inertia.

That day, Sarver was going to try to get the *kachcheri* to hurry up on a plan he had submitted nearly eight months earlier. Since his assistant who had been handling the matter wasn't of a high enough caste, apparently, to deal with the situation, Sarver was going to go himself. He was already irritable. He had gotten up early for a 5 a.m. meeting with an important government minister, only to find that his assistant had made a mistake and the meeting was supposed to be at 5 p.m.

Part of the reason the skeins of red tape were so impenetrable was that the government civil service had become swollen with Sinhalese clerks who would go jobless otherwise; many of these clerks had sympathies with socialistic policies of the past and were resentful of private-sector initiatives like the prawn farm, especially since the private sector paid better. Like the rest of the country's political institutions, the civil service was less concerned with administration and governing than with asserting its own status. Often deeply in debt because of the spiraling cost of living, the burden of feeding an extended family, and providing for funerals, bureaucrats at every level used their positions unblushingly for personal enrichment. At almost every point in the system, some kind of bribe or back scratching was required, although Sarver resisted, because once he began doing so, there would be no end to it.

An emergency that afternoon held us back, but as we drove around the farm on the daily rounds, Sarver regaled me with some

of his personal frustrations with the bureaucracy. The week before, he had gone up to the *kachcheri* and had sat for hours watching clerks snooze at their desks while villagers with petitions sat forlornly waiting for an audience. That day Sarver sat for most of the day waiting for the man he was to meet. Every half hour the secretary assured him that "he will come now" or "he will come soon." "They'll just say that over and over again," Sarver said in a traumatized monotone. "Over and over, instead of telling you plain out that he isn't coming back that day. I once sat in an office in Colombo all day listening to that. Turned out the guy I was looking for was in Africa on a trip. You never get a straight answer."

Even when the right person was there, however, there was little satisfaction. "Most people who petition the *kachcheri* for anything just wind up throwing in the towel," he said, scowling. "You can get the runaround for years. No one explains what the procedures are and they are never consistent two different times anyway. No one takes any initiative or approaches anything with any foresight or takes responsibility for seeing something through. There are always a dozen people to see before you get to anyone who can make the final decision, but there's never really any final decision because no one ever has full and final authority—or exercises it, anyway—because they always want a back door out of the decision to avoid accountability. They will say yes just to shoo you away, but there is a genetic propensity against making decisions here and the matter just stays on some guy's desk, never acted upon. You know there's a good chance he won't act upon it, but you don't want to force anything, because that will really stop him from doing anything, and he knows that and can blow you off with a 'yes, yes' and there's still nothing you can do when nothing happens. He'll blame the mails, or the guy in the other office. If what you are asking him requires a decision on his part, he'll avoid it. Really, I've seen them run right out the door when I've come in needing a signature. Usually a guy will dodge it until you go over his head and his boss orders him to do it and then its okay because it's not his ass on the line anymore, and if anyone down the line gets upset at the decision, they won't come after him."

Once Sarver had to go all the way to Colombo to get a minister's authorization for a *kachcheri* surveyor to come to the farm. When they got back to the *kachcheri*, however, the chief of surveyors balked, claiming that he didn't have a vehicle or a spare crew to do the job. The real reason he balked, Sarver later found out, was that the authorization letter from the ministry bore the previous day's date and he didn't want to act too quickly and give the impression that he had been bribed. "Obviously," Sarver explained, "it is so rare here that anything gets done in a timely manner that when it does, it means the guy has been paid off." Sarver says he had to wait a week before the chief wrote the authorization for a surveyor to come out. The surveyor then waited a week himself before he arrived to do the job. "I was dumbfounded," said Sarver. "But stuff like that happens all the time."

In Sarver's office there was a sign hanging beside his charts and schedules: "Doing Something Wrong Is Better Than Doing Nothing at All."

"I keep trying to tell them that," Sarver explained as we took a tour of the hatchery where the growing of prawn larvae would take place once the facility was completed. "But they are so deathly afraid of doing something wrong that they will often just stand there and do nothing. Their eyes glaze over, their faces lock up, and they just go completely blank."

However simple the mechanics of prawn farming actually were, disaster could strike with lightning speed, which required workers with fast reflexes. Most of the jobs, even those performed by supervisors, could be handled by high school dropouts in America, Sarver said. But getting his workers, who often lacked confidence and initiative, to make those relatively simple on-the-spot decisions was a major challenge.

Part of the problem was that the Sri Lankan family structure led individuals to defer to authority in almost every decision. Another factor was the deep concern for losing face, which made workers overly cautious about even the simplest responsibilities to the point of paralysis. In addition there were the basic conceptual orientations

of Sri Lanka: an Eastern notion of time, in which the concept of five minutes meant something entirely different to Sarver and to his workers, and a hazy sense of accuracy, which made precise measurements difficult. Beyond these there was also cultural resistance to the Western notion of cause and effect.

"The point of the task happens on a level they just don't grasp," Sarver said. "They approach everything with incredible tunnel vision, thinking only about discharging their obligation to you, not the substance of the task. Rote tasks are fine, but if the job requires the least amount of creative interpretation or foresight, you are cooked. They do everything by program, and if the program doesn't fit exactly, they just stand around and say, 'What to do? What to do?' We go over the procedures again and again. But the connections are just not made."

Another problem hindering operations at the farm, especially those like running the hatchery that required a certain amount of coordination, was the fragmentation of the workplace. Besides the obvious fault lines of ethnicity and caste, there was the Sri Lankan capacity for envy, which discouraged cooperation and often prompted workers to undermine each other's labors so they'd look bad, since one worker's gain was seen necessarily as another's loss.

To compensate for all these traits, Sarver said he had been forced to break down tasks, even the most elementary ones, "into the tiniest components—to a very specific and simple chain of command that doesn't require discretion, or even common sense." The hatchery, for example, would have to be manned by twice as many workers as were necessary in other parts of the world.

Nevertheless, mishaps were impossible to prevent. Just the day before, workers had emptied a pond prematurely, a mistake that killed most of the shrimp. Another day, a senior supervisor was asked to post a sign requesting that a generator not be turned off, and thought a tiny index card would suffice, resulting in a ruined generator. An old man was hired to release water through a feeder canal when the depth reached three feet. Since, however, he put his measuring rod into the water at a forty-five-degree angle, he released the water at two feet. Even the professional staff made obtuse

and expensive errors, like the engineers who failed to account for topographical adjustments in their blueprints.

Besides the constant aggravation of having to cope with mistakes, there was the added frustration of not being able to hold anyone accountable. "If someone screws up, it's never their fault. They are never confronted or fired. It's like the rain. Things just happen. No one ever makes this or that happen. They just happen."

With subordinates unable to make decisions independently, even the most minor matters were pushed upstairs for his review. "It's all pissant stuff. But no one else will make the call. It may seem comical, but taken together, it's torture."

Just then, a man came to Sarver's door and looked inside apprehensively. He stepped away, but returned a few moments later looking even more anxious. Finally, he approached and whispered something to Sarver, who scowled and began pulling on his gum boots. One of the ponds was going through an oxygen crash, threatening more than a ton of shrimp.

When we got to the pond it was half drained. Thousands of shrimp wriggled in the mud. The man had started to harvest the pond later in the day than he should have, and the hot sun had caused an irreversible depletion of the oxygen in the pond, suffocating the shrimp. As workers picked their way nervously around him, Sarver stood on the bank of the pond, arms akimbo, trying to restrain his volcanic temper. He would have loved to throw a fit, but in that control-conscious society doing so would have caused him to lose face in the eyes of his workers. I had seen the foreman pacing around outside his office for several minutes before coming in, trying to think of a way to avoid being the bearer of bad news. "It's the old lockup syndrome," Sarver replied, shaking his head back and forth in frustration. "Once he takes his thumb out of his ass and works up the nerve to tell me something's wrong, it is too late."

Although Sarver put extra time and effort into training his workers, many of them were reluctant to ask their trainers to clarify their instructions. To do so in South Asian culture was an affront to the teacher's abilities and a challenge to his authority. Asking a simple question was also an admission on the part of the questioner that he

hadn't understood what was just conveyed. To a Western trainee, this would be a minor matter at most, but to Sri Lankans it was fraught with much heavier implications, involving concepts of face and shame.

As the shrimp hopped pathetically on the bottom of the pond straining for oxygen and dying from overexposure to the sun, workers flailed their arms wildly to shoo away a flock of birds that had swooped down for a feed. Surveying the wreckage, Sarver shook his head disappointedly. "An hour is all it takes around here for the whole house of cards to come tumbling down."

Having gotten a pretty good sense of ground-level development problems as Sarver had experienced them, I was eager to talk to international development officials in Colombo to get their idea of the role that social and cultural factors played in frustrating their expensive efforts. But the people I spoke to were either unable or unwilling to talk about such problems. Few development officials ever got out into the field to get an appreciation of how profoundly different Sri Lankan society was, and with their focus on gargantuan budgets for economic stimulation, the practical issues of front-line development simply didn't engage them.

Behind this official avoidance, though, lurked a theoretical inability to deal with the cultural basis of chronic underdevelopment as well as a fear of being labeled "ethnocentric"—or worse. Ironically, the single development official in Colombo who was candid about culturally rooted development problems was the one who enjoyed the greatest popularity among Sri Lankans, John Guyer, who had run the Asia Foundation in Colombo for more than five years. Guyer's friendships, however, did not make him shy away from making honest, and in many cases unflattering, appraisals of the society, although, with his keen cultural sensitivity, he was usually discreet when expressing them.

"There's very little interest in exploring the facts of life that make most things tick here," Guyer told me one morning in the interior courtyard of his home. "There are professional no-nos in the official community here and an insularity. They have a kind of

professional immunity from having to confront these things. They are allowed—no, encouraged—to ignore these things. It is a strange vacuum that they allow themselves to live in—an air-conditioned, sealed-off world of the bungalow, the office compound, and the club. And the walls get higher every day because every one is afraid to leave Colombo. People inside simply ignore the realities on the ground. There's not much curiosity to begin with, and they know they are going to spend a few years here and then move on to a new assignment. The constraints of time and the constraints of the contacts they are allowed to make give them a superficial feel for the real rhythm of life here. And even if they did focus on what was really at work here—or not, as the case may be—there's no way for them to channel it. The real bases of things here, psychologically and culturally, the things that the charts and graphs and budgets are all anchored in, are studiously avoided—or denied."

Even if the development community at large could admit social and cultural barriers, however, it would be unlikely that their insights would be appreciated, given the resistance imposed by the prickly climate of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism. To challenge Sinhalese culture and customs was "an unpatriotic act—an affront to national self-esteem and dignity," as one former columnist asserted. "Their attitude is: 'This is the way we are. Don't ask us to change.' It is our nationalism and the feelings of specialness and superiority that make us feel this way. We Sinhalese see ourselves as the sons of the soil, entitled to the fruits of development without ever really having to work for it ourselves. Politicians inculcate people with these attitudes, never mentioning the duties and responsibilities we should have, but always harping on our rights and due rewards. They emphasize the duties that the employer has to workers, but never the reverse, what the workers should give in return. The same goes for foreign aid. We think we, the superior Sinhalese, are entitled to this money, and never think that we should make adjustments in ourselves to make things work. In the popular mind, the money is completely disassociated from the results it should have. And in the process we have not seen that we have become a

beggar country, always with our hands out. We are so busy harking back to our past glorious heritage that we don't see we are losing our self-respect in the here and now."

Rather than acknowledge the liabilities of tradition, nationalists blamed the country's development dilemmas on the intrusion of the West; were it not for Western colonialism, they said, Sri Lanka would have become one of the more sophisticated countries on earth, through its superior Buddhist values and heritage. Development had failed because, so far, development efforts had been insufficiently nationalistic. What was really needed was a model for economic development that tapped into the power of traditional values and culture, one contained in Jatika Chintanaya—National Ideology—as espoused by the JVP.

To think otherwise was to be a Western supremacist, I was told by one of the more ardent nationalists teaching at the University of Colombo, a Sinhala Buddhist ideologue named Naline De Silva. His ideas had a great deal of influence with the JVP and its student supporters. We were sitting in De Silva's tiny, sweltering office, though the campus had been closed for weeks because of JVP-inspired unrest. I was a little leery of being so close to De Silva: in addition to having set student brownshirts on colleagues who had crossed or challenged him, he had "cuffed" at least one other academic who had made the mistake of debating him in public.

If his bearing was unnerving, his ideas were even more so. Policies shaped by Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism after 1956 were basically on the right track, he said. The problem was that they just hadn't had enough time to take root and flourish. It was the same in Pol Pot's Cambodia, Khomeini's Iran, and Mao's China, he maintained. They were all guided by basically sound ideas that had somehow been twisted: "logical responses to colonial domination and Western influence that were perverted because people did not think things through enough."

The point of my questions was basically straightforward: however much one could argue or bemoan it, development, in both the East and the West, had only come to countries that had a culture of productivity, which was very much at odds with the prevailing cultural ethos in Sri Lanka. How, then, could a vision for economic development that self-consciously celebrated traditional "cultural purity" spur needed change and economic growth?

Although I phrased my questions as gingerly as I could, De Silva took almost immediate offense, accusing me of using terms such as "efficiency," "productivity," and "supply and demand" that were "value-laden" and implied objectivity when in fact they were not. "That's the problem with all you Westerners," De Silva yelled at me. "You think there is only one way—your way!"

De Silva's values were similar on the subject of teaching English in the universities. Arguments in favor of English, he replied, only showed how brainwashed people had become by the myth of Western cultural superiority. But, I asked, wasn't it clear that increasing the number of English speakers would help the country compete internationally and thereby increase general levels of prosperity? Wasn't that the nature of the world these days, and wasn't that hard to change without allowing the country to turn in upon itself in a ruinous economic insularity?

De Silva glowered. "But we Sinhalese want to *change* the world," he responded. "We want to and we will. At least the Sri Lankan world."

But what about countries like Singapore and Hong Kong? They didn't get to their level of economic prosperity by fetishizing their traditional culture and refusing to learn English.

De Silva paused for a second and then exploded. "That's the whole point. We don't want to be like them. Who ever told you we wanted to be like them? They are only an imitation of New York and Paris. We do not want that. They have had to sell their souls for that."

Then which country provided a model for the kind of development they foresaw?

"What kind of country is a model for us?" he pondered. "That's just the problem. There is no country that provides us with a model because the whole world has been ruined by Western domination. Africa, Latin America—areas that could have developed great cultures on their own were ruined."

Then, as if a light went on over his head, De Silva's face brightened. "What do you know about Burma?" he asked me, his eyes narrowing as if he had a secret.

I told him what I knew. Ruinous economic policies and isolationism. Worthless currency. Staggering official corruption. There probably wasn't a country on earth that had made as many mistakes except maybe Cambodia.

"Well, yes," he mused, still attached to his fancy. "I guess what we would want is Burma, but Burma without the mistakes."

The Burmese experiment was cited positively by another Sinhalese proponent of Jatika Chintanaya, a left-leaning MP. "The elite in this country still looks to the West for its values and modes of living and for solutions to the country's problems," he said, "but their way has not worked for the bulk of the country. We are in a mess today because we have tried to follow a Western approach and it hasn't worked. For forty years we've followed a path of nonindigenous development and where has it taken us? We should have development here. We are a rich tropical country. We have the highest literacy rate in the Third World. We have the sea. We could make power from the sea.

"All we are asking is to revive indigenous assets and resources in our culture that have been destroyed and suppressed by the dominating social classes for the last four centuries. What we need is a development program more in tune with our national culture and its primary values—harmony with nature, egalitarian fairness, equality. There could be a lot of romanticism in that, yes. But one has to have a certain amount of romanticism to keep idealism going. Forty years of these Western-style policies have brought complete failure and an incredible level of debt to foreign lending organizations. We have to search our souls and think what else we can do."

My friend N., on the other hand, found much of the nationalist nostalgia contradictory and unsupportable. Yes, colonialism might have damaged the culture's creative capacities, but it did not follow that reviving traditional Buddhist culture would undo that damage or meet contemporary needs. "Like it or not, we are no longer living in the tenth century and have to depend on the outside world," he

insisted. "Their vision is absurd. Who will bring the letters, run the telephone service? What role does the bus system play, the motorcar, the modern hospital? Nostalgia won't get us anywhere. Maybe you can do it if your population is stable and all your wealth is self-generated. But never here. If the harbor is closed for three weeks, we'll starve. There will be no food and no fuel. It'll be a disaster."

A colleague of N.'s known for sympathies with the nationalist sensibility, at least on an emotional level, saw cause for alarm as well. "It doesn't make sense except in the most insular political and economic terms," he warned. "This ideology, with its concepts of cultural supremacy and its Luddite approach to modern economics and industrial production, can't work in today's world. But as we know, a lot of things that cannot work have an awful lot of appeal."

Sarver almost choked, a few weeks later, when I told him about my conversations with some of the proponents of National Ideology. "Burma without the mistakes! Burma without the mistakes! There is no Burma without the mistakes!"

Throughout its life, nationalism in one form or another had posed persistent problems for the prawn farm. Originally, the government had made an attractive promise to help the owners capitalize the project, but loans to small Sinhalese farmers, the literal "sons of the soil," took precedence. A tract of nearby land that the farm could have used as an alternate site couldn't be leased for prawn farming because it had at one time been planted in rice, after which it was virtually impossible to use for anything else, under legislation passed in the fifties when smallholder rice farming and the pastoral tradition it represented were apotheosized. Furthermore, there was the trouble posed by the very nature of shrimp farming itself. Although the Sinhalese ate seafood as a regular part of the diet, the more fundamentalistic Buddhists objected when the government put its institutional support behind "inland fisheries" like the prawn farm, claiming it violated Buddhist prohibitions against unnecessary slaughter.

Work that week, as it was one week every month, had been greatly slowed by an observance of the full moon called Poya. Work-

ers would take not only Poya day off but the day before and the day after, to travel—via a heavily subsidized transportation network—to visit relatives. When all the traditional holidays were added up, along with the dozen Poya days thrown in, the law mandated nearly 180 days off for workers.

But on my final visit to the farm, Sarver had more on his mind than the problems posed by the politics of national identity. The JVP had recently tried to assassinate a bank manager in Colombo who was known to be a strict disciplinarian with workers. Sarver was beginning to worry that a disgruntled employee might cook up a story to get the JVP to put a hit on him. The JVP in the area was assuming a much more visible profile, prompting security forces to make more frequent stops at the farm to interrogate workers. The JVP had also recently declared that nongovernmental organizations doing development work, like Save the Children and various European groups, were actually "agents of neocolonialism" and were therefore unwelcome. People in the area often mistakenly thought that the farm was one such project. "Their attitude is totally paranoid," a former JVPer had told me in Colombo, describing the reasoning behind the JVP declaration on nongovernmental organizations. "They think they are all out to undermine our culture and must be stopped."

And then the prawn farm had run into its most life-threatening snag to date. The trouble involved a lawsuit between one faction of the board of directors and the other. One group, predominantly Sinhalese, was accusing the other, predominantly Tamil, of management improprieties and playing with the books. The real issue, however, was that the Sinhalese faction did not want company revenues to be reinvested, but instead wanted them issued as dividends to stockholders, many of whom were assembling funds in order to leave the country. If the faction wanting the dividends won out in court, there was a chance that they might pull the plug on the farm, flushing four years of Sarver's life down the drain. Fortunately, the court was nowhere near to a resolution, as the judge had still not decided whether he should allow testimony to be given in English, the first language of the two Tamil partners, or in Sinhala, that of the other board members.

In the meantime, however, the court action made it impossible for Sarver or anyone else at the farm to make authorizations for major purchases and currency transfers. As a result, equipment vital to the hatchery operation was stuck in customs at the port. The port was a renowned sinkhole of corruption, red tape, and bureaucratic intrigue, and Sarver looked with dread upon an expedition there.

The last night there, I stayed with Sarver and his wife, Anne, at their bungalow. That evening a blizzard of butterflies swarmed around the house. It was an arresting sight, yet Sarver, suffering from burnout, didn't seem to notice. He spoke now more like a jaded Peace Corps volunteer than a frustrated professional. He had originally envisioned the prawn farm as a way to put poor villagers to work in an area that really needed it. He had also hoped that Anne would use the farm as a nucleus for health and nutrition improvement programs, her specialty. But while the farm had brought benefits in the form of new houses, marriages, and confidence for those working there, it had also generated an incredible amount of resentment and resistance.

"You could build someone a house here and they'd send it back and order you to put another room on it," he complained in a rare moment of self-pity. "Sometimes I get the feeling that they just don't want all this stuff. It's put on them by Western organizations, and they go along with it because here they go along with everything, at least on the surface. And if they see something in it for themselves, so much the better. That's why the politicians are gung ho for it, because of the money they can rake in. But personally I don't see any real striving to improve things from their end, any solid commitment to development at any level. They want it both ways, I guess. They want the consumer goods and the trappings of modernization that come with development, but they do not want to lose their identity or look at their values and blame themselves for the way things are going here. The trouble is, they can't have it both ways."