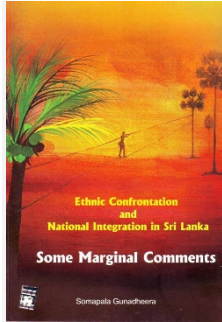


## SOME MARGINAL COMMENTS

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### Insights on dealing with administrative challenges

Reviewed by A.C.Visvalingam

Somapala Gunadheera's book SOME MARGINAL COMMENTS is about Ethnic Confrontation and National Integration in Sri Lanka, which were often the subjects of his articles to the Press over the past ten years or so. It is a selected set of these articles which has been assembled in this book.

Gunadheera's personal background has had a profound influence on the consistent stance that he has adopted with regard to both the origins and nature of the "National Problem". Born in a multi-ethnic, back street community in Colombo, he moved to the rural hinterland before embarking on a journey that took him, by dint of persistence and the blessings of high intelligence, to attain senior positions in the public administration. Unlike those born in a mono-ethnic and mono-cultural background, he obviously had no difficulty in looking at related issues through efficient wide-angle lenses. The consistent effort he has made in his writings to persuade those in power to adopt an objective and, at the same time, philanthropic approach to dealing with minority needs, fears and aspirations has never wavered.

Gunadheera's collection contains many suggestions made by him over a period of several years to solve the ethnic problem and to overcome the many ancillary obstacles which were preventing the principal stakeholders from even sitting down together in a spirit of constructive engagement, let alone discussing any solutions. His analyses and proposals usually dealt with meeting specific situations at specific times and were not meant to be all-encompassing panaceas. Looking back at what he stood and continues to stand for, it is really depressing to contemplate how much of his good advice has been wasted. Indeed, as one continues to read article after article, the reality that one is repeatedly confronted with is how resistant our leaders are to re-evaluating those issues on which they have strong preconceived opinions. Objectivity is not a strong point in the make-up of most people because it calls upon them to re-examine their own views from time to time. Such re-examination requires much mental effort. The approaches to national problem-solving that are

given in the book demand a capacity for concentration and critical assessment that appears to be beyond the reach of most of our politicians and some popular leaders of negative public opinion.

The concern shown by Gunadheera to relieve the sufferings of the refugees in the North, who were being inhumanely shuttled back and forth as part of battle strategies, can be seen to originate from his deep commitment to the fundamental truths that Buddha taught. The author gives a few examples of how he was able to handle the logistical hurdles that had to be overcome in providing sustenance to those in dire need. The generosity of spirit that enabled him to do this kind of humanitarian work, despite the generally slow bureaucratic machinery in which he was a cog, is a striking feature of his character.

The articles also point out the need to avoid a patronizing approach with regard to handling the ethnic issue. He says: "Perhaps the initial misconception is the impulsive assumption that the conflict has to be settled by a 'grant' of concessions from one sector of the nation to another. There can be no 'grantors' or 'grantees' among ethnic groups in a nation. Once a community is inside, it should automatically be entitled to all the privileges of citizenship. These privileges are inbuilt and non-negotiable". Also: "Claims of a community with lesser numbers are identical with those of another with larger numbers, for these claims are acquired by birth and not by force of numbers". It is the difficulty that a lot of people in power find in accepting these propositions which has prevented a non-divisive but equitable solution being found to our longstanding conflicts.

One particularly incisive comment made in 2008 by the author read: "(the) announcement of a package acceptable to the average Tamil would be more deadly to the LTTE than all the weaponry of the armed forces put together". As it happens, the authorities are now claiming that the LTTE is trying to re-form in the North. If this is really the case, it would be wise of the authorities to give serious heed to this particularly perspicacious point made by Gunadheera.

An often-ignored truth that he highlights is the fact that, even in schools that have students in all three language streams, there is little opportunity for inter-mixing. The pupils in each stream go about their work and play mostly in association with those in their own language stream. He expresses the hope that "those in charge of education, now kept busy over setting and re-setting exam papers, would soon be spared the time to discharge their most fundamental duty: the creation of a full fledged nation out of a fragmented and compartmentalized people".

A Bill of Rights, religious intolerance, treatment of IDPs, the Constitution, education for national integration, compensation for war victims, investigation of human rights violations and many other subjects have been grist to the Gunadheera mill but restrictions on space militate against any discussion of these topics here.

In summary, Gunadheera's logic of how he dealt with difficult administrative challenges and how he would deal with even bigger problems which await a solution is presented by him in a very clear manner that would enable the same methodology to be applied to a wide range of governmental responsibilities.