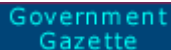


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Rare contributions of an eminent Sri Lankan

by Manel Abeyssekera, Dr. Leslie Herath and Nalaka Gunawardena

It was early in the year 1980 at Bangalore, on the eve of opening of the final high level meeting of officials of South Asian countries for setting up what was to become SACEP, the South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme, which Prof. Suriyakumaran, then the UN's Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific had carefully nurtured in a series of prior discussions, studies and documentations.

Suriyakumaran with his team had already taken up position at Bangalore which was deliberately chosen, and many of the delegations had also arrived, when Suriyakumaran's senior most deputy, and Indian IAS officer on secondment, came scurrying to him. He had just informally visited the Head of the Indian delegation, to be told in no uncertain terms that he had his brief from the highest quarters of his Government to oppose the setting up of this intended organisation, stretching from Iran and Afghanistan through to all of South Asia. The deputy, all agitated, suggested that he calls on the head of the Indian delegation, to which the latter simply replied that there would be no such thing; and that we shall be meeting at the assembly hall the next day.

The polite exchanges and the opening protocols concluded, Suriyakumaran expounded the whole philosophy, background, purposes, and the shared destiny that awaited us South Asians. He only reinforced his views with example of this having been already preceded by his initiatives in the highly successful establishments of similar environmental groupings, for ASEAN and in the South Pacific.

The meeting went on, with contributions, exchanges and expositions, and at the end adopted one of the most enthusiastic endorsements of what was to become SACEP the next year at Colombo.

It had transpired later that the Head of the Indian delegation was so completely convinced as to personally intercede with his own government and change the entire decision.

The head became one of the greatest votaries of Suriyakumaran, whom he later described as having been "responsible for bringing forward in South Asia the crucial importance of environmentally sustainable development long before the concept itself came to be formulated in the Brundtland Report" - a sentiment reflected profusely by others such as Prof. George Francis of Canada, Ken Piddington of Australia and others, in their contributions to Prof. Suriyakumaran's Felicitation Volume in 1995 on the occasion of his being awarded the United Nations - Sasakawa World Environmental Prize.

In that volume the late T. B. Subasinghe who sponsored the felicitation, referred to a number of similar initiatives and breakthroughs, jointly or singly, in establishing these, during his long years in the United Nations - first as Deputy Executive Secretary for Asia and the Far East and later UNEP's Regional Director for Asia and Pacific and Global Director for Education and Training and Technical Assistance at headquarters.

These outstanding institutions included the creation of the Asian Development Bank in 1965 in the teeth initially of US opposition; and thereafter the Asian Clearing Union and the Coconut Community all in the teeth of developed country or multi-nationals vested interest. There were others of similar high importance as well.

Said Subasinghe, "Few parallels perhaps exist of individuals having been in the center of so many achievements", and K. B. Lall of India simply declared, "It was his style and above all his intellectual integrity which enabled him to win the confidence of national delegates, build bridges over their differences and help evolve consensual solutions... There is opportunity for international civil servants today to bring to bear his spirit and skill, and do their duty for poor nations in the global economy".

The first named signatory to this tribute (Manel Abeysekera) had the privilege of being witness as Charge d' Affaires/Ambassador to UN at Bangkok during the Suriyakumaran years; having also known of him as a protege of her father E. W. Kannangara, permanent secretary to S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike in 1945 and later.

The second signatory (Leslie Herath) had the privilege of following his every contribution in Asia in the Environment field: the third (Nalaka Gunawardene) had been his young associate from the days of his return to Sri Lanka, and editor on behalf of the late T. B. Subasinghe of the felicitation volume.

In these days of recommendations to tie salaries to incentives, and short listing UN dignitaries by their being Under-Secretary Generals, Prof. Suriyakumaran pursued his goals, as he would say in the words of his first mentor U Nyun of Asia, "simply in honesty of purpose and a sense of mission", a remarkable performance considering his having been denied his country's support twice during his UN career for the highest positions, at each significant stage of his career.

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