

India and Sri Lanka

Touching Distances

being the Bernard Soysa Centenary Commemoration Oration

by

Gopalkrishna Gandhi

Colombo

9 May, 2014

I am deeply grateful to the Bernard Soysa Centenary Commemoration Committee and to Professor Tissa Vitarana , in particular, for inviting me to give this prestigious Oration. And I am thankful to H.E.Shri Y. K. Sinha, the High Commissioner for India and to the India-Sri Lanka Foundation for facilitating my coming, the first since I left its shores twelve years ago.

Tributes and their scope

I pay tribute to Bernard Soysa as one who held offices, one whom offices did not hold ; as one who held fast to socialism, but whom socialist politics did not hold in chains ; as one who held esteem but whom esteem did not hold hostage. Bernard Soysa had status, but he had something else of greater moment, namely, stature, the stature of an intellect twinned to public purpose and un-twinned from sectarian bias, parochial pinch-heartedness and, generally, from that common malady in politics everywhere – sheer, shameless, self-advancement. Socialist politics are not entirely free of this malady but there lingers in the socialist mind a strong influence of the socialist ethic which strengthens its auto-immunity. Like prayer, remorse and atonement, socialist ethics are invoked penitentially. They do not always change things but are deeply cleansing. We should not , however, romanticise the Left. If the Left has had , very elevatingly, its high moments, it continues, very energetically, to have its low moments ; ‘low’ not in the sense of moments when it has been beaten – others have those too – but in the sense of slipping below its own ideals, its ethic and knowing it has done so.

Among socialism’s ‘highs’ the world over is to be able to see the human condition beyond narrow localisms. Bernard Soysa could see India from Lanka and Lanka from India, redemptively. He was Lankan enough to know that Indian elbow room ended where Lankan breathing space began. But he was also Indo-Lankan enough to know that breezes, waves and tsunamis , both physical and metaphysical fill, like an air-bag, the touching distance, tantalizingly hyphenated, between the political geographies and geographical politics of India and Sri Lanka.

Since, like many of his colleagues in the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, Bernard Soysa knew India better than many Indians and cared for India deeply, I would like to dedicate to his memory some reflections on how Sri Lanka and India, and the Lankan and Indian Left, within touching distance of each other, may respond to the challenges that hover about us.

India, Sri Lanka and their touching distances

Two Lankans have educated me about the touching distances between India and Sri Lanka. They are Siran Deraniyagala, the pioneering archaeologist and Hector Abhayavardhana, the Trotskyist philosopher.

The initiator of the first stratified excavation of the Citadel in Anuradhapura said to me that until about 7000 years ago, the sea around Adam's Bridge was 10 metres lower than it now is. This, he explained, meant that the southeast coast of India and the northwest coast of Sri Lanka were, at that not all that remote time, joined. What is now a chain of soft islets between Dhanushkodi and Talaimannar, or the stretch of whimsical waves between Point Calimere and Point Pedro, was solid land over which ancient man, ancient woman and, we may add, ancient elephant and other quadrupeds must have moved at ease, doubtless in both directions.

At some point, seawaters rose above and engulfed the low-lying land link. Why would seawaters have risen then? Did our planet go through a phase of global warming then? Did a giant meteor punch a hole on or near that landmass? Or did a tsunami of gigantic proportion alter its topography? One wonders. But leaving those questions to experts, we may take note of the fact that what was a continuity, perhaps a boring one, became a 'within touching distance' separation. Be that as it might, by geological and ecological quirks, there arose, with a distinct new-moon edging of its own, the fascinating emerald isle that compasses rusted by salt air, maps limp with brine and telescopes misted over by the spray of dizzy waves, drew men from across the globe, with motives mixed, to its embrace.

In telling me about the ancient dis-jointure, Siran Deraniyagala was not thinking of political boundaries; he was sharing an archaeologically-derived anthropological insight that helped me understand how utterly hilarious is the fantasy of stand-alone races created and preserved by an absent-minded geology. I do not fancy the word 'stock' for it reminds the vegetarian in me of my fear of soups in random restaurants though listed as 'vegetarian' coming, nonetheless, out of a very large vessel-ful of something very thick and very non-vegetarian called 'stock'. The fact is that the humans traversing this vestibule and peopling both its ends, in other words, our ancestors were, doubtless all vigorously non-vegetarian, of course, from the same stock.

The sea coming in where it now is, did not impede more and different men and women coming to the island from both the east and west coasts of what was evolving into India, by sea routes. There must have been vigorous sea-faring in the reverse direction as well and we can assume that a slightly home-sick Rani Rangamma, the last Queen of Kandy, while voyaging to Ceylon, crossed slightly sea-sick Menikes and Kumarihamys, voyaging in the opposite direction as well. Few Lankans, therefore, are without some Indian derivation, recent or remote. ‘Ayyo!’, some may exclaim but there it is. And not a few Indians are likely to carry serendipitous DNAs in them and not, I may add, as many here may like very selectively if not excludingly to think, in the Bengal-Odisha region alone.

Geography forms itself with no interest in its popularity. Politics gives those forms names, very mindfully of mass appeal. Given names say more about the name-giver than about the named. Have not many of us, at some point or another, wished our parents had given us another name? Seven thousand years ago, that yet nameless landmass between the Himalaya and the seas, would not have known, if it could ‘know’ anything, that something looking like petrified wood, called a ‘Constitution’ would, millennia later, name it after a river, ‘India’, that its southern extremity would self-name itself after a very distinctive language, ‘Tamil Nadu’. And that the new island south of even that extreme south would, by something called an Amending Act of Parliament, be named, after a very distinctive ‘something’, we may assume, ‘Sri Lanka’.

Time’s continental creativity is matched by her offsprings’ nomenclatural ingenuity.

‘The pendant on the neck of India’ is how the ‘neck’ sometimes likes to think of this jewel. The emerald, most definitely, has a rather different image of its place under the sun. The Indian jeweller’s image, though mercifully now in disuse, does get re-invented by historically questionable and culturally unquestioning re-tellings of epic lore, ethnic legend and auto-heroic equivalents of nursery rhymes for ungrown-up grown ups.

An old Indian habit or hobby is to imagine that great events and outstanding things anywhere have to have arisen under some Indian link or influence, if not from a direct Indian origination. The so-called Aryan has to have had, according to this fancy, very Delhi-Punjab-Haryana origins, the Dravidian, of course, is wholly and exclusively Indian, the Buddha, needless to say, was ‘Indian’ no matter that ‘India’ was not how India called herself in the Sakyamuni’s age, Asoka was, as were his son and daughter, so that the Bodhi tree at Anuradhapura has to be an Indian tree on permanent loan to Lankan care, the zero is Indian, geometry is, in case you have not heard of jiya-miti, algebra is Indian, in case you have not heard of al-jabr. And even if cricket is not, chess is very Indian, no matter the Norwegians have mastered it, the mango is Indian, rice is, turmeric is, biriyani is and take the optional ‘pol’ from it, and pol-roti becomes authentically and unquestionably Indian. India has to be the original home of the idea of patents.

In fact, give an ecumenical Sanskritist half a moment and he will say “ Why, the word ‘patent’ itself has to have an Indian derivation – ‘patra-anta’ ”. The pathology of large countries regarding smaller-sized neighbours as being in the position of permanent learners, afflicts many large-sized countries. India, though herself in a similar position vis-a-vis China, may be said to be convalescing out of this affliction.

India, China, Japan vis-à-vis Sri Lanka

Here it would be instructive to see how ‘large’ India and China and powerful Japan might regard their Buddhist touch with Lanka. An Indian visitor may well ,enthusiastically , say to the Venerable Mahanayakas at Malwatte or Asgiriya , that Hindus regards the Buddha as the tenth avatar of the Creator. But the Venerable Sirs are not likely to be impressed. Tenth ? Is that a high rank ?

It is unlikely that a Chinese visitor would say to anyone beneath the shadow of Sri Dalada Maligawa that the Chinese regard the Buddha as an outstanding philosopher of sub-Yangtse Asian pedigree or that Confucian scholars are looking for epistemological parallels in Buddhist manuscripts. He will not say that. He will be thoughtfully circumspect rather than effusively celebratory.

A Japanese visitor is likely to wait to be asked before saying anything at all on what Japan sees in its links with Lanka. And when that occasion arises, is bound to give, in very few, careful , elegant words, replies that would enlighten the questioner immeasurably about the profundity of that distant island nation’s knowledge of this one.

China , Japan and for that matter, Myanmar and Thailand are within what might be called thinking distance of Sri Lanka ; India within touching distance. China, Japan, Myanmar and Thailand reach Buddhist Lanka’s mind ; India , her senses. Acoustics and fonts negotiate the ducts of the mind ; tactilities , the nerve-ends. Those who communicate through speech and writing, impress and influence ; those who touch , bond. Difficulty arises when the touching ones, especially when given consanguineous leave to touch, very often take the touched for granted. No one likes to be taken for granted.

Like Buddhist Lanka , the other Lankas – the Hindu, Islamic, Christian, agnostic and atheistic Lankas, the political, intellectual, professional and “working class” Lankas, also have their own experiences, each , of being in touching-distance of India.

I will not go into those in any detail except to say that we in India should remember that comparing when condescending and pairing when patronizing are not always pleasant. Being within touching distance is a great felicity that comes with great complications. Friends can fight and make up or forget one another. Partners can, cousins, companions, colleagues can. Siblings, not quite. Twins, not at all. Those two arose jointly but are different even when identical ; each is separate even when it is also the other.

A major perspective-change was given to us in India in 1962 when, under the world's first woman Prime Minister , Sirimavo Bandaranaike, just two years into her office, 'small' Sri Lanka , with five other non-aligned countries – Burma, Cambodia, Ghana, Indonesia and the United Arab Republic – took up with 'large' India ways of addressing her border dispute with the even larger China. India accepted the 'Colombo Proposals', as they were called.

At a very different and totally non-comparable level, her distinguished daughter, President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga gave, doubtless without intending to, three Asian envoys-designate a salutary sense of the sovereignty of nations being unrelated to considerations like physical size or techno-economic might. The designated plenipotentiaries of China, Japan and India (the last being this speaker) waited on the appointed day to be called to present their credentials until, some tense two or so hours later, by which time the creases had moved from their ironed suits to their faces, they were told by a very apologetic Chief of Protocol that the ceremony had been unavoidably put off to the following day because the President was engaged in urgent political discussions. But – and this is the beauty of it – all tension and dismay vanished when, the next day, a relaxed President Kumaratunga disarmed all three by helping us see that in the relativities of life nothing is small, nothing is big except thought and action. We can have an absolutely and truly large thought as opposed to a petty one, a large step as opposed to a meaningless one. Referring to the postponement most apologetically, Her Excellency said to me : "High Commissioner , I am so sorry about yesterday...you know...politics in our part of the world...". That was truly big of her and I felt very small over my feelings of the previous day.

Politics and Left Politics

Politics is a strange animal anywhere. But, with great and redemptive exceptions, turns the abnormal into the routine, the unworthy into the prominent, the undeserving into the chosen one. South Asian politics has raised this pattern to the level of high art. On our sub-continent's theatre of ancient murders, medieval executions and modern assassinations, the hardy perennials of sycophancy, treachery, deceit, betrayal, loyalty-switches, wheels within wheels and deals within deals, thrive like flies over garbage.

In this matter, there is no distance between India and Sri Lanka, no distance at all, in fact, a great overlap of interests and practice.

Again with great and redemptive exceptions, of whom Aung San Suu Kyi shines luminous, a star, when it comes to this trait, there is no distinction between the politicians of South Asia.

Their driving ambition is to achieve and then to retain prominence preferably with power but even without it, if it comes to that, and their driving fear, is the loss of that prominence and that power. For this he has, basically, to be unworthy of it. To get what seems, awhile, like luck, he has to be spectacularly undeserving of it. If you have those ‘qualities’, you are set.

Where does the Left stand in this ? I refer here to the Left in both our countries. Keeness to garner popular support has, in recent years, made the Left seek ideologically unconvincing alliances at poll-time, winning criticism and discomfiture even before ballot-day. Sharing office in pre- and post- election alliances, as a junior partner, has not been easy to resist. When everyone is rushing for the loaves and fishes, should the socialist alone be ascetic ? As Chakravarti Rajagopalachari once put it : “It is easy to fast, as per custom, sitting at home on No Moon Day but it is not easy to fast sitting in the middle of Modern Café at meal time”. Self-interest has prevailed over self-respect, expediency over experience. And this has accelerated the decline and the splintering of the Left in both countries. The two nations are, after all, within touching distance, inspirational and infectious, of the other’s experience. And our politicians have caught the bug or been caught by it, a long while ago.

Hector Abhayavardhana

I met my other ‘teacher’ in India-Lanka distance touching some four decades before I had my defining conversation with Siran Deraniyagala.

Hector Abhayavardhana had come to a students’ conference organised by the Quakers in Port Dickson, Malaya, in the summer of 1964. I was nineteen then, in the last year of my teens, happy in all the distractions of one of that age. The political scientist and socialist of the ‘old LSSP’ mould, Silan Kadirgamar, then very young, was also at the same conference. I am sixty-nine now, in the last year of my 60s, typically with more frustrations than distractions. And, to my great delight, Silan, at 80, is here once more. Thank God for the Left’s indestructibility – the only non bio-degradable that one wants to last forever.

Unlike the archaeologist, the Trotskyist did want to make a political point with me. It is, principally, to Hector that I owe an early realisation that size is the least important ingredient of a country’s personality. A big country can be a borrower, a small one a lender, of transformational ideas. That Ceylon’s Leftists had drawn inspiration from India’s struggle for freedom because of the absence of a parallel movement in Ceylon, was no surprise.

But that the ‘T’ Group had coordinated its thinking and strategizing with that of the Congress Socialist Party, formed the same year – 1935 – as the LSSP was a revelation to me. That the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India was activated by the LSSP into playing a major role in the Quit India Movement of 1942 , when the Communist Party of India opposed that movement, is something I did not know.

The Left’s Splintering

In all nucleating nuclei, the Left has an unbeatable record in self-atomisation. It defies the laws of physics in one sense. Be one ever to the Left, there will always be another Left to the left of that Left. The Left is a World of the Book. When the World of the Book tries to fit into the Book of the World , difficulties arise, interpretations clash, splits take place. No Book, No Split ; Have Book, Have As Many Splits As Pages In The Book. Sometimes I think the Left is the political co-efficient of particle physics.

When, in 1978, I was posted as a junior diplomat in the Indian Mission’s modest Post in Kandy, I had occasion to get to know and to respect the late Tissa Wijeyeratne. Intellectually at home in the Left, culturally at home in almost every continent of the world, but politically neither at home nor particularly welcome anywhere, Tissa-ji as I came to call him, spoke to me on the world of contemporary Lankan politics and of its Left, in particular. He had , many years prior to that, contested the Kegalle seat from one of the Left’s splinters, only to be told by his father, Sir Edwin Wijeyeratne that he, Tissa, was assured of three and only three votes – those of his mother, the Walauwa driver and the Walauwa cook. Those three, Tissa-ji explained to me, represented rural Lanka. Most wives came to the cities because their husbands were there, and cooks and drivers, whether of Walauwas or otherwise, were from rural Lanka. These three, he said , could hold the key in Lanka if only, he said, the Sangha and the Church would not interfere with their thought processes ! Class war is good theory, he said, but the real war is between rural and urban, sectarian and secular.

Class plus

The seminal social reformer ‘Periyar’ E V Ramasami commenced his translation of *The Communist Manifesto* into Tamil with this profound introductory observation: “In other countries, one factor is considered important, the capitalist-labour (rich-poor) divide. However, in India, since the divide between the upper and lower castes is rampant and primary...communism faces double opposition here (and) communist consciousness has not grown.”

If to the basic notion of class, we are to add caste on our sub-continent, there is another localism lurking in the wings to ruffle the narrative.

Religious and linguistic divides, often overlapping and mutually-sustaining, with sharp edges poised on the whetstone of provocation, constitute sub-nationalisms that relegate class divisions to a later attention. The urgent overtakes the important. The conflict turns from what is crucial to what is critical. Class-divisions are crucial, caste-divisions critical. Class-conflict is crucial, religious-conflict critical. Class is important, ethnic identity demanding, importuning.

And so, over the socialist, Marxist ‘warp’ of class warfare, India and Sri Lanka and for that matter, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar, run the ‘weft’ of caste, religion and language identities.

The Minority Question

Luckily for variety and unluckily for boredom, the people of South Asia, are not made of monochromatic yarn. We are a shot-silk of mixed texture, tone and tint, each having its strong stretches and weak ones. And this where comes in, crucially and critically, importantly and urgently, the issue that lies at the heart of our democracies, that of The Minority.

The minority in India and in Sri Lanka is not a segment but a permeation in the whole. It may have pockets of concentration but essentially it is co-extensive with the main. And there is a further nuance. Majority and minority swap positions all the time. Drive from Talai Mannar to Kandy and you will have identity issues every twenty-five kilometers; from Goa to Dhanushkodi, in every fifteen.

Now, if you are a socialist, you can take that micro-variation rather better than others, that is, with sensitivity and not resistance. And a social democrat dispensation cannot but be minority-sensitive. If it is not, it can also become as brutishly majoritarian as any other dictatorship, theocratic or otherwise, speciously perfumed by the talc of single largest party logic. A democracy has to be a shola forest of un-regulated bio-diversity, not a mono-cultural plantation.

The majoritarian challenge in India and Sri Lanka

India and Sri Lanka are within touching distance – positively and negatively – of each other in their tending of their democratic ecologies. A valid electoral mandate creates and celebrates a political majority. But if that political majority has been gleaned not from political logic but from a-political emotions, the democratic text gets grossly distorted by an un-democratic sub-text. An electoral verdict political in name but ethnic in nature, democratic in name but majoritarian in character, constitutional in name but manipulative in its operation, is a travesty. When a democratically valid electoral majority is teased out of a democratically invalid ethnic majoritarianism stapled together by political opportunisms, we get democratic deception.

The India of Gandhi, Nehru, Ambedkar, Periyar, JP and the Sri Lanka of D.S Senanayake, the Ponnambalams Ramanathan and Arunachalam, G G Ponnambalam, of SWRD Bandaranaike who in courage and faith signed the ill-fated Pact with S J V Chelvanayagam only to be forced by hard-liners to retract, of Philip Gumawardene, Colvin R de Silva, N M Perera and the LSSP would not have countenanced such tyranny.

We are living on a different planet now.

An important fact to note is that the divisions of the political spectrum as between the Left and the Right and of Centre-Left and Centre-Right are now outworn. What is expected by people of politics and politicians is honesty, dedication, and a sense of commitment to public service on the basis of society's real and urgent needs, free of ethnic overlays. Colvin de Silva's famous line 'One language, two countries ; two languages, one country', is an all-time utterance. As is N M Perera's famous scoffing at the idea of one superior race.

It becomes natural and necessary to ask : Is Lanka's Left taking the lead, as only it can, to ask Lankans, in my friend the scholar-author Tissa Jayatilaka's words : " (to) judge (the) country and its inhabitants not by their ethnicity but by the values they possess (and) where man's humanity to man, of course this includes our women, will be restored".

Plantation Tamils

The Lankan Left consistently backed the plantation Tamils' rights, right through the tortuous discussions between the Governments of India and Sri Lanka and through the policy see-saw of the two mainstream parties. Here was an instance of the Left recognising the nuance of another, non-class, identity within the identity of the working class. Thanks to the determined efforts of the late S.Thondaman and the demarches of High Commissioner Thomas Abraham in the period 1978 to 1982, and of those being followed up later, the issue of their statelessness is now over. But statelessness is one thing ; a sense of belonging is another.

Paying my tribute to the initiatives of the visionary S Thondaman and the CWC, the late Azeez and the DWC, may I say that there remains an unfinished agenda about these 'Cinderella people', as Professor Suryanarayan describes them, namely, the agenda of post-integration habilitation in terms of education and careers beyond the plantations.

Will it be too much to hope that the island's Left will now take over from where the trade unions have left it and give to this huge human asset a sense of its true worth ?

Five Years After The War

The LTTE's macabre methodology choreographed its own destruction. The time comes now, five years after the war, to ask if in this, its fifth post-war year, Sri Lanka is at peace with itself. And to introspect on what has followed the end of ballistics. Peace with justice ? Peace with trust ?

The end of the war, unacceptably and complicatingly bloodied as it was, yet opened an opportunity for a new beginning, a great leap forward towards a millennial reconciliation. Is that taking place ? In a situation that calls for reparation, it is the one who needs reparation that must report satisfaction, not the reparation-giver. The thirsty must announce the thirsts's quenching, not the water-dispenser.

It is, I know as well as all in this hall do, a fact that the insensitive thwarting of moderate Tamil Lankan leaders' legitimate aspirations, decade after decade, by narrow ethno-linguistic nationalism, grew into the nightmare that ended five years ago. That vicious cycle must not be repeated.

“Incidentally,” anyone in Sri Lanka could ask me, “who are you to be saying these things, lecturing to us ? What about human rights violations in Kashmir ? What about the killing of Sikhs in Delhi in 1984, of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002 and of minorities and other vulnerable humans in dozens of riots before, in between and after those two shaming episodes ? Are they on India's conscience? Are your Dalits and your tribals in India happy ? Is India at peace with itself ? ”

And that ‘anyone’ would be right in flinging that retort on me. I would not duck or dodge its landing. I would let it come, smack-on. Our loves, our hates, our biases, our crimes are within touching distance of each other.

I said a few moments ago that there is no Left to the left of which there is not one further Left. I will modify that to say there is one point to the left of the most Left of the Left, beyond which there can be no further Left, and that point is called The Truth.

No one in South Asia lives but lives in a glass house. No one can judge but be judged. But this I will and must say for my country : These excoriating questions are being asked of India by India all the time, without fear or favour. India sees shaming things. But India is not ashamed to call a shame a shame. India has a powerful, wise and brave judiciary. It may not be infallible but it is independent. No Government of India will dare trifle with its judiciary.

India has a vibrant media. It too is not flawless, but it is no handmaiden of power. No Government of India will trifle with free speech.

Not a flaky consanguinity, but a frank friendship can keep the touching distances between India and Sri Lanka connected. We are a distinct people, but a connected peoplehood ; a distinct citizenry, but a connected civilization. This is no romanticism but a hard anthropological, historical, cultural, civilisational, political fact.

We do not have the right to interfere, but we do have the duty to be concerned. And to ask of each other questions, not in pride, arrogance, conceit, and certainly not in an air of sarcastic interrogation, but in honest anxiety to make better societies of our present, deeply flawed ones.

So an Indian must be asked the questions the hypothetical Lankan asked me. And that Indian must not be misunderstood one who asks : What does this fifth anniversary of the ending of the war which affected both of us, mark ? Good roads, new bridges, must lead to something, connect something ; they cannot be an end to themselves. They must touch distances, not link mirage to mirage.

The English poet William Watson in his great work written after the Boer War has said what all those who have come through victorious in war, must recall if they are to turn triumph to trust :

HERE, while the tide of conquest rolls
Against the distant golden shore,
The starved and stunted human souls
Are with us more and more.

Vain is your Science, vain your Art, ⁵
Your triumphs and your glories vain,
To feed the hunger of their heart
And famine of their brain.

South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission has had and continues to have its critics but its work rested on credibility and that came from two things : It was chaired by a man of the veracity of Bishop Desmond Tutu and, even more importantly, it was powered by the vision of Nelson Mandela who knew the hunger of South Africa's heart and the famine in its brain, nowhere as well expressed than in his statement "I am against White racism"... "I am against White racism?" ...What is the big deal in that ? The whole world was against apartheid. But the point came in his very next sentence. "And I am against Black racism"...Now that was a Big Deal, a Very Big Deal indeed. That showed the difference between democracy and majoritarianism, between Justice and Victor Justice, between Trust and Fear.

The TRC could have done more, better, but others on the Reconciliation Route cannot do better than follow the TRC where intentions are concerned.

The edge of the verge

I want to conclude with what may be called three ‘constructive’ thoughts – honest cogitations not being considered ‘constructive’ !

Within touching distance that we are, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Maldives , must do something pioneering about the effect of global warming on our coastlines. The rise of seawaters cannot be seen by us a Maldivian imperative, a Bangladeshi criticality and then, for India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan a theoretical possibility. We are all within the circle of danger.

There ought to be a parallel plan with a seismic core for India, Nepal and Bhutan. The trouble is that we have political philosophers, in our part of the world, of the Left and the Right, and political leaders, but we do not have ecological philosophers and ecological leaders. Political ideologies and political sovereignties can look very anaemic in the face of a mega natural disaster. Amitav Ghosh’s amazing novel ‘The Hungry Tide’, foresaw the tsunami of 2006. It is the creative exception which tells us we need an Arthur C. Clarke to tell us in fictional-real terms what we face by way of our planet’s hidden moods.

Even outside of the global warming context, our coasts face grave risks. Tsunamis do not occur too often but lesser earthquakes do, cyclones do. Natural disasters cannot be prevented but now, with seismic and satellite technology, we can anticipate them with intelligence and cope with them, more effectively than ever before. Recently, a furious cyclone that hit Odisha caused almost no loss of life because of advance action based on satellite warnings. When cyclones ravage, they make news. When they do not, they are ignored. This one belonged to the latter category. Littoral SAARC ought to have a fail-proof blue-print for the facing and handling of natural disasters peculiar to the region. We need a joint coastal SAARC plan for ocean disaster management. That we do not have one is a wonder. Not to make one now would be a disaster in itself.

The stalled Cetukalvai Thittam, or the Sethusamudram Project, raises many issues, most importantly, ecological issues. These need to be seen not just through the lenses of giant fishing corporates but through the fisherman’s ancient instincts, including ecological instincts. In the matter of the seas there is and can be no better expert, no greater specialist. He knows those waters better than any giant conglomerate with marine jaws ever can.

Whenever it is that the Project gets to be revived, it will do well to make the fisherman an equal participant in the re-examination.

My second suggestion for our touching distances is about our coasts per se. They are shrinking because of many reasons, including sand-shifts. But they are shrinking and becoming conduits for a greater danger because of the pernicious phenomenon the world over of their becoming dumps for non-degradable garbage. We do not realise this but all our non-degradable waste finds its way into our coasts and thence into the seas along those coasts. Day after day, hour by hour, we are converting our coasts into sewage yards. Is this a hygiene issue, an aesthetic issue, a tourism issue or a plain littoral obsession ? Something of all those are involved, but more than anything else this is a civilisational issue.

Countries with coasts must look after their coasts even as Bhutan looks after its mountains.

My third and last urging : Linked as India and Lanka are by the sea, let us do something startlingly new, something creative, for that very salt of the earth and sea – the Indo-Lankan fisherman and his good wife and their children.

We hear of our fishermen only when they are apprehended and locked up and not un-often shot at for doing what their DNA has trained them to do, namely, follow fish instinctively as they follow plankton unblinkingly. Fish are stateless, fishermen restless. Fishing on the high seas is one of the most instinct-driven livelihood avocations in human civilization.

You might have noticed that I used the phrase Indo-Lankan for the fisherman of the Indo-Lankan seas. If that phrase can be applied to any category of our respective citizenries, it is to the man who rides the wave between our coasts.

I am not suggesting that they be given dual citizenship, though if we had that system, the Indo-Lankan fisherman would be the first to deserve it. I am suggesting that we think of a first-such regime wherein fishermen from both the coasts be given joint rights, with zones and timings worked out, so that they can never be law-breakers, turf-breachers. We should devise a system by which trespass by fishermen becomes definitionally impossible.

That would a touching of touching distances.

No one , barring the Leftist believer in the unity of the working classes, will believe that an Indo-Lankan fisherman is a pragmatic idea but, believe me, he is. Who would ever have thought, until it happened, that the great Lankan Shirley Amerasinghe would devise a Law of the Sea that would be adopted by the whole world ?

Quoting Sarojini Naidu's great poem on the subject, I shall take your leave :

*Rise, brothers, rise; the wakening skies pray to the morning light,
The wind lies asleep in the arms of the dawn like a child that has cried all night.
Come, let us gather our nets from the shore and set our catamarans free,
To capture the leaping wealth of the tide, for we are the kings of the sea!*

*No longer delay, let us hasten away in the track of the sea gull's call,
The sea is our mother, the cloud is our brother, the waves are our comrades all.
What though we toss at the fall of the sun where the hand of the sea-god drives?
He who holds the storm by the hair, will hide in his breast our lives.*

*Sweet is the shade of the cocoanut glade, and the scent of the mango grove,
And sweet are the sands at the full o' the moon with the sound of the voices we love;
But sweeter, O brothers, the kiss of the spray and the dance of the wild foam's glee;
Row, brothers, row to the edge of the verge, where the low sky mates with the sea.*

The speaker acknowledges with gratitude very useful dialogues on the theme of this lecture with Ambassador Thomas Abraham, Mr Tissa Jayatilaka, Dr Silan Kadiragamar and Professor K Suryanarayan. The views expressed here are, of course, his own and not necessarily those of his distinguished interlocutors who may or may not agree with him on many matters nor, indeed, with each other either.

Publications consulted by the speaker include :

'A History of Sri Lanka' (Oxford University Press,1981) , by K.M. De Silva, 'Hector Abhayavardhana : Selected Writings' (Social Scientists' Association, Colombo, 2001), 'Indo-Lankans' (2002) ed. S.Muthiah, 'Sri Lanka: Global Challenges and National Crisis, Proceedings of the Hector Abhayavardhana Felicitation Symposium' (February 2002), 'Sirimavo', (The Bandaranaike Museum Committee, Colombo,2011) ed. Tissa Jayatilaka.