

Ahangamage Tudor Ariyaratne, 76, founded the Sarvodaya Shramandana movement in 1958. The idea was to promote the development of Sri Lankan society in ways that would empower ordinary people. In part it was a response to the sometimes destructive demands of Western foreign aid organizations, whose requirements, Ariyaratne felt, often ignored the needs and expectations of the society they were ostensibly trying to help. One way of surmounting this problem was by organizing development according to familiar and established traditions of self-empowerment—particularly those embodied by Buddhist teaching. Today the group tries to inspire Sri Lankans to find their own hands-on solutions for the problems they face, in the hope that they will find individual self-fulfillment as well as improve life for their own communities. Along the way Sarvodaya Shramandana has become one of the most powerful groups advocating a peaceful solution to the country's 25-year civil war. NEWSWEEK's Christian Caryl spoke with Ariyaratne on the phone from Sri Lanka. Excerpts:

NEWSWEEK: What is your organization trying to achieve?

Ahangamage Tudor Ariyaratne: For the last 50 years we have been able to work in about 15,000 villages in the country. We are trying to help people to improve their living conditions by trying to meet their own self-reliance and potential, by trying to meet their own human needs. Gradually, stage by stage, we are trying to help them provide services to themselves in health, education, communication. Ultimately we are hoping to bring them to a point where they can manage their own affairs.

What is specifically Buddhist about this program?

This is all based on the teachings of the Buddha. In the first place, Buddha advocated that we should obey the five precepts: nonkilling, nonstealing, non-sexual indulgence, nonviolence and nonintoxication. These five precepts are the fundamentals on which we work. We believe that human beings should develop four characteristics Buddha has taught us: to practice loving kindness toward all living beings, to engage yourself in compassionate action, to gain joy out of serving other people and to work in a spirit of equality. These four principles help a person to develop one's personality. From them we can derive another set of principles for the community that we wish to practice. One is sharing, to share your efforts or whatever you have. The second is pleasant language, a language of compassion and respect. The third is constructive activity, the effort to direct your actions toward real and positive achievement. And the fourth is equality in association.

You've been remarkably successful. Now your movement encompasses some 11 million people across the island. How have you managed to achieve this success?

One thing is that we have a dedicated group of people who try to live according to these principles and who strive to organize the communities and to help them to help themselves. If you have a Buddhist background it leads you to help the people to understand and to get involved in what we are doing. So, yes, so far I think we have been very successful.

You're one of the few organized groups in Sri Lanka that has consistently lobbied for peace and an end to the civil war. Could you talk about that?

Right from the inception of our movement we have been insisting that our society should be a non killing society. In other words, we should not accept violence to solve any problems. Nonviolence is one of the fundamental principles of our organization. So right from the beginning people knew that we're an organization that does not practice any violence. Second, in Sri Lanka we have Sinhalese and Tamils and other groups as well, so we have made a point from the start of living equally with everyone without any racial or ethnic discrimination. People know we are not divided by religion or ethnicity or class. We are working with everybody, for everybody—even those who have taken up arms and done harm. We do not encourage anyone to do violence or bring violence. Therefore we are able to work in all parts of the country—even those controlled by the Tamil Tigers, except in two districts where fighting is going on.

Sri Lanka is a very polarized society today. Does your approach meet with resistance in some quarters?

Not openly. We are also an organization with large numbers of people behind it. They don't like to antagonize us, because we are a large part of the community.

There are many in Sri Lanka today who see themselves as Buddhists yet who seem to favor violence as a solution to political problems. I'm thinking particularly of the JHU, the monk-led party that promotes a military solution to the civil war in your country. How do you view such forces?

We keep away from party and power politics completely. As far as the JHU is concerned, we don't have anything to do with it. We don't think that this is the right way for Buddhists. We believe that we should work in harmony with other communities without bringing forward other issues. In our movement we are completely different from the parties in our approach to community-building and peace-building. We have no quarrel with them. We say, "Please don't do politics." We believe peace-building should be done in three sectors. One is to enable people to think that we are one human society, that we are all members of one living world. The second is that there is no place in this world for violence. This is one thing that we try to achieve through mass mediation programs. Sometimes we get thousands of people to participate. We try to promote development of poor communities in those areas which have conflict situations. Third, we try to promote self-government on the level of the community and the village. We think these are three things that are contributing to lasting peace.

By Christian Caryl | Newsweek Web Exclusive