THE VILLAGE AT THE MOUTH OF THE RIVER:  
A Biography of Basil Fernando

Le Roy Robinson

Basil Fernando, an attorney, is a poet and short story writer.
He was born in October 1944 at Palliyawatte, a village in Hendala, Wattala, Sri Lanka.
As a young boy he attended the village primary school.
He attended high school at St. Anthony's College, Wattala, and St. Benedict’s College, Kotahena.
In 1972 he graduated from the Faculty of Law, the University of Ceylon, Colombo.
Until December 1981 he was a teacher of English as a second language in the Sub-Department of
English, Sri Jayawardenapura University, Nugegoda.
In 1982 he began his legal practice.
In 1984 Basil Fernando started working as a human rights lawyer. He filed many writs of habeas corpus and handled other cases allegedly involving torture or extra-judicial killing by the security forces of his country.
In 1989 four of his immediate colleagues were killed within a period of six months, and he was warned by a police officer friendly to him that his safety could not be guaranteed.
In September 1989 he took up work as an appeals lawyer stationed in Hong Kong by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. He reviews cases of Vietnamese refugees.

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When he returned to Palliyawatte from Malaysia Basil Fernando was glad to see his home again.

Compared with other houses in the neighborhood the Fernando house was rather big: there were three rooms. The Fernando property included about an eighth of an acre of land. There were many coconut trees on it that gave a few hundred coconuts every two months or so. To mark the boundaries of the property Basil Fernando’s grandmother had also planted arecanut trees around its perimeter.

Basil’s father’s family house “Maha Gethera” was situated on a nearby piece of land about the same size.

The front side of the Fernando property faced the Hamilton Ela, also called the
Dutch Canal.

The foundation of the house was built high so that when minor floods occurred water could not come inside the house. There were several steps to climb to get into the house.

The house was about 1500 square feet in size. The cement of the front verandah was red in color. The verandah in the rear was a little larger. The roof of the house was rather high to allow the space to be airy. The roof beams were made from jackwood. The rafters were made from matured coconut tree trunks. Tiles were laid on the rafters.

Close to the family house was a fairly large wooden storeroom.

Just in front of the house was a huge mango tree whose branches spread to a neighbor's property.

During the mango season around February to May the children would watch the fruit mature and ripen. This tree provided about 5000 mangos each season, Fernando says. Now, he adds, there are very few mango trees of that size left in any part of Sri Lanka.

As the fruit began to mature owls and squirrels appeared.

In his poem "They Made Love" Basil Fernando says:

Mangos are ripe
but the squirrels
yet asleep.
The skies
have awakened
yearnings deep.

Behind the house there was a large bread fruit tree.

Basil's father was very fond of dogs, and they always had a dog in the house. The family's first dog had been a white one, and whatever its color every other dog was called "White".

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On Basil Fernando's return from Malaysia, a busload of people from his village Palliyawatte was present at the airport to greet him. The following Sunday there was also a reception for him at the village. The road leading to the village from the Palama was decorated with gok kola, tender coconut leaves.

While a procession followed behind them, Basil's childhood friend Victor escorted him in front.

In Basil's opinion, his neighbors seemed to use this occasion as some sort of retalia-
tion against those who had humiliated them because of their caste.

Throughout the day many people came to greet Basil. His father and brother had arranged to treat all who came.

Basil learned that Pethariya, his father's friend, died a few months before. Basil was told that his last days of life were very difficult. Basil visited his grave.

Many whom he had known in his childhood were already in this graveyard. Basil reflected on them in poetry: How did you, a man who lived such an active life and who had been so helpful to others, die destitute?

In his childhood Basil had never seen or heard of any villager dying that way.

If Pethariya was poor and the rest of the villagers were economically alright, this could not have happened. The villagers always looked after their weak and their dying. And Pethariya was someone they liked very much.

For Basil it was not difficult to conclude that things were changing for the worse for the villagers of Palliyawatte.

Basil's mother told him that his father had helped Pethariya as often as he could.

Basil could see from the way his father spoke that he was more than merely sad at his friend's death.

From what Basil heard from the members of his family he understood that bitterness and unrest were growing in Palliyawatte. The easy way of life, with plenty of food around, was changing. Yet the people were good to each other.

Basil later learned in his economics lessons that after the end of the Korean War in 1952 Sri Lanka entered into a period of economic crisis from which it had not yet recovered. By the mid-1960s this crisis was to become visible everywhere. The village of Palliyawatte was no exception.

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After the novitiate the next stage for a Christian Brother was the scholasticate, in which you are supposed to acquire your academic qualifications.

Basil Fernando had to sit for the university entrance examination, G. C. E. “A” Level. Preparation classes for this exam were held at Aquinas University College.

At the same time, following the Vatican Council's recommendations, religious orders were required to provide further theological grounding to their trainees. A course for this purpose was set up at Aquinas. Besides, Aquinas was at this time a place where many open seminars were held about the problems of the nation as well as those of the Church.
Father Tissa Balasuriya, who had become Rector after the death of Father Peter Pillai, the founder of Aquinas, was transforming the place.

Pillai had been an old type of scholar, committed to an elitist type of education. Theologically he was an establishment man.

Balasuriya, although a very loyal pupil of Pillai, was the product of a different generation.

He was a Pathfinder, attempting to gear education to the needs of the country. He was committed to de-root theology from its Greco-Roman roots and to re-root it in Asian soil.

While following the theology courses, Basil Fernando followed all these seminars. For Basil the seminars and discussions were more interesting than the lectures.

Henk Schram used to come to Aquinas often and during the discussion periods he made animated comments.

One such seminar was conducted by Father Amalor Pavadas from India. He was a radical Indian theologian who was for a serious approach to Asian theology. During the period when the Indian Catholic Church opened to change he was much respected. When the Church began to close itself, he was rejected.

At the end of one of these seminars, during the discussion period, Henk Schram said something that summed up his long experience in Sri Lanka: “The Catholic Church hierarchy in Sri Lanka is the greatest barrier to its own development”.

This was said at a time when the Sri Lankan Church hierarchy was getting a boost up by the appointment of the Archbishop of Colombo as a Cardinal. He was the first Sri Lankan to get the red hat.

Basil Fernando says that it is now a joke among Sri Lankan priests that many others have Raktha Watha (red illness), words derived from a sickness that old people sometimes get.

It is ironic that this gesture by Rome to promote an indigenous church did not bring about that result.

The reason was that Thomas Cardinal Cooray was a very conservative man who was really a symbol of the Church in colonial times. The authority and standing that he got as a Prince of the Church were used against the promotion of Vatican II.

* Father Balasuriya’s Right Relationships: De-rooting and Re-rooting of Theology has recently been published.

** Father Amalor Pavadas was recently killed in an automobile accident.
Intellectuals in the Church such as Jochim Pillai and Michel Rodrigo were removed from their teaching posts at the major seminary.

The whole approach, Basil Fernando says, was to preserve the past.

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In an interview recorded by Basil Fernando Father Balasuriya has said that for Bishop Leo Nanayakkara, known as the most liberal minded bishop to be produced in Sri Lanka, and for Balasuriya himself, the synod was a disappointment. They were forced to the conclusion that within the institutional framework of the Church no genuine renewal was possible and that they ought to go their own ways alone and face the consequences. This is, in fact, what many people did. As Basil Fernando says, their stories are yet to be told.

Yet it was difficult to continue in that way because the foundations on which the Catholic Church stood, the private schools managed by the Church, were removed by the state takeover of these schools in the early 1960s.

This takeover is said to be one of the reasons for the attempted coup d'état by leaders of the armed forces. Among the accused leaders of the failed coup were a number of Catholics.

When Basil Fernando met Henk Schram in 1976 in Amsterdam, where Schram was in retirement, Basil asked Schram what he had known of the attempted coup. Schram said that this was the first time that anyone had asked him about it, although many people knew that he had known about the movement toward the coup and that he had opposed it.

In fact, Schram said, he had signalled some trade union leaders to be careful. He and his friends had found a way to do this without disclosing the source of their information about the intended coup. Schram could have kept silent as many others had done. For example, a few months before the coup Father Peter Pillai was asked about the morality of such a coup and replied: “When you do it…, I will advise you”.

Henk Schram accused some Catholic priests of being “whited sepulchres” on the issue of the coup. He was very angry, but he was decent enough not to name names.

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Gradually the group of Brothers who returned to Sri Lanka from Penang as docile novices became more vocal, and that was disturbing to the older Brothers.

Among the vocal ones were Giles Ranjit Amarasekara, Leonard Pijto, and Basil Fernando. (Amarasekara is now a priest in Pakistan. Pinto is a scientist in Australia doing
research in the preservation of mangroves).

The Director of the Scholasticate was Brother Lawrence Justinian. Also the Provincial of the Brothers at the time, he was the former director of a number of leading schools. He was a good administrator and a kind-hearted man.

But, according to Basil Fernando, Brother Lawrence had no clue at all to theology or what was called church renewal. He was mostly amused by what the young Brothers were saying and by their new ideas. If he had been left to himself he probably would have ignored them.

As for new ideas, Basil Fernando thinks that it must be said that at the time theology was quite a new thing at Modera House. An unwritten rule of the house was: too much knowledge is a dangerous thing. Those who embarked on such voyages would bring danger to the house and to themselves. “Humility and ignorance were perceived as twins,” Basil says.

But religious houses are places of intrigue, particularly when one begins to feel threatened. And there were many in the prime of their lives who felt threatened by this emphasis on church renewal.

In Sri Lankan culture a good gossip carrier is an expert in intrigue. Basil Fernando was to meet these people again and again in many places. In his poem “We Had a Dispute” he deals with this period of his life,

There was one Brother who was known to be an encyclopedia of gossip. Once when a young lawyer wanted to marry a young woman, the woman’s parents consulted this Brother Gossip. They were told so many details about the man’s relatives going into many decades that her parents broke the engagement immediately. Someone who did not like the young lawyer had sent the woman’s parents to Brother Gossip.

The young Brothers who were enthusiastic about the new ideas were not yet aware of what was taking place behind their backs.

Gradually many conflicts arose, and disillusionment began to be visible among the Brothers. Giles was the first to leave; he went to Pakistan to be a priest. Basil Fernando remained a little while longer, though he knew there many criticisms against him as being too independent.

To ask questions of the lecturers or to comment on one’s interpretation of some point of religion, or, for that matter, on any subject, without conforming to the most simplistic explanation given, was to be considered independent.

Brother Gossip was also very caste-minded. Basil’s mother had felt this from some remarks Brother Gossip made, and she warned Basil.
While waiting for examination results, Basil taught in two schools for a period of a few months in each. First at St. Sebastian's College, Moratuwa, and then at St. Anthony's College, Wattala.

St. Sebastian's College was still private, which meant the pre-occupation of the Brother Director of the college was to collect money.

Brother Benildus loved that type of work.

The younger Brothers of the community were driven to that task.

Basil Fernando says that "naturally" he avoided this. He was opposed to private schools anyway, and he wanted to spend more time with the students.

He had a number of lessons during the day, and he was happy doing that.

He took the students seriously, and they responded.

One of Basil's classes was religious knowledge for grade ten. He encouraged the students to ask questions and they did ask many questions. He did not have complete answers to many of their questions, but Basil and his students had many good discussions.

One day Brother Benildus, who had a different idea of teaching--teacher teaches, student learns--just entered into Basil's class and stopped it.

Fernando was rather amused by this, but the students were angry.

Basil later learned that this good old Brother had written a report against him.

At St. Anthony's College Basil had a better time since a lot of teachers there knew him to some extent.

There he came across Brother Matthew, a fine man, who was trying to promote changes within the Brothers community.

Unfortunately, he was not much listened to. He later left the Brothers institute and became a priest.

Brother Casian, the Director, was an old-fashioned man who liked to wear the hats like those worn in colonial times. One day he bought one for Basil too.

"Naturally" Basil had to find some excuse not to wear this hat.

The Director expected the young Brothers to be silent.

"Unfortunately" such silence was not a virtue to Basil Fernando.

He found many things at St. Anthony's to be "stupid", and he ignored such instructions that he found to be meaningless.

The result was a report by the Director that Basil was too independent.

Basil was told by Brother Mathew that the other Brothers had written a different
A conspiracy was up in the Brothers Council that Basil Fernando knew nothing about.

Brother Lawrence, the director of Scholastics and the Provincial, said nothing. But the former Provincial, Brother Vincent Joseph, called Basil (Brother Vincent Joseph knew Basil and his brother Anthony) and alerted him to what was going on.

Basil then went and confronted his Director, who was embarrassed. The Director was too much under the influence of the old school, which had elected him. He told Basil that Basil had a right to appeal to Rome.

Basil’s brother Anthony, who came to visit him the next day, for the purpose of giving Basil a history lesson, told him not to make any appeal but to return home as there was a lot of good work that could be done there.

In times of trouble his brother had always given Basil good advice.

When Basil thought about it later he felt more amused than angry.

How could you fight back against something that was absurd? And absurd it turned out to be.

Brother Lawrence, the Provincial, himself left the Christian Brothers.

Out of the nine who went to their novitiate in Penang only one remained.

And today there are not enough Christian Brothers to live in Modare House, a house which was full for almost 80 years up to the early sixties.

Basil Fernando took his brother Anthony’s advice. He found his way back home.

As a Christian Brother his name was Marius Lalith. Now he uses Marius Lalith as one of his pen names.

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Basil returned home in an unusual state of mind. He had begun to see an association between the sacred and the ridiculous. Basil’s mind was filled with all sorts of questions. Had the people of coastal villages like his Palliyawatte, who had experienced Christianity for over 400 years, already seen this link? Is this what his father had in mind when he advised Basil not to get too much closer to the Church if you want to keep faith.

However, when Basil met his former classmates in Palliyawatte he began to realize that they hardly had the time or the desire to amuse themselves with ideas.

Day to day living had turned out to be a grim affair for them.

Aloysius was working hard as a washerman, and the physical effects of that hard work were very visible.

Victor had become a peon, a clerk, in some place in Colombo and looked tired all the
Many others were working as fishermen. They all had the same smiles for Basil as during the time of their childhood together. But they had no time anymore to take pleasure in sentimental remembrances of childhood experiences.

It was as if they had accepted their lives with some sense of fatalism, some resignation.

Basil did not feel that they rejected him, but he could not help feeling excluded by them from their existence, which seemed hard and brutish.

From his family he tried to learn everything that had happened to each one. He realized that direct encounters with them had become almost impossible.

He felt that this too was ridiculous. Had it not been just a little over ten years before they had been so close? “In childhood we were three, Victor, Aloysius and me”.

In childhood it was as if they did not have a separate identity. Now it was if they had nothing in common.

Basil also felt that all he had read and all he thought he had learned had so little or in fact no meaning and relevance to the solution of any of the problems faced by the villagers of Palliyawatte.

A sense that higher education helps you to better only your own position began to grow in him. He tried to suppress that idea in many ways. He told himself that education has value in itself whether it achieves practical results or not.

He is still not sure that he was convinced of this.

Basil Fernando also began to notice that the general sense of cheerfulness and contentment that had existed in the village of Palliyawatte when he and his friends were children had begun to disappear.

Greater economic hardships were visible. Fewer children were being sent to school. There were more people of working age without work. There were more complaints. There was some bitterness.

Basil started to go back to Aquinas College where he found many activities to occupy himself with. There were the seminars on many social and economic issues. There were many meetings and discussions on Aggorniamiento, the changes initiated by the Church.

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At the time Basil also took an active part in the Catholic Students Movement, a movement of students in the universities of Sri Lanka.
It was a period of much activism on the part of students. Many students were involved in protests against the government of the time, a United National Party government.

The main political opposition consisted of a coalition of three parties—Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), Lanka Samasamaja Party (LSSP), and Sri Lanka Communist Party (SLCP).

Students were the most active campaigners of this coalition of opposition parties.

There were small groups of students and other young people who held discussions among themselves against coalition politics and who said that parties such as the LSSP and the SLCP which had a labor base should not join coalition politics but should follow an independent path.

The discussions varied from practical questions of strategy to ones on all sorts of theoretical questions.

There were many lectures on what Marx, Lenin or Trotsky had said, and the interpretations differed.

At this time Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the People’s Liberation Front, had begun to conduct political classes.

Basil Fernando was engaged in an intellectual renaissance, and, he says, he enjoyed it very much.

Having returned from Mutuwal House, he had lost the company of the younger Brothers who were his friends. And he did not have any other friends. So it was a very lonely period for him.

Basil’s brother Anthony, having realized Basil’s situation, presented him with an autobiography of Mahatma Gandhi, which Basil read with delight.

However, he felt that the Indian and the Ceylon independence movements had not proved Gandhi to be right.

While Basil could admire Gandhi the man and enjoy what he had written, Basil felt that what he read did not reveal a genuine social meaning or anything that Basil himself could try doing.

In such a state of mind, he entered the Law Faculty of the University of Ceylon, Colombo, in the middle of 1968. More or less at the same time he became the National President of the Ceylon Catholic students Federation.

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During this same period the Catholic Church of Sri Lanka held a national synod. This was the first such occasion in the entire 450 years of the Church’s history in Ceylon.
For all that, Basil Fernando says, it was only a face saving exercise "as the subsequent years have shown".

It was a contest between the type of Christianity represented by Cardinal Cooray and the type at the Vatican Council inspired by Pope John XXIII.

Cardinal Cooray won in the end and Christianity in Ceylon again became a very obsolete social doctrine in a social context that was manifesting symptoms of an enormous crisis.

The proceedings of the synod were manipulated so as to reject any form of change and to reconfirm an absolute orthodoxy.

The first drafts of the documents to be discussed at the conference, documents which were drafted with the participation of a number of "more intelligent persons", including poet Patrick Fernando, were removed at the last minute and replaced with another set drafted by persons whose extreme conservativeness was never in doubt.

Representing the Catholic students organization, Basil Fernando had two occasions to intervene for brief periods, each a few minutes, at which time he quoted the remarks of Henk Schram to the effect that the Catholic Church's hierarchy in Sri Lanka was its greatest barrier.

All the hierarchy was present when this remark was quoted by Basil Fernando. He could feel the mood of the conference changing into "dead silence". He says, "It was as if I had done something unforgivably offensive".

Fernando knew there were many who agreed with him, but they did not want to show any solidarity with him, lest their loyalty would be doubted too by the people at the top.

"I heard later that there had been much persuasion of the media to prevent these comments from getting into the next day's newspapers", Fernando says.

At the next session a senior priest brought up a resolution to delete Basil's remarks from the records of the proceedings. The reason? That Henk Schram was not there to confirm that he had made the statement that Fernando said he had quoted.

(Henk Schram had left Sri Lanka a few years before.)

All voted in favor of this resolution "as the members of a Stalinist party would do".

Basil Fernando concluded that for the hierarchy to respond to a young man's innocent remarks in this way "something must be ridiculously wrong with these people".

Again his association of sacred and ridiculous was re-confirmed.

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During this period the executive committee meetings of the Catholic Students Federation turned out to be big verbal fights, students versus the chaplain.

Thomas Kuridasa, the chaplain of the movement for many years, was used to a different set of students than those around Basil Fernando. He was used to students of a more affluent social background who sought "good" company and had no reason to challenge the social prejudices of the groups they came from.

For them the chaplain was their leader.

For a new group of students like Basil's who came from a different social milieu the chaplain appeared as their rival.

An orator whose eloquence was exceptional, a Jesuit, an historian, the chaplain had many skills to be relied on in this combat with some of the students.

He also had the benefit of the English language and the executive committee meetings were held in English.

But these students consistently fought back and began to learn the skills required for intellectual discourse and the subtleties of the debating art.

Those were very fierce battles, but Basil and his friends slowly began to feel confidence in themselves.

Some of them who were like Basil law students later realized that they acquired grounding for their legal practice through these debates much more from what they learned at the faculty of law.

While they were debating in this way, rumors were spread about a new political group that was having secret classes. This was the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, which consisted of a leadership who had fallen out with the older generation of leaders of labor parties in Sri Lanka and who wanted to replace such leadership with their own.

The leaders of the JVP belonged to the same age group as Basil's and came from villages even more rural than Basil's own Palliyawatte. But they were a new generation of intelligentsia whose arrival had been predicted by writers like Martin Wickremasinghe and celebrated by writers like Gunadasa Amerasekara.

Their first generation spokesmen and leaders may have been as confused as Rohana Wijeweera and as impatient as the inner group of that party as could be seen by the statements made by them to police which were produced at the Criminal Justice Commission.

When people from social groups that had lived in almost absolute silence come into the open, Fernando says, they carry with them the limitations conditioned upon such silence.
In his poem “Anonymous People”, which has been translated into several languages and republished many times, Basil Fernando writes about this condition.

We
are the anonymous people
our fathers were the same
ages of suffering
connect us to the past
no memories of us
but our world is vast
we
are the anonymous people
silence is our mark

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The members of this new generation which emerged from “the deepest depths” of rural society were different from the few of their forerunners who entered the universities in the late 1940s or 50s.

This difference may be illustrated by a true story: A boy from a very poor peasant family entered Peradeniya University in the early 1950s. Let us call him Paranagama. A series of scholarships that he had obtained finally led him to the university. He majored in economics. He performed brilliantly. When he stepped out of the university he found a place in the civil service.

In no time he rose up. Next a big Mudalai proposed marriage between him and the Mudalali’s daughter. This marriage brought with it a big house in Colombo, and money. Soon Paranagama was bonded to the business establishment of the Mudalali. But the values and the aspirations that he had inherited from his rural background were so different that he had to suppress his inner yearnings in order to adjust himself to his father-in-law’s establishment. His outlet was heavy drinking. Gradually his marriage ended in divorce. He drank more and more, and he began to be sick. Now as a senior civil servant he was more useful to his father-in-law and the business establishment. His liver disease made him realize that his days were numbered. He found comfort in Kusi Amma, a domestic servant who genuinely loved him. He left the bangalawa and returned to the pala (small hut) of his mother.

In the rural surroundings he found peace. He wrote a story in which he predicted what would happen to him after his death. His lawful wife would come and take his body in
an expensive coffin and place it at the bangalawa for the last respects to be paid by the officialdom. Kusi Amma, of course, would not be allowed anywhere near the place. Shortly after the cremation, the widow, wearing a white sari, would become her father’s emissary to the officialdom and negotiate deals for his business. Paranagama’s friends said that events took place as he had predicted. Such was the assimilation and incorporation of rural intelligentsia into Colombo’s business establishment, the elite.

The new generation was far too numerous to be assimilated in that way. There was graduate unemployment, but most of them resisted being incorporated in the way of Paranagama.

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The rumors of a new political group also had an influence on discussions in Colombo by the end of the 1960s.

For some of the elite it was a threat. For others of the elite it was something to play with in their political manipulations.

But everyone was curious.

For young men like Basil Fernando it was an opportunity to learn about new aspects of the social and political life of Sri Lanka.

There were many discussions among Basil and his friends.

As this was a time of unrest among the students all over the world, the time of “the new left”, there was a large spectrum of writings to be read.

Meanwhile, as far as the Law Faculty was concerned, things were as dull as ever.

The only one who was involved in any sort of politics was Terence Wickremasinghe, who had entered the Law Faculty quite some time before but who did not have much interest in taking qualifying examinations because of the contempt he had for the place.

Wickremasinghe was the first one that Basil Fernando met from a group called the Revolutionary Communist League, a small group who claimed that they were linked to the Fourth International. They were opposed to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna on the one hand and to the coalition politics of the Lanka Samasamaja Party and the Ceylon Communist Party on the other.

According to the Revolutionary Communist League both these tendencies were opposed to Marxism. They believed they were the only group that really represented a struggle to build a genuine revolutionary party.

The Revolutionary Communist League had emerged out of the section that broke away from the Lanka Samasamaja Party (LSSP) in 1964 in opposition to a coalition of LSSP
& the Communist Party with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party which they characterized as a bourgeois party.

In 1964 that section had a large following and was known as LSSP(R), R meaning revolutionary. Their interest in theory and opposition to terrorism attracted Basil Fernando to them.

Fernando was by then well aware of the enormous violence that the state was capable of and he feared that provoking violent reactions by terrorist acts would lead only to the advantage of the state and the men who were just waiting for an opportunity to unleash violence.

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The university campus at Colombo was also called racehorse university. The area in which horse races were held from British colonial times up to the 1960s had been transformed into the university campus.

Basil Fernando’s father and Pettrariya too used to go there some Saturdays to see the races and once in a while even won some of their bets.

But the race track was not meant primarily for “little men” like them but for upper class ladies and gentlemen together with the British administrators.

Though the then Minister of Education Mr. Irreagolla wanted to use the opening of the new campus to add to his and his government’s prestige, the event turned out to be otherwise when the students hooted at the minister, who in turn got very angry.

This led to many conflicts, and the Minister became the target of the opposition’s campaign.

Minister Irreagolla was a literary-minded man and had translated Les Miserables into Sinhala Manuthapaya. He also wrote the lyrics to a song which he ordered to be taught and sung in all public schools. The song begins Loke utumrara lankawai, the greatest country in the world is Sri Lanka.

Too narrow-minded a nationalist, the minister did not have sufficient ability to cope with the complex political situation developing in the country in which a new generation of students was becoming a force to reckon with.

A story is told about the assassinated Prime Minister S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike who had a reputation as a witty orator. When he went to address the students of the University of Peradeniya the students greeted him with a long period of hooting.

The Prime Minister calmly began his speech, stating that it was natural for Podi Nariyas (Junior Foxes) to greet Maha Nariyas (Senior Foxes) in this way. The words
Nariya, miharaka (buffalo), buruwa (ass) and modaya (fool) mean more or less the same thing.

Had Minister Irregolla the same wit the Colombo campus would not have acquired the reputation of being a trouble spot as it had by the time Basil and his contemporaries entered the university.

This reputation created in Basil the expectation that he would meet with an exciting time there.

Within a few days of his arrival he saw the first confrontation of students with the police inside the campus premises. He later learned that it was the first time police were called into the campus.

A few student leaders were arrested while others were protesting. A cameraman quite close to Basil was taking a photo of their arrest. A security guard of the university jumped the man and grabbed his camera.

The Vice Chancellor of the University at the time was Wolwin De Silva. Soon after this incident, a stray dog that used to live around one of the canteens on the campus was named Wolwin. Students would amuse themselves by saying to this dog "Wolwin, wara" or "Wolwin, pala" or "Wolwin, duwa". Come, Wolwin. Go, Wolwin. Run, Wolwin.

Bringing the police into the campus was the beginning of a time that has developed into the present situation in which students live under the complete surveillance of military and secret police with police posts established inside the campuses of Sri Lankan universities. A time when students sometimes need to hide their identities to protect themselves from "disappearances", which are all too common.

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The only language of instruction at the faculty of law when Basil Fernando entered the university was English.

It was considered a matter of prestige for a law student to know English, and, except for a few like Basil, for students belonging to families that were considered "elite".

It may be that for that reason, the law school was a very dull place. As a place of intellectual stimulation, even Aquinas College had been much better for Basil Fernando than the faculty of law.

Of the lecturers who were attached to the faculty, only two people inspired admiration in him.

One was Dr. Mark Cooray, who lectured on Constitutional Law in the first year and Equity and Torts for the final examination.
Cooray’s approach was to encourage the students to think and to look for the essentials. He influenced Basil Fernando in a real intellectual way.

The other professor who inspired Fernando was an external lecturer who lectured on Criminal Law, Ninian Jayasuriya. He was then much admired by all external students. He is now a High Court judge. A man with a very extensive knowledge of law, he was also known for his human qualities.

Jayasuriya was one of the panel of three judges who decided the famous Liyanaarracci case: Senior police officers were charged with the arrest that led to the brutal murder of a young lawyer while he was in lawful custody. More than 100 injuries were found on his body, according to the medical report.

This murder shocked the legal profession in Sri Lanka. Basil Fernando joined the large contingent of lawyers who attended the funeral.

The Sri Lanka Bar Association made a historic but controversial decision: not to appear for any police officer until a full inquiry was carried out.

In Basil Fernando’s view, this was a fully justified decision in the context of police complicity in violence at the time. Basil feels proud that he voted in favor of the Bar Association’s decision.

Then President Jayawardene’s brother, H. W. Jayawardene, Q. C., tried to organize opposition to this decision. But he could not muster any noticeable support despite the enormous power he wielded in legal circles in Sri Lanka.

The decision of the three judges paved the way to re-open the inquiry into this gruesome murder. At the time of writing, Officer Udugampola, once the most powerful police officer in Sri Lanka, is being questioned in this matter.

Basil Fernando says: “This court’s decision is a very proud moment in Sri Lanka’s judicial history”.

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Except for these two men, the usual academic life in the faculty of law consisted of a lecturer reading from notes and students faithfully taking down notes on what he had read. Discussions were rare.

Basil Fernando early on had a rather bad experience when he asked some questions regarding a case decided by Lord Dening. The assistant lecturer who was conducting the class immediately retorted, like a high school debater, “Do you think you know more about law than Lord Dening?”

Basil could not help feeling that the assistant lecturer had been made to feel rather in-
secure by Basil’s questions and that all that he was asking for was to be allowed to go on reading his notes.

By this time Basil had attended many forums, and this lecturer’s approach so disappointed him that he decided not to expect too much in law school.

According to Fernando, it is no exaggeration to say that the Faculty of Law was more like a tutory, and there were better tutories outside for learning the law, like Aquinas College’s law degree course.

In the first week of the academic year at the law school, Dr. Mark Cooray asked the new hatch of law students to write a short essay on the rule of law.

In his first essay Basil Fernando wrote mostly on the need for legal reform. He later learned that Dr. Cooray was impressed by the essay.

The relevance of law to society was already in Basil’s mind: It was the bus magnate’s case in which the rich man who had engaged in big violations of law in order to grab land was protected while those who were trying to protect their lands from forcible take over were prosecuted and sent to jail that had motivated Basil to study law.

He wanted to know where things had gone amiss.

But he learned quite early that he was looking for guidance to answer this question in the wrong place.

Gradually Basil Fernando began to absent himself from the law school classes. He began to take a more active part in other activities inside the university and outside.

He learned that there was more social consciousness among students in other faculties. He learned that the general impression of most other students was that law students were politically stupid and socially snobbish.

Basil did not want to be associated with That image. That was another reason for him to find a way out of being trapped in the social obsolescence of the faculty of law.

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At that time the student movement in Sri Lanka was preoccupied with the coalition campaign to defeat the existing government. The election was to be in 1970 and by 1969 things were quite intense.

There were many rallies outside the campus (like those in Hyde Park), near the headquarters of the Lanka Samajama Party.

Basil Fernando did not have any direct affiliation with any of the political parties, but he was intensely interested in learning all that their spokesmen said.

He was, perhaps, trying to overcome a deficiency in his upbringing and in his
Catholic background which made one very a-political. He wanted to overcome some intellectual and spiritual limitations he had inherited.

Fernando's state of mind at the time is reflected in his poem "The Prayer":

Yes, what a distance for me
from those intimacies
intense in their genuineness
beautiful in their innocence
--those that I love to remember
as my own past
but unwilling to repeat.
What a distance between us.

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In 1969 Basil Fernando was looking for a rational explanation to things he had seen in his life, particularly in his childhood. He was eager to know how the people involved in the political agitation in his country saw those problems.

There were many publications and leaflets, newspapers, etc., and he began to discover friends with whom he could discuss these things.

As the president of the Catholic Students Association he had many opportunities to discuss quite a lot of things with people having all sorts of views.

A document drafted by Basil and handed to the Bishops Conference of Asia, 1969, presided over by Pope Paul VI, reflects the nature of the discussions that many students were having at the time.

The document was personally handed over to Pope Paul VI and distributed to all bishops present, a few hundred of them from all over Asia, at the ceremonial opening of Radio Veritas, in the Philippines. *

A broadcaster immediately picked up the document and read it over to an audience all over the world.

The next day, Basil learned later, the statement had been reproduced in full or part all over the world, not always to acclaim.

A Portuguese bishop who was a participant at the Conference and who was friendly towards students said despairingly after seeing this documents that he had lost all faith in students.

* See Appendix
Cardinal Cracias of India was another church official who reacted in similar fashion. A similar response came from Cardinal Santos of the Philippines who was in charge of the conference. He was very unpopular with Filipino students. Every morning in front of the conference building these students would picket carrying placards with the slogan: Viva El Papa, down with Santos. In 1969 Santos was seen as a friend of Marcos then emerging as the dictator of the Philippines.

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Within walking distance of the Colombo campus was the Catholic Hostel. It had been built a long time before and had housed many generations of university students—about 75 students at a time.

This hostel was a place where students of many different faculties met and lived under the same roof. There were Tamil and Sinhalese students there, and there was no recognition of any difference, according to Basil Fernando.

At the Catholic Hostel Basil Fernando made the acquaintance of a medical student Ranjit Weerasinghe. In time they became very good friends. Many times late into the night they talked about medical ethics and many other subjects.

Weerasinghe was also a member of the Catholic Students Association and was vice president the same year when Basil Fernando was president.

Weerasinghe later worked in many hospitals and in family planning abroad but is now back in Sri Lanka.

At the Catholic Hostel there were quite a few arts and science students. At the time the arts and sciences faculties were most politicized, so there were many discussions about politics. By the end of the 1980s the medical faculty too became extremely politicized.

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There were many students who were very excited about the massive victory of the coalition parties in the 1970 general election. All over the campus there were celebrations of all kinds. Most of time the celebrations took the form of protest and mockery.

At the Vidyodaya Campus, one student leader had come onto the campus in a bull-driven cart and went around the premises as the other students cheered.

At the Colombo campus too there were the burnings of dummies.

The message clearly was directed against the university administration and even against some deans and lecturers to the effect that things were changed and now the students too had to be reckoned with.
In fact, the change in politica had a profound effect on university administration in the years to come.

The outcome of the elections did not create any excitement in Basil Fernando, however. He felt that the students were naive to believe that the celebration would last.

Of course, he says, he was aware of the element of opportunism that was in some student leaders' minds, and that too was a big factor that deprived the university students' protest of some credibility.

But Fernando's own worries arose out of his growing knowledge of the upper class of the country and their capacity for rather cruel retaliation.

And, certainly, retaliation came in due time.

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During this same period, Basil received the news that his boyhood friend Victor had died. He went back to Palliyawatte to pay him his last respects.

No one knows how Victor's end really came about. Some say he died from an accident. Others say he was assassinated. He had a big head injury, which was bandaged, when Basil saw him for the last time.

Victor's mother and father and sister and brother looked at Basil sadly as he reminded them of Victor's childhood and early youth. None of them said anything to anyone. The tragedy had made them dumb.

To Victor's father and mother it was their moment of final defeat after a lifetime of hardship. Not long afterwards both of them also died.

Basil Fernando still dreams of Victor, almost every night, and sees him suffering from an incurable brain disease. Basil says that must be the way his subconscious remembers the head injury. The physical distance between them in the last years had not erased the impression Victor had created in Basil's subconscious mind.

Victor's death and the death of Basil's mother six years later was a blow to a belief he had clung to for a long time to the effect that all he was trying to learn from books and from experience would be of some use to the ones he had been close to in his childhood.

This situation gave rise to an inner vacuum and a very deep sense of futility. Deep inside Basil this sense of futility still exists.

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Moving around Palliyawatte Basil Fernando found that the 1970 election had not touched anyone there in any meaningful way. There were quite a lot of people who had
voted for one of the three coalition parties that won a great electoral victory, but, after the ritual voting, they did not seem to see any significant change happening to their village.

They got some of their children’s names entered into the lists for jobs. Jobs to be harbor workers, low level clerks. No one was naive enough to believe that there was going to be any great social change.

Basil had the opportunity to attend a Pan Asian Students Conference during this time. Father Tissa Balasuriya as Asian Chaplain, and two other students Anton Cooray and Ajantha Cooray, were the other members of the team that went to the Phillippines.

Anton Cooray is now a well known authority on constitutional law, and was formerly Dean of the Faculty of Law, teaching at Hong Kong. Ajantha Cooray is now a lawyer in Colombo.

In Hong Kong they met students from all the countries in Asia except The Peoples Republic of China.

The students passed a resolution calling for the admission of China into the United Nations, which was quite a radical thing to do at that time.

At this conference Basil Fernando met James Hurley, S. J., and Jack Clancy, both of whom are still in Hong Kong.

The exposure to people with different cultural and political backgrounds was a good experience for Basil and an eye opener.

On the way back to Colombo he stopped at Singapore and met with some students at Singapore University. Singapore impressed him as a highly controlled society. But at the campus there were several students who were quite socially conscious and critical in their thinking.

★★★★★

This group later reproduced Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire, a Brazilian thinker, which was very popular among the radicals.

Among them was Sister Rosemary Chew, now Lin Lap, who lives in the Netherlands. Then she was a young Chinese nun studying at Singapore University at a time important in student politics in Singapore. She was very intensely interested in understanding what was going on in society and in finding a meaningful role for herself.

Basil too was going through a similar period, and he found in Sister Rosemary a ready listener.

Both Lin Lap and her husband, Biem, are very socially concerned persons and live according to the ideals they adopted in their youth.
Similar tendencies have come about in Singapore many times, a period of liberalization followed by very unreasonable forms of repression. The last was the arrest of 22 persons for no reason at all except as a confirmation of the state's policy of repression. They were accused of "a Communist plot" to overthrow the government, without the government producing the slightest evidence in support of this accusation.

There was a huge worldwide campaign against this, and all of the accused have been released but under severe restrictions on their freedom.

In a poem Basil Fernando has summed up his feelings of this aspect of culture in Singapore:

Man must imitate
the pig
Is now the motto
of this city
Clean like
a well shaven dead pig.

Those refusing pig food
are exiled or jailed.

In Sri Lanka, the United National Party, then in opposition, wanted to follow the example of Singapore.

In fact, they have done so in the political sphere, while creating the chaos for which Sri Lanka is now infamous.

In the 1970s there were signs of a revolt of youth, particularly in the rural areas of the South, and in April 1971 they did rebel.

Basil Fernando says it is strange that his father's immediate reaction to the news of the 1971 insurrection was one of great apprehension. He wanted all in his family to stay at home so that he could see them, and he was also worried about the young boys and girls in their neighborhood.

Basil's father knew little about Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna. He knew that none of
the members of his family or neighborhood belonged to it. In fact, Hendala and Wattala were not affected by the insurrection at all.

Basil's father was acting on some intuition based on what he had learned in early life, or that he had inherited from an earlier generation.

He predicted a soul-less massacre. He believed that any one could be a victim. He also said that during such times jealous people send false petitions leading to arrests and killings.

When Basil looks back on the way his father became protective, it becomes obvious to him that his father did not have the slightest confidence in the system to which he usually conformed.

Basil's father had lived forty five years of his life under the British colonial rule, and he expected nothing but barbarity from the police and the military during times of conflict.

And Basil Fernando emphasies, barbarity was the state's response to the 1971 insurrection.

The late Ranjit Perera, who became a good friend of Basil's, was one of the country's best known musical directors and saxophonists. At the time of his death in 1989, at the age of 43, he was a young naval officer at the time of the insurrection. He told Basil that on the second or third day of the insurrection, the navy received the coded message "I do not want to see casualties. I want to see dead bodies".

With that, according to Perera, it was a free for all, and the armed forces went into action.

The extent of the violence in 1971 on the part of the state is well-known. Basil Fernando says, though the details of torture and brutal killings are not well known.

After the insurrection no attempt was made by any organization to document the incidents of torture and murder and other forms of human rights violence.

In fact, at the time there were no human rights organizations.

The civil rights movement came into being as a result of the emergency and state repression in 1971.

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These newly formed organizations had too many immediate tasks, so systematic documentations on violations, victims and violators did not take place.

Basil Fernando says that the blame really goes to the liberal intelligencia of Sri Lanka who had the human and other resources to undertake this documentation if they had desired to do so.
The Sri Lankan intelligentsia lacked the emotional capacity for such a task. There seemed to be an inherent incapacity in the minds of those who had their education in the colonial tradition to connect the immediate with the universal. They would speak of the universal values in poetry and literature and the arts. In politics, too there were some who would enunciate the universally valid principles.

However, the contradiction of these principles in the actual day to day reality was not treated as a matter that needed to be examined.

The assumption seemed to be that the assertion of valid universal principles over and over again was the way out of the negation of those principles.

This made the colonially bred intelligentia incapable of being outraged. 1971 ought to have been a moment of their outrage.

But unfortunately such outrage was not expressed in Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the violence of 1971.

No one rose to the occasion to say We have a duty to remember and if we fail in this duty this violence will happen again.

There was no Simon Wiesenthal in Sri Lanka in 1971 and so, Basil says, it is no wonder the 1971 kind of violence was repeated in worse form in the 1980s.

Perhaps this time there ought to be much more systematic documentation on every aspect of this man made tragedy.

Though there was no proper recording in 1971, the stories of incredible tortures and killings were told everywhere, and for some time after the curfew which was declared island wide, most people were talking about these incidents.

Basil Fernando wrote a poem in tribute to those who were burned on road sides all over Sri Lanka.

By the Wayside

This wreath of flowers
with no name attached
is for you
who have no grave.

As the place on earth
which embraced you
could not be found
this wreath was placed
by the wayside.

Forgive me.
Forgive me.
for placing
a memorial for you
by the wayside.

Another poem by Basil Fernando expressed the guilt of the middle class over the events of 1971.

He Lies Buried
There's guilt in us
An accusing finger somewhere
But we substitute his sweeter moments
for dreams that at night torment us.

For the students and other young people whom Basil Fernando used to meet at that time the massacre that followed the 1971 insurrection meant a break with the past. Their discussions became more seriously political.

The opposition to the coalition government and in particular to the two labor parties (LSSP and CP) who were partners of that coalition was very obvious.

The tension in the Catholic Students Federation too was intense. Students were extremely critical of their church, implying that they thought it also contributed to the social crisis that was deepening in Sri Lanka.

The tension led to a situation in which, after the exchange of several letters, Cardinal Cooray decided to close down the Students Federation.

The students wrote to the Cardinal stating that they were glad to sever connections with him as he was a person who had forgotten the poor, though he came from a poor family himself.

The university was closed down for a few months after the insurrection. When it was finally re-opened some of the students were missing.

"None from the law faculty, of course," Fernando notes. The chief complaint of the law students was that their exams had been delayed. The exams were finally held in April 1972.

Appendix: Reflections of Student Observers

"DISPOSSESS YOURSELVES OF YOUR WEALTH." This is the sincerest message to all of us who have participated in this meeting, a message specifically addressed to you as our pastors.

In the last few days, you have spoken well in a prophetic voice about the poverty, the wars, and the sufferings of the troubled and the restless peoples of Asia. In your resolutions, you speak of the poverty of the Church. Your analyses have been penetrating and your sentiments most admirable. We endorse your
views and congratulate you for your sentiments.

However, we fear that your words might remain as mere sentiments and fail to be a liberating voice in Asia. Allow us, the representatives of the Catholic students of Asia, to point out that we have heard the same sentiments before; but the face and the heart of the Church have not changed. We warn you in advance that as long as you remain wealthy, you will be incapable of becoming a saving sign in the world. You will remain a part of the status quo that you yourselves condemn yet ironically benefit from—and thus be a self-contradiction. Your words, therefore, will sound hollow and insincere, pious and harmless, like “sounding brass and tinkling cymbals.” Your voices will be but feeble echoes of the resounding message of the gospel—as your wealth has imprisoned you in structures that breed hunger for power and thus alienating you from the poor.

Your future, our future, the future of the Church we love, as well as the future of the world will depend on whether or not you will have further strength to accept the conditions of poverty not only in “spirit” but also in reality and thus be a meaningful voice for the masses of Asia in the angry ’70s. Without such dispossession, you only lead yourselves and those under your spiritual care towards disillusionment and the betrayal of the world which look up to you in hope.

So, in the name of God, Bishops of Asia, we appeal to you. Liberate yourselves. Disentangle yourselves. Dispossess yourselves of your wealth and possessions. Be poor in spirit and in truth. It is only when your actions correspond with your words that you can speak with a truly meaningful and prophetic voice to us, the peoples and students of Asia.

Our dear Lordships, many of our companions and class-mates have already left the Church. But please do not doubt our loyalty and love. It is this very loyalty and love and our deep concern that urges and impels us to unburden ourselves of these sentiments.

(Sgd.) Peter Fan, Hong Kong
(Sgd.) Basil Fernando, Ceylon
(Sgd.) Leo Santos, Philippines
(Sgd.) Oscar Francisco, Philippines
(Sgd.) Carlos Serapio, Philippines
(Sgd.) Artemio Tanchoco, Jr., Philippines
(Sgd.) Emmanuel Montenegro, Philippines
(Sgd.) Cristina Astorga, Philippines
(Sgd.) Manny Gonzales, Philippines
(Sgd.) Jimmy Montemayor, Philippines
(Sgd.) Manny Cruz, Philippines