

SOCIETY OF STRUCTURAL ENGINEERS - SRI LANKA

CELEBRATING THE INCORPORATION OF THE SOCIETY BY ACT OF PARLIAMENT

by A.C.VISVALINGAM - Past President, SSE-SL

Mr President,

I am honoured that you and the Executive Committee have chosen me to speak on behalf of the Past Presidents of the Society of Structural Engineers of Sri Lanka on this happy occasion, which celebrates the Incorporation of the Society by Parliament in terms of Act No. 40 of 2009.

Mr President, Honourable Ministers, Mr Secretary, Distinguished Guests, Friends, Media Representatives and Members of the Society!

This brief account is intended to look back on how the Society came into being and the principal personalities who helped it to develop into what it is today. Even after cutting out huge chunks of detail in an effort to be as brief as possible, I was not able to get this review to much below the 20-minute limit that I had set myself to cover the 21-year history of the Society. Nevertheless, I hope that you will bear with me.

Right at the outset, I need to state that it would not be practical for me to mention the names of all the individuals who sacrificed so much of their time and energy over the years to help found and develop the Society, making it the great success that it has become. Consequently, I shall confine myself to referring to only a few key names. To everyone else who has contributed to the Society's growth, but is not referred to by name here, I apologise in advance.

The Society was conceived on the 25th of April 1989 at an informal discussion that followed a Seminar conducted by the National Building Research Organisation. Eng T.M.D.de Silva, who is an expatriate Sri Lankan, and Mr S.Patil, an Indian Engineer, both of whom, I believe, were working as Consultants at the NBRO at the time, had suggested to the Engineers who had attended that Seminar that it was desirable to form a Learned Society for the promotion and exchange of knowledge in the field of Structural Engineering and its allied disciplines. Not long thereafter, a meeting attended by about twenty-five Engineers in these fields was convened and a 9-man Committee appointed to prepare an appropriate Constitution. The proposal to form a Society of Structural Engineers was then advertised in the Press and the first meeting of those who showed interest was held on the 15th of February 1990.

Just to give you an idea of the names of some of the pioneers, Eng T.M.D.de Silva was elected President, Dr B.M.A.Balasooriya Vice President, Eng Mathan Coomaraswamy Honorary Secretary, Eng S.A.Karunaratne Treasurer, and Eng Saro Weerasuriya Public Relations Officer.

Eng de Silva left Sri Lanka before the first AGM, whereupon Dr Balasooriya was elected President. Sadly, however, from quite early on in 1991, Dr Balasooriya suffered increasingly from a badly botched-up throat operation. Inevitably, the burden of running the day to day affairs of the Society fell increasingly upon the Executive Committee. By May 1993, Dr Balasooriya found it impossible to continue even as a nominal President and resigned, compelling me to take over from him for a full seven years thereafter. Dr Balasooriya was a man of great integrity and deep knowledge. He was revered by the scores of young graduate Engineers to whom he taught the finer points of Structural Engineering. His untimely death, not long after his resignation, was a severe blow to our Society and the Country.

During the first three years, the Society conducted a number of successful Seminars at the Institute for Construction Training & Development at Wijerama Mawatha. We also began what we called "the monthly Question Time", which continues to be held at the Institution of Engineers, Sri Lanka. Unlike a formal lecture, which requires unblinking concentration, Question Time is an interactive presentation, where members of the audience are encouraged to ask questions from the presenter, as and when such questions arise in their minds. This helps to keep everyone wide awake and, in consequence, this unique format has proved to be a great success. We also began publishing our quarterly mini-journal: MODULUS. Dr Priyan Dias, now elevated to the rank of Professor of Civil Engineering at the University of Moratuwa, was its first Editor.

In late 1993, Eng Coomaraswamy and I met the local representatives of the US contractor, Turner Steiner International, that had taken on the redesign and build contract for the 39-storey twin-towered World Trade Centre. This firm readily undertook to fund the cost of a Seminar for which resource personnel would be brought from the United States to explain the design and construction concepts that shaped this building.

The Seminar was inaugurated in late 1994 at the Galadari Hotel but, inauspiciously, within an hour or so of starting, a large panel of the mirrored ceiling of their ballroom cracked and crashed down, critically injuring Eng Vimoo Jayawardene and causing Arch Milroy Perera to lose one eye. These two senior professionals had to resort to litigation to get compensation from Galadari Hotel for the injuries they had sustained. However, the Society's efforts to get a refund and compensation for its losses were ignored by Galadari Hotel because the Hotel knew that the Society did not have the resources to sue them.

We did not give up on that important Seminar but changed the venue to the Colombo Hilton and held it in November 1994. The excellent preparations made and the smooth manner in which the proceedings were conducted were highly acclaimed at the time and also set the

standard for the Society's subsequent Seminars.

We need to place on record at this point that the Society is immensely appreciative of the farsightedness of the dozens of sponsors who have financed its Seminars and some Question Time sessions. Without their patronage, the Society would not have been able to achieve even a fraction of what it has done over the years.

Initially, Eng Coomaraswamy was kind enough to provide space in his office, as well as secretarial assistance, at no cost to the Society. Towards the end of 1994, when he decided to leave Sri Lanka, the Society's Secretariat was moved to my office premises. During these periods, the meetings of the Executive Committee were held at the NBRO, to which we made a nominal payment for the use of its Conference Room. Some years later, paying an appropriate rental, we moved the Society's office to the Professional Centre of the OPA, where we were able to hold our Committee Meetings as well. Recently, however, the OPA decided to terminate this arrangement and the Society had to move once again. This time, the Society has rented office space at the Institution of Engineers, Sri Lanka, as most of you are no doubt aware.

Going back a little in time to 1992, we realised then that the Society needed to have a legal persona for various official purposes. It was, therefore, decided to get the Society incorporated under the Companies Act. As we did not have any money to pay lawyers, I undertook to draft the Memorandum and Articles of Association myself. The draft was improved with the help of Mr Shelton Perera, a retired Deputy Registrar of Companies, whom we persuaded to act as our Company Secretary and who still continues in that office despite poor health. By July 1993, the Society was formally incorporated under the Companies Act.

Soon after that, we had made an appeal to the Urban Development Authority to grant us a block of land to build the Society's office, library, committee room and other facilities. The UDA told us that, as we were not a Society incorporated by Act of Parliament but merely by the Registrar of Companies, they would consider looking into our request only if we were in a position to pay the market price. The unfortunate reality was that we were not in a financial position to purchase even one perch of land at the going rate, and were, therefore, obliged to wait for more prosperous times.

Meanwhile, the Colombo Municipal Council was taking steps to implement in earnest the laws relating to the safety of structures. One of the statutory requirements that came into force immediately was that a person called "a Structural Engineer" should design and take responsibility for the safety of buildings of over 4 storeys in height. As there was no generally accepted definition of a Structural Engineer then, the Society took it upon itself to prepare a definitive Directory of Structural Engineers. Professor M.P.Ranaweera, Dr Milroy Perera, Dr Ms Premala Sivaprakasapillai and I were appointed to a Panel of Examiners that was charged with looking into the applications made by Engineers in this field to have their

names listed in the proposed Directory. We owe a special debt of gratitude to Professor Ranaweera, Dr Perera and Dr Ms Sivaprakasapillai for their unstinting cooperation in carrying out this work since its conception to date.

Becoming increasingly aware that we required a higher level of national recognition, we drafted an Act of Parliament ourselves. Mr K.Kanag-Iswaran PC helped us to polish it, without charging us a fee, for which service we remember him thankfully. We then got the document translated into Sinhala and Tamil. The whole process took us about two years but, just as we were about to get a Member of Parliament to present it as a Private Member's Bill, Parliament was dissolved. The next government had such a small majority that we anticipated that it might be dissolved at any time and, hence, did not try to proceed further just then.

Another two or three years passed before the situation stabilised and we were able, with the help of Minister Arumugam Thondaman, to persuade Mr R.Yogarajan MP, to try to get the Bill through Parliament. Our then President, Eng A.D.Wickremasinghe, worked very hard to get our application processed. The Bill went through many lengthy procedures, and was ready for the third reading and gazetting, when Parliament was dissolved once again. That was in February 2004. It was very frustrating to see so many years of work reduced to virtually nothing.

Eng S.A.Karunaratne took over as the President of the Society in 2004 and the matter of incorporation by Parliament was taken up again in earnest in 2007. Mr Earle Gunasekera MP magnanimously took up the challenge of sponsoring our application. Minister Eng Geethanjana Gunawardena provided the necessary push at several critical moments in getting Act No 40 passed. Similarly, Minister Ms Ferial Ashroff and Minister Dr Rajitha Senaratne also extended their willing cooperation whenever the relevant papers came up before them.

These efforts took up a lot of time and reached fruition only late last year, during the period of office of the current President of the Society, Eng D.A.Jayasinghe. Special tribute has to be paid to Eng Nandana Abeysuriya, who followed up on every aspect of the processing, even in respect of translation and typing, virtually on a daily basis. Had he not taken such an intense interest in the matter, progress on getting this task completed would have been far slower.

At the same time, we need to register our great indebtedness to the Ministry Secretary, Eng Nissanka Wijeratne, for the objective manner in which he helped ease the Bill past the various administrative hurdles that had to be overcome from time to time. I may mention, in passing, that Eng Wijeratne was one of my younger colleagues in the River Valleys Development Board at Walawe in the early 1970s and was regarded as a young man of great promise. His subsequent achievements justify the assessment made of him then, nearly 40 years ago.

In parallel with our efforts at getting legally stronger during the late 1990s, we tried very optimistically to interest one of Sri Lanka's best known philanthropists, with connections to the construction industry, to secure for us a piece of land in a reasonably central location and construct a small Secretariat on it for us, but we were not sufficiently persuasive.

As at July 2010, of the various major objectives targeted by the Society, finding a suitable block of land in close proximity to the other related professional associations is probably the most important one that remains unfulfilled. We earnestly hope that, with the emphasis placed by President Mahinda Rajapakse on rapid infrastructural development, the logic of helping the Society to work from a position of strength to contribute to the realisation of his vision will be appreciated by the relevant authorities. If they do, as indeed they should, the Society will be able to build a permanent home for itself without much further delay. We look forward to having the support of the Ministry and the other concerned authorities to achieve this primary requirement, which will permit the Society to work more effectively towards boosting the Country's physical development.

It is my pleasure at this point to render thanks to the National Building Research Organisation, the Institute for Construction Training & Development, the Organisation of Professional Associations and, most of all, to the Institution of Engineers, Sri Lanka, for having allowed us the use of their premises for Committee Meetings, Seminars, Question Time Sessions and as office space for the Society. Without the help of these great organisations, we would have failed to get as far as we have done up to now.

Finally, I should like to express our gratitude to three groups of the People's Representatives for their indispensable help: one - to Ministers Arumugam Thondaman, Geethanjana Gunawardene and Rajitha Senaratne; two - to Members of Parliament R. Yogarajah and Earle Gunasekera; and three - former Minister Ms Ferial Ashroff.

In the light of the immense difficulties faced in the past by their predecessors, the present and future Presidents and the Executive Committees of the Society will need to commit themselves to reach ever higher standards of professional conduct and achievement. We pray that the Society will continue to perform its role conscientiously in the service of our beloved Sri Lanka.

I thank you for your patient hearing.

5 July 2010