Features

The Milky Way on a dark night (our galaxy seen edge-on) reveals vast dark clouds of dust particles that we have argued are bacteria and viruses containing the all-pervasive cosmic legacy of life. Inset is the galaxy Andromeda, very similar to our own home galaxy located 2.5 million light years away.

THE CASE FOR OUR COSMIC ANCESTRY

New data signals a major paradigm shift in science

BY CHANDRA WICKRAMASINGHE

(*Vidya Jyothi* Professor Chandra Wickramasinghe, MBE, is an Honorary Professor at the University of Buckingham, UK, Honorary Professor at Ruhuna University, Sri Lanka and Adjunct Professor at the National Institute of Fundamental Science, Sri Lanka)

How did life arise? Not just on the Earth, but anywhere in the Universe? Does life emerge on every Earth-like planet that have oceans and an atmosphere by spontaneous processes involving well understood laws of physics and chemistry? Or did it involve an extraordinary, even miraculous intervention?

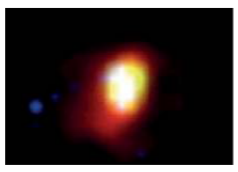
How old is the universe itself? How did it originate, if it indeed *did* ever originate? Is there evidence of life outside the Earth? In comets, the space between stars in our Milky Way galaxy, on other planets, in other galaxies? Science must necessarily exclude miraculous options of course, but the questions continue to be asked and demand answers. Many of these questions have an antiquity that predates Western traditions that go back to classical Greece in the first century BCE. The answers may have a genesis that goes outside the realm of Western culture. The concepts of zero, infinity (Ananta) all have an Indian origin and are inextricably linked with Hinduism and Buddhism. It could well be for this reason that the idea of an infinite universe has been so forcefully resisted in Western science!

In the past six months many strongly-held opinions in science have been challenged by the arrival of new data. We may be now ever closer to finding answers to the age-old questions to our cosmic ancestry and the origin of the universe.

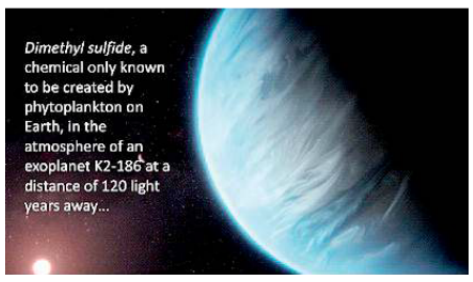
The James Webb Space Telescope (Webb) launched in 2021 is the most powerful astronomical observatory surpassing the range and capabilities of the earlier Hubble Space Telescope. It was designed to see deeper and further into our origins: from the formation of stars and planets, to the birth or possible birth of the Universe itself. Webb is an international partnership between NASA, ESA and CSA.

Discoveries using the new James Webb Telescope have shown the existence of galaxies that are much older than the age of the currently fashionable Big Bang model of the universe itself – a universe which is just 13.8 billion years old, barely three times the age of the Earth.

This unimpressive smudge of light called CEERS-93316 (Fig.1) was observed by the James Webb Telescope and is presumed to be the most distant galaxy at a distance of about 35 billion light years. This latest discovery, amongst others, lend support to ideas of a steady-state universe with an infinite age, or models of the cosmos involving alternating phases of creation and destruction. These emerging models of the cosmos are remarkably in agreement with ancient Vedic, Hindu and Buddhist ideas.



The Galaxy CEERS 93316 at a distance of 35 billion light years from Earth.



Another equally important paradigm shift that is happening now relates to the question of the origin of life, and the connection between life on Earth and the wider universe. The Kepler Orbiting Telescope in launched in 2009 was dedicated to discovering habitable Earth-like planets in our galaxy outside the solar system. A large number of such habitable planets have been discovered so far, and a few weeks ago the James Web Telescope was deployed to study one of these exoplanets in some detail. This "Earth-twin" known by the name K2-186 is located some 120 light years from the Earth. The surprising discovery was a molecule called dimethyl sulphide, along with carbon dioxide and methane, in the atmosphere of K2-186 that has been hailed as definite evidence of extraterrestrial life. The argument hinges on the fact that the molecule dimethyl sulphide appears to be *only* produced by biology on the Earth – by marine plankton in particular. So rather belatedly scientists have accepted that a second living planet exists 120 light years away from the Earth. So, the outstanding question now is *how* and by what processes did life originate on this planet? Or indeed on any other planet?

The long-held view (going all the way back to Aristotle in the third century BCE) is that life emerged and emerges easily and "naturally" on a planet like Earth (or on K2-186, for that matter) as soon as the "right conditions" prevail. The modern version of this concept that has been defended from the dawn of the 20th century is the so-called "theory of spontaneous generation". Without any substantive proof for it and a great deal of contrary evidence this concept remains part of the holy grail of biology.

According to this theory of spontaneous generation organic molecules in the Earth's oceans are supposed to assemble themselves *naturally* into primitive living systems that subsequently evolve over billions of years to produce the magnificent panorama of life of which we form the most trivial part. Needless to say, there was never any substantive evidence to support this point of view, but nevertheless it was one that has been accepted by the entire establishment of science, more or less like an act of faith.

Experiments to "prove" the process if spontaneous generation and to synthesize life from non-life have continued to be conducted in the most advanced biotechnology laboratories across the world for well over half a century. Every attempt that has been made to replicate the process of spontaneous generation in the laboratory under the widest possible range of conditions has ended in dismal failure. The reason is simple: the probability hurdle needed to go from non-living organics to the simplest evolvable living system is of a scale that is super-astronomical. The origin of life requires a system that transcends the scale of the Earth, our solar system, our Milky Way Galaxy and perhaps involves the entire universe, that is now appearing to be possibly infinite in scale.

The alternative to spontaneous generation of life is the concept of life being a cosmic phenomenon or *panspermia* as it has come to be called. This basic idea has an antiquity in Western tradition that predates Aristotle and is attributed to the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaxoragas. Anaxoragas suggested that the seeds of life are all pervasive in the cosmos and they take root and develop into living entities whenever the right conditions prevail. This is the theory of *Panspermia* (from Greek roots: *Spermata* – seed; *Pans* – everywhere). Similar ideas are implied in Buddhist, Hindu and Vedic cosmologies and of course these predate the ancient Greeks by many centuries.

From the 1970's onward the late Sir Fred Hoyle and the present writer became torch bearers for the theory of cosmic life which was a revived form of the ancient theory of panspermia. The starting point in our investigations involved the identification of cosmic dust, the trillions upon trillions of micrometre-sized "dust" that makes up a few percent of the mass of the entire Galaxy, and shows up as conspicuous dark clouds and striation against the background of stars in the Milky Way. By 1984 we had accumulated enough astronomical evidence to conclude that a very large fraction of this cosmic dust in fact linked to life – bacteria and viruses in various stages of decay and degradation, but still largely preserving the information required to initiate life on any habitable Earth-like planet.

Case against spontaneous generation of life

The most powerful single argument for life being a cosmic rather than a purely terrestrial phenomenon was articulated by the late Sir Fred Hoyle way back in 1980, summarizing the position that we had reached at the time:

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THE DUTCH GOVERNOR AND THE BURGHER ARTIST

BY HUGH KARUNANAYAKE

GOVERNOR GIDEON LOTEN

The following item appeared in a catalogue entitled **Bibliotheca Neerlando Indica,** issued sometime in 1883 by Martinus Neyhoff a well known bookseller at the Hague.

Item: 2299-Fauna of the Indian Archipelago and of the island of Ceylon – *a collection of drawings in colour representing birds, mammifers, insects etc of the zindian Archipelago and Ceylon. 144 folio sheets in two part folios – f300*

WATER COLOUR BY DE BEVERE FROM THE LOTEN COLLECTION AT THE NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM LONDON

The collection was bought at the auction by PJ van Houten, Chairman of the Council and Committee of the Colonial Museum at Haarlem. In 1905 Van Houten published a memoir on John Gideon Loten and his Ceylonese artist. Pieter Cornelis de Bevere. Van Houten having bought the De Bevere collection in. 1883 described several water colours by the artist and also added biographical information on the artist based on written notes by Loten himself.

John Gideon Loten was the 36 th Dutch Governor of Ceylon, popularly referred to as the "Naturalist Governor of Ceylon'.

Loten a virtuso in his own right, was fascinated by the diversity and natural beauty of Ceylon and he made it his duty to reveal his observations through the myriad contacts he had in the academic and artistic worlds of the eighteenth century. He held office for five years between 1752 and 1757. Although one may say that it took 36 successive Dutch administrations to discover the natural beauty of Ceylon, a country whose biodiversity, I make bold to state, is unmatched by any other country in the world, we are duty bound to acknowledge the pioneering role of Governor Loten in bringing out to the world his fascinating discoveries in Ceylon.

Governor Loten was easily the most cerebral colonial Governor of Ceylon, and his intellectual pursuits during his governorship in Ceylon, and thereafter in England and elsewhere is the subject of many a published work, the latest of which is a 829 page tome entitled "The Life of Governor Joan Gideon Loten (1710 _1789)- a personal history of a Dutch virtuoso." By Alexander JP Raaf, Hilversum, Verlorem.2010.

The front cover of the book features an illustration by artist Pieter Cornelis de Bevere from his work "Collection of birds from Ceylon" circa 1974. Much of the information presented here is from the book under reference.

The world is indebted to the artist De Bevere for so skillfully reproducing images of Ceylon including not only the diverse flora and fauna of the island, but also of the country's scenery featuring 18 th Century buildings and constructions which featured in. its landscape. The value of De Bevere's work would be more appreciated when we realise that the art of photography was yet to be invented, and contemporary 18 th century imagery would otherwise be totally unavailable to today's afficionado's of our heritage.

Who was De Bevere then,and what was his connection with the Dutch virtuoso Governor Loten ?

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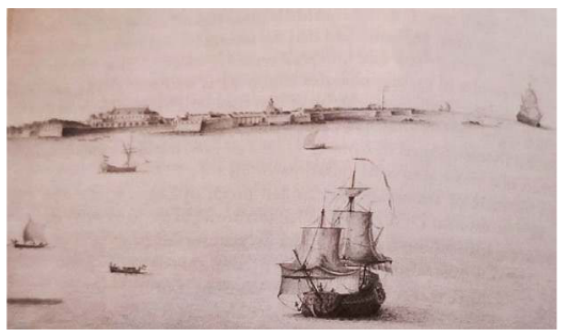

COLOMBO HARBOUR IN 1768 BY DE BEVERE

SARATH SAMARASINGHE

BY VIJAYA CHANDRASOMA

My friend of over 70 years, Sarath Samarasinghe, passed away last week.

Sarath was not only a classmate from Royal Primary through Royal College in our teenage years, but we kept in touch with each other for more than seven decades. The different paths taken by our lives and careers may have resulted in losing touch at intervals during our adult lives, but our friendship endured without pause.

I hadn't met Sarath for many years since I emigrated to the US in the 1990s. One day, I got a call from Sarath, that he was in Los Angeles for a few days. He was calling from the home of Dr. Lareef Idroos, a Thomian friend, also an outstanding cricketer who had gone on to represent Ceylon in the 1960s. I was horrified that Sarath was not with me. Lareef lived in La Canada, under an hour's drive from my home in the San Fernando Valley. I drove there immediately, and insisted that he spends the duration of his visit in LA with me, an old friend and a classmate to boot, rather than with a damned Thomian. Though I have to concede that Lareef is an extremely nice man, for an alumnus of an outstation school.

Thanks mainly to the efforts of another classmate, Ken Balendra, we, the class of 1952, never completely lost touch with each other. Ken's acumen and brilliance in the world of Sri Lankan business circles are unparalleled, but he never lost sight of his beginnings and his friends in the old school, many lifelong friends like Sarath. With Tilak Liyanage and others who valued nostalgia and sentiment over the cynicism of the real world, Ken organized annual reunions of members of our Royal College class of 1952. Evenings filled with booze, laughter and memories of those good old formative days of our lives, when we helped and misled each other on a variety of activities.

Evenings which would never be forgotten, nor complete without a drunken rendition of the College song, at the end of which came the real highlight of the party: Sarath's inimitable rendition of famous arias of Italian tenors. Sarath's style was inspired by the flair of the Italian Opera Buffa, or Comic Opera, which featured "colloquial language and slang expressions, the complete rejection of vocal virtuosity and a tendency to an incorrect pronunciation of the words". An art that Sarath had perfected over the years to a degree of almost professional excellence. Rumour has it that he declined an invitation to perform with the Three Tenors at the Teatro La Scala in Milan because the dates clashed with the Royal Thomian!

Sarath Samarasinghe (seated center) with the Royal College cricket team he led.

Sarath was an excellent cricketer, representing the College First XI from 1956 to 1960, captaining the side in 1959. I left school at the end of 1957, so I was not privy to all of Sarath's exploits, but I do remember him as an outstanding opening batsman and wicket keeper. He used to regale us with the excellence of his glorious cover drives and well-timed leg glances, 50 years later. Proving the old adage, "the older we get, the better we were".

In an article written by a Royal cricketer of a later vintage, Eardley Lieversz waxed eloquent about the "quintessential characteristics of his Royal heroes". He describes Sarath as "chirpy, humorous, competitive, courageous and affable". Sarath was all of that, and more. He was also kind, compassionate, a caring friend and a devout Buddhist.

Although I was at best a mediocre cricketer, I had the pleasure and privilege of playing with Sarath during our early teens. Apart from the routine cricket practices at school, we organized impromptu matches during the weekend, on bare land opposite our house on Fifth Lane, and Sarath's at Reid Avenue. I can fully vouch for Sarath's competitiveness, which coupled with his batting skills, made him a most difficult batsman to dislodge. I well remember one occasion at one these "big matches" in Reid Avenue, I had Sarath plumb LBW with one of my straight up and down off-spinners which rarely spun. He refused to walk. The only DRS system available to us was Sarath's decision, which proved to be pretty unshakeable, as it was accompanied with the threat that "he would take his bat and ball and go home", if he was ruled out. Sarath has always denied this story, which he calls a figment of my imagination. He may be right; his sportsmanship has never been questioned.

I can vouch for Sarath's caring and kindness to his friends, with a recent personal experience. I had recently been recovering from a life-threatening illness, which kept me virtually immobile and helpless for months. When Sarath heard of my condition, he made it a point to visit me, with another of our "baby class" friends, Dr. Harsha Samarajiwa, my excellent physician who has looked after me like gold since I retired in Sri Lanka many years ago. We enjoyed a wonderful visit, entertaining each other (usually lying, or at least grossly exaggerating) about our schoolday exploits.

I still have the message he sent me after this visit. He wrote, "It was great to have had the opportunity to share wonderful stories, and wished we had more time to continue". He went on to tell me, helpless as I then was, to look after myself, adding that the best thing that has happened to me is that my son constantly monitors my health and finances from LA, which will enable me "to get rid of my bad habits". Sound advice, though I would be a liar if I say that those "bad habits" don't beckon most enticingly, just about every day.

Sarath was in the best of health and full of life and laughter, that day. Three short months later, he is no longer with us. Life can be very cruel.

Sarath was my age, but the grief of losing a friend, especially one who shares the proud bond of the old school tie, will never be alleviated by the inevitability of death. We will miss him, but remain ever grateful for the memories we share.

My heartfelt condolences, and those of my family, are with Srimali, Chehan and Anouk.

May Sarath's continuing journey in Samsara be short.

DOES THIS GOVERNMENT KNOW WHERE IT'S HEADING?

This country lacks good leaders who are genuinely interested in the development of the country, welfare of the people and govern with integrity and principles.

(1)Qualities Required.

A good leader will be a good communicator and who will be genuinely result focused. Our present leaders are not capable of commanding respect of the people but they are using the Police and armed forces to "demand " respect, which will only create chaos.

(2)Present status, mistakes and Ill-Motives of researchers.

In desperation without a proper plan we are selling our assets eg. ports, our land, a part of the sea that is ours by permitting Indian fishermen to fish in our waters when our poor fishermen will have to starve! If permits are given to Indian fishermen, what will happen to our sea-bed coral with their destructive bottom trawling? That will be the beginning of the destruction of our coast. Smuggling of gold and drugs will intensify.

Will India permit our fishermen to fish in their waters with permits? The people of this country did not give a free hand to this government or president to sell and mortgage our assets. Why are we permitting the Chinese, Indian and Japanese navies to make frequent suspicious port calls here for conducting 'research'? Are they researching for our benefit or theirs?

Has the government not consulted our scientists who will know better than the Navy about these matters.

How safe are our minerals? Indian fishermen have caused enough damage to our fishing industry by bottom trawling. Is this president having any sinister moves to remain in power by suppressing public opinion along with the Navy, Police armed forces and the foreign naval support?

(3) Solution

The time is ripe for all opposition parties to conduct a proper study of these developments and counter them. None of the opposition parties have a shadow cabinet or a proper manifesto spelling the solutions they propose to implement. The areas that must be covered include the constitution, judiciary and the executive.

(4) Quality Of our executive and implementation and deterioration of standards.

The disgraceful behavior of parliamentarians, and the inaction of the Executive, the Speaker and the Public Service Commission along with the weak AG's department and withdrawal of corruption cases by the Bribery Commission provides a true picture of this country and its leaders.

The judges we had in the past, to mention a few of the caliber of Percy Colin-Thome, Mark Fernando, H.E Tennekoon are certainly a great loss !. Let's hope we will have many like them with courage and fortitude, ensuring the best.

Only divine help can save this country!

Nihal De Alwis

AN APPRECIATION

THE LATE COLONEL JAYANTHA DE SILVA

BY LT COL (RETD) UDENA GUNAWARDENA SLLI

Col Jayantha de Silva, who recently passed away in Melbourne following a brief illness, was undoubtedly a born leader, which was evident from his school days and later in his professional life as a military officer. I had the privilege of serving with him in the Army, at different stages up to the time he emigrated to Australia.

Even before that, despite being in opposite schools, at St Thomas', we often heard about 'PVJ' as he was known by his initials at Royal, excelling as an outstanding basketball player, a senior-ranked school cadet, a school prefect, and in various other activities.

Jayantha was approximately two years my senior in both age and rank in the Army. A graduate from the Pakistan Military Academy, he was selected as a Senior Under Officer, a prestigious title seldom given to overseas cadets, acknowledging his outstanding performance and leadership prowess.

In the Army, from the very outset as a junior officer, he demonstrated exceptional leadership qualities and an unparalleled work ethic. His six-foot frame, erect posture, agility, and friendly nature all contributed to his distinct personality. Additionally, he was gifted with unbelievably creative abilities in mechanical work, handicraft, drawing, and writing—abilities that he consistently applied throughout his distinguished career.

I first encountered Jayantha when posted to Diyatalawa to take over from him as the Course Commander for Officer Cadet training at the Officer Cadet School (now Academy). He played a pivotal role in establishing the first 'mini' Academy along the lines of established academies overseas, in an amazingly short space of time, with the support and guidance of the then Commandant of the Army Training Centre, Lt. Col (later General) Denis Perera.

The opportunity I had to understudy this great man and observe his amazing work ethic, speed of action, and attention to detail was, personally speaking, a great revelation. It challenged me to elevate my own standards in all aspects of training. He was an ideal mentor, leading by example and practice.

On taking over, maintaining the momentum he had set was no small task. In addition to continuing the training based on the PMA lines that he had established, I also incorporated additional aspects of training based on my experience at Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, UK. The foundation laid by Jayantha at the outset made it possible to maintain a very high standard in subsequent cadet training.

Although both commissioned into the First Battalion CLI, our additional Regimental postings meant we rarely served together in the Unit. I recall, however, a time when we were together in the Unit and how the CLI Museum was set up practically overnight, mainly through Jayantha's many talents and with our assistance, at the behest of the commanding Officer, Lt. Col H V Athukorale.

We were posted as Grade 2 and Grade 3 Staff officers, respectively, to Central Command HQ in Kandy, in the mid-seventies. The work, although not exclusively military, demanded significant adaptability, a challenge Jayantha met with ease, much to everyone's surprise and to the Commander's satisfaction. During his time in Kandy, Jayantha voluntarily took on the responsibility of coaching and assembling a basketball team for Trinity College.

In the early eighties (the exact dates elude me), I had the opportunity to work together with him at Army HQ, where he was GSO 1 (Plans) and I was GSO 2 (Training). Working together was immensely productive and enjoyable, particularly on technical evaluation committees and future training plans for the Army, under the direction of Gen T I Weeratunga, the Army Commander.

These are just a few recollections of my personal interactions with Jayantha de Silva, an iconic personality whose memory remains vividly etched in my mind, despite the passage of time.

THE CASE...

FROM PAGE 14

"The very small probabilities, which one calculates for the assembly of these substances (e.g. enzymes), demonstrates as near to certainty as one would wish that life did not originate here on the Earth. Indeed, the infinitesimal probabilities demonstrate that life is even too complex for its origin to be confined within our galaxy alone. The resources of the whole universe were almost certainly needed....."

If there was a deep principle of nature that drove inorganic systems towards the emergence of primitive life - the evidence for this would have long since been discovered in the laboratory, which as we noted, has not. Moreover, with calculations showing grotesquely low *a priori* probabilities for the transition from non-life to life only two options remain: -

(1) The origin of life was an extremely improbable event that must have occurred on Earth against all odds (because we are here!) but will consequently not be reproduced elsewhere. In that case we would indeed be hopelessly alone as a life system in the Universe.

(2) Alternatively, a very much vaster cosmic system than was available on Earth, and a very much longer timescale was involved in an initial origination event, after which life was transferred to Earth and elsewhere by processes that the late Sir Fred Hoyle and the present writer proposed many years ago – *cometary panspermia*.

We then went on to argue that this cosmologically-derived legacy of life, along with its full evolutionary potential (contained within the genomes of bacteria and viruses), were distributed mainly by comets and other repositories of cosmic dust onto habitable planets like the Earth. Comets in this theory are incubators and distributors of the information of life throughout the universe in the form of bacteria and viruses. Whilst in 2023 comets are conceded by most scientists as being the repositories of complex organic molecules that may have contributed to spontaneous generation of life, their role as carriers of life itself, despite an ever-increasing body of contrary evidence is still fiercely resisted. Hard evidence of comets containing organic molecules that can only reasonably be derived from biology are coming in fast and thick. The Rosetta Space Mission to a comet - Comet 67P/C-G – launched in 2013 has yielded a formidable body of evidence, all showing consistency with the existence of microbial material in comets.

Another comet, Comet Lovejoy, has more recently been observed and found to be emitting large amounts of ethyl alcohol as well as a type of sugar into space – equivalent to 500 bottles of wine per second. These are the natural products of fermentation, which is clear evidence for sub-surface microbial activity in a comet.

Are cosmic bacteria continually falling to Earth?

One crucial test of the theory of cosmic life is to probe the stratosphere for in-falling alien genetic systems – bacteria and viruses. To urge international space authorities with the capability of doing this was far from easy. The first dedicated effort to test the idea of bacterial in-fall from comets was carried out in collaboration with scientists at ISRO (Indian Space Research Organisation) in 2001.

Positive detections of in-falling microbiota were made, and the number of bacterial cells collected in a measured volume of the stratosphere at 41km led to an estimate of an in-fall rate over the whole Earth of 0.3-3 tonnes of microbes per day. This converts to some ***20-200 million bacteria per square metre arriving from space every single day.***

Very recently microorganisms were discovered on many occasions between 2013 and 2017 on the outside of the International Space Station that orbits at 400km above the Earth. There is no easy way to maintain that such microorganisms could have been lofted from the surface of the Earth.

This discovery is so profoundly important for science that it needs to be repeated; but the desire to repeat it is difficult to find. A similar experiment, however, is being planned by a team of scientists led by Professor Dhammika Magana-rachchi at the National Institute of Fundamental Studies and myself. A balloon launch to this end is being planned within the next six months. The team at NIFS will be assisted by my grandson, Reuben Chandra Wickramasinghe, who has a visiting appointment at the Mathematics Department of the University of Colombo.

Concluding remarks

I believe that in 2023 we have reached a crucial turning point in the history of human civilization. When it is finally accepted that life on Earth is a minuscule part of a vast cosmic biosphere the implications for humanity will be profound. Even more important would be the recognition that alien life in the form of microbes – bacteria and viruses - exist in our very midst *even now* and are continually raining down on our planet. Such microbes could be responsible for devastating pandemics, but more positively, we should recognise cosmic viruses and bacteria could have the potential to augment our genomes – the genomes of all terrestrial lifeforms - and over long periods unravel an ever-changing panorama of cosmic life.

Whilst advances in technology continue at accelerating pace humanity as a whole is becoming ever more fractured. Wars and bitter sectarian conflicts and heart-rending suffering are to be seen everywhere. The "climate-change" marches and protestations of young people that are gaining momentum are perhaps emblematic of a desire to rebel against reigning paradigms that seem to be threatening our very existence.

Thomas Kuhn famously declared "...when paradigms change, the world changes with them." One could perhaps assert that a reversal of this causality is also possible – "when the world changes paradigms can be forced to change."

Further reading

Wickramasinghe, N.C. and Wickramasinghe, H.C., 2023. Life and the Universe: a final synthesis. Journal of Cosmology, Vol. 30, No.10, pp. 30160 - 30174

Wickramasinghe, C., Wickramasinghe, K., Tokoro, G., 2019. Our Cosmic Ancestry in the Stars (Inner Traditions, NY)

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ther than the parents as
by Governor Loten. Time,

view the circumstances of the artist' s entry into the world, with jaundiced eyes.

On another note, It must also be said that the late Mr Donald Ferguson, and the late Mr RG Anthonisz had made efforts through the Royal Asiatic Socociety (Ceylon Branch) to procure some of the invaluable work of De Bevere but had not met with success during British colonial days. The time may now be opportune for a Sri Lanka Government to pursue the re acquisition of art and artifacts taken away from the country during the days of colonial rule and it is also time the bastard De Bevere returned to his true home!.