SOCIAL AND CULTURAL INTEGRATION IN THE SETTLEMENT SCHEMES : THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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The lack of social and cultural cohesion among the population of Sri Lanka's settlement schemes has received the attention of scholars and planners alike. It has been pointed out that the social and physical conditions peculiar to the settlement context retard the growth of socially and culturally integrative patterns. In this paper, I propose to examine the problem of integration from a cultural anthropology standpoint. First, I shall examine some limitations in the theoretical models used explicitly or implied in the existing literature on the problem of integration. Next, some theoretical orientations in anthropology which could shed light on emerging patterns of social and cultural integration will be discussed. The paper will conclude with suggestions for research from an anthropological perspective.

The broad theoretical position taken in this paper can best be summed up in the words of B.H. Farmer, an early student of Sri Lanka's settlement schemes: 'It is, in fact, important not to paint too black a picture of society in the colonies. On a pessimistic view, they emerge as yet another example of economic development which has divorced the peasant from his traditional way of life and sundered the customary bonds of his society; ..... But a less pessimistic view is possible. Even in the colonies with least social cohesion and least leadership there are many sources of strength.....'[1] He identifies these 'sources of strength' rather cursorily as the continuing importance of the nuclear family, and what he simply calls 'ancient religious values.'[2] He does mention the need for further research in the area.

Contemporary researchers have given less cautious estimates of social and cultural conditions in the settlement schemes. For example, Wimaladharma: 'In the older colonization schemes, what has evolved are loosely structured social relations. The heavy hand of tradition that guided most social relations in a *Purana* village was absent in the colony ..... Dispersed settlements, scattered houses, heterogeneous groupings, absence of the traditional leaders, lack of social engineering, all helped the growth of a loose social structure.'[3]

This paper argues that views of the above type are produced by a rather rigid application of theoretical models, in particular, the ideal-typical model of the traditional village, in an empirical situation wherein the model hardly has relevance. As far back as 1955, Redfield, the eminent student of peasant society, drew attention to the limitations of classical anthropological theories

1. Farmer, B. H., *Pioneer Peasant Colonization in Ceylon*. (Connecticut, 1957), p. 313.
2. ibid.
3. Wimaladharma, K. P., Signposts of the Mahaweli Human Settlements, (Colombo, 1979), Mahaweli Development Board Monograph, p. 51.

derived principally from the study of isolated, simple societies. In his view, the social and cultural complexities of the peasant situation demanded new theoretical approaches and constructs.[4] Since then, numerous anthropological researchers have been documenting from all over the globe the openness of 'the little community' to political, social, economic and cultural influences originating from without. However, the ideal-typical image of the village community with its neatly bounded physical limits, its closed, corporate, landholding kin group and the ties of solidarity within this romanticized republic continues to surface in the theory and practice of settlement planning. For example, as a step towards promoting social cohesion in the settlement schemes of Mahaweli Stage II, a Feasibility Study recommends that the settlement pattern consist of clustered farms or villages, that each cluster have no more than five - hundred families, that each hamlet unit (having approximately 100 to 150 families) 'be composed of people having the same geo-cultural background and the same social status and wherever practicable the same caste affiliations.'[5]

Several assumptions of doubtful value are implied in the recommendations. First, it is assumed that social and cultural homogeneity necessarily leads to cohesion. In-depth, empirical studies of rural Sri Lankan society have not borne this assumption out. On the one hand, it is hardly possible to find a social aggregate which is homogeneous with respect to kinship, caste and social status; wide variations and differences along these lines seem to be the rule rather than the exception even among people living in the same village. Anthropological studies have also revealed that factionalism, competitiveness and conflict are endemic features of rural communities and that a show of unity and solidarity emerges in exceptional situations such as when members of the community face a common threat or enemy. Thus, even if socially and culturally homogeneous communities were established, they are bound to acquire heterogeneous features. Another assumption which is implied in the recommendations is that heterogeneity is socially and culturally maladaptive or dysfunctional. This need not be the case particularly if the different groups in question are governed by a complex division of labour as in a caste society or by an overarching legal and political structure as in a plural society.[6]

The move to create artificial communities in the settlement schemes is also regarded by the planners as an effective counter to social, economic and political trends, which in their view are signs of social and cultural malaise. For example, the growth of individualism, particularly when it comes to making

4. See for example, Redfield, R., *Little Community*, (Chicago, 1956).

5. Mahaweli Development Board, (Colombo, 1972), Feasibility Study for Stage II, p. 124.

6. The sociologist, Emile Durkheim, distinguished between two types of social solidarity; 'mechanical solidarity' which obtains in a population of like units, and 'organic solidarity' derived from occupational specialization and from a complex division of labour (see Durkheim, E., *The Division of Labour in Society*, (Chicago, 1949). He regarded the latter as a more enduring form of social integration.

decisions about agriculture is considered an unhealthy trend. The increased use of cash in transactions, the preference among settlers for using hired rather than co-operative labour, and the erosion of group-oriented activities in general are not treated in a positive light.[7]

The available evidence indicates that socio-economic trends taking place in the settlements do not conform in most respects to the expectations of the planners. In addition to individualism, attention has been drawn to patterns of economic exploitation of settlers by various types of middlemen who also have a monopoly over leadership roles and public offices at the local level.[8] The emergence of protest politics at the mass level and its use as a method of getting things done is another significant social development.[9]

It is doubtful how the complex social, economic, and political processes which are taking place in the settlement schemes could be contained or be channeled into productive directions by recourse to the rather simplistic alternative of changing the physical layout of settler homes. And, there is no way of hermetically sealing off settlers in the newer schemes from the complicating influences impinging on them from outside. Even if this were possible, there is the unsolved issue of social and cultural disintegration in the older schemes such as Kalawewa, Kandalama and Rajangane, and in still older ones in Minneriya and Gal Oya. Does this mean that anomie and social discontent will be the inevitable outcome in the older settlements where the hamlet pattern was never adopted and where attention was not given to homogeneous social membership in selecting settlers. Will the older settlements emerge at some point in time as socially and culturally viable human aggregates, and, if so, what defining characteristics will the settlement society and culture exhibit ?

II

Some theoretical perspectives in cultural anthropology, which may serve as vantage points for the study of change processes in the settlement schemes will now be presented. First, there are the major approaches to the concept of cultural integration. It had been traditionally assumed in anthropology that a culture is and should be viewed as a highly integrated whole, a seamless web whose elements neatly fit into a systemmatic design. It has been pointed out that such neatness and rigdity of design obtains more in the rarefied world of the anthropological anlyst than in the day-to-day realities facing the members of a culture. Clifford Geertz has proposed a re-orientation which might yield results if applied in a study of culturally integrative patterns in Sri Lanka's settlement schemes: 'The problem of cultural analysis is as much a matter of determining independencies as interconnections, gulfs as well as

7. See for example, Wimaladharma, op. cit., pp. 38 and 51.
8. Mahaweli Development Board, op. cit., p. 74.
9. See Farmer, op. cit., pp. 312, 313, and Wimaladharma, op. cit., p. 51.

bridges. The appropriate image, if one must have images, of cultural organisation is neither the spider web nor the pile of sand. It is rather more the octopus whose tentalcles are in large part separately integrated, neurally quite poorly connected with one another and with what in the octopus passes for a brain, and yet who nonetheless manages to get around and to preserve himself, for a while anyway, as a viable, if somewhat ungainly, entity'.[10] The study of cultural integration cannot therefore be guided by rigid models of culture and society. If one looks for a spider web of logically interconnected beliefs and values in the real world, one is apt to be disappointed, particularly if one were studying the settlement context where the range of cultural variation is bound to be much greater than that in a traditional village. Pursuing the the analogy of the octopus, one may suppose that social action in the settlement context may tend towards compartmentalization into technological, economic, social, political and cultural spheres, each guided by a different set of values and beliefs. At the same time, the contexts in which activities take place may have separate but overlapping functions for the entire settlement population. For example, in place of the *gamgoda* where many strands of activity interconnect, the foci of social interaction may be removed from one another in spatial and temporal terms and at weekly fairs, townships, large urban centers, places of pilgrimage and political rallies, to give some examples.

Another useful orientation is afforded by anthropological studies of social groups exposed to radical and rapid change. The ethnographic evidence indicates that a variety of responses may be shown. A simple, technological change such as the replacement of stone tools with steel axes can have socially and culturally disastrous consequences.[11] Similarly, a change in habitat and economy from foraging to farming may result in a total breakdown in traditional values.[12] Usually the change process has dramatic consequences for aboriginal populations which have an unsophisticated technology and a relatively simple cultural repertoire. The response of populations with a high degree of cultural and technological complexity is necessarily complex. Numerous anthropological case studies have documented the persistence of certain social and cultural patterns despite marked outward changes. Thus it may be useful to find out how much of the cultural baggage brought by the rural Sri Lankan into the settlement schemes remains unchanged. Creative syntheses of old with new cultural items is another type of response to the impact of new conditions and influences. Peasant societies in Sri Lanka, India and Mesoamerica have been able to re-integrate the indigenous with alien cultural traditions. It is not unlikely that similar transformations in traditional culture are taking place in the settlement context.

10. Geertz, C. Person, *Time and Conduct in Bali: An Essay in Cultural Analysis*, (Connecticut, 1966), Southeast Asia Cultural Report Series, 14, pp. 65-67.
11. See for example, Sharp, L. (1952), *Steel Axes for Stone Age Australians*, *Human Organisation*, Vol. 11, No. 1.
12. See for example, Turnbull, C., *The Mountain people*, (Connecticut, 1973), *Readings in Anthropology*, pp. 69-77.

Finally, anthropologists have pointed out that even in situations producing the direst cultural and psychological stress, man continues to exercise his creative powers as a culture maker. As opposed to the classic processes of culture change (evolution, drift, diffusion, historical change and acculturation) which are caused by a gradual chain-reaction effect taking place through several generations, there are rapid culture changes consciously created by individuals as a response to cultural and social disintegration. Movements of this kind have been variously referred to as 'nativistic', 'revivalistic', 'cargo cults', 'millenarian' and 'messianic' depending upon differences in their content and orientation.

III

It can be safely inferred from the foregoing discussion that re-organizations and adaptations in traditional culture are taking place in Sri Lanka's settlement schemes as part of an essentially human response to the vacua in the social and cultural lives of settlers. There is no doubt that time is a crucial intervening variable; hence culturally integrative patterns are more likely to be found in the older rather than newer settlement schemes. It may be noted that re-organizations of traditional social and cultural structures are observable in the suburban populations of Sri Lanka, particularly among migrants from rural areas who have settled down in the vicinity of Colombo city. It is likely that patterns of social and cultural integration that have evolved in the settlement schemes have a natural affinity with and structurally resemble those found among the suburbanite segment with a rural background. In the social sphere, one is likely to find a greater emphasis on the nuclear family as the basic unit of association, socialization and the emotional life ; greater dependency on fictive kinship and friendship networks and, tendencies towards participation in mass events such as festivals, pilgrimage centers, political rallies and popular entertainment centers. In the economic sphere, one could expect to find greater participation in the cash nexus, greater reliance on impersonal market relations, and contractual ties as opposed to group-oriented economic action. Finally, in the cultural sphere, a greater emphasis on popular or mass religiosity, a more simplified belief structure which is more emotionalistic rather than theological or meditative; and, a more national rather than a parochial or regional political consciousness. Sri Lanka's peasant society as a whole is undergoing social and cultural transformations of the above nature, and it is likely that these trends are accentuated rather than retarded in the settlement schemes, planners' efforts notwithstanding.