

VILLAGE AS A CONSTRUCT IN DISCOURSES ON DEVELOPMENT IN SRI LANKA

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In recent anthropological research in Sri Lanka there has been a surge of interest in development discourse. The primary argument in this line of research has been that development (especially rural development) thinking and practices in Sri Lanka have been guided and shaped by a dominant nationalist ideology fostered by the Sinhala state and articulated in many different forms by its ruling elite. According to this conception, many seemingly different development programs carried out in the post-independence period by the state as well as by some of the leading non-government organizations have been part of a larger hegemonic project designed to restore past glories of the Sinhala civilization supposed to have collapsed under the pressure of foreign invasions and colonial conquests. This focus on development discourse, in turn, must be seen as part of a larger anthropological preoccupation with Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and antagonistic ideologies, including Tamil-Hindu nationalism, in trying to unravel causes of and paths taken by the ongoing ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. This paper seeks to interrogate part of this anthropological formulation as related to the conceptualization of village within the so-called nationalist-cum-developmental discourse in Sri Lanka.

In relevant anthropological accounts of Sri Lanka, village has been perceived as the central axis through which paths of nationalist and developmental discourses cross in ways that produce hegemonic, namely ideological synthesis that is order maintaining in effect. This formulation needs to be interrogated on empirical as well as theoretical grounds. At the empirical level, given the wide continuum of rural social formations found in contemporary Sri Lanka, any single construct of ideal village as the goal to be realized in all development efforts and nationalist social reconstruction is likely to alienate a vast number of rural people whose real life experiences may be so far removed from the construct so projected. This, in turn, is likely to take wind away from the sail of hegemony that may be attributed to the relevant ideological formulation. Even if this may not be the case, we still need to reexamine the construct of ideal village if we are to assume that ideology has some relation not only to the hegemonic ambitions of the ruling elite but also to the real life experiences of the rural people who are expected to accept, consume and resonate with that ideology.

The theoretical grounds for interrogating the construct of village that is seen as a core element of nationalist development discourse stem from the whole issue of the relation between the realm of ideas and the realm of material conditions affecting people's lives.

Frontal attacks on the classical Marxist formulation of "base" and "superstructure" have come from within as well as outside Marxist scholarship. From within Marxist scholarship Gramsci has tried to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between ideas and material interests. To Gramsci hegemony is the process through which the ruling elite fosters ideas, views and perceptions that directly or indirectly provide legitimacy to the existing social order. On the other hand, attempts to resurrect classical Marxist formulation have put forward the view that the notion of hegemony necessarily assumes a "false consciousness" on the part of the subalterns (Abercombie *et al* 1980, Scott 1985). Outside Marxism, recent works on nationalism have treated it not only as a clear illustration of the autonomy of the domain of ideas but also as a powerful ideological force shaping political processes and even economic realities in many parts of the world (Anderson 1983). Anthropological writings on nationalism in Sri Lanka have largely stemmed from the latter perspective (e.g. Kapferer 1988). These studies have tried to unravel the religious and cultural roots of nationalist thought and the manner in which educational, cultural and mass communication processes (especially role of 'print capitalism') have contributed to the process of ideology formation. The relevance of material interests and intense competition for scarce resources distributed and channeled by the state in shaping nationalist thinking and related social policies has been relatively underexplored. There are notable exceptions in the works of Brow Spencer and Woost who have tried not to lean too much towards either the materialist pole or the ideological pole but to look at complex linkages and interactions between nationalist thinking and ground realities and lived experiences of the people concerned. At times even these more cautious approaches, however, have been inclined too much in one direction or the other.

The present study seeks to reopen the debate on construct of village within the nationalist and development discourses with a view to illustrate how this construct itself has undergone change at least partly in response to many changes in rural social formations over the past several decades; and to what extent and in what ways this construct has shaped and, in turn, been shaped by actual development practices and related articulations of material interests in rural Sri Lanka. The aim is to point to complex and often dialectical interactions between the domain of ideas and that of material interests coming into play in development policies, programs and practices. This, in turn, would enable us to explore development discourses like all other forms of hegemonic discourses as contested terrains where any consensus between the

ruling elite and the subalterns is not axiomatic but conditional upon at least partial reconciliation of divergent interests of the various groups that constitute rural society.

Village as a Construct in Nationalist Discourse

Several anthropologists have elaborated the manner in which Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism rests on a certain conceptualization of village community. This dominant ideology conceptualizes "an historic destiny that binds together the Sinhala people, Buddhism and the land of Sri Lanka" (Brow 1990: 9). The Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism has tended to regard Sinhala and, by implication, Sri Lankan nation as "a nation of villages" (Woost 1990, Brow 1990). According to this conceptualization, the essence of the Sinhala nation is to be found in cultural forms characteristic of its rural populations. As one author puts it "In this still largely agrarian society peasantry is thus authoritatively placed at the moral core of the Sinhalese nation" (Brow 1990: 9). In the nationalist thinking the Sinhala nation and its constituent element village community experienced a series of social, economic and moral decline from a golden era in ancient times to the decadent position they are currently in mainly due to foreign invasions and colonial incursions. This, in turn, gives moral responsibility and a hegemonic thrust to the Sinhala-dominated state to "restore village society to its former glory" (Woost 1990: 89).

The genealogy of this nationalist perception of the village community has been traced from several sources. First, following historical insights provided by Samaraweera (1981, 1978), several anthropologists have interpreted this nationalist construct of village community as an ideological legacy of the 19th-century oriental scholarship in the west (Brow 1990, Spencer 1990, Woost 1990). Henry Main's formulation of idyllic village community characterized by self-sufficiency, isolation, homogeneity and corporate character has been identified as an important influence on the nationalist construct of village community (Samaraweera 1978, 1981). Second, it has been argued that urban intellectuals including nationalist thinkers, historians and creative writers, many of whom lacked direct contacts in rural areas, have readily borrowed the above concept and disseminated the relevant characterization of rural society at popular levels (Spencer 1990). Third, anthropologists have also paid attention to other discursive agents and ideological apparatuses like mass media, cinema and state rituals of various kinds as sources of popular, romantic and often stereotypical notions of village community. This, in turn, is viewed as a manifestation of colonization of common sense understandings and perceptions by nationalist thinking and hegemonic views emanating from the dominant layers in society.

Village as a Construct in Development Discourse

Anthropological research on development discourse in Sri Lanka has highlighted the manner in which development policies and programs have been guided and shaped by nationalist

thinking. If the nationalist discourse provided a diagnosis of and a potent explanation for problems in the rural sector, the development discourse evolved a program of action designed to overcome the problems so identified. In many ways the development discourse assigned a key responsibility and a mission to the Sri Lankan state as a primary actor entrusted with the task of restoration of the Sinhala-Buddhist civilization. As a part of this discourse a comprehensive program of state policies, projects and interventions were developed with a view to arrest ongoing processes of disintegration and degeneration attributed to rural society particularly in the light of its assumed subordination to the expanding estate sector and restore village community to its assumed past glory. A series of official inquiries instituted by the state to investigate causes of and remedies for problems in the rural sector such as the Kandyan Peasantry Commission of 1951, parallel diagnosis of rural problems in certain social science research such as *Disintegrating Village* by Sarkar and Tambiah (1957) and a set of corresponding legislation such as Village Communities Ordinance of 1935, facilitated the shift from nationalist to the development discourse and synthesis of nationalist concerns of Sinhala elite and developmental concerns of the Sri Lankan state (Meyer 1992, Samaraweera 1978, Woost 1990).

The resulting conceptualization of ideal Sinhala village included Buddhist thought and practices as the core of its spiritual life, paddy cultivation as the basis of its economic sustenance and social bonds of kinship as the basis of its unity and mutual support mechanisms (Spencer 1990, Woost 1990). Paddy field (*ketha*), village tank (*weva*) and Buddhist temple (often represented by *dagaba*) came to form a symbolic trio representative of ideal Sinhala village characterized by prosperity, peace, spiritual well-being and perfect adaptation to natural environment. Accordingly, the promotion of paddy cultivation and irrigation rehabilitation and development primarily geared to promote paddy cultivation and promotion of village unity and cooperation became primary goals of government initiated development programs throughout the post-independence period. These ideas, in turn, constituted the main thrusts of the development discourse in Sri Lanka.

Having identified the ideological basis of development policies and programs of the Sri Lankan state, anthropological research has so far progressed along two parallel paths. One examines the manner in which formation of the Sri Lankan state and its progressive penetration into the countryside have been associated with the progress of 'development' project. This, in turn, has enabled researchers to explore the hegemonic character of development policies and programs initiated by the state. Research on the Gam Udawa program and its impact on the Vedda community in the periphery by James Brow (1990) and impact on the broad developmental thrust on a squatter settlement in the remote Monaragala District by Woost (1990) are examples of the relevant line of anthropological inquiry.

The next line of anthropological research relating to development discourse has focused on "rituals of development." Here the

emphasis has been on the manner in which rituals sponsored and often directly organized by the state serves to reinforce and disseminate the hegemonic conception of the development process. For instance, in a highly original research Serena Tennakoon (1988) examined the manner in which rituals organized by the state have been instrumental in contextualizing the Mahaweli Development Programme and resulting human settlement efforts within the nationalist project.

Problems for Discourse Analysis

The parallel discourses in nationalism and development presented in the preceding sections leave certain important questions unanswered. Most importantly, some important questions regarding the relationship between ideology and interest remains unanalyzed. Which interests of different social groups do the nationalist and development discourses noted above serve? The analysis presented so far only indicates that these parallel and mutually reinforcing discourses merely serve the hegemonic interests of the ruling classes. This then leaves us with the question as to why the subordinate social classes accept and conform to these discourses to the extent they actually do. If the relevant ideologies only serve the hegemonic interests of the dominant groups, any conformity to and acceptance of such ideologies by the subalterns can only be attributed to a "false consciousness" of some kind. This is why it is so important to reexamine the whole question of the relationship between ideology and interest in relation to development discourse so as to determine not only how the ideology of development serves the hegemonic ambitions of the ruling classes, but also some of the important material interests of the subordinate social groups. One may argue that the hegemonic project can only be successful if there is a certain unity of interests and a corresponding ideological synthesis between the rulers and the ruled in regard to a pattern of resource distribution and ideas that justify that pattern of resource distribution (Silva 1982).

Here it is important to understand that the post-independent state in Sri Lanka has been a primary agent of distribution of scarce resources such as land, irrigation water, educational opportunities and public sector employment (Silva 1992, Moore 1985). The nationalist and development ideologies may be seen as ideologies that call for and justify a given pattern of resource distribution by the state. It must be noted here that while these ideological systems guide a given pattern of resource distribution on the part of the state, the ideologies are also guided and, in some ways, shaped by the imperatives of the resource distribution system. Any ideologically driven system of resource distribution typically provides for inclusion and exclusion, or patronage and discrimination (Silva 1982) as a means of rewarding those more faithful to the given ideology. In other words, there is a two-way relationship between ideology and interest. While the interests shape ideology (e.g. It is in the interest of the Sinhalese to develop Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism which gives them privileged access to scarce resources channeled by the state), ideology also shapes

interests in so far as a group develops its interests and demands in keeping with a certain ideology.

The relationship between ideology and interest identified in the preceding paragraphs raises some questions about the hegemonic significance of the ideologies in question. If there is an inherent tendency within nationalist and development discourses to provide for inclusion and exclusion as two important and contrasting aspects of the same process, one can question if the ideologies in question can play an effective hegemonic role. This is because those excluded will naturally turn against the system endangering the hegemonic process. This, in turn, implies that disagreement, dissent and even resistance are inevitable outcomes of the ideologically driven resource distribution systems. This is particularly so if the nationalist and development discourses only create spaces and opportunities for the majority ethnic group in the country as appears to be the case in Sri Lanka. Even within the majority ethnic group only rural communities that conform to the ideal Sinhala village as noted above, will truly qualify for mainstream rural development resources dispensed by the state. As will be explained later, only a small segment of rural communities in Sri Lanka can realistically project themselves in line with the construct of ideal Sinhala village attributed to development discourse. Unlike pure ideological processes where hegemonic manipulation may be possible by controlling and mobilizing the ideological apparatuses like media and "rituals of development," apportionment and allocation of scarce resources of the state are fraught with tension, disillusionment and resentment. This, in turn, calls for a reexamination of the conventional analysis of development discourse within the framework of the hegemonic thesis.

The Sri Lankan State as a Provider and a Benefactor

When we critically examine the role of the Sri Lankan state in relation to hegemonic ideologies like Sinhala nationalism and development discourse, we have to consider the manner in which the Sri Lankan state has penetrated into many aspects of rural life from "cradle to grave" (Moore 1985). Hardly any aspect of rural life remains untouched by "technologies of governmentality" (Foucault 1976). Apart from regular public servants like *grama niladhari* (village officer) who are constantly in contact with rural people, many government agencies providing services to rural people have established village level organizations like "farmers' organization", "cooperative society," "rural development society," *praja mandalaya* and "parent-teacher association," in some ways replicating various arms of the state at the village-level. In the rural areas the state plays a critically important role in distributing vital resources like land, irrigation water, development aid, low-interest credit and welfare services of different kinds. Given the fact that many of the land and water resources in Sri Lanka are under state control, the state is involved in regularization of encroached crown lands and nationalization of typically privately-owned estate land for distribution among peasants to distribution of land developed by the state under

colonization schemes. This reveals that the state is involved in both provision of important services like extension services to the farmers as well as critical inputs that shape the ideologies of the rural people.

In trying to understand the relation between ideology and material interests in rural Sri Lanka three important assertions can be made on the basis of available evidence. First, the nationalist and development discourses can be seen as a means to guide the development policies and programs and related provisioning by the state. Second, related development provisioning by the state serves vital interests of rural people distributed in various parts of Sri Lanka. Third, instead of one privileged construct of the rural there are in fact multiple constructs of the rural in nationalist and development discourses in Sri Lanka. The hegemonic potential of these discourses in fact rests on their ability and potential to accommodate various categories of disadvantaged rural people within their ideological fold.

The link between development ideology and resource distribution is illustrated by the fact that the discourses on development are prominent in highly powerful and well-funded government agencies like the Mahaweli Authority of Sri Lanka, responsible for land and water resource development and resettlement of large numbers of rural people who are expected to benefit from the relevant developments covering a large extent of crown land. Similarly, development discourses have been quite prominent in highly politicized state-funded poverty alleviation programs like the Janasaviya program of the 1989-1994 UNP, government and the Samurdhi Programme initiated by the People's Alliance government. It must be noted here that the Sarvodaya Movement, a relatively well-funded national level NGO of local origin, has also influenced by a version of discourse that is both nationalist and development-oriented. On the other hand, more technically-oriented and more decentralized government development programs like the Integrated Regional Development Programs (IRDPs) operating at the district level have been less characterized by the type of development discourses noted earlier.

The appeal of the development discourse to the rural people is not merely of an ideological nature. This discourse is also of special appeal to them in so far as it gives them privileged access to limited resources like land, irrigation water, rural credit, and other forms of development aid vis-à-vis their potential competitors. In this sense it can be argued that they have a vested interest in reaffirming and maintaining nationalist and related development ideologies. As a result, they may not be simply passive recipients of the relevant discourses but also active participants in the development and propagation of the discursive practices in question. The widely acclaimed welfarist character of the Sri Lankan state and its reluctance to cut down subsidies in spite of donor pressure and severe budgetary constraints must be understood in the light of a firm commitment to a development ideology that binds the state, its ruling elite and a large section of its rural people.

The nationalist and related development ideologies also involve multiple constructions of rural communities that accommodate various forms of rural life. Apart from the traditional Sinhala villages with irrigated rice farming as their main source of livelihood, all types of rural social formations have been accommodated and even found a meaning in nationalist/development conceptualizations of one kind or another. For instance, "hemmed in" villages in predominantly estate areas have had a tendency to attribute their landlessness, lack of space for expansion and many other problems they face to the appropriation of land by the plantations set up in the colonial period (Meyer 1992). This, in turn, is an ideology that justifies transfer of land and employment opportunities in the estates to the village communities, a process in some ways officially initiated by the Kandyan Peasantry Commission established in 1951. In a predominantly drummer caste village where the author conducted field research in the 1970s, there was much enthusiasm for establishing "art schools" (*kalayathana*) with government support. The main objective of such schools was to provide professional training in Kandyan dance, seen as a hereditary caste occupation of the drummers as well as an important heritage of Sinhala Buddhist civilization. The latter idea, in turn, linked this village level activity to the nationalist project of the state and the ruling Sinhala elite. Gam Udawa Movement led by President Ranasinghe Premadasa in the 1990s had the objective of assisting rural people to improve their housing stock as well as improve their social status. This program often targeted so-called depressed low-caste communities in rural areas. State assisted infrastructural improvement was accompanied by efforts to help them overcome inherited disadvantages by removing derogatory place names and replacing them with names of historical and cultural relevance (e.g. Samadhigama in place of a name revealing caste identity).

Similarly, most of the spontaneous and unlawful encroachment by Sinhala peasants on crown land in border areas as well as official settlement programs carried out by the state are seen as patriotic if not officially sanctioned moves to expand the frontiers of Sinhala civilization (De Soyza 1994, Woost 1990). As a result, regularization of encroachment has been an important mechanism for distribution of crown land in various parts of Sri Lanka (Silva *et al* 1999, Woost 1990).

Thus various rural social formations have interpreted their situation and role in relation to nationalist development ideology in ways that best suit their different situations. It is important to note that they have tried to establish a certain meaning to their real life experiences in vastly different socio-economic settings using the dominant nationalist/development ideology. This may be seen as a manifestation of the hegemonic success this ideology has attained both in terms of ideological synthesis and unity of interests linking dominant and subordinate social classes in Sinhala society.

Conclusion

This paper confirms the finding of previous analysts that the development discourse in Sri Lanka has acquired a hegemonic character within the majority Sinhala Buddhist community in the country. In much of the discussion on development discourse, however, the ideologies of development have been analyzed without paying sufficient attention to the vital resource flows associated with the development process itself. It is not so much that "the material pole has been allowed to speak louder than the ideological/consciousness pole" as claimed by Woost (1990: 29), but the reverse has often been the case when it comes to analysis of development discourse. The present paper highlights the need to take a balanced perspective emphasizing the mutual interaction between ideology and interests. While the genealogy of the development discourse in Sri Lanka points to its linkages with the older nationalist ideology, shifts and turns taken by the development discourse, including divergent constructs of rural social formations that reflect different situations, clearly indicate that we are not dealing with a monolithic and fixed ideological structure that does not respond to the environment within which it has evolved. Rather, it illustrates that we are dealing with an ideology that takes different shapes and sizes as well as different characteristics depending on the context within which we encounter it. On the other hand, the fact that rural people in vastly different situations identify themselves with and respond positively to the relevant development processes indicates that there may be an underlying logic perceived to be in some ways beneficial to all of them. Finally it must be mentioned that, to the extent public acceptance of the prevailing social order rests on shared belief in some commonly held ideas supportive of that social order as well as the ability of the system to provide the material resources expected to flow from the state, the resulting social order is both vulnerable and unstable as any failure of the system to meet the rising expectations may lead to progressive disillusionment with prevailing social order as well as its ideological basis.

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