TOWARDS A STRUCTURAL PERSPECTIVE IN SOUTH ASIA

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The following essay was written by the late Dr. Newton Gunasinghe, a few weeks prior to his untimely death in October 1988. Readers will find Dr. Gunasinghe's formulations particularly useful to the understanding of the complexities of social and political change in contemporary South Asia. At the time of his demise, Dr. Gunasinghe was a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Colombo and the Secretary of the Social Scientists' Association, Sri Lanka.

Max Gluckman and his students saw ethnicity and the consciousness of identity as taking specific forms in distinct conditions.'Tribalism' was not the re-emergence in an urban context of primordial sentiments born in a former, pre-existing world of experience. It was something entirely new, founded in the political and economic conditions of a colonial industrial labour market. It bore all the marks of an individualism and a stress on identity constituted within a culture of capitalism.

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May I commence this presentation, in the form of certain analytical formulations, that would probably work as the theoretical framework, which shall inform the discussion to follow ? In my view, the fundamental structural dynamics of the South Asian Social formations, as distinct from the other so-called "Third World Societies" and the advanced capitalist social formations may be summarised in the following manner, together with certain introductory and qualifying observations.

i. The need for a macro-social theory covering the entire South Asian sub-continent comprising India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal has existed for a long time. Yet such a macro-theory has failed to emerge. Here, it is also needed to do an exercise of inclusion and exclusion, as to what the social formations under theoretical analysis are, in order to differentiate that which is under discussion, from that which is not, although the other social formations under theoretical analysis are in order to differentiate that which is under discussion, from that which is not, although the other social formations may be geographically closely located. In addition, one is also obliged to make a certain distinction between the cultural sphere and the social structural dynamic, in order to do this exercise of inclusion and exclusion. Afghanistan and Tibet, although somewhat influenced by the Pan-Indian cultural tradition are definitely outside the general South asian Social structural framework, as these areas properly belong to the Central Asian Social formations. Although Maldivian Islands are somewhat culturally influenced by the Indian and Lankan cultural traditions, these are distinct from the sub continental social formations earlier referred to, as their structural dynamics are distinct. Similarly even though the Island of Java, currently located in the modern National state of Indonesia, while being heavily influenced by the Hindu tradition, still structurally distances itself away from, the basic and dominant structural dynamic that runs through the entire South Asian social formations. Burma although it was part of the British Indian empire, Perhaps accidentally due to imperial administrative decisions, while being "a Buddhist" society(Melford Spiro) by an large, in my view, is distinct social structurally from the South-Asian social?

ii. Given these social structural premises, I would define the macro-social field, that one would refer to as territorially comprising the modern states of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal, which any one with a modicum of historical knowledge ought to realise to be creations of modern times, some of which came into formation in the post-independence period. If that is so, what is the underlying logic of these social formations which while displaying structural commonality also express regional and provincial divergences, nevertheless within the broader social formations, which while displaying structural commonality also express regional and provincial divergences, nevertheless within the broader social structural framework that covers the entire South-Asian social fabric ?

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iii. Locating myself broadly in the Marxist tradition, informed by Gramsci (i.e. Southern Question in Italy) but at the same time partially using the concepts of social anthropology as formulated by Evans-Prichard, (segmentation); Max Gluckman, (Custom and Conflict); Chandra Jayawardena (Solidarity) and Louise Dumont (Hierarchy), may I make an initial attempt towards some theoretical formulations pertaining in general to the South Asian social formations, as territorially defined earlier ?

Here I shall embark on a methodological detour, which however, will eventually link up with the theme under discussion. With regard to method in social theory, one is obliged to refer to the rigorously analytical essay by Dumont on South Indian Kinship systems, as to whether there is a general underlying fundamental structure of which these are mere specific and local expressions. In other words, there are apparently patrilineal kin groups, (as among Brahmins of Tanjore) and apparently matrilineal kin groups, (as among the Nayars of Kerala); there is the practice of patrilocal, matrilocal and virilocal residence patterns in marriages. While taking into account all these divergences, Dumont formulates a concept that helps one to understand the fundamental structure that underlies these variations while accounting for differentiated segmental expressions. According to Dumont, South Indian Kinship systems at the basic structural level revolves around a crucial bifurcation between consanguines (blood relatives) which is sociologically defined, and not biologically; so that one's mother's brother is an affine, whereas one's father's brother is a consanguine. The affinal relatives are given in marriage to each other which he terms "bifurcate merging". One may also add that, the traditional Sinhala bifurcation between the 'Le Nayo' and 'Avassa Nayo' which runs parallel to the bifurcation that Dumont has referred to. This comment which may perhaps appear to be a digression from the fundamental theme of the discourse is not actually so. In addition to establishing the structural commononalities of the kinship systems in South India and Sinhala Society, I am also attempting to establish a methodological perspective in social theory; i.e. as Dumont has masterly accomplished in his essay on Kinship that variation and structural similarities could be brought within the same fabric of social analysis which explains both, thus rising above the methodological poverty of empiricism.

Here my objective in this note is to identify both variation and structural similarities in the South Asian social formations, but not necessarily within the confines of the territories of the modern "national states" as they are defined in the late-eighties of the twentieth century. To proceed further, along the lines laid down by Dumont, one should attempt to arrive at a macro- theory capable of encapsulating social processes at work in the South-Asian region as a whole, while theoretically coupling it with sub theories applicable to various other ethnic segmentations in the region, such as the Sinhala, Sikhs, Tamils, Bengalis, Gujaratis, etc. Now, I shall return back to an identification of elements of structural commonalities in South Asian social formations without overlooking the fact that these commonalities may articulate themselves in different or even contradictory forms.

(a) Caste hierarchy, which is continuing while undergoing profound structural transformations, coupled with increasing class differentiation, in the urban areas and especially in those rural areas which experienced the results of the "Green Revolution"; leading to a pronounced contradictions and modern social processes merging in the class/caste dialectic which has brought non-traditional fissures in the social structure, which was not present in the same form in the "exclusive" but geographically nearby social areas such as Afghanistan and Tibet. As the scholarly work by Federich Barth has demonstrated the social contradictions in the Pathan social,structure which covers both the modern states of Pakistan and Afghanistan,but mainly Afghanistan, revolves around clan conflicts led by different Khans, who are in search of territorial control within the context of a basically pastoral economy. Whereas, the traditional Tibetan social system and political structure revolved around the institution of the Dalai-Lama, who was a theocratic ruler combining the headship of the State and the "Church", thus politically and morally encapsulating the main social segments in his territorial domain, as implied in the accounts given by such scholars as H.E. Richardson. These observations in relation to Afghanistan and Tibet are of relevance to this discourse, as I am proceeding towards excluding these geographically adjoining social areas, from my focus of attention towards an attempt to formulate a general social theory of sub-continental social formations, which as earlier referred to mainly corresponds with the territorial area occupied by the modern states of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal. Now since that I have dealt with the exercise of "exclusion" let me proceed with the major structural dynamic that underlies these social formations, as I understand them.

(b) The dialectic of segmentation and solidarity, while covering certain social groups which have deposited them against each other, overcoming traditional loyalties, basically competing for economic resources and political power in social formations subjected

to capitalist growth as well as continuing under development. Here as an illustration, it would be important to consider the social and political contradictions of Tamilnad, especially after independence. According to Beteille, the caste system in Tamilnad (which in my view is a form of segmentation that results when the hierarchical system is in disintegration, not to be confused with caste strata, which although hierarchically differentiated are socially unified as the Indian anthropological literature dealing with the Joint-Family system would indicate) consists of three broad layers, the Brahmins, the middle-level castes and whom he refers to as the Adi-Dravidas, i.e. the so-called untouchables. In the post-independence period with the Congress losing power in Tamilnad and the emergence into power of the Dravidian movement, the middle level castes basically led by the agricultural castes such as Vellallar, Mudaliyer and Kallan came to the fore as political managers depending on the democratic political vote, relying on their numerical strength, pushing the numerically smaller Brahmin groups away from their control over land through land reforms as well as dismantling their political authority and ancestral dominance. What did this precisely lead to? In the first instance, the movement of the Brahmin strata from the rural areas to urban professional pursuits (such as civil servants, doctors and engineers) away from the traditional control over land; in the second instance, the emergence of the middle-level castes, principally the agricultural social strata, which were increasingly being socially differentiated into classes; and in the third instance to an economic marginalisation of the Adi-Dravidas caste groups, except for a modicum of a few family groups which rose up by using popular politics. Now I shall proceed towards the formulation of the concepts of segmentation and solidarity in relation to the Tamilnad illustration. Segmentation is a result of traditional forms of hierarchy, which are essentially unified structures of dominance, combining different layers of society, undergoing a process of social disintegration. As Max Weber has emphasised, although the Hindu caste system is hierarchical, it also tends to avoid contradictions among the layers by a process of Unification. Therefore the segmentation I refer to here has little to do with traditional caste hierarchy; but to the disintegration of it, while retaining certain structural characteristics, which also runs through the entire South Asian social fabric. Segmentation denies hierarchy while attempting to build-up parochial groups of solidarity, which at the same time softens the contradictions among the new

economic strata, formed within these identity groups, using such populist slogans as that we are all Vellallars or Mudaliyars, While maintaining an anti- Brahmanic attitude, dominating the Adi-Dravidas. This creates a false sense of identity or "false consciousness" as Lukacs would have called it, which ideologically reinforces the economic and political interests of the newly emergent bourgeois sections of the middle-level caste groups, thus creating both segmentation and solidarity, which may not necessarily follow the macro class divisions, but the fissures in the social structure obtained from the archaic features of the social formation, nevertheless leading essentially to modern social and political process.

(c) The traditional Marxist problematic of the "National Question" has to be reformulated if one is to theoretically understand the South Asian social formations. Here, ethnic identity and religious ideology interact as a peculiar dialectic which perhaps was not present to the same degree in the nineteenth century Europe. Take the case of Bengal; which prior to the partition in 1947 was basically inhabited by the ethnic Bengalis, except some marginalised sections of people, such as the tribal Santals. But the Bengalis were bifurcated into two religious faiths, i.e. Hindu and Muslim. The matters were further complicated there as the big Zamindar landlords in East Bengal, basically a Muslim province, were mainly Hindus. Within this context in Bengal, in the pre-independence forties, religious ideology overcomes ethnic identity, leading to sectarian riots on the religious divide between the Hindus and Muslims, giving rise to the birth of east Pakistan. In the resultant violent social processes, the Hindus were driven away from what used to be East Bengal. But the "National Question" as the traditional jargon would have it was not yet resolved; the East Bengal Muslims found out that they had come under Punjabi dominance, within the context of this strange state of Pakistan, which had two wings geographically separated by thousands of miles. This led to the Bangladesh concept and a liberation war which was successful in achieving independent statehood. But this did not end the perennial problem relating to ethnic identity and religious ideology; although recently formed, Bangladesh was mainly religiously homogenous, but not entirely so. There were some hill tribes near the Burma border, who discovered that they were being discriminated in an Islamic state, being "Buddhist". This led to violent social conflicts, While some Islamic Bengalis "illegally" migrated to Assam for economic pursuits, territorially a part

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of modern India, creating ethnic tension in that area between the local tribal groups and the new Bengali Immigrants. Thus the dialectic of ethnic identity and religious ideology, worked towards bifurcating and segmenting society, although state formations geographically shift.

(d) The traditional social formations in South Asia were socially multiple; within the context of Sri Lanka for instance, in the nineteenth century, there were a large number of social communities with "ethnic" identities, although they themselves were segmented on the basis of caste and class differences. For instance, there were the low country Sinhala, Kandyan Sinhala, Northern Tamil, Eastern Tamil, South-Western and East coast Muslim communities, who while speaking the same language or professing the same faith still felt themselves to be different "ethnic" identity groups. These parochial identity groups and their ideology was so strong, that the upper stratum of Kandyan society demanded a federal constitution in the early decades of the Twentieth Century as they felt that they had very little in common with the 'Low Country Sinhala". But this perception undergoes changes with certain social processes associated with capitalist growth; such as certain segmentary social groups coming into alliance through marital ties, which helps to cement an overall identity that however cannot overcome, the basic ethno-religious divisions. Hence, in the South Asian social formations, there is a tendency to move from multiplicity to bifurcation which is essentially associated with social processes generated by capitalist growth and underdevelopment. These social processes tend to overcome parochial social groups while giving rise to bifurcation. Let me further illustrate the case with reference to Punjab; before partition in 1947, Punjab was fairly evenly inhabited by Punjabi speaking people of three different faiths; i.e. Hindu, Muslim and Sikh. The partition led to a bifurcation, where the Hindu and Sikhs were on one side and the Muslims were on the other. As a result, on the wake of the partition the overwhelming majority of the Muslims were driven away to the Pakistan side of the newly established border. During this period, the Hindu Sikh contradictions, did not surface as it was overdetermined by the basic bifurcation between the Hindus and the Muslims. But in a situation where both Hindus and Sikhs are driven to the new Indian province of partitioned Punjab, a new bifurcation between the Muslims the Hindus and Sikhs emerge. This is accentuated by the very success of the "Green Revolution" in Punjab, which has created a powerful stratum of kulak farmers, basically from the Jat Sikhs, who in order to maintain their control over the subordinate Sikhs have merged with a separatist slogan. Is it possible that there is a structural parallel between the Sinhala/Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka and the Hindu/Sikh conflict in Punjab, which is basically generated by the social transformation from multiplicity to bifurcation?

If one is inclined to summarise these complex social processes from a sub-continental perspective, it is absolutely necessary to outline a social theory that is capable of grasping the underlying social structural commonalities of the South Asian social formation. May I reiterate these commonalities as follows, as the previous discourse has already provided concrete illustrations?

(a) Caste hierarchy, subjected to social change which still retains some of its archaic features, while the social formations under investigation are also subjected to profound processes of class differentiation.

(b) Segmentation that was present in the traditional social structure, assuming new forms of articulation under uneven capitalist growth, while not submerging, give rise to modern forms of solidarity, which may not necessarily run parallel to differentiation among various economic strata.

(c) Both ethnic consciousness and religious ideology in the subcontinental social formations have been expressing themselves while dialectically interacting with each other. Ethnic consciousness ideologically attempts to embrace and define basically a linguistic community, whereas, religious ideology attempts to demarcate a field of "true believers", or a moral community as Durkheim would have identified it. Yet within the South Asian social formations, one could be Bengali and be either Hindu or Muslim, be Punjabi and adhere to Hindu, Muslim or Sikh faiths, or be Sinhala and proclaim Buddhist or Christian identities. Hence the interaction between ethnic consciousness and religious ideology has been sometimes overlapping and sometimes contradictory.

(d) The transformation from multiplicity to bifurcation, in modern South Asian social formations has created a great degree of social tension as the Punjab and Lankan examples would illustrate. But unfortunately social homogeneity is not possible in a segmented social formation; hence the contradictions generated by uneven capitalist de-

velopment would inevitably tend to express themselves, through bifurcation whether these contradictions run parallel to class contradictions or not.

To conclude I wish to raise certain questions, which I feel to be of importance in the current socio-political conjuncture, where South Asian social formations are located. Is it possible that one is situated in a modern conjuncture where non-traditional macro groups such as macro castes; ethnic groups; linguistic communities etc. are in formation, which, overcome old parochial and kin-group loyalties, while blunting class consciousness. These perhaps would have been at a higher level three or four decades back? Class contradictions, (intensified in a period of accentuated social differentiation) in the absence of class consciousness are being reflected through segmenting divisions, such as ethnicity, religious groups, macro-castes and provincial loyalties. Thus they question all social theories that lay down a unilineal and uni-directional path of change, which in the last analysis derives from Comte's positivism.

PUNISHING THE VICTIM

Rape and Mistreatment of Asian Maids in Kuwait

Since the restoration of the Kuwaiti regime in March 1991, to the present, nearly two thousand women domestic servants, mainly from Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, India and the Philippines, have fled the homes of abusive Kuwaiti employers and sought refuge in their embassies. This mass exodus of maids is the culmination of a longstanding problem: the abuse of Asian women domestic servants occurs at a time of general hostility towards foreigners that has escalated since liberation.

Large numbers of Sri Lankan women have sought employment in the Middle-East including Kuwait. The abuses that some of these women have been subjected to have been highlighted in the press but the general framework of law and custom that makes such abuse possible has not been brought to light. Neither has this situation received adequate attention from the government.

In April 1992, *Middle East Watch* and the *Women's Rights Project,* both divisions of *Human Rights Watch,* conducted a two-week fact-finding mission in Kuwait to investigate reports of abuse of Asian women domestic servants.

We reproduce below excerpts from the report.

The abuse and mistreatment suffered by Asian maids in Kuwait is occurring in the context of hostility towards expatriates that has increased since liberation in 1991. By 1990 , prior to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, foreign workers and their dependents, also referred to as expatriates, accounted for nearly 62% of Kuwait's population. Large numbers come from India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and the Philippines.

Until the mid-1970s, Asian women came to Kuwait as dependents of their husbands, fathers or other male relatives, but were not themselves a significant percentage of the foreign labor force. Since then, increasing numbers of Asian women have joined Kuwait's labor force in their own right, growing from 1,000 in 1965 to over 72,000 in 1985. By 1992, the number of Asian maids reached roughly 75,000 to 100,000, approximately one for every seven Kuwaiti citizens (men, women and children).

In the wake of its liberation, Kuwait has embarked upon a concerted campaign to rectify what it sees as a dangerous imbalance in its population. A report prepared by the government's Higher Planning Council concluded that the high numbers of expatriates are "a threat to national security" because they out number Kuwaiti citizens. The government, by taking steps to limit immigration of foreign workers and curtail employment benefits for expatriates, is actively seeking to invert the pre-war population ratio so that by 1995 Kuwaitis will constitute 60% of the population.

New politics restricting immigration of foreign workers include women domestic servants. The government has reportedly stopped granting permission to bring over more maids to families that already have one or more. However, this new restructuring apparently has yet to significantly affect the number of Asian maids in Kuwait. Asian women domestics are in increasing

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