

IN SEARCH OF A SRI LANKAN SOCIOLOGICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL TRADITION¹

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Introduction: Sri Lankan Sociology and Anthropology ?

The basic attempt in this essay would be to identify the Sri Lankan anthropological and sociological tradition. Clearly, this would be possible only if such a tradition exists. If it does not, I would attempt to identify some of the reasons which have contributed to such an outcome. Two incidents occurred this year prompted me to articulate the ideas that follows. Hopefully this would generate some debate, and allow us to come to grips with the position of Sri Lankan anthropology and sociology. I will refer to these two incidents later as I attempt to locate the central issue that concerns me here—the location of the Sri Lankan anthropological/sociological tradition.

Let me begin by briefly addressing another issue that I think is important to this discussion. That is the manner in which anthropology and sociology are defined in Sri Lanka. Beteille, in an essay attempting to identify the boundaries and similarities between sociology and social anthropology, makes the following observation:

If one wishes to assert the fundamental unity of the two subjects, a particular conception of sociology can be chosen and it can be shown to be the same as the prevailing conception of social anthropology. But by choosing another conception of sociology, someone else can highlight not the similarities between the two subjects but their differences (Beteille 1982:4).

As Beteille argues in his essay, what is sociology and what is anthropology (particularly social or cultural anthropology) has depended on historical as well as national contexts and particular research orientations while it has also changed over time. In the end, and particularly in today's context, the recognition of the differences between these disciplines is a matter of perception (Beteille 1982). Even though in Sri Lanka debates regarding the differences and similarities of these disciplines have not occurred, the same merging of identities that Beteille talks about has been a reality during most of Sri Lanka's modern history of the academia. Of all the universities in the country only the University of Sri Jayawardenapura has a department that is formally identified as the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. In the Eastern University there is some entity called the Department of Social Sciences where everything perceivably social science and socially scientific is lumped together. In all other universities, there are Departments of Sociology.

However, if one were to go through the course outlines and the nature of the dominant literature and reference materials used, what is taught in all of these departments could be generally categorized as social or cultural anthropology in the North American sense. Therefore, the other components of anthropology, such as archaeology, linguistics and physical anthropology are clearly missing in the Sri Lankan context. This is perhaps another reason why this discipline is called as sociology in Sri Lanka.

The point I am trying to make here then is that at the present moment, as far as I can see, there is no conceptual differentiation between these two disciplines in Sri Lankan academic and popular discourse or imagination. In fact, many students perceivably trained in sociology would write a dissertation that is supposed to be based on an anthropological analysis of some social phenomenon. Similarly, irrespective of the fact that one's formal training may be in sociology, many academics would identify themselves as anthropologists in different contexts. In a sense, this is a rather fluid situation very much like James Brow's perceptive definition of the Vedda identity. A Vedda, suggests Brow, is someone who claims to be a Vedda for whatever purpose. Thus, within the rather small social science community of Sri Lanka, an anthropologist or a sociologist is someone who defines himself or herself as such irrespective of the nature and content of their formal training.

The point is that these two disciplinary labels are used interchangeably on many occasions. In such a context, and in the general merging of certain major research areas of these two disciplines on a wider international level, it would be almost useless to attempt to define what is sociology and what is anthropology in the Sri Lankan situation. Thus when I am talking about anthropology in Sri Lanka, I am also talking about sociology and vice versa.

Location of the Problem : Where is the Sri Lankan Anthropological/Sociological Tradition ?

At this point, I would like to outline the two incidents I referred to at the outset of this discussion. In February 1995, the International Center for Ethnic Studies in Colombo organized a small seminar with the participation of Indian scholars Veena Das and Ashis Nandy. In that seminar, in response to Das' discussion of the anthropological discourse on India I was asked to talk about the Sri Lankan anthropo-

logical discourse. In preparing for the discussion I was strongly reminded of the great volume of the anthropological literature on Sri Lanka. I also noticed, as I had done many times before, that much of that literature had been produced by foreign scholars or Sri Lankan born scholars resident in Europe, North America and Australasia. Local residency of course is not a significant factor in the construction of a discourse. But the patterns I observed in the above situation have a significant bearing on the second incident that prompted me to write these lines.

A few months later a colleague asked me to deliver a lecture on the Sri Lankan anthropological tradition. My immediate response was to ask him to explain the nature of this tradition and to name its pioneers. As one would expect, the reply was prompt and somewhat anticipated. The tradition was defined by listing the dominant textual components of the anthropological discourse on Sri Lanka. The pioneers were identified as Ryan, Obeyesekere, Tambiah and so on. My basic argument was that while Obeyesekere, Tambiah and many other anthropologists and sociologists — most of whom were either foreign or Sri Lankans living abroad — had clearly made significant contributions towards constructing a Sri Lanka oriented anthropological discourse, particularly through the construction of texts as well as initiating certain debates, none of them had contributed towards the establishment of a Sri Lankan anthropological or sociological tradition as such. There is a vast difference between the mere construction of texts or discourse, and the actual establishment of a tradition. At this point I would argue that there is no such thing called a Sri Lankan anthropological tradition. Here I would also like to define what I call an anthropological/sociological tradition, and attempt to identify pertinent factors which according to my perception has contributed to the non-emergence of this tradition.

Ideally, it seems to me that a Sri Lankan anthropological/sociological tradition should be a combination of rigorous continuous research, effective teaching, regular and scholarly debate, healthy criticism, writing of texts (particularly in the local languages), regular socio-political intervention beyond the limits of academia, and in the final analysis the construction of the discourse within a particularly Sri Lankan paradigm. At the same time, universal disciplines such as anthropology and sociology cannot be country-bound to the extent of being parochial. Therefore a part of that tradition should also include an attentiveness to and knowledge of what is happening in the wider anthropological/sociological world.

Generally speaking, to me as a university teacher and as an anthropologist, none of the markers I have identified above are visible in the Sri Lankan context. Hence my conclusion that a Sri Lankan anthropological/sociological tradition does not exist.

Non-Existence of a Tradition: Why ?

It seems to me that a number of inter-related issues have led to the non-emergence of a Sri Lankan an-

thropological/sociological tradition. In a sense, one could even argue that in the 1950s, and up to the mid 1960s, there was in fact an embryonic anthropological/sociological tradition attempting to make its presence felt. This was the time that anthropologists/sociologists such as Ralph Pieris, Obeyesekere, Tambiah and some others were based in Sri Lanka, engaged in teaching, research, formulating specific theoretical and analytical perspectives, and initiating debate. The initial prerequisites for the emergence of an anthropological/sociological tradition were in fact available at this time. However, this tradition never grew beyond its embryonic stage. In fact it died a premature death when most — if not all — of these scholars left Sri Lanka for a number of reasons. I would suggest that Sri Lankan anthropology/sociology has not recovered from that initial exodus. We still dream and harp about that short period of relative glory in the past, and have done almost nothing to reconstruct a new tradition from the remains of what is clearly lost.

However, many of these scholars who left Sri Lanka continued to have an intellectual interest in Sri Lanka (and elsewhere) and continued to write and conduct research on Sri Lankan issues. I would also include anthropologists such as Val Daniel, Michael Roberts and H.L. Seneviratne within the same category as above. Elizabeth Nissan traces intellectual contributions of some of these scholars in her 1993 essay *The Work of Anthropologists from Sri Lanka*. Added to this, there is a large number of foreign scholars who also have serious research interests in Sri Lanka. Among others, I would include anthropologists such as Stirrat, Spencer, Scott, Macgillivray etc. Within this second category. Together these two categories of scholars have produced a corpus of significant knowledge on Sri Lanka. A few scholars resident in Sri Lanka itself have also produced some significant work. Two names that come to mind in this regard are Siri Hettige at the University of Colombo and Tudor de Silva at the University of Peradeniya. All of this work — particularly the work of the first two categories of scholars — have not only seriously influenced Sri Lanka oriented research, but also South Asian anthropology in general.

Restrictions on Knowledge: The Problem of Language

Thus, in general, there is no question about the quality (with some notable exceptions!) or the volume of the anthropological and sociological discourse produced in this manner. The problem is that this particular discourse is mostly located in Europe, North America, Australia or some other English speaking academic neighborhood. Almost all of this knowledge is of course produced in English. This then is one of the realities of the contemporary academic discourse, and one of the problems that has contributed towards the non-existence of a Sri Lankan anthropological/sociological tradition. The world of academics — anthropologists or otherwise — is an international one. They have to write in international languages to make their work accessible to a wider audience, not to mention “recognition” and other such considerations.

But at the same time, knowledge thus produced, particularly in the Third World, should not become a kind of language imperialism. If this happens, such knowledge would be restricted to those who have access to international languages. But currently in the Sri Lankan context, this is precisely what has happened.

Thus the anthropological/sociological discourse on Sri Lanka is largely a discourse to which most Sri Lankans, particularly those studying or teaching in university departments, have no easy access to. The intellectual contributions of the anthropologists I have referred to above are largely contributions to the wider anthropological and related disciplines on a global scale. In this context, I would argue that these works in no way have contributed to the construction of a Sri Lankan anthropological or sociological tradition. That is why we cannot consider any of the well known anthropologists I have mentioned above as having made any serious impact, particularly in terms of their more recent work, on contemporary Sri Lankan academic culture.

Then, language clearly becomes a major issue in attempting to understand why a Sri Lankan anthropological/sociological tradition has failed to emerge. This is simply not the language ability of students, but also of teachers. In any definition of Sri Lankan anthropological/sociological tradition, I have mentioned that teaching, research and debate are essential prerequisites of such a tradition. But in a situation where most critical and useful anthropological and sociological literature is produced in English, it is difficult to assure that such inter-related processes would emerge. This is particularly true given the problematic state of our English language education both at school and university levels. We certainly cannot ask everyone to produce their texts in local languages, given the fact that the wider world of academics is an international one. But we need at least translations of the major works. Even these are currently not available despite the fact that sociology/anthropology has been taught in Sri Lankan universities for nearly 40 years.

On the other hand, most of the students who enter Sri Lankan universities do not possess a working knowledge of English. Then, in the very least, we would need teachers who can read and understand this material which can then be transmitted to their students. Such activity would enrich teaching to a certain extent and initiate some debate. But this does not take place, particularly at the level of younger teachers whose command of English is poor. Many of them simply communicate to students snippets of information from the wider anthropological discourse communicated to them by their teachers years ago. What this means in practice is that much of the empirical and theoretical material being thus communicated today is dated, and riddled with mistakes accumulated over generations of note-taking. Clearly, we cannot talk about constructing a healthy and dynamic anthropological/sociological tradition in a context where the dominant method of teaching is the utterly boring and non-constructive practice of repeating such "notes" of dubious value and origins. One could call this situation the "note culture" or the "parrotification" (i.e. repeating like parrots) of knowledge.

This is of course not unknown to anthropologists. This is very much like the oral histories that they encounter in the field whereby "knowledge" is passed from one generation to another by word of mouth, each generation adding or deleting components.

On the other hand, the lack of English also means theoretical debates raging in other parts of the world are almost unknown to many Sri Lankan anthropologists/sociologists. Some are still stuck in the theory of residues of Pareto. A brave few would attempt to discuss what Levi Strauss meant by binary opposition. With some luck, Foucault and Derrida may make an entrance sometime in the middle of the next century when the utility of their theoretical formulations would have been overtaken by more contemporary ones in other parts of the known world. Another problem is the relative unavailability of the anthropological and sociological literature on Sri Lanka or other parts of the world as well as literature dealing with theory. What is available is prohibitively expensive. Thus, even for those who have access to international languages, access to texts may be restricted by financial constraints. What this means in real terms is that access to knowledge has been limited by both financial and language restrictions.

Restrictions on Knowledge and the Dependence on Dubious Interpretations

We have already established that knowledge has been limited as a result of restrictions on language abilities. In a situation where translations, or even regular reviews of literature produced in English do not appear, students, some teachers and the general public tend to depend on the irregular and dubious interpretations of such work some academics produce. It is on the basis of such work that both students and many others form their ideas and initiate debate. Such debates would generally tend to be non-academic and utterly polemical. Let me refer to a few recent examples. Nandasena Ratnapala, in an introductory sociology textbook refers to Nur Yalman's *Under the Bo Tree* (1971) in the following words:

Nur Yalman wrote a research work titled after "Under the Bo Tree" studying folk religion in Sri Lanka. Through this book, which is written from a sociological perspective, he attempted to analyze Sinhala religion and society. (Ratnapala 1986: 184)²

The problem with Ratnapala's interpretation is a basic one. Yalman does not talk about religion — Buddhism or anything else, for that matter — in any significant detail. *Under the Bo Tree* is not a book on folk religion in Sri Lanka as Ratnapala asserts, but an exhaustive study of caste, kinship and marriage. Ratnapala's confusion perhaps is the result of taking the title of Yalman's book literally. On the other hand, such a mistake could have been easily avoided if Ratnapala had taken some time to browse through the contents and some of the pages of Yalman's book. Similarly, in a recent article in the *Divayana*, Obeyesekere's and Gombrich's book *Buddhism Transformed* is described as a Marxist interpretation

(*Divayina*, 8 January 1995). Unfortunately, I cannot think of too many other Sri Lanka oriented anthropologists who are as distant as Obeyesekere and Gombrich from both Marxist theory and practice.

I would like to refer to another such bizarre interpretation by historian Mendis Rohanadeera, which emerged in the context of the controversy surrounding the publication of Tambiah's book *Buddhism Betrayed*? At a meeting at the University of Colombo he told a mostly undergraduate audience that Tambiah could not have written the book (specifically the early chapters dealing with the Buddhist revival in the early part of this century) because "he had not lived in this history" (Perera, 1995:29).

The logical extension of this kind of reasoning is that since not many people alive today would have lived in that period, we cannot write about that history. Or else, as I have noted in another essay "we will have to bank on the memories of senior citizens" (Perera 1995:29). In this context, teaching ancient history would be impossible since it would be difficult to locate people who were contemporaries of King Dutugemunu, Devanampiyatissa and so on. Moreover, Rohanadeera's own profession would be threatened with extinction. But then, I suppose we can always utilize the memories of reincarnated individuals and spirit mediums and make them professors of anthropology and history.

The same speaker also offered a new definition of anthropology. According to Rohanadeera, anthropology is the study of contemporary people and therefore anthropologists have no right to write history (Perera, 1995:29). If this position is to be taken seriously, the world have to be without many of the anthropological and sociological texts written to date. For the record I should note, however, that anthropologists and sociologists clearly have a legitimate right to write about the past as well as the present. In fact, the past is the area of specialization of historical anthropology and sociology.

The point I want to make here is quite simple. Many of the people who would have been exposed to these interpretations would not have been exposed to the original works by Yalman or Obeyesekere and Gombrich which were written in English. Or for that matter, there are no up to date extensive published discussions on anthropology and sociology, in Sinhala or Tamil. But the interpretations of the speakers and writers mentioned were produced in Sinhala, and widely available. Therefore many people, mostly students and undergraduates, would then bank on these dubious interpretations merely because of their accessibility in terms of language and easy availability. The debates emanating from such interpretations themselves be rather polemical as the entire "debate" (for the lack of a better word) surrounding the Tambiah controversy amply demonstrated. Clearly, this is no way to construct the kind of anthropological/sociological tradition I had defined earlier.

"Yes Sir Syndrome" and Problems of Academic Recruitment

Certain patterns of recruitment in Sri Lankan universities I believe also retards the emergence of a healthy and vibrant anthropological/sociological, or any other academic tradition. For instance, junior academics are usually hired only with a BA degree qualification. This system of recruitment was initially introduced at the time when there was a dearth of adequately qualified personnel. Today, this practice is not at all helpful in the attempted establishment of a dynamic academic culture in our university system. At the time of recruitment, most of these young teachers are not intellectually mature enough or as well trained as they could be to teach advanced courses, supervise dissertations, and motivate students. The main reason for this is that their own knowledge is rather restricted due to such problems as inaccessibility to English and non-familiarity with pertinent literature. Thus after they graduate with their BAs, it would be better to allow them a period of time to explore and widen their horizons in their selected fields of study. Thus it would be more beneficial to both academic departments and future of Sri Lankan anthropology and sociology to higher people who are better trained (at least with an MA) at the initial stage of hiring.

The main problem however is that most academic departments would prefer to hire their own graduates. This is particularly true at the level of junior members of the academic staff. Thus, Colombo would prefer to hire its own graduates, as would Peradeniya and Sri Jayawardenapura. This rather incestuous practice leads to the emergence of two disturbing trends. First, for obvious reasons of practicality, undergraduate research interests revolve around teachers' interests. Sometimes, this is helpful when assigning dissertation supervisors. Therefore as far as research is concerned, different departments tend to churn out graduates whose research interests are broadly similar to those of their teachers. When the same departments hire some of these individuals as junior lecturers, the research potential and the theoretical orientations of the departments hardly expand. It is precisely due to the recognition of this fact that many American universities would hesitate to hire their own graduates. Some have in fact explicitly prohibited such hiring.

Second, such hiring also leads to an even more dangerous state of affairs. This is the emergence of what I would call the "yes sir syndrome". Most of the junior academics hired in this manner have a serious problem in relating to their former teachers who occupy senior academic positions in the same departments. One has to understand the nature of the teacher-student relationship patterns idealized in the socialization process of the wider society, strongly inculcated in schools and later entrenched even further in the universities. That is, there is a great distance between teachers and students, which is encouraged in the cultural practices of the universities. According to these values teachers are seldom criticized or questioned (Perera: 1992). This is also reinforced in the universities' highly stratified internal hierarchy of teachers.

Within this system, debate and constructive criticism of the work of senior academics by junior academics almost never takes place. Usually, there is total agreement: the "yes sir syndrome" in operation. What is worse is that this self-perpetuating negative legacy is transmitted to undergraduates as well. This situation most clearly manifests itself in the almost total silence of undergraduates in class. It is very seldom that they ask questions or dare to contradict their teachers in academic matters. Unfortunately, it seems to me that this situation is encouraged, sometimes directly by teachers, but mostly as a result of the structural restrictions that we have already discussed.

Moreover, there is very little internal debate or criticism of the work of senior academics even among themselves. This is because even healthy criticism is not usually tolerated within Sri Lankan academic life. People are concerned that their colleagues would get angry or upset. Thus due to this situation of relative self-censorship, there is very little space for constructive criticism and debate. Clearly, all of these trends would severely retard emergence of any dynamic anthropological/sociological tradition.

Lack of Inter-Institutional Contact and Opportunities to Exchange Ideas

Another serious problem is the lack of regular academic contact between different university departments and other research organizations. Thus there is no regular formal or informal meetings between the anthropologists/sociologists at Colombo and Peradeniya. The main problem here is distance. Given the nature of the Sri Lankan island mentality, many people would consider anything over thirty-five KM or so to be too far away! Contact does not occur with Sri Jayawardenapura and Kelaniya departments because many academics, with a certain degree of intellectual arrogance, consider these places to be intellectual wastelands. There are also very few, if any, formal institutional linkages between university departments and the research agencies in the private or NGO sector.

Moreover, regular conferences where ideas may be exchanged and debated also do not take place within Sri Lanka. Even when they do occur, the participation of junior academics is once again restricted because the language of discussion in most of these events is English. Many of them also cannot attend international conferences due to the same language problem. Even for those senior academics who are invited to attend foreign conferences, the bureaucratic rituals are so frustrating that many simply refuse to attend such events. For example, permission must be requested from the government 30 days ahead of time. But many international conferences are put together in much less time, and organizers cannot simply wait until the Sri Lankan bureaucratic procedures unfold in their usual lethargic fashion. Such procedures are also serious restrictions on the academic freedom of intellectuals and an unnecessary interference in universities' academic activities. The cumulative effect of these restrictions is the retardation of academic activities in general.

On the other hand, privately funded research institutes and think tanks, mostly in the NGO sector, do have the resources to organize such seminars and conferences. They in fact organize such events. But once again, most of these are also conducted in English, and more importantly attendance at these events is severely restricted to a small group of selected middle class individuals. Thus, it is not unusual for one to run into the same group of people in the Colombo seminar circuit. Such restricted access to knowledge is a form of intellectual imperialism which in no way could contribute to the emergence of the tradition that we are talking about. They can seldom be anything more than middle class talk-shops of which, of course, there is a fairly well established tradition.

Another serious problem that has contributed to the lack of scholarly debate and the non emergence of a dynamic anthropological/sociological tradition is the lack of one or two serious journals, published regularly. Both NARESA and the University of Peradeniya have their own journals for the social sciences, which in the past have carried some significant research papers. Some of them have made a considerable impact on Sri Lanka oriented anthropological and sociological scholarship. But the problem is that none of these journals are regular in publication or distribution due to financial restrictions as well as lack of intellectual contributions. The *University of Colombo Review* has a life of its own. No one seems to know when it would appear, and in what kind of pathetic state. Similarly *Marga*, the journal of the Marga Institute, has also deteriorated in its content over the last few years. Compared to this problematic situation with regard to our journals, neighboring India has such prominent journals as *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, and the *Economic and Political Weekly*—just to mention two different orientations. Their standards are high, publication is regular and distribution is quite wide. The main reasons for this success is the commitment of the editors and the publishers as well as the ability to generate funds for these ventures within India and from Indian sources, including the government. Some of the most important debates in Indian sociology and anthropology have unfolded themselves within the pages of *Contributions to Indian Sociology*.

Lack of Research Funding and the Hierarchical Positioning of the Social Sciences

Another significant reason that has prevented the emergence of a dynamic anthropological/sociological tradition is the problem of finding research funds and the highly problematic positioning of the social sciences in general within the hierarchy of the knowledge in Sri Lanka. It is very difficult to find generous funding for research from the universities. For that purpose, one has to turn to external, mostly foreign, sources which usually means that researchers have to re-orient their research interests in order to suite the research agendas of the funders. Thus an anthropologist interested in political violence may be reduced to undertaking health-oriented research for some entity like the UNESCO simply because of the availability of such funding. Their real interests will have to be of secondary importance.

There are a number of active Social Science Research Councils which initiate serious programmes to encourage sociological, anthropological and other social science research in the countries of the region. Sri Lanka which touts herself as a future NIC has no such entity. I would suggest that much of its minuscule social science research budget is essentially controlled by such entities as NARESA, which in the final analysis is run by people who have no real understanding of the social sciences or its needs, and its role in the development of the country. So what we really have are minor social science research funds essentially administered by a group of virologists, chemists and medics.

The reason why the social science funding has been restricted and allowed to be dictated by people who are not social scientists is indicative of the relatively low position accorded to the social sciences within the academic hierarchy in this country. The significance of social science research in general (let alone anthropology or sociology) has not been properly understood by any of the post-independent governments which have been perfectly satisfied with allowing non-social scientists to decide the direction of Sri Lankan social sciences. What is worse is the fact that anthropologists and other social scientists have allowed this situation to continue for such a long time. As far as sociologists and anthropologists are concerned, this self-inflicted lethargy is infectious and self-destructive. For instance, while an entity calling itself the Sri Lanka Sociological Association does exist in theory with a large membership, in functional terms this association is dead. It does not organize seminars or conferences; nor does it publish a journal or even a news letter. It does not even meet regularly to discuss its own professional problems. This state of affairs alone shows the lack of a dynamic social science tradition (not merely an anthropological or a sociological one) in this country which is capable for fighting for its own rights. This situation, I believe, has caused serious damage both in retarding significant social science research and in the overall non-emergence of the tradition we have been talking about.

Nature of the Anthropological/ Sociological Research Agenda and the Ivory Tower Mentality

There are certain other important conclusions one could draw from the orientation of the existing texts and research interests of anthropologists and sociologists working in Sri Lanka. One could see that certain areas of research have been visibly dominant. These would include studies on caste, religion (particularly Buddhism), agrarian production relations, ritual and more recently, political violence. But these areas have been overdetermined to the problematic exclusion of other equally significant areas of research. Thus comparatively, there is very little research done on the urban sector, the estate population, the Muslims, less visible minorities such as the Kaffirs and the Chinese, and non-Buddhist religious traditions in general. Even the studies on political violence have not been concerned with how people cope with political violence and terror. These studies

have been overdetermined by the nature of the violence itself. Sometime it is difficult to see much appreciable difference between supposedly scholarly accounts of political violence in Sri Lanka and the discourse produced by news media and popular writers.

I believe that the main reason for this is because the research interests and agendas of many of these scholars — who in any case are based in other parts of the world — are determined by the interests and research agendas of the institution in which they work, and the dominant interests of the major funding agencies. Thus generally speaking, even the large anthropological/sociological textual tradition on Sri Lanka is also produced on the basis of interests beyond Sri Lanka. Clearly, such a situation cannot produce a Sri Lankan anthropological/sociological tradition of the kind that I am talking about. If we are to move closer towards producing such a tradition, we have to set up our own research agenda. This of course is more easily said than done, given the restrictions imposed on the locally available funding as I have indicated in the previous section. However, this problem needs to be addressed as a matter of priority.

There are also serious lapses in the kind of courses our university departments teach. Many of these courses are too widely defined, and as a result quite vague in their expected achievements. For example, in the University of Colombo there are courses such as rural sociology, urban sociology, development sociology, culture and personality and so on. To me, these seem to be more like sub-fields of anthropology or sociology than specific course. For instance, none of these are rooted in any Sri Lankan or South Asian ethnographic material—except on the occasions when a few teachers would take the initiative to locate such material, and communicate this knowledge to students. Here again, these initiatives depend on teachers' access to such material as well as their command of the English language in which almost all such material is produced. As a result, students can graduate from a university with a degree in sociology/anthropology without a sound knowledge in any Sri Lankan ethnographic material or serious sociological or anthropological perspective on many important socio-political issues facing the country or the region.

Once again, the situation in India is quite instructive. There, all courses taught in universities are deeply rooted in the Indian socio-economic reality. Even theoretical discussions are initiated in this context where Indian ethnographic material is widely used. Thus, Indian universities offer courses on specific themes such as caste and class in North India, religion and political violence in the sub-continent and so on. Hence my suggestion is that Sri Lankan universities ought to introduce specific course on political violence in Sri Lanka and the region, courses on ethnicity and nationalism with particular reference to South Asia, the processes of change in Sri Lanka, survey courses on South Asian ethnography, problems of under development in the region, the role of NGOs in the country's development process, the correlations between religion and socio-economic change and so on. Moreover, we have to develop a capacity to change our courses within short periods of time, depending on changing requirements neces-

sitated by socio-political transformations in the wider society. The rigidity that seems to be inherent in our current course structures makes it impossible to improve sociological/anthropological instruction in the country as well as pave the way to establish the kind of dynamic anthropological/sociological tradition that we ought to establish.

I would also suggest that in societies like ours where socio-political and economic instability is a way of life, we cannot afford to undertake research for the mere satisfaction of intellectual curiosity, and be imprisoned within the confines of an unrealistic ivory tower. The research of Sri Lankan anthropologists and sociologists should primarily be of practical utility. Such work should attempt to place some of the socio-political problems we are currently facing in its proper perspective, and initiate debate on such issues. This does not mean that the earlier category of work should not be carried out. Such an eventuality would be unpractical, boring and intellectually unsound. What I am suggesting is a kind of prioritization of our collective academic agenda. Organizing and prioritizing our own research agenda within a specifically Sri Lankan paradigm would bring us closer to the possibility of constructing the anthropological/sociological tradition which thus far has eluded us.

Conclusion: Is there Adequate Space for a Sri Lankan Anthropological/Sociological Tradition ?

What I have outlined thus far are some of the more obvious reasons which have prevented the materialization of a dynamic Sri Lankan anthropological/sociological tradition. The question to ask now is whether it is possible to establish such a tradition. If we allocate to ourselves a time span of 50 years or, so such a venture may be possible—provided we take serious steps to address the problems that have brought about this situation in the first place. One of the main pre-requisites for such a venture would be to make available in the local languages at least some of the major texts that are already available in English. Wherever one finds a strong intellectual tradition in the modern social science sense, one would also find a large body of relevant literature being available in the local languages. The United States and Britain are two examples of this situation. The significance of this must be particularly emphasized. From a Sri Lankan perspective I would argue that the work of Ratnapala has had a more significant impact on the recent generations of Sri Lankan students of sociology/anthropology than the combined work of such scholars as Obeyesekere, Tambiah, Spencer and so on. It is Ratnapala they know, it is him that they quote; it is through his writings that they have heard about Obeyesekere; it is he who has told them about Yalman (too bad that the information provided was wrong).

Here I am not referring to Ratnapala's major work such as *The Beggar in Sri Lanka*, *Alcoholism in a Sinhalese Village* etc. Such work is also in English. Instead, I have in mind his introductory text books which are all in Sinhala. The main reason for this

success has been his willingness to write such texts in Sinhala, in a language that is easy to comprehend, summarize in Sinhala his own work as well as others' work that is already in English, and also make interventions in the Sinhala press. The clearly problematic nature of some of his work is an entirely different matter.

Making the major anthropological/sociological works on Sri Lanka available in the local languages is quite a daunting task given the fact that we are already over fifty years behind schedule. Besides, this will be a never ending task, particularly because we cannot translate into vernacular languages all the major theoretical contributions and non-Sri Lanka anthropological/sociological literature. Given this reality, students of sociology/anthropology will have to get a reasonable grounding in functional English as part of their degree requirements. Here I do not mean the kind of intensive English language classes conducted at Sri Lankan universities. Students themselves often complain that these classes are utterly boring. What I have in mind are language classes specifically designed not simply to enhance their language abilities, but to do so while keeping their specific disciplinary interests and needs in mind. This suggestion should also extend to teachers whose academic contributions have been restricted due to their incompetence in English.

I can think of two examples where sociological and anthropological instruction in the English language has worked remarkably well in a non-English speaking Third World setting. These are University of Delhi and Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. Here sociology and anthropology, particularly at MA level and above, are taught in English. And it seems to me that these departments are among the most literate that I have come across anywhere. The difference, however, is that unlike our students some of the students in these departments would have had their earlier education in English also. But even those who do not have that background seem to manage when they are exposed to this particular situation.

On the other hand, we have rigorously encourage the regular exchange of ideas through the organization of local conferences in local languages and formal and informal meetings between both students and teachers of different university departments and research institutions. Here when I refer to departments, I do not merely refer to the sociology or anthropology departments. Such contacts should be between all departments teaching social sciences and humanities, and the natural sciences also when necessary. For instance, anthropological research into the human adaptation to the natural environment as well as possible correlations between genetic transmission and the production of culture (even though sociobiology in my view is also quite dated) can collect much valuable information from both biology and zoology. Moreover, there should be at least one or two major journals in both English (for international and national consumption) and the local languages that come out regularly. They need not be restricted to anthropology and sociology, but to the social sciences in general. Ideally, such journals should be located within universities or independent research institutions.

Equally important, funding for social science research in general should be significantly increased. Such founding responsibilities should be vested in the hands of the social science community itself such as under the auspices of a future Social Science Research Council. Clearly these responsibilities should be removed from the control of the natural and hard sciences cartel as seem to be the current dominant practice.

Current patterns of recruitment to the anthropology/sociology departments of the universities should also be changed. Academics should not be recruited to the department at BA level. It should be done, in the very least, at the MA level. That is, all new recruits should at least have an MA at the time of initial recruitment. This would mean that such new recruits would be more mature in their outlook and hopefully better trained, which would enhance the research and teaching capabilities of the departments.

Alternatively, (if necessary) promising graduates may be offered scholarships by the universities to undertake their higher education within a relatively short period of time, such as to qualify with a useful MA within two or three years. Ideally, they should be encouraged to receive their post BA higher education in a recognized university in India. Financially speaking, this is the only viable option excluding a Sri Lankan degree. However, this can be achieved only if their language restrictions have been overcome by that time. In fact, I would suggest that in addition to an MA, functional proficiency in English should also be made a basic requirement for recruitment to sociology/anthropology departments. During that time, they can be recruited to the departments on a temporary basis to carry out specific duties such as conducting tutorial classes, teaching basic courses, grading answer scripts of basic courses and so on. But they should not be given the responsibility of supervising dissertations at this time. Limiting their responsibilities would, in theory, give them more time to complete their higher studies within the suggested period of two to three years. At the same time, in order to avoid the "yes sir syndrome", attempts should be made to recruit people who ideally would not have graduated from the same department. Needless to say, as I have already stated the existing courses taught in university departments should be changed in accordance with local requirements as well as international trends in sociology and anthropology.

Finally then, there is no doubt that at the moment it is meaningless to talk about a Sri Lankan anthropological/sociological tradition. The only way to establish such a tradition as well as to improve the quality of sociological and

anthropological instruction in Sri Lanka would be to seriously address the problems we have already identified. Moreover, the establishment of this tradition is a matter for the future. To do that we have to look to the future, not to the past, and to the short-lived glory that was.

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Notes

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2. Approximate translation.