SRI LANKA: SOME ISSUES OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION

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Introduction

The creation of "an enabling environment for social development" has been identified as a major theme in the Programme of Action, adopted at the World Summit for Social Development, held in Copenhagen, in March this year. The document has identified two essential components as constituting this `enabling environment': "a favorable national and international economic environment" and "a favorable national and international political and legal environment". Eradication of poverty, the expansion of productive employment and the reduction of unemployment, and social integration are treated in this document as central policy themes in an overall strategy for social development.

The aim of this paper is to highlight some key challenges that Sri Lanka's policy makers would face in an overall policy project of social integration. The paper is divided among two main themes: the first is the general treatment of the question of social integration, highlighting some of the advances made in the thinking concerning social integration; the second theme focuses on two specific problems of social integration in Sri Lanka, that of socially integrating the present generation of the youth and the challenges emanating from the prevailing caste order.

Social Integration as a Macro Political Goal

If we take the Copenhagen Programme of Action as our starting point, we may identify a useful attempt to set out the broad normative contours of social integration efforts:

The aim of social integration is to create "a society of all," where every individual, each with right and responsibilities, has an active role to play. Such an inclusive society must be based upon respect for all human rights and individual freedoms, cultural and religious diversity, social justice and the special needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, democratic participation and the rule of law[1].

Social inclusion, as opposed to social exclusion, is recognized here as the basic normative characteristic of a well integrated society. Democracy with guaranteed human rights and freedom, ethnic and cultural pluralism, social justice, and safeguards for disadvantaged social strata are thus posited as means as well as consequences of social integration.

These normative principles are in a way derived from the actual experience of societies which can generally be viewed as non - integrated or mal - integrated. The Copenhagen document describes some of these experiences as "negative developments" that include social polarization and fragmentation, income disparities and inequalities, uncontrolled urban development and environmental degradation, marginalization of families and communities, population dislocation due to economic transformation as well as armed conflicts. The `negative' dimensions of mal - integration can also be seen as consequences of political authoritarianism and systematic denial of democracy, grave human rights violations, denial of pluralism and ethnic majoritarianism, political violence freely employed by the state as a means of social control, and concentration wealth and power among narrow social strata often with state sanction. When all or many of these circumstances and conditions prevail in a society, social discontent tends to emerge as a shared response among `excluded' social strata. Social discontent, by itself, may not be a sufficient condition for social disintegration. However, accumulated social discontent, coupled with a belief that the prevailing order is fundamentally unjust, may lead to the erosion of the legitimacy of the existing social and political order. Hence, effective social integrationist projects need to address all sources — economic, political, social, ethnic and cultural etc.— of social discontent, resentment and as it often happens now, revolt.

It is in this context that we may argue that social integrationist efforts are macro political projects and that they require a massive thrust towards social engineering in the form of conflict management and resolution. But this is easier said than done. The capacity of the state and public institutions to constructively intervene in social conflicts, that arise from social discontent as well as well -mobilized and articulated group interests, is not always the strongest feature in our societies. Using the notion of 'crisis of governability' to encapsulate this phenomenon, Atul Kohli makes an apt comment on the growing incapacity of the Indian state to manage increasing social disorder, a comment that is at least partly relevant to Sri Lanka's own experience in the recent past:

India is still a functioning democracy, but increasingly it is not well governed. The evidence of eroding political order is everywhere. Personal rule has replaced party rule at all levels — national, state and district. Below the rulers, the entrenched civil and police services have been politicized. Various social groups have pressed new and even more diverse political demands in demonstrations

that often have led to violence. The omnipresent but feeble state, in turn, has vacillated; its responses have varied over a wide range: indifference, sporadic concessions, and repression. Such vacillation has fuelled further opposition. The ineffectiveness of repression, moreover, has highlighted the breakdown of the civil machinery intended to enforce the law and maintain order. In order to protect themselves, citizens in some parts of the country have begun organizing private armies. The growing political violence has periodically brought the armed forces into India's political arena, whereas the armed forces once were considered apolitical[2].

Kohli's observations should not make us totally pessimistic about the capacity of the state and political institutions to govern our societies effectively and democratically. There are new approaches that suggest means to arrest the process of decay of public institutions. Transparency and accountability of public institutions, the participation and involvement of civil society in the formulation and implementation of policy, making the state less and less coercive, and maintaining the distinction between the state and the regime through re-democratization of the state are some useful ideas that have emerged in Sri Lanka's recent political debate on responsive governance.

Meanwhile, in Sri Lanka's recent policy debates, considerable attention has been paid to the rather complex problem of national, or ethnic, integration. Given the centrality of the nation -building exercise, as a post-colonial project, in making a modern nation in Sri Lanka in the context of heightened ethnic tension, this particular emphasis is quite understandable. Quite apart from the political aspects of modern nation-building, the economic development of the country too has received policy attention. However, one of the key lacunae in the policy considerations concerning national integration and economic development has been the inadequate emphasis paid to address issues that are unique to Sri Lankan society and that threaten social cohesion. It is perhaps quite remarkable that after two youth revolts in Sinhalese society within a space of twenty five years, no systematic policy emphasis has been laid on to arrest the growing discontent and alienation of Sri Lanka's youth[3].

Sri Lank's traditional approach to social integration has been anchored on a generalized social welfare policy. The basic assumption in that approach is not a complicated one: it is an obligation of the state to distribute its surplus among practically all social classes; if the state does not have a surplus, it is once again obligatory for the state to find a surplus necessary for the implementation of re-distributory policy objectives. The státe, which assumed a paternalistic role, functioned in this model as the supreme agency of guaranteeing social contentment and obedience through the dispensation of its own resources.

The inherent contradictions of this policy of social welfarism became apparent in the early 1970s when the children of the welfare state began to express a deep sense of resentment to the established order. The youth rebellion of 1971 proved,

among other things, the limitations of the paternalistic welfare state as the supreme agency of social integration. The hopes and aspirations generated by the welfare state among the first post-1956 generation— through the expansion of universal free education, through the achievement of a considerable high social life index, through the commendable expansion of social infrastructure and through the vernaculation of the state— could not be met any longer. The traditional instruments of social integration could no longer be effective in managing the aspirations of the first generation of the post-colonial Sri Lanka. Social discontent among a specific demographic stratum — the youth, in this case — proved to be a source of political instability as well, thereby indicating the close relationship between the degree of social cohesion and integration on one hand and the level of political stability/instability on the other hand.

Looking retrospectively at several decades of the experience of the welfare state, from the vantage point of the post-welfare state, we are now in a position to identify some of its main contradictions. Its social engineering capacity was limited in terms of time and space. Its initial assumption of social cohesion and integration was limited to the extent of the state's ability to dispense public resources in a fundamentally state-centric social policy regime. It has created a populace that had primarily dependent on the state for survival, mobility and social stability.

The preponderant desire as well as tradition among a variety of social classes in Sri Lanka for state -dependence has in fact placed the state in a rather vulnerable position. If the state does not ensure for different social strata — from rural peasantry and students to urban entrepreneurial elements — access to state resources, the state easily runs the risk of attracting anger and hostility of these affected social groups.

The nest section will discuss this issue in relation to the social predicament of the present day youth in Sri Lanka.

Youth and Social Mal -Integration

S ri Lanka's inability to effectively integrate its varied youth strata with the mainstream of the social, economic and policy life has caused great concern among policy makers, especially after the widespread youth revolt in 1988 - 1990. The Youth Commission Report of 1990 identifies the socio-economic and political roots of youth unrest and proposes remedial measures in a remarkably interventionist spirit. The paradox of Sri Lanka's youth problem, however, is that diagnosis as well as remedies recommended notwithstanding, the policy rhetoric, as persuasive as it is, remains hardly translated into tangible and effective policy interventions. Given the political volatility of the youth in Sri Lanka, if an enabling environment is not created for the integration of this vital social segment with the mainstream of life, integrationist measures in other spheres of social relations may even be jeopardized.

My intention here is not to re-narrate the problem with we are only too familiar. Instead, I wish to highlight an emerging aspect of the problem which requires urgent policy consideration.

When the Youth Commission Report was written in 1990, the social impact of the de-statisation of the economy was not yet clearly visible and felt. However, with the progressive marketisation of economic relations in the ensuing years, the question of marginalization of certain social strata — for example, the rural and urban poor, women, children, craft communities and small producers — has been identified by the research community as a negative consequence of structural adjustment programmes[4]. The issue I am focussing on is related to the youth, education and employment.

To present the problem first, my argument is that while Sri Lanka's economy has now been almost completely adjusted in structural terms to promote a market-led growth process, the public education and employment policies largely remain as they were perceived and formulated to suit the parameters of the welfare state. To illustrate the gravity of this policy contradiction, one may only turn to the expectations and demands of the youth that very emphatically suggest an almost total dependance on the state for obtaining free education - whatever that may mean- and employment. This contradiction becomes all the more sharper when we recognize the fact that the state has now ceased to be the supreme agency of social benevolence, guaranteeing both free education upto the tertiary level and employment after every level of education[5].

We should not blame the youth for this situation. Present generation of the educated youth are in a way victims of a specific transitional period in our social history; they are a generation born into and raised under conditions of the welfare state. Their socialization process in the seventies and eighties was fundamentally shaped in the general belief that the state was a dependable source of social support and therefore state dependence a social right. Yet, in the current transitional period in which the market-led economic growth strategy is taking firm roots, the majority of these youth are shut out from quality education and gainful employment in the private sector which still maintain a social and cultural bias in favor of the recruits from elitist social groups in the urban society[6].

My final point in relation to the problem outline above is that an interim policy option needs to be worked out to effectively integrate the youth social strata — who are caught between the erstwhile welfare state and the expanding market economy — with the mainstream of socio-economic life.

Caste Order and Social Integration

A much neglected aspect of Sri Lanka's social integration needs is the continuing marginalization of socially backward caste communities, particularly in rural and semi-urban settings. The phenomenon of caste oppression

and marginalization in Sri Lanka is extremely complex and it has defied both conventional Marxist and liberal understanding of Sri Lankan social processes. At one level, in the face of public denial of caste in public affairs, except in electoral allegiances, caste is commonly viewed as resident in the private spheres of life. At another level, opportunities opened to and seized by intermediate caste strata to achieve capital accumulation, social mobility and a distinct share of political power are usually generalized to make the claim that the rigidity of caste distinctions and separation has largely disappeared. But, caste as a social structural barrier to social accommodation and integration does exist in a form not so peculiar to Sri Lanka, that is at the level of subordinate and backward caste communities.

Recent research conducted and field observations made by Nandana Weeraratne and his colleagues point to a phenomenon that will have significant social policy implications. During the JVP rebellion in 1988, a large number of rural communities who joined the movement and the revolt en masse, and who were subjected to direct state terror and violence are from the subordinate groups of the Sinhalese caste hierarchy. Recent press reports as well as field observations made by researchers indicate a growing tendency in rural society for tension between subordinate and dominant caste groups. All these instances suggest two inter-related factors that appear to have led to growing politicization of rural subordinate castes. Firstly, continuous economic backwardness and the incapacity of traditional service and craft economies to retain new generations among these communities within those traditional occupational parameters has made the rural socio-economic conditions an insurmountable barrier to achieving social mobility objectives of the youth. Secondly, in instances where small scale capital accumulation or social mobility achieved by individual families, the inflexibility of social structural relations among dominant and subordinate caste groups has made traditional patron - client relationship obsolete and intense competition and rivalry has surfaced in the midst of a social - structural process of reconstituting power relations in the rural society. Where state institutions are not geared to be sensitive to caste conflicts in rural society, such institutions, particularly the police and agencies of public administration are often reported to side with dominant structures of power[7].

Similarly, the question of social justice figures prominently in the marginalization experiences of subordinate caste communities. Nearly sixty years of the welfare state and fifty years of liberal democracy has not yet introduced social justice effectively into the social conditions and existence of these communities. In a recent visit to a potter community village, located in a modern Free Trade Zone near Colombo, I observed how free education has not yet enabled single member of that community to receive university education. A very high school drop out rate among children of this community of nearly 75 families was explained to me by a leader of that community as resulting from the reluctance of young students to experience 'unequal treatment' by teachers and fellow students. Upon further query, and the responses provided by my informant, I gathered that interpersonal language used in the mixed

caste school, located in the next village was thoroughly hierarchical[8]. Nandana Weeraratne's research findings concerning subordinate caste communities in Badulla, Ratnapura, Kurunegala, Kandy, and Kegalle districts confirm this proposition.

The point here is that the right to free education, and the right to equal and non- discriminatory treatment — which are primarily issues of social justice and democracy—still remain illusive to a fairly vast segment of Sri Lanka's population. What is unique in Sri Lanka, in contrast to the Indian experience, is that resentment and anger against caste domination and injustice is not expressed in a caste idiom. It is expressed in a non - caste idiom and non- caste political practice, as demonstrated in the high incidence of individual violence in rural society and the easy attraction among men and women to politics of rebellion.

Actually, caste order still remains in Sri Lanka as sustaining a disabling environment for social integration.

What, then are the policy options for social integration in the rural society? This is a question for which we may not find an easy answer. A brief review of the Indian experience is perhaps relevant to our discussion. India has constitutionally mandated policy of positive discrimination whereby so-called Scheduled Castes and Tribes" and "Backward Castes and Tribes" are granted special opportunities for education and employment on the basis of a quota system. The violent opposition launched by the so-called "Forward Castes" to Prime Minister V. P. Singh's attempt to implement the Mandal Commission report indicated the deep social resentment among dominant castes against the system of positive discrimination. Besides, unlike in India, the Sri Lankan social culture is such that open and public admission of caste identity and affiliation is a cultural taboo among subordinate and socially backward caste communities. Therefore, a policy of positive discrimination, to ensure social justice, along Indian lines will not be welcome in Sri Lanka by the very constituencies that such a policy should be aimed at.

There is obviously no easy way to overcome this policy paradox in Sri Lanka. The first step, therefore, should be to recognize the gravity of the problem and re-think strategies for social integration from the perspectives of social -structural specificities of the Sri Lankan society

Conclusion

C reating an enabling enviroment' for social integration would require the elimination of disabling environments as well structures that may keep different social strata away from the social, economic and political mainstream. Quite apart from such general policy goals as poverty allevia- tion, employment creation, gender equality, arresting economic marginalization, ensuring participatory dimensions in governance etc.,- which are significant elements of any effective social integrationist effort-other specific and and hitherto hidden barriers to social integration need to be identified in order to formulate meaningful policy measures.

Notes

1. *Copenhagen Programme of Action* (Advance unedited text), 1995,p. 45.

2. Atul Kohli, 1990, *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability,* Cambridge University Press, p.3.

3. The notion of social alienation is perhaps useful to encapsulate trends in society that stand counter to integrationist goals.

4. For example, see, John Twigg and Alex Bush (eds), 1994, *Impact of Structural Adjustment Policies on Small Scale Producers in South Asia,* Colombo: Intermediate Technology Development Group.

5. I can personally vouch for the social benevolence demands made by the youth on the state in relation to m encounters with young men and women who came to me seeking state employment.My public identification as a person close to the power structures of the present government apears to have made them believe that state benevolence could easily be invoked through political links --a negative legacy of Sri Lanka's welfare state. Whatever I tell them about the current and actual state of the state's inability to provide employment as it did in the past, I observe a reaction from these youth which can be described as one of `social dispair'.

6. In passing though, I must mention here that the public sector educational institutions, including schools and universities, have ceased to be centres of quality education. As a result, public sector education fails to produce generations of the youth with a competitive spirit for excellence. The expansion of the private sector of education in the English medium, catering to new classes of capital and surplus accumulation, is a mere illustration of this discomforting trend.

7. Investigatons into a recent incident of factional violence in a village in the Kurunegala district revealed that the police, *grama seva niladari,* the village temple and the Divisional Secretary in the area sided with the dominant caste against the subordinate caste. In many narratives of power struggles in rural society, this trend can be seen as constituting a general pattern of alliance-making.

8. *"Umba, bang, bolang kiyala kata karanawata ape Lamai kemathi ne"* is one statement made by the village elder.This expression can be translated as "our children don't like to be addressed in social hierarchical terms in the schools"

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