



## **CHANGING PATTERNS OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY PRACTICES IN SRI LANKA IN THE CONTEXT OF DEBATES ON NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN THEORY<sup>1</sup>**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Former British colony Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) developed the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya as a model for the region. Its academic staff in the Social Sciences had their intellectual roots in the British or US traditions of scholarship due to their postgraduate training and research in these countries. Up to the early 1970s, there was a thriving academic atmosphere along with knowledge production and dissemination activities but this started to deteriorate with the socio-economic and political changes, changes in the language of instruction and the composition of the student body. A brain drain contributed to the creation of a different practitioner community of Anthropologists and Sociologists in the universities whose focus was more inward looking. Its links to Western traditions of scholarship also became weaker.

Being a participant in this process from early 1970s up to the mid 1980s, the author uses his reflections and experiences to recount the changing nature of Anthropology and Sociology practice, theoretical emphasis, players involved, and the role of two research centres established outside the university system. The paper looks at the views of three Sri Lankan Anthropologists and Sociologists who have expressed concerns about the changing nature of teaching practices and constructed reality in Sri Lankan universities. The author connects these with the ongoing debate about Northern vs. Southern theory and prospects of alternative knowledge production articulated by Raewyn Connell.

**Key Words:** Southern Theory, Sri Lankan Anthropology and sociology, Higher education in Sri Lanka, alternative knowledge, Social Sciences in Sri Lanka, University of Ceylon (Peradeniya)

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper examines, by using Sri Lankan Anthropology and Sociology as a case study, the prospects for alternative social science theorising in the global

periphery and the challenges emerging in a context where the focus is shifting to Asia. The nexus between Western Social Science and local academic practice in the universities as well as its changing nature is examined through the story of these two disciplines. The aim of this exercise is to encourage practitioners of Anthropology and Sociology and related disciplines to re-think and re-connect with indigenous intellectual traditions to enrich the perspectives adopted in teaching, research, seminar circuits, and publications.

It has been over 60 years since Anthropology and Sociology were introduced to Sri Lanka's universities, first to the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya in the late 1940s and then to Universities of Sri Jayewardenepura and Colombo in the 1960s. Later these disciplines were introduced to other universities such as Ruhuna, Jaffna, Kelaniya, Sabaragamuwa and the Eastern University. Sociology is a popular subject today among University students. It is offered as a subject in the External B.A. degree also.

The teaching of Sociology and Anthropology and the conduct of research and publishing refereed academic work in Sri Lanka have had a transformative history due to several reasons; its colonial history and post independent developments, changing nature of the political system, nationalist policies including language policies for the expansion of higher education, departure of Western trained intellectuals for greener pastures, the expansion of Sinhala and Tamil medium teaching, the poor knowledge of English skills among the academic staff as well as students

entering universities. Some argue that the changes in these disciplines and academic staff profiles have led to a situation of intellectual parochialism, linguistic segregation and a situation of being cut off from the advances in Western social science knowledge. For instance, Perera states that in Sri Lankan universities there is a "diminished intellectual environment" (2006, p.38).

What caused this 'diminished intellectual environment' in the local university system? What has been the impact? Could one expect intellectual dependency on metropolitan theory and methodology to be challenged by practitioners of Anthropology and Sociology in Sri Lanka? Can we expect a Southern Theory<sup>2</sup> to emerge in a condition like this? Or for that matter, could one expect the academic staff to even 'engage with Northern theory and methodology' with a critical edge like their predecessors did? To find answers to these questions, one has to examine the changes that occurred in the country and its universities during the critical decades following 1948 independence from Britain. In this article, I focus on the 1970s and 80s when I had first hand experiences as a university student and then as a member of the academic staff involving discussions of Western theory and its application in countries like Sri Lanka. Changes that occurred in later decades are not covered here<sup>3</sup>.

Critical reflections on the 1970s and 1980s are important because of certain events and transformations that occurred in Sri Lanka's Anthropology and Sociology teaching and research. These have been characterised as marking "the more sustained beginning of the dismantling of Sri Lankan Sociology and Anthropology

in terms of research, teaching, publication and related activities” (Perera 2014). Several conditions contributed to this trend:

- i. The migration of pioneer Sri Lankan scholars to European and American universities.
- ii. The relative lack of success in training others to take up their intellectual roles.
- iii. Restriction of state funding and the non-availability of private funding which negatively impacts the regular publishing of scholarly journals for knowledge exchange and the resultant dismantling of the tradition of critical debate.
- iv. The change in the medium of instruction in universities from English to Sinhala and Tamil in the 1960s, and the inability to set up a program to publish serious sociological knowledge in Sinhala and Tamil to augment this transformation.
- v. The non-emergence of a local academic publishing industry.
- vi. The non-emergence of a serious and viable local institutional system to undertake funding for research

(Perera 2005, p. 231-232 cited in 2014, p.15)<sup>4</sup>.

Though by implication Perera hints that the 1970s and 1980s were the golden era of Sri Lankan Anthropology and Sociology due to the presence of well trained intellectuals and a flourishing research and publication agenda, teaching of these disciplines and conduct of research even during this era were not without problems and challenges.

Goonatilake delves deeper into these problems by reflecting on the work of four Anthropologists whose work focused on Sri Lanka (Goonatilake 2001).

As the basis of my observations during the period concerned, I use self-reflection and autobiographical method to dig deeper into my own experiences and insights acquired as a participant in the learning and teaching process at the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya and the memories I carry until now<sup>5</sup>. My remarks are based on the experiences and insights derived from being a student and then a staff member in the department of Sociology, University of Peradeniya<sup>6</sup>. I also draw from ongoing discussions on *Southern Theory* in the Comparative and International Education Research Network (CIERN) located in the School of Education at the University of New England. To set the scene, I examine writings by three Sri Lankan Anthropologists and Sociologists along with those of Connell.

The paper contributes to an understanding of Anthropology and Sociology practice in Sri Lanka during a period where socio political and economic changes impacted the higher education system, its quality and processes. How these contextual changes impacted the role of Anthropologists and Sociologists in constructing and disseminating knowledge, particularly critical knowledge, will also become evident. Through these deliberations, the paper contributes to critical discussions on Northern and Southern Theory taking place in the wider world of Social Sciences.

## CONNELL'S SOUTHERN THEORY AND HER ASSERTIONS

*Southern Theory* is “a book that in its nutshell critiques the content, form and process of knowledge production in social science”<sup>7</sup>. In her introduction to *Southern Theory*, Connell states that the purpose of her book is “to propose a new path for social theory that will help social science to serve democratic purposes on a world scale. The dominant powers reshaping our world seek to close down, rather than open up, the self-knowledge of society. In such a world, social science has a vital democratic role to play” (2001, p. vii). Furthermore, the dominant genres of social science “picture the world as seen from the rich capital-exporting countries of Europe and North America – the global metropole” (2001, p. vii).

In the first section, she “examines how modern social science embeds the viewpoints, perspectives and problems of metropolitan society, while presenting itself as universal knowledge” (2001, p. vii-viii). In the second section, Connell examines the “ambivalences of social science” in Australia and its relationship to the metropole “without ever generating a distinctive viewpoint” (2001, p. viii). In the third section, she examines social theorising in four situations namely postcolonial Africa, modernising Iran, Latin America since WW II, and India since 1970s while showing how dependence has been challenged. Her approach is to look at texts from these contexts “as texts to learn from” and to find out what they reveal “about the project of theorising in the global periphery” as well as differing forms of intellectual and practical problems (2001, p. viii). In the final section, she “explores

consequences of Southern perspectives for social science as a project on a world scale” (2001, p. viii). One task here is “to rethink the character of social-scientific knowledge (epistemology, methods and forms of communication) in a context of respect for intellectual traditions from the global periphery” (2001, p. viii). In the final chapter she makes some proposals relating to the democratic project.

Thus the book is about how Social Science knowledge originating from the global metropole has had a domineering effect on Social Science practices in other parts of the world as well as how Social Science theory emerges from the periphery in many genres and styles –including as resistance to the domineering theory or reproduction of the same. An interesting question and a dominant assumption emerging in the book is whether social science can have only one, universal, body of concepts and methods, the one created in the global north?

It is important to note Connell’s claim that,

Colonised and peripheral societies produce social thought about the modern world, which has as much intellectual power as metropolitan social thought, and more political relevance... Work needs to be done to develop the connections, as well as the contrasts, between these bodies of thought and those of the metropole (2001, p. xii).

Connell wants Sociologists in the South to develop theories (not a grand or universal theory) to suit their location, issues, and interests rather than imitating theories developed in the metropolis. There are ‘other ways of knowing about the world’ –quite apart from those promoted by Northern Theory – and we have a

responsibility to find and articulate these for a wide audience<sup>8</sup>. Some questions arising from Connell's book include the following:

- i. Do we selectively utilize concepts and methods to study narrowly focused topics without context, history, identity and culture?
- ii. Has there been an 'institutional replacement' for old Sociology? What are the examples from South Asia?
- iii. Has sociology moved beyond 'scientificity' in its content and method?
- iv. Can there be a sociology without northern theory and methodology?
- v. Do practitioner communities in the global periphery simply follow northern sociological theory, literature, methodology and become dependent instead of producing alternative knowledge rooted in their places, histories, and intellectual traditions?

### **VIEWS OF THREE SRI LANKAN ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND SOCIOLOGISTS**

In this section, I briefly examine the views of three selected Anthropologists-Sociologists from Sri Lanka who have commented on the Western dominance in theory, methods etc. or have provided critical comments on Sri Lankan Anthropology and Sociology practice in universities in the previous decades.

#### ***Siri Hettige***

Hettige provides insights about the nature of changes in society as well as what he calls 'sociological enterprise' during the last 60 years. British colonialism produced

elites who had a liberal education and internalised liberal values. They came from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. However, with the rise of nationalism and language policies after independence, ethno-linguistic segregation was created in all spheres of social life including the universities. This prevented the emergence of a pan-Sri Lankan community of Sociologists (Hettige 2010, p. 303-305).

Today "[a] large segment of the practitioners of Sociology remains almost totally cut off from their counterparts elsewhere, not just from those who are based in dominant centres" (p. 313). Many remain teachers of Sociology rather than researchers. To cater to undergraduate learning, a range of books in vernacular languages has been published (p. 311). Moreover, many University academics are not competent in English. The standards have also declined. Thus the process of vernacularisation and democratization of higher education has led to a mixed bag of outcomes. These remarks broadly correspond to the diminished intellectual environment in universities that Perera refers to (Perera, 2006, p. 38).

#### ***Sasanka Perera***

Perera provides a historical overview of the evolution of Anthropology and Sociology in Sri Lanka, the players involved, and the influences and outcomes while emphasizing the absence of a critical sociology knowledge production lately that engages with Western theory.

From the mid 1800s onwards there were writings by a pioneer group of armchair 'anthropologists' with no formal training in the craft of anthropology, e.g. colonial civil servants, medical officers, military

men, missionaries and a handful of scholars in the formal sense. Their writings became a crucial foundation and long-term source of influence for the anthropology of Sri Lanka<sup>9</sup>. The publication of Charles Gabriel Seligman's and Brenda Seligman's ethnography on the Veddas in 1912 in London was a landmark. After that 'ethnographic record on Sri Lanka expanded, often thematically, following the debates on kinship, caste, land tenure etc. that were emerging in centers of anthropological knowledge production in Europe and North America (Perera 2014, p. 6).

Perera notes that the first department of Sociology at Peradeniya was established by American rural sociologist Bryce Ryan with two other Americans, Murray A. Straus and Jacqueline H. Straus who were social psychologists. It had a strong empirical focus leading to a 'Village Studies Program'. Soon afterwards, "It proceeded to document the status and changes of numerous villages scattered around the Kandyan countryside, which remains to date some of the best descriptions of village life of the time" (p. 7). Ryan's books included *Caste in Modern Ceylon* (1953) and *Sinhalese Village* (1958). Ralph Pieris, the first Sri Lankan Professor of Sociology, wrote a book named *Sinhalese Social Organization*. It was a description of Sinhalese social organization in the Kandyan Kingdom based on an analysis of historical records. Laksiri Jayasuriya, who was trained in Social Psychology at the London School of Economics, joined the department in 1955<sup>10</sup>. According to him, the department was modeled along the 1960s Harvard Sociology department. Specialized Sociology degree programs were offered only by 1956. Between 1955-1960 S. J. Tambiah, who had obtained his PhD

from Cornell University in 1954, taught Sociology. According to Tambiah Bryce Ryan introduced him and fellow students to own villages and culture through field trips (Macfarlane 1983).

In the 1960s some changes occurred in the academic staff profile.

The next group of academics who joined the department as teachers since the mid-1960s were mostly 'anthropologists.' These include Gananath Obeyesekere (who drifted from English to anthropology) as well as H.L. Seneviratne (1968-1970) and Kitisiri Malalgoda<sup>11</sup> ... Gananath Obeyesekere's assumption of the leadership of the department marked a shift in its direction towards a distinctly 'cultural anthropology' identity in the American sense of the terminology (Perera 2014, p. 9)<sup>12</sup>

These details about prominent anthropologists and sociologists at the time show the influence of U.S. and British higher education institutions and personnel at a time when Sri Lanka was emerging from colonial rule. Perera then elaborates on how Sri Lanka was treated by Western anthropologists as a site to conduct fieldwork: "Until the 1960s and to a significant extent now, Sri Lanka was not a center for innovation in knowledge production and generation in anthropology; it was merely an experimental ground, to which people often came to undertake fieldwork" (2014, p. 6).

In terms of research, Perera looks at two pieces of writing that reflect on the subject, i.e. E. Nissan (1987) and K.T. Silva (2001). Nissan looks at the period from late 1950s to mid 1980s. Silva examines the period from 1949 to 1983. According to his assessment,

both these sources offer a reasonably accurate description of Anthropological and Sociological research in Sri Lanka.

However, today there is a body of work produced in Sinhala and Tamil easily accessible to local readers. But 'many of these 'studies' are simple and linear descriptions of social phenomena which often include studies of prostitution, beggars, 'coolies' in Colombo and simple 'village studies' (2014,p.14). These include numerous dissertations at undergraduate and post graduate (particularly MA) levels. Some of these are published with minimum editing, yet they have a significant impact on students of Sociology.

According to Perera, institutional and disciplinary contingencies have led to a situation where there is no engagement with theory or intellectual discussions in Anthropology and Sociology. Due to factors like monolingualism in the Social Sciences, a gap between contemporary world Social Sciences and Sri Lankan Social Sciences has grown resulting in 'a long-term process of parochialisation of knowledge' (Perera 2014, p.20). Two factors contributing to this are lack of English knowledge and lack of translations of globally circulating texts and local texts of comparable value. Rote learning is also happening in undergraduate education. By way of explanation, Perera states that,

The teacher who cannot access material written in English (or any other world language where adequate literature is available) will invariably refer mostly to the material available in the local languages or even more commonly, to their own classroom notes, leaving it up only to the most enterprising students to seek anything beyond that (p. 21).

There is also a relative poverty of ideas due to the lack of a sound conference circuit for local Anthropologists and Sociologists. Those that exist in Social Sciences adopt a developmentalist orientation searching for 'clinical and statistical understandings of topics' rather than those focusing on thick ethnography or theory. Academic texts in local languages are also published without peer review (Perera 2014, p.22). Globally produced knowledge on Sri Lanka is also not accessible to Sri Lankan social scientists due to language and cost factors.

Thus, there is a clear absence of engagement with (western-derived) current social theory and an absence of alternate local theoretical formulations. This state of affairs perpetuates an unfortunate environment of intellectual mediocrity. What is taught and produced in the name of anthropology and sociology is not comparable to international standards. The lack of critical self-evaluation by Sri Lankan Sociologists about the way Anthropology and Sociology is practiced contributes to this situation.

Though these remarks cannot be generalized to all Social Sciences or all social scientists including Anthropologists and Sociologists, they seem to reflect the dominant trends in the disciplines and how they are practiced. Individual exceptions can be observed in each of the fields – though their contribution to alternative theory and knowledge production can be questioned.

### ***Susantha Goonatilake***

Goonatilake looks at the scholarly interactions between the West and

East, in particular Sri Lanka, and the cross fertilization of ideas and concepts between the two as a civilizational discourse. Writing about how this happened in philosophy, he says “There have been many studies in the tradition of East-West comparative philosophy indicating that although Buddhist and modern Western approaches may not necessarily agree on the answers to key questions, they sometimes address broadly similar problems” (2001, p. 12). He provides examples of how Buddhist ideas and explanations figured in Western thought as well as comparisons between Christianity and Buddhism (see Goonatilake 2001, p. 13-16)<sup>13</sup>.

Speaking about the way decolonization and other factors of change impacted the manner in which Anthropology was delivered to Anthropologists dealing with Sri Lanka from the 1970s onwards, Goonatilake states that the discussions in the 1960’s “pointed to the relationship between colonialism and anthropology” mainly as “an ideologically biased viewpoint on non-European countries” (p. 24). The inability of Anthropology to adjust to an anti-imperial world because of its growth from imperialism, the Anthropologist’s role in producing ideas useful to colonial exploitation, the need for Anthropology to go through a process of change to be legitimized in the Third World, the lack of discussion about the problems arising from confrontations with Western domination are some of the points discussed, based on various writers in the 60s and popular assumptions in Anthropology such as the taken for granted colonial situation and unequal relationships (p. 24-26). This led to a rejection of Anthropology by Third

World intellectuals and Western radicals by the 1970s. At the time, the need to decolonize the subject was acutely felt. The idea of ‘native Anthropologist’ biased toward his/her own social group emerged in this context.

After conducting an analysis of the work of four prominent Anthropologists who have contributed to the constructions of Sri Lankan Anthropology in the 1970s and 80s, Goonatilake concludes that these four “deliver a highly flawed anthropology, partly derived through their intellectual social matrix” (p. 263). Referring to their work he says, “contradictory views of what constitutes the Sinhalese and what makes them behave emerge through these case studies” (p. 263). Kapferer “deliberately chooses to view the Sinhalese through the worldview of demons, and not through the ideas of the Buddha or of Buddhist monks” (p. 263). Goonatilake presents his critique to show that theories and concepts of anthropology were “formulated from the point of view of Western ideology, Western needs and Western lifestyles” (p. 27).

Goonatilake presents a picture of the contextual background within which Sri Lankan anthropologists such as the four authors examined in his book “began their foray into Sri Lanka in the 1970’s” (p. 28)<sup>14</sup>. In the 1970s the lack of support from the state for academic research resulted in restrictions on access to information and even a lowering of the high standards expected through peer reviewed academic work. In this context, “Major funding has generally come from external Western donors largely to private organizations” (p. 270).



Interestingly, Goonatilake refers to the layer of Anthropologists, Social Scientists and journalists in the country who function as a filter for Western ideas on the one hand and translate local reality in terms of Western frameworks of thought on the other as a 'Social matrix'. This includes those working for Centres of Research outside the University system-particularly relating to what he calls Postcolonial Orientalist discourse on Sinhalese Buddhists. He claims that "Sri Lankan thinking of the formal social sciences kind is very much governed, in spite of a few laudable local attempts, by external definitions" (p. 272). Fifty Westerners who have produced a large amount of literature pre-empt the 'international' and determine "the local academic definition of formal Sri Lankan social knowledge" (p. 272-273).

Goonatilake sees a disjuncture between the local and global, preventing access to local debates in the Sinhala medium –though some such debates "fall into the most provincial of genres" (2001, p. 273). One example cited is the debate on *Jathika Chintanaya* (National Thinking). Like Perera, he observes a growing insularity in Anthropology.

Anthropology constructed by Western trained Anthropologists for their subjects represents an artificial external reality that "categorises them, judges them, and operates on them through academic discussion, citations and foreign government actions" (p. 275). Furthermore, "None of the social science literature on Sri Lanka in the external world...is fed back to those studied" (2001, p. 276). Goonatilake's accounts correspond to the views expressed by Perera and Hettige on the development

of parochial intellectual-academic culture and practice leading to the lowering of Sri Lankan Anthropological standards and engagement with the world of knowledge.

Highlighting the constraining factors in Sri Lanka affecting the knowledge community, he points out that unlike in India, Sri Lanka "has a lesser flow of information and resources at the tertiary levels and above – essential for informed debates" (P. 268). He says,

This is partly because in several disciplines, university education has for more than a generation been delivered in the national language of Sinhala and Tamil. This process has democratized access to education but has tended to strongly compartmentalize the knowledge available to the English, Sinhala and Tamil medium readership (p. 268).

These views expressed by Sri Lankan Anthropologists, Social Scientists and Connell could be used to compare and contrast self-reflections by this author as reported in the next two sections. They provide a picture about the changing academic staff profiles in the two disciplines, linkages that existed with the wider world of knowledge, linguistic segregation due to the compartmentalisation of teaching, research and publications and the growing gap between knowledge available through English sources and those in local languages. They also show how some professors found it useful to access and utilise knowledge available via English as well as other languages and contexts in comparative studies of social institutions, e.g. state, economy, family, kinship, marriage.

**UNDERGRADUATE STUDY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CEYLON, PERADENIYA, SRI LANKA (1968-72)<sup>15</sup>**

I started my Sociology (hons) degree after spending two years in preparing for the General Arts Qualifying (GAQ) and Special Arts Qualifying (SAQ) exams. For the former I studied three subjects, i.e. eastern history, philosophy, and economics. For the second, I studied two subjects from the sociology stream. Before being allowed to undertake SAQ subjects, I had to sit an English test conducted by the department. It included two paragraphs from Raymond Firth's *Human Types* that I was supposed to translate into Sinhala. It was in the third and fourth years that I studied Sociology and Anthropology proper as a student qualified to undertake a Sociology special degree<sup>16</sup>.

This was the time when there was a government led initiative to expand education into rural areas, and a demand for teaching in universities in the mother tongue, i.e. Sinhala or Tamil. The university professors and lecturers who had obtained their own higher education in English medium from universities in the UK or the US, or in the process of doing so found it difficult to teach subjects such as Sociology, Economics, Philosophy, and Political Science in Sinhala, my mother tongue. Sociology and Anthropology, which were taught in the same department, were considered by students as elite subjects that were available to a few English educated students from the cities. The books and journals in these disciplines were available in English only. I was an outsider to this knowledge and learning milieu by any measure.

In contrast, subjects such as Sinhala language and literature, Buddhism, History, Tamil language and literature, Hinduism, Pali studies were taught in the mother tongue. Some Sinhala professors had obtained their higher degrees from the London School of Oriental Studies or the US. Two such examples were Professors D.E. Hettiarachchi and W.S. Karunaratne. They had acquired knowledge of oriental and Western languages like other scholars who had specialized in Pali, Sanskrit, Sinhala or Tamil. Historians were a different breed as some specialized in British history and others in Indian history. They derived their methodological approaches largely from Northern/Western centres of higher learning such as Historiography.

These scholar teachers had an appreciation for Western as well as Eastern thought in their own disciplines. This was especially the case in relation to historians. Some would visit libraries in Holland, Portugal, Britain and elsewhere in Europe to access specialist collections pertaining to the colonial history and its different phases<sup>17</sup>. This inclination to study Western and Eastern thought was evident among philosophers also when it came to topics like logic, ethics and epistemology. Political Scientists and Economists mainly dealt with Western thought while trying to shed light on Sri Lankan institutions and issues in the course of their lectures. These included topics such as the state, pressure groups, political parties, or economy, poverty, and development. The nature of the welfare state and its challenges were also considered.

Sociologists and Anthropologists were in the process of participating-willingly or unwillingly- in university wide efforts to provide teaching in Sinhala<sup>18</sup>. Sinhala is the language of the majority whereas Tamil is the language of numerical minority.

By and large Anthropology & Sociology professors and lecturers were coming from theoretical and methodological foundations and frameworks that they had acquired or were in the process of acquiring from Western higher education institutions. They now had to translate these into Sinhala. Given the fact that the overall number of students considering specializing in Anthropology and Sociology in a given year was much less compared to subjects such as Political Science, Economics or History, and my own batch consisted only eight students (the previous batch had about 11 or 14), the teachers used both English and Sinhala. Some lecturers had better Sinhala knowledge and skills (e.g. Kitsiri Malalgoda, H. L. Seneviratne, Sunimal Fernando) compared to others (e.g., Gananath Obeysekera<sup>19</sup>, Tissa Fernando). Ralph Pieris, who was the first professor of Sociology, delivered lectures on the Sociology of development but did not display much knowledge of Sinhala. He would come to the class with a pile of English books and give lectures in English without lecture notes. I had no idea of what he was talking about, except a few sentences here and there that I was able to pick during the course of the lecture. Some of my colleagues in the class had better English language skills than me, and they explained the ideas learned from Pieris later, when I needed help.

The overarching emphasis in the teaching approach in the department of Sociology was to impart knowledge and skills in Western Anthropological and Sociological thought, methods of study and analysis including the comparative method<sup>20</sup>. Anthropology was the more established discipline by that time and Sociology was an emerging discipline. This is because there was a series of writings by British administrators, priests and travelers during the colonial period providing rare insights into the life and world of the Sinhalese and to some extent Sri Lanka's indigenous people called Veddas. Some Sri Lankan scholars such as N.D. Wijesekera (1949) and Ralph Pieris had also followed in this tradition of writing about the social organization of Sinhalese society. These were written in English using documentary analysis as the main source. Wijesekera used his own experiences and observations also in his work, *The People of Ceylon* (1987 3rd edition).

In the Comparative Social Institutions course taught by Malalgoda, he introduced us to a range of social institutions in a number of societies. The Sociology of religion course provided a thorough introduction to the works of Durkheim, Weber and Marx plus others. We learned about the emergence of Calvinism and Protestant ethic in England, Durkheimian interpretation of religion as a social fact, as well as Weberian and Marxist interpretations of religion. These courses introduced us to the Buddhist revivalist movement and Buddhism in Sri Lanka also. The work of Anagarika Dharmapala was considered along with the views of Malalasekera who was a Sinhala scholar of repute. With a

sound knowledge of English, however, the prevailing view was that our teachers were adopting a comparative approach to the study topics reinforced by Western Anthropological or Sociological research methodology whereas the local Sinhala or religion scholars were working within the language or religious traditions without being analytical or critical. This was based on the view that they were primarily 'careers of a tradition' rather than 'critical analysts'. Thus the impression given was that our vocation is a superior one. This was a view, however, contradicted by the Sinhala and religion scholar teachers.

There was another key aspect to this dominant view. As Anthropologists or Sociologists we were not only examining written documents for our analytical tasks, compared to the scholars in other fields such as language study or study of religion and history. We were supposed to be using various other methods of study such as fieldwork, observation, interviews or surveys to gather first hand information from the subjects or study participants. Thus our vocation was different from pure library or book study but firmly grounded in the day-to-day life of the people we study. This view was reinforced further by the adoption of positivist research methodology in Sociology where it was believed that there are 'social facts' to be discovered by the use of interviews, surveys, fieldwork, etc. Objective research methods that eliminate the possibility of personal biases need to be used to generate valid research outcomes and new knowledge, we were told.

There was healthy debate and discussion among students about the difference between Durkheim and Weber. It was

thought that Weber added the notion of interpretation of social facts to the academic discourse. Marxist thought was different from the other two due to its political connotations. As the period of study was one of social and political turmoil due to the 1971 Sinhalese youth insurrection, the first in post independent Sri Lanka, we were being exposed to Marxist thinking through multiple sources. In addition to our anthropology and sociology lectures, there were open talks and debates by political scientists as well as visiting politicians and activists. Literature on the subject was also freely available, some in Sinhala through various political groups such as the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP), *Virodaya* (protest), Ceylon Communist Party (CP), or *Lanka Sama Samaja Party* (LSSP). Newspapers and magazines also had informative articles. Members of parliament from the CP or LSSP used Marxist terminology in speeches delivered on campus. Students of Political Science were much more literate about Leninism, Stalinism, or Trotskyism and even Mao, Che Guerra, Kim IL Sung or Latin American struggles and writings. After the crushing of the 1971 insurrection by the government (participants called it a revolution), most of the lecture notes, books and articles had to be burned, buried or hidden as the possession could have made the owner a suspect leading to arrest and even detention.

Sunimal Fernando taught us a course on Social Stratification dealing with topics such as class, caste and status stratification. He drew from American and British literature but the innovation apparent in his teaching related to three factors: 1) he focused on conflict rather

than functional approach though he taught us both. 2) His Sinhala language skills were far superior to his colleagues in the department's teaching staff that left for overseas posts around mid 70s. 3) As someone who had worked for the government earlier, particularly in the field of land reform, he brought some ground knowledge to the teaching rather than relying on theory per se. He in fact adopted a critical approach to Western ideas and concepts but his own practice in terms of research in time to come was grounded in survey and interview based sociological method and interviews rather than the village study method that was dominant in a previous era. The critical approach he adopted in teaching inspired us to look at our subject matter, the society and its issues in a different way, e.g. poverty alleviation and rural development from the point of view of depressed communities such as minority castes.

We had visiting lecturers like Joe Weeramunda (Land Tenure) and J. P. Delgoda (Criminology & Penology). Delgoda was the Commissioner of Prisons at the time and had completed his Master's degree at Illinois University specialising in Crimes in Southern Ceylon. He brought practical experience to bear in his lectures, which were delivered in English. Yet his English was easy to understand. He added colour to his lectures by telling stories about prison riots, or about specific prisoners and events –while smoking his pipe in the class.

Thus the learning of Anthropology and Sociology at my time was not a simplistic transfer of a dominant metropolitan social science theory and methodology. It was

a highly complex task in the eyes of the teachers as well as students because of several reasons.

- i. It included a critical and comparative approach. Thus in the study of a given topic, we approached it from the perspective of Durkheim, Weber and Marx but also subsequent writers not only from the global north but also from the global south.
- ii. Our knowledge and understanding were enhanced by research findings from different corners of the world. The differences between tribal, peasant and urban industrial societies were noted but the task of studying society, culture, social institutions or problems was considered as requiring different methods, e.g. Anthropological to study tribal and peasant societies, and Sociology to study urban societies and issues<sup>21</sup>.
- iii. There was an attempt to link what we learned in the classroom or the library with our own life experiences and other knowledge sources. While western academic Anthropology and Sociology provided a comparative perspective, theories and a methodology, we were not immune to other understandings that came our way through the vernacular sources such as writings on history, religion, literature, politics, and economy. Even our exposure to the popular media, Journals (e.g. *Sanskriti*), drama, and Buddhist sermons in Sinhala were alternative sources of knowledge<sup>22</sup>.

We did not consider ourselves as prisoners of Western Social Science though in our subsequent life as Sociology academics we tended to

utilize the methods of data collection and analysis from Western Social Science in our research. We tended to consider our discipline as superior to others due to the reasons mentioned above. We were proud of our ability to link up with world knowledge acquired through English language though our roots were in the Sinhala heartland and tradition. However, in my case at least and a few others from my era, we never lost touch with the utility of critical and comparative approaches in our studies. Application of such approaches seemed far more rewarding compared to functionalist approaches.

#### **TEACHING PERIOD IN ANTHROPOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY AT PERADENIYA (1975-1986)**

When I joined the department of sociology's academic staff in 1975, the senior Anthropologists and Sociologists of the department who had obtained their own training from UK or USA were in the process of leaving the country for overseas assignments<sup>23</sup>. This was replicated in other departments also. This was due to their frustration with the restrictions imposed by the government on travel, relative inability to teach in Sinhala medium, and the politicisation of university administration around the time of 1971 JVP insurrection in which a large number of university students were involved. For Peradeniya University campus, a competent authority was appointed. Other academic staff joined government departments or non-government agencies conducting research. Marga Institute in Colombo established as a NGO with funding from local and foreign sources was one

such organisation engaged in social surveys, and interviews and generating a range of seminars and publications on development related issues.

The 'comparative perspective' in teaching and research prevalent up to the time I joined the department started to dissipate due to internal political developments within the country, in particular with the nationalist policies of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) led coalition government (1970-1977). It had already centralised university administration under the ministry of higher education in Colombo, thereby eroding university autonomy. This was coupled with the adaptation of nationally oriented economic policies that involved import substitution and other restrictions. A drive for local agricultural and industrial development was in full swing as well. Movement of people for higher study overseas was centralised along with the restrictions imposed on foreign exchange transactions. What limited number of commonwealth and other scholarships available for emerging academic staff to further higher studies abroad became highly competitive and politicised. While faculties prepared a ranking system and universities forwarded the names of lecturers recommended by the Deans and VC's to the Ministry of Higher education in Colombo for selection and approval, it was widely believed that various personal and political factors interfered in the final selection process.

During my years of teaching and conducting research at the University of Peradeniya in Kandy, Sociology –and for that matter even Anthropology- was defined and approached overwhelmingly on the basis of European and American

literature, ways of thinking and conducting research. Our task was to understand the concepts and theories as well as the methods of these disciplines –available via English texts and lectures by Western trained academics- and look at the Sri Lankan society, culture, social institutions, beliefs and practices, values and norms, issues and problems through the prisms of these conceptual and theoretical constructs. Theory alone was not considered sufficient as it is abstract and applied to contexts elsewhere. Theory applied to local contexts and topics or issues was considered the right way to go about. Thus some of us applied functionalist theory. Others applied Marxist theory or its variations. Yet others applied various micro theories in Anthropology or Sociology in their studies. Our research either confirmed or rejected the theoretical assumptions and any hypothesis used. In the early period, the purpose of our research was meant to be to ‘contribute to knowledge’ rather than to the ‘development of the country’<sup>24</sup>. We did not look for an alternative theory.

Social Science, in particular Sociology, was considered a science by classical writers in the field adopting quasi scientific methodology that could eliminate human biases in the study of various topics. In particular, the experimental method was considered so. Thus in the 70s when mass education was being expanded into rural areas by way of building new laboratories and teaching science subjects, this emphasis on Sociology as being a quasi-science gained much credence among the academics, parents and future students who viewed it as a new discipline that could make a contribution to socio-political, development, poverty, equality,

and other discourses. Anthropology itself was seen as a discipline that could shed new light on study topics due to the fieldwork and observation methods –compared to the conventional work of historians, which was seen as based on documentary analysis. Limitations of Sociology and other Social Sciences became problematic only when they were not able to provide credible holistic analyses of the problems that the country was facing or the needed solutions until the appearance of critical Social Science work and a few Marxist-oriented academics in the universities.

Doing fieldwork and collecting empirical data from the field to back up our arguments was consistently required. This was the main distinction of Anthropology-Sociology practice from other disciplines such as History, languages, religious study, or literature. Often, there were concerns expressed by some colleagues about the empiricism that could arise in such work due to the lack of links between theory and collected data or over-emphasis on the data side. So the requirement was to put findings from empirical research -by using questionnaire surveys, interviews, or field work methods- in the context of a selected conceptual/theoretical framework coming from the global North, primarily UK or USA. In Anthropology, in contrast to Sociology, a bottom up approach to theory building was also possible on the basis of ethnographic data collected – though this was not clear to us until much later.

Dominant in terms of theory was the ‘modernisation theory’ and to some extent ‘dependency theory’. The former stipulated that societies in the world

are in a state of transition, and some societies are more advanced in terms of technology, science, education, and culture, specifically those in the Northern/Western metropole. They are more developed, and in the case of Britain, among other factors, protestant ethic contributed to such development. Societies considered as under-developed, mainly those in the global South in Asia, Africa and Latin America, had to follow the same path that more developed countries had followed. Thus for economic development, technology transfer was considered essential together with the capital and know how. Development for under developed countries was a matter of imitating the western model of development with the support of international agencies and Western government prescriptions. The role of Sociologists (including Anthropologists) was to consider how to make development possible in different cultural and value contexts. Culture was seen as an obstacle for development, and Anthropologists and Sociologists were seen as professionals who could understand and explain cultural obstacles as well as the solutions to the Western donors and facilitators of development. Government bureaucrats were seen as incapable of providing this role –even though there were instances when some bureaucrats transformed themselves to be Sociologists without having to go through the process of acquiring formal qualifications.

Compared to the knowledge we received from our Anthropology and Sociology professors and lecturers, intellectual contributions of a different kind started to appear on the scene with the arrival

of Newton Gunasinghe, a Marxist Anthropologist who completed his PhD at the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex in 1979. His articles and seminars on Kandyan Class Relations referring to the capitalist mode of production and traditional forms of land tenure were quite different from the intellectual architecture presented to us by our Anthropology-Sociology teachers who focused on Social Change –encompassing the economic dimension also- due to Westernisation, modernisation, and industrialisation rather than changing class relations in rural society. Gunasinghe, through his presence in the Workers and Peasants Institute (WPI) in Kandy and Seminars presented at Ceylon Studies Seminar at the University, plus some journal articles, as well as personal conversations among academics from a cross section of disciplines made an impact on their thinking. He engaged in education work among peasants and workers including in the tea plantations and urban locations. His approach was appealing, writings were innovative and original, and his intellect was highly articulate though rooted in the Marxist Anthropological forms of thought. Development being promoted by the state and some research centres outside the university was seen as a dependent variety. He advocated us to critically look at the expanding capitalist mode of production and the classes –dominant and subordinate- within this mode as evident in agriculture, commercial plantation sector and elsewhere. He drew our attention to the role of multinational corporations, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank and the need to focus on international relations rather than looking at the country itself. He talked about export-import trade,



merchant class, imperialism, and how colonial practices continued under the guise of neo-colonialism. Even in the tea industry, he talked about how exploitation of labour is prevalent while showing how the surplus created by workers was being appropriated by national and multinational capital. In the agricultural sector, particularly in paddy cultivation, he wrote about various forms of surplus extraction and rent seeking, and how these led to the maintenance of traditional hierarchies and class relations of dominance and subordination<sup>25</sup>.

As we entered the 80s when the neoliberal, 'open' (to the world) economic policies of the UNP government led by J.R. Jayawardena were in full swing and the racial riots of 1983 became a watershed in Sinhala-Tamil relations, we were primarily concerned with the study of society from the prism of development-underdevelopment framework. Economic development of the country was the main socio political discourse, and the role of Sociologists was seen as important to expand the development models and programmes supplemented by foreign capital, knowhow, and involvement. Assisting the government, NGOS, INGOs and multilateral agencies like IMF and the World Bank plus UN agencies were seen as the role of the policy relevant Sociologist from a cultural and social point of view while the Economists looked after the hard core economic side in terms of economic theories, arguments, policies and recommendations. Those who were able to fit into the research programs led by the government, development NGOs, and INGOs were privileged over those who wanted to adopt an underdevelopment approach<sup>26</sup>.

Conflicts between the government and trade unions plus the Tamil insurgents from the north continued during this period making us think and reflect more on the causes of conflict and solutions. Gunasinghe's intellectual inputs coupled with those of other Marxist scholars were helpful to understand and explain what's going on in the country. Focus on class relations and appropriation of surplus produced by the workers was seen as the main priority for Sociologists though the state was bent on making the racial conflicts between Sinhalese and Tamils plus the economic development drive the main focus.

To some extent, the emphasis on class, power and wealth in our thinking was assisted by the availability of scholarships for doctoral studies from the department of Anthropology and Sociology, Monash University in Australia. Thus the PhD research conducted by Siri Hettige, myself and Tudor Silva under the supervision of Rashmi Desai, a Marxist Anthropologist who had obtained his PhD from the London School of Economics, had a great focus on class relations in three villages, two in the Kandyan highlands, and one in the North Central Province. Gunasinghe himself had completed a Masters degree with Desai earlier on how Buddhism emerged in India as a protest religion against Hindu religious hegemony. During and subsequent to our doctoral studies at Monash, there were several other Sri Lankan students from universities or government departments doing their research on topics like slum dwellers in Colombo<sup>27</sup>.

The department of Anthropology & Sociology at Monash University provided a venue for us to engage intellectually

and critically with a range of students from other Asian countries such as Singapore, Bangladesh, Indonesia, South Korea, Malaysia, Fiji and Australia. Department seminars – some of which focused on Sociology topics dealing with urban Sociology – focused on the region, with a special focus on migration, gender, classes, culture and development issues. The presence and writings of Joel Khan, another Marxist Anthropologist, provided much impetus to our work. Michael Stevenson, a lecturer, also provided us informal inputs, as did other professors. Don Miller and Dawn Ryan also taught Anthropology.

Desai, Miller and Khan's contribution to the conduct of research on the economy, class relations, labour relations, culture, and state in the Asian region was instrumental in producing a generation of Anthropologists in the 80s including Siri Hettige, myself and Tudor Silva. My own work for the PhD was completed as an Anthropologist rather than a Sociologist. Unlike at Peradeniya, the difference between the two disciplines was stark in the department at Monash. You either had to be an Anthropologist or a Sociologist there. Sisira Kumara Pinnawala from Peradeniya completed his PhD thesis in 1984 on *Sri Lankans in Melbourne: Factors influencing Patterns of Ethnicity* at the Australian National University.

When 1983 race riots took place in Sri Lanka, the country was in some turmoil, particularly in the North and East provinces. Universities continued producing knowledge and training Social Scientists but unlike a decade or so ago, without the presence of foreign trained intellectuals as a dominant force. Some remained in the system or returned after

higher study in Western capitals, as they had to meet a condition of employment. But the deterioration in teaching and learning standards was all the more evident. University departments were running teaching programs largely by Sinhala or Tamil educated junior lecturers whose second language was English. The close connection that existed between English educated local university intelligentsia – considered as elitist – and academic institutions in Western capitals had been weakened. Lecturers who returned after postgraduate training in Australia or elsewhere were attracted to research and consultancy work outside the university – rather than being motivated to look for alternative knowledge suitable for the country or construct theory. The junior lecturers who had inherited comparative social science knowledge and approaches from their professors continued to teach the same ideas, concepts and theories like parrots without a deeper analytical or comparative understanding of their intricate and subtle meanings or relevance. They were primarily using lecture notes from previous professors and lecturers in teaching. They had difficulty in critically engaging with the received knowledge in the English medium.

The fact that students in universities, largely drawn from rural areas and semi urban centres were by and large illiterate in the English language, combined with the fact that the textbooks and journal articles were in English, made the disconnect between inherited knowledge and their applicability to political, social and cultural contexts starker. For example, many found difficulties in the application of concepts, theories and

approaches from the Western cannon to the study of particular problems, issues or topics in the country in serious research. While earlier Anthropologists like Obeyesekera had produced work of serious scholarship, such work by local Anthropologists and Sociologists became rare in the years to come. In the meantime, the attention and energy of local Anthropologists and Sociologists were being sucked by the national and international organisations conducting a plethora of funded research that was not necessarily focused on theoretical issues in the disciplines. Instead of macro theory, attention was focused in such studies on micro theories. In this context, the doctoral researches by Hettige, Silva, and Gamage at Monash was significant but their overall impact on the country, particularly among the young generation of Sociologists would have been moderate<sup>28</sup>. In time to come, some junior staff started to obtain their higher education from Indian and Chinese universities as a less expensive option<sup>29</sup>.

In this environment, in the mid to late 70s and early 80s, Social Sciences in universities were suffering from a lack of direction –both in theoretical and methodological terms. Usefulness of Anthropological studies in the former sense, i.e. as functionalist studies, though they had some comparative outlook, was being openly questioned. On the other hand, the growing empiricism in Sociological studies-particularly those conducted by Marga Institute- was becoming apparent<sup>30</sup>. Trend setting or landmark studies from the University staff were becoming rare compared to the previous era. Reproduction of knowledge inherited from Western

trained academics by junior lecturers who had no serious training from Western universities was continuing in an atmosphere of increasing nationalism, rejection of western theories and concepts, and growing social and political unrest in the country. The gulf between English educated Anthropologists and Sociologists and those operating in Sinhala or Tamil medium started to grow. The enthusiasm for intensive, sustained, analytical, in-depth study of the disciplines or application in systematic, fundamental research started to wane among the next generations.

Two developments are noteworthy in this context. One is the emergence of the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) and the Social Scientists Association(SSA) both with head quarters in Colombo. The former had an office in Kandy and was led by a reputed Historian from the department of History, K.M.de Silva. Academic staff members from the disciplines of Economics, History, Sinhala language, and Geography including Gerald Peiris, S.W.R de and Vidyamali Samarasinghe, K.N.O Dharmadasa, B.L.Panditharatne, and C.R.de Silva collaborated with the Centre's Conferences, research and publications. In the Colombo office, Neelan Tiurichelvam, Radhika Coomaraswamy, and Reggie Siriwardane were among the contributors. The centre received a large grant from the Ford Foundation as well as government patronage for its work. It started research programs, seminars and conferences, and publications, especially the Ethnic Studies Report, with the involvement of other scholars, policy makers etc. from the region and internationally. In

contrast, the SSA was founded by a group of progressive intellectuals from various disciplines, such as Political Science in 1978. The key founding members were Kumari Jayawardena, Senaka Bandaranayake, Kailsawathy, Newton Gunasinghe, Kathigesu Sivathamby, Leslie Gunawardena, Sunil Bastian, Charles Abeysekera, and P. Devaraj (Jayadeva Uyangoda, personal communication, 2014). It started a journal titled *Pravada* (later Polity) co-edited by Jayadeva Uyangoda and Charles Abeysekera (later Kumari Jayawardena became co-editor), published scholarly books, and conducted seminars. They adopted a critical perspective to the study of Sri Lankan society in terms of topics such as class, gender, state, ethnicity, nationalism and economy. It is believed that the Association, as an NGO, received foreign funding also for its work. Publications and seminars sponsored by the Association provided an important venue for a breed of Social Scientists adopting a critical, anti-neoliberal, pluralistic-democratic, internationalist perspectives to circulate ideas and discourses by such scholars as Quadri Ismail, Ram Manikkalingam, Pradeep Jeganadan, Sunil Bastian, Nira Wickramasinghe, and Sumanasiri Liyanage. SSA publications like *Pravada* included articles by regional Social Scientists also, e.g. Ashis Nandy, Arundati Roy, Amartya Sen, Egbal Ahmed, Partha Chatterji, and Ajaz Ahmad. SSA reached the Sinhalese and Tamil young intelligentsia through vernacular publications, e.g. *Pravada* and *Piravatham*.

Intellectual inputs and knowledge arising from these research centres compensated

for the lack of serious academic publications from the universities in the social sciences. Lecturers and students used these publications in their work. Some of these publications were available in all three languages. In the 80s, the ethnic discourse and models of ethnic power sharing, accommodation and integration started to dominate the political and intellectual engagements over other topics like class, gender or development. Both centres engaged with ideas of pluralism, democracy, self-determination, majority rule, ethnic relations and harmony from critical, constitutional and pluralistic perspectives. Both Centres incorporated a comparative approach in their work-even though the scholars and researchers that each used had a distinctive difference. In general, ICES viewed ethnic conflicts and solutions from the point of the liberal-democratic, majoritarian governance or constitutional perspectives, considering Tamils as an ethnic minority who needs to be accommodated within a unitary state whereas SSA adopted approaches based on greater power sharing between the Centre and Northeast provinces while being critical of the majoritarian democracy<sup>31</sup>. Elements of a Southern Theory can be detected in some of the writings from these two centres. But they are not articulated in one book or one article as such. Authors address specific issues in the country and region from a broad intellectual stance involving Northern Theory and to some extent Southern thought arising from writers located in the global South. This is a point that needs further exploration.

Though there were differences in emphasis, approach, theory and outlook

between the two Centres of research, i.e. ICES and SSA, both were seen by Swabhasa educated junior academics as elitist, and limited to a few academics with privilege and other public intellectuals who were conversant in the English language and conceptual apparatuses in Social Sciences primarily emanating from the global north. To Swabhasa educated junior academic staff, such intellectuals and their work appeared as 'abstract' as they could not understand the subtle conceptual and substantive arguments embodied in their work. They did not have the language and conceptual sophistication or the time to grasp fundamentals or the nuances in the writings. As a result, many opted to reject theory –whether north or south - and write descriptive pieces, which embodied less theory. Articulation of their own research with alien theory was considered a difficult task, other than to join the two in a superficial manner. Students who specialised in various fields were also struggling due to this tendency.

One of the challenges that Sociologists and Anthropologists faced in comparison to other Social Scientists was that whatever we say and write had to be backed by empirical data collected in a systematic way by using Social Science methodology. This applied to Economists also but it was less applicable to Political Scientists. Unless we conducted new research, collected data, analysed and interpreted them in light of what is already known through published literature within and outside the country, what we say did not have much credibility—at least among fellow Sociologists and Anthropologists. This made our task more difficult but it distinguished us from journalists and

others who operated with a degree of speculation. We were required to come up with fact-based findings in relation to various topics to preserve objectivity and we in turn expected our students to do the same. In our doctoral training, this was even more emphasised and required. The contribution of Sociologists and Anthropologists was seen as lying in this sort of work. Textual studies and contextual studies were two different types. Whenever we made a presentation on a given topic, one of the questions those in the audience asked was whether our conclusions were warranted by the procedures we adopted for collecting and analysing data. Methodological rigor was emphasised –though in Anthropology this was translated to ethnographic rigour.

University academics in the field of Anthropology and Sociology became facilitators of transmitting knowledge about theorists, theories, concepts and research conducted elsewhere in the world based on what they learned from their teachers, but poor producers or communicators of indigenous knowledge acceptable to the foreign trained Social Scientists. One set still aspired for recognition from the Western/Northern Centres of learning. Another set looked inward and practiced a different kind of Anthropology and Sociology. In time to come, Sociology was offered as a subject in the external Bachelor of Arts degree and the student audience for the subject expanded. This allowed university lecturers to conduct classes in private teaching institutions-called tutorials- for a fee. University academics were also drawn into various research projects conducted by local NGOS and INGOs for a fee. Thus they developed divided

loyalties between their university role and outside work -spending more time and energy on the latter while conducting internal classes as a routine activity with inherited notes. Majority of them placed high importance on the outside work, as they were lucrative compared to the teaching role and their own research. An academic dependency developed on outside bodies not necessarily dealing with intellectual matters. They were more focused on policy related work. The possibility of original research based on highly articulate and critically insightful frameworks of thought –irrespective of whether they adopted Northern theory - became scarce. A small number of lecturers who wanted to link up with world knowledge and practice in Social Sciences however considered linking with research projects conducted by visiting researchers, outside funding bodies etc. as an avenue to do so<sup>32</sup>.

### **EMERGING THEMES IN RELATION TO THE PRACTICE OF ANTHROPOLOGY & SOCIOLOGY**

From the foregoing discussion and reflections, several themes relating to the practice of Anthropology and Sociology in Sri Lanka stand out.

i. Influence and the dominance of Western (i.e. US and UK) theory, concepts, methods and approaches –epistemology- in the early phase of 1950s and 1960s, in terms of teaching, research, publications as well as the training of lecturing staff. If we follow Goonatilake, anthropologists constructed a ‘fictitious reality’ as far as the Sinhalese Buddhist society and culture are concerned. To Perera and Hettige, the Eurocentric theory,

concepts and methods provided the international standard that local anthropologists and sociologists need to benchmark their work of scholarship.

- ii. Expansion of higher education in the 1970s and 80s by way of teaching and publishing in Sinhala and Tamil languages but leading to a situation of knowledge segmentation among linguistic groups as well as between Sri Lankan academics vs. world social sciences due to weaker English language skills among academic staff and students specialising in Anthropology and Sociology.
- iii. Relative absence of critical intellectual engagement with broader contexts of knowledge production or epistemologies or texts produced globally or locally. Instead the perpetuation of inherited lecture-notes-based teaching, rote learning, production of sub-standard publications, and acceptance of sub-standard scholarship as legitimate and acceptable by the authorities in universities became the vogue. Previously examined comments by Perera, Hettige and Goonatilake explain the context and causes of these conditions.
- iv. Division within the local academic staff into two groups: 1) those who were still able to link up with foreign researchers and academics conducting research using English as the medium of interaction but with no significant interest in Southern Theory, alternative knowledge or critical perspectives. Such knowledge, ideas, and concepts as well as research

themes and priorities acquired through these interactions would have filtered down to their teaching also. They are in the minority. B) Those who were relying on received knowledge and imparting the same to students by using Sinhala or Tamil while rejecting Northern-Western knowledge available in English. Less links with world researchers who use English as the medium of interaction. Ideally, one would expect ideas on Southern Theory or alternative knowledge discussions to emerge from this group, focussed on Buddhist and other traditions in Sri Lanka yet it is doubtful whether this has happened? This group is in the majority<sup>33</sup>.

- v. Reliance on traditions –whether it is Sinhala literary or Sinhala Buddhist, or Tamil, the popular discourses available in Sinhala and Tamil sources – to discover concepts, theories, methods and approaches to the study and explanation of human behaviour, life’s challenges by some Social Scientists who were proficient in Sinhala, Tamil, English and other languages<sup>34</sup>.

These notable patterns and characteristics in the changing nature of practitioner groups of Anthropology and Sociology in Sri Lanka shed light on the Northern and Southern theory discussions that sociologists like Connell have commented on. In particular, they illuminate contextual, institutional, linguistic, and colonial-post colonial factors and influences that are working against the opening up of spaces for intellectual work in relation to producing ‘alternative knowledge’ that is free from Northern epistemology and even

Eastern traditions. Superiority of Euro-centric epistemology and Social Science imposed on colonial subjects, in particular the literati, in the past has given way to a considerable degree to an inward looking trend among Sinhala and Tamil speaking lecturers and professors who seem to not accept the supremacy of Western/Northern Social Science or their status as international standard. However, they are unable to be completely free from the theories, concepts and methods coming from the metropolitan North, as there is no credible alternative.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Ideas about justice, rights, equality etc. continue in life and work together with practices that lead to unequal outcomes and existence. This is a universal experience. But the path one chooses for knowledge production and intellectual work and the type of conceptual frameworks one uses to understand the world and explain it can make a significant difference –irrespective of whether you are an Anthropologist, Sociologist, Marxist Anthropologist or a comparative Sociologist. But one has to engage with knowledge –Northern or Southern- not as dogma but as a reservoir of tools and concepts available for the enlightenment of self and the other to grasp injustices prevailing on the ground and propose humanistic solutions within and beyond historically defined systems of thought and action. As Connell reminds us, our work should be for democratising knowledge and intellectual work. If Northern/Western knowledge has been dominating and marginalising indigenous knowledge and modes of thinking, this has to be exposed and strategies for avoiding

this conceptualised and communicated. Similarly, if Sinhala or Tamil Anthropology and Sociology thinking and practice are marginalising and exclusive, this also has to be exposed and critiqued. We cannot approach knowledge, traditions and practices from a puritanical, abstract sense far removed from the particular contexts in which we are operating.

All three Social Scientists reviewed and quoted here (i.e. Perera, Hettige, Goonatilake) recognise and comment about the changes in the practice of Sociology and Anthropology that have occurred in Sri Lankan universities during the period concerned and the adverse situation existing in terms of teaching, research, publications, intellectual engagement with world knowledge and circuits of discourse. However, Hettige and Perera see this situation as arising from the gap that has been created among linguistically different, segregated Sociology and Anthropology communities. They praise the situation that existed before and even aspire to it by implication. Goonatilake is critical of the situation existed before as, in his view, the practitioners of Sociology and Anthropology constructed 'a false reality' of Sri Lanka and the Sinhala Buddhist tradition. He advocates a different way of anthropologizing Sri Lanka. Either way, Social Science knowledge construction, dissemination and engagement with the audiences within Sri Lanka and outside have become contested and problematic requiring further in-depth examination.

What this paper shows is that as an academic Sociologist/Anthropologist from a small island nation subjected to colonisation, neo-colonisation and now globalisation, my academic

training, thinking and practice have been influenced by a range of people, institutions and thought. It is not a simple fact of a dominating metropolitan theory and methods in Social Sciences and the complete subjugation of the mind to them. We received and responded to various waves of academic knowledge, traditions and practices in comparison to our location at the time, and the dominant idioms of intellectual practice available. Sometimes we were lost in the jargon of academic disciplines due to language deficiencies, and other times we grasped the fundamentals of theory and method to move forward with new thinking and understandings as well as application.

Sri Lankan Sociologists who are employed by universities mainly work as holders of local knowledge and translators to academics, NGOs, multilateral institutions, and other researchers from the global north who come to the country to conduct research or engage in other scholarly activities such as publishing books, articles and edited volumes. In this way, they function as a conduit to access local knowledge by foreign entities. Since this is a dominant activity backed up with substantial monetary and other rewards, these practices tend to condition and determine the intellectual activity and knowledge production by local Sociologists to a great extent. The state sponsored university system struggles to motivate academic staff to develop research agendas appropriate for the country and its future from a holistic sense going beyond consultancy type research. More fundamental issues addressed in this paper and related publications cited here need to be taken into account when developing research



agendas by local Anthropologists and Sociologists.

Connell's argument is that Social Science theory, methods and knowledge produced in the metropolitan, imperialist global north dominate Social Science practice and discourse in the global south –reproducing the same theories, methods and knowledge. Yet in the global South, there is alternative knowledge, produced by local intellectuals, Social Scientists that are not given the same status in the global Social Science world because of the existing hierarchy of knowledge production and dissemination controlled by the established publishing industry and perpetuated by Social Scientists from the South who obtain their qualifications from higher education institutions in the North. This hampers the development of truly Southern Social Science. In the Sri Lankan case however, the paper showed that there are local reasons for the intellectual impoverishment in universities regarding the practice of Sociology and Anthropology. Greater divergences between knowledge in English vs. local languages and segmentation of knowledge into linguistic groups are two examples. These reasons are paramount in preventing a Southern theory from emerging from the work of Social Scientists and Anthropologists from the south.

Instead of a flawed and biased Anthropology with Eurocentric biases in perspective, concepts and theories, Goonatilake suggests that Anthropologists from former colonies like Sri Lanka ought to adopt Anthropology suitable to the decolonized condition. Goonatilake refers specifically to the studies conducted by various

Anthropologists trained in Western epistemological contexts on Sinhalese Buddhism. His argument is that “the best way to view the Sinhalese Buddhist condition would have been as an East-West Civilizational dialogue through which both parties shed their own ethnocentricities” (2001, p. 265-266). In such an approach, “Buddhism could become a tool for anthropological exploration not just a subject of exploration” (2001, p.267). He however stops short of claiming that there is Buddhist Anthropology or a Social Science. What is present in Sri Lanka is a Buddhist epistemology.

My view is that Sri Lankan Anthropologists and Sociologists ought to look at their own histories including oral histories, literature, art, music, religions, Social Sciences as well as Asian –in particular South Asian- intellectual traditions in order to identify significant currents of thought, scholarship, explanations of human behaviour, foundations of social systems, cultural remedies for co-existence and continuity, as well as ways of dealing with inequality, injustice, discrimination and human suffering. Through such exercise, they should try to develop a more humanistic set of concepts, theories and even research methods that can function as a counter to the Western/ Northern epistemology and Social Sciences. This is one option available to the practitioner community of Sociology and Anthropology. But in this process, there is no reason to reject or disregard Western/Northern epistemologies. To do so is anti-intellectual. What is necessary is to engage with them analytically.

If such an epistemology that informs Sociology and Anthropology –or a way of systematically studying society, people

and culture can be re-constructed in Sinhala and Tamil but with cross-cutting conversations among segregated academic communities, then the products of such work can be translated into English and other world languages for wider access, comment and critique.

Criticising Westerners (or for that matter Sri Lankans who adopted Western approaches) who studied Sri Lanka alone is not sufficient, though it is a necessary task for building a Southern Theory. We have to move to the next step of active analysis and scholarship of main thought patterns in the local traditions and discourses. For example, we can examine the 'egalitarianism' embodied in religious traditions and the way of dealing with perennial problems that humans face. Critical intellectual perspectives within such traditions can also be identified and elucidated<sup>35</sup>. Alternative thinking contained in Asian/Sri Lankan traditions –both religious and intellectual– could thus be utilised to build a Southern Theory applicable to the global South.

Critical examination and assessment of the 'Sociological enterprise' of Hettige and the 'Social matrix' mentioned by Goonatilake are important tasks in this regard. Development itself needs critical examination and commentary<sup>36</sup>. Material development without intellectual engagement on alternative possibilities is a flawed approach to take. Likewise, ideology, for instance nationalism, is not a replacement for Social Science knowledge. We have already seen the damage nationalism has done to the Sri Lankan Sociology practice. Even if we look at the Sinhala Buddhist or Hindu-Tamil tradition for answers to the growing provincialism and linguistic

segregation in Sociology practice as well as anti-intellectualism in the teaching of Sociology and Anthropology, it should not be on the basis of a superficial rejection of "all that is Western/Northern". In this regard, a comment made by Malalgoda recently is useful.

As regards my own work, I try to do the best I can with whatever materials and tools that are available to me and which I am capable of handling. In the choice of materials and tools, what matters to me is whether they are suitable for the task at hand, and not where they come from. In relation to the pursuit of knowledge, I can see no reason why we should either accept or reject anything solely on the basis of its place of origin. In choosing to work mainly on Sri Lanka rather than on some other place, naturally I hope to make some contribution to Sri Lanka studies. At the same time, in writing in English rather than Sinhala, I also expect to reach - and open my work to the critical scrutiny of - a wider international audience (personal communication, September 2014).

## NOTES

1. In this paper Anthropology refers to social and cultural Anthropology. For a reflective and critical account of the development of Anthropology and Sociology in Sri Lanka, see Perera (2014).
2. Connell uses Southern Theory to draw attention to 'periphery-centre relations in the realm of knowledge (and) to emphasise "relations – authority, exclusion and inclusion, hegemony, partnership, sponsorship, appropriation – between intellectuals and institutions in the metropole and those in the world periphery" (2007, p. viii-ix).
3. For example, incorporation of Sociology into professionally oriented faculties of Medicine, Agriculture, Allied Health Sciences and even the National Institute of Social Development and Buddhist and Pali University as one anonymous referee of this paper pointed out.
4. He further points out that Sri Lankan "universities are no longer in the forefront of

initiating or publishing cutting-edge, path-breaking or creative research; neither is this the preserve of the civil society sector” (Perera 2005, p. 232 cited in 2014, p. 15). In this situation, “serious research on contemporary Sri Lanka is the activity of individuals, be they based in the country or beyond” (Perera 2005, p. 232 cited in 2014, p. 15).

5. I was a student between 1968-1972 and an Assistant lecturer to lecturer and then senior lecturer in the Department of Sociology, University of Peradeniya (1975-1986).

6. To obtain details of the way Anthropology and Sociology teaching started and evolved in other departments in the country see Perera 2014.

7. This idea was discussed in discussions held at the Comparative and International Education Research Network, School of Education, University of New England, Armidale, Australia.

8. Ibid.

9. Many of their works were published in the journal of the Royal Asiatic Society - Ceylon and other outlets.

10. Jayasuriya’s service in the department was between 1955-1967. From 1957-60 he resided in UK for his PhD (personal communication, October 2014). He initiated the Department of Sociology, University of Colombo in 1969 and left for Australia in 1971 (Perera, 2014, p. 11-12).

11. Malalgoda specialized in Sociology at the University of Peradeniya between 1960-64 after doing History, Geography and Economics for GAQ. His employment at Peradeniya was between 1968-73 (he was on leave during academic year 1969-70 in order to complete graduate studies). His graduate study at Oxford University was between 1965-70 but he took leave in the academic year 1968-69 to take up an appointment at Peradeniya (personal communication, October 2014).

12. Perera (2014) describes in some detail the establishment and development of other sociology departments in Colombo.

13. According to him, “Western religions are revealed systems, presumed to be revealed by a higher power, ‘God’. Buddhism is, at least partly, experiential and experimental, built on individual perceptions and experiences, not necessarily on another’s unverified word of his experience” (Goonatilake 2001, p. 16).

14. According to him, we must recognize that “Sri Lanka is not the isolated primitive village, the classical hunting ground of anthropologists. It is

a rich civilizational entity with a long intellectual and political history, which has been at the crossroad of major civilizations for well more than two thousand years” (p. 28).

15. Though I was a student and then an academic staff member of the Department of Sociology, University of Peradeniya starting from September 1968 until my departure in 1986 for Australia, there was no informative history of the department available to gain knowledge about the time before my encounter with the department.

16. Subjects studied included principles of social structure, social administration, comparative social institutions, theories and methods of Sociology, Criminology and Penology, the culture and social organization of South East Asia, statistical methods, and Social Anthropology.

17. Sri Lanka was colonized by the Portuguese, the Dutch, and British.

18. Tamil medium was introduced much later.

19. For more information about Obeysekera’s study and work history, see ‘Dear President Rajapaksa, Bring Back the Universities to its Early Glory’, Colombo Telegraph, May 2, 2014 (An extract from the book ‘Letters to Presidents’ by Sri Lankan and US alumni of the US-Sri Lanka Fulbright Commission). He graduated from the University of Ceylon in 1955 with an English degree, and then studied at the Department of Anthropology, University of Washington, Seattle for his PhD-completing it in 1964. He was the Chair of the Department of Sociology, University of Peradeniya since 1968 and resigned in 1972 to accept a position at the University of California, San Diego. Eight years later he moved to Princeton University. Edmond Leach was a role model for him and E.F.C. Ludowyk a teacher and mentor. When he joined the department at Peradeniya, there was S. J. Tambiah, Ralph Pieris and Laksiri Jayasuriya, all young PhD scholars. He describes the time of his arrival at Peradeniya as a “glorious epoch in our university’s history when a galaxy of intellectuals had arrived, or were soon to arrive, with PhDs from major universities to make Peradeniya one of the best, if not the very best in the region” (Obeysekera 2014).

20. But this did not mean that my lecturers and professors disregarded non-Western knowledge completely. In their own academic research and readings they accessed and acquired nonwestern knowledge pertaining to the specific topics under study, e.g. Peasant societies in Asia, Africa or Asian mode of production, or rituals in Asia and Africa or other tribal societies.

21. During my doctoral studies at Monash University however, my colleagues used anthropological methods to study urban issues, e.g. ethnographic method.

22. After a long period of absence, *Sanskriti* has been revived and is now being published in Sinhala.

23. Obeyesekera, Malalgoda, Tissa Fernando, and H. L. Seneviratne left the country for USA, New Zealand, Canada, and USA respectively. Ralph Pieris remained in the country as a consultant to the government. Namika Raby who was a new lecturer also left for USA.

24. This was a point of contention between the earlier generation of academic staff in Anthropology and Sociology (except Ralph Pieris) and those who came next such as Sunimal Fernando. In time to come with the work of Marga Institute etc. the latter view gained more acceptance in the Sociology community. It was felt the study of society for the sake of study was not the right thing to do. Controlled social change should be the aim.

25. Among his publications were (1975) Production Relations and Classes in a Kandyan Village. *Modern Ceylon Studies*. 6(2), pp. 116-139; (1979) Agrarian Relations in the Kandyan Countryside in relation to the Concept of Extreme Social Disintegration. *Social Science Review*. No. 1. Colombo: Social Scientists Association; (1986) Open Economic Policy and Peasant Production. *Upanathi, Journal of the Sri Lanka Association of Economists*. 2(1), pp. 37-67.

26. The underdevelopment approach viewed poverty conditions existing in society as a result of the expanding global economy based on capitalism, in particular expropriation of surplus produced in the process of production, manufacturing and exchange. Labour had a crucial role to play in producing surplus capital.

27. These included Lakmalathi Panditharatne's PhD thesis *Marsh Dwellers of Colombo: An Ethnography of Squatter Settlement* (1993); Suji Colomage's Masters thesis *Yonakawatta and its people: An Ethnography of an Urban Slum in Colombo* (1985); and Michelle Forster's PhD thesis *Wealth Without Power: An Ethnographic Account of the Elite Women of Sri Lanka* (1992). Gamini Wickramasinghe had completed his Masters in Anthropology before Silva, Hettige and myself.

28. Though we adopted critical perspectives in our study of the three locations, still they were focused on villages as the basis for generating

knowledge. In my thesis, I debunked the 'village studies' method and adopted a class analysis, as did Hettige and Silva. See Gamage, S. (1989). *Expression of Class and Class Consciousness in Sri Lanka: the study of a rural settlement in Kandy*. Monash; Silva, K.T. (1982). *Caste, Class and Capitalist Transformation in Highland Sri Lanka: Continuity and Change in a Low Caste Village*. Monash; Hettige, S.T. (1980). *Wealth, Power and Prestige: Emerging Patterns of Social Inequality in a Sinhalese Village in North-Central Sri Lanka*. Monash.

29. A look at the web pages of the academic staff in the Departments of Sociology in Sri Lankan universities will confirm this. What impact such training has had on teaching and research is yet to be ascertained. Interestingly, such departments are designated as Sociology departments rather than Anthropology departments.

30. However, research conducted by such Institutes was considered as applied research or policy relevant research though they were based on positivist methodology.

31. For more information on their publications, access libraries maintained by these two entities. They are accessible through the Internet.

32. In recent times, the World Bank and other funding bodies have provided scholarships for university academic staff to obtain postgraduate qualifications from Northern-Western universities through grants given to the higher education ministry, e.g. IRAQ program

33. One could examine whether there is an element within this group that draws from Indian, Chinese and even Japanese knowledge and scholarship, inspired by their postgraduate experience and qualifications from these countries.

34. For example, see Dissanayake, W. (2005). *Enabling Traditions: Four Sinhala Cultural Intellectuals*. Boralesgamuwa: Visidunu Publications.

35. Here one could examine Sinhala and Tamil literary work, historical work, and artistic productions also.

36. As an example, see Dissanayake, W. (2014). Development and Communication in Sri Lanka: A Buddhist Approach. In Asanthe, M. K., Y. Mike, & J. Yin (Eds.) *The global intercultural communication reader* (pp. 467-479). New York: Routledge.

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