

A GROWING YOUNG SHANTY SETTLEMENT IN SUBURBAN COLOMBO - A CASE STUDY

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During the past twenty years suburban land of Colombo city has been utilized much more intensively than ever before. Heavy commercialization in the core area of Colombo city, together with its related adverse consequence such as air pollution, noise pollution, skyrocketing land values, congestion, heavy traffic, high competition for land etc. made city living unpleasant. As a result the well-to-do class moved into the suburban areas where there was a much more pleasant living environment with more space, more greenery etc. at affordable prices thus generating the process of

suburbanization around Colombo city. Due to the high demand for land in these 'new' areas, a number of changes occurred. Land prices rose, subdivision of land set in, existing building structures became more intensively utilized with annexes and rooms being rented out and parts of buildings being converted into non-residential purposes, more commercial establishments being set-up to meet the needs of the increased population and so on. In addition the buildings rented out previously were requested back by owners or tenants were requested to pay higher rents, thus making the situation difficult for tenants. As a result the not-so-well-to-do class who were most badly hit by this situation were forced out of their residences. Therefore they were left homeless or

they were forced to seek solutions such as encroaching nearby unused land.

The shanty settlement under consideration had its origin in a similar way. Majority of the present shanty dwellers had been living in rented houses in nearby areas prior to encroaching the area they are occupying now.

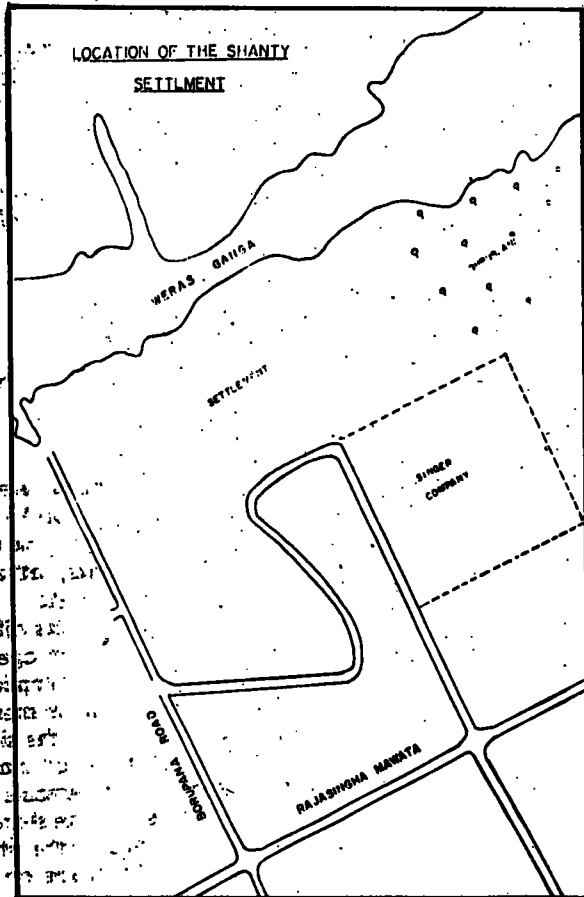
Origin of the Settlement

The origin of the settlement is given here as described by the "leader" of the settlement who claims to be its "founder".

In 1973 while he was only a boy of seventeen years, the owner of the land on which the settlement stands now, had requested him to look after the land and he had agreed. Since his father - a farmer - lived in an adjacent plot of land he could do without much difficulty. At that time, the area had been covered with shrubs, infested with serpents and it had been a meeting place for robbers. According to the leader, robbers from Piliyandala, which is just across the Weras Ganga, used to cross the river and engage in illegal activities in the shrubland, bringing numerous hardships to people of nearby areas. Due to the underworld activities that went on in the shrubland, the well-to-do class in nearby areas became suspicious of the poor families living in the area and this situation gave rise to 'friction' between the 'haves' and 'have-nots'. This friction has gradually gathered momentum to the level of a revengeful force.

Rapid development of contemporary shanty settlements in not so far away Telawala and in Air Port Road, Ratmalana provided an incentive for the leader to originate a shanty settlement himself. In 1982 the leader, having built a shanty for himself, came to live in the area. A few of his friends followed suit.

The leader's intention was to give land to the landless poor and originate a 'village' in the area. Therefore he sent messages to friends requesting them to come or send people to occupy the land. There had been times when he himself had gone in search of poor people to persuade them to settle down in this 'village'. In the meantime people from nearby areas having seen the shrubland being cut down for house construction, joined in the process. News of a 'village' being set up on en-



Location of the Settlement

The settlement which covers an area of about 4.5 acres is located behind the premises of the Singer Company, Ratmalana. It spreads upto the Weras Ganga, which is the eastern boundary of the settlement. Borupana Road, which runs from Galle Road upto about the

Weras Ganga forms the northern boundary while the uncleared shrubland on the bank of the Weras Ganga forms the southern boundary. Part of the western boundary is the Singer Company, the other part being a narrow road running northward from the Singer Company to join the Borupana Road.

croached land also spread through hearsay. By April 1988 there were sixty seven settled families in the area and several other houses were being built.

The settlement has already taken roots during a period of five years. A small Buddhist temple has been built with two resident priests. A 'Dayaka Sabha' has been organized among the shanty dwellers for the upliftment of the temple. Alms for the priests are given daily by residents. Pathways have been built leading to houses. Marshy land has been reclaimed with waste rubber from a nearby industry and the name - Samagipura - has been given to the settlement by its residents.

The Process of Development of the Settlement

The process of development of the settlement has taken place due to three means of communication, viz. on seeing, through hearsay and on transaction. Many who were interviewed stated that on seeing the shrubland being cleared for house construction, they too joined in the activity. After deciding on a suitable plot, they demarcated the plot, cleared it and built the house during their free time depending on their financial situation. Since 90 percent of the residents were from nearby areas such as Egodahena, Angulana, Moratuwa and Borupana, they engaged in house construction while residing in their previous houses. Others who did not have a nearby house to "operate from", built a temporary hut within the demarcated area and built their "permanent" houses as and when money became available. The set of people who came to the settlement through hearsay from friends, relatives, neighbours etc. were either from nearby or from far away places. On the other hand families who had "purchased" the houses formed a separate group. They bought houses from those who built the houses and did not want them later. There was still another group of dwellers who built houses in the settlement, but kept them closed. The owners themselves lived outside the settlement. According to neighbours, these owners "visited" their houses about once a month, to see whether everything was in order.

Labour for building of houses was supplied mostly by friends, relatives and family members, for whom no cash payment was given, instead food was supplied

during helping periods. However 29 percent of the families interviewed had used hired labour which was used mostly to fill the earth rather than to build the house as the area was marshy. Time taken to build a house varied from three days to three months - the main reasons for the difference being the financial situation of the builder and the nearness of the previous residence to the settlement. Favourable financial conditions and nearness to settlement meant less time in construction and vice versa.

With regard to the mode of transport 33 percent, 22 percent and 12 percent of the dwellers had come on foot, by bus and by hired vehicles respectively while others had come by cart, bicycle, train, friends' vehicles etc. to settle in the area. Sixty two percent of the householders came with their families while 26 percent recorded that they came with wives. There were instances where the couple came first and the children were brought down later.

Of the total number (42) of households interviewed in the settlement, thirty five were built during the period 1980-1987 while three were built in 1970's and only one was built in 1960's. Out of the recently built 35 shanties, 30 were built during the past five years (1983-1988) which fact indicates that it is a growing young settlement. The number of shanties (i.e. 9) under construction by April 1988 is also an indication of its continuing development.

Profile of Shanty Dwellers

The age structure of householders reveal that 62 percent of the dwellers are in the age group of 20-40 years while 21 percent fall within the age group 41-50 years. Only 17 percent are over 50 years which facts show that the householders are young when considered on an overall basis. Educational background of householders was quite low with 38 percent of the householders having obtained formal education upto Grade 6 and Grade 8 respectively. Seven percent of the householders have never had formal education. Only 22 percent of the householders have studied upto Grade 10. No householder has obtained formal education beyond Grade 10 level. As for permanency in jobs, only 10 percent of the householders interviewed had permanent jobs while 50 percent were engaged in part time jobs such as labourers, shoe-repairers, road-workers etc. Thirty eight percent were retired personnel from government/private sector

jobs. Two percent did not reveal their occupation.

Income of householders varied from Rs.200/- per month to Rs.2,000/- per month. Fifty five percent of the householders recorded as earning less than Rs.1,000/- per month while 21 percent earned wages in the range of Rs.1,000/- to Rs.2,000/- per month. Twenty four percent of householders did not answer the question on income. With regard to the ethnic composition of the householders, 86 percent were Sinhalese while 7 percent, 5 percent and 2 percent were Tamil, Malay and Muslims respectively. Ninety percent of householders were Buddhists while 7.1 percent and 2.4 percent were Hindus and Muslims respectively. Ninety eight percent of the householders were married.

It was interesting to note that 90.5 percent of the households had five or less number of members, residing. Seven percent of the households had members between 6-10 in number and 2.4 percent of the households had more than 10 members residing. Therefore it could be concluded on a general basis, that occupancy ratio was relatively low in the settlement. It was also evident that the settlement consisted of small families with 76 percent of families having five or less number of children

Of the children in the settlement 84.6 percent were below 20 years of age. Thirty three percent of the children fell within the age group 1-5 years while 6.4 percent were below one year which facts show that a considerable proportion were very young children.

Ten percent of the population in the settlement belong to the 'other' category, which means persons other than members of the nuclear family. All who fall into this category were found to be relatives of either the householder or his wife.

Housing Conditions of Dwellers

The houses consisted mainly of two parts. The "main part" which was used as the bedroom/sitting room/dining room/verandah and the kitchen which is usually smaller in size than the "main part". The houses were of varying sizes. Sixty eight percent of them were of floor areas less than 300 sq.ft. while 6 percent belonged to the 300-500 sq.ft. category. Ten percent were bigger than 500 sq.ft. in floor area. All houses were

built with planks. Fifty seven percent and 38 percent of the houses had roofs of zinc sheets and of cadjan respectively. Only 43 percent of the houses had cemented floors, others had bare soil or clay/cowdung applied. Since the structures were built on marshy land, those without cemented floors caused problems during rainy seasons. For continued rain even for a short time the area got flooded about one foot deep. Several dwellers remarked that cooking is done on empty barrels kept inside houses on flooded days. Children are also kept on empty barrels on such days to save them from dampness and ill-health. Leeches are a menace during rainy days. In many houses the rains beat into the house through gaps between wall-planks. Ventilation is absolutely inadequate for healthy living. Lighting is also inadequate which factors combinedly cause rapid breeding of germs. Some householders had used for their roofs sheets made by crushing discarded barrels from nearby industries. Wooden bars, beams, rafters etc. necessary for house construction were obtained mostly from the nearby shrubland.

Living Conditions of Dwellers

Living conditions of a person depends mainly on his income. As shown before 55 percent of the householders earn less than Rs.1,000/- per month and hence their living conditions are invariably below subsistence level. Several dwellers remarked that starvation is not an unusual occurrence. According to figures provided by respondents, 90 percent of their earnings is spent on food and only 10 percent spent on other things. However it should be pointed out that the information given regarding income and monies spent on food, fuel, medicine etc. is not reliable. For instance, several respondents gave higher figures for expenses on food, fuel etc. than their monthly incomes. The reason for this could be that they are not familiar with figures or that there are other sources of income which they are reluctant to reveal. Hence it is difficult to draw conclusions on this aspect.

Availability of adequate space is necessary for healthy living. Children should have enough space to play, or a common place for such activities should be available. The small garden surrounding the house is not at all adequate for the children to play. Since wells are dug in these small gardens and kept unprotected, they cause fatal accidents. Two

years ago, a two year old child had died after falling into such a well while playing. Since a number of wells are still kept unprotected, repetition of such occurrences can not be ruled out completely. As for the space within houses, adequate space should be available for different household activities such as cooking, sleeping, resting etc. However, this was not found in the settlement. Congestion was seen in those households occupied by families who were in rented houses previously. Because they were more or less 'stabilized' with a number of household items such as cupboards, almirahs, beds etc. the space occupied by them was comparatively large. On the other hand, those who settled down in the area soon after marriage did not encounter this problem of congestion due mainly to the fact that they did not own many household items.

Lack of drinking water in the settlement has caused numerous hardships to dwellers. No family in the settlement consumes water from wells dug in the home garden since it is polluted. Drinking water is brought from wells in nearby 'bungalows' or from roadside pipes, which are about ¼ mile away from the settlement. A few houses located along the "boundary road" use the wells of "bungalows" situated in the immediate neighbourhood. Dwellers have been requested not to take water from wells in the bungalows as they "muddy" the gardens. It is normally the womenfolk or the children who bring water from these far away places. The well water from dwellers' home gardens are used for cooking and washing. The unpleasant odour and the yellowish colour of the water made washing of clothes useless at times. The salinity of water made clothes wear out soon, causing further problems to the dweller. All householders complained that water has got polluted due to industrial liquid waste being disposed in the surrounding marshy land, by nearby industries. The writer was shown a bottle of well-water which was full of mosquito larvae and with an unpleasant odour. The Weras Ganga, to which the industrial liquid waste is supposed to be disposed of, is more or less stagnant thus enhancing the process of mosquito breeding and depletion of fauna and flora. Adults and children are deprived of bathing in the river as skin eruption is caused by bathing there. Therefore males usually go to a not so far away well, road side pipe or to the sea for bathing. Females and children are sometimes forced to use the

unpleasant well-water in home gardens for bathing. According to dwellers, the mosquito menace in the area goes beyond tolerable limits.

As for toilet facilities in the shanties, 40 percent of the houses were without toilets and residents use a neighbour's toilet or the nearby shrubland. Even the few available toilets in the settlement were not constructed according to accepted public health standards. For instance barrels dug into the earth were used as toilet pits. Young children were seen defecating in the home garden itself.

As dwellers are hygienecally poor, they are more exposed to diseases like fever, influenza, diarrhoeal diseases, skin ailments, rheumatic disorders, influenza and other lung diseases. Often they complain of maculo-papular rashes such as Scabies, specially after bathing in the river - Weras Ganga. It is possible that usage of unboiled water for consumption (55 percent in this case), non usage of soap as well as inadequate intake of proteins, carbohydrates and other essential nutrients, are the main factors contributing to the above mentioned diseases.

As for recreation, 45 percent, 33 percent, 31 percent and 24 percent of the householders stated spending their leisure time as listening to radio, talking to friends, reading and watching television respectively. It should be pointed out here that although residents in the settlement do not have televisions for themselves, it is the televisions in roadside showcases or in shops/boutiques that are watched. Some respondents own radio sets operated with batteries. 10 percent and 12 percent of respondents answered the question on spending leisure time as taking liquor with friends and playing outdoor games respectively. Since going to the cinema is expensive, it claimed a very low percentage (2 percent). Fair number of householders said that they attend to household matters or look after young children during their leisure times. It should be mentioned here that, comparatively, the womenfolk do not engage in recreational activities much, may be for lack of time and money. In fact, one lady cried when the question on recreation was put to her, and said that however much she craves to go to the cinema, the low financial situation prevents her. The most popular way of recreation observed for womenfolk, was "talking to friends/neighbours" during

their leisure time. Visits to relatives/ 'friends' places was also comparatively lower than in the case of males. It was strange to note that small children do not get together to play as a group, very likely for lack of adequate space. The social stratum within the settlement too would have prevented the children from getting together due to parental influence.

Social Fabric of the Settlement

The social structure within the settlement apparently consisted of two strata, viz. the poor and the rich on a relative basis. It is possible that families who occupied rented houses before coming to the settlement or families of householders with permanent jobs formed the upper social stratum in the settlement. The recently married couples or householders with part time jobs formed the lower stratum.

It was interesting to note that 69 percent of the respondents revealed their "satisfaction" in living in the settlement. The probable reason for the situation being the attitude of "helping each other" prevalent in the settlement. Number of respondents mentioned that "we the poor should help the poor". Though not much financially, help was forthcoming in kind and/or in action. The fact that neighbours helped in constructing houses of new-comers to the settlement, free of charge, confirms their statement.

The Buddhist temple set up recently in the settlement, has become instrumental in bringing about unity among dwellers. After the temple was established, a 'Dayaka Sabha' has been set up among dwellers which has caused residents to work as a group. The 'Shramadana' programmes held to construct the temple, to lay roads etc. and the alms provided to the temple in rotation by residents also show the close knitting of the social fabric within the settlement. Unity among dwellers was a salient feature. It was substantiated by the fact that some dwellers were weaving cadjan for the temple and some others were engaged in constructing a Wesak Pandal/Lantern unitedly when the writer visited the settlement.

It was noted that some householders did not have much connection with their parental family members, relatives or friends while others did show enthu-

siasm in maintaining some. Some reluctance was shown by some householders when questioned on the parental family background. However some of the respondents who keenly maintain social connections are visited by friends and relatives from far away places like Galle, Kataragama, Kandy, Anuradhapura, Bibile, Matara, Tissamaharama, Bandara-wela and Jaffna. It was revealed that dwellers visit friends who live only in nearby areas like Nugegoda, Ratmalana, Moratuwa etc. due mainly to heavy travelling expenses otherwise, but some did visit relatives who live hundreds of miles away at least once a year. Another group of respondents preferred maintaining social connections only with friends.

Future of the Settlement

The settlement is young in age with 175 people living on it. There is still more shrubland around it which can be cleared and populated. Hence more people are bound to migrate in increasing the present day population. Since there are children of marriageable age and since there is a preference among teenagers to settle down in the settlement after marriage (which has already taken place in some cases) an increase in population is to be expected. With increased population present day problems are sure to get aggravated causing further problems to dwellers as well as to authorities. The settlement therefore can be considered as a "budding problem". In other words, this can be considered a situation where future problems could be prevented if proper measures are taken without delay.

Possible Corrective Measures

Educating the females is one sure way of alleviating some of the possible problematic issues of the settlement. The basic hygienic requirements such as boiling drinking water, the importance of sewage disposal, washing with soap after using the toilets, keeping children clean etc. can be inculcated among females in the settlement through voluntary social service organizations. Educating them in family planning techniques and child care too could reap favourable results in the long run. Since female labour is wasted with no proper training on hand, they could be incorporated into such training programmes as sewing, flowermaking, knitting, sea-shell craft, batik making etc. offered by various social service organizations.

Young minds can be directed on healthy

lines if a pre-school is set-up for the children in the settlement. The writer observed that due mainly to ignorance of parents, young minds are being treated harshly which situation can cause irreparable damage in the future. The teenagers too could be provided with suitable training to join in the process of development. The young dwellers are an energetic group who comprise the majority of the population and they could be made use of in various ways in the process of uplifting living conditions of the dwellers. In other words, potential labour found within the settlement could be harnessed for the betterment of the dwellers.

Lack of a playground for children as well as adults poses a drawback in the settlement. The shrubland situated south of the settlement could, with permission of the local authorities, be cleaned for use as a playing field, through "Shramadana" programmes.

Giving incentives and guiding residents to organize themselves more to work jointly in religious activities, sports, "Shramadana" programmes etc. could also be beneficial to the dwellers. Pressing issues such as tenure of land, provision of pipe-borne water to the settlement, prevention of dumping urban and industrial waste in nearby areas, construction of toilets, controlling floods etc. could be taken up with the appropriate authorities if strong organization is established among dwellers.

It was heartening to note the innate moral goodness of these shanty dwellers. The generosity, hospitality and the welcome extended to the writer and her assistants during their visit to the settlement did made the writer wonder why some hold an attitude of suspicion and hostility towards shanty dwellers in general. When the dwellers were informed of the academic purpose of the writer's visit to the settlement, most of them were eager to cooperate. This reveals that they hold education in high esteem though it is a far away dream for themselves. The manner in which dwellers had found solutions to their problems - though short term - such as reclaiming marshyland with rubber waste and making zinc sheets for roofing by crushing discarded barrels, does reveal their ingenuity, resourcefulness and enterprising nature. Therefore it is evident that if an impetus is given from "outside" to help them help themselves, their quality of life could be greatly improved. One could even explore possibilities of getting foreign assistance from organizations which are inclined to helping the poorest of the poor to provide the basic amenities to this neglected shanty settlement which our survey reveals contained much human potential.