

JAN HESSELBERG

THE FUTURE OF RURAL CRAFTS

The case of Puwakdandawa, a craft village in southern Sri Lanka

Introduction

The present case concerns a village in the extreme south of Sri Lanka consisting of 374 households, of which nearly all are occupied in various crafts. This craft village will be called Puwakdandawa. The reasons for treating this area as one village, even if it comprises parts of different administrative units, are that functionally and according to people's perception it can be regarded as one. This is not to say that there is not a number of barriers to internal interaction - most people, however, regard the village to exist when speaking to an outsider.

The following notes represent some aspects of a more extensive report, entitled "The future of rural artisans: the case of Puwakdandawa, a craft village in Hambantota District, Sri Lanka" (Hesselberg, 1980). The intention in that report is to provide a broad presentation of the existing crafts, their recent history and future prospects.

A number of words are used to denote the simple form of production carried out at home (or in a shed beside the dwelling house), and turning out cheap goods of often inferior quality, which is found in many industrializing (developing) countries today. Such production is variously called: crafts, handicrafts, village crafts and cottage industries. The people involved in such production are named craftsmen and -women or artisans. Each kind of occupation of course has its own name, for instance, pottery and potter. Here the words craft or artisan production and artisan will be used. The reason for not using the more common designation cottage industry, is because the word industry is misleading. Cottage industry should rather be used to denote what is usually implied by small-scale enterprise/pro-

duction, being different from crafts first and foremost in the use of non-manual, often quite modern, machinery. Craft (artisan production) is then defined as including all activities that produce or modify objects by manual means, with or without the use of mechanical aids such as looms or potter's wheels.

An artisan is a workman or -woman of a particular craft possessing a special skill. Artisan production has several characteristics distinguishing it from small-scale and other forms of production: 1. Traditional crafts are often associated with art. This is no longer so. The products made today are usually simple and functional and they are not given any extra, unnecessary finish. 2. In most human societies throughout history, crafts have been organized primarily on the basis of sexual division of labour: Which crafts were carried out by men and which by women have varied from place to place. For instance, men were potters in Europe, India and Central Africa and women in West Africa and Latin America. 3. Crafts were and are structured in the family unit. Usually only family members are employed, there is little or no wage labour. In South Asia the crafts are organized in castes. In many other societies castelike family organization exists among artisans. The crafts are hereditary. Inter-marriage in one craft is commonly culturally prescribed, making for a complex kin unit. Particularly in towns, guilds were established in earlier times. Today artisans may be organized in cooperatives according to their own or governmental initiative. 4. The artisans settled near the raw materials or the market. In certain areas craft villages developed. Today raw materials are still usually procured locally and the market seldom extends beyond the local area. 5. A single individual carries on all the processes of production from gathering the raw materials to the finishing of the article. The sale of the article may either be undertaken by the producer, a local or outside trader visiting the producer, or today also by a local cooperative. The artisan is a typical self-employed worker. 6. Production is carried out with simple hand-driven techniques, and is confined to the dwelling or garden space. 7. Earlier the crafts were normally part-time occupations, most artisans practising agriculture as well. Today this has changed in many places. Some artisans now try to survive by doing more than one type of craft, for instance combining carpentry and blacksmithing. The artisans, however, still have the same uncertain and highly seasonal incomes.

Theoretical perspective

One consequence of the process of economic growth, of improved infrastructure and enlarged markets, is an increasing concentration of non-farm activities in towns and cities. Another is a growing specialization towards a full monetized exchange economy. At the same time household production for own use is declining. The process is a gradual one in which households become increasingly dependent upon market exchanges for their income as well as for goods and services. The rise in both agricultural productivity and in incomes, and the corresponding increased demands for non-farm goods and services has led to a more complex pattern of employment for household members, and gradually to the disappearance of artisans.

This structural change from rural-agricultural to urban-industrial economies is a universal phenomenon. In several industrializing countries one finds, however, dispersed crafts or pockets of different kinds of crafts in and outside of villages and towns in rural areas. It is found, but to a lesser extent, also in major cities. One possible interpretation of the existence of these artisans is that they are "survivors" of an earlier type of society, and consequently are about to disappear. Only in rare exceptions is there a place for traditional crafts in industrial societies. When the artisans were or are forced out of work by competition from modern technology, they had or have to move to towns and cities. The movement to cities gives jobs based on scientific management but there is no use for the artisan's skill, so he loses it. This can be called the conventional view.

Another way of looking at the matter is to explain the existence of these crafts by reference to the international capitalist system (Frank 1967, Amin 1974, Braverman 1974, Taylor 1979). Modern transnational firms and the rules and regulations agreed upon by industrial countries, or the effects of these forces, have penetrated to the remotest parts of industrializing countries. This process, together with the colonial experience most industrializing countries have, has produced a special kind of distorted economy. The main point is that the development of a fully fledged capitalist economy similar to the ones in the industrial-capitalist countries is blocked by the very nature of the capitalist penetration. The traditional and simple forms of production like crafts are accordingly reproduced.

The extension of capitalism occurs fully only in sectors that are crucial for the accumulation of capital in the industrial countries. Other sectors or parts of sectors in remote areas are not developed. It is maintained that the capitalist form of production may become dominant in an industrializing country but not exclusive as it nearly is in industrial countries. The resulting uneven development of sectors and areas in an industrializing country, leaving small "pockets" of markets for extremely simple production, becomes a self-sustaining process. (The market consists mainly of the extremely poor.) In this way traditional crafts are given an opportunity for continued existence, though in a very elementary form, at the same time as improvements in the crafts' technology are blocked. Investments in modern industry, on the other hand, do not create as many job opportunities for artisans as the number it ruins. The conclusion is therefore the opposite of the conventional view - the artisans will not disappear under the present type of capitalist penetration. This will be termed the non-conventional view.

National strategies

There are two main categories of strategies which a nation can use to promote industrialization: import-substitution and export-oriented industrialization. In practice, a country will choose a mix of these two. The weight will, however, be in one or the other direction.

Import-substitution has a potential for indigenous development of crafts in as much as it at least gives effective protection to different kinds of crafts, though this varies from country to country. It also has a potential for decentralization of economic activities, which has not been realized to any large extent. Export-oriented industrialization, on the other hand, takes the increasing interdependence in the world as a point of departure. It is, however, becoming more and more clear that to participate in only beneficial interaction and to erect national barriers to those links deemed to be less attractive, is difficult. The protection given to crafts therefore disappears. The market which is left for artisan production is that provided by the extreme poverty produced by unequal distribution of incomes and by the effects of high inflation on basic necessities following this kind of rapid economic growth. This poverty is to be found both in rural and urban areas. The market the poor people represent does not, however, allow an improvement

in the technology used by the artisans.

This model is modified by national policies such as special bank loans to small-scale producers including artisans, quotas of subsidized raw materials, and extension service, among others.

Development aid from national and international organizations also has an impact. On the international level, the negotiations in the various UN-organizations under the auspices of a new international economic order are of potential importance, as is further producer cooperation among industrializing countries.

National strategies in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka the strategies adopted have oscillated between protectionism and export-led growth with the change of governments at every general election since independence in 1948.

The last government (1970-77) took an active part in the direction and regulation of the industrial sector. The aim was to create small-scale industries on a regional basis, and to use intermediate technology and domestic resources. A tariff structure was set up to protect local industrialization (and to alleviate the chronic foreign exchange deficit).

In 1977 the liberal United National Party gained an overwhelming electoral victory. The new government initiated a number of significant economic as well as constitutional changes. Concerning the industrial sector, the main one is the Free Trade Zone where foreign investors are invited under a liberal package of incentives. Another change is a scheme of liberalized imports of both raw materials and finished goods. A third is that bank lending is back to traditional banking criteria. The criteria, used during the previous government, of decentralization, use of local raw materials and technology have been replaced by an emphasis on the market mechanism.

Puwakdandawa

One consequence of the caste system is that the artisans, although concentrated in particular villages, live segregated not only from the farmers, but also from each other. Puwakdandawa can be divided into four parts: Viskumpura I being traditionally a brass-smith community, but today having more aluminium-spoon makers; Viskumpura II consisting of blacksmiths and some other crafts; Pansalagawagoda having only specialized potters; and Medagoda comprising potters making different kinds of pots.

Table 1. Occupations¹ in Puwakdandawa, 1979.
Number of households.

	Visk. I	Visk. II	Pans.	Meda
Brass-smiths	9	1		
Blacksmiths	1	30		
Potters			27	192
Aluminium-smiths	10			
Aluminium /brass-smiths	4	1		
Goldsmiths		1		
Traders	5	12	5	13
Other ¹	22	35	1	10

1 By "occupation" is implied working in the village. However, the group "Other" also includes households where the husband is working in another place. See text for explanation.

The production carried on in the village is for all the different kinds of crafts taking place in the garden space of each particular household. Each household constitutes a production unit. There is little or no internal division of labour in the production unit. Among the potters, the man is the sole one to provide the inputs when he is not able to form the pots. Children can be put to all sorts of odd jobs, such as working the blower for the blacksmith's furnace. However, the blacksmith more often does that himself. It is only among the aluminium-spoon makers that employment of youngsters to work the cement bag-blower are common.

The increased number of artisans in Puwakdandawa and higher prices for raw materials (generally without a proportional rise in people's incomes) have resulted in many of the artisans being forced to look for markets elsewhere. This is typical for the goldsmiths (15 from Viskumpura I and II) and the carpenters (9 from the same communities). Another way of adapting

has taken place among the brass-smiths, many of whom started with the production of aluminium-spoons. This is particularly the case with the sons of the brass-smiths. Table 1 also shows that in the pottery communities, little but the traditional occupation is carried out. No potters have left the communities for work elsewhere, leaving behind the rest of the family.

The tools used are old and often self-made. The tools bought (usually in Matara, the nearest larger city) are most often imported. On the whole, they are of the simplest type.

The raw materials are for all the crafts except pottery acquired from large cities (Matara, Galle, Colombo).

The time spent on production varies: The aluminium-spoon makers work 3 to 4 days a week (80% of the households). They have no traders either local or from outside who buy their produce. They therefore travel around widely to find a market, at the same time collecting liquor corks from bars for their next production of spoons. The blacksmiths work 5 to 7 days a week (50%). They sell both at nearby markets and to local traders in the community. The brass-smiths work more than the two previous groups (50% work 7 days a week). This shows their deteriorating situation. The potters are of two types - one (35%) works 7 days a week, whereas the other (42%) 3-4 days (only 5% work 5-6 days). The main reason for this is the varied access to different kinds of transportation of raw materials which are taken from the local area. Clay, the most important one, is fetched from 5 kilometres away.

The potters do not employ any paid workers, but in all the households more than one of the members participate. Among the brass-smiths 75% use family labour, whereas in the rest only the head of the household is occupied with brass-smithing. No one employs any workers. 39% of the blacksmiths use family labour. In 44% of the households the head is the only one working. 6% have 1 person employed on a more than casual basis. Concerning the aluminium-spoon makers, 33% use family labour, 50% have 1 person and 17% 2 persons employed.

The age of the artisans clearly shows the expansion of aluminium and the contraction of brass-ware production. All the brass-smith households have a man in the age-group 41-60 years, whereas none of the aluminium spoon makers are that old. The percentage of blacksmiths in this age-group is 42 and the figure for potters is 50.

Only a few aspects have been touched upon above. The merging picture is, however, that of a relatively stable situation for the blacksmiths, and even more so for the potters. The brass-smiths, on the other hand, have increasing difficulties, whereas the aluminium-spoon production is the most promising. The worsening situation of the brass-smiths is clearly visible from table 2. On the whole, the standard of housing is a telling indicator of the standard of living in a society like the Sri Lankan.

Table 2. Standard of houses according to occupation.
Percentage.

	Black-smiths	Brass-smiths	Pottery makers (specialized)	Other pottery makers
Brick/tiles	56	38	55	38
Brick/cadjan	26	19	0	14
Mud/tiles	4	0	0	0
Mud/cadjan	15	44	46	48
Total	101	101	101	100
Good	33	6	36	28
Fairly good	44	63	36	41
Bad	22	31	27	31
Total	99	100	99	100

In the period 1970-77, the market for the blacksmiths' goods was protected in that a state-led cooperative bought what was produced of a number of items. Since 1977, they are finding it increasingly difficult to produce more than merely for day to day living. The brass-smiths have for some time been unable to produce the traditional articles at prices people can afford. The potters have still not felt heavy competition from aluminium-pots, which according to local people are no good for cooking the traditional dishes. The spoon-makers are now facing competition from imported spoons (import liberalization after 1977) and from polished spoons made in the capital Colombo. Some of them have become well versed in the pay-dates of the low-paid tea-estate workers far from Puwakdandawa.

The artisans own perception of the future possibilities of their crafts, table 3, shows an unquestionable pattern.

Table 3. The artisans perception of the future possibilities of their crafts. Percentage.

	Future	No future	Not sure	Sum
Aluminium-spoon makers	100			100
Blacksmiths	56	44		100
Potters	25	56	19	100
Brass-smiths		75	25	100

What then is the case for supporting crafts like the ones described above? It rests primarily on the fact that a large number of poor people depend on them for their livelihood. (In the present case very few have other sources of income.) These people should be assisted, one could argue, in order to ease the inevitable adjustment to an industrial society. There is, however, no prospect of a large-scale adjustment for decades to come - the labour force in the industrializing countries will increase more rapidly than new capital-intensive industries will be able to create jobs. Of the two ways in which crafts could be assisted - namely 1. various measures to protect crafts from competition from modern industry and 2. improvement of the crafts' productivity - the latter should accordingly be chosen. This, in turn, raises the question whether the market for the products of the crafts could be substantially extended. As indicated earlier, the prospects for this are not encouraging.

Governments and aid organizations do, however, assist in improving the productivity of various crafts. The work on, for instance, small-scale intermediate technology carried out in many industrializing countries and funded by development aid may have an effect on some particular artisan communities. New markets may be found for such restricted production. The hypothesis is, however, that poverty, which no amount of development aid will eradicate, will persist, and thereby a market for continued unchanged artisan production is created.

An intriguing question (and prerequisite for the hypothesis) is why modern industries are not (and will not) exploit the market for the simple

goods of low quality which are made by the artisan in Puwakdandawa.

In the following, the question whether artisan production in rural areas should be assisted will be discussed for the various kinds of crafts.

The discussion will be limited to improvements in the productivity of the crafts, assistance through protection from competition will not be touched upon. A comment is also made on possible forms of assistance. If new machinery is provided, most kinds of artisan production must probably find new markets - like tourism and export. (These markets of course make the artisans dependent on the economic ups and downs of the industrial countries and, for the tourist market, also on fashions in travel.) Goldsmiths in Puwakdandawa have diverted their skill into making products demanded by tourism (traditional products like earstuds, necklaces etc. have no demand, the tourists want rings). The export market has been entered by brass-smiths living elsewhere in Sri Lanka (heavy products like pots, oil lamps cannot be exported, but there is an export market for small light items like trays). Marketing must in this case, however, be organized by a central institution. The goldsmiths can, on the other hand, adapt individually by selling to tourists or more commonly by beginning to work for wages or under some other arrangement in workshops in larger cities.

Market possibilities in tourism and export are, however, not sufficient to provide employment for all artisans in need, as well as for all kinds of crafts. The extreme case is the potters whose products depend on the traditional way of cooking (making clay products for tourism cannot employ many people). Blacksmiths will also be in this situation of having no potential market either among tourists or abroad. An added disadvantage for the blacksmiths is that most of their products are not cultural-specific. They make knives of different sizes and other small articles.

To provide improved equipment for the potters (like tractors, mixers, etc.) should not turn them out of the market - they have a sort of monopoly situation. The prices would not increase for the consumer either because the rate of breaking when burning, for instance, would be reduced (today it is from 25 to 40%). The same can evidently not be said for the blacksmiths' situation. To improve the quality of their products would imply not

only a better production process and finish (polishing by electrical machinery) but also, among other things, better scrap iron.

The conclusion is then that the potters stand as a prime case for development aid. Improved production in one village will, however, possibly reduce the number of potters in another as well as remove some of the weakest producers in the village itself. At least in the case of Sri Lanka, they say that there is today a large market potential for various kinds of pots. To improve the quality of the pots it is, however, also essential to stand up to competition from aluminium pots in the long run. In all circumstances, a reduced number of potters in the future will probably be unavoidable if each potter household is to get a decent income.

The brass-smith community could be provided with a common facility centre where they could polish as well as market their products for export. The point is, however, that if the export marketing is not looked after, there is no sense in assisting the brass-smiths at all. In order to keep a certain blacksmith production catering for the market represented by the poor, easy access to scrap iron should be provided. A common building storing scrap would be a possible solution. By having a regular supply of scrap at stable prices the blacksmiths' production would improve without a necessary *shift of market*. There is of course no export market available for blacksmiths.

The point to stress regarding development aid is that in assisting traditional crafts, separate studies must be carried out for each separate craft - they have different total situations. Further, it must be accepted that to improve techniques may turn them out of the market they depend on now. Assistance to craft villages or communities should not be directed to the craft, but focus on other aspects like, for instance, the productive role of women, and other ways of diversifying the income sources of the individual household. In addition, investments could be made in services like water, health, education etc. In this way the artisans are given a standard of living more in pace with the rest of the society. The rationale for doing this is that the artisans produce goods which are cheaper than mass-produced ones or articles viewed by tradition to be essential, thus giving other poor people goods at prices they can afford as well as keeping aspects of the traditional culture alive.

There is, however, no dynamic aspect in this line of thinking (besides alleviating the situation of poor groups of people in a period of transition), nor is there any possibility for a gradual process of economic growth - like improved incomes, better techniques of production, etc. This is effectively hindered by goods produced by modern internal small- and large-scale industry, and imported ones.

But, even though the crafts discussed here will not be dynamic factors in the rural economy, they are important in order to keep the economy to some degree differentiated. In this way they may stand as a potential for, for instance, later changed national policies.

Literature

- Amin, S., 1979. *Den ulige utvikling*. Aurora, København.
- Braverman, H., 1974. *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. Monthly Review Press, London.
- Frank, A. G., 1969. *Capitalism and underdevelopment in Latin America*. Penguin, Harmondsworth.
- Hesselberg, J., 1980. *The future of rural artisans: the case of Puwak-dandawa, a craft village in Hambantota District, Sri Lanka*. Department of Geography, University of Oslo.
- Taylor, J. G., 1979. *From modernization to modes of production*. Mac-Millan, London.