

**SOCIAL SEGREGATION, THE URBAN POOR AND THE MACRO —
URBAN SYSTEM : THE CASE OF A COMMUNITY OF URBAN POOR
IN COLOMBO, SRI LANKA**

By S. T. Hettige

*Department of Sociology
University of Colombo
Colombo.*

Introduction :

The urban poor constitute the largest single segment of the population of most Third world cities. It has been estimated that they constitute over 50% of the population of the city of Colombo. The popular belief is that the over-whelming majority of these people do not engage in formal sector activities of the city and that they man what is often referred to as the 'informal sector' or the bazaar economy. (cf. Marga : 1979, McGee. 1967, Perera, 1982). It is also often noted that they are concentrated in settlements of sub-standard or rudimentary housing.¹ Even though these and similar observations are not without any empirical basis, such generalizations seem to be too simplistic in the face of concrete empirical evidence. For instance, not all poor urban dwellers are informal sector activists. In fact, many slum and shanty dwellers occupy lower-rung positions in the formal sector. It is also evident that not all informal sector activists are resident in the city.²

An important feature of the distribution of the poor in Third World cities is that they are spatially concentrated and socially segregated rather than randomly scattered. What is the sociological significance of this spatial pattern? This study attempts to find answers to this question. The observations made in the following pages are based on an intensive study of a squatter settlement in the city of Colombo undertaken by the author. The essay consists of two parts. Part one outlines its major themes. Part two attempts to substantiate its assertions with empirical evidence.

Part I.

In spite of the fact that the urban poor are socially and spatially segregated, contrary to popular thinking, they are not divorced from the urban politico-economic system.³ The spatial and social segregation of the poor has led many observers to assume that the poor are trapped in a vicious circle of poverty. This line of thinking is evident in the notions of marginality and the culture of poverty. It is argued in the present essay that social segregation is only a mode of adjustment adopted by the settled poor in an underdeveloped urban situation. It is a social mechanism through which constant politico-economic interactions between the segregatd and the macro-urban system takes place. There is therefore a paradox of urban living for the poor; social segregation on the one hand and economic and political interdependence on the other.

Socio-economic inequalities between the poor and the more affluent sections of the urban population in cities of under-developed countries are so marked that the social distance between the former and the latter is understandably great. Absolute poverty, unemployment and widespread underemployment, economic insecurity, lack of basic civic amenities, extremely unhealthy physical environment, etc. do not permit the poor to conform to the norms of 'urban living' and dominant social values prevalent among the more affluent sections of urban society in terms of housing, sanitation and health care, schooling, savings, etc. These are, the factors that socially and physically separate the poor from the others in the city. Some of these factors together with certain others such as the feeling of insecurity and uncertainty operate as 'pull' factors bringing the urban poor together.

Insecurity is a product of diverse circumstances such as instability of social relationships due to geographical mobility, unstable employment and income, lack of legal ownership of land and housing, and other forms of deprivation and disabilities. The urban poor who share many common characteristics vis-a-vis the other strata of urban society, get together to share a common habitat in order to face collectively the ravages of urban living, that are for them, characterized by uncertainty. The process eventually leads to segregation which allows the segregated to find their own social and sub-cultural solutions to their problems of survival.

Social segregation does not however mean that the poor are trapped in a vicious circle of poverty and isolated from the urban politico-economic and the socio-cultural system. They are in fact involved in a network of complex economic and power relationships with the world outside their own. Moreover, segregation does not represent a static situation either. The mobility of people between segregated communities and the outside world is also significant. Those insiders who are upwardly mobile tend to move out, leaving room for the drop-outs of the macro-urban system to move in.

Segregation : Dynamics of the Urban System

Today's social structure of the city of Colombo is largely a product of its recent historical evolution as the capital of an underdeveloped, ex-colonial country. (cf. King 1980. McGee, op, cit.) Its growth had hardly any parallels with that of a western industrial city which usually remained polarized between an expanding industrial work force and an owner-managerial class for many decades until the emergence of today's more complex social structure due to the rise of a substantial service sector. (Reissman, 1964).

The socio-economic divisions of the city of Colombo were of a different order which, however had parallels with many similar cities of the third world (King op. cit. McGee op. cit.). In the absence of an expanding industrial sector, most of the unskilled, unemployed rural immigrants moving into the city had no alternative other than to find employment in the so-called informal sector. Some managed to secure employment in public sector organizations

and private sector firms as watchers, peons, labourers, etc. The earnings of these lower level employees were either so low or so unstable that they were almost excluded from the competition for urban space and housing in the open market. In other words, they could not secure rights of ownership or occupation through normal, legitimate market channels. On the other hand, most of those low and unstable income earners whose places of origin are often far away from the capital city due to a number of reasons, could not afford to commute daily from the surrounding rural areas where land was relatively cheaper.

Daily commuting is not practicable for certain categories of people. This is particularly so in the case of some informal sector activists such as cycle-repairers, domestic workers and pavement hawkers. Shoe repairers, and pavement hawkers find it impracticable to either carry with them or leave behind their equipment, tools, raw material wares, tent material, etc-if they are forced to commute daily from a distant location to the city. Furthermore, the cost of transport, the time wasted and the inconvenience involved are also constraints. The lower class employees of the public and private sector organizations and firms also face similar difficulties and therefore, prefer to reside in the city itself.

The majority of poor urban dwellers or their parents are immigrants from rural areas. As indicated in Table 2, the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of Pansalwatta — the particular squatter settlement under study, had been born in Colombo city itself. Some of them had migrated from rural areas outside the district of Colombo. The fact that the residents at Pansalawatta had not originated from the surrounding suburbs and villages is noteworthy.⁵

The people of lower classes in the city face a dilemma. On the one hand, they are forced by diverse circumstances to settle down in the city. On the other, they are unable to acquire urban space for housing through formal market channels. The illegal occupation of private and public land is their response to the above dilemma.

The emerging squatter settlements are socially and physically segregated. They can be contrasted with more affluent urban settlements where allocation of space is guided by the market and state and municipal regulation. In squatter settlements, allocation of space and land use are guided by extra-market forces. Moreover, social segregation facilitates the formation of informal norms and practices.

The social and physical separation of the settlements of the poor from other residential landuses performs two important functions. On the one hand, it acts as a filter which insulates the 'insiders' from the pervasive forces within the urban system allowing only the 'desired' elements to flow in. This 'gate-keeping' function of segregation is crucial for the survival of the 'insiders' in the urban milieu in view of the fact that the squatters move into such settlements because they are unable to meet the initial demands imposed on them

by the urban system. On the other hand, the sharing of a common habitat⁶ by a large number of individuals and families often with no regard for the socio-cultural and legal practices prevalent elsewhere with regard to land ownership, privacy, public health, etc. facilitates the evolution of a distinctive socio-cultural pattern which not only guides their conduct but helps to find solutions to many problems the urban poor face in their day-to-day lives.

Thus social segregation and the emergent socio-cultural patterns among the settled urban poor have not been the causes of their poverty. They in fact constitute the only logical mode of adjustment that the poor could resort to in order to ensure their survival in an under-developed urban environment. A closer examination of the internal dynamics of a shanty community and its inter-links with the macro-urban system reveals that these communities, on the one hand, attempt to safeguard their rights to urban space by insisting on social and physical boundaries of their habitats and, on the other, constantly move out seeking access to sources of subsistence and other resources. At the same time, it should be emphasized that the underdeveloped urban system is dependent on the segregated communities for its own needs. However the crucial functions performed by the latter are often not recognized by either the planners or the urban theorists. In fact they not only cater to diverse needs of the urban system but do so often without being recognized by the others as legitimate members of the urban society.

Part II.

So far, an attempt has been made to outline the major themes of the present essay. It was already mentioned that (a) social segregation represents a mode of adjustment adopted by the poor in an under-developed urban situation, (b) that it does not imply that the poor people are functionally isolated and trapped in a vicious circle of poverty, (i.e. people move in or out depending on their success and failure in terms of the requirements of the macro-urban system), (c) that it is a boundary maintenance — mechanism which helps the poor in safeguarding their rights to urban space and, (d) that the poor, though socially segregated, exist in constant interaction with the macro-urban system. Let us examine these themes little further in the light of empirical evidence.

The focus of the present study is a squatter settlement located in the south-western quarter of the Colombo city. It will be termed Pansalawatta in the context of the present paper. The settlement located on a narrow strip of land along a waterway consists of about 180 dwelling units. As indicated by the household survey carried out by the author towards the end of 1982 there were 210 families there. The first few settlers had erected their huts close to the main road in the late fifties. Since then more and more families and individuals have moved in and the settlement spread into the interior as far as half a mile from the main road (see Table 1, 2 and 3).

The inhabitants of the settlement derive their subsistence from diverse sources. As mentioned at the outset, they are not necessarily informal sector activists. A significant proportion of the adult population is also engaged in formal sector employment. Table 3 shows the employment structure of Pansalawatta.

Even though an attempt was made during the course of the present study to sort out the complex occupational and activity structure and classify it into meaningful categories, it was revealed that such an attempt invariably leads to over-simplification. In other words, the concepts and categories such as employment and work used in modern economics could rarely help comprehend the complex state of affairs in the squatter settlement concerned. Children as young as eight years of age engage in diverse activities and derive an income which supplement the budget of the family. For example, some children collect and supply earth worms to well-to-do families in the vicinity who keep fish tanks (indoor aquarium). Other children help the traders in the local markets by cleaning and arranging their wares. Some women supply cooked food (**Kadayappan**) to nearby houses and restaurants in small quantities and make a meagre profit. Other women are employed as part-time domestic workers in the well-to-do houses in the vicinity. Even though the cash earnings from such engagements are not high, these domestic workers are often provided with meals. They can also rely on their employers for an emergency loan, etc. It is also useful to note that such domestic work is not well-defined and includes diverse activities such as cooking, cleaning, gardening, baby sitting, accompanying children to and from school, etc. Some settlers engage in other informal sector activities such as street vending, mending of shoes, repairing of cycles, etc. with the help of their family members. Others engage in illicit activities such as gambling, sale of illicit liquor, prostitution and even theft. A careful examination of all these activities reveals that the squatters operate well within the macro-urban system on which they are very much dependent for their subsistence. Theirs is not a self-contained economy but has diverse links with the wider system.

Despite the fact that many squatters engage in diverse informal sector activities, a significant proportion of the squatter population is engaged in formal sector work. As mentioned before, they occupy lower rung positions in both public and private sector organizations. Some of these are the Colombo Municipal Council (C.M.C.), the Colombo harbour, Textile mills, Public Works Department, Railway, and construction projects.

The similarities between the poor informal sector activists and the lower rung employees of the formal sector who co-exist in the same settlement are more significant than their differences. Both categories subsist on low incomes and therefore, are unable to raise capital required for the purchase of property. As is well known, banks and other lending agencies discriminate against low and unstable income groups by laying down conditions which the poor cannot usually meet. On the other hand, the price of urban land and housing is so

high that the poor can hardly aspire to possess such property. However, irrespective of whether they are in the formal or the informal sector, the well-to-do categories of people, owing to their capital assets have access to urban space. Unlike small scale informal sector activists, the larger, informal sector operators deal with banks and other formal lending institutions and therefore, are credit worthy.

The inhabitants of Pansalwatta irrespective of their sectorial affiliation are those who have been excluded from the competition in the open market for urban space and housing. The lack of access to capital coupled with inferior social status forced them to move into their present habitat.

The allocation of space even in squatter settlement is an orderly process guided by a set of commonly accepted principles. The first few settlers might have been a random collection of immigrants but subsequent arrivals found their way in through kinship, friendships and regional ties. When the settlement reaches its natural limits of expansion, the problem of allocation dwelling space arises only when a dwelling unit falls vacant due to do emigration or when a new unit is constructed. The new comer may pay a lump sum in cash and acquire the unit on outright 'purchase' or temporarily occupy it by paying a monthly rent to its 'owner'. Owing to both population pressure and the scarcity of habitable land in the vicinity, there is a tendency towards sharing of dwelling units the sizes of which range from about 50 square feet to 200 sq.ft. In Pansalwatta, larger units are subdivided and shared by as many as three nuclear families.

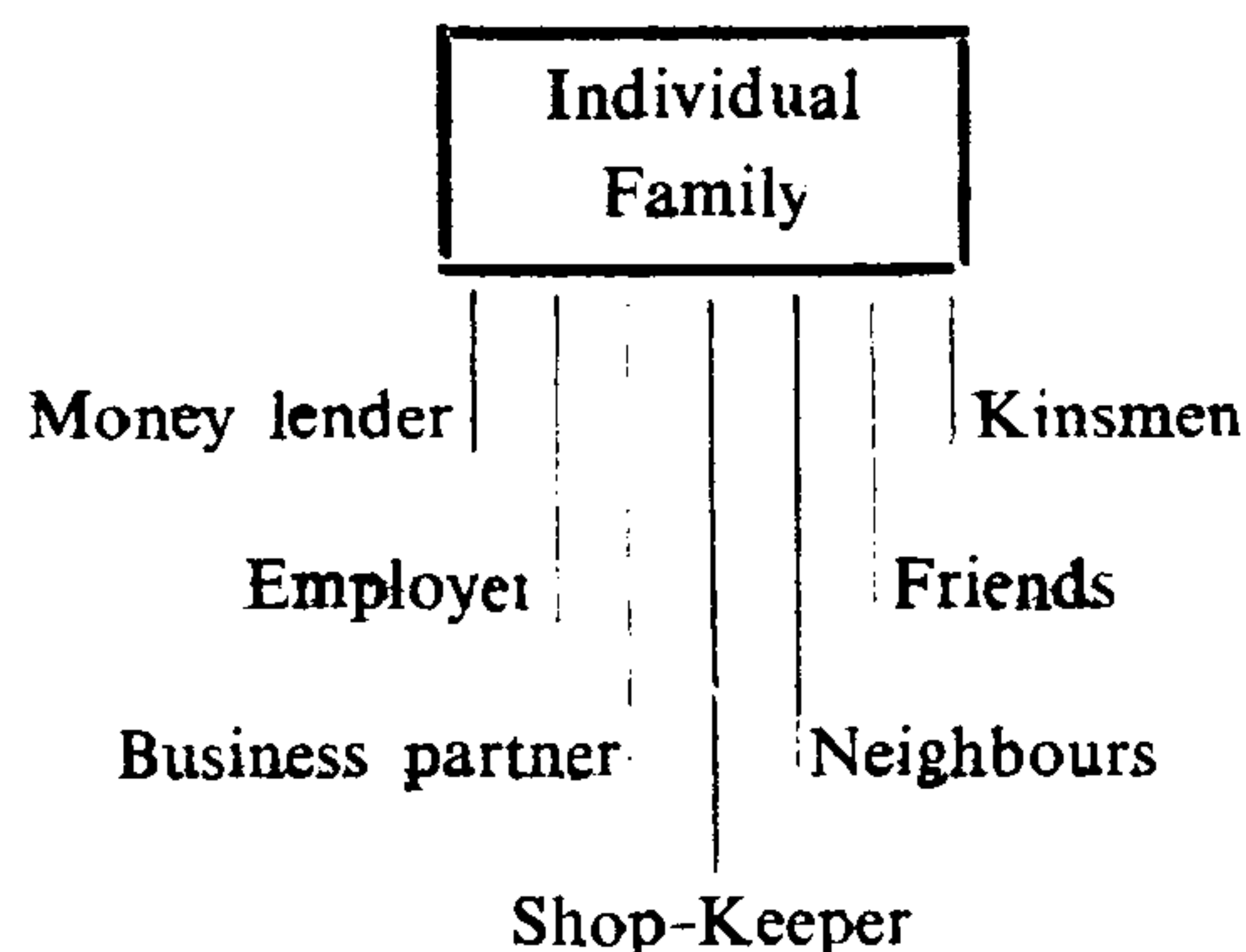
The pressure on the existing housing stock has been increased by three major factors. Firstly, there is a certain degree of geographical mobility among the settled urban poor in the city of Colombo due to change of occupation or place of work, marriage separation, etc. Secondly, a few rural migrants may also move in every now and then. Thirdly, those who move in often outnumber those who move out. Even though no attempts have so far been made by researchers to establish the exact causes of such movements, it might be assumed that the increased pressure on urban space and low rate of out migration are responsible for the pattern. The recent escalation of land prices in and around Colombo has no doubt restricted the expansion of squatter settlements. However, it is interesting to note that squatter settlements are largely insulated from the effect of such drastic changes in land values. It is well known, that land values in Colombo are so high that the lower middle class and even the middle classes by and large, have already been eliminated from the competition for urban residential space. They can no longer afford to pay higher house rents or secure parcels of land to build houses. Ironically, the urban poor reside in areas where the price of land is very much beyond the income of an average middle class person. Pansalwatta is no exception to this pattern.

A poor person moves into a squatter settlement mainly because he or she is too poor to compete for a plot in an urban 'residential' area. His economic position is often dependent on his personal and social characteristics such as lack of formal qualifications, little or no formal education, lack of social or personal links with the 'influentials' such as politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen. These economic, social and personal characteristics in turn make it difficult, if not impossible, for him to find a niche in the urban social structure outside the squatter and similar settlements. Therefore the settlements of the poor are often places where people who share common characteristics come together and are exposed to similar social and cultural conditions. The socio-cultural patterns emerging under such circumstances are distinct from the patterns found elsewhere in the city.

In a squatter or a slum community, the spatial structure and the socio-cultural milieu influence each other. The physical and social separation of the settlement, lack of privacy for individuals and families due to physical proximity, lack of private bath and toilet facilities. The absence of strict privatization of dwelling units and parcels of land, etc. tend to make many social values, behavioural norms and cultural traditions prevalent elsewhere either irrelevant or untenable. The feeling of insecurity and uncertainty make individualism a luxury for the poor. While more affluent segments of the urban population can often depend on the formal institutional fabrics of the city-viz: banks, credit and welfare societies, trade unions, professional associations, bureaucracy etc. to meet their diverse needs and preserve their identity and self-esteem, even the very survival of the poor in the urban environment can be threatened by the urban system itself; the occasional demolition of illegal shanty settlements removal of pavement hawkers etc. are indicative of this systemic threat to their survival.

The unstable and uncertain circumstances that surround the lives of the segregated poor force them to rely heavily on a network of dense, social and functional relationships for survival. Many of these relationships, particularly those centred on kinship, family and neighbourhood are based on the principle of reciprocity. Such relationships, often involve the exchange of favours both material and non-material. Figure 1 below shows the major categories of social and functional relationships.

Figure 1 : Social and functional relationships among the urban poor.



The relationships indicated by two-way arrows are reciprocal in the sense that the parties involved can be both recipients as well as donors alternatively. Such reciprocal relationships normally take place among equals in socio-economic terms. In a relationship indicated by a one-way arrow, the poor family or the individual is always the client while the other party is usually the patron.

It should be noted that the above relationships are informal in nature. Unless the person is employed in the formal sector, the relationship with the employer also tends to be informal. Even the few shop keepers in Pansalwatta deal with their settler-clients informally. They also cater to the specific needs of the inhabitants. Many poor families buy their daily requirements in small quantities. These shop-keepers are willing to sell these items in small quantities. It is also noteworthy that they sell goods on credit. The poor can rarely rely on bigger shop-keepers outside the settlement for their needs.

The exchange of consumer goods in small quantities between households is an important phenomenon among the poor. A house-wife may 'borrow' tea leaves, sugar, dried chillies, etc, in small quantities from a neighbour. She does not return them immediately but is obliged to reciprocate when the other party is in need. The settlers who are assisted by friends and relatives in the construction and repair of houses are also expected to reciprocate. Here the exchange of labour reduces the cost of construction or repair of dwelling units.

The exchange of material and non-material favours is an integral aspect of the life-style of the urban poor. It is of crucial significance for those who live at or below subsistence level and whose sources of subsistence are uncertain and irregular. An unexpected misfortune such as sickness, death of a family member or even inability to find work for a day or two can pose a threat to their survival. In such situations, the social mechanism of favours operates as a form of social insurance and often ensures the survival of the victims.

Even though the exchange of consumer goods and labour takes place on a reciprocal basis, there are other transactions which take place on unequal terms. Buying of consumer requirements on credit, borrowing of larger sums of money are cases in point. Such transactions usually take place between poor residents and relatively well-to-do members of the community such as boutique-keepers and money lenders. Unlike in the case of the exchange relationships, the objective of the patron here is to make a profit. It should be noted, however, that the transaction takes place in a personalized market situation, that is between individuals who are known to each other.

Conclusions :

It was mentioned at the outset that there is a strong tendency among the urban poor to concentrate in socially segregated settlements in the city of Colombo. The main objective of the present essay has been to examine the sociological significance of this phenomenon of social segregation.

It has been argued in the preceding pages that social segregation is not merely a product of concentrated poverty but amounts to a mode of adjustment resorted to by the urban poor in order to survive in an underdeveloped urban situation. Thus, social segregation helps them find solutions to diverse problems in a number of arenas.

As we have already seen, the urban poor are sandwiched between two conflicting forces; one driving them into the city and the other pushing them out. As far as urban space is concerned, the forces operating in the open or the formal market do not favour the urban poor at all and, therefore, they are guided by them. As we have already seen, these very forces have driven many members of the middle and the lower-middle classes away from their work places, into the suburbs and beyond. However, the responses of the poor has been different. They continue to reside closer to their places of work or subsistence activity.

The emergent life-styles in the segregated communities of the urban poor are very different from those found elsewhere in the city. Here, there is little room for privacy and individuality. Though not very marked, there are material and non-material inequalities and, hence conflicting interests. Yet common interests and living conditions bring members of the community together at various levels ranging from inter-household exchanges to community identity, the latter being a vital weapon in their struggle to protect their rights to urban space.

In spite of the fact that the urban poor are socially segregated, they nevertheless operate within the macro-urban system. In other words, they do not operate within a self-contained economy or a society of their own but perform diverse tasks within a larger system. Though it is possible to divide the urban economy into an informal sector and a formal sector in conceptual terms, it is almost impossible to perceive the two operating as separate entities in empirical terms.

The urban poor do not necessarily engage in informal sector activities. As is evident, a significant section of them occupy lower rung positions in the formal sector. It should also be noted that even those who do not belong to the formal sector do not constitute an autonomous, self-contained economic organization but fill in the vacuum created by the underdevelopment of the ex-colonial city.

Finally, the position of the urban poor in an under-developed urban situation is paradoxical. On the one hand, they are socially segregated. On the other, they are part and parcel of the macro-urban system in functional terms. This is true not only in terms of economics and politics but also in terms of popular culture.

Notes :

- (1) Settlements of the poor and the under-privileged in Colombo are classified into two main categories, namely slums and shanties. Shanties are of ten settlements occupied by squatters with rudimentary housing constructed of discarded material while slums consists of dilapidated buildings or housing units occupied by low income families. (Policy paper on slum and shanty upgrading in Colombo Municipal Council, Urban Development Authority, Ministry of Local Government, Housing and Construction Colombo, Sri Lanka. 1979, Page 1).
- (2) The author is of the view that the arbitrary division of an underdeveloped city into two separate sectors, namely, 'formal' and 'informal' though useful for analytical purposes, is often misleading because, in reality, the two types of economic organization, though easily distinguishable in conceptual terms, do not either exist or operate in isolation from each other. They are, in fact, interlinked through a complex network of economic and social relations. The people occupying the lowest positions in both sectors are so intermixed that the differences between the two categories cannot be easily noticed. On the other hand, those who occupy the highest positions in the two sectors, despite their similarities in terms of economic and political power, do not easily merge into a single social entity (see also Hettige, 1986).
- (3) However the present essay does not examine the way the urban poor relate themselves to the macro-urban system in political terms.
- (4) The fact that the educational facilities are concentrated in the city means very little to the urban poor. For a number of reasons, they do not or are not able to make use of such facilities. (Hettige 1982) see table 5.
- (5) There are people belonging to the lower class who commute to the city daily from the villages surrounding the city. They occupy lower rung positions in both the formal and the informal sectors. It is significant that they operate from their own, native villages where they have access

to a small parcels of land but often own no productive wealth such as agricultural land. Their housing conditions do not differ a great deal from those of the squatters in the city but they enjoy security of tenure. Unlike the squatters who engage in diverse activities, they (lower class people who operate from the surrounding villages) are restricted in the type of activities they could engage in. While some occupy lower rung positions in the formal sector, others engage in small-scale informal sector businesses; some collect vegetables, fruits, etc. in their own villages on a daily basis and transport it to the nearest market in the city using public transport. Others, carry only a basket or a wooden box with them on the way to the city every morning where they buy first or vegetables in small quantities from traders and sell these on the pavement.

- (6) The whole stretch of land covered by a squatter settlement is usually unpartitioned land and therefore, sharing is guided not by law but by local traditions, conventions, etc.

.. Pansalawatta is a pseudonym for the particular squatter settlement which is the focus of the present study.

Table 1 : POPULATION AND AGE STRUCTURE IN PANSALWATTA.

Age (years)	Number of Persons	%
0 — 5	140	13.2
5.5 — 15	205	19.4
15.5 — 20	115	10.9
20.5 — 30	176	16.6
30.5 — 50	317	30.0
50.5 —	102	9.6
Total	1,055	99.7

Table 2 : DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION BY PLACE OF BIRTH IN PANSALWATTA.

Place of Birth		Number	%
(i) Pansalwatta	} Locally born	625	59.2
(ii) Other parts of Colombo City		215	20.3
(iii) Southern Province		148	14.0
(iv) Western Province	} Migrants	18	1.7
(v) N. W. Province		11	1.0
(vi) Eastern Province		38	3.6
Total		1055	99.8

Table 3 : STRUCTURE OF EMPLOYMENT IN PANSALWATTA.

Occupation	Number of Persons	%
Wage Labourers :		
Public corporations, Govt. Departments, etc.	67	19.7
Private firms	.. 18	5.2
Casual day labourers	.. 63	18.5
Trade :		
Retail pavement hawkers, etc.	.. 98	28.8
Domestic work	.. 33	9.7
Hotels, restaurant etc.	.. 10	2.9
Clerical / Technical	.. 07	2.0
Masons, Carpenters, painters	.. 06	1.7
Laundering	.. 08	2.3
Overseas (middle east)	.. 19	5.5
Others	.. 11	3.2
Total	.. 340	99.5
Employed as % of the total population in Pansalwatta (1055)		32.2
Employed as % of those who are over 15 years of age (710)		47.8

Table 4 : DISTRIBUTION OF HOUSEHOLD HEADS BY DATE OF ARRIVAL IN PANSALWATTA

Year	Number	%
Upto 1940	06	2.8
1941 — 1950	34	16.1
1951 — 1960	32	15.2
1961 — 1970	39	18.5
1971 — 1980	70	33.3
After 1981	15	7.1
Born in Pansalwatta	14	6.6
Total	210	99.6

Table : 5 LITERACY AND EDUCATIONAL IN PANSALWATTA

Category	Number	%
Below school going age :		
Attending pre-school	06	0.5
infants and those not attending pre-school	115	10.9
No formal Education		
5 — 16 are group	21	1.9
over 16 years	97	9.1
School going age but not attending school	89*	8.4
Currently attending		
School :		
Grade 01 — 03	53	5.0
04 — 06	64	6.0
07 — 08	23	2.1
09 — 10	08	0.7
11 — 12	—	—
Education completed :		
Grade 01 — 03	120	11.3
04 — 06	278	26.3
07 — 08	142	13.4
09 — 10	113	10.7
11 — 12	—	—
Not known	15	1.4
Total	1144	99.3

* Included in the category 'education completed'

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