

FORM AND TECHNIQUE IN TRADITIONAL RURAL HOUSING
IN SRI LANKA

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By

DR .SENAKE BANDARANAYAKE,
SENIOR LECTURER IN ARCHAEOLOGY,
UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA.

(Drawings by Albert Dharmasiri)

INTRODUCTION

The systematic study of traditional culture has a very special significance in transitional societies such as ours. The process of modernisation in such countries has been and still continues to be dominated so heavily by external forces that the rich historical experience and resources of traditional culture have often been ignored or neglected in the formation of modern culture. One aspect of this neglect has been the failure to make a scientific appraisal of traditional cultural phenomena and especially an appraisal of the specific ways in which such phenomena could serve contemporary social needs. Another aspect has been the uncritical "appeal to tradition". This includes attempts to counterpose "traditional" and "modern" as two hostile categories and the failure to recognise that the persistence of so many negative and backward aspects of traditional culture are manifestations of the stagnation, impoverishment and underdevelopment of our societies. The scientific documentation and analysis of traditional culture, therefore, plays a vital part in the correct evaluation of that culture: it is an important and necessary contribution to that on-going historical process by which traditional culture is either preserved

or allowed to go into abeyance; by which society, either consciously or unconsciously, retains such phenomena, transforms and adapts it to contemporary needs, or rejects it altogether. In such a context, the study of traditional culture is not carried out "for its own sake", but for its historical meaning and its relevance to the unfolding contemporary situation. The problem of its preservation, and of its disappearance has to be seen as an integral part of that same context.

The question of traditional rural housing exemplifies this situation. While many design concepts and constructional techniques of traditional rural housing have unconsciously influenced the modern building tradition in Sri Lanka, no systematic attempt has been made to consciously study and apply the lessons of traditional architecture to modern architectural problems. Nor has there been much interest in the opposite process studying and developing traditional housing in order to transform it and bring it up to modern living standards and conditions (thereby expanding the scope of the available solutions to contemporary housing problems).¹ The documentation and study of traditional rural housing is, therefore, a contribution not merely to conservationist interests but to the architectural problems of our time. Such research in Sri Lanka has been limited so far to a few pioneering studies.² The present article does no more than outline some of the major aspects of form and technique in traditional housing and offer a general orientation to the subject.