

**Review of *Asian Drama*  
by Gunnar Myrdal**

Handwritten comments by the class teacher:

*A- Some excellent critical comment here, but observations of a first hand or personal nature on your part do not rule out the need for such "comparative" studies as Asian Drama. They indicate of course, that we should have better, far better, ones undertaken, including the effective use of Asians themselves in such work.*

**Part I**

This 3 volume work was published in 1968 by Pantheon, a Division of Random House and bears the sub-title, "An Inquiry into the Poverty of Nations." The chief writer is Gunnar Myrdal, a Swede, and he was assisted by one Finn, another Swede (his own household), two English and two American professors. This illustrates one of my cynicisms: that it is possible for a Nordic to write on Asia and be accepted seriously but it is not possible, because it is not permissible, for an Asian to write on the Scandinavian or North European lands to be accepted seriously, yet.

I myself have been emotionally moved by Lord Snow with his "two cultures," one of which seems to accept scientific procedures and the other dialectical outlooks. In the foreword (page v) it says:

"For Professor Myrdal had not only to move against accepted premises and assumptions; what was more difficult, he had to move against those premises which he had himself done so much to establish and to make seem self-evident. Burke says somewhere...."

What Burke says somewhere or nowhere to do with anything connected with the "Asian Drama" is something totally incomprehensible to me. And again, biased or not, I have personally concluded that many items of Oswald Spengler's philosophy can, and even should be applied to Southeast Asia. Or sarcastically, "There are three enemies to American policies in Asia: Dale Carnegie, Jesus Christ and Oswald Spengler, and the greatest of these is Spengler."

In the preface, page vii, the author says: "... I made a six weeks' tour of South Asia in the autumn of 1953, visiting Pakistan, India, Burma, Thailand and Indonesia." To me it looks just like that; A six weeks' tour!

If this paper were to receive a title it would be "The Tragedy of Asian Drama." I certainly have met half a million actual human beings in the areas covered; have preserved a multitude of field notes

and find, in general, acceptance or rejection accordingly as the party to be interviewed belongs to one or the other of Lord Snow's "Two Cultures." No scientist has ever refused an interview. Many of them, especially on the various campuses of the "Multiversity of California" have been to the same lands and reached identically the same conclusions. Dr. Chandrasekhar, the demographer, has proposed collaboration. So one finds the extreme range among "social philosophers": from collaboration to absolute refusals to have interviews at any levels whatsoever.

The Prologue on page 5 is called "The Beam in Our Eyes." Of course there is a beam. The various famous ones mentioned came from another continent and another age. What their theories and doctrines have to do with the area in question perplexes me. The first sub-title, "A Plea for a Sociology of Knowledge" might equally apply to "A Plea for a Knowledge of Sociology." I did meet a single sociologist and one team of British social anthropologists while on tour. I am sure many more have gone to the area in question. But they have not been connected with the UN organizations.

It is also extremely difficult to write, and more so to read this book when one receives weekly "The Asian Student" published by Asia Foundation. I find all articles based on observations. The dialectic pseudo-approaches are notably absent and this paper may be summed up by my personal battle-cry: "Reality Not Realism."

A number of years back I wrote a paper, "The Interaction of the Past and Present in the Solution of India's Problems." There were many quotations from India's leading (to me) economists, Professors Wadia and Merchant of Bombay who later became my close friends. Professor Wadia spent four hours with me discussing Vedanta. He averred that only with a knowledge of the basic philosophy of a country could one understand its economics. Then we spent five hours discussing economics. In the philosophic session we were equals and in practical agreement. At the second session he was guru and I chela, but again with remarkably substantial agreement.

My reports of these and other sessions have never been accepted by "social philosophers." Yet on page 16 we find under subtitle 5: "...Transference of Western Concepts and Theories." And again on page 26: "8. A Plea for Institutional Emphasis." I do not find any institutions mentioned.

Chapter 3 is entitled "The Wider Field of Valuations." To me this illustrates remarkably well the difference between Snow's two cultures. My visits to that part of the world were based on observations, and sometimes measurements. In Mathematics when there are evaluations there is some nexus or point of origin from which evaluations can be made. But when an author jumps from country to country and even subject to subject in the middle of a paragraph, I am unable to fathom his purposes.

In this chapter he discusses languages, or one should say the **word**, "language" without clearly defining it. Nor does there seem to be any mention of Thailand, the one country in the region where there is some uniformity of tongue.

Sub-title 7 in Chapter 3 is “The Role of Religion.” A blanket statement is offered:

“Understood in this realistic and comprehensive sense, religion usually acts as a tremendous force for social inertia. The writer knows of no instance in present—day South Asia where religion has induced social change.”

This is an excellent dialectical dogmatic unsupported and perhaps unsupportable conclusion. When the Ford Foundation published its book on Indian Agriculture, every chapter had a quotation from the scriptures to support the contention for the modernization of agriculture and industry. Myrdal and his co-workers show little evidence of any real knowledge of the real people in the region. The American, Gertrude Emerson, who went to India to help in this field, found it was very easy to go ahead, once one accepted the local institutions.

I once met the oft-quoted Pakistani Muslim, Mahdoodi. He was in tears. He was supporting a conservative policy both in religion and politics. He met a Sufi and said he was worsted on every point. Sufis are not quoted in our culture, yet. (The recent deceased president, Dr. Zuhair Hussein of India was a disciple in Sufism.)

Of course if one is writing an essay, one is writing an essay. *Asian Drama* is an essay or a compendium of essays.

Most of this work is very much like Count Keyserling. His “Travel Diary of a Philosopher” tells almost nothing of the people whom he visited or the country; he tells us in detail about his thoughts and feelings.

One can quote ad nauseam, in the middle of a statement about events, what Karl Marx would have said and then a discussion as to whether he was right or wrong, and almost nothing about what did really happen.

Sub-title 8 in Chapter 5 reads: “India’s Undeclared War with China and Its Aftermath.” There is some reference to the McMahon line but none to the conditions which compelled a temporary or permanent acceptance of that boundary. Many people, in their arguments, overlook the hard fact that the Chinese had some sort of stable government covering some territories for many centuries. There was no “India” at all.

Sub-title 9 reads: “The Settlement of Burma’s Boundary With China.” During the course of many centuries a central Chinese government entered into relations with many governments of Southeast Asia. Sometimes tribute was enacted; sometimes there were gifts, which were considered as tribute by Peking. Many of these treaties were never repudiated and sometimes a monarch paid tribute both to China and to his immediate suzerain (often an imperialistic Western power).

At times it might appear that it has been the Chinese central power, though under absolute

communist control, which was pursuing the policy of enforcement of legal enactments, and note of expediency or philosophy. Indeed if it had not been for the British, who knows whether the Chinese empire might not have extended much further into the general region.

Although there is agreement of the preponderancy of Agriculture in most of Southeast Asia, some of the statements by the author(s) are false and one is against the situation of individuals facing institutions, and of independent research against legalized statistics.

For some reason or other, without any qualification, Agriculture in Western Bengal is contrasted with that of Central Thailand. This is one of the many examples of the misuse of the term "Ecology" by sociologists. Why does not the author compare Western Bengal with Burma?

One reads (Volume II, pp. 1083-4):

"First, let us consider two paddy-producing regions; one a densely populated area in West Bengal in eastern India; the other in the sparsely populated central plain of Thailand. Cultivated area per man is more than twice as large in the latter as in the former, but in other respects agricultural practice in these districts is sufficiently similar to make comparison worthwhile. Both districts are situated at the lower course of rivers, the Ganges and the Menam, respectively, which overflow during the monsoon. Their physical situation enables a single crop of paddy to be taken with little use of manure and hardly any application of fertilizer. Apart from bends, the two rivers are largely unregulated. In both samples, about 25 percent of the area is under irrigation. In the West Bengal sample, 13 percent of the area is double-cropped as against roughly 1 percent in the sample for Central Thailand.... In both districts the cropping is dominated by paddy, though in West Bengal some jute and potatoes are grown between the paddy crops."

I do not know where and how this material was collected. When I visited the Menam in 1956 there was a very active program toward electrification, especially with water pumps; and the collective ownership of trucks, enabling the farmers to reach markets soon. The norm was three crops per year. I have learned that in part of Thailand, near the delta, a program has been introduced enabling in some cases five crops to be harvested but this program had just been begun.

The Thai people do not use animal manures for fuel. They have an extensive program of organic gardening, and this has been most successful. Evidently when the author mentioned "manure" he may have been referring to purchased manures. India has fallen for the chemical additives and these are banned not only in Thailand but in much of southeast Asia. While chemical manures do "fatten" crops, they also add to pollution, the story just coming out at the present moment in the campaigns just started on pollution.

Evidently none of the co-authors know much about Horticulture, soil fertility, and the chemistry and physics of irrigation.

As far as I could tell, Thailand is not caught in the caste-complex. The Japanese seem to have imparted some industriousness. For instance the Japanese method of piling hay-stacks was evident when I visited the land in 1956, but elsewhere it was not always evident. And finding that labor could be saved by introducing pumps and other machines, by collective and co-operative buying, the whole country was being transformed. The American interests were furthering this program.

The reports on Burma are remarkable by their absence. Throughout history it has been remarkably free from famines. There are few remarks and nearly all of them are subjective, so subjective it is impossible to quote them.

I saw all kinds of golden statues in Burma and felt that there was a horde of this metal lying in neglected piles. This was specifically corroborated by my friend, the late Phra Sumangalo, the Buddhist monk. He told me all kinds of stories about the gold and he even had plans to collect it when he died. But this tells us little about agriculture or cottage industries. For every single fact one finds ten pages of commentaries.

I have never visited Indonesia but have done “book research” on edible crops and how they are used. Fish farming, which plays so important a role in that land, is not even mentioned. And that is why there are caustic remarks about sociologists taking over “ecology.” Some knowledge, of course, has come from nationals and also from now exiled Eurasians.

Cambodia is hardly mentioned at all. The few reports are in the tables of quite uncertain sources.

Indo-China comes out little better. The conclusion is that it has been a waste of money to purchase these volumes and a greater waste of the world's money in compiling what to me is utter nonsense.

I do not know what the authors mean by “poverty.” I saw nothing in Southeast Asia to compare with India. What I did see in India and Pakistan—far more than in Southeast Asia—hardly comes under our discussions. One can agree with some of the facts—not all of them, the explanations are hardly in line with anything but personal subjectivities. Ayub Khan is mentioned, but chiefly as a political figure.

As he actually accomplished much in eliminating misery in his land and promoting certain reforms which at least saved the country from starvation, one might think that this would be mentioned in a word sub-title, “An Inquiry Into the Poverty of Nations.”

Without a more careful study, my own conclusions cannot be fully verified. I personally believe that mechanical aptitudes and the introduction of certain forms of mechanization are higher in parts of Southeast Asian than in parts of Europe. Not being an economist or sociologist, this is beyond my interests.

I definitely do not recommend this book, and, if this is characteristic of the work being done by the United Nations, I am hoping that we shall by-pass this institution. "The Multiversity of California" alone has done more to eliminate some of the sore-spots than all the presumable adjustments mentioned in this work.

## Part II—Integration vs. Analysis and Dialectics

It may be vain or it may be proper to offer an approach to problems of a Southeast Asia more along the line of what Lord Snow calls "the scientific culture." There may be nothing necessarily new here, and it would regard Economic Geography, Economic Geology and several branches of Anthropology as valid methodologies.

What we are dealing with here is essentially a part of the world with heavy rainfall, and warm climates. The heavy rainfall may not always be equitably distributed. In Ceylon and India, perhaps for different reasons and with different factors, there are relative or absolutely dry seasons. Ceylon has no large river basin so irrigation there would be based on different factors and quite different techniques than where there are valleys. But Ceylon is hardly a land beset by poverty for the "usual reasons."

Then we have to consider the trench and through rivers, the rapid and sluggish ones and their general effects. This subject has been dealt with by many writers, none of whom seem to have been quoted by Myrdal and his associates; but then none of them have been heavily relied on either.

Then there are questions of soils—the types of soils and how they are available and what types of crops are needed. The economics of upland and lowland Rice are different, as well as the effects on seasonal work.

Then there are cultures which can be studied from two different levels at least: (a) aptitudes, especially applicable to Agriculture; (b) civilizations, i.e. city-societies. We have at least five of these:

1. **Mon-Khmer**, blended with various Indian cultures, not all the same
2. **Thai**, invaders from the north-east
3. **Burmese**, invaders from the north-west
4. **Malays**, infiltrators from the south
5. **Chinese**, invaders in Vietnam, infiltrators elsewhere.

At their highest levels a study had been made years ago by Mr. Martin Rosenblatt, Vice-President of Gump's (A lifelong friend). Mr. Rosenblatt's discoveries and uncoveries are very close to the psycho-geometries of Spengler, and even to the "non-Aristotelian" and "non-Euclidean" theories of Alfred Korzybski, author of *Science and Sanity* and other works.

No doubt the earliest Rice culture was that of slash-and-burn, and no settlements. But the wonders of terrace farming have remained—how were they started, and why do we find elements of them in quite separated places.

(Note: The writer is an FRAS and has read much of the literature published by them during the course of many years).

Then there is the subject of diet on health. The calorie requirements in different environments may be very different. The general judgments have been derived from an assumed "normalcy" of American or European quantitative and qualitative intakes. But there may be quite a different effect on industriousness between Brown Rice and White Rice partakers. And beyond that the to me much more serious investigation of organic vs. inorganic agriculture. This is even more complicated at the moment when the first disturbances have come from the effects of each to rivers in connection with pollution. Pollution has been studied from the standpoint of the chemist and engineer, but no overall study seems to have been made.

UN delegations generally deal with government and do not make in situ studies. Governments may be variously organized and so discrete studies are not always made, or they are made by agencies which do not always share with other agencies, governmental or private.

It has been chiefly Anthropologists who examine all factors—that is a first and necessary merit. And also they do much of their work in situ, dealing with the actual humanity.

When we come to the pseudo-controversial subject of DDT and poisons used by pest-control operators, the first item overlooked is why they have been used in the first place. We have demanded Mosquito abatement. We have insisted on the eradication of Malaria and tropical fevers of all sorts. All these things must be taken together.

In visiting the various campuses of the University of California alone I have found these factors and facts:

- a. Study of the protein needs of the peoples and "seeding" with fish and shellfish in certain areas.
- b. Use of Algae to help correct diets and to operate as soil additives.
- c. Multi cropping whenever and wherever possible
- d. Introduction of new crops and proper varieties of old crops

e. Cheap adobe and other housings which structures are rain-proof

f. Sanitary engineering (I mean here that done by UC persons or team)

g. Learning from one area to propose in other areas similar methods. Unfortunately these works are not always rapidly available and the men are too often transferred to other campuses of the same "Multiversity" or sent abroad, or even go to other States.

I have therefore been proposing the "grill-structure" whereby experiences and knowledges can be rapidly shared. Some items of this "grill-structure" arose years ago when visiting the University of Pennsylvania. It was there that I met Dr. Kinsley Davis who was later transferred to this region, but he seems to belong to "the other culture."