

Ceylonese Finds Eskimos No Longer Nomads But White People Are

The Eskimo people of Barrow and Wainwright have acquired a suprising amount of the benefits—and the problems—of modern civilization, reports Shelton Gunaratne, a journalist from Ceylon who recently visited the two communities.

Gunaratne is attending Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota under a one-year World Press Institute fellowship. He selected the transition of the Eskimo-people into modern society as his independent research paper for his studies.

One of the changes that he discovered in the Arctic, Gunaratne said, is that "the Eskimo people are no longer nomads. The real nomads now are the white people."

He noted that the more permanent people at the Arctic Research Lab are the Eskimos, and that most of the school teachers also come and go.

In line with this change, he said "it is right that the government should give them land. For stability, they should live in a place they can call their own."

Another suprising change is that the snow-go has largely replaced the dog team. He didn't see a single dog team traveling while he stayed in Barrow, and there were about 22 snow-gos in Wainwright—there were two last year, he was told.

Gunaratne continued, "the Eskimo people will have to depend on hunting for a living for a long time—the value of a dollar on the Arctic Slope is about 40 percent low and the cost of things is very high.

"If they don't depend on hunting, their income is not enough to pay to import food."

He was surprised also to

meet many young Eskimoese who were unable to use kayaks—they had become accustomed to using power boats.

One disappointing aspect of the modernization is that "the Eskimo dialect is not taught in the schools there. I believe, to maintain the culture and identity, the BIA or others should start lessons in the Inupiat language in the North."

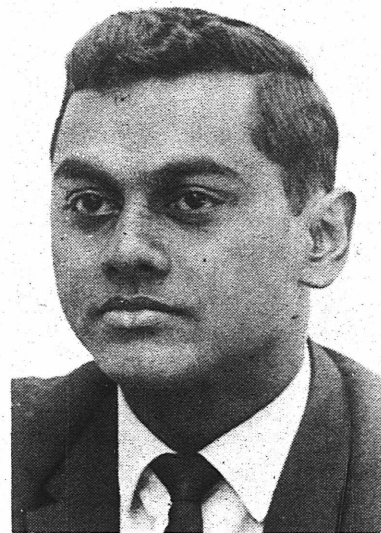
"I believe the government has done a lot of good for these people," Gunaratne said, "but at the same time they are completely dependent on the government for maintaining the dollar economy there. If the government withdraws, it will disintegrate."

On ASNA's proposed development plan, he questioned some details—he didn't think the cannery at Wainwright would be feasible because of transportation problems—but he felt that some such program should be undertaken to free the villagers from complete dependence on government spending alone.

Gunaratne felt that the supplying of natural gas to Barrow had done a lot of good for the community—it had cut the monthly fuel bills from \$150 to \$40 a month for the average resident.

Water is still a problem, he noted. But, even with water in Barrow costing nearly ten cents a gallon, "it is quite impressive how these people are trying to live with so much cleanliness."

One problem of the cash economy, he said, was that it had brought such social problems as alcoholism to the Arctic. He noted that, on the day he had interviewed her, the magistrate at Barrow had



Shelton Gunaratne

handled three cases of young girls being drunk.

He found the people of Wainwright to be more isolated than those of Barrow. The facilities in the town were poorer—even the school used honey buckets—but he felt the people were friendlier and had less of the social problems.

One person at Wainwright who especially impressed Gunaratne was Weir Megovanna, a carver who plays a saw in church on Sundays, using a violin bow. The music "sounds like a beautiful whistle."

Gunaratne is the assistant news editor for the "Daily News" in Colombo, Ceylon. It is the largest English-language daily paper in the country, and has a circulation of 55,000. The company also publishes papers in the Sinhalese and Tamil languages.

He has a degree in economics from the University of Ceylon, which has about 10,000 students. The university follows the British system (Ceylon is a former British colony) and does not offer journalism.

Ceylon is an independent country on an island south of India. Since he is from a tropical country, Gunaratne found it quite exciting to see light both day and night and to be able to walk on the (frozen) ocean.

He had a chance to travel by dog team in Wainwright, and enjoyed it very much. He regretted having to leave Barrow just as the whaling was starting—he wanted to see the blanket-tossing ceremony after a whale is caught.

He was surprised to find that the Eskimo people in Wainwright drink a lot of tea—Ceylon is a major producer of tea.

Ceylon also has its native population, the Vedhas, he said. These people speak a different dialect than the rest of the country, and are gradually being integrated into the rest of the population. There are only a few hundred of them in a total population of 11 million.