
THE PLANTATION PEOPLE OF SRI LANKA

TOWARDS A STUDY OF COLONIALISM AND OTHER SOCIAL

VARIABLES AFFECTING THEIR STATUS AND ROLE

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Since the end of the first half of the last century, the Tamil plantation people figure importantly in the multi-ethnic structure of the population of Sri Lanka. The official Censuses of Population since 1911 refer to them unfortunately as Indian Tamils. Before the 1911 Census, all previous Censuses include the 19th century Tamil immigrants in the single category of Tamils. By 1911 it was obviously clear that the last wave of immigrants would not be rolled back and it was specific enough to warrant separate listing. Not all the Indian Tamils live on the plantations but the great majority of them do.

There are records from early times of successive waves of immigrants from India to the island. It may even be that the first humans who inhabited the island were not the autochthonous but were those who came over in the pre-historic era from peninsular India. From the 6th to the 4th century B. C. there is evidence of immigrants into the island from the Gangetic plain. In later centuries many that came from South India to fight and conquer remained to trade and colonize. From about the 8th century A. D. there is evidence of Arab-Moorish migration mainly, it would seem, from the Malabar coast. Closer to the modern period there were waves of immigration from South India, probably of specific castes for specific labour requirements, and some of these with the passage of times lost Tamil and acquired Sinhalese identity. There can be no doubt that the ethnic origins of the overwhelming majority of the people now living in the island are Indian and it is highly probable that the origins of the great majority are South Indian.

Finally in the 19th century and through the 4th decade of the 20th century came the last recorded wave of Indian immigration into the island. This wave carried into the country the Tamil plantation people of contemporary Sri Lanka. They began to arrive in the island not long after the British conquest of Kandy. *'The mountain zone,'* wrote Tennent, *which for centuries had been mysteriously hidden from the Portuguese and the Dutch was suddenly opened to British enterprise in 1815 ... and British capitalists introduced the cultivation of coffee into the previously inaccessible highlands ... By the Sing-*

*halese of the maritime provinces, long familiar with the energy and enterprise of Europeans, these results are regarded with satisfaction. But the Kandyan, brought into more recent contact with civilization, look on with uneasy surprise at the effect it is producing. The silence of their mountain solitudes has been broken by the din of industry, and the seclusion of their villages invaded by bands of hired labourers from the Indian coast.*¹

There were several reasons why the British planters had to meet their requirements of labour from supplies in South India, but the fundamental one behind all the others is that the Kandyan villagers were unwilling to accept permanent employment on the British estates. That the Kandyans looked on '*with uneasy surprise*' is an understatement. The presence of the foreign British and the whole plantation enterprise caused deep resentment which erupted in violent insurrection in 1817 and in 1848. To the extent that the '*hired labourers from the Indian coast*' accepted employment in the enterprise they were also to be objects of resentment.

Reluctance or outright refusal of the local population to accept employment on the foreign-owned colonial plantation or extractive industry enterprises is by no means peculiar to the plantation enterprise in Sri Lanka. In his excellent study, *The Export Economies*, Jonathan Levin notes that '*where an indigenous population existed it was generally indisposed to take up wage labour in mines or plantations.*'² But even Levin, succumbing to the standard western stereotypes of Asian and Africans, errs when he seeks reasons for the unavailability of local labour. '*The chief obstacle to availability of local labour lay in the character of the existing local economy. The indigenous subsistence culture was usually a self-contained social and economic unit, creating in its members only those social and economics wants which it was traditionally able to satisfy. A demand for goods which only money could buy did not exist among members of these subsistence economies and there was no incentive to earn money wages in the export industries. A demand for money and money goods was to arise only later, through contact with the merchandise and culture of the outside world.*'³ Even the best of western writers find it difficult completely to shed the blinkers of western intellectual chauvinism!

Certainly, so far as Sri Lanka is concerned, the two classical reasons given by western writers for the unavailability of local labour for the 18th century plantations, namely, the Levin argument of a non-monetized economy and its resultant culture and the congenial laziness of the Sinhalese peasant,⁴ are without foundation in fact.

S. B. de Silva in his recent book has adduced several pages of evidence of the use of money in the pre-British period in the Kandyan region and concludes as follows: '*I have shown how in Sri Lanka the extensive and relatively complex commercial and monetary transactions in the Kandyan Kingdom before the British conquest invalidate the commonplace view that it was unfamiliarity with money which made the Kandyan peasants reluctant to be drawn into the plantation system.*'⁵

Congenital laziness and indolence is an argument often used to justify the coercion and harsh treatment of labour. The argument is at best impressionistic, is not supported by facts, and is often adduced with noticeable lack of conviction. In the early Sinhalese Kingdoms of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa

and in the construction of the ancient irrigation systems, the Sinhalese rural population in fact displayed a degree of creativity and energy at least equal to what the plantations required. And, in our time, the Sinhala peasant exhibits a rhythm of work that is often different from that of an urban worker, but — given fair treatment — the peasant is by no means lazy or indolent.

Indeed, it is not true that the Sinhalese categorically refused wage-labour on the plantations. Not only did they exhibit their innate prowess as woodsmen in the initial clearing of the forests to make way for the plantations — of this there is sufficient evidence; they also accepted employment on the plantations in numbers that are not inconsiderable. It is true that where they accepted such work, they preferred not to accept residence on the plantation, but to commute from their village base; that they were less willing to work in unaccustomed cold and hill-country climates than in the mid-country and low-country; that they were relatively more present in rubber and coconut plantations than on tea. But many did accept work on the plantations and, when they did, they worked efficiently and were not less productive than Tamil workers.⁶

The Sinhalese showed reluctance to work on the plantations for reasons that were valid and justifiable. Plantation wages were usually lower than what they were in the peasant sector. Own-garden farming was often found to be more profitable than working for the low wages given on the plantations. There was much defaulting of wages on the plantations while the *kanganis* (labour gang supervisors) and labour contractor often arrogated to themselves a part of the wages due to the workers. Finally, the peasants quite rightly preferred the freedom of the village to the regimentation and near slavery of the plantation.

If the Sinhalese peasants showed reluctance and even repugnance in the matter of accepting plantation wage labour, neither could the British rulers have been enthusiastic about enlisting them for permanent service on the estates. The great rebellion of 1817 and the rebellion of 1848⁷ took place in the Kandyan provinces and the British could not but have noted the deep dissatisfaction of the people with their rule. Not by any means would all the British planters have agreed with De Quincey's damning description of the 19th century Kandyans as '*a desperate variety of the tiger-man, agile and fierce, but smooth, insinuating, and full of subtlety as a snake.*'⁸ But when the Sinhalese refused to work and an alternative source of labour offered itself in South India, the British planters were doubtless greatly relieved. Compared with the Kandyans, the South Indians were '*a peaceable and easily governed race.*'⁹ And Michael Stenson, writing sensitively about the Indian workers in Malaysia, says sombrely: '*Recruited largely from the untouchable (or adi-dravida) castes of South Indian society, the Tamil and Telugu labourers were probably the most obedient, indeed, servile labourers then available in the colonial world ... They were ideally suited to a form of production that had been initiated with slave labour ...*'¹⁰ The British in Malaysia preferred the Indians to the Chinese and the Malays; in Sri Lanka they preferred the Indians to the Sinhalese.

A very brief historical background of the Tamil plantation people in Sri

Lanka is necessary. This history may be divided into four periods:

- (i) The Beginnings: c. 1820 - c. 1870
- (ii) Consolidation: c. 1870 - 1948
- (iii) Post-Independence: 1948 - 1964
- (iv) The Inter-Governmental agreements and Land Reform: 1964 to the present day.

The Beginnings: c. 1820 - c. 1870

The task assigned to the first South Indian labourers who came to Ceylon in the first quarter of the 19th century was road-building and the construction and maintenance of works of public utility. But even before the work on the Kandy road was complete, Governor Edward Barnes and, with the help of Barnes, George Bird, opened the first coffee plantations not far from Kandy. Labour for the plantations was imported from South India.

These early immigrants came with certain clear characteristics of class, social status, religion, language, ethnic customs and practices which were to persist with the same identifiable clarity until the final drying up of the immigration stream in the late fourth and in the fifth decade of the 20th century.

Not only the social characteristics of the immigrants but the process of immigration through the *kangani* or labour-recruiter system remained substantially unchanged for several decades. The hardships endured by the immigrants in the first period recall those endured by the African slaves in the heyday of the slave trade. There were several factors that caused their extreme suffering. First there were the rigours of the sea voyage and the 130-160 miles long immigrant trail from Talaimannar to the estates through harsh territory and sharply contrasting climates. Second, the utter inadequacy of the medical facilities enroute from their South Indian villages to the Sri Lankan estates. There was a high incidence of cholera and small pox (which also spread from the immigrants to the poor peasant inhabitants of the areas which the immigrants had to traverse before reaching the estates). Furthermore, the evils of the *kangani* system and the absence of effective wage legislation prompted the labourer to go working even if ill or too utterly weak to work. Third, there was the planters' callous neglect. Large Agency Houses like Ackland, Boyd and Company or Hudson, Chandler and Company depended on European overseers and Superintendents to run the estates. These were often non-commissioned officers of regiments stationed in Ceylon, with much brawn but little brain, with complexes of colour and racial superiority, often cruel and sometimes of loose morals.

Caste, class and social status oppressed the immigrants in their South Indian society. They contributed to the acceptance of oppression on the journey and

to the maintenance of the state of oppression once they reached journey's end in the plantations of Sri Lanka.

Consolidation: c. 1870 - 1948

The first major plantation crop introduced by the British was coffee. However from the 1840's British planters began experiments with the cultivation of tea, guided by the experience of British tea planters in India. By the late 1860s and in the 1870s the first large tea plantations appeared in the Central Highlands. When coffee progressively succumbed to disease in the 1870s and 1880s, tea was therefore more than able to step into the breach.

While coffee, since it was a seasonal crop, did not require a permanent resident labour force, the cultivation of tea, since it was a perennial crop, led to the setting up of a permanent resident labour force on the estates. Housing – though of a most rudimentary and insanitary type – was provided on the estates in the form of long rectangular blocks divided into ill-ventilated rooms with one room per family. Medical facilities – again the most basic only, and, even these, often unsatisfactorily – were provided on the better managed estates. Schools – the object of which was child-minding rather than child education – were established on the estates. Various legislative measures were passed, sometimes ostensibly to protect the workers but practically of little use or, at least in implementation, more favourable to the employers than to the workers. The hierarchical and quasi-military system of plantation management of which the British had prior experience in the Caribbean and which they were later to carry into Malaysia was introduced with the intention of maximum efficiency and profit but with scant regard for the humanity of the worker. During this period, though an effort was made to mitigate the worst excesses of the earlier period, there was yet a consolidation of the process of alienation of the worker and a strengthening of a plantation social structure so all-embracing and pervasive as to defy substantial change up to the present day.

Change may have come from a plantation trade union movement which began in the second half of the third decade of the 20th century under the charismatic leadership of a South Indian Brahmin, Natesa Aiyar. He linked with A. E. Goonesinha, the urban labour leader, and indeed soon became Vice-President of Goonesinha's Labour Union for a short period. Unfortunately, the linkage between the two leaders did not last long. The growing economic crisis and depression of 1929-1933 made Goonesinha infuse Sinhalese populism into working class politics. This and the depression which made it more difficult to win demands on the plantations crippled the nascent estate worker movement. There was a revival of unionism on the estates with the entry of the brilliant young marxists into the plantation areas in the second half of the 4th decade. The LSSP (Lanka Sama Samaja Party, red.) in particular made great headway on the estates and was at this stage determinedly anti-communist. But if the first stage of estate unionism was broken by depression, the second was broken by war. War drove the marxist leaders either underground or into

exile. When they returned at the end of the war, they found that the Ceylon Indian Congress had taken root on the plantations and the workers were less open to marxist unions. With the loss of citizenship and the right of franchise soon after Dominion Status, the estate workers became political expendable to Sinhalese union and political leaders. The Labour Union of the Ceylon Indian Congress which later became the Ceylon Workers' Congress and the Democratic Workers' Congress had an uncontested hegemony in the plantations and served in the decades to come to mark the plantation labour movement with the stamp not so much of class as of occupation, language and ethnicity.

Post-Independence: 1948 - 1964

In 1948 Sri Lanka, after four and a half centuries of foreign rule, received Dominion Status from the British Government. The social classes to which power was transferred in Sri Lanka — as in several other Asian and African countries obtaining independence in the postwar period — could be relied upon not to make radical changes in the social structure which benefitted them. The structure of organization and management of the plantations therefore continued unchanged. Indeed, the plantation workers, as a group, received no benefits from Dominion Status. As an ethnic group, Dominion Status brought them only new and serious disabilities.

Indeed, the first clear signs of impending disaster came at the time of the Donoughmore Commission towards the end of the 1920s. The Commissioners soon declared their intention of recommending universal adult franchise. When the Sri Lankan leaders of the time and the classes which they represented were finally forced by the Commissioners to accept it, they continued successfully to oppose its full and free extension to a special category of persons: the 19th century South Indian immigrants and their descendants, most of whom were plantation workers. They succeeded in their demand that this category of persons should, in addition to domicile, also have the special qualification of a '*certificate of permanent settlement*' in order to be able to exercise the franchise. In practice, most of the immigrants who received the franchise, obtained it under the ordinary qualifications of '*domicile of origin or of choice*' and only 2 percent sought the extra certificate. Nearly 100,000 19th century immigrants gained the right to vote.

The Sinhalese leaders retaliated by tightening the procedures of the registration of these voters. With the revision of the electoral registers the number of Indian voters which had risen in 1939 to 225,000 fell to 168,000 in 1943. In spite of this, at the crucial General Elections of 1947, the Tamil estate workers won out 6 of the 7 seats which their party — the Ceylon Indian Congress — contested and in certain other constituencies they seem to have voted for non-United National Party candidates.

This finally closed the case against the Tamil estate population. No longer would the estate people be asked to produce proof of domicile or certificate

of permanent settlement. There was a simpler system. Let the Tamil plantation workers obtain citizenship if they wanted to vote! But, to make citizenship difficult for the Tamil estate workers and in many cases virtually impossible to obtain, the *Citizenship Acts* of 1948 and 1949 were passed. Dominion Status therefore inaugurated the status of statelessness for the plantation workers. The *Citizenship Acts* were followed by the *Parliamentary Elections (Amendment) Act* of 1949 which stated simply that anyone who was not a citizen would not qualify for the vote. With statelessness therefore came disfranchisement.

The Inter-Governmental Agreements and Land Reform: 1964 - the present day

So long as Nehru lived, India had held firmly to the position that the 19th century immigrants into Sri Lanka were the responsibility of Sri Lanka while Mother India would be willing sympathetically to continue to consider anyone of Indian origin who entirely of own volition and not through any direct or indirect compulsion wished to return.

However, only a few months after his death in 1964, the two Prime Ministers of Sri Lanka and India signed the first of the *Repatriation Agreements*. The second followed in 1974. Estimating that in 1964 there were at least 975,000 stateless persons in Sri Lanka — the bulk of whom were plantation workers and their families — the two Agreements stipulated that 375,000 with the natural increase 'will be granted Ceylon citizenship by the Government of Ceylon' while 'the Government of India will accept repatriation to India' of 600,000¹¹ with the natural increase. The two Agreements were games of numbers played in New Delhi and in Colombo without reference to the thousands of persons affected by them.

For most of the workers it was not a matter of repatriation, but of expatriation and in some cases of deportation. Even in a world where there has been so much else to hit the headlines, it is surprising that the Agreements, which heralded the largest organized worker migration of the 20th century, have gone so largely unnoticed.

The actual implementation of the Agreement of 1964 (which covered 825,000 persons) had to await the required enabling legislation which came only with the *Indo-Ceylon Agreement (Implementation) Act No. 14* of 1967. It would seem that the 1974 Agreement (covering the balance of 150,000 persons) would need another Act. Meanwhile, the Indian Government has taken up the position that on 31 October 1981 the period of implementation of both Agreements ended and that therefore from that date it would not entertain new applications for Indian citizenship.¹²

The hardships of repatriation during this period were compounded by those encountered by the plantation people in the aftermath of the *Land Reform Laws* of 1972 and 1975. Ostensibly anti-imperialist and socialist, in their actual implementation these laws worked against the interests of the Tamil plantation people, especially in those areas where the plantations were situated close to new Sinhala re-settlement schemes or where they were held to be suitable for peasant re-settlement in the future.

With repatriation and land reform there was still another factor imposing hardships on the plantation people during this period. This was the acute food shortages of 1972-1974. It is not difficult to understand that crises such as food scarcity bear most heavily on those sections of a population least able to withstand them. Consequently, it is not surprising that the plantation people suffered enormously from the crisis in food production and food distribution.

The factors of their class, ethnicity and the colonial heritage combined during this period not only to continue to maintain the plantation people in their secular disadvantage but also to add new elements of uncertainty and insecurity to their position in the demographic and social structure of the population of the island. To an examination of these and other factors we must now turn.

The draftees from South India came for the most part from the poverty-stricken villages of the districts of Trichinopoly, Salem, Madurai, Tanjore, North Arcot and South Arcot. In these villages, to the conditions of secular poverty and agrestic servitude of the lower classes to traditional landowning classes must be added the disrupting effects of western rule on the traditional way of life which, although undeniably oppressive of the poorer classes, still had inbuilt into it certain compensatory elements.

There is dispute about the level of wages in South India at the time in comparison with the wages offered on the plantations of Ceylon. Michael Roberts, citing also Dharma Kumar, asserts that *'the planters in Ceylon offered inducements through wages that were higher than those in India'*, while S.B. de Silva maintains that *'on the plantations of Sri Lanka the level of wages was lower than in South India from which labour was drawn'*. In both authors there is little to document comparative real wages. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that the majority of those who opted to leave their ancestral villages for other pastures across the sea were from the most oppressed sections of South Indian society of the time.

Oppression in India was not only economic but was also social. The main fount of such social oppression was caste. In his informative study of South Indian Tamil immigrants into Sri Lanka c. 1850 - c. 1940, R. Jayaraman states: *'A majority of them were Hindus and belonged to the Non-Brahman and Untouchable castes of Tamil country. (...) Adi-Dravida groups such as Pallans and Paraiyans have emigrated in large numbers, and constitute more than half the emigrants to Ceylon. Vellalans, Kallans, Ambalakkarans, Agamudaiyans and other Non-Brahman caste groups form the bulk of the other half.'*¹³ Then, as now, to be born an untouchable in India made oneself liable by that very fact to various forms of social oppression. Many must have hoped that emigration would see an end of economic and at least a weakening of social oppression. But it was not to be.

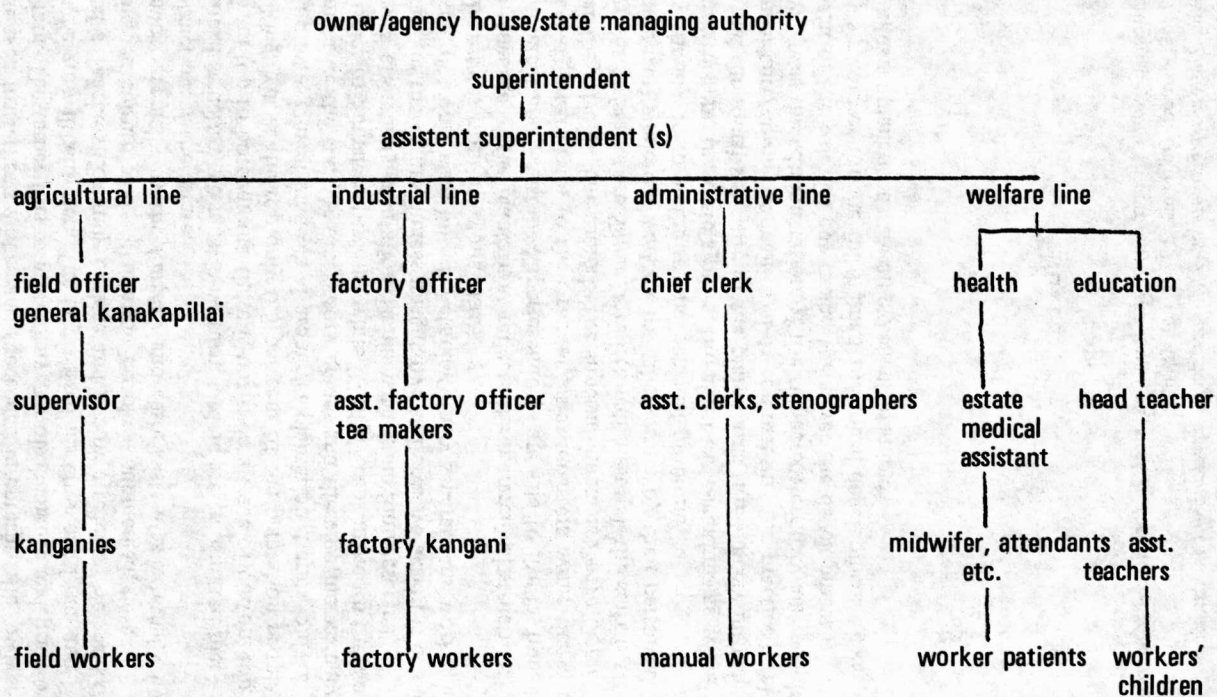
Jayaraman writes: *'My study shows that the traditional caste distinctions and caste practices still persist, and, on the whole, caste remains an important organizing principle among the Indian plantation workers in Ceylon.'*¹⁴ He lists eight reasons for the continuance of the caste structure of the South India Tamil immigrants in Sri Lanka which may usefully be summarized here: (1) large scale immigration by family identifies the caste of each

individual and prevents changing of caste; (2) the *kangani* (or labour supervisor) method of recruitment of labour gangs had the same effect as migration of the whole family; (3) the *kangani* system of labour-use in Sri Lanka also meant that those of one caste worked together under the same *kangani* (often of a higher caste) ¹⁵; (4) lack of diversification in the plantation system afforded little opportunity for changes in prestige and status; (5) estate-owners and *kanganis* found caste useful for maintaining a docile, even servile labour force; (6) religious observances on the estates often fortified class divisions; (7) the relative economic, social and political isolation of the plantation workers on their plantations isolated them from factors promoting change outside the plantations and deprived them of occupational, and hence of social mobility; (8) legislative measures of the Government of Sri Lanka precluded the plantation workers from acquiring property political and civic rights which would have facilitated change of social status.

The social oppression of caste and the economic oppression of class reinforced each other on the plantations as indeed takes place wherever caste is present in a class-structured society. The plantations did not destroy or weaken caste in either village or plantation. On the contrary, the British planters found in caste a convenient tool for exploitative and oppressive labour management processes of the plantation system. Caste was legitimized by the religious system of the numerically predominant Hindu plantation people but it is not possible within the confines of this article to comment further on the mechanisms of the religious legitimization of caste and social structure on the Sri Lankan plantations.

Caste was an explicit element in the recruitment of labour from South India and continued to be important for the management of labour even after such recruitment ceased at the end of the 1930s. The mechanism used for both recruitment and management was the *kangani* system. On most estates, or on divisions of large estates, there was a *head kangani* or several *head kanganis* and under the *head kanganis* there were *silera* or sub- or small *kanganis*. The *silera kangani* was the head of a small work gang while the *head kangani* was the leader of all the work gangs of all the *silera kanganis* working under him. The *kangani* consequently had great prestige and power in his dealings with the workers; vis-a-vis the management he was, at least until the trade unions were established, the workers' representative and spokesman. The *head kangani* and *silera kanganis* were often of a caste considered high and were hardly ever of a "lower" caste than the workers under them.

Illustrative of the oppressive dominance of the *kangani* is the following carefully checked instance. R was a boy considered very low on L estate in the high-grown tea country. His father was a worker on the estate and lived in a line-room. The boy was always at the top of his class in the estate school and was ambitious to continue his studies beyond Grade V which, like in all estate schools, was the highest grade in the school. The *kangani* who was of a caste considered high, fearing that the "low" caste boy would one day be a threat to his own authority on the Estate, dissuaded him from continuing his studies in the town school a few miles away. Having failed with the son,



the *kangani* prevailed upon the father whom his son dearly loved to stop his son's further education on the grounds that it was not filial for a son to aspire to become something bigger than his father. The son, however, went against even his father's wishes and succeeded in entering the town secondary school. The father was so grieved by the disobedience and pride of his son that he grew ill and died. The boy passed his Ordinary Level and finally entered a Teachers' Training College and is now a teacher. He speaks of the submerged culture of the plantation people — submerged, he explains, as much internally by the *Kangani* and caste system as externally by the social structure of the estate.

To this social structure we must now turn. Orders are transmitted hierarchically from top to bottom and there is not even a trace of bottom-top decision making. Yet at the top only 0.5 per cent of the plantation people constitute the management grades and are never plantation Tamils, only 2 per cent constitute the staff or supervisory grades and these go increasingly in modern times to Sinhalese persons, while 97.5 per cent make up the worker grades who are mainly plantation Tamils with some Sinhalese and Moors. In fact, in the future, unless imaginative and creative action is deliberately taken, not only class but also ethnicity may separate the worker grades on the estates from everyone else.

Even the language of the plantations reflects the hierarchical structure: the Superintendent and Assistant Superintendents are said to live in 'bungalows', the staff grades refer to their residences as 'quarters' while the workers say that they live in 'line-rooms'. The superintendent is *Periya Dorai* (Big Master), his assistants are *Sinna Dorais* (Small Masters), the staff is *Yiyyar* (Gentleman) while the workers are called either by their personal names or by the low form of the second personal pronoun.

The *kangani* system, the caste system, the allied caste-legitimizing religious system and the social structure of the plantations fitted nicely into the British colonial enterprise. The main goal of colonialism — in practice as also in theory — was the administration of the subjected territory and people for the benefit of the colonial power and was never the development of the territory's resources for the full human and social development of its people. Sri Lanka's plantations are an excellent example.

NOTES

- 1 J. E. Tennent, *Ceylon: An account of the island physical, historical and topographical* (1st ed. 1859; 6th ed. Dehiwela, 1977) Vol. II, 622.
- 2 J. V. Levin, *The export economies. Their pattern of development in historical perspective* (Massachusetts, 1960) 125.
- 3 J. V. Levin, *Export economies*, 126.
- 4 S. B. de Silva, *The political economy of underdevelopment* (London, 1982) 209