

Abstract

**Indebtedness and socio-cultural hierarchies on 19th Century Ceylon  
Plantations: Unfree Labour and Capitalism in South Asia**

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In contrast to slave and indenture labour that was deployed in the Caribbean and America South, 'free' migrant workers from South India developed the coffee and tea plantations in 19<sup>th</sup> century Ceylon. While the form of production was retained, prevailing global economic and political changes as well as local restructuring of production and power relations influenced the labour regime on the modern plantations. Important were the pressures by innovations in industry, finance and transport in the West, and the emergence of a large pool of poor and unemployed workers in South India who could be recruited in the absence of adequate local labour. Compulsion and coercion, features of the slave plantations however, continued characterise the labour regime of the modern plantations, but assumed new forms geared more directly to the generation of an elastic and cheap labour force in line with the dominant interests of the colonial state, finance capital and the planters. Key was use of debt bondage embedded in the systems of recruitment and labour deployment. The planters used intermediaries (*kanganies*) as labour contractors, to recruit destitute 'low caste' migrant workers from South India, providing them with advances that could rarely be paid as wages were low and infrequently paid, and successfully binding workers to the intermediary and plantation through ties of debt. They also involved the recruiters in the management of the workforce, transferring some of the costs of supervision and control to the intermediary, while guards, police and the judiciary prevented any escape. The pattern of recruitment, where groups travelled together from the same region, also allowed planters to consciously institutionalise socio-cultural hierarchies, such as those associated with religion, caste and patriarchal practices, in the labour regime and living arrangements of the workers to divide the workforce and counter collective action. Women workers occupied the lowest rungs of these hierarchies, undertaking the labour-intensive, repetitive, time-consuming tasks, receiving lesser pay and usually placed under male control, while doing unpaid reproductive work in the household. The combination of 'tried and tested' means of labour control as well as new forms of economic and extra-economic compulsion and legal coercion meant that 'unfree' labour continued to characterise the plantations even under laissez-faire capitalism under colonialism.

## **Indebtedness and socio-cultural hierarchies on 19th Century Ceylon Plantations: Unfree Labour and Capitalism in South Asia**

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While parts of Ceylon had been occupied under the aegis of the British East India Company from 1795, the whole island came under British administration in 1815. Coffee had previously been grown in the centre of the island on a small-holder basis, but its value rose with the abolishment of slavery in 1833 in important coffee-growing regions Jamaica, Dominica and Guiana as well as the removal of the preferential duties for Western Indian coffee in Britain. In Ceylon, the local government, based on the recommendations of a Commission of Inquiry in 1833, undertook the reforms to commercialise agriculture, through providing supportive infrastructure, passing favourable laws that abolished export duties on key commercial crops, and even providing land to prospective planters at low costs (Mendis 1956:xi) As a result there was a “great resort of Europeans to Ceylon” and “a large expenditure by them in the cultivation of coffee and sugar”<sup>1</sup> based on the ‘West India system of cultivation’ or plantation production (Ferguson 1893:64). Like their counterparts in the Caribbean and the America South, the planters in Ceylon faced the challenge of accessing sufficient labour for the large-scale cultivation of commercial crops, particularly with the end of slave trade in 1807 and the abolition of slavery in 1833 in the British colonies. Local labour was also not available as the early coffee plantations in Ceylon did not dispossess the peasantry from their land, and give rise to a group of workers who had to undertake wage work (Jayawardena 1960). And while local Sinhalese did undertake some piece work such as clearing the forests, they were not prepared to do the more regular work of coffee cultivation as they worked on village agriculture (vanden Driesen 1982:3).

This paper analyses the nature of the labour regime that emerged on plantations in Ceylon in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It shows how global political, economic and technical transformations as well as local structural changes meant that plantation production became increasingly geared to promoting the the profitability of corporate and finance capital, leading to intensified pressure on minimising labour costs. What emerged was circulatory migration to service the cultivation needs of plantations, which was different and distinguished in character and form the employment of indentured or slave labour from Africa, which took on a more permanent form. The forms of compulsion, inherent in the use of slave and indentured labour were retained and complemented with new forms of compulsion and coercion. The case of Ceylon shows how planters, with the support of the state, used local labour contractors, or *kanganies*, to secure the necessary labour, enforce debt bondage and manage the workers on the plantations. The pattern of group migration allowed planters, with the help of *kanganies*, to institutionalise local socio-cultural hierarchies, such as those associated with religion, caste and patriarchal practices, in the labour regime and living arrangements of the workers to divide and control the workers. Women workers experienced multiple patriarchies; they occupied the lowest rungs of these

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<sup>1</sup> SLNA. 4/193, Anstruther to Colonial Secretary of State, 23 November 1840.

hierarchies, undertaking the labour-intensive, repetitive, time-consuming tasks, receiving lesser pay and usually placed under male control, while doing unpaid reproductive work in the household. The paper shows how the combination of 'tried and tested' and new forms of economic, extra-economic and legal coercion reflected in the words of the social reformer and politician P. Arunachalam, Ceylon's "own form of slavery" (1936: 217). In these ways, 'unfree' labour was incorporated into plantation, ironically with the support of the colonial state that upheld the ideology of laissez-faire capitalism.

### **The industrial Plantation, Compulsion and Labour Costs**

The early plantations in the Atlantic regions were developed during the mercantilist period and reflected the priorities of the feudal state in Europe. While the form and structure of the slave plantations of the Caribbean and America South were retained, the nature of the labour regime on the 19<sup>th</sup> century plantations in Ceylon could be viewed as the historical outcome of transactions and interactions at various levels with different groups and power relations, reflecting what Warren has labelled as a 'zone' where communities and ethnic groups were influenced by internal social and cultural changes as well as economic and political changes in the global world signifying a "history without borders" (Warren 2007: xviii).

The logic of plantations changed with the increasing hegemony of the industrial bourgeoisie from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and spread of more liberal and laissez-faire ideologies in the West. The rise of industrial capitalism in the West, while opening up possibilities for the growth of global commodity production, led to colonies being viewed as sources of cheap raw material and food that could keep down the level of wages in England. The British state was also keen to generate funds to cover the military and other expenses associated with ruling the colony. Innovations in shipping, railways, vehicles and roads meant labour, goods and other services could be transported to the peasant hinterland, and plantations could be developed in places where local labour not available. These links between commercial enterprises and the industrial developing in the West gave rise to what Courtenay has labelled as the 'industrial plantation', which in effect was a segment of the industrial world economy of the period, operating in the expanding world periphery, as well as, in many cases, replacing the traditional plantation in the older "inner periphery" of tropical America (Courtenay 1980:76).

The accompanying development of firms resulted, particularly in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in 'sterling' companies promoting the 'industrial plantation' in Asia, distinguished by the high involvement of risk capital which they raised on the London market, having to compete for resources with alternative forms of investment, and being successful only if investors could expect a sufficiently high return after the costs of clearing the land and buying the necessary labour and capital were taken into account (Courtenay 1980:55-56). As the companies developed, they often turned to Agency Houses and Brokering Firms to 'manage' their plantations on a commission basis rather than handle their affairs from a distance, resulting in the dominance of finance and merchant capital not only managing of plantations and employing expatriate managers but also taking care of the brokering and shipping of the commodities. The net outcome of these changes was that producers in the colonies were essential 'price-takers' and had little influence on

the international market value of their products. Under these circumstances, controlling labour costs within their domain, assumed significance.<sup>2</sup>

Considerable research had been done on the use of compulsion to access and control labour on plantations. The Dutch ethnologist Herman Jeremias Nieboer has argued that compulsion was required to procure labour in contexts of 'open resources' and 'scarc labour', an extreme form being the use of slave labour (Nieboer 1900). As plantations had historically developed in contexts of 'open resources', compulsion was manifested in the capture, recruitment, transport and control of slaves from Africa. In a similar vein, and using James Watson's typology of "open" and "closed" types of slave systems, Anthony Reid has argued that slavery as a phenomenon in Southeast Asia, which could assume different forms, were linked to the relatively low levels of population in comparison with the needs of the booming spice trade of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, as a result of which control over manpower became "the index to power" (2018:1463). Such controls often assumed different forms of bondage ranging from pure chattel slavery to debt bondage, and linked to prevailing social relations of power and the nature of the state and situated within existing social relations of power and the state. He emphasised that, while different reasons led to bondage, such inheritance, capture in war, judicial punishments and failure to meet debts, latter was the "most fundamental source of Southeast Asian slavery".

Coercion and force were used to restrict their mobility of workers and manage them for plantation cultivation often with these assuming forms of physical punishment and the use of guards to prevent escape leading scholars to characterise slave plantations as 'enclave units', 'total institutions' and 'instruments of force' (Wolf 1959:136).<sup>3</sup> The abolition of slavery however did not result in the end of compulsion. Kloosterboer tested Nieboer's theses in non-slave circumstances and concluded that, with some codification, the need for compulsion was equally applicable in the post-slavery period in 'open resource' contexts (1960:206-215) including relying on debt bondage, decrees against vagrancy forcing vagrants to work on plantations if they were unable to pay a fine as well as enforcing various types of penal sections to access labour (Kloosterboer 1960:191). In addition, famines in the wake of droughts, floods, failure of crops also resulted in people selling their children into bondage as a means of survival (Allen 2018:1439). All these circumstances suggest that the notions of 'choice' and 'free labour', applied in economics discipline as characteristic of individuals under capitalism are not applicable to plantation labour. Allen has demonstrated in this regard the importance of recognising "the existence of increasingly integrated networks of free and unfree or forced migrant labour within and beyond the confines of the Indian Ocean world by the late eighteenth century" (2012:8)

Compulsion existed also in the employment of indentured labour that replaced slavery in the Caribbean after it was abolished in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the bulk of whom were

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<sup>2</sup> This paragraph is based on a more detailed section in Kurian 1989: 8-10).

<sup>3</sup> The notion that plantations were essentially enclave units used by the New World Group of Caribbean scholars, including Best, Beckford, Girvan, Thomas, Brewster and Jefferson (for a review of their theories see Benn 1974:249- 260).

transported from China, Java and the Indian subcontinent (Campbell 1923, Horton 1942; Tinker 1974). Labelled as “A New System of Slavery<sup>4</sup>”, Hugh Tinker has powerfully critiqued the “exile into bondage” of indentured workers where they were forced to work in a “lifeless system, in which human values always mattered less than the drive for production, for exploitation” (1974:60). According to Tinker, the “world of slavery still survived; the plantation was a world apart, on its own, subject to the laws –or whims –of those in charge: the overseers and the manager or the proprietor” (1974:177). The ‘Tinkerian paradigm’ has come under criticism as not fully recognising the nuances, complexities, and differences in the experiences of indentured labour (Allen: 226). At the same time, there is little doubt on the fact that compulsion was necessary and used by the planters and the state to keep them as a ‘captive’ labour force on the plantations.

But compulsion and coercion also involved financial outlays with planters having to bear the costs of recruitment and transport of workers, as well as controlling and extracting maximum work from them on the plantations, and ensuring that they did not leave or run away. As slave trade became more expensive planters attempted to force female slaves to bear more children to reproduce the workforce, involving violence and compulsion as many of them resisted these pressures (Tinker 1974:11; Reddock 1985). In the case of slave and indentured labour, it also meant that planters had to maintain permanent workers, even if they were not fully occupied as in lean seasons, and in the case of slaves providing some even when they were old and unable to work.). While these outlays were acceptable under feudalism, they increased in significance with the development of capitalism. The cost of maintaining slaves was taken into consideration by both state and companies from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century up to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with increased support for the use of ‘free’ labour (Allen 2014 :11). Kloosterboer has argued that the degree to which compulsion changed was dependent on how much it could be transferred away from the costs on the estate. She concluded that while “ethical considerations” influenced the abolition of slavery, the most important motive was one of an” economic-commercial nature” (Kloosterboer 1960:215).

By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, another system of labour recruitment emerged in India that allowed for new forms of compulsion and the transference of its costs away from the local producers. This involved planters hiring migrant workers by using the services of a labour contractor, who travelled with them and was involved in supervising and effectively controlling them on the plantations. This form of form of recruitment – seen as compatible with the laissez-faire idea of ‘free’ labour, in effect functioned to bond the worker to the intermediary and plantation through ties of debt. Gail Omvedt has argued that while indenture involved a formal debt to the planter, this was replaced in the new system by an informal debt bondage to the intermediary labour contractors (Omvedt 1980:192). According to her, planters ever preferred this method as it provided more workers and better control over labour.

..the labour-contractor took over most of the employers' functions of control and supervision, and the labour force - often recruited from the same village and family

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<sup>4</sup> This quote is attributed to Lord John Russell 25 February 1840, and used by Hugh Tinker as the part of a quote in the beginning of his book “A New System of Slavery” (1974).

group - worked as a more tightly knit unit. In addition, it appears that the open, widespread recruiting associated with the indenture system could not (at the level of wages paid to the workers) produce sufficient labourers in the way the labour-contractors could through their links with the village areas of recruitment (Omvedt 1980:193).

This type of group migration, as we shall see in the case of Ceylon, also allowed the retention of caste and religious groupings even in the new setting and the use of controls within these domains, including prevailing patriarchal norms and practices, which could be inserted and institutionalised in the plantation labour regime. Furthermore, and unlike the prevalence of individual owners of the early slave period, the management of plantations was increasingly replaced by employees of firms and agency houses whose bonuses were dependent on the yearly profits and who had little compunction of using harsh methods to maximum short-term profits in the short period of their stay, no doubt an incentive being that their bonuses were dependent on the yearly profits. The following sections highlight some of the ways in which these elements resulted in 'unfree' labour being incorporated in the Ceylon plantations.

### **Plantations in 19<sup>th</sup> century Ceylon**

As noted earlier, the need to access sufficient and cheap labour was an urgent concern for the Ceylon planters and the colonial state from the 1830s. While the coffee plantations required relatively less labour and even a temporary workforce as it had peak demands, the demand for labour increased considerably with the development and expansion of tea plantations in the 1880s. But the early plantations did not disturb the ties of the local peasantry to the land as they were grown on relatively higher altitudes and therefore did not result in the so-called primitive accumulation of capital that, in its classic form, released wage labour for commercial purposes. The search for labour took the planters to the famine-prone districts in the Madras Presidency in South India, where a large group of largely 'low-caste persons experienced destitution and were prepared to undertake plantation work as a means of survival. (Hjejle 1967). Gough's study of Thanjavur, an important source of labour for the Ceylon plantations, showed that the systematic recruiting of labour to Ceylon from the 1830s was also facilitated by the legal freeing of slaves in India allowing agents to beguile or kidnap poor landless labour from the region, while allowing southern Indian landlords to retain a sufficient labour force through debt bondage while it relieved them of the encumbrance of a looking after destitute peasants (1981:119-121). The workers were not willing to migrate to work on the Ceylon plantations if other means of livelihood were available (Kurian 1989:59).

The local government in Ceylon was familiar with the option of using indenture labour as in the British colonies in the Caribbean. Governor Barnes hired some 150 indentured workers in 1828 from South India to develop his own plantation but they deserted within a year (Kumar 1965: 129). By 1839, and as a result of what was viewed as more "systematic recruitment" around 2,432 indentured workers were hired and legislation was enacted allowing planters to take action against workers who deserted but as "desertion was difficult to check when the homeland was so near" the indenture system had to be given up (ibid). The colonial government also recognized that the "great deficit

of Ceylon” was the “scarcity of population”<sup>5</sup> which could work on the plantations, and was keen to support ways of attaining the labour.

The proximity of Ceylon to the Indian sub-continent, as well as the use of South Indian labour for the building public works and in service of the officers in the army, influenced planters in their search for workers to develop the plantations. <sup>6</sup> The planters found a pool of destitute workers in the famine-prone regions in South India, where large numbers of ordinary villagers, as a result of British colonial policies between 1770 and 1850, were chronically indebted to landlords and city moneylenders and desperately needed money for their survival. The planters were able to persuade these workers to migrate to Ceylon to work on the plantations, with estimates suggesting 90 per cent of workers to the Ceylon plantations originated from the Madras Presidency between 1871 and 1891 (Kumar 1965:129). While the initial migration was of a seasonal and temporary measure, methods were used to ensure that a more permanent and more cost-effective workforce than indenture or slave labour was employed on these plantations.

The workers were also aware of the difficulties of the voyage and the demanding conditions of work from persons who had already made the trek. Sir Emerson Tennent, the Colonial Secretary in-charge of Ceylon in 1847 wrote about how workers were often exposed to disease, fever and dysentery, and even be left to die, “without the care of an attendant or even the shelter of a roof.”<sup>7</sup> He noted that these workers had little choice of place of work or seasonality of employment as they were caught between the dictates of debt bondage and plantation capitalism. It was therefore only during famines or droughts that destitute peasants in the region, faced with a Hobson’s choice between starvation in South India or having a chance of survival under difficult circumstances migrated to work on the Ceylon plantations.<sup>8</sup> When conditions for rice cultivation in India were favourable and there were possibilities for the workers to make an adequate living in India, they remained in the country while emigration also increased during periods of famine in South India as in 1877-78. At the same time, the ‘mobility’ of the workers was also restricted by their bonds of indebtedness to the local landlords who ‘released’ them to find employment elsewhere only when they found it convenient (Kurian 1989:109). All these factors meant that the early migration was male, and not reliable or regular. It also meant that controls through indebtedness were endemic in their lives.

Recognising the need to stimulate the migration of workers for the plantations, the Ceylon colonial government passed the Ordinance No. 15 of 1858, with the specific purpose of “encouraging and improving the immigration of coolies from the south of India”<sup>9</sup> and created the Immigrant Labour Commission, the latter being very active from the second half

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<sup>5</sup> SLNA. 4/193. Despatch. Anstruther to Col. Secy. Of State, Nov. 23, 1840. (London).

<sup>6</sup> SLNA. 5/2. North to Hobart, Dispatches, 3 Oct. 1804 and 5 Oct. 1804.

<sup>7</sup> SLNA 3/34 Pt I Tennent to Grey, Dispatch No.6 (Misc).21 April 1847.

<sup>8</sup> The Police Magistrate of Kegalle in 1845 (when 12 workers had died on the road in June of that year) asked the police to cover the Colombo-Kandy road and safeguard passengers and give protection “to the unfortunate Malabar sick coolies, who deserted by their comrades mostly perish miserably in considerable number” (Dep 1982:251).

<sup>9</sup> Report of the *Immigrant Labour Commission of Ceylon* for the half-year ending 30 June 1859.

of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was in this process, that bonds of indebtedness became more significant in obtaining more labour and it was reflected in the use of advances to recruits. The Immigrant Labour Commission sent an Agent to south India to “employ native agents to collect coolies to whom he will make small advances on account of private individuals who may lodge money with the Commission for that purpose, by which means he will be able in a short time to determine if this plan can be permanently adopted.”<sup>10</sup> In time, this developed into what came to be known as the Kangany system of recruitment, and the most important way in which workers migrated from the region to work on the Ceylon plantations.

### **‘Advances’ and the Kangany System of Recruitment**

During the early period there were instances when workers would form themselves into gangs ranging from 25-100 persons, and select from among themselves a leader, or a *kangany*, who would “conduct their journeys, negotiate their engagements, superintend their labour and receive in return a trifling proportion of their pay.”<sup>11</sup> In time however, the kangany system of recruitment was systematically developed by the planters, advances became embedded in the recruitment of labour, and a means of ensuring adequate, cheap and disciplined labour. The *Kanganies* were given advances by planters for the voyage and other expenses and were encouraged to recruit labour for the Ceylon plantations. The majority of these *kanganies* went to their own villages, to secure this labour from among their relatives and friends. Some *kanganies* also advanced money to their recruits for their transportation and other costs on the condition that this would be repaid when they received their wages (Kurian 1989:91).

Advances were important in persuading workers, who were otherwise reluctant to make the journey, to migrate for plantation work, with some workers even being sent by their families who used the advances to pay local debt, while landlords also took these advances to redeem workers’ debt, (Wenzlhuemer 2008: 250). There were also instances of abuse and kidnapping (ibid). There were also situations when the *kangany* himself did not go to India to recruit, but remitted money obtained for this purpose to his relatives who would recruit for him and dispatch the workers. In this way, old *kangany* gangs increased in number and new *kangany* gangs came into existence (Majoriebanks and Marakkayar 1917:2). By the 1870s when the coffee cultivation was at its peak, a hierarchy also emerged among the *kanganies*, where a head *kangany* controlled several sub-*kanganies* (Wenzlhuemer 2008:250).<sup>12</sup>

While seasonal and circulatory labour was sufficient to meet the needs of coffee plantations, the development and spread of tea plantations in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century required a more permanent workforce. To support the planters the state passed laws and regulations to govern relations between employers and employees. The most prominent of these were the Master-Servant Laws (under ordinance No. 5 of 1841) which

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<sup>10</sup> SLNA. 6/2644. Robert Dawson, Secy. Of the Immigrant Labour Commission, to Colonial Secretary: 11 August 1859.

<sup>11</sup> SLNA. 3/34. Pt. I. Desp. No. 6 (Misc.) Tennent to Grey, 21 April, 1947.

<sup>12</sup>Roland Wenzlhuemer, 2008, *From Coffee to Tea Cultivation in Ceylon, 1880-1900: An Economic and Social History*, Leiden, Koninklijke Brill NV.



introduced labour contracts for up to one, and later (under Ordinance No. 11 of 1865) for up to three years. What emerged under these circumstances, as analysed below, was the increasing use of worker indebtedness to tie the workers to meet the labour needs of plantation production.

### **Indebtedness and the Labour Regime**

The system of advances associated with the Kangany system of recruitment meant that workers began their lives in debt, as they had to pay for the expenses of the voyage. Moreover, since this money was advanced through the kangany, the worker was “virtually the servant of the kangany.”<sup>13</sup> The management used the hold of the Kangany over the workers in managing and controlling them on the plantations. The head kangany was a key figure in the control and management of plantation labour. The management paid him a certain amount of money for each worker he brought across to Sri Lanka. In turn, he was the acknowledged and *de facto* leader of this labour force.<sup>14</sup> In addition to his function as recognized head of his own labour force, the kangany also supervised work in the fields. For this task, he was paid ‘head money,’ a sum he received for each worker who reported to work. In this way, the kangany (and through him, the sub-kangany) played a crucial role in the daily turn-out and in organizing the daily labour force, a task for which he had, in turn, to be paid. He also received a fixed salary for other ‘special duties’<sup>15</sup>

The kangany also controlled the labour force under him in other ways. It was not uncommon for the Head Kangany to run the estate shop; where “the workers were the victims of all the evils of the ‘truck system’” (a system also prevalent in Britain where the workers’ needs were provided at the Company owned shop) The system was based on high prices and indebtedness to the shop-keeper who provided loans at high rates of interest” (Jayawardena 1972:17). He supervised and transacted all the financial affairs of the estate concerning ‘his coolies,’ even if he was not actually paying their wages. He was often the sole debtor to the estate, since he was the medium through whom all advances were made; in this role as lender, he worked through the medium of sub-kanganies, who worked on a day-to-day basis on individual debts. This system not only gave the head kangany a great deal of power, and possibilities to enrich himself. Even after workers became resident on the estates and the need for direct recruitment had disappeared, the kangany continued as “headman, patriarch, money-lender and shop-keeper”; he might be of some service both to the estate and the workers, but more often, “too many opportunities existed for tyranny, extortions and embezzlement.”<sup>16</sup>

Under the system, during periods of shortage of labour, the kangany would transfer a gang of labourers from one estate to another if the new employer paid the amount of the debts due to the kangany, which resulted in “a thoroughly objectionable form of peonage.” The worker was thus perpetually in debt to the kangany, who could: “transfer

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<sup>13</sup> SLNA. PF/24. Attorney General to Colonial Secretary, NO.364, Sept. 4, 1897.

<sup>14</sup> The description of the ‘Kangany system’ and the general structure of labour relies heavily on the *Report and Proceedings of the Labour Commission*, Colombo, 1908, headed by Sir Hugh Clifford.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Jayawardena 1972

him from estate to estate and enrich himself in the process. A kangany frequently gives notice to a Superintendent... even when the coolies do not wish to leave. They are practically intimidated by the kangany to whom they owe money.”<sup>17</sup> A witness at the 1908 Labour Commission said it was probable that some kanganies did not tell the workers what their debts were from year to year; and the Commissioners reported that “in many instances the labourer was made the victim of more or less deliberate fraud.”<sup>18</sup>

Indebtedness was also generated and sustained by the infrequency of payments. The method of payment in the early years of the plantation sector in Ceylon was such that one month’s wage was paid to the worker and his next month’s wage paid to the kangany, to be set off against the worker’s debts; it was a system which increased the opportunities for the swindling of illiterate workers (Jayawardena 1972:17). Even the Immigrant Labour Commission, which was primarily interested in recruiting more labour recognized the controls placed by the Kanganies on the workers through the system of advances. As early as 1859 it noted that . It noted that the:

Greatest evil of the system and which doubtless has had the most prejudicial effect on the supply of labour, however, is the loss which the coolly sustains in the extortion practiced by the Kanganis when making advances to him, or in being compelled to make good the advances received by other coolies who may have died on their way to their place of employment.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, the debts did not cease to exist with the absconding of the person or even their death. The nature of the labour-relations system was such that the kangany would prevail on the relatives of the absconder (or the deceased) to take on the debt due. The workers appeared to have “a moral obligation” to discharge the debt, and the kangany who “would share their view of the situation, would find his own means of recovering the amount, either in Ceylon or in the villages of Southern India.”<sup>20</sup> The bond of indebtedness was a particular source of hostility, and by the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed increasing antagonism by workers against kanganies. In 1908 the evidence recorded by the Labour Commission of that year indicated that some workers often had little knowledge of the amount of their indebtedness to the kangany.

One of the reactions to the system of super-exploitation of the workers was the increasing incidence of ‘bolting’. Ordinance No. 11 of 1865, was enacted under which desertion was considered a breach of contract of service and declared to be a criminal offence punishable in a manner provided in the section. However, Section 23 of the Ordinance enabled the police magistrate to allow the deserter to return to his employer rather than be punished. As the incidence of bolting increased, there was growing concern about the fact that the pay advances (or the so-called indebtedness of the worker),

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<sup>17</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Labour Commission 1908

<sup>19</sup> Report of the Immigrant Labour Commission, Colombo, for the half-year ending 30 June 1859.

<sup>20</sup> *Report and Proceedings of the Labour Commission, 1908*, headed by Sir Hugh Clifford.

could not be recovered. The Planters' Association noted that if any action was taken against the kangany, he would simply disappear; if made bankrupt, "his gang was swallowed up in the gangs of his friends and relations" and the amount advanced, was thus lost.<sup>21</sup> Although the law was meant to formalize a contract of service between the employer and the worker, it was noted that it was the kanganies who were very much involved in this process. The Attorney General, in 1898, was to note:

In a very large number of cases the kanganies have availed themselves of the provisions of Section II for the purpose of recovering a civil debt by a criminal prosecution, and that often a debt which could not be recovered in a civil court owing to its being prescribed<sup>22</sup>.

As it was made understood, the prosperity of the agricultural districts depended "largely on the *proper control and discipline of the Labourers*." The Police Magistrates were encouraged to 'enforce vigorously provisions whereby the bolters would be reprimanded.'<sup>23</sup> However, as many of the persons had escaped back to India, warrants for their arrest extradition had to be enforced in conjunction with the government of India. This drew criticism on many grounds, and the Indian government upheld the fact that the local Magistrate was correct in refusing to extradite these persons.<sup>24</sup>

This problem of the workers' indebtedness and the role of the kangany in perpetuating it evoked much comment even in the later years. In 1931 the Indian Agent called it "the most distressing feature of the Indian labourers' life in Ceylon," and as "a most perplexing and seemingly insoluble problem," a problem that haunted the worker from birth to death.<sup>25</sup> The causes were the low wages, the method of payment, the illiteracy of the workers and the wish of the kangany's keenness to keep a hold on the workers by giving them loans. As the Indian Agent pointed out, "The head kangany on the estate naturally wished to keep a hold on his labourers, and in indiscriminately lending money to them, he finds a convenient means of achieving his object."<sup>26</sup>

The kangany, though prevented by law from recovering debts in the courts, was able to use "various means, fair and foul, for the recovery of his debts." Some of these extra-legal methods were the detention of the debtor's wife and children or goods, and trumped-up prosecutions for theft. The main breaches of the law involved the method of wage payment and the misuse of the discharge certificate system. The 'discharge certificate' was used by planters as a means of preventing the excessive mobility of estate labour. It was issued to workers when they left the estate; and through an agreement between planters, no estate would employ a worker without such a certificate. The effect of this system not only restricted the workers' freedom of movement, but enabled the kangany to

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<sup>21</sup> SLNA. PF/2693 a: *Times of Ceylon*, 2 November 1907, Report of a meeting of the Planters' Association of Ceylon held on November 1, 1907.

<sup>22</sup> SLNA. PF/24: Attorney General to Colonial Secretary, No.364. September 4, 1897

<sup>23</sup> SLNA. PF/24. Police Magistrate, Hatton, to Colonial Secretary, No. 20, March 11, 1898

<sup>24</sup> SLNA. PF/24. Letter from H. Luson, Deputy Secy. Government of India, to Colonial Secretary, (Colombo). 7 February 1898

<sup>25</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Jayawardena 1972:17

get the superintendents to withhold discharge certificates until the debt owed by workers to the kangany had been paid.

### **Socio-cultural hierarchies and multiple patriarchies**

In spite of plantations in Ceylon developing after the abolition of slavery, they continued the hierarchical practices based on race, colour and gender prejudices associated with the slave plantation. At the peak of the hierarchy was the planter who was a white British man, known as the *periya dorai*, (big master), supported by *sinna dorais* (small masters – also white and male), office staff that were Tamils or Euro-Asians from outside the estate who had an English education (Kurian 1989:99-101). Race and colour were reflected also in the residences of the different groups also reflected race and colour differences with the planter living in relatively palatial ‘bungalow’, his assistants in some less but still luxurious houses, with the office staff living in ‘quarters’ that were more like cottages. There was clear social demarcation between the staff and the planter and his assistants, with little or no social contact and reinforcing class, race and colour hierarchies. Workers formed the lowest rungs of this pyramid, under the authority of the management, and housed in barrack-like structures or ‘line-rooms’ with a metallic roof, the chief features of which included inadequate water and hygiene, and crowding. According to a contemporary planter, the workers “had objection to be packed tolerably close”, the cost of a line room being 5 pounds sterling while the ‘bungalow’ of the superintended was in the order of 500 pounds sterling (Sabonadiere 1866:66 cited in Kurian 1989:72).

In addition to these features of the classical slave plantations, the Ceylon planters used prevailing ideologies in religion and caste that emphasised social differences amongst the workforce. The Kangany system involving the recruitment of ‘gangs’ of kin groups meant that the workers knew the different caste and family backgrounds of one another at the place of origin, and this information was retained during the voyage and in the new setting on the Ceylon plantations. It is useful to note that this preservation of caste was not fully possible with indenture labour, when such identities became loser in the process of migration. The majority of workers who migrated from South India belonged to ‘the lowest castes’ in South India who were ‘landless and vulnerable communities’ (Baladundera, Chandrabose and Sivapragasam 2009:79-80). The majority belonged to the Sudras (agricultural castes) and various so-called ‘outcastes’ referred more contemporary to as Dalits or Adi-Dravidas. The former included Vellalans, Ambalakarans, Ambattans, Kallans, Padiyachis and Kapen. The main Adi-Dravida castes were the Pallans, Parayais and Chakiliyans.<sup>27</sup> The sub-kangany groups were relatively homogenous in terms of caste and were often composed of people related to one another (Jayaraman 1975:20).

The Head kangany belonged generally to a relatively ‘higher caste’ and had a stake in maintaining his ‘superior’ status. Given his status as recruiter and the provider of funds, the Kangany commanded respect from his ‘gang’. The workers were also split into a

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<sup>27</sup> Lewis Green: *The Planters Book of Caste and Custom*, Times of Ceylon Co., Colombo, 1925. Chapter 2.

number of subgroups, each under its own patriarch, or *selera* kangany; these subgroups would generally be homogenous in caste and comprise of kin groups. The whole workforce was structured so that these divisions were to enhance what was seen as the ‘family principle’<sup>28</sup> workers, at each level exercising rights on those below him and paying respect for those higher in the hierarchy. Such methods were said to produce the most ‘satisfactory results,’ as they could usually ‘settle on the estate.’<sup>29</sup> . Thus, the very pattern of recruitment promoted the retention of caste-based hierarchies and controls in the new place of work.

It was also in the interests of the planters and the management to use methods that divided the workforce. The form and structure of plantations meant that there was a huge numerical difference between the size of the labour force and that of the management. The latter, often being outnumbered by hundreds of workers, were, no doubt, aware and even fearful of the physical harm that they could face if the workers decided to jointly take action against them. The adherence to and even promotion of caste divisions were methods of dividing the workforce, while also enforcing discipline and acceptance of authority associated with caste. The labour gangs on the estates, under the supervision of kangany and sub-kangany, divided the workforce while reinforcing caste and kin groups.

Caste differences were considered and preserved in the residential allocation on the plantations, with the kangany playing an important role in advising the planter on the differences. Even the ‘line-rooms’ were allocated according to caste, apparently respecting the views of the relatively higher castes that they do not live close, or even look at the living quarters of the ‘lower castes’, and a concentration of certain castes in specific areas.<sup>30</sup> It has also been argued that, while caste differences within these caste groups in India were not so significant as all of them belong to the lower sections of the caste hierarchy, the differences assumed more significance in the new setting, as the relatively ‘higher castes’ attempted to assert their higher status emulating what M.N. Srinivas (1956) has referred to as a process of ‘Sanskritization’ (Kurian 1982). These practices were closely related to the Hindu religion which was extensively practiced on the estates. Endogamy became important and even religious ceremonies and festivals, which were promoted by the management also an important caste dimension with some castes refusing food if it was cooked by a ‘lower caste’. Thus notions of ‘pollution’ and ‘purity’ assumed great significance amongst plantation labour.

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<sup>28</sup> *Report of the Labour Commission*, Colombo: 1908.

<sup>29</sup> *Ceylon Labour Commission Handbook*, Dodson Press, 1935. p. 20.

<sup>30</sup> The various ‘acceptable’ ways of constructing line-rooms so as not to offend the traditional prejudices of the workers are given in detail in Lewis Green, *The Planter’s Book of Caste and Custom*, The Times of Ceylon company Limited, Colombo and Blackfriar’s House, St. London 1925, (chapter on housing). Interviews with the superintendents also indicated this picture, although they attributed it to the kangany’s advice which was generally accepted, and not to any conscious attempt on the part of the management to maintain these features.

## Multiple Patriarchies

Kurian and Jayawardena (2016) have used the concept of ‘plantation patriarchy’ to signify the ways in which the labour regime and the wider society, used discriminative norms and practices in colonialism, race and gender relations, as well as other cultural practices to enforce women’s subordinate position. They have argued in Sri Lanka this subordination was re-enforced by prejudices stemming from caste, ethnicity, religion and cultural practices that promoted structural violence against women plantation workers. The workers were incorporated into a labour regime that was hierarchical and patriarchal, reflecting hegemonic masculinity at all levels (Kurian and Jayawardena 2016:28-29). According to them

These ‘multiple patriarchies’ legitimised a gender division of labour where women workers were allocated the labour-intensive tasks on the fields and their household, and were constantly under male supervision and control. It justified women being paid lower wages while working longer hours than their male counterparts, and also being largely responsible for the reproductive chores, including taking care of the children, the sick and the elderly. As most workers resided within the boundaries of the plantations, and interaction with ‘outsiders’ was relatively limited, plantation patriarchy was durable.

The planter was the effective patriarch who exercised authority of all persons within the estate, and male dominance was the norm at all levels of the labour regime and in the lives of the people. These features were a legacy of the earliest plantations that were developed by the Portuguese in the 15<sup>th</sup> century that took over the institution of the feudal patriarchal (male-headed) household as the most effective social organisation to manage the plantations including the management of large number of slaves for plantation work.<sup>31</sup> The slave plantations retained these social hierarchies and a division of labour that promoted white male authority, and enforced a division of labour and living arrangements that were based on race and colour, while ensuring social distance in interaction between the levels (Durant *et al* 1999: 11). At the peak of the pyramid was the white planter, (manager) while women were subordinated to men at all levels. The whole system was supported by the state, which also sustained, through colonial ideologies, inspectors and bureaucrats, the notion of male authority.

This was the case also on the Ceylon plantations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where male domination was accepted and enforced at all levels of the plantation hierarchy, with the (male) planter, as the head of the unit of production, having unquestioned authority over all matters within its boundaries. While the initial recruitment for the coffee plantations constituted largely of male workers who migrated and returned in line with seasonal requirements of cultivation, the development and spread of tea plantations resulted in greater demand for labour. The planters were keen to recruit more women on three main grounds. First, female agricultural workers in South India were paid less than their male

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<sup>31</sup> Familiar with the use of slaves for domestic labour, they used greater numbers of slaves for the large-scale cultivation of sugar, providing a “model” of slave plantations in the subsequent period (Curtin 1998: 23-24).

counterparts, which meant that planters could, by maintaining the same discrimination in pay, be able to lower the costs of labour on the plantations. The second was they felt that recruiting women would provide an incentive for the men to stay on for longer periods. The third was that women were viewed as more controllable, as they were subject to the patriarchal norms in South India, and therefore less likely to challenge the authority of men at all levels.

As early as 1860, the Secretary of the Immigrant Labour Commission asked the Agent in India to look for more labour, “either on long or short engagements, and who if required would bring their wives and families with them.”<sup>32</sup> The Agent noted that the women were generally employed for “carrying earth from the embankments of tanks and were the more steady and regular labourers.”<sup>33</sup> He thought “most probably a considerable number might be induced to emigrate to Ceylon with the men, if a quick passage was ensured.” He said that he had every reason to believe that when a regular line of steam communication was established between southern India and Ceylon, the immigrants would be “induced to take their wives and families and remain for a period instead of returning after a few months work.”<sup>34</sup> More importantly, these women were also paid less than the men.<sup>35</sup> More importantly, these women were also paid less than the men; in 1859 a male worker in Tinnevely and Madurai received 3 p. per day, while a woman received about 1 p. and 3 farthings.<sup>36</sup> In Yangan, this was 1 an. 4 p. and 1 an. 1 p., respectively.<sup>37</sup> The Commission was willing to pay relatively higher rates for ‘able-bodied’ men, with “women and youths at some proportionally lower rate.”<sup>38</sup>

Few women migrated as workers in the early period, and they constituted just 2.6% of the total labour force on the plantations in 1843<sup>39</sup>. W. C. Twynam, Government Agent of Jaffna, observed during the 1840s “...miserable gangs of coolies... with one or two women to 50 or 100 men”.<sup>40</sup> With the development of tea plantations, the increased demand for labour along with poverty and unemployment in certain pockets of the Madras Presidency, led to increasing number of women migrating for plantation work, with the proportion of the female labour (excluding child labour) increasing to 27% in 1866.<sup>41</sup> From then onwards the proportion of female labour continued to increase. By 1917 there were 234, 594 males and 205, 708 females working on the plantations, leading in time to the equalization in the gender composition (Majoriebanks and Marakkayar 1917:2-3).

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<sup>32</sup> SLNA. 6/2144: Dawson to Graham: 6 March 1860.

<sup>33</sup> SLNA. 6/2644: Graham to Hansbrow: 24 March 1859.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> SLNA. 2/2644: Graham to Dawson: 20 September 1860.

<sup>36</sup> SLNA. 2/2644: Graham to Hansbrow: 24 March 1859.

<sup>37</sup> SLNA. 2/2644: Graham to Dawson: 20 September 1860.

<sup>38</sup> SLNA. 2/2644: Dawson to Graham: 6 March 1860.

<sup>39</sup> Ferguson’s *Ceylon Directory*: 1866-1868: p. 183 and Appendix 2

<sup>40</sup> London, Colonial Office, CO 54/475, Letter to Colonial Secretary, Henry T. Irving in “Correspondence on The Condition of Malabar Coolies in Ceylon”, p.16, Enclosure No.8 30 September 1869.

<sup>41</sup> Ferguson’s *Ceylon Directory*: 1866-1868: p. 183 and Appendix 2.

These women were incorporated into a unit of production that was historically and remained patriarchal in nature and form. The authority of the male planter was absolute over all who lived and worked within the boundaries of plantation, and hegemonic masculinity was expressed in the subordination of women at all levels of the plantation hierarchy. For example, in addition to the male planter, others who were in authority such as overseers, recruiters, government officials and even inspectors and other government bureaucrats were men, and they operated in a social and political environment that sustained such norms. The authors have previously developed the concept of 'plantation patriarchy' arguing that in the case of Ceylon women workers were also exposed to 'multiple patriarchies' associated with caste, religion and culture that subordinated women in the labour regime and social organisation. (Kurian and Jayawardena 2016). They were exposed to sexual abuse and exploitation by men, harassment and domestic violence. The planters, like the other males on the plantations, could subject the women workers to sexual exploitation with impunity. As early as in 1848, Governor Torrington noted these "most objectionable" ways of the coffee planters (cited in KM de Silva 1965; 98). British bureaucrats, soldiers and minor officials also sexually exploited the workers, as well as local women, with the children from these liaisons being sent to Catholic convent schools, or to the Paynter Homes, established for the purpose of "rescuing" the Eurasian children (Jayawardena 2007).<sup>42</sup> This violence was built into the labour regime and the household as women workers were constantly under the control of male authorities, whether it be the planters, the *kangamies*, or their fathers and husbands.

The subordinate position of women in the plantation hierarchy was also justified in the Hindu religion, followed by the majority of the workers, which among other beliefs upheld the notion that being born a woman was bad *karma* or the negative consequence of bad deeds in the past, had the *dharma* or duty to be obedient to men, and show respect to those above her in the social hierarchy. Women workers were in the lowest rungs of this social pyramid, with religious rituals and norms pressurising her to abide by their rules in her daily existence. Strong female deities, such as Kali, Saraswathi and Lakshmi were also worshipped on the plantations, and women were highly involved in organising religious festivals. Thus, while religion was viewed as an important source of solace and strength for women workers, and participating in religious activities noted as a meritorious deed that could enable them to be reborn at a high level, it also endorsed the fatalistic belief that women's injustices stemmed from actions in the past, and were therefore deserved. In a similar manner, the so-called low castes in society were pressured to accept their fate and not attempt to challenge their situation. Planters, on their part, actively encouraged religion on the plantations, supporting the building of temples.

Physical and cultural violence were not something apart from the structure but in reality informed the structure of plantations, including the division of labour in the fields and households. Women were allocated the labour intensive and time-consuming tasks on the fields and in the households. The most important and labour-intensive task on the tea estate was plucking of the 'flush', or the immature leaf, that appeared on the bush. Women

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<sup>42</sup> Little has been written on Eurasians by researchers, but there are some references in fiction set in Ceylon (Jean Ararasanayagam, Lorna Wright, William Knighton), and also some writing on Anglo-Indians (Jayawardena 2007).



were viewed as particularly important for this task as they were considered to have 'nimble fingers' and to be 'patient'. In spite of its significance to the profitability of production, women were paid less while working longer hours than their male counterparts, as the patriarchal ideology normalised the lower value (and thus the pay) of women's work. At the same time, there is little doubt that cost considerations were important in the employment of women workers. As early as in the 1839, a planter pointed out that plucking had become expensive as it was done by men, who could not pluck "as cheaply as the women and children" with the latter also "working at it steady."<sup>43</sup> This inequality was incorporated by the State into the Minimum Wage legislation introduced in 1929 and continued until it was rectified by law in 1984 as a result of mass trade union action and mobilisation of workers (see later discussion).

Women were also under constant male supervision by the planters, the management and the kanganyes. For example, the plucking was usually done in a 'gang', which was under the supervision of a kangany (generally a man). It was the duty of the kangany to maintain the standard of the plucking and maximize the quantity of good leaf. This usually meant a fairly strict overseeing of the 'gang' in the field and during the time of the weighing. Vigilance had to be maintained to see that the workers did not slacken in their efforts or waste time, and also to improve the quality of the product by checking on the number of '*bangies*' (hard leaves) and seeing that the standard of plucking is maintained. The gang-system, under the supervision of the kangany, allowed for this close (male) watch over the performance of the workers.

Apart from their work on the fields women workers were also responsible for a wide range of household tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, caring for the children and other family members, fetching the water and firewood. This was the accepted traditional gender division of labour and as it was unpaid (or even acknowledged as work) it basically subsidised the wages workers received for their work. Like their work on the fields, the women were under male authority in their households, and were supposed to, by culture and practice, take care of the needs of the different males (husbands, fathers and at times, even the *kangany* and the planters). Some women workers also served as domestic servants in the homes of planters, as kitchen assistants and caregivers for children and were also vulnerable to sexual exploitation and violence from the planters as well. Overall the tasks undertaken by the women were labour-intensive, repetitive and placed them under male supervision and control. Finally, the different activities provided them with little time for either, social contacts or sustained political activity, and the nature and intensity of estate and household work placed them in a well-defined, limited and highly controlled situation.

In addition to discrimination in wages, the State and the planters did little to improve the health or education (basic capabilities) of women. The abysmal sanitary conditions and high mortality rates of the plantation workers forced the government to pass the Medical Ordinance of 1872 to establish minimum health services for the workers. The schemes under the Ordinance however, were not successful and estate hospitals continued to remain of poor quality, with bad hygiene and high mortality rates

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<sup>43</sup> Report by Rettie of the Spring Valley Estate, reporting on the Uva Estate on 4 July 1893; Spring Valley Estate.

(Jayawardena, L.R.1960: 117). While there no specific details were provided on the health of women workers, there is little doubt that they suffered greatly also due to the problems in giving birth in unsanitary conditions and without adequate medical facilities. The primitive estate schools were mainly for boys, and little effort was made to raise women's literacy. While literacy was, on the whole, very low for both males and females, the statistics for 1911 showed that women fared significantly worse than the men. The literacy rates for women among the Indian Tamils in the principle planting districts were between 1% to 3% (the equivalent figures for males was between 13% and 21%) (Denham 1912:409).

## Conclusions

The changing nature of plantations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century resulted in a labour regime that depended on circulatory labour to meet the needs of cultivation. At the same time compulsion and coercion were used to ensure the development of a cheap and elastic labour force that would promote the profitability and interest of finance capital, the colonial state and the planters. Indebtedness, in combination with low wages and infrequent payment, was complemented by the conscious use of power relations and ideologies based on class, colour, caste and gender to consciously divide the workforce and enforce labour discipline on the 19<sup>th</sup> century Ceylon plantations. In many ways, these workers while being viewed as 'free' were in chattel labour, not dissimilar to those who worked on the slave plantations. Paradoxically, the relatively hidden nature of these ties and transactions sustained 'unfree labour' in a context where the colonial state was intent on promoting entrepreneurship, removing feudal ties, and increasing the mobility of labour.

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