

Labor, Race, and Gender on the Coffee Plantations in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), 1834–1880

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Coffee plantations in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) were developed in the early nineteenth century under British colonial rule, and they were to dominate the economic development of the island until the last quarter of the century. This chapter is concerned with how the ideologies and practices concerning race, caste, and gender differences were incorporated into labor relations on these plantations. It shows how local government policies favored European ownership and helped to sustain differences between the latter and local entrepreneurs. It deals with the recruitment of a “foreign” Indian work force to service the needs of coffee plantations, and how workers were kept isolated from the rest of society. It analyses how race, caste, patriarchy, and indebtedness were used as methods of labor control, both in the recruitment of labor and in the organization of work on the estates. In effect, it is a study of how extraeconomic forms of coercion were effective in promoting the interests of European capitalist production.

The Bias toward European Ownership on Coffee Plantations

British colonial rule in Ceylon coincided with the establishment of industrial capitalism in Western Europe. Parts of Ceylon were occupied by Britain in 1795, but the whole island did not come under British administrative control until 1815. This was the period when the policy of *laissez-faire* was beginning to be heralded in England as the most effective way of increasing wealth. In addition, there was increasing pressure from London on colonial governments to reduce expenditure. This, together with the emerging commercial ethos of the period and the lucrative

prices of coffee in the international market, paved the way for the rapid development of coffee plantations on the island.

Coffee had been grown and exported prior to this period, at the time of Dutch supremacy, being cultivated by the Sinhalese in the Kandyan districts as a garden crop. The “West India system of production,” or plantation production of coffee, was introduced by the British, and was associated with predominantly white male management and ownership.¹ This was the outcome of a policy followed by the Ceylon government, which consciously promoted European ownership and management on coffee plantations. The Ceylon government rationalized this policy by emphasizing that Europeans were necessary to “set an example” for others.² However, there was a clear vested interest for officials, who wished to develop coffee plantations themselves, and who were initially allowed to do so.

In line with this policy of encouraging European management, specific financial incentives were provided to European entrepreneurs wishing to take up coffee cultivation. This included the availability of cheap land, often in the form of grants, and the exemption from taxes on many items involved in the production of coffee, such as import duties on machinery and land taxes.³ Local officials, who were involved in developing such incentives, were quick to take advantage of the potential profits from coffee cultivation. Indeed, officials developed most of the early plantations, especially during the 1840s.⁴ In fact, Governor Sir Edward Barnes (1824–31) was often referred to as the “pioneer” of the island’s planting industry, and it was he who opened up the Grannoruwa estate at Perideniya. Most plantations were private proprietorships, and a principal motivation of planters appeared to be to take advantage of high short-term profits during the coffee boom of the 1840s. The average size of a coffee plantation before 1860 was probably quite small, at about 100 acres or 40 hectares.⁵

¹ J. Ferguson, *Ceylon in 1893* (London: J. Haddon, and Colombo: A. M. and J. Ferguson, 1893), p. 64.

² SLNA 5/81, Maitland to Castlereagh, Aug. 19, 1808, p. 141. SLNA 4/3 Bathurst to Brownrigg, June 23, 1813, pp. 53ff.

³ L. A. Mills, *Ceylon under British Rule, 1792–1932* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 224.

⁴ E. F. C. Ludowyk, *The Modern History of Ceylon* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), pp. 61–2.

⁵ D. R. Snodgrass, *Ceylon: An Export Economy in Transition* (Homewood, Ill.: Richard D. Irwin, 1966), p. 23, shows that the average size of coffee land sold to a European between 1833 and 1860 was 97 acres.

The cozy relationship between state and planters was reflected in policy. Local officials in Ceylon were keen to support planters, who pushed for government-sponsored labor immigration. Sir Henry Ward, who became governor in 1855, put forward schemes to help them. These included setting aside money from surplus revenue to create a Cooly Transport Company and a Ceylon Agency, with depots at convenient ports of embarkation. The links between officials and planters often “affected their impartiality in disputes between the planters and plantation labour,” resulting in judgments in favor of planters.⁶ The European official to whom the villager or worker could present her or his grievances was, in many instances, a planter himself.⁷ Records also indicate that judges almost invariably ruled in favor of planters.⁸

Although most planters had little knowledge of cultivation practices, and even less formal training, they were able to prevent competition from local planters. It was only in the 1850s that a systematic effort was undertaken to recruit persons with some degree of farming experience for estates.⁹ Local Sinhalese and Tamil entrepreneurs were also involved in coffee cultivation to some degree.¹⁰ However, their cultivation remained almost entirely on a smallholding basis.¹¹ The relative contributions of estates and smallholders to the coffee industry can be gauged from Table 7.1.

The table shows that while “native” smallholder coffee production also profited from the boom, local people appear to have been less successful than their British counterparts. Clearly, the availability of appropriate and sufficient forested land was an important reason for this, as state policy on land strongly favored European ownership. For local entrepreneurs wishing to develop larger holdings, it would appear that availability of finance was another factor. The minimum cost of setting up a plantation in 1844 was estimated at £3,000, and planters often had to borrow this sum from British-owned banks and agency houses operating in the island. These lending agencies were willing to issue a mortgage for a British

⁶ S. B. D. de Silva, *The Political Economy of Underdevelopment* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 259.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

⁹ D. M. Forrest, “Hundred Years of Achievement,” *The Times of Ceylon Tea Centenary Supplement*, July 31, 1969.

¹⁰ M. Roberts and L.A. Wickremeratne, “Export Agriculture in the Nineteenth Century,” in K. M. de Silva, ed., *History of Ceylon* (Colombo: University of Ceylon Press, 1973), vol. 3, pp. 94–7.

¹¹ Snodgrass, *Ceylon*, p. 26.

TABLE 7.1. *Estate and Smallholder Coffee Exports 1849–1886 (Selected Years)*

Year	Estate volume (000 cwts) ^a	Estate unit value (s) ^b	Smallholders volume (000 cwts)	Smallholders unit value	Smallholders volume share (%)
1849	210	33	127	18	38
1850–54	237	44	118	33	33
1860–64	450	54	132	40	23
1870–74	749	82	135	55	15
1880–84	405	91	27	58	6

^a A cwt is a hundredweight, which is an old British measure equaling 112 British pounds, or 50.80235 kilos.

^b In British shillings.

Source: D. R. Snodgrass, *Ceylon: An Export Economy in Transition* (Homewood, Ill.: Richard D. Irwin, 1966), p. 30.

planter, but were reluctant to do so in the case of a Ceylonese entrepreneur. Moreover, if they did so, it was generally at a higher rate of interest, making it less profitable for indigenous entrepreneurs than for the British. It was thus the latter, with the help of finance from British-owned sources, who launched large-scale plantations.¹² Thus, from the very beginning, Europeans were favored with regard to ownership and management, and this racial dichotomy became entrenched in the hierarchy on coffee plantations.

A Shortage of Local Labor

The spread of coffee estates in the island was dependent to a large extent on the availability of labor at the appropriate seasons. Attempts to employ local peasants were not successful. Sir Edward Barnes even exempted workers in the Maritime Provinces from compulsory service (*rajakariya*), so that planters might avail themselves of their labor.¹³ Following the advice of the Colebrooke-Cameron Commission, *rajakariya* was abolished altogether in 1833. It was hoped that this would free the peasantry to take up work on the plantations, by not having to provide labor for public works. However, this was not to be. The main reason was that coffee plantations did not, in any serious way, disturb the ties of peasants to

¹² Ibid.

¹³ G. C. Mendis, ed., *The Colebrooke-Cameron Papers: Documents on British Colonial Policy in Ceylon 1796–1833* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. xxvii.

the land.¹⁴ Thus, the local labor could not be relied on to undertake the coffee picking that coincided with a heavy labor demand in village agriculture.

In addition, local Sinhalese were deterred from joining the plantation work force by relatively low wages, the infrequent and irregular payment of wages, and the bias of officials toward planters.¹⁵ Some Sinhalese performed piecework in the fields, transported goods, constructed buildings, and cleared forests, but they were averse to regular employment on coffee estates. More important, they could not with any certainty be available for coffee picking, which coincided with heavy labor demand in village agriculture.¹⁶ In 1840, the Colonial Secretary of State noted that the “scarcity” of population to service the estates was “a great deficit.”¹⁷

A “Foreign” Work Force for Coffee Plantations

Under these circumstances, planters turned to the relatively close and famine-prone Tamil districts of the Madras Presidency of southern India. There, large numbers of low-caste agricultural workers lived in difficult conditions. Their vulnerability was associated with three phenomena. In the first place, the policies of the British colonial government between 1770 and 1850 resulted in the chronic indebtedness of ordinary villagers to land magnates and city usurers. Second, these regions suffered from episodic famines and deprivation during this period, which particularly affected the lowest castes and classes. Third, bonds of debt continued to exist between landlords and ex-slaves, even after the official abolition of slavery, which occurred in Malabar and most other areas under direct British rule in 1843, and in the princely state of Travancore in 1855. Nor did the Indian Penal Code, which came into force in 1862, reduce the burden of debt for former slaves. The combined impact of these phenomena was “communalized destruction,” with the creation of a large pool of

¹⁴ L. R. Jayawardena, “The Supply of Sinhalese Labour to Ceylon Plantations (1830–1930): A Study of Imperial Policy in a Peasant Society,” Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1963.

¹⁵ Silva, *The Political Economy*, pp. 236–73.

¹⁶ I. H. Vanden Driesen, *Indian Plantation Labour in Sri Lanka: Aspects of the History of Immigration in the 19th Century* (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 1982), p. 3.

¹⁷ SLNA 4/193 Despatch, Ansthruther to Colonial Secretary of State, Nov. 24, 1840, London.

pauperized workers, who needed to find some means of survival during abnormally depressed periods.¹⁸

Kathleen Gough's study on Tanjavur, one of the major sources of labor for Ceylon's coffee estates, reflects many of these pressures on low castes. Her study of the village of Kumbapettai showed that, prior to 1855, most low-caste groups were in a state of bondage. The abolition of slavery did not necessarily provide greater mobility to ex-slaves, for many were Adimai Alukal, belonging mainly to the Pallar and Konar castes, who became *pannaiyal* (debt peons) to landlords. Such ties allowed landlords to retain a sufficient labor force through debt bondage, while it relieved them of the encumbrance of a growing slave population.¹⁹ When laborers were needed for cultivation, landlords operated their authority through debt bondage to retain them in India. When they were not necessary for this purpose, it was in the interests of landlords to allow them to find other work. As the population increased, so did this group of workers, creating a widening pool of casual labor. Indeed, landlords gradually found it less necessary to keep workers in debt, for labor was easily available. Thus, the majority of migrants from Tanjavur were *Harijan*, from the lower castes of non-Brahman peasants. This "coolie" group was particularly affected by agricultural distress, and formed the main pool of labor for estate work in Ceylon.²⁰

This was also the case in many parts of Madras Presidency. The *ryot* (owner of land) in the early nineteenth century had attached a certain prestige to the number of workers whom he commanded. After the 1850s, however, many landlords hired out land to cultivators who were rich peasants and usurers.²¹ As a result, the *ryot* required less labor for the cultivation of his land. Simultaneously, the increasing monetization of the economy opened up alternative forms of investment. In this situation, landlords found it worthwhile to invest in other areas, such as education and industry, even at the cost of their patronage over workers. By the end of the nineteenth century, the *ryot* found it more remunerative to employ wage workers on a temporary basis at the time of sowing and harvesting,

¹⁸ Silva, *The Political Economy*, p. 244.

¹⁹ K. Gough, "Caste in a Tanjore Village," in E. R. Leach, ed., *Aspects of Caste in India, Ceylon and North West Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), pp. 119–21.

²⁰ Gough, "Caste," pp. 131, 184–95.

²¹ D. Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India: Agricultural Labour in the Madras Presidency during the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 85; S. Sarkar, *Modern India 1885–1947* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 1983), p. 34.

rather than maintaining a permanent work force. This meant that any agricultural distress had a severely adverse effect on casual workers. As noted by the Collector of Nellore in 1900:

Formerly, the *ryot* with his cultivating labourers was the agricultural unit. The labourers were attached to the soil and looked to their masters for support in good and bad seasons. . . . The *ryot* has now no anxiety about securing labourers, and therefore no necessity to maintain them in hard times, and has less inducement to do so. . . . He employs large numbers at the time of sowing and harvest and then dispenses with their services. On the failure, therefore, of a single monsoon, all these labourers who, in former times, would naturally look to and be maintained by their masters, are now thrown adrift without any means.²²

In spite of these problems, the workers were not always ready to undertake plantation work in Ceylon. It was well known that estate work was arduous and difficult, with little support from the state for the rights of workers. Furthermore, the sea voyage was sometimes difficult, which also discouraged migration to Ceylon. This meant that labor supplies for Ceylon's coffee plantations could not be guaranteed. Given the unpredictability, planters used monetary inducements to get adequate labor, as well as having recourse to extraeconomic forms of coercion, including methods of social control based on race, caste, patriarchy, and debt.

Early Attempts at Encouraging Labor Migration

The first organized attempt at dealing with the recruitment of plantation labor was by the Ceylon Agricultural Society, formed in 1842. The Ceylon Government played an important role in setting up this organization, and Philip Ansthruther, the Colonial Secretary for the Ceylon Government, became its first president. Another attempt was made in 1858 when Ordinance No. 15 was passed by Governor Sir Henry Ward for the specific purpose of "encouraging and improving the immigration of coolies from the South of India." This ordinance created the Immigrant Labour Commission, which attempted to recruit workers with partial funding from the planters.²³

The commission knew that in spite of problems experienced by low-caste workers in South India, it would not be easy to persuade them to

²² Quoted in D. Wesumperuma, *Indian Immigrant Plantation Workers in Sri Lanka: A Historical Perspective 1880-1910* (Kelaniya: Vidyalandara Press, 1986), p. 93.

²³ Driesen, *Indian Plantation Labour*, p. 70.

work on Ceylon plantations. Clearly, monetary inducement was important in this respect, and between 1851 and 1861 a “Coastal Advance” system of recruitment developed. Recruiters were paid from one to two shillings per head for every migrant they brought, and one pound per month in addition as a retainer. Wages were higher than those available in South India. The commission, for its part, was willing to pay relatively higher rates for “able-bodied” men, with women and youths to be paid at a lower rate.²⁴

Migration was usually effected through the *kangany* (recruiter) system. The *kangany* was a man who was given advances by planters to recruit people to come and work on estates. The *kangany* was usually from a relatively high caste, familiar with, and usually originating from, rural South India. He would offer inducements to kinsmen and other people to go to Ceylon and work on a particular plantation. Those willing to do so were given a cash advance, to meet expenses incurred in their journey.

The labor force was subdivided into smaller groups, each under a *silara* (lesser) *kangany*, generally in charge of a kin group. Some workers formed themselves into gangs, ranging from twenty-five to 100 people, and selected from among themselves a leader, also called a *kangany*, who would “conduct their journeys, negotiate their engagements, superintend their labour and receive in return a trifling proportion of their pay.”²⁵ There existed yet another system, whereby a *kangany* would meet potential workers on their arrival from the coast, and undertake to lead them to estates, for which service he received payment.

Workers generally stayed between five and twelve months, and then returned home with their savings, sometimes coming back, or being succeeded by others in the following year.²⁶ The government took the position that the seasonal cycle of coffee cultivation meant that it was possible for seasonal migration, by and large, to meet the demands of the coffee industry.²⁷ It was estimated that between 1843 and 1877, an average of 56,000 men, 10,300 women, and 8,000 children came to Ceylon to work on coffee estates.

²⁴ SLNA 2/2644, Dawson to Graham, March 6, 1960.

²⁵ Much of the material in this and the following paragraphs is from the lucid analysis and description provided in SLNA 3/34 Pt. 1, Tennent to Grey, Despatch No. 6 (misc.), April 21, 1847.

²⁶ Driesen, *Indian Plantation Labour*, pp. 8, 52.

²⁷ K. M. de Silva, “Indian Immigration to Ceylon – The First Phase c. 1840–1856,” *Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies* 4, no. 2 (1961): 106–37.

Female Labor

Given the problems of migration, most early migrants were men, but planters were keen to encourage female migration for several reasons. An important consideration was lower payment given to women in South India, a reflection of the prevailing patriarchal ideology embodied in the caste system. A comparison of wage rates in several regions sending workers to Ceylon shows that women were paid about half what men received. In 1859, a male worker in Tinnevely and Madurai received three pence per day, while a woman received about a penny and three quarters.²⁸ A similar disparity existed in the case of Yangan.²⁹ Another important consideration was that women from low castes and classes were at the bottom of the Indian hierarchical order, which forced them to accept hard and menial tasks.

In addition, planters felt that if women came with men, there was a greater chance for estates to have a more settled population. The secretary of the Immigrant Labour Commission was thus specifically to ask the agent in India to look for workers who would bring their wives and families with them.³⁰ The agent, for his part, felt that it would be good to recruit more women, as they were “more steady and regular labourers.” Moreover, if men could be induced to bring their wives and children along, it was likely that they would stay for longer periods, rather than returning after a few months’ work.³¹ Planters were keen to keep workers who had survived the initial period, as mortality at this stage was very high, possibly as much as 25 percent.³² This was due to harsh conditions on the journey and problems of acclimatization, as well as the work regime. If women were encouraged to migrate, there would be less incentive for men to go home quickly. Additionally, the small proportion of women among the immigrants came to be seen as a great evil, because of a high incidence of sexually transmitted diseases and related problems.

Despite these factors reflecting discriminatory and patriarchal attitudes toward women, which were retained throughout the history of the plantations, the number of women on estates did grow. An increase in destitution and the erosion of patron-client relations in South India contributed

²⁸ SLNA 2/2644, Graham to Hansbrow, March 24, 1859.

²⁹ SLNA 2/2644, Graham to Dawson, Sept. 20, 1860.

³⁰ SLNA 2/2644, Dawson to Graham, March 6, 1860.

³¹ SLNA 6/2644, Graham to Hansbrow, March 24, 1859.

³² Colonial Office, CO 54/475, W. G. Van Dort, “Report on the Gampola Civil Hospital,” in “Correspondence on the Condition of Malabar Coolies in Ceylon.”

to this slow shift in the sex composition of the estate work force. More women began to migrate, and they came to constitute a fifth of migrants between 1843 and 1877.

It is likely that the small number of women led to the provision of sexual services outside stable family relationships. Medical records indicate a very high incidence of sexually transmitted diseases among male workers. The few women on estates, who had to endure dreadful hardships on the journey, were often exposed to illnesses and infections, and had to face sexual abuse from men. Their plight can be perceived from the observations of W. C. Twynam, Government Agent of Jaffna during the initial period of migration. He saw

... miserable gangs of coolies of 1843 and 1845, with one or two women to 50 or 100 men, strangers in a strange land, ill-fed, ill-clothed, eating any garbage they came across (more however from necessity than choice), travelling over jungle paths, sometimes with scarcely a drop of water to be found anywhere near them for miles, and others knee-deep the greater part of the way in water, with the country all round a swamp; working on estates just reclaimed from jungle, or on jungles about to be converted into estates, badly housed, and little understood by their employers³³

The Patriarchal and Caste Hierarchy of Labor Control and Management

The workers were slotted into a labor regime that was characterized by a clear sense of differentiation and hierarchy. This was based on color, race, ethnicity, and sex, with little but stylized interaction between the different levels within this pyramid. The overall emphasis was to exert maximum control over the work force and instill respect for those in authority. Women workers were at the bottom of the pyramid, and male domination was enforced at each and every level.³⁴

A plantation had clear geographical boundaries, within which there was a strict hierarchy. At the head was the superintendent, or *periya dorai* (big master), the white manager, who governed the estate like a slave plantation in the Caribbean. His word was law, unquestioned within the estate, and this social acceptance was manifested through a series

³³ 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, Sept. 30, 1869.

³⁴ R. Kurian, "State, Capital and Labour in the Plantation Industry in Sri Lanka 1834-1984," Ph.D. thesis, University of Amsterdam, 1989.

of rituals and behavior patterns, which emphasized his complete authority. The workers were on no account to look him in the face, and they were to step out of his way if they met him on a path. No direct words were to be spoken to the superintendent, and the men were not to lower their *sarong* (tunic) in his presence. Workers could not use an umbrella or other forms of apparel that might indicate high status or might lessen the social and political distance between them and their superiors. This was reinforced by a qualitative difference in housing and physical comforts. The palatial bungalow of the superintendent, with its splendid view and beautiful gardens, was a far cry from the barrack-like line rooms of the workers, which rarely boasted even adequate water or minimal hygienic conditions.

Below the *periya dorai* were the *sinna dorai* (small masters), generally European assistants. They were also provided with a great deal of comfort in terms of housing and perquisites, but lived in a somewhat less luxurious style than the *periya dorai*. The clear distance between the two highest levels of authority was significant, for it underscored the importance of differentiation and the unquestioned acceptance of respect for hierarchy. Below the *sinna dorai* were the estate staff, the *kanakapillai* (accountant) and others who helped in running the office. These persons were Tamil-speaking, but did not belong to the same background as the workers. In many cases, they came from the north or east of Ceylon, rather than from South India. Referred to as "the staff," they lived in "quarters," housing that was better than that of the workers but considerably less comfortable than the houses of the *dorai*. The staff handled the payment of wages and checked weighing and production processes. They treated the workers as befitted the general principle of conventional estate organization, that is, with little respect and often with a great deal of arrogance.

The head *kangany* was a key figure in labor relations on the estate. While his role was technically akin to that of both foreman and recruiter, his power extended to both planters and workers:

The laborer's lack of access to the estate manager made the *kangany* the link between the estate management and the laborers; in the early years, he even distributed wages on behalf of the employer, and till recently a laborer's notice of resignation required the *kangany's* endorsement. His ties of caste and kinship with those whom he recruited gave a moral basis to his authority. He mediated in their family affairs and was their representative and spokesman in labor disputes. Combined with this patron-client relationship between the *kangany* and his labor gang was a creditor-debtor relationship, which placed the

laborers in financial bondage to him, and consolidated his leadership. As an intermediary the kangany was not a neutral element but a prop in the power structure of the estate community. In the eyes of the laborers he was effectively their employer.³⁵

Laborers were at the bottom of the pyramid, numerically most significant and least remunerated in terms of monetary and physical rewards. However, within the work force there was also a clear hierarchy. The head *kangany* was generally of the highest rank, and the work force was split up into different gangs, each under the authority of its own patriarch, the *silara kangany*. The whole work force was structured so that these divisions tended to enhance what was seen as the “family principle.” This meant that the male authority at each level exercised rights on those below him and paid respect to those higher in the hierarchy. Such methods were said to produce the most “satisfactory results” as workers could usually “settle on the estate.”³⁶

The caste system introduced yet another element in the hierarchy. Brought from India, this can be seen as a kind of racist ideology. Castes were considered to be endogamous groups, traditionally associated with ascribed occupations and ranked hierarchically. Each caste had subdivisions, and a person acquired her or his caste solely through birth. The two castes that were numerically dominant amongst the migrant workers on the estates were the Sudra and the Adi-Dravida.

The caste hierarchy was imported to the Ceylon estates in different ways. In the first place, the *kangany* was usually a man from a relatively high subcaste. As migration took place under his supervision, usually in families or kin groups, the preservation of caste identity was facilitated. Second, when these groups arrived on the estate, they were isolated, having little social contact with the rest of Ceylon society. In 1871, only 3.3 percent of the resident population on the estates were local Sinhalese.³⁷ Third, the formation of labor gangs under *kangany* and *silara kangany* was based on caste, strengthening both caste and kinship ties. Research has indicated that *silara kangany* groups tended to be homogenous in terms of caste and kinship.³⁸ Fourth, the estate owners had a vested interest in

³⁵ Silva, *The Political Economy*, p. 329.

³⁶ *Ceylon Labour Commission Handbook*, 1935, p. 20.

³⁷ E. Meyer, “Between Village and Plantation: Sinhalese Estate Labour in British Ceylon,” in *Asie due Sud: Traditions et Changements* (Paris: Colloques Internationaux du CNRS, 1979), p. 460.

³⁸ R. Jayaraman, *Caste Continuities in Ceylon: A Study of the Social Structure of Three Tea Plantations* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan Press, 1975), p. 20.

preserving caste differences, and using the ideology that lay behind it to control workers.

Estate housing and the preparation of food also maintained caste differences. Caste differentiation was respected by management, which in early days would often allocate housing on the advice of the head *kangany*, who would ensure that standards of “acceptable” housing were adhered to. For example, certain castes would not face others, and certain castes would not live with others.³⁹ Living quarters were often arranged on the basis of caste, because higher-caste people disliked living the same “lines” as people of lower castes. There were also instances recorded of an Adi-Dravida cooking food at a festival, which Sudra participants refused to eat.

Women workers formed the lowest rung of the estate hierarchy, directly under the command of men at every level. Even though they worked for wages, they had little access or control over the money. In most cases, their wages, lower than those of men, were handed via the *kangany* to the male partner, who often used them according to his own needs. Indeed, giving women’s wages to men is a practice that has continued until the present day on plantations. Women faced the worst effects of class, social, caste, and sexual oppression. They experienced the negative impact of caste repression and they were subjected to the ideology of male superiority inherent in their social and work circumstances. Most of these women had to bear the brunt of male domination inherent in caste ideology, which was preserved and even reinforced by the process of kin-group migration. Some of them even faced more rigid sexual restrictions in their new setting, as their husbands made attempts to “privatize” their sexuality, something that was less rigidly observed in their traditional background in India. Indeed, it could be argued that the process and nature of the integration into the estate labor force, in kin and subcaste groups, led to a reinforcement of caste ideology and caste power, and to a resulting loss of freedom for women within their community.

Indebtedness and Infrequent Payment as Methods of Labor Control

An important way of controlling workers was through debt. As the money for travel expenses was advanced to the worker, he or she generally began life on the estate in debt. This debt was mediated through the recruiter, the *kangany*, who effected a certain degree of control over the movements

³⁹ Rachel Kurian, *Women Workers in the Sri Lanka Plantation Sector* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 1982).

of the worker, because the recruiter had lent estate money to the worker. Moreover, since money was advanced through the *kangany*, the worker was “virtually the servant of the *kangany*.”⁴⁰ Means and levels of payments were such that workers could rarely pay off accumulated debts. In most cases, the worker himself had little idea of the amount of debt he or she had to pay, and was frequently “made responsible for larger sums than he has in fact received or has had expended on his behalf.”⁴¹ The debt of the worker was written on a *tundu*, or piece of paper, and it was only after these dues were paid that the worker was “free” to leave employment.

This system was notoriously abused by some planters, who simply refused to issue tickets when they did not want labor to leave their estates.⁴² Control over the mobility of estate labor was reinforced by the use of guards.⁴³ As a recruit was personally known to the *kangany*, he would often be caught in his home village in South India if he ran away, and he or his relatives would be made responsible for paying his debt. I have argued elsewhere that the *tundu* system in practice contained the principle of indentureship, even if it was never formally viewed as such in law.⁴⁴

The Immigrant Labour Commission, primarily interested in recruiting more labor, saw indebtedness as a major factor in hindering labor availability, and it was clear that planters portrayed the *kangany* recruiter as the main culprit. As early as 1859, it noted that the

greatest evil of the system and which doubtless has had the most prejudicial effect on the supply of labour . . . is the loss which the *coolly* sustains in the extortion practised by the *Canganies* 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.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, planters quite early understood the significance of advances to workers. And while critical of the power enjoyed by recruiters, they also used this system to ensure that the workers were successfully tied to the estate during the peak season of labor demand.

⁴⁰ SLNA PF/24, Attorney General to Colonial Secretary, No. 364, Sept. 4, 1897.

⁴¹ *Report and Proceedings of the Labour Commission* (headed by Sir Hugh Clifford) (Colombo, 1908).

⁴² K. V. Jayawardena, *The Rise of the Labour Movement in Ceylon* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1972), p. 18.

⁴³ Report of the agent of the government of India 1926.

⁴⁴ Kurian, “State, Capital and Labour,” p. 93.

⁴⁵ *Report of the Immigrant Labour Commission*, Colombo, for half-year ending June 30, 1859.

A feature of labor relations was the infrequency of wage payments, often only two or three times a year. Withholding wages allowed management to have some security for the recovery of advances, while also tying labor to the peak period of coffee production. Moreover, working capital was kept to a minimum. Planters had a limited supply of working capital and obligations of higher priority to meet, such as the purchase of rice and stores. They thus preferred to pay workers as late as possible.⁴⁶ A *kangany's* account of such delaying tactics goes as follows:

My old Master was a very good Dorai, but he had a temper and when I came to the office and said that I thought the coolies ought to have some pay, he would, if he were in a good mood give me a cheque for, say, a couple of thousand rupees. And, if he was not, he would tell me to go to the devil! And in that case I would ask him again two or three days later. Now, if I should say, "Dorai, two thousand is not enough," my Master would answer, "all right, you can take a couple of those black pigs!" And if I replied "May God be my witness! two black pigs are not sufficient," he might answer, "Very well then, you can have the pigs and the little red heifer which is in calf by the Australian bull!" And so it was!⁴⁷

For nearly a century, there was little attempt to systematize or regulate wage rates, which ranged from four pence to nine pence for a working day of ten to eleven hours in the 1830s and 1840s, and rose to about 10 pence per day in the 1860s.⁴⁸ The wage also took a cash and kind form. Most estates supplied rice to the workers, the cost of which was deducted from their salaries. The rice was imported mainly from South India, and in periods of distress its price increased. The plantation workers were cushioned with regard to the availability of rice, as it was a component of the wage. At the same time, the increased cost of the imported rice resulted in a decline in nominal wages on plantations.

The Harsh Life and Work Regime of Laborers, and their Resistance

Workers lived in severe circumstances, suffering from poor health and high mortality. The Assistant Colonial Surgeon estimated that some 350,510 persons, or 25 percent of the total arrivals of immigrant workers, were unaccounted for between 1843 and 1867. In his opinion, a large

⁴⁶ L. R. Jayawardena, "The Supply of Sinhalese Labour to the Tea Industry in Ceylon," Research Study, Cambridge University, 1960, p. 27 (kindly made available by the author).

⁴⁷ A. P. Lanter, "A Planter's Pilgrimage and Some Rum'uns Encountered by the Way. Memoirs of Alfred Hugh Mead 1873-1939," pp. 7-8 (undated memoirs of a Ceylon planter, kindly made available to the author by his great grandson Philip van Ryneveld).

⁴⁸ Jayawardena, *The Rise of the Labour Movement*, p. 20.

proportion of these deaths could have been prevented by a more elaborate system of Medical Police, beginning its supervision in the maritime districts of the Northern Province. Immigrants needed to be accompanied along the inland routes to their several places of destination, and there should be a strict enforcement of sanitary laws in cooly lines on coffee estates.⁴⁹ Conditions of work and life on the estates, including whipping and assault, were harsh, contributing to high mortality.⁵⁰

This state of affairs was compounded by the inadequate medical services available for estate workers. There was constant argument between the colonial government and planters about who was to bear the expenses of medical care. Ordinance No. 14 of 1872 was unsatisfactory, and was replaced by the Medical Wants Ordinance No. 17 of 1880. However, planters and government had their differences on how the scheme was to be financed, the latter insisting that the planters should bear the total costs of the medical scheme. This was violently opposed by planters, who argued that costs should be borne by the state. The Colonial Office in London placed pressure on the local colonial government in Colombo, and Ordinance No. 11 of 1881 was passed, placing a capitation tax, according to the numbers of workers employed on an estate, to finance the health scheme. In 1882, however, the government agreed to bear half the costs of medical welfare. Ordinance No. 9 of 1882 imposed a low import duty on rice in place of the capitation tax.

However, this did not resolve the issue. There were instances when additional medical expenses incurred were taken from the workers, through profits made on the rice that was issued to them.⁵¹ Minimal attention was paid to maternity facilities and benefits. The Medical Ordinance of 1872 made provisions for rudimentary medical facilities in the plantation districts. The maternity benefits provided were two measures of rice and 75 cents in cash per week for four weeks.

The housing provided on estates promoted ill health, as it was very poor. Workers lived in “line rooms,” or barrack-like structures generally built of stone with metallic roofing, similar to those constructed in other colonial plantation economies. According to a contemporary planter, the “coolies” appeared to “prefer smaller houses,” which they considered both “warm and more cosy.” In his opinion, rooms of 12 feet by 12 feet

⁴⁹ Colonial Office, CO 54/475, W. G. Van Dort, “Report on the Gampola Civil Hospital,” in “Correspondence on the Condition of Malabar Coolies in Ceylon.”

⁵⁰ Driesen, *Indian Plantation Labour*, p. 10.

⁵¹ Wesumperuma, *Indian Immigrant Plantation Workers*, p. 252.

could hold some twelve workers, as they had “no objection to be packed tolerably close.” It is interesting to note the cost implications of this attitude. Each line room cost him five pounds sterling, while the superintendent’s bungalow set him back to the tune of 500 pounds sterling.⁵² The workers lived in these “line rooms” during their stay on the plantations, and there was little or no change in the housing conditions during the coffee period. Indeed, these barracks still exist on plantations, as housing for the majority of workers.

Women faced the triple burden of harsh work regimes with low pay, household work in difficult conditions with violence within the household, and bearing children without access to proper care. Housing conditions on estates were particularly difficult for women, as they had to do a great deal of work within the household, notably, cooking and cleaning. The difficult experience of women in these conditions was compounded by their lack of privacy and vulnerability to sexual abuse. They were thus undoubtedly more vulnerable to health problems and related mortality.

It would be fallacious to assume that workers meekly acquiesced to and accepted their conditions of work and life. They did resist the controls placed on them, even though they were mainly migrants and government and management practices restricted their possibilities for free movement and association between estates. Under these conditions, worker resistance was ad hoc and at an individual level, employing what Scott has called the “weapons of the weak.” Acts of flight, sabotage, and even theft formed part of the “unwritten history of resistance.”⁵³ There were cases when workers simply did not return to the island for work. There was also absenteeism from work and “bolting” from the estates, two forms of resistance that became particularly significant toward the end of the nineteenth century. Formal trade unions and other political organizations did not develop until the twentieth century, when the developing tea and rubber plantations required a more settled work force throughout the year.

Conclusion

As on plantations in other parts of the world, labor relations on Ceylon’s coffee estates were hierarchical, with patronage and patriarchy reinforced

⁵² W. Sabonadiere, *The Coffee Planter of Ceylon* (Colombo: Mees, J. P. Green, 1866, pp. 65–6.

⁵³ J. C. Scott, “Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 12, no. 2 (1986): 5–6.

at all levels of production. In the case of Ceylon, the position of women was particularly bad, due in part to the relatively unstructured and unsupervised nature of migration to the island from neighboring South India. Moreover, a special role was attributed to caste differences, which complemented hierarchies based on color, race, and gender in management, division of work, and distribution of benefits on plantations. While extra-economic forms of control over a migratory work force were to be found in tropical estates around the world, caste was limited to areas where Hindu workers migrated, and was particularly salient in Ceylon.