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Recruitment of South Indian Labourers during the British Rule in Sri Lanka - A Study

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Introduction

The English Rulers in Sri Lanka introduced the plantation agriculture for which the labourers were recruited from South India, notably from Tamil regions. These labourers in course of time stayed on Sri Lanka as permanent settlers with the introduction of tea cultivation. The contributions of these labourers were considered very important to the growth of the Sri Lankan economy. The objective of the essay is to highlight how the British capturing in Sri Lanka, launching of Estate, recruitment of South Indian labourers and methods of labour recruitment

Conquest of Sri Lanka by the British

The English East India Company was founded by Queen Elizabeth in London on December 31st, 1600.¹ The Queen gave monopoly in trading rights to this company. The English East India Company was engaged initially in trade with the countries in the East but dragged into politics of South Asia soon. The first English man known to have landed on the mainland of India was Thomast Phens.

The English East India Company had to come to know about Sri Lanka and its trade on spices. Sri Lanka was then under the control of the Dutch. Nevertheless, the British did not like to take over Sri Lankan administration immediately, because of their friendship with the Hollanders in Europe. By the end of the 18th century, the Dutch had lost their influence in Sri Lanka. This prompted the British to evince interest in Sri Lanka.

The British entered Colombo on February 16th 1796, forcing the Hollanders move out of Colombo.² Thereafter Sri Lanka was ruled for 130 years by the British. During the period of the Governor Robert Browning (1812-1820), Kandy was captured in 1815³ and the Nayak King and last king of the Kandy named Sri Vikrama Rajasinha (1798-1815) was arrested and sent to India by the British. Then the whole part of the Sri Lanka was brought under the control of the British.

The Launching of Estate in Sri Lanka

The British introduced the coffee plantation in the upcountry land of Kandy for the first time during the period

of Governor Edward Barnes (1824-1831).⁴ In the early stage, the British had interest in spice trade like other European countries. However, the suitable condition for the coffee cultivation in Sri Lanka and other colonial countries prompted the British to evince interest in coffee plantation.

For a long time, the West Indies supplied coffee to European countries. Nevertheless, coffee crops declined in West Indies suddenly. Around this time, industrial revolution created a work force that had a liking for coffee. The number of those addicted to coffee increased. Therefore, the British desired to earn money by supplying coffee to European markets. Sri Lanka turned out to be the suitable place for cultivation of coffee. Since it had roads all over the country, it reduced the transport expenses to distribute coffee in and part of the country.

After few years, coffee crops were affected by leaf disease and hence coffee was abandoned in many estates of Sri Lanka.⁵ As the British could find no cure for the leaf disease, they turned their attention to tea. Tea was started in small quantity in the beginning. However, by 1890, tea had become one of the major exporting crops. In the last quarter of 19th century rubber estates were also launched in many areas of Sri Lanka.

In early stage, Africans were brought as slaves to work in the mines and estates by the British in America. However, this slavery system was abolished in the British Emperor. Hence, a new system was introduced to get the workers with low wage, that was indentured labour system.

Recruitment of South Indian Labourers

The South Indian labourers were living in Upcountry in high density and spread in other parts of Sri Lanka. They belonged separately to north and east Sri Lankan Tamils. Hence, this emigration was permanent because India is situated near Sri Lanka. During the 19th century, the South Indian labourers avoided to settle down permanently in Sri Lanka. Due to their poverty, they accepted the lowest wage in Sri Lanka. The information about the estate and their habitation would not be given to them while they were called to the Sri Lanka. consequently, they were trapped in Sri Lanka. Thereafter Lakhs of South Indian

labourers were brought from India. Following that, a new slavery system was started by the British in Sri Lanka.⁶

In the beginning, the Sinhalese who were mostly interested in agriculture did not support the plantation work.⁷ Nevertheless they were not ready to give up their traditional work and accept the new life styles which were their resultant of plantation.

The European countries were not able to gather the African Negro slaves, as slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1834. It was favourable to gather labourers from India.⁸ The Indian emigration continued to Fiji, the islands in the east, the West Indies in the West and Mauritius in the South.⁹

As for as Britain was concerned it exploited India for its own betterment.¹⁰ It imposed many restrictions to cripple the cottage industry and handicrafts in India.¹¹ Many Indian artisans who were affected by the colonial policy of Britain in order to survive moved out of their native soil.

Land revenue was increased 90% in West Bengal. above 80% in north India and 50% on Chennai.¹² These heavy taxes on agriculture hit the peasantry and forced them to sell their land.

The small and marginal farmers who were affected by the agrarian policy of the colonial state sold most of the lands to the government, since they were not able to repay their loan. Due to the colonial economical policy of the British in India, cottage industry and agriculture were ruined, As a result, the Indians who had been reduced to the state of penury tried to migrate to other countries.

The frequent famines that struck India in the early periods of British rule devastated the districts of Tamil Nadu. In the year of 1799, 1804, 1807, 1813-1818, 1824 there were severe famines in which many people died.¹³ Every famine caused a flux of emigration to overseas countries.

Further the wretched caste system in South India denied a secure livelihood to a vast majority people.¹⁴ All these factors were responsible for Tamils responding to the live of the European planters to work in their estate. After the abolition of slavery, West Indies had the shortage of labourers. The same condition prevailed in Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and British Guyana.

However the people who emigrated to foreign countries were affected by some factory like the land lord's tyranny, harmful weather and poor wage, The emigrated were mostly weavers, farmers and barbers.¹⁵ Among them 1/3 were untouchables and they emigrated because of the oppression in their native land. Such labourers came to Sri

Lankan estates. First, the British thought of bringing labourers from China but they gave up this idea because of huge expenditure involved.¹⁶

Many of Sinhalese placed high in the social hierarchy and so they did not like to work under the British. They wished to live somewhat freely. Further, they did not like to go far away from their family for jobs. Although the British introduced coffee, they sought the service from local people to make the estates mainly. They rendered many helps to the British for cutting trees and cleaning the forest.¹⁷

The British thought that the South Indian workers worked hard and they were submissive and obedient to be British's rules and regulations unlike the Sinhalese workers who were aggressive and defiant. Moreover, the British had the diplomacy that if they brought the labourers from other countries they would not revolt against the British as they were in a foreign land.

The first contract labourers were recruited from the South India by the British planters in Sri Lanka to work on the coffee plantation in the Kandian hills cave, in 1830.¹⁸ After 1838, labourers emigrated in proper manner under the supervision of British India Government.

The Methods of Labourers Recruitment

The British Government followed many methods to recruit the labourers to plantation in Sri Lanka.

Indenture Labour System

This system was introduced by the British to gather the labourers for the colonial countries, which were far away from South India, the people who went there faced different conditions. India is situated near Sri Lanka. Due to this location, they did not have the intention to settle down in Sri Lanka permanently.

According to the indenture labour system, the estate owners encouraged their managers in India to gather and send the necessary labourers. The authorized person sent his workers to villages to gather the labourers. The gathered labourers signed and agreed that they would be under their control for five years. Otherwise, they were made to do the second agreement. When the labourers were gathered, their wages were also fixed.¹⁹

The travel expenses of labourers were borne by the estate owners. After that, the expenses were deducted from the labourer's wage. The labourers were gathered in wrong ways and women were forced to do prostitution also.²⁰ This system was another form of slavery and due to its evil nature it was finally abolished in 1915.

Kangany System (Sardary System)

The British obtained the labourers in low wage through Kangany system in Sri Lankan estates. ²¹ Kangany was the supervisor and he had 25 or 30 labourers in his group. All the groups of an estate were activated under a chief Kangany. ²² The manager in charge of the estate was called Estate Superintendent. The Chief Kangany was responsible for matters relating to the labourers and their wages. He got monthly salary and also brokerage from the labourers apart from salary. These Kanganyans were selected from Indian labourers.

The Kanganyans gathered the labourers and provided them to estates where the labourers were needed mostly. Particular amount of money was given as an advance to the Kanganyans for labourers' travel and other immediate expenses²³ and later it would be debited. This was one of the systems of exploitation.

Tin Ticket System

Another system of gathering labourers was the Tin Ticket System. The system was introduced in 1902. The worker was issued a Tin Ticket (a little disc or tin punched with a letter and two numbers denoting his name and name of the estate) which he had to present to the camp superintendent in the Sri Lanka Government quarantine camp in Mandapam. They provided the labourers and undertook the responsibility of transporting them to their respective estates. In order to attract a large flow of labour the Sri Lanka Government subsidized the planters. Only 50 percent of the cost of transport and food was recovered from the planters. Sir West Ridgeway aptly compared this system to the value payable by post (VPP) the worker being delivered like a parcel. While it ensured efficient and speedy transport of the workers to the estate their basic problem remained unsolved. The practice of debiting of the cost of recruitment and transportation of the labourers against their estate accounts continued. ²⁴

Thundu System

Closely associated with the Kangany institution was another civil practice known as Thundu system. The estate managers gave the advance to the labourers and noted in a slip. This slip was maintained by estate owners for every labourer individually. The labourers had to work in the particular estates only until they returned the advance payment. While the labourers had more expenses, they had to get the advance.

If there were excess of labourers in estates, manager asked them to return the advance payment and then released the labourers from his estate. Consequently the manager gave a slip about the labourers loan to Kangany,

and then he went to another estate where there was labour shortage and received the advance payments in new estates and credited them in labourer's account. He also settled the loan dues to the previous estate owners. This system changed the labourers' loan area only but it did not help to reduce the labourers' burden. Due to this Thundu system, the Kanganyans had been changing their estates with their labourers for ages. If the estate owners rejected the Kangany's loan request then they got their slips and went to another estate.²⁵

The enclave nature of labour settlement, coupled with illiteracy, prevented the Indian labourer from taking interest in the socio-political²⁶ life of the country of his adoption. The Thundu system was abolished in 1921 by Thundu prohibition Ordinance on the Recommendation of the Ceylon Labour Commission.²⁷ Even then the Tamil estate labourers continued to live in debts. This was mainly because the institution of Kangany was not abolished.

The estate labourers were brought from south India especially southern districts of Tamil Nadu, Trichirapoly, Tanjavur, Pudukottai, Madurai, Ramanathapuram, Tirunelveli, Salem, and north Arcot, south Arcot, Coimbatore, Pondichery and Madras were the native places of the labourers.²⁸ The total number of Tamil labourers employed on the coffee estate in 1837 was estimated to be 10,000.²⁹

The labourers suffered not only in Sri Lanka but also in Mauritius and Guyana. Indian Government knew the suffering of labourers and implemented the law to block the labourer's migration from India to foreign countries in 1839. Due to this law, there was shortage of labourers in Sri Lanka. India and Sri Lanka then negotiated. Due to that negotiation the law which blocked the labourers to migrate to Sri Lanka was cancelled.³⁰ The Indian Government requested Sri Lankan Government to take care of labourers' health and their well being.

In early days, individual persons only brought the labourers from South India. So the labourers were subjected to many difficulties. Even the government followed the principle of non intervention. In the beginning labourers traveled long distances from their own villages to reach Indian yacht ports to migrate to Sri Lanka. They mainly used Mandapam Pamban-Dhanushkodi-Thalaimannar rail cum ferry route and Tuticorin-Colombo sea route to reach Sri Lanka.³¹

After they reached Sri Lanka, they had to travel around 200 miles to reach Kandy. When they traveled through forests, due to lack of food and water, many of them died on the way. The estate owners and Kanganyans did not take any responsibility for the well being of the labourers.

Particularly they did not provide any medical care on the way and also in the early phase of their working in estates. When the labourers reached the estates, most of them were not fit to work and their health condition was also very bad. Hence, many of them had to return to their country.

Many labourers eventually became sick, affected by chicken pox, malaria, measles, and diarrhea. Even though they managed to work with many difficulties, they did not get proper salary. Sri Lankan Government did not consider the labourers' health and had adopted many laws since 1872. Yet in practice, no law was enforced with the objective improving the living conditions of estate labourers.

Sri Lanka got freedom in 1948. After that, the arrival of Indian labourers got reduced. Further Sri Lankan Government faced unemployment problem due to economical slackness in the 1930's and 1940's. Since the days of Great Depression of 1930's the emigration to Sri Lanka had stopped, there was only repatriation of Indian labourers from Sri Lanka. Table shows the repatriation figures from 1929.

Repatriation figures for 10 years from 1929

Year	Number of workers	Year	Number of workers
1929	3,183	1934	2,034
1930	7,462	1935	6,252
1931	15,707	1936	5,396
1932	14,388	1937	10,322
1933	42,343	1938	3,004

Source. *Administration Report of the commissioner of labour (Sri Lankan: Government Publication, 1954), p.p 99.*

The British introduced the slope cultivation and cultivated coffee first, then tea and coconut and latter rubber. The native Sri Lankan labourers were unwilling to work in estates and hence efforts were taken to bring labourers from other countries. The south Indian labourers were known for hard work at low wage and so the British preferred them to any other labour force. As the South Indian labourers were recruited under indentured labour system, numerical strength of South Indian labourers slowly increased in Sri Lanka after 1830. The labourers came from several parts of South India along with their family to Sri Lanka not only to work in the estates but also to do other manual work.

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