

Education and Change in Plantations: The Case of Sri Lanka

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Sri Lanka has one of the finest social welfare records in the developing world. Levels of literacy and basic health compare very favourably with other developing countries, particularly those with comparable per capita income. Sri Lanka's welfarist policies are funded through revenue derived from an agricultural economy, which is still dominated by plantations. The plantation economy of Sri Lanka is based on three principal crops — tea, rubber and coconut. In 1983 these three crops accounted for over half of Sri Lanka's export earnings. Tea alone accounted for one-third of all export earnings.

However, although the education and health standards of the people in the country as a whole are high, those of the people who work in the plantations to generate the revenue which helps sustain those welfare policies are very low. People inside plantations are the means to the ends of people outside plantations.

In this article I examine the development of provision for basic education in the tea plantations in Sri Lanka between 1830 and the present day. My working definition of the purpose of basic education derives from Seers [1981]. Basic education provides for the development in all persons of the ability to predict and provide solutions to problems raised by the struggle for survival, and is one of the essential ingredients of any basic needs strategy. At the very least, this implies the achievement by all persons of functional literacy and functional numeracy. In Sri Lanka today the number of years of schooling which comprise basic education is not defined. However, general education, which in theory is freely available to all, comprises 11 years of schooling.

The article is divided into four parts. First, I examine the status of basic education in Sri Lankan plantations today. Second, I provide a brief historical account of three phases in the development of provision for basic education between 1830 and 1977. Third, I focus more specifically on contemporary forces for change which over the last 10 years have placed education for plantation workers' children as an issue firmly on the political agenda. Finally, I offer some comments on the future of plantation education. Throughout I am concerned to locate basic education on the plantations within its wider economic, social and political context.

Education in Plantations Today

The majority of plantation workers are Tamils of South Indian origin whose first ancestors migrated to Sri Lanka in the course of the 19th century. They were recruited to work the newly-created coffee plantations opened up by foreign capital under British colonial rule. A minority, though, are Sinhalese. Indian Tamils currently number around 800,000 persons (1981 Census), and the vast majority live in plantations.

Educationally, plantation workers are disadvantaged in comparison with the population as a whole and the rural population in and around the plantation areas. For example, the national literacy rate in 1981 was 87 per cent. For Indian Tamils it was 67 per cent and for female Indian Tamils it was only 55 per cent. In 1984 there were 558 government-run plantation schools in tea and rubber estates and just over 63,000 students, of whom 46 per cent were girls.² Most of these schools are located on estates in the up-country tea growing regions of Nuwara-Eliya, Hatton, Bandarawela and Kandy. Almost all children of plantation workers attend Tamil-medium schools located inside plantations and providing for the first five or six years of the basic education cycle. However, a small number of workers' children attend schools outside the plantation, especially from year 7 upwards. By contrast, the children of plantation managers and supervisory staff (who tend increasingly to be Sinhalese) are educated at the better-run government or private schools which provide primary and secondary education in the Sinhala and Tamil medium in the provincial towns of the plantation areas or in the capital. Some travel daily from home while others board at school or with relatives.

In 1984, 78 per cent of the teachers in the plantation schools were permanent government employees, of whom less than one third were trained teachers. Twenty-two per cent of the teachers were volunteers, paid small wages by voluntary organisations and plantation parents. The average pupil-teacher ratio in 1984 was 55:1, contrasting unfavourably with the national average of 34:1. Dropout rates in the primary grades in the plantation schools are very high: one estimate is that only around 30 per cent of these

¹ I am grateful for comments on a draft of this paper to Sunil Bastian, George Gnanamuttu, T. Marimuthu and R. Sivasithambaram.

² These figures apply to tea and rubber estates. The majority of plantation schools are located in tea estates, the focus of this paper.

children who enter the first year of primary school reach year 6. The comparable figure for the country as a whole is 90 per cent. Furthermore, access to education beyond year 6 is limited, opportunities for vocational training and adult education few and enrolment at university rare.

On average estate schools are not as well maintained as village schools in the rural areas. The buildings (classrooms and teachers quarters) are delapidated and latrines non-existent or locked. There may be only a single teacher in charge of a large group of children of ages ranging from five (and below) to 14. The children are often absent from school or listless in their response.

Yet there is a far greater degree of heterogeneity among schools inside plantations than outside in the surrounding rural areas. There are plantation schools with sturdy large buildings dating from the 1940s, with two or three enthusiastic teachers, with equipment and reasonable water and sanitation facilities. The condition of these unusual schools can generally be traced to the enthusiastic support and interest of the plantation owner or manager, and sometimes his wife — then and now. However, these schools tend to be an exception to the general rule.

The Development of Education

Since the introduction of plantations to Sri Lanka in 1830, there have been three main phases in the provision of basic education.

1. Laissez-faire growth, 1830s-c.1920
2. The implementation of a statutory framework by the Colonial Government, c.1870-1948
3. Post-colonial state intervention, 1948-1977.

The historical account I present here draws heavily on Gnanamuttu's *Education and the Indian Plantation Worker in Sri Lanka* (1976).

Laissez-faire Growth, 1830-1920

The early plantations produced coffee and required seasonal rather than permanent labour. The Kandyan peasant living in the plantation areas cultivating rice, and tending cattle, was not attracted by plantation work with its long hours, low wages and cramped living conditions. As a result labour was recruited from Tamil-speaking districts of South India. However, the coffee industry collapsed under the impact of the coffee blight and the plantation economy came to be dominated by tea. In contrast to coffee, tea in Sri Lanka requires permanent labour, and work was freely available for men, women and children [Kurian 1982]. The presence of growing numbers of children in plantations led to the provision of rudimentary forms of education, with the Tamil

language used as the medium of instruction. Within the plantation early education was of two types — self-help schools and missionary schools.

Self-help schools were organised by the head kanganyes not by the plantation owners, who for the most part regarded education as an unnecessary addition to the cost of production. As well as their functions as labour recruiter, labour supervisor, money lender and community leader, the head kanganyes also assumed the role of educational initiator and organiser and established a dual and male-dominated system of education within the plantations. One type of school admitted the children of kanganyes and of subordinate staff members such as field officers and clerks. In these schools the kangany's personal clerk taught the 'three Rs' and some English, enabling these children to move on to English-medium schools in the nearby towns. The second type of school, usually run during the evenings, admitted the sons of labourers. The curriculum was confined to the reading and recitation of moral and religious verse in an imitation of the traditional verandah school then popular in South India. Gnanamuttu [1976] records that by 1904, 179 of these 'coolie-line' schools were in operation. In both types of school boys were admitted more often than girls.

The top-layer of self-help school provided access to schools outside the plantation and enabled children to attain the same job status as their fathers or to seek government employment as teachers or clerks. The bottom layer of self-help school provided access only to jobs inside the plantation for which neither basic education nor specific training were strictly necessary. These schools probably performed a socialising more than a knowledge-creating role. The schools did more than teach school subjects. They kept the community together, preserved its institutions, its values and its unwritten codes of conduct, and were a bulwark against disintegration [Gnanamuttu 1976:16]. Balasuriya, commenting on the same period, describes the schools as fitting workers' children to their lowly position in life, a purpose that suited the kanganyes, since, 'they depended on the ignorance of the masses of these workers for their own position and advantage' [Balasuriya 1978:31].

Missionary schools in and around the estates were of different kinds — Christian, Hindu and Buddhist. The earliest report of Christian activity was in 1842 when the Baptists established a mission and a school in a coffee plantation near Kandy. Their establishment, motivated by an 'anxious concern for this class of our fellow creatures' [K. M. de Silva, quoted in Gnanamuttu 1976:16] did not go unchallenged by the planters. The missionaries proceeded regardless, since, 'neither the Jamaican planters nor the Anglicans (*sic*) were in a position to prevent its

establishment for unlike Jamaica, Ceylon was . . . a land of freedom, and obstacles which once existed in Jamaica were not to be met here' [K. M. de Silva, quoted in Gnanamuttu 1976:16]. By 1844 the school had closed down. But by 1854 the organisation that was to contribute most towards the education of workers and their children — the Tamil Cooly Mission — had been established. This was formed initially by evangelical Scottish Presbyterian planters who believed that education preceded religious conversion. Soon after, the work of the mission was taken over by the Anglican Church Missionary Society. The Mission sought to establish two types of school. The first were schools inside the estates providing a rudimentary education for labourers' children. The second were schools in the towns for the children of subordinate staff members.

Buddhist and Hindu organisations also contributed to educational provision for the children of Indian Tamil plantation workers, though the schools were mostly located in the plantation area towns and admitted children who had already received a few years of basic education inside plantations. Such schools taught through the medium of English and charged fees.

In this early period, the education available to the children of plantation workers and staff members was organised through private initiative. However, given the attitude of the colonial authorities towards education in general, this was no different from the situation prevailing in the rest of the country. In the early part of their nineteenth century Ceylon was regarded by the British as a strategic outpost valued for the protection it offered expanding British possessions in India [de Silva 1973:67]. Among other things, the colonial authorities believed that educational expenditure was a luxury which it could not afford. On balance, all missionary organisations were more successful in establishing schools outside rather than inside plantations and in reaching the children of subordinate staff rather than workers.

The Implementation of a Statutory Framework by the Colonial Government c.1870-1948

In 1869 a Special Report on the State of Public Instruction in Ceylon recommended that plantation owners be encouraged to provide for the education of their workers' children in the same way that mill owners were required to do in England. The colonial authorities did not take up the recommendation, but offered instead a financial grant to those estate proprietors prepared to establish schools. Estate proprietors were unwilling to spend much on education themselves since schools constituted an additional item of expenditure which increased their costs of production. As regards the motives of the colonial authorities, their increased interest in welfare

and education among Indian Tamil plantation workers derived from public opinion and changing attitudes towards education in the UK, the need to attract labour to the plantations which they felt was essential to the overall economic development of the colony, and pressure from the Indian government on behalf of Indian Nationals in Ceylon, and particularly Indian Tamil plantations workers.

In the first half of the 20th century, though, a statutory framework for estate education was developed. Government Ordinances of 1907, 1920, 1939 and 1947 laid down conditions for improvements in buildings, furniture, equipment, daily timetable and qualifications of teachers. But although each successive ordinance stipulated the obligations of estate proprietors for better provision of education, the gap between statute and practice was wide and estate education remained inferior to other forms of education in the country.

Post-Colonial State Intervention, 1948-1977

A few years prior to Independence the report of the Special Committee on Education, 1943, chaired by Kannangara, was presented to parliament. This report is considered by many to be a landmark in the development of education in Sri Lanka, with its recommendations for 'free' education from kindergarten to university and the establishment of better schools in rural areas. Significantly, no representation on estate education appears to have been made to this committee, nor were any references made to it in the report. The recommendations were, however, amended in parliament, and the law embodied in the Education Ordinance of 1947 did make provision for the integration of state schools into the national estate system [Gnanamuttu 1976:41]. There was potential for change. Soon after Independence was declared in 1948 Indian plantation workers were disenfranchised. And Kannangara, who was in favour of the amended recommendation for government take-over of estate education, was defeated in the 1947 parliamentary elections. For the next 30 years few practical steps were achieved in the state take-over of estate education. 'Promises continued to be made, punctuating periods of inaction, and commissions continued to recommend the taking-over of estate schools and integrating them into the national system of education' [Gnanamuttu 1976:53].

However, the nationalisation of estates under the Land Reform Acts of 1972 and 1975 finally placed an obligation on the state to integrate estate schools into the national system of education. The United Front Government of Mrs Banaraike [1970-77] responsible for nationalisation also committed itself in its election manifesto to the take-over of estate schools. In fact, few schools were taken over during its period of office,

though negotiations and discussions took place at various levels. But under the present United National Party Government, a phased formal take-over of estate schools has been initiated.

Contemporary Forces for Change

The vast majority of schools inside plantations have now been incorporated into a state education system. For many, the problem is now over, as if education can be transformed overnight. However, the teachers and parents of children who attend plantation schools know differently. Teachers are still short of books, equipment and basic furniture. Roofs leak, electricity supplies, where they existed, are still cut-off. The chances of children attending school beyond grade 6 have improved little, nor has the general quality of learning and teaching shown marked improvement.

The main changes brought about by the take-over have been experienced by teachers. Whereas earlier they had been employees of the estates, with limited mobility and few rights of appeal, they now became government servants answerable not to the estate management but to their Circuit Education Officer and Regional Officer of Education. Estate managers, though themselves also now government servants, no longer exercise jurisdiction over estate teachers. Estate management and teachers are linked to different ministries and vertical lines of authority. The State's involvement in plantations bifurcated. Production and all aspects of welfare except education are under the control of the Ministry of Plantation Industries. Education is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education.

However, over the past 10 years there have been other economic, social and political changes in the island at large which have created the conditions for further educational change and have made possible a more positive prognosis for plantation education than ever before. Education on the estates has now been placed firmly on the political agenda. In the next section I outline the major reasons why this has happened. I deal in turn with ethnic conflict and the economy; politics and trade unions; citizenship and repatriation; international aid; national skill shortages and local pressure groups.

Ethnic Conflict and the Economy

The majority of plantation workers are Indian Tamils. They are to be distinguished from the Ceylon Tamils who live mainly in the North and East of the island and who have been settled in Sri Lanka for centuries. Although Indian Tamils and Ceylon Tamils share a common language, there are fundamental historical, economic, educational, cultural, caste and geographic differences which separate the two groups. Tension

between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Ceylon Tamils (who comprise around 78 per cent and 12 per cent of the total population respectively) has been growing since Independence. In the last 30 years, there have been successive outbreaks of violence which have been more severe over the past years. Indian Tamils are not directly involved in the struggle for Eelam, the separate state for the Ceylon Tamils, although they have been subject to communal violence. Nevertheless, the Sinhalese government and majority feared the prospect of an alliance between all Tamil groups in the island (Ceylon and Indian). Balasuriya, writing in 1978 and unaware of the scale of ethnic violence which was to follow, noted that given this fear of alliance, Government was likely to consider the demands of plantation workers 'partly in order to wean them away from the militant TULF'³ [Balasuriya 1978:42].

The present government is also well aware of the continuing importance of the tea industry for the economy as a whole. Over the past 10 years the Sri Lankan economy has experienced mixed success in terms of economic growth. In 1977 a series of economic reforms transformed a state-regulated and inward-oriented economy to one characterised by a market and external orientation. The rate of growth of real GDP, which had averaged 2.9 per cent per annum during the period 1970-77, had reached 6.0 per cent per annum by the early 1980s. But by 1982 the world economic recession had taken its toll on the Sri Lankan economy. The terms of trade, balance of payments deficit and the debt-servicing ratio had worsened. Although the international prices for tea also worsened, government continued to depend on tea for much-needed foreign exchange earnings. Foreign exchange has also become extremely important for the defence budget, which has rocketed by a factor of 15 over the past five years.

These two forces — ethnic conflict and the economic significance of tea — contribute to an understanding of why government is prepared to listen to the demands of plantation workers; why the Ceylon Workers' Congress in particular has won concessions on, among other things, citizenship; and why international aid is flowing to the plantation sector. These factors are discussed below.

Politics and Trade Unions

Trade union activities on the plantations originated in the late 1920s in response to the exploitative system of labour recruitment and control organised through the kanganies, and to a decline in minimum wages [Jayawardene 1972, 1979; Kemp, in this issue of the *Bulletin*]. By 1986 there were 14 unions representing workers in plantations, the largest being the Ceylon Workers' Congress [CWC].

³ Tamil United Liberation Front.

The CWC has passed resolutions on a wide range of welfare issues, including education. For many years the CWC demanded government take-over of estate schools [Jayawardene 1984:154] and government provision of the same level and type of education offered to the rest of the population [Sandarasegaram 1985]. Some have argued, however, that traditionally the unions have not been 'too anxious about the education of the rank and file workers. This is because their power and that of the kangany class (from which many of the trade union leaders derive) depends on the submissive position of the workers' [Balasuriya 1978:42].

Nonetheless it is worth noting the current link between unions, politics and government. In the 1977 elections the CWC president, Mr Thondaman, was elected to parliament as an Independent CWC candidate. Before the 1977 election the CWC entered into a 'tacit alliance' with the United National Party, and soon after Mr Thondaman joined the government as Minister of Rural Industries Development [Moore 1985]. This strategic move by Government was probably linked to the perceived and continued importance of the newly nationalised plantation sector to the country's balance of payments, to the anticipated importance of bloc votes for the government and to the growing ethnic conflict involving Ceylon (not Indian) Tamils in the North of the country and the majority Sinhalese described earlier.

This alliance between government and the CWC has not in fact led to increases in spending on estate education by the Ministry of Education. But it has resulted in the creation of a special budgetary vote known popularly as 'Thondaman's vote', which is spent almost exclusively on school buildings in plantation areas. The interest of government is also clear from the establishment in 1984 of a Presidential Secretariat Group comprising representatives from the plantation corporations and the Ministry of Education which was set up to examine issues in estate education. Although no union interests were represented in the group, by 1985 Cabinet had approved a recommendation by the Education Minister for a Five Year Development Plan for the development of the education system in the plantation sector (*Ceylon Daily News*, 25 July 1985).

Citizenship and Repatriation

Universal franchise was introduced in 1931. Under the 1948/49 Citizenship Acts Indian Tamils were disenfranchised and could only be re-enfranchised after gaining citizenship, a long and arduous process. It is widely believed that disenfranchisement resulted from the fact that some of the Indian Tamil vote went to left-wing candidates, and that the seven elected

Indian Tamils worked with the opposition once in parliament [Jayawardene 1976]. By voting with the Left the Indian Tamils challenged the company and individual interests of Sinhalese (mainly low-country) plantation owners and the up country interests of the Kandyan peasantry.

By the mid-1960s the issues of disenfranchisement and citizenship were linked with repatriation. The Indo-Ceylon agreements of 1964 and 1974 provided for Indian citizenship and repatriation for some 600,000 persons, and Sri Lankan citizenship for 375,000. Largely as a result of repatriation, the Indian Tamil share of Sri Lanka's total population dropped from 10 to 6 per cent between 1971 and 1981. By 1986 a new Citizenship Act was pushed through parliament by government in an attempt to achieve a final resolution of the outstanding issues of citizenship, statelessness and repatriation.

There are two main implications of this latest Citizenship Act for education in the future. The first is directly political. At the next general election more Indian Tamils will have the vote than they did in 1977. Education has always been near the top of the political agenda in Sri Lanka. Plantation education is therefore likely to feature prominently in the agenda of politicians in plantation areas. If provincial government becomes a reality in the future (as is currently proposed), resources for education will be competed for at the level of provincial rather than national politics.

The second implication of citizenship re-enfranchisement and repatriation is a change in the level and mix of labour on the plantations, a force which also has an indirect political dimension. On the one hand, the new Citizenship Act will have the effect of increasing the numbers of educated Tamil labourers who find work outside the plantations. On the other, rural unemployment in the areas surrounding the plantations is likely to lead to an increase in the number of Sinhalese working in plantations. This increased mix of the Sinhalese and Tamil labour is likely to result in an increased consciousness on the part of Tamil labour of their basic human rights, including education [Balasuriya 1978], a consciousness which will be independent of the different trade union affiliations of Sinhalese and Tamil plantation workers.

International Aid

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka over the past decade has increased the awareness of many aid agencies of the existence of minority groups in the country. Many agencies have been answerable in their home parliaments to questions from their electorates about continued aid support to the Sri Lanka government, described variously in the Western press as 'fascist',

'discriminatory' and 'anti-human rights'. The fact that Indian Tamils are not by and large involved in the ethnic conflict is less important than the fact that they are Tamils.

But interest in people in plantations has also been stimulated by a desire on the part of many aid agencies to direct aid to the poorest — an international philosophy of aid that coincided with the growing ethnic conflict. Indian plantation workers are a fairly obvious 'target group', defined easily as disadvantaged on a variety of social and economic indicators, and thereby as justifying aid.

International aid would be unimportant as a condition for change in plantation education, were it not for the fact that the country as a whole has traditionally received large amounts of international aid (more per capita than elsewhere in Asia), and the enormous increase in the defence bill. At the most recent Sri Lanka aid group meeting in Paris (July 1986), the Minister of Finance assured aid donors that not one rupee of aid money would be spent on defence. Aid donors for their part applauded the government's proposals for peace. Nonetheless, defence and other items of government expenditure have to be paid for somehow.

International aid to estate education is timely from several points of view, and over the past six years aid for basic education in estate areas has flowed into the country from Sweden, Holland, Germany and from UNICEF. The Ministry of Education and the Swedish International Development Agency have recently signed an agreement for a major programme of phased support to be extended over the next 12 years to all plantation schools in the country [Sri Lanka 1986]. Aid to other aspects of welfare has also flowed copiously from a number of agencies, the most recent example being the mid-term investment programme funded by the Dutch and Norwegian governments.

Not all forces for change in plantation education are so directly interrelated: others include the long-standing efforts of local pressure groups and national level skill shortages.

Local pressure groups

Despite increasing government involvement in estate education, there are still many non-governmental organisations working to improve 'basic education' on the estates. Church bodies support a variety of activities which include the provision of scholarships, equipment, buildings and training programmes for volunteer teachers. From time to time they join forces to make recommendations and put pressure on government to take action. For example, in 1982 the Hatton Joint Committee of voluntary organisations and trade unions submitted a memorandum to the Minister of Education on the education reforms

proposed in the 1981 White Paper.

National Skill Shortages

Overall, there is currently a labour surplus in the plantation sector [Sinnathamby and Wickramasekera, 1984]. But there are specific shortages in certain skill areas like masonry, carpentry and electrical wiring. These are due to two main developments: firstly, considerable investment by government in the past few years in production-oriented and welfare-oriented construction activity; and secondly, migration to West Asia. The latter has led to shortages of skilled workers in the national and local economy. Estate management and union alike agree on the urgent need for vocational training. This will be most effective among youths who have experienced at least five to six years' basic education, thus providing tacit support for an improved system of basic education.

Towards the Future

Explanations for what has happened in the past have a tendency to reduce the actions of people to rather abstract economic and political forces. But those forces comprise people and it is people both inside and outside plantations who determine both history and the future. In the future the individual and collective actions of teachers, bureaucrats, trade union officials, managers and children will combine with those of politicians and international decision-makers to determine the nature of educational provision in plantations. People are both the source and the receivers of programmes for education.

The financing of plantation education in Sri Lanka is no longer the major obstacle. The challenge for the future lies in the social and political coordination of an integrated package of activities which include physical infrastructure (school buildings, water sanitation, teachers' quarters, equipment and furniture), quality development of education (teacher training, curricula materials and teaching methods), an increase in human resources (teachers and officers from plantation communities) and local participation (school development societies). The government, through its bureaucratic machinery, can achieve much, though to be most effective its efforts need to be supplemented by a range of initiatives taken by others, e.g. union and workers organisations, other government agencies and local and international non-governmental organisations.

One of the main challenges for the future will be the creation of, and tolerance for, participatory structures of control over education, a theme referred to for other welfare sectors in Sri Lanka by Bastian [1985] and by Laing and Piggot, Kemp and Kirk in this issue of the *Bulletin*. The provision by others of welfare or

basic needs does much to redress economic and apparent social inequality in the short term. But in the long term, a people's belief in themselves and control over their own environment will determine both their productivity and their welfare. Thiruvalluvar, the Tamil poet wrote: 'Only those who can read have eyes — those who cannot read have sores on their face'. There are no instant cures for 'sores on the face' — but there is basic education.

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