

Women in the Plantations: Limits of Progress

Valli Kanapathipillai

In the past decade, Sri Lanka's national policy planners became increasingly responsive to the need of formulating measures to change the backward conditions of plantation labour. Concerted efforts were made in the 80's to improve the living and working conditions of the estate workers. Although these policy decisions and consequent improvements in the welfare of the workers were not always targeted specifically at women, some 'trickle-down effect' seems to have worked, improving the quality of life among plantation women.

Changes

These improvements have, nonetheless, been mainly welfare oriented. The most significant change is the equalizing of wages of male and female labour in 1984, followed by increases in the basic daily wage and living allowances. Health services have also been improved with the active participation of and funding from international and bilateral donor agencies, the overall result of which has been the decline in mortality among the plantation workers. During this period, the urgent need to provide adequate housing for this largely resident work force was finally recognised and, efforts were made under the Medium Term Investment Programme to upgrade existing houses or build new ones in some selected estates. Improvements in education in the estate sector was initiated by the government, following the take-over of estate schools in 1977 and 1980. Attempts were also made to upgrade

existing schools, initially under the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) and later through a programme implemented by the Ministry of Education with the support of European donors such as SIDA and NORAD. The availability of education for the estate sector has shown progress, while more women are seen to avail themselves of educational opportunities.

These policy changes and improvements have indeed been made possible by agitation of the workers themselves. Loss of citizenship and voting rights under the Citizenship Acts of 1948 and Parliamentary Elections Amendment Act of 1949, marginalised the Tamil plantation workers from the parliamentary process, leaving the trade unions as the main platform for agitating towards welfare and civil rights. For instance, the equalizing of pay and increase in wages was made possible by the massive strike undertaken by the unions in 1984. However, the success of these unions in the past decade, has to be seen in relation to the enhanced political strength that the plantation workers gained during this period.

The strategic position which the plantation workers have acquired in recent Sri Lankan politics is the main factor which compelled the state into paying more attention to the demands and needs of the workers. After decades in the political wilderness, they acquired a significant bargaining capacity in the 80's, due to three parallel developments.

The first was the increased electoral strength of the Tamil plantation workers, following the implementation of the Sirima-Shastri Pact of 1964 and later the Agreement of 1974. Those who have received citizenship under these Agreements, up to now, are concentrated within

a specific electoral region in the Central highlands, which has made them an important electoral constituency, particularly under the Proportional Representation System.

Secondly, the civil war situation in the North and East of the Island has compelled the government to be more considerate of the needs of the workers of Indian Tamil origin. Preventing Tamil nationalist forces in the North and East from spreading their influence among people in this sector was, indeed, a tactical necessity of the State.

Thirdly, the political role and leadership of Mr. Thondaman, the head of the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC), has been as significant as the first two factors. He has been the leading representative of Indian Tamils in most post-independence parliaments. Mr. Thondaman initially witnessed disenfranchisement of his constituents and later their actual expulsion from the country, or repatriation to India, under the two agreements of 1964 and 1974. By his presence in parliament, Thondaman has been able to tone down the most extreme aspects of these Acts of Parliament. From 1977, when Thondaman was appointed a Cabinet Minister, he was able to mobilize the forces of the CWC to win political and welfare concessions for the workers as well as to become an influential figure in national politics.

The entry of the state has also been significant in terms of social development in the plantation sector. State take-over brought the Indian Tamil worker within the framework of the wider political process, giving them the political capacity to agitate for better working conditions. The state also opened the

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doors for welfare work within plantations by establishing social development divisions in the two plantation corporations, the JEDB and the SLSPC. In certain instances, the plantation welfare services were integrated with that of the state.

Under the World Bank/IMF policy strategy for Sri Lanka in the post 1977 period, the importance of improving productivity in the plantation sector was stressed, given that it was still a major contributor to foreign exchange earnings in the country. In the new policy climate, the improvement of plantation productivity was viewed in conjunction with the need to accelerate social development of the plantation workers.

Women Workers

Meanwhile, European donors too extended the policy debate on plantations, when a strategy for plantation re-structuring was being formulated and later implemented. Thus, the donors, too, came to play a role in welfare development among workers. The donors were involved in setting up projects towards improving the living and working conditions in the estates.

The donor agencies, in keeping with the global trend towards recognition of women's oppression and their right to liberation, built into their programmes, the necessity of creating support schemes that would specifically benefit women. The women's movement in Sri Lanka, by incorporating and actively highlighting the oppression of estate women, has also contributed towards initiating awareness among trade unions, policy makers and among the workers themselves.

Despite these changes, women plantation workers continue to hold secondary status as wage workers, their position compounded by the double burden of domestic work, low literacy, poor health and the constraints of an ideology that keeps them subordinate to men. These changes, actually, fall far short of an overall progress. It is hardly possible to rectify in a decade what is almost a century of neglect.

Wages are still perceived as family income, which explains the management's unquestioning practice of handing over women's wages to their husbands. Even the unions have failed to stop this unfortunate practice which has continued from the 19th century. Studies show that this practice takes away women's control over their own incomes, which indirectly has a bearing on poor nutrition and health among women and children.

In spite of integrating the estate schools with the national education system, and the concerted efforts at upgrading schools with the assistance of various donors, education levels of plantation workers in general, and women workers in particular, still fall far short of accepted standards. In the opinion of officials involved in the upgrading schemes, it could take another 20 years to bring the education system in estates to a standard equivalent to that of the national level. And, even among those who have received education up to O'Levels or higher, gaining employment is a real problem. In 1985/86, of the women who had passed O'levels/N.C.G.E., 40.3% in the 15-19 age group were unemployed. Another 41.5% of women in the 25-29 age group were also still unemployed (*Labour Force & Socio-Economic Survey, 1985/86*).

Statistics show substantial improvements in health among workers in the plantation sector. Yet, as a recent study notes, "health conditions on estates still have some way to go to reach levels comparable with the rest of the country:" (Report by the Technical Assistance Team, 1992). Health conditions among women in this sector, has to improve far more than at present. Maternal mortality is still higher among women in the estate sector. Both the donors and the state do not appear to have paid adequate attention to the poor working conditions of women, and occupation related diseases prevalent among them. A study on health status of women workers by the Congress labor Foundation, addressed this particular issue. According to this study, infections of the respiratory tract or air passages were common among the women in the sample. Exposure to adverse climatic conditions, coupled with low nutritional standards, ac-

counts for their poor health. Even though maternity benefits are available, they rarely meet the acutely felt health and welfare needs of the plantation worker mothers.

Lack of women's organisations to initiate changes is particularly felt in the plantation sector. In other sectors of the economy, however, it is not an uncommon practice among women, to organise *around* issues that affect them. Trade unions have 'women's wings' but these have been mere appendages of male led union bodies, existing in name alone. Very recently, these 'women's wings' have begun to assert some degree of autonomy. Of late, some NGO's too, have started separate 'women's sections', the impact of which is yet to be felt. Women comprise almost 50% of the plantation labor force. Yet, they sometimes remain unorganised as women. The explanation fundamentally lies with the ideological and social construction of gender, which ascribes certain subordinate positions for women within society. The constraints placed on them by the very structural features of the plantation system and by ethnic segregation, have exacerbated these conditions.

Prospects

As the privatization of estates is debated and discussed, certain features of the emerging form of management have arisen, which could make a positive contribution towards improving existing conditions of workers in general, and women in particular. It is envisaged that welfare and social development among workers will not be left in the control of individual private management companies, but is to come within the purview of a central body, in which unions have a voice and a role. This arrangement is supposed to ensure the continuation of social development started in the 1980's.

Plans are afoot, to give workers the ownership of houses and land. This is hopefully, a welcome move since divorcing the workers' residence from the plantation management is likely to break up the 'enclave' type system that has been partly responsible for the conditions of semi-slavery, in which the work-

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ers have been kept for more than a century. This is likely to widen the workers' opportunities for gaining social and economic mobility, while easing the surplus labour problem on estates. The possession of land and housing, may give a worker-family a sense of security, identity and perhaps independence. It may also break the links between the estate and

the household, which partly account for the subordinate position of women in this sector.

However, be it their right to own a house and land, or their labour-mobility, or the emergence of a new 'open' system of labor relations, all these possibilities will depend to a large extent on the ethnic issue, and the acceptance of these progressive measures by the majority Sinhalese community. ■

Three Days in Paradise

by Vinod Moonesinghe

I first met Singapore in 1986. It appeared to me then, as the dream of Sri Lanka's 1940's nationalists: a modern city built on tropical swamps, a St. Petersburg of the South. I visited the island again in February this year. Six years on, the place didn't seem quite such a utopia.

Singapore, like Hong Kong, is one of the Four Tigers; unlike Korea and Taiwan, the two Megalopolitan Tigers have developed on the basis of free trade, an important consideration in view of the IMF/World Bank-imposed conditions on Sri Lanka. How does one prosper on non-protective free trade? The answer probably lies in viewing Colombo, in isolation, from the hinterland: take the Metropolis out of the rest of the island and you have a Singapore in the making. The population of Greater Colombo (Negombo to Panadura, Bambalapitiya to Oruwela), is about that of Singapore; the area provides Sri Lanka's answer to the South-East Asian city state, with Port, Airport, Industry and Commerce.

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All the ingredients are available in Colombo, save one: the political will. One of the major similarities lies in the persons of Lee and Premadasa. Both might be said to have come from the insurgent constituency, in a situation where the insurgencies were crushed. However, there is a crucial difference in that Singapore detached itself from its hinterland, while Colombo has not (except in a social and cultural sense). Indeed, given the conditions imposed on Colombo from outside, one should be surprised at the lack of a Colombo-centred separatist movement: an independent Colombo could continue to exercise economic imperialism on the hinterland, while having none of the responsibilities of feedback to the rural areas. Such, after all, was the fate of Singapore after its break with Malaysia.

My first impression of Singapore, was of awe. Here was Birmingham (Edgbaston) recreated in the tropics. Here was what Colombo should be: a city rising out of the marsh in European splendour. The difference is that Singapore is greener than any European city, greener than the Colombo Municipality. It was also very clean, comparing even with Zurich, that cleanest

of European cities. It did lack some of the chic of Europe, no central plazas preserved over hundreds of years. The Raffles Hotel is a preserved monument, a distinction never granted to the Galle Face Hotel, or even to the Dutch building that stood on the site of the present Hotel Oberoi. Colombo has a far greater preservable archaeology than Singapore but, with the exception of a few buildings (The VOC office in Pettah, the Wolvendahl Church, etc.), makes few attempts to preserve its history. Our historiography always harks back to the 'Golden Age' of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. The state of the Ambalama at Pitakotte junction, or even the Rampart at Etul Kotte, attest to the lack of interest in artifacts of less than seven hundred years ago; the Mission House at Christian College (the Bangalawa of the Bangala Junction) was unceremoniously pulled down in 1978, even though it served as Alma Mater to Don David Hewavitharana (aka Dharmapala).

What struck me most about Singapore was not the Tower Blocks for housing the proletariat (an utter abomination for anyone who has lived in one,

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