

LABOURING TO LEARN ON PLANTATIONS

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Angela W. Little, *Labouring to Learn, Towards a Political Economy of Plantations, People and Education in Sri Lanka*, Macmillan, 1999; reprinted SSA, 2003, 324 pages, Rs.750/=.

Sri Lanka is widely known internationally for quality of life indices that are disproportionately high in comparison to the per capita income of her population. Another distinctive Sri Lankan feature is that among the three largest ethnic categories, viz. Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamil and Muslim, the inter-ethnic disparities in many of these indices are minimal – much less than between major ethnic categories almost everywhere else in South and South East Asia. The ubiquitous exception is Sri Lanka's fourth major ethnic group, viz. Malaiyaha Tamils (officially known as Indian Tamils and often referred to as Plantation Tamils by Professor Angela Little. In terms of almost every recognized socio-economic index, this ethnic group is greatly disadvantaged in comparison to others in Sri Lanka. Even the term Malaiyaha Tamil (the choice of that community) has gained neither official recognition nor currency in popular usage. Legal obstacles (arising from statelessness) are nearly overcome, but many socio-economic hurdles are yet to be cleared.

It is the achievement of modest, overdue but measurable progress, particularly in the field of education, that is the focus of the book under review. Using material gathered from research spread over a quarter of a century, Little begins with an outline of a day in the life of Vickneswari, an 8 year old Malaiyaha Tamil girl living with her family in a "line room" on a tea plantation, to tell a comprehensive tale of the ups and downs and gradual emancipation, yet in its early stages, of her community over 16 decades. Despite the distinctive and substantial contribution of Malaiyaha Tamils to the national economy and development, especially foreign exchange earnings, over the decades, the overriding feature of their socio-economic condition has been stasis. There have been significant gains form time to time, but these have been wrested through skilful political leadership at the national level by the late S.Thondaman.

Little's analysis draws from many theoretical models of educational change, both Marxist (Bowles and Gintis) and non-Marxist (including Archer; Weiner; Baccus) Her focus is on when, why and how changes have occurred rather than on why changes have been so few and so late, and on discovering the linkages of educational progress (or lack of it) to political and economic developments, national and international, in relation to the plantation sector.

Beginning in the 1830s, the labour was initially all male, into the coffee plantations that required only seasonal labour, and the migration was circular. There was then no need for schools to be established on the estates. However, consequent to the outbreak of coffee blast, tea gradually replaced coffee, and there was growing need for labour all-year-round. In consequence the migration became progressively permanent or semi-permanent, and of families rather than individuals. But the means of recruitment through Kanganies (labour contractors and supervisors) and the indentured system (under semi-slave conditions) remained essentially unchanged. Moreover, differences in ethnicity and caste, and geographical isolation served to keep the immigrant labour and their families apart from the local population, undermining their capacity to establish political linkages and sharing in upward socio-economic mobility. However, their geographical and occupational concentration did facilitate trade union activity and, eventually, this proved to be invaluable in backing the efforts of the political leadership to progressively surmount the many obstacles in the way of their advancement.

By the 1970s, for Sri Lankans other than Malaiyaha Tamils, primary educational enrolment and literacy, and access to free secondary education in their own language medium in schools within easy access were near universal. Several small, scattered concentrations of Malaiyaha Tamils had no Tamil medium schools; and estate schools, serving the bulk of the Malaiyaha Tamil population, remained mostly outside the mainstream, with minimal inputs from the state, till 1977. Lack of educational facilities within the estates helped to ensure that the plantation management had easy access to cheap labour. The transformation began with political developments in 1977, leading to the state accepting full responsibility, for the first time, for the education of children in the plantations. A supplementary factor contributing to heightened interest in education within the plantations (from parents and students, teachers and the plantation management) was the shrinking of the demand for unskilled labour within the estates and the opening up of some opportunities outside for those with a measure of secondary education. But the critical factor was the role of S.Thondaman who emerged as a powerful trade union and political leader, and cabinet minister in the new government. He motivated the Malaiyaha Tamil population, the educational establishment, the plantation management, the cabinet and aid

agencies to co-operate to upgrade the quality of education on the estates; to a less extent, he helped to generate some modest employment opportunities outside the plantations for Malaiyaha Tamil school leavers.

Despite significant advances, inequalities between schools within and outside the plantations continue in respect of student-teacher ratios, professional qualifications of teachers, the level of supervision and support by the state, school buildings and other facilities, playgrounds, etc. In terms of enrolment ratios and the quality of education, the disparities may be least in primary education, but rise sharply with the level of education; the intake of Malaiyaha Tamils into the universities remain negligible. Vicknesvari's educational and employment prospects continue to be substantially lower than those of other children of her age, gender and class, though the gap is gradually decreasing. Within the education bureaucracy, Malaiyaha Tamils are severely under represented, and this is reflected in reduced concern for the quality of estate schools. Moreover, they no longer have a single dominant and powerful leader – the leadership is now divided and their political clout substantially reduced. But Malaiyaha Tamils are now more assertive of their rights, and more alert and vigorous than ever before in grasping and even creating opportunities for socio-economic advances for themselves and their community.

The orientation of the book, from cover to cover, is positive, focusing more on the achievements and less on the failures, and more on those who helped and less on those who obstructed. Little

is meticulously careful in listing and acknowledging her debts to many who have been of assistance, including the Social Scientists' Association who are to be congratulated on bringing out this book as a reprint within the reach of many who may not have been able to purchase the original Macmillan publication.

The book is remarkably error free, and only two blemishes hit my eye: firstly, the terms Jaffna Tamil and Sri Lankan Tamil seemed to be used interchangeably (there are also Tamils from the East and the Vanni) and, second, the Indo-Ceylon ferry is referred to as having plied between Jaffna peninsula and India (it plied between Mannar peninsula and India). But these minor shortcomings, both peripheral to the primary focus, take nothing away from the worth of a very comprehensive, exhaustively researched, and well structured book by a knowledgeable scholar deeply committed to the welfare of the Malaiyaha Tamil people. Each chapter begins with a brief description of its scope and ends with a summary of its contents. There is a wealth of data and excellent analysis in every chapter. The historical sweep begins with the entry of the Malaiyaha Tamil community into the island, and extends to the end of the 20th century. Formerly a Fellow of the Institute of Development Studies of the University of Sussex, and now Professor of Education (Developing Countries) of the University of London, and with recurrent professional involvement in Sri Lanka over a quarter of a century, there could be no one better qualified to undertake this venture. This book could well remain, unsurpassed as an important and valuable guide, and a reliable source of reference for scholars of diverse disciplines. ■

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LABOURING TO LEARN

Towards a Political Economy of Plantations, People and Education in Sri Lanka

by

Angela W. Little

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