

Some British Agricultural Policies and Their Effects on Peasant Agriculture of the Wet Zone of Ceylon during the 19th Century.

by

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THE British conquered the maritime provinces in 1796, but it was with the cession of the Kandyan provinces in 1815 that the country as a whole came under their control. Prior to the occupation of the Kandyan kingdom the maritime provinces have already had nearly three and a half centuries of contact with the western powers. But, the hill country was to a great extent isolated from foreign influences during the same period. Three major factors, firstly, the extreme difficulty of access due to the mountainous nature of the country (*giridurga*) secondly, the thick belt of high forest reserve¹ along the boundary of the kingdom (*vanadurga*), and thirdly, the marshes and floods (*jaladurga*), mentioned in the historical sources, helped to maintain the isolated character of the area. Hence it is natural for differences in the social and the economic conditions between the two regions to exist. Socially, the ancient customs remained undisturbed in the hill country ; but in the low country, the customs and traditions underwent a change due to the oppression, conversion, and intermarriage with the aliens. In the hill country, the basis of the social structure was still the family unit, and the peasants were able to pursue their normal vocation in security. On the other hand, the oppressive and tyrannical policy of the Portuguese, and the dictatorial and selfish rule of the Dutch, in the low country gave no opportunity to the 'native peasants' to develop their agriculture. The resultant insecurity, in a large measure, contributed to the breakdown of the family unit, which in turn adversely affected peasant farming in the region.

Economic differences too, were markedly evident. In the hill country peasant production was essentially for family consumption ; therefore, self-sufficient except for some necessities like salt, cloth and metal goods obtained from the coast, and paid for with surplus agricultural products. The greater part of the peasant production in the maritime provinces, on the other hand, was directed towards the satisfaction of the needs of the alien powers. Despite these foreign influences, peasant farming remained the predominant activity of the majority in the wet zone, and social status as in the past was measured

1. These were *rajasantaka kala* (crown forests), preserved for military reasons. As these were highly protected trespassing was severely prohibited. There were only a few foot paths across these forests, known only to a selected few.

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in terms of land ownership. This was particularly so in the hill country, and in this respect Davy observed that "agriculture in no part of the world was more respected or more followed than in the interior of Ceylon"². But, it will be shown in this study that the economic structure of the hill country, too, was completely disrupted as a result of the introduction of systematic plantations in 1825.

Notwithstanding these influences, the predominant settlement unit in the wet zone remained the village, and the nucleus of the village the tract of paddy land. Contemporary writers like Knox,³ Tennent⁴, Stewart⁵ and Salmon⁶ examined peasant agriculture of the period in its true perspective and bemoaned the lot of the peasant farmers. Others conclude that it was primitive.⁷ "The wants are few and easily satisfied, and there is no incentive to increase or improve tillage" was the frequent criticism of peasant agriculture⁸. Lewis too had come to the conclusion that "their skill and industry is upon the most limited scale"⁹. Stewart on the other hand, was of the opinion that when Ceylon was handed over to the British public to attempt its colonization, its people were happy and strangers to poverty¹⁰. Payne asked the question, "why are the rice fields, which when the Dutch occupied the Island, were cultivated with the care and with the most abundant success, now suffered to remain overgrown with jungles?"¹¹, and 'Jus' asked a similar question, "why is the condition of the villages appalling when the land is good?"¹², and Salmon discussing the Ceylon Starvation Question emphasised the prevalent "misery and degradation to the cottages of the poor, and the overburdened peasantry of the Island"¹³.

These pronouncements clearly indicated the direction in which peasant farming of the period had taken. There is also no doubt that the present conditions of peasant farming are more deeply rooted in the hundred and fifty years of British rule than either in the Portuguese or the Dutch regimes. It is also indisputable that the economic policy of the island prior to 1931 was entirely British, and was dictated by the export crops, coffee, then tea and rubber and to a lesser extent coconuts. This study therefore, attempts to

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2. Davy, J. (1821). *An Account of the Interior of Ceylon and of its Inhabitants*, p. 270
 3. Knox, R. (1681). *An Historical Relation of Ceylon*, Pt. 1, Chap. 3, 4 & 5.
 4. Tennent, Sir James (1860). *Ceylon. An Account of the Island*, part vii, ch. v and vii.
 5. Stewart, J. (1850). *Notes on the Monetary System and Cinnamon Revenue of Ceylon*, part iv, p. 8.
 6. Salmon, C. S. (1890). *The Ceylon Starvation Question*, pp. 3-7
 7. See, *A Belgian Physician's Notes on Ceylon in 1687-89*, Tr. Ferguson (1887), p. 6 ; Schrader, P. G. (1909). "How to Improve the Lot of the Villagers". *Tr. Agr., Ceylon*. Feb. 1909, p. 117 etc. etc.
 8. Cordiner, Rev. James (1824). *A Description of Ceylon*, p. 106 etc.
 9. Lewis, R. E. (1848). "The Rural Economy of the Sinhalese", *J.R.A.S.C.B.* vol. 1, No. 1, p. 38.
 10. Stewart (1850), *ibid*, part iv, p. 8.
 11. Payne, C. H. (1854). *Ceylon - Its Products, Capabilities and Climate*, p. 28.
 12. 'Jus' (1889). *The Grain Tax or Native Distress in Ceylon*, p. 2.
 13. Salmon, *ibid*, p. 5.

analyse the various policies and trends of the period in some detail, in order to evaluate the extent to which peasant farming was affected by the colonial administration.

The fundamental desire to achieve self-sufficiency caused the *kumburu*, *hen* and *vatu* land use to be continued with the same importance as in the earlier periods. By 1931 however, the importance of the high lands ceased to exist due to the development of cash crops and population pressure, and the fields in the region became restricted to the wet lands, as at the present day. The process of disintegration of *hen* and *vatu* lands which began with the Portuguese in the low country, however, was completed over the entire region by this period with the permanent establishment of plantation agriculture. In the low country the first foundation in this direction was laid with the abolition of the "odius" cinnamon monopoly in 1832, and the parallel step that caused the same result in the hill country was the introduction of coffee on a plantation basis in 1825.

The economic policy during the first few decades of the occupation was primarily directed towards obtaining the maximum from the available exportable resources. Under such a policy, the contribution of peasant products had little significance, and it was natural to ignore this sector. There is no doubt therefore, the adverse effects of cinnamon growing on peasant agriculture of the low country, were numerous. But those considered most pertinent are :

1. *The cinnamon laws.* The maintenance of the Government monopoly on cinnamon demanded stringent measures. Though the laws were less severe than those enforced by the Dutch the one that affected *vatu* culture most was the prohibition placed on any kind of cultivation in either crown or private lands whenever cinnamon plants were present¹⁴. It is evident that cinnamon was widely propagated by birds, and consequently the trees were found growing over a wide range beyond the actual plantations. This imposed a heavy restriction on both *vatu* and *hen* cultivation over an extensive area bordering the plantations. Acreages of such lands are non-available, but in a region where a scarcity of land already existed, the repercussion of such a measure on the peasantry are comprehensible.
2. *Disorganisation of the agricultural activities* of the *chaliya* caste in order to gather and peel cinnamon led to the neglect of both *vatu* and *kumburu*. But by far the greatest calamity caused was the withdrawal of *accommodessans*. This resumption divested the *chaliyas* of all the fields, *vatu*, and *hen*, and made then a landless peasantry completely dependent on outside (both local and foreign) sources for their food supply.
3. *The cattle trespass laws.* The scarcity of grazing land in the low country which hindered the rearing of cattle, was intensified by the laws which made trespassing of cattle on cinnamon lands a highly punishable

14. CO.54/124. Memorandum Relative to the Situation and Management of the Disavony of Colombo. 1832, p. 98.

offence. The majority of the Cinnamon plantations were unprotected and only a few were even guarded by a ditch¹⁵. Therefore, to prevent cattle trespassing on such lands, the employment of a person became necessary. This was beyond the means of the average peasant family, and the only alternative left was to dispose of the stock. The net result was an acute shortage of animals for paddy cultivation.

In 1832 the state monopoly on cinnamon was abandoned. The major development due to the abolition of the monopoly was the entry of the peasantry into cinnamon growing. By 1879 however, a substitute for cinnamon was found in cassia, and from 1891 it became a strong competitor with an average supply of 9,000,000 lbs. per year. The entry of cassia resulted in the decline of cinnamon. The subsequent history of cinnamon is not the concern here. But, though cinnamon subsequently became unattractive to the peasantry, it had caused two developments during its period which completely revolutionized *vatu* agriculture in the island. The change of ownership of cinnamon holdings from the alien to the indigenous was the most significant development agriculturally. This change made it possible for the peasants to participate in the world markets, which in turn resulted in the rise of a class of semi-agriculturists from the peasant sector, who came to be dependent to a greater degree on the production of a cash crop. The other was the rapid rise to importance of a subsistence crop — coconuts.

The coconut was never a rival to other *vatu* species though it was grown as a popular palm in the wet zone for centuries. The peasantry it is observed, was not concerned much with its extensive cultivation beyond what might be needed for the supply of their own family needs. This was to be expected, for the peasants had no incentive to produce more as there was neither a local demand nor a means of transport conducive to the conveying of such bulky products. The commercial value of coconuts however, was known to the peasants, and contemporary sources show that this aspect was exploited to a limited degree from pre-Portuguese times¹⁶. The early acquisition of the knowledge to produce oil, coir, and alcoholic drinks would have made it possible to carry on some trade in these articles with foreign countries¹⁷, but no quantitative information is available to surmise the extent of this trade. All evidence shows that it was only after the 15th century that the export of coconut products assumed some importance¹⁸. It is evident that the Dutch brought about the systematic cultivation of coconuts. Therefore, when the British took over the island the entire coastal plain between Matara and Chilaw was a continuous belt of coconut palms.

The British never considered the potentialities of this palm, and therefore, the revenue measures introduced on occupation had quite a contrary effect on coconut cultivation. The existence of millions of coconut trees in the peasants' gardens was looked upon as a source of revenue through taxation. The

15. Bertolacci, A. (1817). *A View of the Agricultural, Commercial and Financial Interests of Ceylon*, p. 248.

16. *SP* xii of 1949, p. 8.

17. *Ibid*, p. 7.

18. Bertolacci, *ibid*, p. 147.

Dutch wisely avoided this aspect of the coconut. For the first time in the history of the palm, Robert Andrews with the approval of Lord Hobart, imposed a tax of one silver *fanam** on every coconut tree in plantations containing fifty or more trees, as from 1st September 1796¹⁹. The planting rate varied between 70 and 90 trees per acre. This means that the majority of peasant holdings came under this tax. This was strongly resented, for "it was unprecedented, was unequal in incidence, often excessive and onerous, because it taxed an essential article of diet"²⁰. The consequent revolt forced the abandonment of the tree tax. By 1813 two other major matters of policy arrested the development of coconuts. The importation of cheaper arrack into India²¹ was the first unwise move. This action though motivated by the desire to make Batavia, which became a new British possession, a 'paying concern', brought ruin to Ceylon arrack. The other was the regulation of 27th July 1813²² passed by the Madras Government imposing a duty of 150 star pagodas per legger† from countries east of the Cape of Good Hope. This was over and above the 8 per cent duty already levied. Moreover, the retailers in India had to pay an additional excise duty not exceeding one star-pagoda per gallon. The export duty at the Ceylon end was 10 percent per legger. Under these circumstances Ceylon arrack lost both its competitive power and the Indian markets. The Ceylon exporters who normally trade on a limited capital, were unable to pay the duties until they obtained a sale for their commodity, were ruined.

The encouragement given by Governor Barnes (1820-1824) was instrumental in the introduction of machinery for the first time to extract oil, and also for the first shipment of coconut oil to England in 1820. By 1902 there were only eight steam mills with hydraulic machinery as compared with 2,729 *sekkus* for the extraction of oil. This clearly shows that from the very inception, the peasants contributed the major quantity of oil for the export market. The success of this venture created an interest among the English planters, but it was only with the failure of coffee in 1870 that some planters took to coconuts seriously. The eagerness with which planters took to other commercial crops, and their phenomenal development were marked by their absence in this case. This probably may be due to the fact that coconuts were already established as a peasant crop. The industrial expansion in the west during the 50's created a greater demand for coconut products, and gave an additional impetus for the expansion of coconut growing by both the British planters and the peasantry.

By 1850 coconut plantations were begun in earnest in the low country, and from 1860 onwards its cultivation spread inland in the Western and North Western Provinces. The impetus given coconut growing in spite of the heavy taxes and duties, is reflected in the trade during this period. In 1870 coconuts amounted to only 4 per cent of the total export trade of Ceylon. In 1880 it

* About 2d.

19. *Coconut Commission Report*, 1949, p. 7.

20. Bertolacci, *ibid*, p. 152.

21. Batavian arrack was 10 to 15 percent cheaper than Ceylon arrack. The average price of Ceylon arrack was 33 to 34 star-pagodas per legger; but with the import of Batavian arrack the price went down to 24 star-pagodas. Vide Bertolacci, *ibid*, p. 151.

22. Ferguson (1887) *Ceylon in the Jubilee Year*, p. 51.

† A legger was 150 gallons.

was 9 per cent, and in 1890, 15 per cent. In 1910 coconuts contributed 25 per cent of the total export trade. The contribution of the peasant sector to this development is the most significant. Of the 350,000 acres in 1870 only 50,000 acres were classified as plantations. In 1903 only 30 percent of the total acreage was under large plantations, and the balance, 70 percent, was under small holdings²³. This clearly indicates that coconut growing was a successful small holders' venture, and essentially a peasant cultivation, and it is evident that this was the only cash crop that had no competition from the plantation sector. That this 'peasant status' was maintained up to the present times is evident from the fact that in 1931, of the approximate acreage of 1,000,000 only 300,000 acres were classed as falling into the category of plantations²⁴.

Though arecanut had become a significant palm in the peasant economy the indifference with which it was grown makes it impossible to arrive at either its acreage or its accurate distribution. The characteristic feature of the distribution however, was the presence of a few trees to almost every *vatta*, and as the palm had a wide range it was successful in every part of the low country, and in the hill country up to about 3,500 feet altitude. It is evident that arecanut was one of the chief sources of trade in pre-British times, and that the Portuguese and the Dutch made an exclusive trade of it. The British also were directly interested in this commodity as a revenue earner. Though it is stated that the British dropped the monopoly on arecanuts and instituted a duty of 5%²⁵, yet it is evident that during the first few decades of the occupation the British too followed a policy similar to that of the Dutch. A Colonial Office document shows that areca was purchased by the commissioner at the rate of 3 pice per *amunam* of 26,000 nuts with an advance of 15 per cent²⁶. In the Kandyan Kingdom, on the other hand, arecanut was a royal monopoly, administered through the *Madige* or "Carriage Bullock Department"²⁷. With the cession of the Kandyan Kingdom, Brownrigg abolished the *madige* in June 1816. By 1832 free trade in areca was established; but a duty which was a fixed amount of areca to be given gratis, and another fixed amount to be sold at a fixed rate was initially imposed²⁸. This, however, was subsequently changed to an export duty of 10 rix-dollars per *amunam*.

The establishment of free trade in areca benefitted both the Government and the peasantry. The export duty of 10 rix-dollars per *amunam* brought in a good revenue to the Crown²⁹. The peasants were able to obtain a better price for their commodity. Prior to the establishment of free trade the price

23. *SP* xii of 1949, p. 10.

24. *Census Report*, 1931.

25. Silva, C. R. de (1942), *Ceylon under the British Occupation*. p. 480.

26. CO. 54/124 *ibid*, p. 55.

27. For details vide. D'Oyly Diary Special Publication *J.R.A.S.C.B.* vol. xxv (1917) pp. 21, 22, 86, 149, 160.

28. E.g. "The writer of Eanaputty must provide 5 *amunams* and 12,000 nuts gratis and 20,313 at 4/5 rix-dollars per *amunam*". "The writer of Iddigoda pattu is bound to provide 6,195 nuts gratis, and 13 *amunams* and 11,375 nuts at 4/5 rix-dollars". The writer of Kalutara : 7 *amunams* and 3,266 nuts gratis etc. etc. vide CO. 54/124 of 1832, pp. 60, 61.

29. The revenue from this source was 125,000 rix-dollars per annum or $\frac{1}{4}$ of the whole collection of sea-customs. vide Bertolacci, *ibid*, p. 160.

of arecanut collected in the Kandyan Kingdom was 6 to 7 rix-dollars per *amunam*, and in Colombo the selling price was 14 rix-dollars for the same quantity. By 1832 the peasants were able to sell the arecanuts at 12 to 14 rix-dollars per *amunam*³⁰. The arecanut however, being entirely a peasant crop, and the market being restricted to the Asian countries, the demand had been comparatively small, but steady throughout the period. As such the acreage remained more or less static.

Stimulated by British interests coffee became an important *vatu* crop during this period. The plant, in fact was known in Ceylon long before plantations were inaugurated in 1825. But there is no evidence to show that the coffee plant was indigenous to the island, and neither is there a definite indication as to the probable period of introduction. There is however, no doubt that the Sinhala peasants, having discovered the use of coffee, kept up its cultivation and trade during this period. The Government Gazette of 9th June 1802 shows that the price of coffee in the markets was 4 *fanams* and 2 *pices* per measure. This clearly indicates that the people of that time were in the habit of buying and selling coffee.

The first extensive agricultural venture by an European in the hill country was inaugurated in 1825 by one George Bird at Sinhapitiya near Gampola with a grant of some 200 acres of "unoccupied high ground for the purpose of forming a coffee plantation, tax free"³¹. The impetus given by Barnes had its effect on the English planting community, and there was a rush to plant coffee. In 1812 though Governor Maitland removed the prohibition against Europeans acquiring land outside Colombo, land sales were insignificant³². It was the occupation of the Kandyan Kingdom, and the suitability of this region for coffee growing that led to the participation of Government officials in a "land grabbing frenzy" and a "wild speculation in land"³³. In the initial stages of the coffee period, land was alienated at the upset price of 5s. per acre, and extensive tracts became the property of civil servants and military personnel. By 1833 onwards, land was granted free of land tax, for coffee cultivation. By 1843 the demand for land was so great that the Government advanced the price to £1, and finally to £2 per acre³⁴. The policy of the Government to sell only in lots of not less than 250-300 acres was a significant feature of the land sales of the period. The procedure adopted in the granting of land too, was extremely cumbersome except to the English educated³⁵. Besides the actual cost of the land, there were the survey fees, cost of plans and deeds to be paid by the buyer.

30. CO. 54/124, *ibid*, p. 62.

31. It is doubtful whether the grant was 200 acres or 1000 acres for "I have 1086 acres of high ground on the banks of the river. I have paid 3s. 9d per acre.....and the land was granted in perpetuity and free of rent". *Vide*. CO. 54/A5., Evidence of G. Bird, 23rd September 1829.

32. *Kandyan Peasantry Commission Report*, (1951) p. 67.

33. Sabonadiere, W. (1870). *The Coffee Planter of Ceylon*, p. 3.

34. The public officers who were the largest land owners, were accused of inducing the Government to put up prices, in order to sell them at twenty times their normal price. *Vide Economist*, 1846, p. 961.

35. CO. 416/G12, p. 117.

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These requirements were in fact, highly prohibitive measures against the peasantry, and therefore excluded completely the indigenous population from acquiring land. This is the only reason why there are "no records of any land grants to the natives"³⁶. On the other hand, land sales to planters rose rapidly. The average annual land sales between 1834 and 1838 however, increased to 6,412 acres³⁷. In 1836 the actual area under coffee was only 4,000 acres and in 1845 about 37,966 acres³⁸. This clearly indicates that some of the speculators who acquired land left it uncultivated. The total extent of land bought by planters up to 1870 was 380,883 acres of which only 176,467 acres were planted with coffee³⁹. By 1877 the extent had risen to a new peak of 481,539 acres comprising 1351 properties, but the actual area under coffee was only 249,604 acres⁴⁰.

The acreage under peasant holdings, on the other hand, never showed such a phenomenal development. In 1857 the area under European plantation was 80,950 acres and the extent grown by the peasant holders was only 48,000 acres. By 1870 when there were 176,467 acres under coffee, the peasant acreage remained stagnant, and there is no evidence to show that it ever exceeded 50,000 acre limit at any time. Furthermore, it is apparent that even this acreage was only possible by planting *vatu* lands with coffee. The effect of this mal-distribution is seen in the export figures for a sample period :

	1849/53	1854/58	1859/63	1864/68	1869/73
	cwts.	cwts.	cwts.	cwts.	cwts.
Plantation					
Coffee	... 218,438	339,586	497,012	694,818	794,676
Native Coffee	... 117,401	148,758	154,595	174,781	143,193

Source : *The Ceylon Directory* — 1874

These figures however, show that though the "native" coffee acreage was smaller, the production was not insignificant, for during the period 1849 to 1869, 25-50 per cent of coffee exported was from this sector. A comparison of the acreages and productions of the two sectors clearly indicates that the yields of the peasant sector were not so low as presumed, and that peasant coffee growing was not so primitive as widely accepted.

In 1868 the coffee blight (*hemiles vastatrix*)⁴¹ made its appearance, and spread rapidly in the coffee areas. By 1904 the area under coffee dwindled down to 4,000 acres, and the coffee era came to an end. The development of plantation coffee therefore, struck the hill country peasantry more forcibly

36. For details vide Millie, (1884). *Coffee Planting in Ceylon 1848 to 1878*, Ch. 4.

37. *Kandyan Peasantry Commission Report*, *ibid* p. 68.

38. *ibid*.

39. Sabonadiere, *ibid* p. 211.

40. Hull, E. C. P. (1877), *Coffee Planting in S. India and Ceylon*, p. 17.

41. For details vide SP. 14 of 1874 ; SP. 9 of 1880 ; SP. 100 of 1880 ; SP. 4 of 1881 ; and SP. 17 of 1881.

than did cinnamon, its low country counterpart. The restriction placed on the acquisition of land made it impossible for the peasants to participate completely in the coffee export market. The consequence of the denial of this incentive was that peasant production remained more or less static, and also the yield remained lower due to indifference caused by insecurity. On the other hand, that the sale of all "uncultivated" land including forests and "waste", severely limited land for peasant agriculture, in a region where it was already a scarce factor, needs no explanation. The extensive clearing of forests suppressed not only the peasants' supply of necessary timber for both agricultural and constructional purposes, but also essential grazing grounds. The latter condition necessarily created a scarcity of cattle⁴² for paddy cultivation and a decrease of an important source of manure. Furthermore, the conversion of forest lands into plantations naturally created a greater scarcity of *hen* land, and destroyed its relationship to the *kumburas*, and left the peasant sector in a position near starvation. In the meantime thousands of acres bought by land speculators — held in quantities too extensive for private cultivation — remained uncultivated and neglected. Moreover, Millie showed that important water sources necessary for the needs of the peasantry were not only polluted by coffee pulp, but even eliminated, diverted, and turned off from their original sources by planters whereby water much required for paddy cultivation, was cut off or sent down another stream⁴³. The net result of the coffee era therefore, was the complete disruption of the subsistence economy of the island.

It is therefore, clear from the above analysis that the economic significance of *vatu*, *hen* and *kumburu* underwent changes during this period. The consequence of these changes was the complications that arose in the existing tenorial system. The indigenous land tenure of the period is adequately considered by D'Oyly⁴⁴, Bertolacci⁴⁵, Codrington⁴⁶, C. R. de Silva⁴⁷, W. A. de Silva⁴⁸, Lanerolle⁴⁹, Reimers⁵⁰, et al. and it is not necessary to reiterate the same facts. However, the land policy under the British requires some analysis as it directly concerned the development of peasant agriculture in the wet zone. It is observed that every peasant was a land holder, and land was the only object that was between him and starvation. D'Oyly's statement "the possession of land is the foundation of the King's right to the service and the contribution of the people, and vice versa" shows the very basis on which the land tenure system, both in the low country and the hill country was formed under the Sinhala kings. In brief, all land was held under *rajakariya*, and in theory, persons

42. In 1828 there were 258, 147 cattle in the Kandyan country (vide CO. 416/G10, also G18) but in 1919 there were only 126,744 heads of cattle (vide *Tr. Agr.*, 1919, p. 143).

43. Mille, P.D., *ibid*, ch. xx, p. 101.

44. D'Oyly, Sir John (1832) *The Sketch of the Constitution of the Kandyan Kingdom*. p. 60-64.

45. Bertolacci, *ibid* pp. 277-329.

46. Codrington, H. W. (1939) *Ancient Land Tenure and Land Revenue in Ceylon*,

47. Silva, C. R. de, *ibid*, vol. 2, pp. 320-353.

48. Silva, W. A. de (1927) "Sinhala Vitti and Kadaimpot" *J.R.A.S.C.B.* vol. xxx, No. 91, 203-210.

49. Lanerolle, (1938) "Ancient Land Tenure and Revenue in Ceylon" *J.R.A.S.C.B.* No. 91, pp. 203-210.

50. Reimers, E. (1928) "Feudalism in Ceylon" *J.R.A.S.C.B.* vol. xxxi No. 81, pp. 20-33.

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not possessing lands were not liable to regular service or duties. The Sinhala land grants were made under a *sannasa*, and later such grants were recorded in *lekam mitiyas* (land registers). The Portuguese never ventured to alter this system, but the Dutch replaced it by "*Thombu*" wherein the private and the crown lands in the maritime provinces were well defined. On the other hand, up to the time of the British occupation *lekam mitiyas* were maintained in the Kandyan Kingdom. Prior to the occupation however, these were destroyed. Therefore, when the whole island passed into the hands of the British, the ownership of land in the maritime provinces was to some extent clear, but it was not so in the hill country, and large extents of uncultivated land came into their hands. In the low country, outright sale of land by the Dutch made private ownership a common feature, but in the Kandyan country, private holdings were ill-defined, held by prescriptive rights, and in most cases confined to the compound land. But large extents of high land and forest were held under some form of communal ownership, where *hen* cultivation was practised. Therefore, in the Kandyan country land apparently uncultivated was in fact the 'reserve' without which the subsistence economy of the peasantry would not have been complete.

The development of coffee necessarily caused land problems. The crown, probably with an inadequate knowledge of the tenure system, and the prescriptive rights of the peasantry, considered itself the lawful owners of forests and uncultivated land, and granted these to the planters. It was not only the remote forests but also communal forest lands were granted in this fashion⁵¹. The expansion of coffee necessitated more and more land. In order to satisfy the planters' demands, and to clear all doubts as to the ownership, the crown created a presumption on all forest and waste lands by the enactments of the Crown Land Encroachment Act No. 12 of 1840. Clause No. 6 of this act, which is relevant to this study states :

" All forest, waste, unoccupied, or uncultivated lands shall be presumed to be the property of the Crown until the contrary thereof be proved, and all *chenas* and other lands which can be only cultivated after intervals of several years shall, if the same be situated within the districts formerly comprised in the Kandyan provinces (wherein no *thombo* registers have been heretofore established), be deemed to belong to the Crown and not to be the property of any private person.....except upon proof only by such persons of a *sannas* or grant for the same, together with satisfactory evidence as to the limits and boundaries thereof, or of such customary taxes, dues, or services having rendered within twenty yearsand in all other districts in this Colony such *chena* and other lands which can be cultivated after several years shall be deemed to be forest or waste lands within the meaning of this clause "

The final enactment which completed the accretion of land to Crown was the Waste Lands Ord. No. 1 of 1897. Section 24(a) reads thus :

51. *Kandyan Peasantry Commission Report*, p. 71.

“ All forest, waste, unoccupied, or uncultivated lands and all chenas and other lands which can be only cultivated after an interval of several years, shall be presumed to be the property of the Crown, until the contrary thereof be proved ”.

The difficulties of establishing ownership under these regulations were numerous. *Sannasas* were unavailable as they were not preserved, and it was possible to establish prescriptive rights only for paddy and some high lands, but not for forests and other “ waste ” lands, for *hen* cultivation was dynamic. The other conditions required by the ordinances were equally difficult to satisfy. The extent cultivated was highly variable, and there were no exact measurements of the area cultivated or individual holdings. Permanent boundaries, on the other hand, were non-existent. Therefore, 99 per cent of the *hen* in the Kandyan Provinces lapsed to Crown⁵². It is a fact that these Crown lands were auctioned. But the peasants were unable to compete with the companies or the capitalists (economic sense) as the prices were forced beyond the normal means of a peasant. Alternatively the peasant had to pay a price far above the economic value of the land in which case he started with an initial financial handicap.

It is evident that land grants to temples and other religious bodies by kings were extensive⁵³. The Registration of Temple Lands Ordinance No. 10 of 1856 therefore, was another enactment which made it possible for the Crown to acquire land. According to this ordinance all lands claimed by Temples etc. had to be surveyed — the expenses partly borne by the claimants and partly by the Government. As the acreages to be surveyed were extensive large tracts of land were omitted by the owners in order to reduce fees. The lands being forests and waste, naturally came to be vested in the Crown⁵⁴.

The loss of high land therefore, made the peasantry increasingly dependent on the lowlands for their subsistence. The consequence of this dependence is correctly shown by Lord Stanmore in his criticism of the Waste Lands Ordinances, when he says “ It is manifest that a village restricted rigorously to its paddy land alone could not continue to exist ”⁵⁵. There is no doubt that hundreds of such villages came into existence during this period.

Two other factors aggravated the situation. The increase of population was the major one. The first recorded census of 1824 shows that the wet zone maritime provinces had 399,408 people, and the Kandyan region 258,835 people. The subsequent increases of population are revealed in the census reports of 1911 and 1946. No explanation is necessary to show that the increase of population exerted a great pressure on the lowlands. The other factor that hastened the disintegration of the peasantry was the lack of documentation to the land

52. King, A. A. (1872) *Administration Report*, 1872, p. 34.

53. The approximate acreage of temple lands in Ceylon at that time was as follows : Central Province 239, 232 acres ; Western Province 75, 303 acres. North Western Province 58,360 acres ; Northern Province 1,583 acres, and Southern Province 1,559 acres, giving a total acreage of 376,037 acres. *Vide Service Tenure Commission Report*, 1872, p. 450.

54. *Kandyan Peasantry Commission Report*, p. 72.

55. *ibid* p. 71.

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already held by the peasants. The presumption created by the ordinances led to an insecurity among the peasantry as to the titles to their lands, and caused them to sell what they considered as doubtful title to speculators⁵⁶. The net result of all these factors therefore were :

- i. *Subdivision of land.* The confinement of the peasantry to a restricted land use, and the increase of population made the subdivision of the available land among the family members necessary. From this originated the *tattumaru* system of land tenure, which is evident to this day, perpetuating the attendant evils of such a system.
- ii. *Lack of incentives.* The prevalent insecurity gave the peasants no incentives to make either temporary or permanent improvements to their holdings. This naturally caused the total production to decline progressively.
- iii. *Landless peasantry.* This result was inevitable under the conditions that prevailed. In the earlier periods any increase of population was absorbed by the additional land brought under cultivation.

This was now denied the people. Though information on landlessness during this period is not available, some conclusions can be arrived at. The economic independence of the peasants created no desire for them to work in the plantations, but the rapid rise of such labour during this period indicates the degree of landlessness (vide Table below). There was also no industries to absorb the

Sinhala Estate Labour Population

Year					<i>Labour Population</i>
1891	...	...	...	...	19,307
1911	...	...	...	...	39,309
1921	...	...	...	...	54,576
1931	...	...	...	...	75,786

Source : Census Reports

landless peasants, and naturally many migrated to the towns in the hope of employment. Those who remained took to illicit *hen* cultivation. This is the reason why during the period 1870 to 1880 the area under *hen* cultivation doubled itself⁵⁷.

56. *ibid* p. 73.

57. Vincent, F. (1882) *Forest Administration in Ceylon*, S.P. 43, p. 44

- iv. *Import of foodstuffs.* Prior to the *British era*, there is no evidence to show that rice and other foodstuffs were imported to feed the local population. In 1816 only 778 bushels were imported⁵⁸, but in 1873 5,303,582 bushels of grain were imported. An examination of statistics relating to the population, acreage under paddy, acreage under other grains and total cultivated area from 1831 to 1931 clearly indicates the inadequate state of peasant agriculture of the period.

The taxation policy of the British too, contributed to the disintegration of the peasant sector. The Portuguese and the Dutch maintained monopolies on most of the products. But the British re-imposed taxes without removing the monopolies, which had been substituted for it during the preceding regimes. The simultaneous administration of these two policies was too oppressive, and open resentment forced the Government to abandon the monopolies, and replace them with a taxation policy unparalleled in the history of peasant agriculture in Ceylon. Three proclamations completed the first stage of this policy. By the Proclamation of 3rd May 1800 "all highland cultivations are taxed 1/10 the produce. If land is not registered by 1st November it shall pay half of its produce to Government from that date". *Alvi* for unknown reasons escaped this tax, but by the Grain Tax Ordinance of 1875, Cl. 4, *alvi* was also classed as a dry grain, and was taxed at 1/10 wherever it was grown⁵⁹. The other proclamation dated 3rd September 1801 effected firstly, the abolition of accomodessan tenure and secondly, the resumption of crown land held in accomodessan. Instead, a tax on these lands were settled as follows :

- i. Paddy lands not held in service tenure, the existing tax on which was less than 1/4 the gross produce, to pay 1/10 of the gross produce.
- ii. Those on which taxation had been $\frac{1}{4}$ or more than $\frac{1}{4}$ to pay 1/10.
- iii. Paddy lands held by service tenure to pay 1/5 of the gross produce.
- iv. High lands held by service tenure and others held in undivided shares to pay 1/5 gross produce. When divided 1/10.

(vide Ordinance pp. 6-8)

Finally by the third Proclamation of 21st November 1818, the tax on paddy lands were fixed at 1/10 the produce⁶⁰. Subsequent developments however, show that the tax on paddy lands were made variable. In 1890 the paddy lands were taxed as follows :

- If average yield was 12-fold, crop share of Govt. 1/2
- If average yield was 8-fold, crop share of Govt. 1/4
- If average yield was 7-fold, crop share of Govt. 1/5
- If average yield was 6-fold, crop share of Govt. 1/10

(vide S.P. 4 of 1890, Grain Tax Settlement)

58. CO. 16/A3 Report of Grain Imported into Ceylon from 1816-1828

59. S.P. xxii of 1880, p. 2.

60. S.P. xvii of 1890, p. 278.

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This valuation clearly indicates that the taxes were on the productive capacity of both land and labour. This naturally curbed the peasant's incentive, for the more land he brought under cultivation, or the more labour he employed to increase yields, the more he had to pay as taxes. Compensation for additional labour being progressively less the tendency was for the peasant to neglect their cultivations. The taxing of a staple food crop itself was demoralising; but the mode of collection of the taxes was even more oppressive. Bertolacci, a contemporary civil servant and writer, showed the oppressive way in which the taxes were collected. Part of the tax was collected by Government officials, and the rest farmed out to renters. The renters in turn sold it to sub-renters, and "this system in truth ramifies in a thousand branches" (vide, *ibid*, pp. 303-313). The evils of such a system are well known. But it must be mentioned that a group of renters with the connivance of some corrupt officials exploited the peasantry "by much harassing and extorting much more than their due share" (*ibid*).

By 1836, the Government introduced voluntary commutation, and by 1878 commutation was made compulsory. The rates of commutation varied between 40-50 cents to Rs. 1.50⁶¹. It was estimated that about 50,000 acres of paddy land lie fallow every year, but under the existing system of taxation, the peasants had to pay a tax as if it were cultivated⁶². Prior to commutation, the tax had been on the production, but with compulsory commutation, land was made liable and could be seized and sold at public auctions. The effects of this were the most damaging. In good years the tax was paid, but when harvests failed the peasants' only resort was the moneylender (which became an "institution" in itself during this period). The result of this need no explanation. In 1881 the first eviction began. A greater proportion of the lands therefore fell into the hands of the usurers, and another proportion to the indigenous capitalists. It is evident that a greater part of these lands, bought by absentee-landlords, went out of cultivation. In the Galle district over 2,300 fields were sold for default. In the Kalutara district over 390 acres were sold and over 150 acres went out of cultivation. In the Nuwara Eliya district 2889 acres or 15 percent of the total acreage under paddy was thrown out of cultivation. The total area in the Western Province sold for default up to 1886 was 4,031 acres, out of which 1981 acres went out of cultivation. In 1880, 420 acres were sold in Sabaragamuwa, out of which 142 fields went out of cultivation⁶³. The consequence of this was two fold. On the one hand, there was a great displacement of peasants, and on the other, paddy production went down. These conditions are clearly evident from the fact that in 1883 there were 605,757 acres under paddy, but in 1887, the acreage was only 462,016, which gives a fall of 143,741 acres in five years. The concomitant result of this state of peasant agriculture was starvation. Salmon⁶⁴, showed how death due to starvation had risen with the commencement of evictions, in the Nuwara Eliya districts, viz.

61. "Jus", (1889), *The Grain Tax or Native Distress in Ceylon*, p. 8.

62. Salmon, C. S. (1890) *The Ceylon Starvation Question*, p. 6.

63. "Jus", *ibid*, p. 9.

64. Salmon, C. S. *ibid*, p. 18.

Death by Starvation in Nuwara Eliya District

Year	...	...	1882	1883	1884	1885	1886
No. of deaths	...	...	1281	1181	2197	2076	1983

Though no information is available, it is probable that similar conditions prevailed in other parts of the wet zone.

The basis of the peasant economy during this period too was the *kumburu*, *hen* and *vatu*. But it is evident from the above analysis that their relationships were maintained at a lower level than in the preceding periods. Such a system of agriculture was not conducive to the accumulation of wealth among the majority. It was therefore, British capital and enterprise that made Ceylon a commercial nation. Subsequent developments indicate the creation of two economies — the plantation and the peasant. It can be claimed that an integration to some degree, took place between the two economies as there was a minor mobility of labour from the peasantry to the plantations⁶⁵ and a similarity in some of the crops grown. It is certain that there was no major influx of native labour into the plantations as the prevailing social organization tied down the lower castes to their traditional duties and vocations, and it was taboo for the higher castes to work for others. The abolition of *rajakariya* in no way created either an excess of labour or made it possible to obtain native labour for the plantations. Inducements even by wages, were unattractive to this society, where the peasantry was traditionally bound to their own lands, and the subsistence economy gave them a greater degree of independence. This was the main reason why the entire labour force for the plantations had to be imported from S. India. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the peasants emulated the planters by growing similar crops ; but the Government restrictions made it impossible to systematize their production. The major economic significance of the investment of British capital therefore, was the expansion ad. lib. of the plantation sector and the stagnation of the peasant sector.

This parallel development of a high per capita production sector, and a low productive farming sector was a necessary creation of colonial administration. When land was alienated to the planters, the Government took away the very lands that were to feed the growing domestic population. In the preceding periods, the increase of population was absorbed by extensions of cultivations. But this avenue was closed by the land policy of the Crown. Divested of the traditional *hen* and forest lands, and with the increasing pressure on land, the peasants had no alternative but to divide and sub-divide their holdings. Such small 'parcels' of land were unable to keep them in sustenance. The only other outlet for the expanding population was the plantations. But the

65. Sinhalese labour was available for work such as felling and clearing forests, sawing, and building but not as coolies. Vide Hull, *ibid* p. 22.

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planters now preferred the cheap immigrant labour from S. India. All other avenues being closed to the peasantry, they naturally became the victims of money-lenders and traders, which in turn created a predominant feature in the agriculture of the 20th century Ceylon — absentee landlordism.

Contemporary writers have suggested a number of causes for the static nature of peasant agriculture, in the island during this period. In almost all cases they have considered only the prevailing conditions, but not the contributory causes. In this study it is maintained that it was the composite effect of a discriminatory agricultural policy embodying short-sighted land alienation and taxation acts, that caused the development of an unintegrated highly progressive commercial sector and a backward peasant sector.

Abbreviations

CO.	...	...	Colonial Office Series, Public Records Office, London
J.R.A.S.C.B.	...	...	Journal Royal Asiatic Society, Ceylon Branch
Paddy Report	...	...	A Report on Paddy Statistics, Monograph No. 9, Ceylon, 1956
SP.	...	...	Sessional Paper, Ceylon Government
Tr. Agr.	...	...	Tropical Agriculturist, Ceylon

Glossary of Sinhala Terms

Accommodessan	...	...	Land granted " under personal-service tenure ", in compensation of the services which certain individuals were bound to perform for Government
Alvī	...	...	Highland paddy
Chàliya	...	...	Cinnamon peeler
Hén	...	...	Cultivated areas under land rotation (sin. <i>hena</i>)
Kumburu	...	...	Paddy fields (sin. <i>kumbura</i>)
Ràjakàriya	...	...	King's service
Sannasa	...	...	Deed inscribed on a copper plate or on a ola leaf
Sekku	...	...	A device based on the pestle and mortar principle. This is worked either manually or by means of oxen
Taṭṭumàru	...	...	Cultivation of a single plot of land by a number of co-owners on a rota basis.