

Socio-Economic Conditions and Unproductive Lands in the Plantation Sector

Introduction

Plantation sector plays an important role in most of the developing countries as a basis of foreign earnings and contributor to nation development. It has been the important sector to Sri Lankan economy too through out the last two centuries. The country's development activities and the socio-economic progress have been closely linked with the plantation sector. The sector has been shares a major portion in employment, export earnings and government revenue for more than a century. It accounts for nearly 5% of Sri Lanka's GDP while sharing 20% of the total land area, 40% of the cultivated land area, 10% of the total labour force and 20% of the total foreign earnings of the country. The plantation cultivation confined to the wet zone and some parts of the intermediate zone. The major three plantation crops are tea, rubber and coconut and they mainly cultivated in Central, Uva, Subragamuva, North-western and Southern provinces.

Plantation History

The plantation industry in Sri Lanka was started with opening of the coffee plantation in Gampola by George Bird in 1823. However, the coffee industry was extinguished by the coffee blight in 1870s and this pave the way to introduce tea cultivation which had already planted on an experimental scale by James Taylor in 1867 at Loolkandure estate in Kandy district. Tea proved as a durable resource and which replaced the coffee cultivation all over the country and extent up to 243, 516 ha in 1967. The capital, labour and market were foreign based. Especially, the technology, capital, and entrepreneurs were brought from England and the workers from Tamil Nadu in India. The immense labour force were migrated from India resulted rapid expansion of the tea plantation. The labour force was increased from around 10,000 in 1827 to 1,210,000 in 1910. Hence, the development of large scale agricultural units of plantations with a larger scale of resident labour force producing entirely for the export market paved the way for the emergence of an enclave system of the plantations in Sri Lanka.

Changes of Ownership and Management

In the early days, the plantations were owned by the British and the management of the plantations was controlled by the British Companies which were called as 'Agency Houses'. These companies have been registered as Sterling Companies in London and as Rupees Companies at Colombo. In 1950s, there were 365 plantations managed by 24 British Agency Houses. After independent, the plantations no longer seem to be a foreign enclave. The post independent economic policy aimed at integration of the plantation economy with national stream of development. A significant change in ownership pattern took place in 1950s and 1960s. The new reforms introduced to the plantation sector were emphasized "ceylonization" of ownership and management. The ceylonization process was attributed to increasing direct and indirect taxation on plantation products and imposed restriction on transferring the profits abroad. The gradual increase in the share of smallholders also a remarkable change took place after independent.

However, the structural changes of the plantation sector were commenced with enactment of Land Reforms in 1972 and 1975. These two reforms led to the nationalization of the plantations. It was brought more than 60% of the plantation lands under the control of state. With the nationalization of plantations, the management of the nationalized estates handed over to the Sri Lanka State Plantation Corporation (SLSPC), Janatha Estate Development Board (JEDB), Usawasama, Janawasama, and Electoral Co-operative Societies. But in 1977, all other agencies except SLSPC, JEDB were abolished and all nationalized estates were brought under both corporations, the SLSPC and JEDB.

In 1990s, the government made attempts to reduce state intervention and tried to promote private sector involvement in the plantation industry. As a result, the government re-privatized the state owned plantations in 1992. As a follow of this, initially 22 independent government owned limited liability known as Regional Plantation Companies (RPCs) were formed and 449 estates originally managed by JEDB and SLSPC were leased to these 22 RPCs. In addition, on the basis of competitive bids, 22 local private companies were selected and they were

requested to establish separate independent public companies known as Managing Agents (MAs) to manage the RPCs on a profit sharing basis. Later, the 23rd RPC was established and handed to another MA. Altogether, 459 plantations were grouped into 23 RPCs and they were given to 23 MAs to manage them. The remained plantations were continuously kept under management of the JEDB and SLSPC. Initially, the management contract was for 5 1/2 years from June 1992 to December 1997 with the provisions of extending for further period of time. However, the private MAs were not involved in long term investments due to the short term nature of the contracts. To attract the private investment, the contract was extended to 50 years period of time from 1995. On the other hand, the social welfare activities of the plantation community were brought under the responsibility of the Plantation Housing and Social Welfare Trust (PHSWT).

Environmental Issues

Plantations are basically a monoculture cultivation system and which utilize land and other natural resources continuously for very long period of time to produce plantation commodities such as tea rubber and coconut. Introduction of the plantations in Sri Lanka were started with falling a larger extent of the virgin forests in the hill country areas. Plantation cultivation practices mainly depend on toxic chemicals and manures which create various environmental pollutions and due to unsustainable land preparation practices adopted the soil erosion became a serious environmental problem. During the last two decades, various forms of management agencies established to manage the plantations however, none of them not properly attended to incorporate the natural resources management aspects and to minimize the environmental pollutions exist due to the plantation agricultural practices. As a result, the environmental problems such as soil erosion, land degradation, water pollution, became serious issues in the sector. This also rendered the cultivable fertile land into uncultivable arable land. A vast area of the plantation lands were lost their productive capacity and considered as the uncultivable land which also marginalized from the production activities now.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study were to estimate the unproductive and uncultivable lands in the plantation sector and to find the opportunities to improve the unproductive lands with the participation of plantation youth by incorporating appropriate agricultural practices. In addition, the study also focused on analyzing the historical and social structural changes took place in the plantation sector, identifying the social, economic, political, cultural and human rights status of the plantation community and to evaluate the present development status of the plantation youth and their aspiration on agricultural activities. The primary data collected from field survey and the secondary data from reliable sources were utilized in this study.

Plantation Population

Out of the total population of the country, nearly 0.9 million live in the plantation sector. Out of this, 88.4% are Tamils of Indian Origin, 10.7% are Sinhalese, 0.8% Muslims and 1% others. On the other hand, out of the total Tamils of Indian origins 81.4% are lives in plantation sector. It can be noticed that majority of the Tamils of Indian origin concentrated in the plantation area. They also called as plantation Tamils. About 90% of the plantation workforce is from this Tamil community. It is the Central, Uva and Subragamuwa provinces that have the largest concentration of the Plantation population. However, Out of district population, the plantation populations belong to the Nuwara-Eliya, Badulla, Kandy, Matale, Rathnapura and Kegalle districts accounts for 59.8%, 25.1%, 11.6%, 8.5% 13.5%, and 9.2% respectively. About 80% of the plantation populations are Hindus (Tamils), 10%, are Buddhists, less than 1% are Islam and the balance are Christians. Therefore, the plantation sector is identified as area of a separate ethno-cultural entity of Plantation/Malaya Tamils. Their cultures, Customs, believe and worships are different from North-East Tamils and very closely characterize the south Indian Tamils.

Social and Economic Conditions

Education

Education is the main factor that determines the social status of development process of an individuals as well as a community. It transforms people psychologically, socially and culturally. Plantation community is one of the marginalized groups that are more vulnerable in educational achievements. The comparison of literacy rates with national level showed that the plantation community was only 76.9%, while the national average was 91.8%. Similarly, only 20.2% of the plantation population has a secondary education and only 2.1% of them had a post secondary education. The comparable figures for the all island are 52.2% and 20.7% respectively. More than half (55.9%) of the plantation population had only primary education. A few of them had entering into the university system.

Health

The indicators of health and nutrition are another source which reflects the backward and neglected nature of the plantation community. The percentage of undernourished children below the age group of 5 years in the plantation sector was 38.9% where as the percentage of same for the rural and the urban sector were lower and they were 21.8% and 12.8% respectively. Infant mortality in the sector was 60.6%, while the national rate was only 25.3% and still birth rate is 22% in the plantation sector. The plantation health sector still not integrated with the national health stream and it is treated as a separate entity. As a result, national health policies and health programmes are not fully reaching to the plantation community. Plantation Human Development Trust is the institutions which handling the entire health services in the plantation sector. Estate hospitals are not equipped with the necessary facilities. Lack of qualified doctors and lack of qualified health staffs, lack of medicine and indoor treatment facilities are the major problems that are face by the estate health service.

Housing, Water supply and Sanitation

The plantation sector has its own identical housing patterns known as line rooms, introduced by the colonial planters. The line rooms are barrack type structured with 200sq. feet for an entire family, with hardly any ventilation, no privacy for grown-up children and over crowding due to larger families with their dependent parents. In the plantation sector, 185,533 families consists the population of 777,730 live in 163,580 housing units/line rooms. Most of these line rooms are more than 100 years old and 70% of them now in dilapidated conditions. The percentage of self owned houses among the plantation community to be as low as 10.2 and others are live in the line rooms which are owned to the plantation companies. Nearly, 13.000 families do not have even line rooms they live in temporary huts. However, as a result of various housing programmes implemented by the different organization from 1995, 45,000 new housing units were constructed and some of the old line rooms were upgraded. However, given the large number of unsuitable housing units in the plantation sector the challenges behind the provision of decent houses for the plantation community is enormous.

With the regard of provision of drinking water and sanitation 90% and 62% of the needs of the estate sector are met respectively due to Donors, NGOs, and Government interventions. But still 74% of the estate households use common taps and 15.5% use common well for drinking water. While nearly 25% of the households use latrines, another 25% do not access to latrine facilities. After the re-privatization in 1992, Government Agencies and NGOs were taken interest to improve the water supply and sanitation conditions, but the problem still prevails in higher level compare to the other sectors.

Civic Documents

Historically, the plantation community treated as a separate entity. Unlike the average citizen of this country, the births of the plantation people were registered by the estate manager at estate level and details provided to the Register General to issues birth certificates. With the structural changes took place in the sector most of the birth records were lost. As a result, a larger number of plantation

people made unable to obtain a birth certificate. The problem further aggregated due to non-registration of births properly. Nearly 25% of the plantation population does not possess the birth certificates, 31.5% of the married people did not registered their and 33.2% of the deaths were not received death certificates. The absence of the Birth certificates makes it difficult for a person to obtain National Identity Card. As a result, 29% of the people who aged above 16 years do not have National Identity Card. In addition to this, there is sizable number of people in the plantation community live without Citizenship. Even who have citizenship, 1/3 of them hold citizenship through affidavit. The absence of proper civic documents caused for many of the plantation people to face hardships to integrate with the mainstream of the country. As a result, they were marginalized from country's main stream of development process. Due to this problem, the plantation youth had barrier to find alternative employment outside the estate which was limited their mobility in occupation and economic activities.

Employment, Unemployment and Income

Labour force participation rate in the estate sector is around 45%. The sector also characterized by high labour force participation rate (43.4%) among females compare to the other sectors. However, in the recent years the labour force participation rate of the sector is decreasing due to the emerging trend of greater emphasis on education over employment at a relatively younger generation. However there is a decline in participation of female in labour force from 47.6% in 1986/87 to 45% in 1996/97 in the plantation sector. Out of the total active persons in the plantation community 80.6% have employed while the unemployment rate is 19.0% at overall. But the unemployment rate among the younger generation is 70.5%. There is 7.5% of the working people have permanent employment while 28.7% are temporarily employed and 3.1% engaged in self-employment. On the other hand, only 9.1% of the plantation people have subsidiary occupations.

Unemployment is an acute socio-economic as well as development problem because of its relationship to the poverty and human development. Unemployment have identified as a emerging problem among the plantation youth especially after

privatization of the plantations in 1992. Among the all plantation youth, the unemployment rate is 38.63% but it is 50.6% among the educated youth. Of the working youth only 43.67% have permanent employment and the balance engaged in temporary or casual works. It is also noteworthy to explain that among the working youth only 25% are satisfied with their present jobs while 67.75 are not satisfied. The reasons for dissatisfaction are low wage, lack of incentives, low states of job, lack of promotional aspects, lack of social security benefits etc.

The higher poverty line defined by the Department of Census and Statistics reveled that nearly 80% of the plantation households lie below the poverty line. The income of plantation workers household is determined mainly by five sectors such as daily wage rate determines by the collective agreement, the number of days of work offered to them by the estate management, the number of days they actually worked, non-plantation work income that they are able to earn and number of income receivers in the household. From the inception of the plantations, the managements have maintained a low wage mechanism in order to ensure chief labour and higher profit. Because of this mechanism, they receive very low level of wage in the country compare to the workers in the other sectors. According to the collective agreement of 2004, they receive Rs 135/= as a basic wage per day plus Rs. 25 as price share supplement and 20 as the Attendance incentive bonus for work attendance of over 75%. While the money wage increasing from 1992 the real wages of the plantation workers not shown significant increases but showed a static trend in changes. A recent study showed that 67% of the estate workers earned less than Rs 5000 per month while 26% earns between Rs 5000 and Rs 7500 and only 7% earns more than Rs. 7500 per month. The average monthly income of tea estate workers found to be Rs 2362. It is also noteworthy to indicate that the average income of a plantation worker is around 50% of the income of rural workers and 25% of an urban worker. In the plantation households, the average number of income receivers had decreased from 2.29 in 1986/87 to 1.7% in 2002. Thus, 23.8% of the estate households have only one working members, about 57% of the household have at least two working members, 13.6% households have three working members and only 5.6% of them have four or more

than four working members. The increasing cost of living in the country has an adverse effect on poverty level of the plantation household.

Child Labour and Alcoholism

Although there is a slight improvement in schooling among the plantation children, child labour found to be one of the serious issues. A study conducted by Vijesandiran for Centre for plantation study in 1999 showed that among the plantation children below 18 years old, 28.82% had engaged in child labour. The child labour rate is high among the female (33.55%) compared to the male children (22.58%). Poverty and poor education facilities are found to be the major causes for child labour problem. It is observed that parents are compelled to send their children for work as a venue to cope with poverty incidence. In addition to this, it is also observed that there is an increasing trend in alcohol habit among the members of the plantation community. There is nearly 60% of the plantation workers consume alcohol and they spent 6.6% of their total income on alcohol and 6.7% of their income spent on Tobacco and betel. Alcoholism is seen as two aspects in relation to poverty in the plantation community. One is that the alcoholism is one of the major causes for higher poverty incidence and the other one is that it is the result of higher level of human poverty prevails in the community.

Status of Women

Sri Lanka has attracted much attention as a country in which women have unusually favorable position in society and in political field when compared to other countries of the SAARC region but the plantation women have been neglected and marginalized by development programmes. Plantation women's work has been undervalued and underestimated. The economic contribution women make has not been fully recognized. The plantation women tend to have multiple roles. Women have a double burden as income earners and as care-takers. As a result, they do not have leisure time on a normal working day. Estate women especially vulnerable to the oppressive economic and social structures exist in the system that has continued to subordinate them for over a century. Women's subordination is rooted in patriarchy. In the plantation families, decision making on major issues like

education of children, their employment and marriage, handling of the household authority structure of the family where the husband is the main actor. Women constitute majority among trade union subscribers but not even one percent of the position in the decision making level shared by them. The isolated life led by them in the estate is another issues, most of them do not know any world beyond their estate. Female literacy rate remain lower in plantation sector than in the other sector and the school dropout rate of females remains high. It has been recorded that only 53% of female children actually complete primary schooling, 24% tented to secondary school and only 4% remain until GCE 'O' level.

Human Rights

Historically, the plantation community experienced with many forms of human right violations. They are the most disadvantaged and discriminated ethnic minority group in the country. The plantation system characterized by the ruthless exploitation of marginalized workers and has been patronage by the Sri Lankan state which ensures the smooth continuation of the exploitative mode of production. The plantation workers work long time for low wage and their labour rights were denied in many times in the history. The international labour standards are not fully instrumented by the estate management and they were treated as semi-slaveryes.

The stateless problem of the plantation Tamils was started in the same year of independent in 1948. In the year, plantation Tamils were disfranchised and their citizenship, political and other civil rights were denied by the first parliament. Since 1964, there were 5 acts were enacted to solve the stateless and citizenship problems but still the problem is not fully addressed and the plantation people are not recognized as the equal citizen to the other communities live in this country. Sri Lanka is one of the few countries in the world that they uphold two different types of citizenship. The other residents except plantation Tamils are obtain citizenship by decent. But the plantation Tamils were treated separately and the citizenship for them were provided by registration and affidavit.

Plantation community has a limited access to the Local Government Authorities and Public Administrative System. They also have no direct access to Grama Seveka. Main reason this is that the plantation sector forms a separate entity and not come under the purview of the Divisional Secretariats and Pradesha Sabhas. Therefore, the government development programmes were not directly reached to the plantation community and they were denied to provide employment in the public sector, semi-government units, and provincial councils. According to their ethnic proportion they should enjoy 5.5% of the jobs in the above institutions but they share only 0.1% of the jobs in Public services, 0.2% in the provincial council services. The Grama seveka deals any official matters related to the estate workers through estate management not directly with them. This indicates that the plantation people treated by the state not as equal citizens and recognized them as a separate ethnic entity and their rights to equal opportunities for public services were also denied.

The ethnic violence unleashed against the plantation Tamils after the independent era especially in 1958, 1977, 1983 and 1986 is deliberately a violation of human rights. Arbitrary arrests, detentions without inquiry, rapes, tortures etc are the worst forms of the human rights violations imposed on these people. Gender inequality and women's right violations are also exist as serious issues among plantation women. Patriarchy social structure and cultural values became the causes for violation of women's rights. Child rights violations and child abuses prevail in significant extent in the plantation community. Child labour, malnutrition, school dropouts, lack of health and schooling facilities, lack of facilities for recreation and sports are some the areas identified where child right violations exists.

Trade Union Movement and Political Representation

The socio-political life and political history of the plantation people closely linked with the evolution of trade union movement in the plantation sector. K Natesa Ayer, known as the pioneer of the plantation trade union movement. He organized Ceylon Estate Worker's Federation as the first trade union to protect labour rights

of the plantation workers. The leftist movement of Ceylon entered to the plantation sector after 1935 and struggled for the rights of these workers. However, the Ceylon Indian Congress was established in 1940s to safeguard the political rights of the Indian Origin Tamils in the country. It also involved in the trade union activities. However, the congress converted as Ceylon Workers Congress in the early part of 1950s. The congress became a major trade union and political party for the plantation community of Sri Lanka after 1977. Although, in the 1950s and 1960s, there were many trade unions established to fight for the labour rights of the plantation workers.

The political history of the plantation Tamils was started before the independent with the introduction of the Universal Franchise in 1931. Since this, they enjoyed their political and voting rights as the other citizens in the country. They were exercised that right fully in the General Election held in 1947 and selected 7 members to represent them in the parliament. However, they were disfranchised just after independent by introducing Ceylon Citizenship Act in the first parliament of the Independent Sri Lanka in 1948. Which brought to majority of the plantation people became stateless and only few of them received the Sri Lankan citizenship back through the Indian and Pakistani Residential Act No 3 of 1949. As a result, plantation people lost their political representation until 1977. There is one member was elected from Nuwaraeliya district in the General election of 1977 which also a result of the Shrima-Shasthri Agreement signed in 1964 to solve the stateless problem of the Indian Origin Tamils. However, there were several acts enacted (1986, 1988 and 2002) to solve the stateless problem of these people. These efforts provided the citizenship and voting rights back to more than 75% of the Plantation Tamils which had raised the political status of the people and increased their political representation at Parliament, Provincial Councils and Pradesha Sabhas. Presently, they have 10 members in the parliament including two cabinet ministers and 4 deputy ministers to represent their community in the political decision making body. They also control two Pradesha Shabhas (Nuwaraeliya and Ambagamuwa) and two Urban Councils (Hatton Dickoya and Talawakelle-Lindula) in the Nuwaraeliya district.

Role of NGOS and GOs

There are various Government and Non-Government organizations have been directly and indirectly involved in the social and human development activities in the plantation sector. Ministry of Plantation Industries, Ministry of Estate Infrastructure, Ministry of Community Development, Ministry of Housing and Ministry of Education were implemented projects on physical and social infrastructure development. Likewise, the International NGOs and organizations, such as Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), NORAD – Norwegian Development Agency, Organization for Economic Cooperation (OEC), United State Agricultural Aid Department (USAID), World Bank, United Nations Education and Cultural Development (UNECD) International Labour Organizations (ILO) etc. were provided financial support to implement development projects in the plantation sector. Since 1980s, the INGOs, such as Plan International, German Technical Zone (GTZ), OXFAM, Christian Aid, World University Service Centre (WUSC), Care International, Sri Lanka Canadian Development Fund (SLCDF) and World Vision were directly implemented much of their plantation development projects. In addition, there are more than 40 Sri Lankan NGOs have been work in the plantation sector to uplift the social, economic, and cultural advancement of the plantation people.

Aspirations on agriculture

In the plantation sector, the land under economic activities and settlements are owned by the state but, these land is given for private management companies on long-time lease in 1992. The land areas in which the workers settled are not belong to them therefore they become a landless by generations from introduction of the plantation system. However, nearly 10% of the workers having own property which was developed under the self-help housing scheme implemented by the Plantation Housing and Social Welfare Trust since 1994. On the other hand, about 90% of the plantation household having small plot of land for home gardening. Out the total plantation households those having plot land, 75% of them have less than 25 perches. At the same time, 76.8% of the plantation workers showed their

interest on agricultural activities. Out of the plantation workers who engaged in any type of cultivations, 97.3% do not possess any training in agricultural practices. Only a small group of the workers have land area enough for cultivation activities which can be utilize for earn extra income. Those who engage in agricultural practices earn between Rs. 2000/= and Rs 4000/= as an extra income per month. Out of the total agricultural products, nearly 51% were sold through directly to the market or intermediates while only 6.8% was sold their products directly to the consumer. The facilities which are needed to agriculture activities available are limited to the estate workers. They face difficulties in getting enough water and land for cultivation, to obtain loans, to market their products, and to get necessary agricultural training. Nearly 30% of the farmers who engaged in cultivation activities do not get enough water facilities and 99% do not receive any loan facilities.

Status and Aspirations of Youth

The youth belong to the age group 15 – 30 share 29% of the total population of the plantation community and the females share higher percentage than males. Out of the total youth, only 10% are schooling and 78.4% are received education up to secondary level while only 0.3% received university education. The occupational information showed that nearly 58% of the plantation youth are engaged in employment activities and the balance are unemployed. The less educated youth face more unemployment than educated. However, the young females (57.1%) have higher unemployment rate than younger male generation (42.9%). Out of the employed youth 60% are work as plantation workers, 38% of them works out of the plantation sector, 1.4% of the employed youth engaged in self-employment activities, 0.4% involved in cultivation related works and 0.5% raring the livestock. The study revels that about one third of the plantation youth are showed keen interest in agricultural related employments. But, the lack of resources such as land, capital water etc, poor marketing channels and transport facilities; and lack of proper training are the major constraints for plantation youth to extent their occupation activities in cultivations.

Uncultivated Land

Out of 279,450.1 hectares of land under plantation sectors, about 25% are uncultivable land. The extent of uncultivable land under JEED and SLSPC is higher than the same land under the private companies managing estates. It is 22.93% (57,442.66 ha) in private managing estates, 38.94 (5,968.81) in JEED estates and 33.38% (4775.91 ha) in SLSPC estates. The plantation cultivation mainly concentrated in the 13 districts but mainly in Nuwaraeliya (58,058.02 ha), Rathnapura (57,677.97 ha), Badulla (41,190.41 ha), Kandy (34,453.95 ha) and Kalutara (23,666.59 ha). However, the highest percentage of uncultivable land could be found in Moneragalla (50.7%), Matara (40.2%), Kandy (31.7%), Matale (28.3%), Rathnapura (26.9%) and Badulla (25.9%) districts. The highest hectares of uncultivable land identified in Rathnapura (15,516.14 ha), Nuwaraeliya (11,795.84 ha), Badulla (10,795.84 ha) and Kandy (10,705.78 ha) districts. In the Galle, Kalutara, Puttalam, and Kurunegalla districts, the uncultivated lands form less percentage which is less than 20% of the total plantation land.