

SRI LANKA'S 'COLONISATION' EXPERIENCE: DEVELOPMENT

OR DISASTER?

Leaders of newly independent Ceylon like those of her neighbour India, became imbued with massive agricultural schemes, planned and implemented by the state and involving huge capital investment, as a means to rapidly modernise their countries after the fashion of leading Western nations. Thus in calling Bhakra Nangal, India's first major dam, the 'temple of modern India', Nehru was decisively moving away from his erstwhile friend and mentor, Mahatma Gandhi.

Although paving the way for massive transfers of population, Ceylon's first major dam, the Gal Oya (800 000 acre feet), commissioned in 1952, was a relatively modest investment. At Rs 750 lakhs, the cost of the dam (exclusive of downstream costs), it was about 10% of the annual export earnings from tea at that time. The accelerated Mahaveli Development Project (ADMP) commissioned in 1978 by J.R.Jayewardene's new UNP government was huge in comparison with the size of the economy and, characteristically, financial prudence was thrown to the winds. The project in addition to a hydro-power generating capacity of 650 MW, proposed to utilise most of the 7 billion acre feet of water, that annually flowed down the Mahaveli, Ceylon's largest river, to irrigate much of the dry-zone. Its cumulative cost by 1989 was Rs 55 billion [1], more than twice the annual export earnings from tea and more than the earned contribution to the annual budget (about Rs 80 billion, half of which came foreign loans). 60% of the cost of the ADMP came from foreign aid of which 55% was spent abroad. 44% of foreign aid component (26% of the cost of the project) came as grants. This contributed to massive inflation, of around 30%, and labour unrest in the early 80s, when investment was highest. From 1984 onwards the mounting military cost of the civil war, which was directly related to colonisation policies, rising to over 15% of the budget by 1985, added to the strain on the economy. The cumulative balance of payments difficulties found the rupee dropping from Rs 8.59 per US dollar in 1977 to Rs 40 per US dollar in 1989 [1]. This worked to further defeat the stated aims of peasant colonisation.

Social and Economic effects on colonists:

The colonists, nearly all of them Sinhalese, were drawn from marginalised and impoverished sections in the South and significantly from the Kandyan region. The traumatic suppression of the Kandyan revolt of 1817 -18 and the introduction of the alien plantation centred capitalist economic relations to their region, which they were ill-equipped to adopt themselves to, led to their progressive alienation and marginalisation to this time. That they needed help was beyond question. Uprooted and transported to a new place where they felt aliens, combined with their inexperience, made them susceptible to new forms of control, particularly by those with state patronage to dispense. Thus politicians who represented colony areas have been traditionally powerful, which worked towards the neglect of even other important Sinhalese areas like the Southern Province.

For the colonists, their own backgrounds and present circumstances, their relations of dependence on a few powerful individuals and the needs of day to day survival, tended towards regimentation. The development of a representative local leadership (as distinct from

agents) and a healthy community based politics was thus impeded. Tissa Devendra [2] attributes this to 'bad physical planning'.

A high rate of inflation, the drop in value of the rupee, a consequent rise in the price of inputs, a growing incapacity of the state to help them and their inability to offer collateral and borrow from banks, led to a progressive deterioration of the position of colonists. Studies done on farmers in the Mahaveli areas [See 1,3 & 4] speak of an astonishing level of poverty. Rupasena [3] estimates the average monthly income of a family in System H (Anuradhapura) at Rs 1000/= per month (at 90 bushels per acre on 2 1/2 acres) and adds that those in the Polonnaruwa area (LB of System B and part of System C) fare even worse despite good harvests. Indebtedness could only further undermine their income. Ariyasinghe [1, pp29-35] lists several trends in the Mahaveli regions leading to impoverishment and marginalisation. They are: "...with increased pauperisation and dependency, tenancy changes are taking place, with hidden tenancy to owners of inputs or officials, whereby they(the colonists) become tenants, labourers or share-croppers on their own land. The high increase of population had led to fragmentation of land with sizes becoming small and uneconomic. The introduction of cash crops by large investment companies, especially in Systems B & C (Polonnaruwa District) has pushed the farmers to work in commercial farms neglecting their block of land. This also leads to hidden tenancy... Dependence on channel irrigation has led to risky agriculture based on water availability ... due to improper water for irrigation... They (the settlers) now want village tanks in the Mahaveli areas rehabilitated especially in Systems H,B,L and C."

A pessimistic note is also struck in the official Mahaveli Authority publication [4, p10]: "Only those farmers who are able to achieve 100 bushels of paddy per acre on 2 1/2 acres for two seasons a year can be expected to earn a minimum subsistence level income..."

There is therefore a very definite trend, aided even if inadvertently rather than cynically, by the government's adoption of the open economy and heavy overseas borrowing, for the control over land to shift from the colonist to those with speculative capital, and towards agribusiness to invest on cash crops. Over 100 000 acres in the Polonnaruwa and Moneragala districts have been given over for this purpose. Given this pressure from foreign debt and local interests allied to international capital, it is hardly surprising if the government is seen as indifferent to the decline of the small local farmer in favour of cash crop production.

Discontent and a feeling of hopelessness among colonists has been an old story. Uprooted from his native village, where at least the social and cultural support to help him in his distress was extant, and in which surroundings he would have been best helped, he finds himself in an inhospitable environment, unable to plan his future, and leading a precarious existence. These are circumstances associated with high birth-rate and early marriage resulting from insecurity and a lack of upward social mobility, together with an undercurrent of political violence [8, p171]. Statistics released by the Ministry for Women's Affairs show a tendency to higher birth and fertility rates in districts with either a large number of colonists or other forms of long term insecurity, as compared with districts with traditional populations such as Gampaha and Kalutara which have enjoyed welfare benefits in health and education over a sustained period from the 40s [5]. It may be countered that the two latter districts are now semi-urban. But that would raise the question whether the solution to extreme-poverty in certain areas is to uproot people and transplant them amidst so many unresolved political questions, using borrowed money, only to have their final position dubious if not definitely

worse? It has been estimated [1,p45] that each direct or indirect job created under Mahaveli development has cost Rs 800 000 and whether this employment is sustainable is questioned by the tendencies pointed out above. This is a huge sum compared with the productive enterprise grant of Rs 4 000 given to returning refugees from the ongoing ethnic conflict to aid self employment. Would it not have been more beneficial if a fraction of the resources spent on job creation in colony areas was spent improving health, education and infrastructure in the colonists' native villages? What seems clearer is that huge projects such as the Mahaveli create conditions where the benefits accrue largely to business interests in creditor nations and to their local partners.

This country has seen two Sinhalese youth insurrections in 1971 and 1988 and is involved in a ten year old civil war that defies resolution. Both have powerful contributory factors arising from state sponsored colonisation. Tissa Devendra [2] says, ".. it is a truism that the development of community spirit and leadership has been greatly retarded in the colonies. This was clearly illustrated during the insurrection of 1971 where most of the young insurgents came from the colonies and not from ancient villages.." The 1988 insurgency also saw a significant contribution from the colonies, such as in particular from the colony villages of Ambagahavelle and Paragahakelle in the Gal Oya scheme, and Gantalawa and Vendarasanpura in the Kantalai scheme.

Thus attempts by the state to ignore the imponderables of human affairs, and plan the futures of its poorer citizens on a scale beyond this country's means, only helped to beach them helpless, on the inhospitable shores of international capital.

Influence on politics:

In view of the ethnic conflict that dominates any talk about Ceylon, colonisation has been represented as a planned attempt by the state to transplant Sinhalese into the Tamil speaking North-Eastern region and ethnically marginalise the Tamil speaking population. This trend, though more evident from the 60s, is only a part of the story. There is much that is more simply explained by the character of parliamentary politics to the exclusion of vibrant movements that address local concerns. A closer look will show that among the greatest losers in colony areas are the native Sinhalese villages. The nature of election politics is such that once numerically overwhelmed by colonists, their cause is bound to go unrepresented and their existence forgotten.

Because huge state resources are involved in colonisation schemes, politicians within the government who disburse these resources are bound to use them in such a manner as to consolidate an electoral base for themselves or to improve their position within the party. Thus the Amparai electorate in the Gal Oya scheme and the colony areas in the North Central Province have been normally represented by powerful figures as mentioned to the neglect of even other Sinhalese areas. This may partly explain why the development of river basins in the south of the island were long delayed, inspite of the presence of an electorally signification population in the area in need of irrigation. Indeed in the Kandyan Sinhalese district of Moneragala devastated following the rebellion of 1817, the extant irrigation works, were ironically enough, mostly initiated by the British colonial administration during the last three decades of the 19th century, and are at present very inadequate[10].

In the colony areas themselves, while the colonies are new, resources are being poured in and land being alienated, much political mileage could be gained by the presiding minister or his proteges. But when things start going wrong as they have done, and the planned system begins to disappoint, there is usually a steady stream of appeals to the political representative to intervene and put things right. While there is hope the representative of the party that looks like being in power is at an advantage. The break is likely to occur when the constituents become too hard to please within the resources at the command of their representative. Thus in Gal Oya, the oldest major scheme, the feeling of discontent and neglect among the colonists was evinced during the JVP insurgency of 1988 when the police repression was brutal. Their representative, a senior and powerful minister, earlier in land, irrigation and Mahaveli development, is now seen to be turning his attention away from the Gal Oya colonists towards the nearby new colonies in the ongoing System C of the Mahaveli project.

The thrust of powerful political figures directing their attention towards colony areas gives a new twist of the state ideology of Sinhalese ethnic supremacy. A crusading zeal along these lines serves as a useful political gambit to divert attention from the stark failures of state policy. Sinhalese colonists in the East are involuntarily transformed into frontiersmen. With the growth of what is in intent equally pernicious counter-violence on the part of Tamils who feel threatened, the desperate economic concerns of colonists become overlaid by security concerns giving rise to further dependence on the state.

In the two Tamil speaking districts of Trincomalee and Amparai in the Eastern Province where Sinhalese colonisation has gone furthest, a mixture of ideological empathy, and a desire for political consolidation as well as to secure space for investment opportunities, is now driving the state to push in order to tip the balance towards a Sinhalese majority. Not surprisingly the East has seen some of the bloodiest scenes in the ethnic conflict, where those dying have little stake in the designs of either side. In both the districts mentioned, there is prominent evidence of the overspill of Sinhalese population from the failed colonies being settled in small patches of dry land in militarily vulnerable areas, making them pawns in a political and military game. A prime example of colonisation as military and ethnic engineering is System L of the Mahaveli project on the boundary of the Tamil speaking Northern and Eastern provinces. It was meant to be feasible only when the North Central Province canal channelled Mahaveli water into the area. The NCP canal was long abandoned. But System L was instituted in 1984 with hardly any water in prospect and attempts are continuing to induce colonists to go there. For the year 1992 Rs 150 million (US \$ 51/2 million) was voted for System L. Only tragedy has come out of it.

In now overpopulated schemes like Kantalai, with alternative employment scarce, military service in the current conflict is among the prominent opportunities for employment for young and women, victims of failed policies. Many deserters are also said to be in the area.

Marginalisation of original inhabitants and cultural destruction:

This holds irrespective of whether the original inhabitants were Sinhalese, Tamil or Muslim. The East of the country has very old tradition of cultural and religious pluralism and a rich folklore recorded long before current rival nationalist claims were advanced[6]. The thrust of state ideology underpinned by colonisation was to promote a brand of scholarship that denied, belittled or suppressed evidence of a rich and complex past, to promote partial claims in support of purported demographic changes. There were long standing Sinhalese

villages in the East, which blended into a unique culture that characterised the largely Tamil speaking region. Several of the Sinhalese villages are culturally Kandyan and have a tradition of tracing their beginnings as refugees from Uva when the Kandyan region was devastated during the British suppression of the revolt of 1817-18. The existence of these villages has been used to justify colonisation as the revival of Sinhalese heritage in the East. But the reality was that when irrigable lands were alienated to Sinhalese settlers, the native Sinhalese villagers were either not offered land (as in the Allai and Kantalai schemes in the Trincomalee District), or when offered largely turned it down (Gal Oya scheme in the Amparai District).

The reasons for the latter were largely cultural, and applied in varying degrees to local villages in colony areas of all communities. Although poor, they were able to meet their basic needs and placed a high value on being part of the village community. The old Sinhalese villages for instance lived on increasingly neglected cereals like kurakkan, which unlike rice, didn't require large quantities of water, and there was wild honey to be obtained. The religious and community lives of Muslims gave them a strong preference to live in closely knit villages and travel daily to fields several miles away. These native villagers need irrigation. But resisted the regimentation of colony life, without then was taking place and how such a demographic change would be used in an unhealthy political ambience.

In the late 40s and early 50s the native population in the Amparai District was far from being oriented to take advantage of commercial opportunities arising out of the scheme in Amparai town. Following successive bouts of ethnic violence, the sizeable Tamil population in the town has been virtually driven out of what is the district's commercial and administrative capital. Although local Muslims are today advanced commercially, an unwritten policy is being followed to keep Muslim commercial interests out of the town.

This is also a pointer to how colonisation has affected ethnic minorities like Tamils and Muslims with a local preponderance, as those in native villages in the East with a culture of their own. The former had been politically mobilised under the threat of marginalisation and a significant section among them made steady gains in education and competitiveness until the civil war erupted. The native Sinhalese villagers in colony areas are now an underclass. At election time they are often promised water or a village tank, and have ended up collecting foundation stones. Nationalist politics does not allow such minorities to be different.

The marginalisation of local cultures has extended beyond colony areas. The Gal Oya scheme in what was then Pattipolai Aru (river) was mooted as a multi-purpose scheme, mainly for irrigation and flood control (the power component of 10 MW maximum being small), drawing on the inspiration of the Tennessee Valley scheme in the USA. In concentrating a huge quantity of water in a single lower basin reservoir which facilitated a far-reaching demographic change, the future needs of the upper basin in the Sinhalese speaking Moneragala District were overlooked. The population of the district (Lower Uva) was contiguous with native Sinhalese villages in Amparai, and had received little help since the devastation of 1818. They are very conscious of this neglect, and keep a very jealous eye on their remaining water resources. But an insolvent government had other pressing considerations. Multinationals were invited and about 100 000 acres of lands in Moneragala were alienated for sugar cane and pineapple, adding to the discomfiture of the local populace and further impairing their control over their land, water and forests. In some instances village tanks were covered up to yield extra land for sugar cane. In several cases where people could technically retain their homes, conditions were created where they had to leave. Thus whether

in their native villages around the central hills, in scattered villages in the East, or in colonisation areas, the saga of the Kandyan peasantry who received a heavy blow in 1818, continues without a happier turn of events, as for the rural Tamil and Muslim populations caught in the civil war.

New Perspectives

The effects of massive uprooting of populations and destruction of local cultures to serve a supposedly beneficent master plan for development have been studied in several contexts. To quote 'the Ecologist' [8, P181]: "Witnesses to previous managerial policing operations can testify, in addition, to how such notions as those of 'carrying capacity' and 'overpopulation' are used by institutions such as the World Bank to license programmes of staggering human and environmental impact. Indonesia's Transmigration Programme, for example, ostensibly undertaken to relieve "population pressure" on Java, has marginalised hundreds of thousands of people, heightened social conflicts, and ruined vast expanses of forests and land."

Along with such notions of planned mega-projects also went the baggage of nationalism demanding uniformity that would not allow for the autonomy of local cultures. In Ceylon this nationalism which expressed itself in the form of ethnic supremacy of one group over others led to the emergence of two or three conflicting nations, as artificial as the first, unresolvable territorial claims, and a bloody impasse. The reality in Ceylon as a patchwork of local communities that happen to speak one or more of the two main languages, subscribe to one or more of the four main religions, have their many faceted interactions with neighbouring communities and having sometimes surprising intimate ties with distant communities through ancient links or in consequence of religious pilgrimages, has become more difficult to discern. Not surprisingly the emergence of vibrant environmentalist groups that uphold the autonomy of local communities has been retarded. Environmentalist pressure groups have emerged that have raised issues such as the expected displacement of 2500 families for the Colombo-Katunayake Express Way, some aspects of displacement and colonisation in the South[7]. Other groups have taken up matters such as industrial pollution, work hazards, the role of multinational agribusiness in Moneragala and the construction of a proposed hotel complex in the catchment area of Kandalama tank, serving a rural Buddhist village. But the fact that most incipient mass movements that tried to mobilise around some of these issues fell by the wayside shows the power of big business with state backing to cajole, co-opt and coerce people into submission.

The emergence of a mass movement requires a radical critique of accepted economic and nationalist mores that will address the core desires of an individual's security and being - the possibility of living and finding fulfilment in one's local community. This means that the cynicism inherent in the common belief of the elite, that invasion of all aspects of life by the world economy and the accompanying permanent poverty and discontent among about half the people, are both inevitable, must be decisively refuted. To quote from the Indian experience in resisting the Narmada Valley project and the Sardar Sarovar dam [9]: "Going beyond the rhetoric of sustainable development, people at the grassroots are recognising the rich traditions that face destruction through large dams. Their protests push the debate towards the imperative to respect threatened cultures, because of their own intrinsic worth as well as the ideal and practice of sustainability revealed by them. People at the grassroots are struggling to shift the debate away from the economy, and towards cultural survival and autonomy of communities. They are firmly learning to reject arguments based on economic

and technical feasibilities, arguments in which states and institutions have up to now maintained their dominance.

" Today the challenge for grassroots groups involves, on the one hand, avoiding the devastating forms of communal violence now endemic everywhere. On one hand it involves opening up to people the king of concrete possibilities and hopes that could help to make the democratic ballot box more meaningful. This involves, among other things, learning to see the ballot box as a mere umbrella for real, direct democracy, rooted in indigenous traditions, radically distinct from the abstraction called " the nation state".

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