

between his respect and admiration for Sarojini and the compulsion to denounce her is also apparent. Given that this article is a response to the publication of the University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) *Special Report no. 11, A Tamil Heroine Unmourned and the Sociology of Obfuscation*, (1998), it is very likely that it was written at the behest of the LTTE, and is an indication of their Nazi methods i.e. forcing people to do something vile—killing a child, torturing someone, betraying a parent, colleague or close friend—so that they totally lose their self-respect and become docile tools in the hands of the totalitarian power.

5. See Amnesty International, 1998, *Children in South Asia: Securing their Rights*; excerpts published as Sri Lanka's Children: the AI Report, in *Pravada*, Vol.5, No.10&11.

6. Adrian Wijemanne, "Free Education vs. Reform", *Pravada*, Vol.5, No.6

7. See Tarzie Vittachi, 1958, *Emergency 58. The Story of the Ceylon Race Riots*, London: Andre Deutsch

8. See Ram Manikkalingam, "Tigerism", in *Pravada*, Vol.1 No.4, *Tamil Times*; London, April 1992, and *Tigerism and other Essays*, Ethnic Studies Group, 1995, and Pradeep Jeganathan, "Who are the Tamils?", *Pravada*, Vol.5 No.4&5 for critiques of the LTTE definition of Tamils.

9. This impression is, admittedly, formed on the basis of limited empirical evidence, namely the views of refugees interviewed for

my book *Journey Without a Destination*, but I feel sure that any survey which guarantees confidentiality would come up with the same result. After all, most Tamils are normal human beings; they too cherish their freedom and wish to be able to exercise it without being incarcerated, tortured, or killed. The fact that in Tamil Eelam they would be repressed by a Tamil state is immaterial. Anyone who doubts this should try telling relatives of victims of the 1987-90 violence in the South how lucky they are that their loved ones were hacked to death, herded together and shot, dumped in rivers, burned on tyre-pyres or buried in mass graves by paramilitaries speaking their very own language, or security forces of their very own Sinhala state. Or try to imagine being tortured to death oneself: would it be any consolation that the torturers/executioners speak the same language as oneself? Any normal person would prefer not to be tortured or killed at all for normal activities like telling the truth or expressing an opinion!

10. Ram Manikkalingam, "How Valid is the Claim for a Cease-fire?" *Sunday Times*, 25/9/94; also reproduced in *Tigerism and other Essays*, which includes many useful observations on the LTTE and the ethnic conflict.

11. Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, "After Devolution: Protecting Local Minorities and Mixed Settlements", *Pravada*, Vol.5 No.4 & 5; "From Ethnic Conflict to Dirty War": the Hidden Economies of Armed Conflict, *Pravada*, Vol.5 No.8

12. See UTHR(J), op.cit., p.61; also *Journey Without a Destination*, especially the last chapter. ■

CASTE HIERARCHY AND FEMALE LABOUR Sri Lankan Plantations

Rachel Kurian

The two main divisions found on the Sri Lankan estates were the *Sudra* and the *Adi-Dravida*. In order of hierarchy among the *Sudra* were two sub-divisions, namely *Kudian* and *Non-Kudian*. A common caste found on the estates was from the *Kudian* sub-division, as the *Vellalan* who were generally accepted to belong to the highest social caste on the estates. Many of them, in fact, claimed to belong to the *Vaisya* division. Besides the *Vellalan* at least thirteen other castes and their further divisions belonging to the *Kudian* and *non-Kudian* sub-divisions are found on the estates.

The *Adi-Dravida* or *Panchama* formed the largest proportion of the estate workers. In Tamil Nadu in South India they, historically, worked as some form of hired labour, and they may even have had to scavenge the area. The *Chakkiliyan*, considered to be the lowest caste (their name is derived from the Sanskrit word *Shatkuli* i.e. -flesheater), were often given the task of sweeping (apart from the usual field work for estate production). The *Pallan* and the *Paraiyan* clearly constituted the bulk of the labour on the estates. These two

castes in Tamil Nadu worked for the *Vellalan* and the other high castes, and often had their dwelling places outside the village areas. Given their social situation, it is perhaps not surprising that a large number of converts to Christianity came from these two castes, especially the *Paraiyan*.

Sanskritization Process

As the labourers from South India were incorporated into the plantation system, they were to experience a change or a shift in their status as workers and as members of the new estate community of which they were a part. Their new status depended not only on the particular caste from which they came, but also on the caste ranking in the new environment, and on whether they were male or female. In general, most of the sub-castes experienced upward mobility as the process of migration freed them from the controls of the higher castes. At the same time, however, while this implied greater freedom and power to the male members, it

created greater controls on the women. An important element in this process which continued to control their lives was the retention of some caste values. This was facilitated by the peculiar pattern of recruitment which encouraged migration in kin-groups under the leadership of a *kangani*, and did not allow the workers to free themselves completely from their caste background. Furthermore, since they came across in such groups, it was easy enough for the relatively upper-caste groups to demand the services and respect which were their due previously in the Indian situation.

Even the relatively higher-caste Tamils who came across as estate workers were, in reality, from the relatively lower of the caste ladder in the Indian context. Understandably, they were less concerned about strict adherence to the rituals, religious ceremonies and customs that were part of the society of the upper castes; if only because these were often seen as the domain and right of the latter. There were cases to indicate that compared to the caste rigidity that characterized norms and behaviour of the upper castes, there was relative flexibility of caste divisions among the *Sudra*.

As far as *Adi-Dravida* women were concerned, their profession as cultivators or scavengers had forced them to work together with the men. They had much contact with workers in their own sub-caste, and often even with the members of other sub-castes. This situation created relatively independent attitudes, as well as a bolder and more egalitarian attitude vis-a-vis men of the same sub-caste. They often did not adhere to the strict moral codes of the upper-castes which placed women under the control of their men-folk, and it was not uncommon for these women to enjoy a greater degree of sexual freedom. Inter-caste marriages were more widely accepted, and in the case of the *Adi-Dravida*, all of these trends were more pronounced. In spite of these factors, things were to move in a more conservative direction for women in their new situation as plantation workers in Sri Lanka.

There was a very conscious attempt by the higher sub-castes among the *Sudra* to (re)introduce a similar pyramid in the new environment. This was a conservative and traditionally-based caste structure with themselves at the top, taking over the role of the *Brahmin* and the other high castes. This attempted reconstruction of the former social background, with its norms and behaviour patterns resulted in the imposition, in this setting, of a quasi caste system. The hierarchy was now one with the *Sudra* (often claiming to be *Vaisya*) on top and the *Adi-Dravida* below, with various sub-castes being highly differentiated among the *Sudra*. The demarcation between the different sub-divisions grew more significant and more important as those at the top of the pyramid separated themselves from those below. Caste ideologies and patterns of behaviour which gave them a higher position within their community were revived.

In particular, the method of recruitment, the system of labour management on the estates, and their relationship to the wide society in Sri Lanka stimulated this process. Firstly, the fact that migration took place under the supervision of a higher caste *kangani* and usually in families or kin-groups together, served to make the preservation of caste identity much easier. Secondly, when these groups arrived on the estate they were isolated from and had little

social contact with Sri Lankan society. The latter had, anyway, a social system which was feudal in nature, and inimical to that of the Indians (de Silva 1979: 129-52 and Silva 1979: 43-70). Thirdly, the formation of labour gangs on the estate, under *kangani* and sub-*kangani*, was (at least in the early days) based on caste, and tended to strengthen both caste and kinship ties. It has been argued that the *kangani* system in fact tended to perpetuate these values on the estates. Given this tendency for the sub-*kangani* groups to be relatively homogeneous in terms of caste and kinship, and given the fact that, in the earlier days, these groups had to align together under a head-*kangani*, a situation was created in which, in reality, a large number of *Adi-Dravida* had to work under *Sudra kangani* (Jayaraman 1975: 57-64). In fact, the *kangani* used caste in this way to maintain his position, assert his authority, and better his situation. He could control the workers below him, and this gave him enormous power in negotiating with the management. Caste differences between the workers were expressed in a number of ways in their social life. Living quarters, for example, were arranged on the basis of caste. Higher-caste people disliked living in the same lines as people of lower castes, and in some cases objected even to having to look upon them. These arrangements were nearly always made on the advice of the head *kangani* who knew the 'needs' of the different castes, and allotted rooms in line with such reasoning (Green 1925). The result was often a concentration of a particular caste in one 'line' or one housing area, keeping awareness of caste very much in the fore.¹

In these new circumstances hypergamous marriages, especially among the higher castes on the estates, were strongly condemned, and if the castes were not structurally close, this could result in virtual ostracism. All sub-castes of the *Vellalan* were discouraged from inter-marriage (although exceptions were not uncommon), and the *Konga* sub-caste (the lowest amongst the *Vellalan* caste) was very often not allowed to mix socially with the higher *Vellalan* sub-groups (Green 1925). The significance of this process lay in the increased differentiation that developed amongst the workforce on the basis of caste.

Religion played a very important role in the lives of the estate workers; and rituals and rites, formerly the domain of the *Brahmin* and other higher castes, were now taken over and more rigidly observed by the *Sudra*. There was also a caste hierarchization experienced in these practices, with the *Adi-Dravida* not being allowed the same privileges as the other higher castes. If an *Adi-Dravida* cooked the food, the *Sudra* would refuse to eat it. In these many ways the divisions within the Tamil community were heightened in their new setting.

The Impact on Female Labour

The above factors had a special significance in terms of the position of women. The resurgence of caste and religious practices gave prominence to traditional notions concerning women and their role in Tamil society. Most important of all these was that women were viewed as inferior to men. It was their duty to serve the needs of men and to be subordinate to them. Inequality between men and women, an important feature of traditional Hindu practices, became even more apparent in the lives of the Tamil workers on the

estates as they aspired to positions of status within their community. Subordination of women to men was considered 'proper'. It could be widely used to control their lives (sexually and in terms of other services), and these beliefs were constantly being reinforced in the social life and took place on the estates.

Festivals were in general important events, and they were even more so in the lives of women because these were important opportunities which allowed for wider social contacts outside their work situation and their immediate neighbourhood.² Religion of higher castes of non-Brahminic order became a more important part of their lives, and the inequalities inherent in this religion became an even stronger means of male control. Women could not set foot inside the temple's sacred area 'lest their action pollute the gods'. The important ceremonies following births were much more elaborate in the case of male than female children. A male child was always considered to be that much better. When girls reached puberty, this too was the subject of ceremony, but in the course of their menstruation they were confined to a separate section of the house, as they could 'pollute' other family members.³

The marriage ceremony emphasized the subservience of women,⁴ and following a death, it was the men, and not the women, who accompanied the deceased to the graveyard.⁵ All these points served to engrain a sense of their inferiority into the women and into the consciousness of the Tamil community. These rituals were rarely observed with such sex or caste segregation among the *Sudra* and *Adi-Dravida* who lived in Tamil Nadu. The process of sanskritization, as such, created a loss of freedom for the woman. As a *Sudra* family tried to emulate the behaviour of higher castes, and reflect the status that it had now acquired, the woman in this caste assumed the role of being the private property of her husband and subservient to him. At the same time, this process also implied distinguishing oneself from other people, or a process of social differentiation, as discussed earlier, which resulted in the woman becoming more isolated and even more cut off, at a social level, from the lower-caste women and the rest of the estate community. Thus, with the sanskritization process emphasizing caste difference, *Sudra* sub-caste women began to lose the freedom they had earlier enjoyed. This was manifested in *Sudra* women by their special efforts to avoid alcohol, and by an increasingly conscious observation of rituals associated with high-caste festivals. Women of the lower divisions of the *Adi-Dravida* castes often drank. Their attitude in general was more relaxed, and they had less to gain from adopting, and were therefore less concerned with the need to follow high-caste rituals. This was marked in the attitude that they displayed to men in their households. Even today, although all women claim to hold their husbands in fear or *bhayam*, there is a correlation between the level in the caste hierarchy and the degree of reticence that women display towards their men. The higher the caste, the greater the degree of reticence that they show. *Sudra* women tend to be less free and more subservient to their husbands than women amongst the *Pallan*, *Paraiyan* and *Chakkiliyan*. The latter, in contrast, are more open with their men and often prepared to stand up and fight for their rights.

The implications of this entire process, in terms of labour control, cannot be underestimated. It was largely in the interests of the management to promote social relations which upheld notions of respect for those in power, and which discouraged any type of joint organization or confrontation on the part of labour. In this way, using the caste values, the plantation management could rely on obedience of the workforce to the *kangani*, and at the same time keep them sufficiently divided. With regard to women, there was also a special significance, and one which allowed greater economic exploitation of labour. Firstly, the notion that women were inferior to men justified their being paid lower wages, even when they did the same work. Secondly, the division of labour was such that women were involved in monotonous time-consuming activities which were labour-intensive and of lower status, although this was justified on the grounds that women were more 'patient'. Finally, the profitability of the estate was also promoted by the structure of the household unit and the division of labour within it. These activities which included cooking, cleaning, looking after the children, were almost exclusively done by the women and seen as part of the natural duty of women, and as such did not have to be accounted for by the management. In this way, patriarchy and casteism were to become important elements of the Tamil community; and used as a means of labour control for women on the plantations.

Inroads into Labour Control – the Contemporary Situation

There have been two major processes that have served to challenge the traditional patterns of labour control. Their impact has been limited and in some cases even marginal. However, it is important to explore this a little more. The first process has to do with the granting of universal franchise and the subsequent development of trade unionism on the plantations. The second is concerned with the repatriation process through which large numbers of plantation labourers have been rendered 'stateless' or been returned to India.

The granting of universal franchise in 1931 under the Donoughmore Constitution served to question the traditional basis of authority in the plantation Tamil community. The most important effect of this was to shift the balance of political power to those sections of labour that were most numerous, notably the *Paraiyan* and the *Pallan*. The high-caste workers who had hitherto maintained their superior position with the caste rationale now had to give way to a situation where the most numerous low-caste groups had a more important influence on political organization. However, although efforts may have been made to shift away from power structures based on caste, it had been so much part of the social situation that in one way or the other, even the trade union movement was affected by this phenomenon. Although this is denied by the existing unions, and efforts are made to erode power based on this, it nevertheless continues to have importance in the social life of the workers.

The second element to question this traditional caste authority has been the increased process of repatriation in the post-independence period. Many of the people who had opted to return to India in the wake of the Sirimavo-Shastri Pact of 1964 and the Sirimavo-

Gandhi Agreement of 1974 have been people from the higher castes. These people had, in many cases, maintained contact with relatives in India. They had often made journeys to their native villages, and they were even in the habit of remitting money to their families in India. It was the habit of persons in those castes to save their money, while the lower castes, with few possibilities for their future, were more likely to spend it on alcoholic drinks or speculation. When the process of repatriation was started, those families with some contacts in India initially opted to leave Sri Lanka. The net outcome of this is that there are few such families remaining on the estates, thereby making it possible to break down the values that they had stood for.

Finally, there is the increasing social intercourse that has come about between the Sinhalese villagers and the Tamil workers, this phenomenon being more evident in the mid and low country areas. In some cases this has given rise to inter-marriage and, in the process more direct questioning of the traditional value system.

In all these cases, however, there has been little to question the traditional position of women. It is true that women in the lower castes tend to be more vocal about their problems than those of the higher castes, and to that extent it might seem that their grievances are given more attention. However, with few exceptions, the trade unions have tended so far to be male-dominated. The participation of these women is more or less limited to paying their membership fees and making their complaints to the *thalavar* (union representative). This is further compounded by the fact that meetings are often held when the women cannot be free from work (either in the household or in the field) and little effort is made to provide facilities whereby their jobs can be taken care of. Even when they do attend, there is a tendency for the meetings to be male-dominated. It is true that there is concern amongst some of the younger generation who are more active in asserting their rights as workers. However, this is more the exception than the rule, and most of the women continue to feel that trade unionism is a man's domain, and therefore do not take part in the decision-making process.

Notes

1. Observed in Green's (1925) book and confirmed in interviews with senior superintendents. They maintained that it was not that

'lines' were consciously allotted on the basis of housing decisions, and that they followed the custom of ensuring that there should be no unrest by placing certain castes in certain areas. The 'lines' refer to long, barrack-like buildings divided into very small dwelling units, side by side, opening out into a common area.

2. The most elaborate celebrations relate to the festivals of *Deepavali*, *Pongal* and *Adi Poussai*. Also celebrated are *Vael*, *Shiva Ratri*, the feast of Perumal and St Anna's Day.

3. The coming of age ceremony of the girl, known as the *ruthu sadangu*, is a significant ceremony in the family, but the confinement of the girl reinforces the notion that there is something unclean about a woman during this period. This feeling is perpetuated by other norms; for example, that she should not touch the food that is to be served to the rest of the family at any time when she is menstruating. In fact, at these times she is treated as somebody who would pollute the others if she came into contact with them.

4. In a typical Vellalan marriage, the bride has to make a circle with the first fingers of each hand and look towards the star Arunditi. This symbolizes wifely duty and constancy. The rituals also stress the subservient role of the female to the male.

5. The funeral rites are considered to be very important on the estate, and only men are allowed to participate in the various rites involved.

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