



# Women and Motherhood in the Plantation Sector of Colonial Sri

Ramani Hettiarachchi

Senior Lecturer, Department of History, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received: 26 February 2017;

Received in revised form:

01 August 2018;

Accepted: 10 August 2018;

### Keywords

Plantation labourers,

Gender violence,

Discrimination,

Colonization.

## ABSTRACT

Sri Lankan historiography relating to immigrant plantation worker community under colonialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century has so far failed to examine the inner complexity of strategies of labour management. This historiography tends to emphasize institutional developments in the plantation sector as and overall process of modernization where the colonial state and the British planters combined to provide better social, health and sanitation facilities for the welfare of the immigrant workers. Women were looked upon as machines of reproduction that would serve the long term labour requirements of the plantations while at the same time providing cheaper female and child labour.

© 2018 Elixir All rights reserved.

## Introduction

As in most colonial economies the plantation economy in Sri Lanka depended on a large resident labour force. From the point of view of the planters, the ideal 'female coolie' had to be firstly, free of family burdens and secondly an instrument of reproduction of labour force for the sustenance of the plantation economy. This research tries to understand contradictions highlighting the general issues of the condition of female labourers in the plantation sector in colonial Sri Lanka.

The analysis of this contradiction will be undertaken with a thematic approach focusing on the labour recruiting process, the management mechanism and structural female subordination. From the capitalist producer's point of view the ideal female coolie was one who had abandoned family and home. Women by and large, could not meet this ideal (without seriously jeopardizing their own morality and, by extension, the moral order of coolie identity- a point we will return to). Morris (1965) summarizes the attitudes of the managers of Bombay's textile mills thus: "Even before the passage of the factories act of 1891 women in these departments typically came to work later and except during very busy periods, would leave earlier than the men. They were also customarily allowed to leave the mills during the day to feed their children." (p.69)

The male worker, on the other hand, came close to the idea of the unencumbered labourer; the ideal coolie. Of course this ignored the fact that in Asia, a full adult male is a married man and an unmarried man at any age is in a deep cultural sense incomplete. The deprivation in the life of the coolie was such that to have a wife became a symbol of status, security and prosperity in the plantations (Tinker, 1974, p.201). However, if a coolie arrived at a plantation together with his wife, he ran the risk of losing her to a superior that is to a foreman a white employee, there by reverting to the status of a "boy", as an incomplete man. During The early days, even though there were women workers among Indian Plantation workers, when we compare

the details of migration, the percentage of women were much lower than that males.

C. Kondappi (1951) pointed out the Indian government's indifference to the question of a sufficient proportion of female to male immigrants. He says that it was, "one of the serious defects of early Indian emigration policies" (p. 87) Official policy in India was different in relation to Ceylon from policy in respect of emigration to Mauritius, and the West Indies. There was concern among officials in Madras, Calcutta and London about ensuring at least some minimum proportion of women to men among Indian migrants to the sugar colonies, but Ceylon was a different proposition, both in respect of its proximity as well as in the fact that migrants for employment on the coffee plantations were free to travel between the two countries as they wished unlike in the sugar colonies where they went out as indentured workers on contracts of service that generally ranged from three to five years. A peculiar feature of Indian indenture system was the insistence by the government of India after the 1870s that 40 females migrate for every 100 males on all shipments leaving the subcontinent. Though this move was opposed by the recruiters and British planters, the Indian government remained unmoved, adamant in its desire to promote family life and to alleviate problems caused by the disproportion of the sexes in the colonies (Lal, 1990, p. 65). However the policy on migration to Ceylon changed due to introduction of a new rule by the government of India that bachelors should not constitute more than one in every five of groups emigrating to Ceylon (Tinker, 1974, p. 93). When we pay attention to understanding the reality of the sex ratio statistical information reveals that among Indian immigrant labourers in Sri Lanka in January 1839, there were 64 men and 13 women. These figures work out to approximately one woman arriving for every five men. According to statistics on February 1839, 265 men and 31 women arrived in Ceylon. Thus this month there was one woman to almost nine men who arrived. The proportion of women to men had dropped even more steeply, to one to every eighteen men approximately.

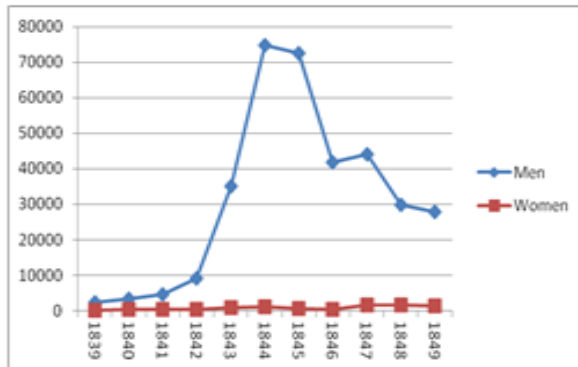
This imbalanced condition continued until the 1860s, Pedrick Peebles showed an improvement in the sex ration from one to eight in the 1850s to one in six in the 1860s. However, due to the shortage of women's migration there many socio-cultural problems emerged in the plantation sector in Sri Lanka.

According to other leading researcher's views this problem was a common issue in later of colonial plantation economies such as Burma, Malaya and Fiji Island. Brij V Lal and Tinker have stated that government reports listed the lack of women as one of the foremost causes of the migrant of suicide wherever indentured labourers were settled (Lal, 1990, p.67). This current research study was able to identify several causes of suicides in the plantation sector in Sri Lanka in the colonial period based on official documents such as sessional papers. Although show its several incidence of suicide among this immigrant society unable to find out what are the facers led to this causes in this period.

#### The arrivals and departures of the Indian Plantation Labour Community in Sri Lanka

Arrivals					Departures				
Years	Men	Women	Children	Total	Years	Men	Women	Children	Total
1839	2432	188	99	2719	1839	1956	161	85	2202
1840	3326	307	181	3814	1840	3464	256	153	3873
1841	4523	363	164	5050	1841	4243	274	117	4634
1842	9025	279	166	9470	1842	10691	345	228	11264
1843	35195	957	448	36600	1843	15868	914	436	17211
1844	74840	1181	724	76745	1844	38337	825	535	39697
1845	72526	698	177	73401	1845	24623	145	36	24804
1846	41842	350	125	42317	1846	13833	48	23	13907
1847	44085	1638	417	46140	1847	5897	79	33	6009
1848	29936	1685	551	32172	1848	22680	557	152	23385
1849	27732	1430	268	29430	1849	10479	335	84	10916

Source: Drisen, 1998, p. 22.



I begin by focusing colonial attitudes towards this gender imbalance problem and its consequences. The labour commission reports reveal that there emerges a new dialogue among planters and officers relating to these specific subject. The commissioners raised the question about whether planters are interested or not in the arrival of women labourers in Sri Lanka. The important fact was that while several planters gave the oral evidence for the commission; they gave different ideas relating as to the advantages or disadvantages of a large proportion of women on a plantation. In response to the question "What is your opinion?", A planter answered : "I believe a large proportion of women among the coolies is a great disadvantage" (Ferguson, 1968). This planter further explained that within this period a much larger proportion of women and boys among the coolies was found. It is clearly obvious through this evidence that many planters were not satisfied and considered the arrival of more women labourers burdensome because they had to take responsibilities of an additional labour force. Especially, they were not ready to take care of children. Although, some planters openly expressed their objections relating to them

migration of a large proportion of women and children, they made no arrangement to restrict the number. However, planters gradually understood on how they would gain many economic benefits through promoting the cheapest labour force. A leading planter stated that the children are more beneficial for their targeted economic development in future. The results of this practical change of attitude among the planters led to the encouragement of the women workers as well as children. They become as an instrument due to considered properly for the planters (Hettiarachchi, 2014, pp.227-237). For instance; another leading planter declared that, "women labourers are machines of reproduction" (ibid). He further noted that we need to protect these women labourers with the proper facilities when they are ill. Another fact was that while the colonial state neglected female health, the state and planters combine to provide essential facilities for female plantation workers in the form of maternity needs.

The Indian plantation labour force was predominantly male. Part of the explanation of this trend lies in the cultural tradition of the Indians. But the ideology of the colonial regime – that the women's role was largely a reproductive one – also played a part in this development. This was reflected in the sexual division of labour in the plantations and a differential wage scale, with women being paid lower wages than men. European planters of the period seem to have taken full advantage of the lack of family migration among labors by over-crowding them in coolie lines and mixing the sexes indiscriminately. These arrangements, devised with a keen eye to minimizing labour costs, were rationalized in terms of the alleged habits and customs of the people.

Some of the immigrants bring their wives and children with them, but the greater number are single men. It is the custom of these people to form themselves into messes at the houses of the married men, the wives cooking and receiving a small fee for the service (Sandu, 1969, p. 79).

Motherhood become important in the plantation labour management in the sense that re-production of labour was considered largely a function of female workers in the plantation. Therefore, due to this requirement of motherhood, facilities for their child birth and infant care became a responsibility of the individual plantation management.

Another aspect we gleaned through contemporary sources is the fact that, planters became convinced of the value of locally born workers. As a planter stated, "But an important consideration is the number of new born in the country who grew up here and never leaves it... but now that children have been forced to be well fitted for the work of leaf plucking. He finds it useful to preserve his progeny, and little brown urchins of both the sexes from the age of five earn ten to twelve cents a day (Cave, 1900, p.187). This shows that, some of planters viewed employment of women more positively than others. Their target was the reproduction of a Ceylon born generation of labour. This was economically more beneficial in lowering the cost of importing Indian labour.

#### **Migration Experiences**

This current research tries to give an analysis of the Indian female worker's own experiences within the migration process in this particular period. I expect to draw your attention to the difficulties they faced within this process as a migrating labour force.

My main argument is that because they are migrating as an outside labour community they faced many pathetic situations in migration process.

When we investigate why they are attracted to work as a labour force there is evidence that women may have had their own reasons to leave their homes, to escape from domestic quarrels, economic problems and hardships, a social structure so attractive to young widows and brides who have inadequate dowry, and the dreariness of the rural Indian's life. Significantly, a very large proportion of the women had left their homes before they met the recruiters and were shipped to other colonies such as Burma, Malay and Fiji. The fact is migration was not a new or unknown phenomenon for Indian women: thousands had moved to other parts of India (Calcutta, Jut mills, Assam tea gardens, Bihar coal mines, Bombay textile mills) in search of employment. The journey to Ceylon, Malaya and other countries was a part of this large process of migration. Most emigrants left India hoping to return one day after they had earned enough money: the women, taking a greater risk, perhaps desired a permanent break from a condition that seems to offer many problems but few possibilities (Lal, 1990, p.66). Contrary to all the available evidence, even at the recruitment, contemporary official documents reveal Indian immigrant women as being low caste and uneducated: the *kanganies* wish to entice women in these conditions. The *kanganies* painted a colourful picture about the fortune of a life in the Sri Lankan plantations. To attract the plantation workers, the *kanganies* distributed a large number of leaflets. Deceived by the information in the leaflets, the plantation workers started to migrate in large numbers. Although according to the Indian law, it was illegal for unmarried women to migrate, they produced false certificates of marriage to migrate. Having left their parents, they had to face a lot of tragic experiences during the long journey across the seas.

According to historical sources Indian Plantation women labourers complained of blackmail by policemen in India while they migrated from their own villages. This condition is revealed by new research through classic example.

"The police take money to allow the coolies to come here: if they do not pay, they are taken up and kept in the station. In addition a leading planter, J. M. Mackenzie commented on a similar condition where he brought in his personal experiences: the police and others fine and blackmail them. They make them pay a certain sum before they are allowed to pass the police station" (Hettiarachchi, 2012, p.61).

Even though migrate workers faced harassing incidents as a whole, we can see the extreme harassments the workers had to face as women.

In this study we found evidence to prove while they were migrating many women workers were exposed for criminal assault. According to the information in administration report of 1888, "One murder occurred on the North road at a long spot, where a Tamil travelling to the coast was followed from Kandy waylaid, murdered and robbed of a quantity of jewelry. Before the discovering guilty person he escaped to Mannar, and owing to the number of coolies passing and re-passing it was impossible to identify him" (p.110). However, we can understand the real picture and what kind of difficulties that they were faced in with an alien location. As shown above, the reality was quite in contrast to the beautiful

picture that was painted by the colonial authorities. There was a discrepancy between theory and practice. In addition this was a classic example to portray helpless life among the plantation women workers due to result of colonial hegemony.

In addition, this review of documents indicates that sea voyages had created stress and discomfort that made them really susceptible to infection by diseases. Particularly the change of climate and environmental conditions while travelling in sea vessel and the swaying of the vessels made vomiting a normal experience for the travelers. The principle mode of travel was in small native sailing vessels, the majority of which were unfit to carry passengers. The holds of these vessels contained ballast consisting principally of sand on which the coolies, specially the women and children lay; this sand became polluted by vomit, excreta and was seldom changed at the end of the voyage (ibid, p.53). For individuals suffering from such difficulties, the quality of food provided for them has been described by M.S. Lorea, trader who gave evidence on those matters. "When they are sick, we give them nice kanji twice a day, we don't charge separately for it." (ibid). Thus this was the journey by ship under inhuman conditions, resulting in a high mortality. A good number of the men and women reached Ceylon were unfit for any kind of work.

According to S. Arsarathnam's research, (1970) a very similar condition was reported in Malaya. The British sub collector of Tanjore, observing the operation of the recruiting system from Nagapatnam, the chief port of departure, called it "a regularly organized system of kidnapping". In addition to this he noted that sometimes and this happened in the cases of speculators, questionable means were used to entice the labourers, who were in effect kidnapped to a distant country. Incidents of abuse relating to young women were tragic (p.13).

What must be emphasized here is that the drawing the attention to identify such cases in colonial India in parallel to Sri Lanka, P.D Mohapatra indicated that more similar trends in Assam tea plantations under the colonial regime. He stated that the first reports concerning the increased abuses associated with deregulated emigration came from the Chotanagpur division, where the commissioner reported that in 1882 there was a great increased in enticing minors from the protection of their guardians and the abduction of married women. In addition to this missionaries in Chotanagpur supplied the commissioner with 50 documented cases of kidnapping and abduction in 1882, and the Deputy Commissioner of Ranchi and Manbhum reported another 100 cases of abduction of women (Behal, Mohapatra, 1992, p.154).

When we further investigate their travel route and their own experiences it was revealed that they seldom sleep in this traveling process. If the weather is fine they preferred camping in the neighborhood and cooking their meals in the open air, and these strangers grouped together at sunset under the trees near some tank and made themselves quite at home (Travers, 1899, p.123).

Another important pathetic situation was that while they trying to cross the village areas expecting to reach to their relevant locations they faced additional problems. We have an opportunity to elaborate on which kind of complexity they faced while they trying to get little relaxation in that moment. Some historical resources disclosed how much they sacrifice their lives in various stages. According to the following statement, it indicated that when they attempted to get a rest

in the Ambalama as a mother how she tolerate such bad experiences.

William Sabonadiere stated that exposure to the elements; the lack of accommodation; the adequate wells; and a shortage of food; were the main privations of the workers on their journey. He declares that in many cases the only sustenance for workers on the march was 'rice water' or the water that had been drained off in the boiling of rice (Letters., 1855, p.12).

In addition to this, when hunger and sold and if not for the aid given to them by the keeper of the ambalama. Many would die before starting again in their journey. Many drop down on the Ramboda and Hakgalapastures and were carried in by police patrols to the civil hospital where they were attended to. Another important case was that one night the keeper found a mother and child in the road drain near the ambalama, in a state of unconsciousness. Through this statement it can be illustrate that how far they sacrificed their lives in a new location.

### Gender Dominance and Harassment

Because of the low percentage of women labourers, many women were inclined to sexual promiscuity in the plantation sector in Sri Lanka. According to Hugh Tinker's (1974) interpretation, they included widows: women who had been deserted by their husbands for infertility or other reasons. Prostitutes, entertainers such as dancers whose fortunes have declined: women who had been kidnapped, or women who had left home on pilgrimages. Together they constitute "a sorry sisterhood" (p.202).

A peculiar feature of the Indian indenture system was the insistence by the government of India after the 1870s that 40 females migrate for every 100 males on all shipments leaving the subcontinent. Though this move was opposed by the recruiters and bitterly resented by the British planters, the Indian government remained unmoved, adamant in its desire to promote family life and alleviate problems caused by the disproportion of the sex in the colonies. Despite the popular view and claims of recruiters that they were experiencing extreme difficulty in recruiting the required number of women notwithstanding, the stipulated proportion was invariably met in all the colonies.

Let us take a typical case of Indian plantation women coolies involved as prostitutes in many countries such as Burma, Malay and Fiji. According to .F. Andrews, (1918) who writes about society in colonial Fiji:

The Hindu woman in this country is like a rudderless vessel with its mast broken drifting on to the rocks: or like a canoe being whirled down the rapids of a great river without any controlling hand. She passes from one man to another, and has lost even the sense of shame in doing so (p.6).

Breman (1987) identifies similar conditions among the women workers on the large plantations in Sumatra under colonialism. He explained and show employers rejected the idea of wage increase for women workers on the grounds that the greater majority found an easy source of extra income in prostitution (p. 192).

The District surgeon of Matale in Sri Lanka explained his own experiences relating to endemic diseases among plantation women workers and he pointed out that this condition was significant as occurred almost to the same extent among married as well as among single women. He further mentions that "with syphilis this is very effectual , but

in the case of gonorrhea, which some times lasts a considerable time, this is hardly practicable, and the obstacles to finding out the delinquents are so serious that until coolies can be made aware of the serious consequences of neglect... (Estates., 1876, p. 187).

Other countries also faced similar social problems due to disproportion of the sex ratio in the colonial context. Some argue that in Fiji, prostitution was practiced by a professional class of prostitutes who had emigrated from India. This view is widely exaggerated for as many scholars have observed, prostitutes had little incentive to migrate. Prostitution was directly the result of conditions in the plantations, especially the disproportion of the sex ratio.

Due to the disproportion of women among workers they faced many problems in the plantation sector. The reluctance shown by plantation workers, both men and women, to being admitted to hospital when they became ill, was one such problem. However, when we further investigated, it was revealed that a large number of bachelors were more affected by illness and they were hospitalized to protect many women in the plantations. Many bachelors who were affected by these diseases had to be however hospitalized as a safety measure.

While investigating how the Indian plantation workers were subjected to abuse, we have to analyze two main streams. These two streams are worked based harassment and domestic harassment. During this research, we focused on the first stream and the harassment these women faced by the *kanganies* was revealed. They were prevented in associating with the outside society, and deceived by false promises. The colonial authorities were able to keep these people as an isolated specific community by installing line rooms, hospitals, and liquor bars etc. in the plantations itself.

The planters were to maintain a system where they obtained the poorly paid services from the women who were caught within this bonded labour system. Since they interacted with the plantation women regularly, their work was organized by the *kangani*. It was evident that the women were frequently subjected to *kangani's* domination. In many plantations, the *kangani* was able to pressurize the women by maintaining teams of women workers. Since the women had to buy their home needs from the *kangani's* own boutique on credit, they were also permanently caught in his bounded loan system. Furthermore, through the operation of the patriarchal system on bondage, he was able to corner the women according to their names. From the initial point of recruiting, these women in the villages of India, where the *kangani* begins his loan system and right up to the end of their lives, they are enmeshed within these bonded lives, imposed by the *kangani*.

Furthermore, by the services rendered by the women workers within the plantations, they were subjected to the various harassments and needs of the *kangani*. It has been proved that that the *kanganis* have also endeavored make indecent (improper) suggestions to the women workers. The women who did not accept and submit themselves to these suggestions were subjected to harassment. For example the daily quota of tea plucking done by the women was recorded by some *kanganies* in the books as lower than the actual amount. In addition, the *kaganis* had taken measures to terminate the services of those women who refused to submit to their licentious suggestions. It has also been revealed that the *kangani* has tried to fulfill their needs by indirect means if they failed to enmesh the women to submit to their wishes. Some *kanganis* were vicious enough to get to the wife and

children if these workers under their rule were not able to pay off their debts (Hettiarachchi, 2012, p. 86). There were instances where the women secretly escaped from the plantations when they were unable to face these situations. Even though they ran off from the plantation, the owners often saw to it that they were unable to live where they wanted.

The domination of the *Kangani* becomes structural in the productive system. My main argument is that, in the process of legalizing institutionalized the role of *Kangani* badly affected to female workers.

Not only *Kanganis* but also some planters are involved in harassment of plantation women workers in Sri Lanka. According to contemporary sources, there were planters who inflicted corporal punishment on women. As seen by Tyler, ill treatment of women seems to have been generally by way of sexual harassment and this according to Carpan, the *kangani* also caused great distress to husbands, parents, brothers, and sisters of the women involved. Carpan states that the of that happened to planters who were known to be sexually abusing female workers was that they were sent to some other estate. Carpan had a word of advice for planters as follows: "I trust that the younger generation of today will take warning from this. They don't know how coolies resent any liberties taken with their women. They do not say anything even when they know it, but that it was because a coolie, as a rule, hates any scandal, or else he is afraid that his powerful master ... him in some way."

#### **Living Condition and Maternity benefits**

Another important matter was the manner in which plantation labourers were crowded together in their line rooms. According to information available, generally eight people lived in one room, which is 8 by 10 feet, without any regard of age or sex. This situation also badly affected their health. Under such circumstances, it was almost impossible to limit infection. Some planters understood these circumstances and looked it in a sympathetic way. Some of them have suggested changing this condition also. "As a first step towards improvement in this respect, I would suggest that in every estate, there should be separate lines for married and unmarried men" (Estates., 1876, p.177). In addition to this the problem faced by young girls and old women living together aggravated the discomfiture of day to day life. The planters supplied *cumbilies* (a rug of coarse sacking) or blankets, for women workers to wear to protect from the cold climate in the hill area in the plantation. Initially *cumbilies* were given free, but according to planter P D Millie's information, the *cumbilies* were not well maintained until the management began to charge the workers, which they were allowed to retain unless they left the estate (Millie, 1838).

A planter described the dress of the workers sarcastically. "The necessity for clothing creates a market for the *cumbly*, a rug of coarse sacking, which in wet whether both men and women fold in a curious manner, so that it will hang suspended from the head and fall over the shoulders and back: but there are many comical sights of Tamils attired in cast off coats or military tunics, with their legs bare beneath the tails." (Cave, 1900, p. 143).

Statements of some planters, suggest that Indian women workers were more efficient than the men in tea plucking. Some planters were able to paint a wonderful picture about the women engaged in tea plucking. From this we can gain an understanding of the appearance of the contemporary women from the colonial angle. They look very picturesque, with their fine glossy hair and dreamy black eyes; their ears, necks,

arms and ankles adorned with silver ornaments, and their gay clothes of many colours falling in graceful folds while standing intent upon their work among the bushes.

According to Balasingham (1960) the government increased the wages of road workers from six pence to seven pence and "whole gangs of workers struck work in the estate for the same amount of pay and the planters were compelled to raise their wages." In addition to this, it was revealed that at that time there were reports of starvation among workers (p. 51).

Concerning maternity benefits of female plantation workers under section 12 (1) of the medical ordinance, it was the duty of every estate superintendent to supply at cost to the estate to every female labourer resident in it, giving birth to a child, sufficient food and lodging for one month after the birth of the child and to ensure that the female labourer is not required to work in the estate for one month after child birth unless the District medical officer reports that she is fit for work earlier than one month (Wesumperuma, 1986, p.280). The colonial office therefore drew the attention of the colonial government as early as 1885 to the need to make it obligatory for the employers to provide food and lodging for the mothers for the one month after child birth. However, no immediate action was taken and it was only in 1912 that this recommendation found it way into the statute book. Although the government introduced these kinds of rules and regulations, we do not see them properly implemented in the plantation sector in colonial Sri Lanka. A more serious attempt was made to impose these requirements on the planters only after Sri Lankan politicians were entrusted with ministerial power. In June 1937 however, the planters entered in to an agreement with the Sri Lankan ministry of Health for the payment of the following maternity benefits in estates. (a.) the grant of 1/8<sup>th</sup> bushel of rice free and the payment of 75 cents per week for four weeks and Rs. 2 at the end of three months if the child is alive and well. (b.) provisions of maternity or lying-in-rooms (c) provision of the service of midwives (d) the mother should not be compelled to work for four weeks immediately following her confine (ibid).

However, all estates did not begin to carry out or practice these provisions. Many mothers after their delivery reported to work due to their poor economic conditions. Another important fact was that many women understood the difficulties due to pregnancy and they had abortions. In addition to this it is seen that these pregnant women are subject to various kinds of diseases and to lack of nutritious food.

Medical officer's reports, reveal that some an unborn children did not develop normally due to the lack of nutrition and that the cases of abortion among the plantation women have risen to a very high level.\* According what was shown above, although the planters introduced various rules regarding the maternity needs of the women, they were aware of poor health condition among women. On other hand, the labour commission indicated their planters myth have failed to keep adequate supply in the plantation.

"We would further recommend that a sufficient supply of artificial infant food, of which there are many in the market, be stocked on each estate. There were cases of failed maternal nourishment. The infantile mortality is extremely high: the children of debilitated and sickly parents are necessarily immature and degenerate, with little vital strength or power resistance to diseases and combined with ignorance and often carelessness on the part of mothers is a most potent factor in the cause of infant mortality in the



estates.” (Laboure, 1908, p.127). Even British officials seem to be blame high infant mortality, not on malnutrition but on inherent ‘weakness’ of plantation workers.

Although the planters try to show they are ready to provide women’s health through the service of midwives in the plantation sector, this was not successfully implemented. Because trained midwives were not able to deal with serious cases occurring among the women workers. According to evidence of the labour commission reports revealed the real condition of this service as follows: “I don’t know any suitable women for it. Some estates have women with traditional knowledge, but they were just local women who had acquired a little knowledge pertaining to child birth.” (ibid).

Kumari Jayawardena stated that difference between the infant and maternal mortality rates between the plantation sector in Sri Lanka and the rest of the country have frequently drawn comment. In 1920, for example, the infant mortality rate in the plantation was 224 per 1000 birth compared to the island rate of 182. However it revealed that all mothers did not want to keep their babies in this nursery and they tried to protect their babies while they working daily in the plantations.

“These children if not reared upon tea are indeed brought up among the bushes. No sooner are they born than they accompany their mothers in plucking. It is an amusing spectacle for the stranger to see them, literally gains of suckling humanity, basking in the sun upon mother earth or upon the combilies that their parents spread out for them upon the estate paths or among the bushes where the work of plucking is going on. They do this even before their legs are developed sufficiently to support them in any other position.” (Baker, 1874, p.187).

In addition to this it was further revealed that this condition, as they reach a more troublesome age, when they begin to feel to feel their feet, the mother does not run the risk of finding her offspring face downwards in a drain or lying at the foot of a precipice. She was careful of her progeny in these days for the reason hinted above and secure the wee hair by converting the cumbily in to a temporary hammock, which with the baby placed within, she suspends from a branch of a nearest tree, visiting the little brown urchin when the voice of hunger warns her of the necessity of comfort.

### **Wages**

The fact that immigrant labours supply could be manipulated through immigration controls was to have important implications for the wage structure.

One of the most glaring injustices was the issue of wages. The methods used to exploit plantation workers varied. Planters in the 19<sup>th</sup> century sometimes failed to pay wages regularly, handed the worker’s wages to the kangamy, or made deductions from wages. One planter admitted that “if coolies did not do work, what was considered a fair amount of work, they were either absent or half a day was put in the check roll, or kept out of the working place, not at work, till it was dark. (Millie, 1838, p. 18). The wages paid to the immigrant men, women and children employed in the plantations were lower than those of the lowest paid unskilled urban workers. Even up to 1927, when the first wage legislation was introduced in Ceylon, the average wage of plantation workers had stagnated, in spite of the rise in the cost of living and increases in urban wage levels. The lack of bargaining power of those workers, their political isolation from the rest of the community and the tight discipline

maintained by planters, enables wages to be kept at a constant low level even during periods of labour shortage. The determined policy of keeping wages down was described in 1908 by a planter “I have been in Ceylon for 14 years and I understand it was a matter of honor that I was not give more than 33 cents (daily for men) 22 cents (for women)” (Report., 1908, p.127).

Since the atmosphere of the plantation sector was not attractive or encouraging, most of the women workers attempted to escape from their own locations. that was a common issue of the plantation area. According to this classic example, a woman bolted from an estate and was brought back, and the magistrate gave the option of returning to the estate while the case was being heard, the kangany wrote out a moth’s notice to the superintendent of the estate, in which he said “this woman will leave the estate at the expiration of thirty days. When the superintendent got back to the estate and the women had already returned, they called her up and asked her “did you give this notice?” and she said she knew nothing about it. At the end of thirty days a police constable arrived with a warrant and arrested the woman and took her away as she had given notice and this action was upheld because she was leaving the estate. The planters and administrative authorities used various techniques as mentioned here to keep these women workers within the state sector without given any possibility for labour mobilization.

In Sri Lankan and South Indian plantations the kinds of work such women did were called” piece work “.they consisted of a chore here, a job there, called upon to do one thing and interrupted to be told to another or nothing at all: a coupled in old Tamil folk song sung by female plantation workers in Sri Lanka goes thus; “On pieces of paper we received pieces of work Piecing and unpiecing us as he wished”.

Another salient feature is commonly as labourers they faced more difficult conditions in finding work place even under this condition in colonial Sri Lanka. I briefly address through this reality of their day to day life. A planter reports such as; “Indeed I am informed that about 1849 and 1850 coolies were begging to be taken on to estate to work for their rice” (Ferguson, 1867, p. 81). The planters and colonial authorities understood the fact that plantation labours do not complain or protest for an increase to their salary. Once leading planter stated that “what has become of the wish so general a few years ago to have, coolies settle more on estates with their families. We have no reason to complain on this score, and I attempted to show that we have no grounds for complaint as to the higher rates of wages” (ibid, p. 86).

The socio-cultural condition of plantation women workers of the colonial context was more tragic and vulnerable than hitherto unpretended. Because they were in a .... as a labour grade, they were backward as compared with other workers in local society. Although some historians identified colonial plantation setup with a modernization perspective it was completely different from the real picture of this subordinate community.

### **Acknowledgment**

This research paper was presented for the international conference on **Social Work - Social Development and Sustainable Development Goals**, Asia Pacific Branch with the Department of Sociology, University of Peradeniya, 2016. I must thank to Prof. Kajsa Ahlstrand, the University of Uppsala, Sweden, and Prof. C. R. de Silva, former Dean of the Faculty of Arts (1978-81), University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka, and chair of the History Department, at both Indiana State University (1991-98) and Old Dominion University.

They provided very useful comments and criticisms after read this research article.

# Reference

- [1] Administration Report, 1888, Ceylon Government Press, Ceylon.
- [2] Andrews, C F, Pearson, WW, Indian Indentured Labour In Fiji, Privately published, Perth, 1918.
- [3] Arsarathnam, S Indians in Malaysia and Singapore, Institute of Race Relations, Oxford University Press, 1970.
- [4] Baker, Samuel White, Eight Years in Ceylon, London: Longmans, 1874.
- [5] Balasingham, SV, The Administration of Sir Henry Ward, Governor of Ceylon, 1855-1860, Colombo, 1960.
- [6] Behal, Rana P, Mohapatra, Prabhu P, Tea and Money versus Human Life: The Rise and fall of the Indenture System in the Assam tea Plantations 1840-1908, cited in Plantations ,Peasants and Proletarians in Colonial Asia, edited by E Valentine
- [7] Breman, J, Taming the Coolie Beast; Plantation Society and the Colonial Order in Southeast Asia, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- [8] Carpan, The Autobiography of a Head Kangani, Colombo.  
Cave, Hendry W, Goldern Tips: A Description of Ceylon and its great Tea Industry, New Delhi: Sampson Low, Marston And Company, Limited, 1900.
- [9] Daniel,Henry Bernstein and Tom Brass, Frank Cass and Co.Ltd, USA, 1992.
- [10] Driesen, Ian Driesen, The Genesis Of Indian Immigrant Laboure in Sri Lanka, 1835-1849, Journal of South Asian Studies,vol. XXI, special issue,Australia: South Asian Studies Association, 1998.
- [11] Estate Medical Wants: Report of the Medical-Inapectors of Coffee Districts for 1876, Government Press, Colombo.  
Ferguson's Ceylon Directory, Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited, 1968.
- [12] Ferguson, AM, The Ceylon Directory, Calandar and Compandium of Usefull information for 1866-68,The Observer press,Colombo,1867.
- [13] Hettiarachchi, Ramani, "The Health and Colonialism of Plantation Economy of Sri Lanka", in World Health Congress, University of Yeditepe, Istanbul, 2014.
- [14] Hettiarachchi, Ramani, "The Plantation Economy and Social Formation among Indian Immigrant Workers of Sri Lanka", Unpublished PhD thesis, 2012.
- [15] Kondappi, C, Indians Overseas 1838-1949, Indian Council of World Affairs, 1951..
- [16] Labour Commision Report,1908.
- [17] Lal, Brij V, "Kunti's Cry; Indentured woman in Fiji plantations" , The Indian Economic and Social History Review, Volume XXVIII, 1, Jan to March 1990, London: Sage Publications.
- [18] Letters Addressed by members of the District Committee to the Secretary, Kandy, Examiner Press, 1855.
- [19] Moldrich, D, Bitter Berry Bondage: the Nineteenth century coffee workers of Sri Lanka, Co-ordinating Secretariat for Plantation Areas, 1989.
- [20] Morris, MD, The Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in India: A study of Bombay. Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1965.
- [21] Millie, PD, Thirty Years Ago or Reminiscences of The early days of Coffee Planting in Ceylon, Colombo, 1838, No Pagation, Chapter 3.
- [22] Report and proceedings of the labour commission Report 1908.
- [23] Sandu, KS, Indians in Malaya: Immigration and Settlement, 1786-1957, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969.
- [24] Tinker, Huge, A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920, London, Oxford: University Press, 1974.
- [25] Travers, RW, The Manual of the North Central Province, Government Press Colombo, 1899.
- [26] Wesumperuma, D, Indian Immigrant Plantation Workers in Sri Lanka: A Historical Purspective 1880-1910, Colombo, 1986.