

# **Human and Social Capital in the Sri Lankan Tea Plantations: A Note of dissent, Culture Beyond Universal and National Cultural Dimensions**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines idiosyncrasies of tea plantation culture and politics in relation to Sri Lankan national and popular cultural typologies, with special reference to female tea plantation workers. Tea production in Sri Lanka is heavily based on manual labour, and it is the largest industry that provides accommodation for employees and their families. In this paper, it is argued that politico-cultural production relations have dominated labour productivity in tea plantations. Ways in which female workers have been marginalised, through patriarchal politics, ethnicity, religion, education, elitism, and employment are explained. This culture of the plantation community operates negatively with respect to the management agenda. It is also argued that social capital development in tea plantations is important not only for productivity improvement, but also for reasons of political and social obligation for the nation, because migrant plantation workers have been working and living in plantations over 150 years.

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to critically assess a major critical factor-labour: the social and human capital in a wider context of socio-cultural, and politico-economic reality in the Sri Lankan tea plantations. Therefore, this chapter provides an insight to understand the production relations of the tea plantations, especially to the female Tamil plantations workers with an emphasis on factors such as the national class structure, and power relations in patriarchal political trade unionism including ethnicity, religion, language, education, elitism, and employment.

This paper combines fieldwork data with existing literature on tea plantations labour especially female labour process to provide new insights into labour issues. Our perception from descriptive analysis of fieldwork data suggests that the problems in the Sri Lankan tea plantation sector problems are not fully

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explicable by conventional neo-classical economic theories including strategic management. Some of the issues that have been identified in relation to labour are: low productivity, high cost of production, labour out migration, militant trade unionism, lack of worker discipline, and alcoholism (Asian Development Bank 2002; Wickramasinghe and Cameron 2003c).

The chapter argues that issues of the tea plantations cross the classical economic boundaries and extend to encompass a cultural-political dimension, thereby demanding socio-political and historical studies. Therefore, this also examines the significance of human and social capital, especially of female workers in the Sri Lankan tea plantations. More than 50 percent of the total cost of production is consumed by tea plucking and field related activities (Fieldwork 2001/02), and 95 percent of female workers are Tamil and working as tea pluckers (Samarasinghe 1993).

## **Cultural analysis and the worldviews of South Asians: Historical and cultural foundations**

Social and cultural data consists of measurements of the worldviews or systems of mental constructions that people use to interpret and respond to the world around them. This sense-making process generates the values and behaviours of people. This section describes the context of history and religion to provide an in-depth understanding of the culture of Sri Lanka. Insight into the social foundations of Sri Lanka, culture is essential to understand the commonalities and unique features of Sri Lankan socio-cultural context especially in tea plantations in Sri Lanka.

Culture is an extremely broad concept and very difficult to define. However, it touches and alters every aspects human life. In general, culture refers to the distinctive way of life of a particular group of people (El Kahal 2001). Culture also shapes people's values, attitudes, beliefs, and behavioural patterns (Terpestra & David 1985). Cultures are an outcome of the interplay between religious, historical, political, social and economic forces. Culture consists of a worldview that distinguishes the citizens of a country and makes them indubitably the nationals of a particular state (Gupta et al. 2002). It is therefore crucial for business managers, and policy makers to understand fully not only how people in different cultural settings behave but why they behave in the way they do. First I trace the early history of this region to provide an understanding of its evolution and next I summarise the influence of religious ideologies and cultural practices.

The earliest historical book is on Sri Lanka known as the *Mahawamsa* (Mahanama et al. 1958). Sri Lanka's first settlers were the nomadic Veddahs. Legend relates them to the *Yakkhas*, demons conquered by the Sinhalese around the 5th or 6th century BC. A number of Sinhalese kingdoms, including Anuradhapura in the north, took root across the island during the 4th century BC. Buddhism was introduced by Mahinda, son of the Indian Mauryan emperor Ashoka, in the 3rd century BC, and it quickly became the established religion and

the focus of a strong nationalism. Anuradhapura was not impregnable. Several independent local kings governed the region and localised patterns of trade, exchange, and cultural development (Gupta et al. 2002; Thapar 1998; Vadim et al. 1972). The kings ruled with the assistance of three groups officials: *Samithi* (the Parliament), *Vidatha* (prominent scholars), and *Sabha* (village heads). The king as *Kulapati* (in literature, head of the family), was the supreme patriarch, expected to exert military power for the maintenance of peace. As *Janapathi* (head of the people), the king was the custodian of moral order and justice, elected by the people for their protection, and expected to rely on voluntary contributions rather than on imposed taxes (Thapar 1998).

The concept of kingship practice contributed to a male dominated society to perpetuate the traditions and power of the imperial state. The preference for male children and the practice of dowry system are two important cultural artefacts of these societies, which were reinforced by Arabic occupation during the second millennium (Gupta et al. 2002).

### **Religions in the Sri Lankan Worldview**

There is significant religious diversity in Sri Lanka: 76% of the population is Buddhist, 8% Hindu, 8.5% Muslim, and 7% Christian. Almost all plantation workers and their families are Hindus (Department of Census and Statistics in Sri Lanka 2001), while plantations officials are overwhelmingly either Buddhist or Christians (Fieldwork 2001/02). Therefore, the next section will discuss these two main religions in brief in order to gain understanding of the peoples' behaviour and social norms in the labour process. Despite such diversity and the occasional outbreak of violence, tolerance for other faiths is evidenced by joint celebration of religious holidays, and respect for one another's leaders and places of worship. For instance, Buddhists in Sri Lanka visit some Hindu temples and worship Hindu Gods. Almost all Buddhist temples have statues of some Hindu Gods for worshipping.

In Sri Lanka, it is not enough to understand about the various cultural elements existing in the region, such as, for example, language, religion, social structures, education, aesthetics, attitudes, moral values, and so on. It is also essential to understand the reasons and motivations behind such behaviours and cultural norms. For the purpose of this research, the most influential religious worldviews – Hinduism and Buddhism in the Sri Lankan tea plantations, and generally in Sri Lanka, will be highlighted to provide deeper understanding of cultural practices and aspirations of people in Sri Lanka.

#### ***The worldview of Hinduism and Buddhism***

Hindu moral philosophy is governed by two important principles: Karma and Dharma. Karma – 'to do' - was originally a power by which one could determine one's destiny through one's intent, behaviour and actions. The sacred texts of the *Upanishadas* (around 700 BCE) commanded the individual to be responsible for their personal conduct and not expect the priesthood alone to safeguard one's

destiny through the performance of sacred rites (Weber 1958; Narasimhan 1965; Weber & Andreski 1983).

Dharma is a guide to social and moral issues and is closely connected with Karma. It literally means, 'to uphold what is correct', what may today be called morality. One could break the chain of rebirths through appropriate performance of one's Dharma, its duties and responsibilities, and performing them earnestly. Karma and Dharma were later subsumed into a theory of social caste, based on social division of labour and the ethical imperative of doing the very best in whatever situation a person is placed. Each person had a moral responsibility to learn from the elders, which included the occupational knowledge and expertise, and to pass on the wisdom to their children.

An outgrowth of turbulent times, Buddhism recast the basic tenets of Hindu philosophy focusing on the removal of human suffering. Buddhism emphasised that all dissatisfaction stems from the human tendency for desire and aversion. It advocated a middle path avoiding extremes of conduct such as austerity and indulgence, promoted the use of reason (rationale) instead of the performance of religious rites as enjoined by Hindu priests, and adopted the doctrine of rebirth to formulate the ethical theory that people are accountable for their actions to the end of their lives. Therefore, the next section examines how these religious values shape peoples' way of life in Sri Lankan national culture in general and plantations culture in particular.

## **The Sri Lankan national culture: Elites, ethnicity, and class contradictions**

This section explores the significant cultural elements and behaviours in the Sri Lankan socio-cultural and political landscape. The purpose of this exploration is to make sense of how national cultural elements influence the culture of the tea plantations. It also provides evidence for how and why plantation culture is different from the general national cultural milieu. This understanding about similarities and differences between the national and the plantation culture will shed some light on existing cultural studies that assume that culture is a national concept.

In the post-independent (after 1948) Sri Lankan landscape, the country's nerve centre Colombo, emerged as a symbol of wider changes taking place in the country and its regional and world context. Growth of the private sector, increased emigration and other contacts with the world, the rush for profit-driven enterprises, changes from closed economic mode to open economic mode, privatisation of state enterprises, effects of the protracted war with Tamil militants, inadequate state welfare and other public services, are some of these changes (Gamage 1997). Underneath this contrasting symbolism is the hierarchy of classes and class fractions which have developed conflictual and consensual attitudes, differing life style, networks of power and powerlessness, and transnational contacts (Gamage 1997; Hettige 1997).

Hettige (1997) further argued that the Colombo administration mainly accommodates the nationally-oriented, lower to upper middle class monolinguals who have paper qualifications and employment in the state bureaucracy. The directors and the heads of departments of various divisions in the ministry mainly come from the English-educated, Westernised, Sinhala and Tamil upper middle class. Whereas the Minister has an elite background coming from the English-educated, Sinhala upper class. The owners of hotels, private sector enterprises, airline offices, and houses belong in the upper class bourgeois and/ or elite stratum.

Apart from the post-1977 economic and political changes there are other important factors which need to be explored in an examination of the national class and social fabrication of Sri Lanka to fully understand the country's contextual reality and its reflection in the tea plantation economy. A major contextual factor is the formation of upper classes and class relations, especially the elite stratum of culture in Sri Lanka, a result of English-medium, and especially the school system established during the British period in Sri Lanka. Generations of children went through these schools, and made their way into tertiary institutions in England and Ceylon, and then went to various professional, executive and political positions in Sri Lanka. In the past, average citizens and their children were kept outside the walls of these schools. The residential college system existed for boarding students who could pay the fees especially the children from the *Mudaliyar* class (for more details, see Chapter Three) were admitted to these schools. They were given a western-oriented education and subsequently incorporated into the civil service, plantations' superintendents and professions. These schools still produce the national elites and leaders of the country (Jayasuriya 1969; Gamage 1997; Jayawardena 2000).

Thus, those who were anglicised were seen as spies by the Sinhala-Buddhist nation. Christians who held significant positions in the government were characterised as *paragati* (loyal to foreigners - this is a Sinhala term used by Buddhist nationalists) (Hettige 1997). As has been the case in other Asian countries since independence, the two main political parties have adopted a liberal attitude to contact with Western countries and have encouraged more integration economically and socially with the West. Now, after initially embracing a form of socialism, capitalism is seen and described as a force that the nation has to come to grips with if we are to progress economically. However, some elements within the private sector, and the upper strata of society which include technocrats, bureaucrats, professionals, and some intellectuals oppose this view of the state. There is also a different conception about the expanding capitalist economic forces and their effects on life and community at the grass roots level (Gamage 1996; Gamage 1997; Hettige 1997; Jayawardena 2000).

Those segments of society which have access to power, wealth and status see it in their interest to maintain the existing politico-economic system whereas those segments which do not benefit or only marginally benefit see the need for significant change in the system. Members of upper class fractions who have acquired a knowledge of the English language, an appreciation of Western

societies, cultures and lifestyles, have used these as a point of reference to make attitudinal and behavioural distinctions between themselves and lower class fractions whose members speak native languages as their main language, and follow a more traditional life style characterised by rural norms and values. Basically, Sri Lanka is agriculturally oriented and this feature has changed relatively little in the face of socio-economic changes taking place over the last four decades. In this context, class distinction maintained on the basis of wealth, power, language, culture, and life style by elites and upper classes, who have the upper hand in various fields and professions is a prohibitive factor to the access to the resources for the lower classes, especially native language speaking fractions (Gamage 1996, 1997; Hettige 1997; Jayawardena 2000).

Even more than four decades after Sinhala was made the official language, and substantial expansion of native language education, the divisions of society into English-speaking and native language-speaking segments have remained and even deepened. Therefore, it is significant to understand this distinction and how it affects the management of the plantations of Sri Lanka. The roots of these contradictions go back to the days of European colonisation, the socio-economic and political institutions and processes they established, and the cultural and educational factors (see Chapter Three and Four).

Most of the prominent social and political scientists in Sri Lanka (such as Jayasuriya 1969; Jayawardena 1972; Gamage 1994; Gamage 1996; Gamage 1997; Hettige 1997; Jayawardena 2000; Jazeel 2001) argue that often merit and skills are overlooked in favour of political social class and personal criteria. The ability of the lower classes to lobby and pressure the actual decision making process within the various institutions is not something nurtured by the ruling parties. Therefore, the class interests and needs of the lower classes have been largely neglected. As a result these lower class segments are continually frustrated and thrown into the margins of society (Gamage 1997). For illustration, the uprisings from the south and the north have much to do with this central political and class problem, and the cultural and the language manifestations associated with it.

### ***Concepts of class and status***

Groups, which are formed on this basis and the relations these groups have with each other and the institutions of society - conflictual and consensual - are discussed conceptually in this section.

According to the Marxist conception, class contains an objective situation and a subjective consciousness (Gamage 1997). The first involves various relationships between people involved in producing economic goods and services. The second concerns the various understandings and conceptions that individuals in different social classes process about the nature of society and the way their conceptions are tied to class struggle and social change. For Marx, classes, whether acting as class fractions or alliances, or whole classes acting collectively, are the major agents of social change.

For Weber classes are not expected to act this way collectively (Weber & Eldridge 1972). Where classes may be characterised as an objective feature of the individual's market situation, status groups have a subjective dimension to them embodied in mutual feelings of belonging together and having similar ways of life. Possible bases for status group formation include age, occupation, race, gender, religion and ethnicity (Western & Najman 2000).

Ethnicity, religion, and language are important factors in the articulation of Sinhala and Tamil nationalist ideologies. Even though the state accommodates other faiths to some extent, the dominant state ideology is Sinhala-Buddhist. At the political level also there are Tamil parties which work in collaboration with the main two main Sinhala parties to hold their power (see Chapter Four, Six and Eight). These relations are manifestly non-conflictual except in situations when ethnic feelings explode into mob riots periodically (Gamage 1997). The Colombo based state is also multi-ethnic even though it is predominantly dominated by the Sinhala-elite (De Silva 1998). Each ethnic group maintain ethno-cultural distinctiveness and identity while participating in the society's economic and political system along with other ethnic groups.

Writers on Sri Lankan affairs (Jiggins 1979; Roberts 1979) have used the concepts of 'elites' and 'masses' in describing the evolution of politics in the colonial to post-colonial period, political systems and the conflicts generated in society over its resources, opportunities, and access to power<sup>3</sup>. In Sri Lankan society the status of an individual, family or a community is determined not only by the amount of material possessions held, but also by the level and kind of education, place of education, professional qualifications, position held by the individual and family members (past and present), contacts with significant people in society, children's achievements, exposure to modern Western life style, networks among people, especially with leaders in society at provincial and national levels - links with bureaucracy, knowledge of English language and other factors (Gamage 1997).

Opportunities and life chances of individuals and groups are intricately linked to the networks of relationship open to an individual or a group rather than the mere paper qualifications, work experiences, on duration of unemployment. Combinations of factors like wealth, ethnicity, caste religion, residential location, education, political party affiliation and family produce cumulative opportunity effects either in favour of or against a given individual or a group. Such opportunities can be in gaining admission to a prestigious school, gaining valued employment, winning a tender for a government contract, obtaining a

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<sup>3</sup> According to Roberts (1979) 'An elite is taken to refer to a social category with the following attributes and functions which can be conveniently classified under two sub-heads.

**Power:** 1. Wealth or a misappropriate share of, or access to, the valued goods and services in Ceylonese society; 2. Control of, or access to, political power; 3. The holding of offices which are socially valued and which yield considerable authority.

**Status:** 4. a distinctive life-style and consumption pattern which attracts emulation ( /or jealous criticism) from other persons in Ceylonese society; 5. High social status - whether based on caste or other criteria; 6. High access to the valued intellectual and cultural activities in Ceylonese society. These attributes are viewed as interrelated and occasionally even overlapping elements' (Roberts 1979).

government controlled quota for imported goods or services, or getting an important managerial position in a state controlled corporation, or similar venture. It is commonly believe that elites in society such as business elites, bureaucratic elites, political elites, military elites, enjoy privileges which are out of proportion and not accessible to others. However, the next section focuses on the working class in Sri Lanka to explore the production relations in tea plantations.

### ***The working class***

This class consists of urban, rural and plantation workers. Members of this class are busy eking out a daily living. Class and status differentiation within the working class itself and even within the three sectors is immense. The lower social image of this class is derived from the low status occupations they carry out. These occupations include drivers, labourers, housemaids, peons (office assistants), fish traders and sellers, cattle traders, cashew sellers, chalk sellers, cycle repairers, masons, fruit sellers, cobblers, plastic good sellers, and bakery workers (Abeyewardene 1993).

In terms of the ethnic antagonisms, one may discern antagonistic attitudes between Indian Tamil plantation workers and Sinhalese rural dwellers living in the tea plantation areas. This has some historical and economic roots dating from the time of British colonisation, with the acquisition of land by the colonial state and developing these into tea plantations owned and managed by British nationals and companies (see Chapter Three). Plantation workers are viewed as inferior in status by the Sinhalese rural dwellers who live on their own land. Similarly, members of the urban working class look at rural working class members as inferior because of lack of exposure to city life (Gamage 1997).

The education system provides ethnically pluralistic education to Sinhala and Tamil students. However, the segregation and specialisation are based on ethnicity - Indian Tamil plantation workers, urban slum dwellers, pavement hawkers, port workers, and porters respectively live and work in specific locations. Nevertheless, common class experiences have a generalising effect on the thinking and behaviour of members of this class. Thus the problems of day to day living dominate their thinking much more than ethnic differences, suspicions and antagonisms. Patronage relations also have some impact on the thinking and behaviour of members of this class. Upward social mobility is limited for this class due to the kind of education they get, the lack of necessary qualifications and skills, and lack of social and political contacts. Economically and socially this class fraction is the most disadvantaged.

If members have been educated in the English medium and have passed through Colombo's elite schools, they therefore have life chances and upward social mobility in the system. Some come from provincial elite families where their parents were the old boys and girls of city-based schools. Children of this strata receive their secondary education in the same schools and/or foreign countries. They get apprenticeships through the old boys networks or other contacts that their parents have with those who control such programmes and institutions. In the recruitment of tea plantation managers and supervisors,

middle level positions in private firms, the school one attended and references matter very much (Gamage 1997). The main qualification is the status of a past student of a prestigious school.

During my fieldwork period, three plantation superintendents - plantation managers<sup>4</sup> claim that there has been discrimination against them because they are not from popular schools, not from an English speaking background, being graduates, and so on. One plantation manager commented that

I had to face three times to my promotion - from assistant superintendent to senior superintendent. One member of the interview board asked me about my wife's job- she is a graduate teacher and how she is going to school. At that time she went to school by bus (public transport). I told about that, then that person and the board discussed it in front of me that I can't maintain the status, because my wife is going by bus. Then they decided that not to promote me to the next grade, because my wife was using public transport. You know they were so smart to discuss that matter even in front of me. One of the ministers of plantation industry made a decision to recruit graduates as trainees for plantation management. That is way we had this opportunity to join to plantation management. I passed through many difficult times within last 26 years. My friends are in other estates also telling me about their experiences, they are same as me. They hate university graduates, they don't allow us to give opportunities for career development and important decision making either (Interview 8: Fieldwork 2001/02).

As I described earlier in this section, there is a clear class struggle between managers who come from the Sinhala speaking lower class and university graduates and managers who comes from the elite upper class with English-speaking background, and popular schools. This formal and informal struggle may affect the performance and operation of the plantation in many ways.

Almost all managers who have been subjected to discrimination perceived that 'they work only for their survival' not for the plantation or for workers. According to their words, 'we feel fear that any time they will fire us. Now it becomes much easier to fire us because of private ownership'.

For a clear understanding of the roots of the English speaking fraction of the upper class one has to read historical and sociological accounts about how this fraction was developed during the colonial period. Many families in this fraction have their roots in the *mudaliyar* class described earlier and in the Chapter Three.

## **Social capital in tea plantations: Ethnicity and patriarchy**

It is a well known historical fact that the British planters found it extremely difficult to persuade Sinhalese peasants to work on such commercial farms as wage labours first in the early coffee plantations and later in the tea plantations (see Chapter Three). Sinhalese peasants preferred to be subsistence farmers rather than earn cash incomes as manual workers (Jayewardene 2000). This was partly

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<sup>4</sup> After the privatisation this position has been named as 'manager', but workers and surrounding community call him in former version- *Watte Loku Mahathaya*, means big boss or lord at the estate.

due to the negative attitude the local workers had towards low-paid manual work. Even later when land became scarce, due to the expansion of plantations and population growth leading to conditions of agricultural innovation, peasants preferred either to share whatever land they had or migrate to other areas rather than to work on plantations as labourers. Those who work in the plantations are treated by the rest of the village community as 'failures' (Hettige 1997).

### **Female workers' on a String: Classes within a Class - The Role of Gender in Tea Plantations**

In this section I probe the socio-cultural and political factors that impact upon female tea plantation workers in Sri Lanka. Approximately 80 percent of tea plantation workers of Sri Lanka are ethnic Hindu Tamils of South Indian origin. They are concentrated in the central highland districts of Sri Lanka, where 90 percent of the tea plantations are located. The Indian Tamils constitute 6 percent of the total population of Sri Lanka ( Department of Census and Statistics in Sri Lanka 2001).

According to my field survey, over ninety-five percent of the female Indian Tamil plantation workforce is employed as tea pluckers. Their main task is to pick the tender green leaves from the tea bushes and carry them to the weighing point or the factory, where the leaves are processed into black tea. Female labour force participation among the Indian Tamil group is about 55 percent, while the total female labour within the national workforce of Sri Lanka is only 32 percent ( Department of Census and Statistics in Sri Lanka 2001). Although there is reason to believe that a considerable number of female participants in the rural subsistence agriculture sector in Sri Lanka are not counted, such under-assessment is partly the result of women's nonremunerative work patterns (Samarasinghe 1993).

#### ***Employment inequality: Are men more efficient than women?***

Women working as tea pluckers form the single largest segment of the plantation workforce in Sri Lanka. The smooth operation of factory-based tea processing is heavily dependent on the skilfulness and efficiency of the tea pluckers who bring in the green tea leaf. A plantation manager interviewed strongly commented that '...the female workers are economically far more important than male workers'. Until 1978, however, female labourers were paid 20% less than male labourers. (Peopel's Bank of Sri Lanka 1980; Kurien 1982). In 1978 the government passed legislation to increase and equalise plantation wages for all labour categories, thus removing the wage anomaly between male and female plantation labour that had existed in the sector since its beginning in the mid-nineteenth century (Samarasinghe 1993).

The daily wage rate for all workers in 2002 was Rs.130.00 for an eight-hour workday (Fieldwork 2001/02). The tea pluckers are also entitled to an 'over kilo'

payment of Rs.4 per kilogram during the periods of 'flush'<sup>5</sup>. However, male labourers have the opportunity to earn extra cash by taking advantage of the plantation work schedule where men can do 'task work' that they usually complete within a few hours in the morning although they receive pay for an eight-hour day. They can either find additional employment as a casual wage labour in nonplantation horticultural activities or engage in their own productive work (Samarasinghe 1993).

### ***Right to earn, but not to spend***

As we observed and according to the office records of plantations, female workers earn relatively higher incomes than men, but evidence suggests that they neither handle nor manage their earnings. To start with, the female workers do not collect their own wages. Women's wages are routinely handed over to the males (husbands/ fathers) by the management. This practice of payment of female wages to male members of the household originated in the mid-nineteenth century, (see Chapter Three) when the Indian Tamil labour gangs, consisting entirely of families, were brought to the newly opened plantations in the island from southern India. In 2002, 53 years after independence from the British and more than 15 years after the large privately owned tea plantations were declared as state corporations, and again after the 1995/96 privatisation of plantations, female wage earnings continued to be handed over to the males. This effectively carries on historically established norms of gender discrimination. This line of thought has been revealed empirically by writers (i.e.(Kurien 1982; Samarasinghe 1993).

Management personnel confirmed Kurien's (1982) and Samarasinghe's (1993) earlier observations that frequent family conflicts arise because men tend to waste the wages of their wives or other females on alcohol and gambling. A senior plantation manager commented that 'I am so strict and I have strongly advised to the office people to pay wages to right person, not to others, but I know some husbands and wives come together and get their wages individually. Then after they are going back home, the male takes custody of wife's wage. So what we can do for that?' In the view of management, however, women do have the opportunity to collect their own wages, since there is a compulsory work stoppage when wage payments are made. Plantation workers are paid twice a month (Almost all other sectors pay their salaries once a month), and although there is a work stoppage on the formal pay-day, the vast majority of the women tea pluckers simply stay at home, and male members of the household collect their wages. It should be noted, however, that there are instances when women collect the men's wages as well. But such cases are extremely rare. On the days when 'wage advance' is paid, only a few plantations in my observation stopped work anyway, usually in the afternoon, when the men were relatively free.

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<sup>5</sup> The management of each plantation sets a 'weight norm' of green leaf that the tea pluckers are required to bring in each day. During the heavy season for tea plucking, which is called the flush season, the tea pluckers are encouraged to work longer hours in order to harvest the flush and they are entitled to be paid separately for the extra amounts of green leaf that they may bring in.

Subsequently, with the increase and equalisation of wages in 1984, now the women have regular work and also relatively higher monthly wages owing to the extra tea plucking they are entitled to do in the flush season. However, almost all the cost is deducted from the women's wage for the food items that are provided the plantation store. The basic rationale for this appears to change over time. The management position now is that deductions are made from the member of the household who earns the higher wage unless there is a request by the members of the household to split the deductions. Such requests have to come from the male workers. However, during my survey there were no such requests. My interviews with the women workers clearly showed that they mostly welcome the idea of splitting the deduction. They felt that if such a practice was adopted by the management, at least some part of men's wages would be spent regularly on household food purchases and thereby reduce wasteful expenditure. Since women did not collect their wages anyway, however, with or without the deductions for food items, it seemed a fruitless exercise to request the management to split the deductions. It would merely be on paper. Besides these deductions, women's wages are also used for food purchases outside the plantation store. Such grocery shopping is done by the males in the household, who have taken upon themselves the responsibility of managing the household incomes.

It may be argued that as a consequence of a long history of male control of their earnings, the Indian Tamil female tea plantation workers would have internalised the belief that they cannot manage money and voluntarily left the management of their earnings to the males. But this does not appear to be the reality. For instance, they have small amount of money that they had managed to hide away in an informal savings system called *Ceettu*. The participants would take turns in receiving the pooled sum of money each month. That money is not given to the males and the women spend it mainly on purchase of household goods, and in some instances on jewellery. As for collecting their own wages, they had neither the resources nor the organisational capability to change the pattern in the face of a male-dominant workplace and a patriarchal domestic sphere. They viewed themselves as producers, working as many hours as possible to earn the maximum wages.

### ***The socially and culturally constructed way of life of plantations workers***

In addition to the above characteristics and social realities, tea plantation workers devote their lifetime which to an outsider may seem irrational. This situation of total institution remains almost the same as it was in the colonial period. It is the males in the family who collected the cash payment and spend it on themselves. I learned that most of the families especially females in the household suffer and have to bear burdens mentally and physically with huge responsibility and worries in their lives. They have to earn, prepare meals, look-after the family, arrange marriages and dowries for their female children, look after grandchildren and the like. They tolerate all sorts of harassment from their drunken males. As a family they have a peculiar lifestyle, which is totally different from that in the surrounding village culture. Culturally and socially females in Sri Lankan society

still behave in a traditional manner. This includes not drinking alcohol, smoking, or grumbling except for some elite classes and westernised females. However, I observed during my field survey that 2 female plantation workers had recently died and a few female had been hospitalised after drinking locally produced alcohol, which is illegal and of very low quality.

I also learned that when a wife gets maternity benefit payments that this money was spent mainly on redeeming outstanding debts, on ceremonies connected with the birth of the baby, and travel to visit close relatives to show them the baby. However, spending this money on alcohol and gambling was not unusual. According to Samarasinghe (1993) new mothers continue to receive cereal and sugar from the plantation store, deductions for which can be made from her wages once she has returned to work. This means that she is already in debt to the plantation when she returns to work.

### ***Women workers' double burden***

The workload of a tea plucker is heavy, and as a labour category they occupy the lowest position in the hierarchy of the plantation sector. They work in groups, and each group is directed by a male field supervisor call a '*Kanagapulle*'. Tea pluckers report for work by 7.30 every morning and work until about 1 p.m. (with a tea break between 9.30 and 10a.m.). Then they take the plucked tea leaves to the "weigh-in shed situated in the valley, visit the crèche if they have young children, and return home for the midday meal. It is the responsibility of the women to prepare the meal. They are back in the field by 2.00 p.m. and continue to work until 4.30 p.m., when the final load of plucked green tea leaves is taken to the weigh-in shed. The women usually return home around 5.30 p.m. in the evening. Tea is grown on mountainous terrain and the tea pluckers have to move up and down the slopes several times a day, carrying a tea basket secured around their forehead and suspended down the back<sup>6</sup>. It may weigh up to 20 kilos. While a few Indian Tamil workers are employed as tea factory workers or as crèche attendants, 98 percent of them begin and end their wage employment as tea pluckers (Samarasinghe 1993). Even today this structure and relationship remain a nd produce the same.

In contrast, the male unskilled Indian Tamil plantation workers enjoy a much more flexible time schedule. They are assigned task work that they can complete within a few hours. Such work includes pruning tea bushes, uprooting old bushes, replanting, weeding, fertilising, cutting or cleaning drainage canals, and so on. They are not required by management to put in the full eight hours as in the case of the tea pluckers. Generally men complete their work by noon or early afternoon and they are free for the rest of the day. In principle, wages were equalised in 1978 for all categories of unskilled labour in the plantation sector. Because of the nature of the work they do, however, women spend longer hours than their male counterparts for the same daily wage. In fact, when the gender disparity of wages for manual work was removed, there was a fear that male

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<sup>6</sup> In the Nuwara El iya district, Central highland of Sri Lanka, the elevation ranges from 500m to 2800m above sea level. It is in the wet zone in Sri Lanka, where the annual rainfall exceeds 2000mm. The temperatures range from 25c (daytime) during April to August to 4c (night-time) during December and January (Samarasinghe 1993).

workers might want to become tea pluckers and thus possibly cause higher female unemployment. My interviews with the male workers in the field survey revealed that there was no such danger. The men knew that the tea pluckers' work is hard and more time-consuming than the task work assigned to male workers and they expressed no wish to become tea pluckers.

Household work remains the sole responsibility of women. All of the women in my observation and interviews, were the first to get up in the morning (usually around 5.a.m.), and the last to go to bed (around 10.00p.m.). In the morning they fetched water, prepared breakfast/lunch, cleaned house, and got the children ready for crèche or school. These everyday jobs had to be completed before they reported to work around 7.30 in the morning. When the women returned from work around 5.30 in the evening, they fetched water, prepared the evening meal, fed the children, and put them to sleep. Then they saved meals for their husbands/adult males in the household before eating their own meal and then cleaned up before going to sleep. Kurien (1982, 1999) and Samarasinghe (1993) observe that the patriarchal Hindu culture does have a decisive influence on the subordination of women in the tea plantation community. Kurien (1999) adds that men often show no sympathy at all for the women's position and expect women to earn the maximum wages, which calls for extra time spent in the fields, but they are not willing to do any housework to ease the burden for women.

### ***Nutrition and health***

There is a clear evidence of distinct male bias in intrahousehold food allocation patterns. Rice and wheat flour are the staple cereal in the tea plantation households. While the Indian Tamil male groups actually had larger quantities of cereals than the recommended levels for all Sri Lankan males for different age groups, females - especially pregnant and lactating working women - consumed less than the recommended quantities of cereals (Samarasinghe et al. 1990). During the survey period many of the resident health workers remarked that the women 'generally get the scrapings off the cooking pot'.

### ***Education in the tea plantation***

While their low level of education undoubtedly contributes much to women's perception of their worth, it also makes them accept more readily the traditional norms of gender subordination. It has been repeatedly acknowledged by policy-makers that the spread of the education among women should be a fundamental strategy for the enhancement of the status of women in poor Third World countries. A vast majority of women in my field survey (75%) were completely illiterate. This is in complete contrast to the high female literacy level of 84% recorded for Sri Lanka in 2001. Illiteracy among the Indian Tamil plantation workers is a legacy of the colonial era. It was against the interests of the capitalist plantation owners and managers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to offer more than very basic levels of educational facilities to the Indian Tamil plantation workers (Chatopadya 1979; Wesumperuma 1986). This attitude has not changed much over the years. Access to education is lower in the plantation areas, for both men and women, compared to the other areas in

Sri Lanka. The widest gender gap in literacy levels among all ethnic groups in Sri Lanka, however, is seen within the Indian Tamil population group ( Department of Census and Statistics in Sri Lanka 2001).

It is not surprising that girls among this population group have less access to education than boys. This may be attributed to two principal reasons. First, they are likely to be kept at home to look after younger children when crèche facilities are not available. Second, young females can get employment as tea pluckers by the age of 14, and families expect them to join the work force as soon as work is available. Spending time on education seems a waste, since parent do not perceive education as useful for the type of employment available, whereas male Indian plantation workers may aspire to rise up in the occupational hierarchy to supervisory grades. Women tea pluckers have no such opportunities. They join the labour force at an early age as tea pluckers and continue in the same occupation until they retire at the age of 55. Females who manage to acquire a mid-level education (8 to 10 years of schooling) find it almost impossible to find alternate employment within the plantation system. A young Tamil male urged me that 'I have passed grade 8, so I cannot work as a labourer at the plantation, because I am educated. I like to work at the office. Workers cannot reach to some sections of the estate because they cover with weeds. Plantation managers are not keen to clear them. They want only tea leaves. They do not care about workers. If we talk about these things they hit us. I do not care about them either. If they hit I also hit them. They have threatened us that we will be pulled out from the estate. They can't do that' (Fieldwork 2001/02).

The same attitude is also evident with their parents. They think if their children pass grade 5, then they will not work as labours at the plantation. Their perception is 'our son is educated'.

### ***Trade unions and male dominance***

The male dominance of the tea plantation sector is clearly visible in relation to the plantation trade unions. Plantation workers were virtually imprisoned during the colonial period (Tinker 1977). Starting in the interwar period, however, they developed a strong trade union organisation, which they successfully used as a base to form a powerful political structure, especially during the last two decades (This structure has been discussed in Chapter 3).

Exercising a virtual monopoly over the loyalty of the majority of the Indian Tamil tea plantation workers in Sri Lanka, the trade union has successfully lobbied for, among other things, 26 days of assured work per month for its members, periodic wage increases, and maternity benefits. While half the tea plantation labour consists of females, however, all trade union leaders are males. I visited and observed the operation of CWC in Colombo head office, a four-storey building at the centre of Colombo. All the higher officials are males. Some of the clerical, security, and office assistant positions which are treated as lower class jobs in Sri Lankan society, were occupied by a few Tamil women. Women tea pluckers have a representative in the labour union, but she does not exercise any power. Thus women simply do not have a voice. Better access to basic needs, such as

more sanitary living conditions or better schooling or more flexible work schedules for tea pluckers, have received a low priority on the trade union agenda. There has also been no demand by trade unions that management pay women their own wages.

During an interview with female trade union representatives at the plantation level, it became clear that they come and stay at the plantation trade union office which has few facilities, to listen and do something for plantation workers' complaints. In addition, these female union officers visit plantation families at their line rooms (living barracks) and try to educate them about family management including savings, women's rights, alcohol abuse and the like. However, the general conclusion of almost all interviewees was that there is no significant impact of their efforts that made any difference in the lives of plantation families. This male dominant culture brought from South India which has been exacerbated in the Sri Lankan plantation during the *Kangany* system, has remained impervious to change.

In the course of my interviews with male workers, it became more clear to me that the collection of female wages by the male members of the household was a privilege that the men were not ready to give up willingly. At the same time, a management keen on maintaining the smooth operations of the industry seemed reluctant to bring up any issues that might not be acceptable to the plantation workers' trade unions.

## **Summary and conclusion**

The social capital of the tea plantations, especially female worker culture, is somewhat peculiar compared with the national culture and its social and political stratification. It is quite different and less compatible with popular cultural studies which culture is considered as a national concept (for examples, Hofstede 1984; Hettige 1997; Gamage 1997; Hettige 2000; Hofstede 2001; Lessem 2001).

Female tea workers in the tea plantations earn higher wages and have more work than males. However, there are no visible signs that there is a corresponding increase in their ability to control their incomes, a necessity for the human and the social capital empowerment. They seem to be entrapped as a productive economic resource within the male-dominated social and political system. By controlling women's labour and incomes, men have been successful in stalling or preventing the changes necessary for the effective empowerment of women.

Therefore, this chapter clearly shows that despite the increased earnings of the female plantation workers and the explicit recognition of their worth as important producers, the dominance by plantation males, both in the workplace and at home, promoted a continuation of women's subordinate position within the tea plantation system. The macro production system and the household power structure seem to reinforce each other in leading to a double exploitation of the women workers. Their struggle keeps going on even programmes are carried

out, such as by trade unions and ADB, to empower the labour in the tea plantations. It is evident that certain specific historical circumstances may account for the relatively higher degree of patriarchal controls within the tea plantation sector than generally with the rest of Sri Lanka.

The nature of the labour process discussed in this chapter supports the argument developed in this thesis that labour is a critical strategic factor for competitiveness of the tea plantation and at least for its survival. The labour factor is critical: labour intensive nature of the production; total institutionalism and survival of smallholdings. Most of the smallholdings operations depend on resident plantation labour or otherwise. Throughout the tea plantation history power relations between elite and working class played a dominant role in the decision-making process including strategy. This situation continues with earlier forms or modified forms such as trade unionism, total institutionalism, and patriarchal labour relations, even within the managerialist business strategy approach of private capitalism.

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