

# **Labouring to Learn: educational change among the Indian Tamil minority in Sri Lanka**

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This paper is based on a book I wrote during the 1990s titled *Labouring to Learn: towards a political economy of plantations, people and education in Sri Lanka*. The focus is on educational change among a minority community in Sri Lanka, the plantation Tamils who currently comprise 5% of the population.

Tamils in Sri Lanka are of Indian origin and speak Tamil, a Dravidian language. They are an extremely important minority and may be divided into at least two distinct groups. The first, the Sri Lankan Tamils are concentrated in the North and the east of the island. Their ancestors migrated to Sri Lanka over 2000 years ago. The second, the Indian Tamils are concentrated in the south-central 'up country' highlands. Their ancestors came to Sri Lanka when the British established an export-oriented economy based on coffee, and subsequently tea and rubber. Indian Tamil labour for the plantations was recruited by plantation owners from among Tamils living in the areas of the Madras presidency. By contrast with Sri Lankan Tamils, the Indian Tamils are drawn disproportionately from low-caste groups. This paper focuses on educational progress and change among the Indian Tamil minority.

## **The broader literature on education and plantations**

Despite the widespread extent of plantation economies and communities, analysis of educational change in plantations is scarce. Analyses tend to focus on stasis or continuity, rather than change, and employ structural explanations of continuity rooted outside the education system. Thus Marimuthu (1971) describes the education of the children of plantation workers in Malaysia as serving a custodial function, failing to facilitate social mobility and serving effectively as a means of social control. Beckford (1984) writing of the plantation in the Caribbean emphasises its all-embracing nature. The plantation is not just a system of economic production; it is also a community and a system of social reproduction. Only minimal education provision is necessary for this reproduction.

And in his comprehensive account of the political economy of underdevelopment in the context of plantation economies the political scientist S.B. de Silva notes that

education was not part of plantation culture; it was neither technically necessary nor did it have any survival value. For labourers' children, education is a means of emancipation, but to the planter it is a potential threat to the labour supply (de Silva 1982:346).

These and many similar analyses of education in plantations highlight the reasons why educational change does not happen, rather than why it does. Such analyses of the role of education in plantations are useful in understanding the enduring aspects of education, resistance to educational change and the maintenance of the status quo. But a long view of history indicates that education change has occurred in many plantation settings, albeit often

rather slowly, and that this change cannot be explained simply by changes in the nature of the plantation production system. Strictly speaking change can be negative as well as positive. In this lecture however I will be using the term change to describe positive change and will use the words progress and growth interchangeably with change. I will contrast this with the notion of stasis or, at times, decline.

The following statistics provide some idea of the educational change that has taken place in Sri Lanka. In 1911 the literacy rate in Sri Lanka was 31.0%; in the plantations it was 12.3%. Table 1 shows the literacy rates for males and females in the estate, rural and all sectors between 1986/7 and 2003/4.

**Table 1 Literacy rates by sector and by male/female**

	<b>Rural</b>	<b>Estate</b>	<b>All sectors</b>
<b>1986-7</b>	<b>89.5</b>	<b>68.5</b>	<b>88.6</b>
Male	92.8	80.0	92.2
Female	86.5	58.1	85.2
<b>1996-7</b>	<b>92.3</b>	<b>76.9</b>	<b>91.8</b>
Male	94.4	87.2	94.3
Female	90.4	67.3	89.4
<b>2003-4</b>	<b>92.8</b>	<b>81.3</b>	<b>92.5</b>
Male	94.7	88.3	94.5
Female	91.1	74.7	90.6

Source: CFSES report, 2003-4, cited in World Bank, Sri Lanka Poverty Assessment, 2007

Across the twentieth century literacy rates improved dramatically for all sectors of society, including among those living in the estates. Between 1986/7 and 2003/4 rates in the estates improved from 68.5% to 81.3%. The increase among females – from 58.1% to 74.7% has been particularly striking. Nonetheless, the literacy achievements among the estate population still lags behind that of the non estate rural population, by more than 10 percentage points. Estate males lag 6 and estate females 16 percentage points behind the respective rural rates.

This paper focuses less on continuing divergences between the estate and other sectors and more on the positive change that has occurred over time among this population.

### **Phases of educational progress**

Development between 1840 and 1994 may be divided into at least five phases.

1840-1869 diffuse inception of line and mission schools

1869-1900 slow growth of line schools and mission schools

1900-1948 widespread establishment of estate schools

1948-1977 slow consolidation, even decline, of low quality estate schooling

1977-1994 state take-over and widespread expansion of enrolments

#### **Phase 1 1840-1869: diffuse inception of line and mission schools**

Most people assume that the first plantations in Sri Lanka produced tea. But in fact in the earliest phase, the plantation crop was coffee and labour was seasonal. Planter's early attempts to use the labour of up-country Sinhalese living in the Kandyan region were abandoned and Indian Tamil workers imported. The 'push' for many of the Indian Tamils,

recruited through kin networks, was the avoidance of starvation during periods of famine in South India. Male labourers, mostly illiterate, migrated seasonally between the coffee plantations in Ceylon and their villages in the South of India. The lives of these men were harsh, their culture impoverished.

So under such conditions of resistance how did the rudiments of plantation education begin? The impetus for education appears to have arisen from cultural and religious needs from among the community residing inside the plantation and from the religious aspirations of missionaries outside. There appear to have been three main agents of change.

*Kanganies:* The labour kanganies were the labour recruiters and labour supervisors. They were also money lenders and debt collectors. They established night schools for the labourers, probably for two purposes - to reinforce their control of labour, and to conserve the values of the labour community. These schools were known as 'line schools'.

*Missionaries:* External or exogenous influence came from the efforts of individual missionaries, whose work in the plantations was an extension of their religious work elsewhere in the island and more globally.

*A few planters:* There is limited evidence that a handful of individual planters established schools in this early period. The names of prominent planters - Ferguson, Bird, Tytler and Wall - are associated with the ad hoc establishment of schools. And one or two not so prominent planters - for example Finnimore and Simmons - resigned their posts to become religious missionaries working among the labourers.

Overall, educational change was slow and fragmented. To the extent that one may speak of an incipient system of education in the plantation sector during this period it was characterised by an aggregation of uncoordinated initiatives.

Alongside these agencies acting for education were influences inhibiting the establishment of schools and attendance of children. These were primarily economic - the colonial export economy was expanding and needed a growing supply of unskilled, docile and low paid labour. Labour was seasonal and although many of the men were illiterate their purpose in being in the plantations was to labour, not to learn. Any kind of education was perceived by planters to represent a threat to the supply of labour.

### **Phase 2 1869 - 1900: slow growth of different types of school in and near plantations**

During the period 1869-1900 the nature of plantations changed. Coffee gave way to tea. Tea is a crop that requires all year round labour and it was during this period that labour became more settled and more female. Women and children were encouraged by the colonial authorities to migrate and augment the labour force.

Labour kanganies became more active in the provision of line schools within the estates and the missions more active in the provision of schools in the towns surrounding the estates, attracting to their schools children from the kangany and the staff grades, and, occasionally, the son of a labourer. Missionaries also expanded the number of schools run inside the plantations.

The economic influences that had inhibited education in the earlier period continued throughout this phase - the plantation production system needed an uneducated, docile, low paid guaranteed supply of labour, and the colonial export economy continued to expand. So too did the religious and cultural influences promoting education. But these were given added force by economic and educational considerations, both within and beyond the plantation. Economically, the substitution of tea for coffee led to the need for a more settled and family-based labour supply. The English market for tea expanded, profits boomed and labour needs increased. Females and children were encouraged to join the male members of the household. While children were frequently employed, their labour was not required full-time. Custodial care was functional, while mothers worked full-time in the tea fields. So in this phase education was increasingly provided for children rather than for adults.

Beyond the plantations, the colonial state government met a growing social demand for education, itself stimulated by a growing awareness among the middle classes of developments in England and by religious revivalist movements within Ceylon, by offering support to missionary and private agencies through a financial grant-in-aid scheme. Although this would have only a modest spin-off within the plantations where the major expansion in schooling continued to be driven by the kanganies this would establish educational benchmarks and eventually aspirations for the plantation community. The impact was greater in the areas surrounding the plantations where missionary agencies established schools, supported by the state sponsored grant-in-aid. These schools established an avenue of opportunity for plantation children. Thus, a degree of co-action between the colonial state and missionary bodies resulted in an expansion of education in the country at large, from which there was some spin-off for the plantation community. The change in the nature of the economic production system and composition of labour within the plantations led to an expanded set of actions by kanganies, apparently uncoordinated, within the plantations, as the numbers of children residing within them expanded.

### **Phase 3 1900-1948: widespread establishment of schools in plantations**

Over the next forty years, the establishment of schools in plantations became widespread. At the beginning of the twentieth century a number of influences coalesced to promote literacy and education in Ceylon in general and to that within the plantations in particular. The Ceylon census report of 1901 had indicated that less than a quarter of elementary school-age children were attending school in Ceylon. There were enormous gaps in the literacy rates of Europeans and Burghers on the one hand, and Sinhalese and Tamils on the other; between males and females, and between those living in urban and rural areas. Plantation Tamil labourers were singled out for attention. In 1903 questions were raised in Westminster of the Secretary of State for the Colonies about the levels of literacy in the country as a whole as well as the lack of educational facilities in the plantations. The colonial government, under pressure from Westminster, sought to influence the group perceived to hold the greatest sway with respect to the education of children in the plantations - the planters. By now the planters were acting in a co-ordinated manner and expressing their views and concerns via the planter's association. Although a handful of individual planters, behaving atomistically, continued to support actively a handful of schools most were content to offer passive support for the actions of the kanganies who ran the line schools. By the turn of the century tea was yielding a healthy economic surplus for both the private companies and colonial government revenue. Almost all the tea crop was being exported to Britain and almost all stages of the production, processing and marketing were controlled by British interests. Although there were annual fluctuations in production and profit the general sense of economic prosperity

was positive. In such a climate the colonial government felt able to raise with planters questions about the conditions in which labour lived and worked. The planters were characteristically. Despite the profits from tea, they fell back on two concerns - the start-up costs of a school, and the potential threat to the supply of child labour.

A second influence was informed by financial considerations of a different kind. Although tea was generating a healthy economic surplus, the colonial government was becoming increasingly concerned about the costs of a country-wide expansion in education. Financial responsibility for elementary education had already been devolved to local government authorities in British India, and this was a practice which the Ellis report in 1901 and the Wace report in 1905 would endorse for Ceylon. In 1906 and 1907 a series of government ordinances established guidelines for the provision of elementary schools in town and rural areas. Because of the rather separate nature of labour in the plantation community, and perhaps, more importantly, the political and economic strength of the planters the 1907 rural schools ordinance contained separate and less restrictive clauses pertaining to estate education. Although education at this stage was not compulsory for children residing in plantations, it had finally been incorporated into a system of norms and expectations which would gradually become more binding over time. Where educational provision in the estates had been a matter for individual kangany, planter or religious agency during the nineteenth century, it would become a matter of colonial state ordinance in the twentieth. Successive ordinances were introduced in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s and the numbers of 'officially recognised schools' would grow from 43 in 1904 to 968 in 1948.

Two movements of general significance for the plantation community with spin offs for education were the growth of trade unionism and political franchise. The first trade union in the plantations was established in 1931. Unsurprisingly, the union met with the resistance of planters. Its demands for improvements in wages coincided with the onset of the global economic depression and retrenchment of plantation workers. It collapsed after only two years. The second, the Ceylon Indian Congress Labour Union (CICLU), later to become the Ceylon Worker's Congress (CWC), attracted a large membership during the 1940s and contributed to the success of politicians representing plantation labourers in the 1947 elections.

Political franchise was extended to most sections of the Sri Lankan population in 1931. Some sections of government and the electorate questioned the political rights of plantation labourers, many regarding them as a migratory population having no abiding, long term interest in the nation of Ceylon. Despite some restrictions on their numbers able to vote, plantation Tamils proved a significant constituency in the first election after independence.

#### **Phase 4 1948-1977: slow consolidation of low quality schooling in plantations**

During a fourth phase of educational development, between 1948 and 1977, promises of government take-over were frequently made but infrequently followed up. The number of registered estate schools peaked at 968 in 1948. From then on enrolments remained remarkably stable and the number of schools began to decline. Many plantation Tamils were repatriated to India during this period. The percentage of Indian Tamils in the total population declined from 11.7% in 1946 to 9.4% in 1971 and 5.6% by 1981. Constant enrolment in those schools which remained open is not inconsistent with an extremely slow rise in enrolment ratios across the period 1946-1981, though there may well have been a real decline in ratios

between 1946 and 1971. This phase may be regarded as a period of extremely slow consolidation, or even decline.

The free education act of 1945, which had carried enormous significance for the enfranchised masses of the Sinhalese and also the Sri Lankan Tamil communities had less impact on the plantation Tamil community. Although the 1947 ordinance had prescribed that the state would be responsible for establishing new schools in plantations, there is no evidence of the state establishing any new schools on the estates under the provisions of this ordinance. Between 1948 and 1951 a large number of schools were closed down or amalgamated, and 24 were taken over between 1948 and 1955. Several questions were raised in parliament about take-over and many reports written over the period up to 1970 but no action was taken.

A major obstacle to the integration of estate schools into the emerging national system of education was language. The Sinhalese who supported integration recommended that Sinhala be taught as a compulsory language, or that rural Sinhala and plantation Tamil children be taught together in the same school, with Sinhala as the medium of instruction. Plantation Tamils were keen on the integration of their schools into a national mainstream but wished the schools to be maintained as separate institutions or streams, in which children learned through the medium of Tamil. This position has prevailed.

The issues of integration and language were linked with the broader issues of citizenship and franchise. At the first post-independence election the Indian Tamil community won seven seats and joined the opposition. Shortly afterwards, the Indian and Pakistan Citizenship Acts of 1948 and 1949 effectively disenfranchised large numbers of those previously enfranchised. Agreements between the governments of Ceylon and India in 1954 and 1964 to repatriate agreed numbers of Indian Tamils without Ceylon citizenship created a situation of extreme uncertainty for the plantation Tamil community. Many of those who applied for repatriation to India would wait many years for their papers to be processed and their passages secured. During this time families did not know whether their futures lay in India or Ceylon. The value of education, even a primary education, to a community whose future remained unsettled, was in some doubt.

So, if the period 1900-1948 was a phase in which political influence exerted from outside the country led to a considerable expansion of plantation schools, the period from independence to 1977 saw political influence take its toll in an opposite direction. Plantation revenues were required to finance new economic strategy and welfare among the Ceylonese population outside the plantations. The plantation labourers' economic subsidy to the rest of the economy and society was matched by little political compromise by the national government. Plantation labour unions, the only corporate channel for the collective expression of labourers' demands, lacked substantial political power to achieve effective compromises. Declining terms of trade for plantation crops and the dawn of nationalisation of plantation assets led to disinterest on the part of both planters and the newly independent government to invest in the welfare of a substantially disenfranchised minority population.

### **Phase 5 1977-1994: state take-over and the widespread increase in enrolment**

The second half of the book focuses on change in the late twentieth century, especially the period from 1977 to the mid 1990s. During this period educational progress may be attributed to the interaction of six main influences:

The first was the take-over of plantation schools by the State. Take-over was a process that started in the 1950s, and became an election issue in the manifesto of the United Front in 1970. Take-over gathered momentum in the mid to late 1970s, but the full implementation of the policy has taken time. It has taken until today for the state to take over almost every plantation school. The policy of take-over of the schools from the estate management provided a legal framework within which the expansion of enrolment could proceed.

A second factor which has contributed, perhaps a little more indirectly, was the economic decline of the tea and the growth of a labour surplus during the 1980s. This factor touches on a recurring issue in the plantations, that of labour supply. During the 1980s employers had a guaranteed labour supply, there was little need to employ children, and unemployment was beginning to surface as a problem in some estates. It was clear from our interviews with superintendents that they preferred to see children enrolled in schools rather than roaming around the estates. Moreover, the fact that the schools had been or were about to be 'taken-over' meant that employers were no longer responsible for the costs of schooling and could afford to adopt a more relaxed attitude to the question of education of the plantation labourers' children.

A third influence was citizenship combined with a rising social demand from plantation labourer parents. The gradual resolution of the citizenship question for stateless persons contributed to a strengthening of the social demand for education from estate workers for their children. Many families could now look forward to a future as citizens of Sri Lanka. A growing number of young people were gaining jobs through education. These young people provided role models for estate parent and their children.

An influx of teachers of plantation community origin in the mid 1980s was an important fourth influence. In the mid 1980s the Ministry established a scheme called the Plantation Sector Teacher's Programme which encouraged young persons with GCE O level qualifications to become teachers in the plantation schools. Similar schemes followed and contributed to an increase in the number of teachers in the estate schools from 1146 in 1984 to 4843 in 1994.

The availability of foreign funds for development assistance (from multi-lateral and bi-lateral European agencies) has supported the building and re-habilitation of schools and crèches and comprehensive for improving the quality of teaching and learning. These programmes were well planned, regularly monitored, periodically evaluated and well-managed by the Ministry and district and provincial departments of education.

The final, but by no means the least influence in recent times has been the broader political and ethnic crisis and the specific position of plantation Tamils within it. This part of the analysis will come as no surprise to those who understand the political tapestry of Sri Lanka. But external audiences are often puzzled by a story of progress among an ethnic minority. How and why, they ask, was increasing state and external donor intervention in plantation schools possible during a period (i) in which the Sri Lankan state had been accused internationally of human rights violations against minority Tamils; (ii) in which there has been open warfare between Tamil extremists and the state security forces; and (iii) in which thousands of young and educated Tamils and Sinhalese died. Moreover, they ask, why would a government encourage investments in plantation people's welfare when the economic contribution of the plantations was waning?

The answer lies in the position of the plantation Tamil community within the broader conflict. Politically, the vote of the plantation community was important in the deliverance of the United National Party to power in 1977 and their maintenance of power up to the mid 1990s, and important also to the Peoples Alliance in the mid 1990s. Both the major political parties have grasped the importance of the plantation minority, its political party cum trade union, the CWC, and its unrivalled leader, the late and charismatic Mr Thondaman. Rather than joining the call for Eelam, Mr. Thondaman chose instead to work within the framework of government to promote the interests of the plantation community. Seizing every opportunity to wring concessions from the state, he promoted education, housing, income generation, the resolution of the citizenship issue and a general upliftment of the community. Political agency and political forces more generally provide a major part of the explanation for increased access to education among the plantation community over the past two decades.

### **Conclusion: Variation in the dominance of influences on progress and stasis over time**

The long view of progress in education has indicated that the dominance of economic, political and social influence on it varies from phase to phase. In the mid nineteenth century the cultural needs of the plantation labourers to maintain contact with kin in India, the religious goals of missionary organisations and philanthropic pressures on a colonial government influenced the establishment of a network of schools offering rudimentary education. In the early to mid twentieth century political influence arose from Westminster and from India for the improvement of labour conditions. This, combined with political developments in Ceylon generally (e.g. the growth of political franchise, the growth of trade unionism) and an expansion of education in rural and urban areas, contributed to the expansion of education in the plantations. In the late twentieth century the politics of plantation trade unions, combined with the economic decline of the plantation industry and the generation of a labour surplus, created a major influence on educational expansion.

Similarly, the long view of stasis has also indicated that the dominance of economic and political influence varies over time. Although the major influence on educational stasis has been economic - the low skill requirement of plantation labour - stasis can also be traced to the politics of ethnic relations. Where political influences may have promoted educational progress in the period between 1900 and 1948, they largely inhibited it in the period after independence up to 1977. The growth of anti-Indian sentiment and Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism retarded significant educational development in the plantations between 1948 and 1977. Subsequently, and somewhat paradoxically, these political influences of resistance metamorphose into political influences for change in the period 1977-1994, as the political and ethnic crisis in the country escalated and political opportunities emerged within it for the plantation community to promote educational progress.

If one were to try to generalise across the entire period however, the balance sheet of influence would suggest that the main direction of economic influence has been to restrict rather than expand education in the plantations; by contrast, the main direction of political influence has been to expand rather than restrict education in the plantations.

In so far as they focus on stasis, rather than progress, the reproductive models of education in plantations presented hitherto are confirmed by the analysis presented in this book. The major imperative for stasis has arisen from the characteristics of the production system in which plantation communities labour. Reproductive models of education also suggest that when change does occur it arises from a contradiction between an economic dynamic and an



educational system that tends to stabilise class relations. The analysis of the emergence and expansion of education in the plantations of Sri Lanka presented in my analysis departs from this position and suggests that education emerged and expanded largely in spite of, not because of, contradictions between the production system and educational provision in the plantation. The growing political consciousness and the political skills of human agency exerted at particular moments in Sri Lanka's economic and political history provide much of the explanation of educational change.

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