CHAPTER 4

STATUS OF TAMILS: COLONIAL AND POST COLONIAL PERIOD

4.1 Colonial Period

The medieval Sri Lankan history showed that in that period there were three kingdoms in the country. The coastal area of southwest part was ruled by kingdom of Kotte. The northern part of the island form Vanni. The area between Jaffna and Anuradhapura in the Jaffna peninsula was occupied by Tamil settlers and was known as Jaffna kingdom. The Kandyan kingdom existed in the central highlands. The Kotte and Jaffna kingdom fell victims to Portuguese conquest in 1505, and later to the Dutch in 1656, and the British in 1796. In 1815 the Kandyan kingdom fell to the British and the whole country thus came under foreign rule for the first time.1

4.1.1 Under Portuguese

Following the Vasco da Gamma’s discovery of the Cape of Good Hope in 1498, the Portuguese maritime adventurers made their way to Sri Lanka. Capitalist mode of production was not the dominant form of production at that time. The concept of global market and compartmentalization of labour were not widely established. To them conquest was aimed at acquiring a trading post and secure the sea route to east. Expansion of the realm of colonies was not their aim. They administered the Sinhalese and Tamil areas as separate territories.2
The most important legacy of the Portuguese in the island was the introduction of Roman Catholicism and missionary activity. Franciscans established centers in the country from 1543 onwards. Jesuits were active in the North. Towards the end of the century, Dominicans and Augustinians arrived. With the conversion of Dharmapala, many members of the Sinhalese nobility followed suit. Dharmapala endowed missionary orders lavishly, often from the properties of Buddhist and Hindu temples. After the Portuguese secured control of Sri Lanka, they used their extensive powers of patronage and preference in appointments to promote Christianity. Members of the landed aristocracy embraced Christianity and took Portuguese surnames at baptism. Many coastal communities underwent mass conversion particularly, from Jaffna, Mannar and the fishing communities all over the country. The Portuguese language spread extensively, and the upper classes quickly gained proficiency in it.3

The converts were assured better preferential treatment under their law and exempted from certain taxes. Briefly, this group came to be treated as a privileged group. For both Sinhalese and Tamils who aspired to high office, the membership in the church was a facilitating factor. At the same time, religious fanaticism and narrow mindedness of Portuguese led to the deprivation of people who had not converted to Christianity.4

4.1.2 Dutch

Dutch east India company first controlled only the coastal lands. They gradually pushed inland, occupying considerable territory in
southern, and southwestern Sri Lanka. In 1665 they expanded to the east and thus controlled most of the cinnamon growing lands and points of exit and entry in the island.

The attitudes of Dutch towards ethnic groups in the country were not different from the Portuguese. They continued the separate administration of Sinhalese and Tamil areas. In the Sinhalese portion they introduced Roman-Dutch law and introduced certain reforms within the country. They undertook the education of the people to enable them to read the Bible and other religious books. Like Portuguese, they respected the traditional land structure and service relationship, but based it more methodically to enhance revenue. Taxes in kind collected for the state were used in trade. Remuneration of Sinhalese nobility also was retained because the Dutch depended on the rural nobility for knowledge of the system. They continued the separate administration of Sinhalese and Tamil areas. In the Sinhalese portion they introduced Roman-Dutch law and effected certain reforms within the country. When the Dutch occupied Ceylon, the reformed Church established schools. The Dutch tried to promote trade with neighbouring countries, but only under a strictly controlled system. They sought to monopolized the export of cinnamon, elephants and pearls.

4.1.3 British

When British East India Company came to trade with Ceylon they were fully aware of the importance of the cinnamon of Ceylon. However, the British came to Ceylon in 1796 for reason other
than economic. British and French were more concerned about the control of eastern parts of India. At that time, sea battles took place in the Bay of Bengal. The east coast of India did not possess a single harbour which could be used as a naval base. That was because of climatic change. In this background they decided to obtain a specious and safe harbour in the Bay of Bengal during monsoon. They found that the best harbour was Trincomalee. At that time Trincomalee was under the control of the Dutch. But the imperial government in Ceylon decided to engage in a war against Dutch. The British East India Company found it a good opportunity to occupy Trincomalee and captured it in 1793. France declared a war against British and Dutch Republic. Finally, Ceylon fell into the hands of British, the most progressive commercial and maritime power in the world at that time. Harry Williams commenting on the commencement of the British rule in the whole of Sri Lanka after the deportation of the very last Sri Lankan ruler in 1815 stated:

From Vijaya in 543 B.C to Wickramain A.D 1815 had been without a king, one hundred and sixty five monarchs in all, they played their little parts in the fascinating enigma of power, but now they are gone and the stages is set for new civilization, that of the west.

During the colonial rule, they transformed the internal economies of Sri Lanka in tune with the European market. Crops were used as export commodities. Land used for cash crops was in Sinhalese
areas. Sinhalese upper strata, traditionally holding land benefited the most from this change. Their political leverage in the colonial system of the 18th century brought them large amount of land. With slow movement towards freehold land in the Dutch period and the development of artificial cultivation of cinnamon, the main export crop, these Sinhalese landowners came to be more securely tied to the market.

This introduced two fold considerations in the economic structure, and also it had far reaching repercussions in the social and political formations. The modern plantation sector was highly developed, foreign-owned, organized and characterized by colonial mode of production, modernization and positive marginal product of labour.9

From 1830s, the estate system of coffee plantations, established by British capital and entrepreneurship, produced fundamental socio-economic changes. The new export economy, dominated by the demands of commodity production was linked to the imperial network and controlled by the metropolis. It was virtually dependent on foreign capital, a permanent labour force and low wages. For this purpose a large number of Tamil workers from south India, were imported to the country.10

At that time British planters tried to minimize the labor costs by controlling the regular attendance of their workers during the crop season. They used the local workers during the crop season and they found that the local villagers were insufficient for the work. So they recruited seasonal labor from south India.
When the coffee industry was more firmly established, the same laboures came regularly and the planters kept many workers during the off-season. But very few came with their families as there was not much opportunity for female employment. These regular migrants freely interacted with the local villagers except at the estates at the highest elevations where the villagers were too far away. As coffee picking was seasonal work and all of them could return to India once the coffee season was over, it is likely that many of them remained in the villages near the estates doing casual work.

When tea replaced coffee after the crash of the 1870s, the workers came with their wives and children for whom there was picking work all the year round. Plantation society became a distinct world, and there were less opportunities for villagers and estate workers to meet.

After the British conquest in Sri Lanka, at first they administered the Sinhalese and Tamil areas separately as earlier rulers. The Colebrooke-Cameron Commission recommended the abolition of separate administration. So British rulers brought together Tamils and Sinhalese as a single politico-geographic entity under centralized government. In 19th century British introduced plantation system which strengthened the land holding classes. They imported Indian Tamils as plantation labor and this increased the cultural division of labor in the country. These Tamils were placed inside estates
entrenched in Sinhalese areas. They also expanded the administrative system and recruited natives for the lower levels.

Y. Fries and Bibin who made a study on the immigrant plantations came to the conclusion that it was another case of 'divide and Rule':

The hatred shown by the Kandyan peasantry was a natural reaction to colonial exploitation, but unfortunately this resentment was diverted from the plantation owners to the plantation workers....... The mutual distrust and fear between the local peasants and the Tamils was fostered and cultivated by the colonial rulers. Villagers had no right to go in the plantations and the plantation worker had no freedom of movement........ In spite of this, natural economic relationship have developed over the years, in that plantation workers would have looked to the surrounding villages for their requirements of foodstuffs and the like.....But the British rulers of the country met the requirements of the worker population through import and thus they destroyed every possibility of natural linkage....... planting interests also exploited the existing contradiction between Sinhalese and Tamils by recruiting village labour as strike-breaking force.12
The flow of labour between villages and tea estates was regulated by the varying needs of the planters, who employed villager as extra labour in rush periods or on contract for specific tasks such as weeding while keeping their regular Tamil labour nucleus. At the time of labour shortage planters become beware of contract labourers.13

4.1.4 In the Field of Education

The long settled Tamils were given greater facility for education. In that way a large number of Tamils got better education. English education was provided mainly by Christian missionary schools. The government had limited state schools and granted state aid to private schools. Local personnel who were proficient in English were appointed for junior and middle level bureaucratic positions. Hence English education came to be valued and it spread outwards, particularly to Jaffna, where a number of mission schools was established. English education became the primary means of economic advancement, social mobility and elite status.14

At the close of the 19th century the prestigious civil service, the apex post of the colonial administrative structure, was opened for Sri Lankans. This facilitated English educated peoples to join the state service. Majority of them were Tamils. Along with the government service, the English educated went into medical, legal and teaching professions, engineering technical and allied occupations, banking, brokerage and mercantile jobs.15
In trade and commerce the Tamil speaking Indians and Muslims were dominant. In administration throughout there were a large number of anglicized, often Christian, Sinhalese and mostly Tamils. In Sinhala areas Tamils appeared in super-ordinate positions of bureaucratic authority and economic power and also held very lowly positions as estate laborers. There was a proliferation of the cultural division of labor that overflowed ethnic regions. Some Sinhalese and Tamils, especially of the middle class elite, developed positive attitudes toward each other as they made contact at places of employment, educational institutions, and public places in the mid nineteenth century. As the nation moved into twentieth century their interest collided and enhanced contact led to more ethnic consciousness and the asymmetry of relations led to incipient antagonism.\textsuperscript{16}

In the first two decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the urban population of the island grew, particularly in the Sinhala areas connected to the European market. Skilled Tamils and Sinhalese moved into commercial towns. Given the fact that commerce operated through networks, it become clear that earlier ethnic networks played an important part in the commercial success of Tamils and Tamil speaking foreigners.\textsuperscript{17}

4.1.5 \textbf{In the field of Administration}

In 1911 the legislative council was established and Tamils and Sinhalese elite came together. At that time the national leadership roles fell into the hands of Tamils. They came together as equal partners on a vague platform of nationalism engendered by class
interest not on the basis of anti-colonialism or desire for political liberation.\textsuperscript{18}

At that time inter-caste rivalry among Sinhalese was of greater importance. The \textit{Karava Sinhalese} were economically and politically dominant groups and \textit{Goyigama} Sinhalese instead tried to end \textit{Karava} domination. But the 1915 Sinhalese Muslim riots were suppressed by the government and this forced the imprisonment of many Sinhalese leaders. For releasing those leaders they had to change the martial law. This strengthened the unity of Sinhalese community and that led to the formation of the Ceylon National Congress (CNC) in 1919.\textsuperscript{19}

The introduction of territorial representation, the elective principle and segregated formations gave rise to mobilization of the respective ethnic communities for political purposes. The constitutional reform got momentum in 1920 when the Tamils took on a new self-images as a national minority. So they wanted a Tamil political leadership and then resorted to demanding communally weighted representation and sought legal safeguards to bargain with the Sinhalese leaderships. The constitutional reform process gathered momentum after 1920. The Tamils took on a new self-image as a national minority.

\textbf{4.2 After Independence}

At the time of independence Sri Lanka had one of the highest literacy rates among Asian countries. The British gave top priority to education as part of their welfare programme. In course of time English education also created cleavages in the Sri Lankan society.
The education among Sinhalese was disadvantageous for seeking employment and other opportunities.20

Another impact of colonialism was that within the society class divisions had emerged. There was a small number of upper middle class and they were often limited by kinship. This group stood at the apex of the social structure. They were subordinated only to British officials. Among this small group were two segments, namely plantation interests and those in colonial administrative service. Plantations concentrated on forest clearing, building and transport contractors, retail trade, suppliers of food and so on. The offices in the colonial service had knowledge of English language and they were qualified for higher positions of power. But these two segments gradually went for professions, estates agency, export business, shipping and commerce.

There were also lower middle class which included the salaried persons in the public sector, mercantile and banking, teachers, professionals, small land owning farmers, traders and shop keepers. These groups did not share a common class consciousness; sometimes they voiced support for militant trade unions allied to left-wing parties. They periodically engaged in strike actions and won for themselves better salaries and improved conditions of service.

At the bottom of this social stratum was the working class. They can be divided into both urban and rural. The urban workers had their own organization and they had better solidarity and militancy. The rural workers were largely unorganized and find
only seasonal employment. The plantation workers consisted of Indian immigrants working on tea and rubber estates, and they contributed the largest component of the working class. They were the most discriminated and exploited among all working classes in the Sri Lankan society.21

The majority of plantation workers were organized in a party known as the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) under the leadership of S. Thondaman who was a member of Jayewardene's cabinet. As plantations were a major foreign exchange earner the government followed some kind of appeasement policy towards this sector. But Thondaman was against it. In all these agitations the Indian Tamil peasants were less involved. At the same time they played a crucial role in the upliftment of the plantation sector and thereby the improved position of the country in the world market. Since they were coming from India as labour force in British plantations, without any rights, they became the most unorganized class in the country. In other words, they were the harmless community and most useful for the economy until the 1983 violence.22

The various governments which came to power after the independence tried to marginalize the Tamils in Sri Lanka by various measures. It was the United National Party (UNP), a party led by the majority Sinhalese, which came to power immediately after independence. UNP led by Stephen Senanayake was the major party which was founded in 1946 by a change of name of Ceylon National Congress (CNC). In the initial stages its members
included the right-oriented conservatives of Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims. But later it became a Sinhalese dominant group. It was the UNP which won the 1947 general elections and assumed power from the British.23

The UNP government had not interfered with the land ownership patterns that existed and the powers of the landlords. That was because the party’s electoral support was the Sinhalese landlords of the low-country areas who through their hold over the rural peasants were able to influence their voting.24

4.2.1 In the Political Field

The Ceylon citizenship Act No.18 of 1948 brought all Indian Tamils both born and domiciled in Sri Lanka ineligible for Sri Lankan citizenship. The law defined the qualifications necessary for citizenship as persons who born before or after 15 November 1948. This was deliberately aimed at excluding the Indian Tamils from Sri Lankan citizenship.

According to the provisions of the 1948 law a person born in Sri Lanka before 15 November 1948 become a citizen of Sri Lanka only if his father was born in Ceylon or his paternal grandfather and paternal great grand father were born in Ceylon. This legal formulation was designed to deny citizenship to the plantation Tamils of Indian origin, not only those living, but those still to be born. With this citizenship law nearly a million men women, and children of Indian origin working and living in the country lost their citizenship. In other words, a million lost their homeland and became non-citizens. So, it is clear that the Sinhalese
regarded the Indian Tamils as a slave community, and they were treated with contempt. This legislation denied political rights to both Indian Tamils and those with Sri Lankan origin. By the Citizenship Act political representation was also reduced. Most of the Indian Tamils whose ancestors had been brought by British to work in the plantations became stateless.25

D. Senanayake the chairman of the Land Commission in 1920s, had for a long time viewed the Tamils of Indian origin with disfavour and argued that they were not permanent residents of Sri Lanka. The Interim Report of 1927 defined “Ceylonese” so as to exclude the Indian Tamils. The report stated that Ceylonese mean Sinhalese, Ceylon Tamils, Burghers, Ceylon Moormen, Ceylon Malays and Europeans in Ceylon, that is, those who had adopted Ceylon as their permanent home.26 Based on this report the Land Development Ordinance of 1935, framed by D.S Senanayake as minister of agriculture and lands excluded Indian Tamils from the benefits of land, alienation by the government.

As early as 1940, Senannayeke said,

It is unthinkable that we should give... full rights of citizenship to people who have not made Ceylon their permanent home. The vast majority of the Indians in Ceylon consider India to be their home and Ceylon their place of occupation.. They are here only to earn and to make money and to take it a way to India. ...Unless we stem the tide of the growing
domination of Indian in Ceylon in our economic and social life, our extinction as a Ceylonese nation is inevitable.\(^{27}\)

He made some arguments in favour of his comments. He said the Tamils had bolstered the Tamil population to 23% in the Island. They had expressed the working class solidarity and increasing militancy in 1930-40. They also supported the left wing political parties. All these denials, deprivations and discriminations were only for the establishment of ‘Sinhalese Nation’ in Sri Lanka by the political leaders. Moreover, the solidarity of Tamil working class with their Sinhalese counterpart was a constant threat to the upper class control of the state. These fears forced Senanayake to hit at the very root of the democratic strength of the working class of Ceylon.\(^ {28}\)

4.2.2 In Service Sector

On 5 June 1956, immediately after assuming power prime minister Bandaranaike introduced in the Sri Lankan Parliament, a bill to make the Sinhala the only official language of Sri Lanka.\(^ {29}\)

Reacting to this bill G.G Ponnambalam the leader of the Tamil Congress said:

The imposition of Sinhala as the sole official language of this country must inevitably and inexorably put an end, even if that is not your real objective today, to the Tamil nation and Tamil people as such.\(^ {30}\)
Before the bill was passed, English was the official language of Sri Lanka. And the bill provision was given to retain the English language until 31 December 1960. This act demanded the proficiency of Sinhala in the civil service. The officials who did not know Sinhala were deprived of the right of increments and promotions on this ground. So Tamils were forced to learn Sinhala language or leave employment. So many English medium schools were closed by the minister of education.\textsuperscript{31}

By passing the Sinhala only Act, the Tamils who were proficient in English language were prohibited from using English language. This negated the purpose of education and shut out Tamils from their traditional source of employment. But simply by knowing the "official language", it become easy for the Sinhalese to have employment without any competition. Tamil entrants to the civil service had to pass Sinhala examination, and a policy of discrimination in favour of Sinhalese in University was introduced.\textsuperscript{32} As a result the Sinhalese became the official rulers and Tamils were reduced to the status of a mere subject people. In fact, the employment opportunities in the public service were thus, practically closed to Tamils.
In view of the adverse language and employment policy of the central government after 1956, the urban middle class Tamils increasingly entered professions and business that requires higher degrees of literacy skill, technical expertise, self-help and self employment but were compelled to do so outside Jaffna in areas where better opportunities were present. This situation drastically underlines low capacity that the Jaffna economy had to absorb much of its new educated lower middle class in this period. It also explains University admission policies which struck Jaffna Tamil Youths in the early 1970s by sharply reducing access to professional and technical programmes like medicine, engineering and physical sciences. The real motive on each of this occasion was economic i.e. to prevent Tamils from earning money and to eliminate them in employment and business.33

4.2.3 In Land Holdings

The unevenness of benefits of the development can be gauged from the uneven spread of irrigation facilities, which overwhelmingly favoured Sinhalese dominated areas in the region. By the end of the 1970s 94% of the North Central province were irrigated, while it was only 76% in Amparai district. Among Tamil populated areas, Mannar was highly irrigated with 88% of coverage. The other districts such as Trincomalee and Vavuniya were irrigated below 59%. The main center of Sri Lankan Tamil population, the Jaffna and Batticaloa districts had less than 33% irrigated land.
The overall government policies increased the control of land by members of the majority group and provided broader bases of support to its elite. The political leadership of newly settled areas went to Sinhalese leaders and former public servants. This elite group was originally from the low-country Sinhalese areas. The new infrastructural and functional links would be forged with the Sinhalese-dominated center and the Tricomalee area would acquire a new strategic importance as a national center of industry and trade. The ethnic ratios in Tricomalee district were already sensitively balanced at parity between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities as a result of state-sponsored settlement. Thus the Sinhalese control of the district and its growing economic opportunities increased.

4.2.4 Education

Tamils were marginalized in the education sector not only by 'Sinhala' only act, but also by the standardization programme. Bandaranaike government in 1970 introduced the standardization programme. It was a notorious selective device which was mainly aimed at subjugating the Tamil students. According to this programme, the Tamil students were required to obtain a higher aggregate of marks for university admissions than their Sinhalese counterparts. This severely undermined the Tamil prospects for higher studies and the rights to higher education.

Closing of English medium schools and standardization programmes came as a shock to the Tamil students. By this way, the Tamil students, who were proficient in English, and had better chances
to get admission in universities and also to get employment in government and other sectors, were marginalized. The Sinhala students who had poor knowledge of English were lagging far behind the Tamils who easily got university admissions and placement. With the benefit of this Sinhala policy being advantageous to Sinhalese people and also to appease Sinhala clergy, the government introduced various destructive measures, which ultimately threatened the very future of the Tamil population. This also caused unemployment among the Tamils and became an important issue later on. This was one of the reasons why Tamil youths became more militant in their approach.

NOTES


There is no consensus as to the date of the establishment of the Jaffna Kingdom. But some Tamil scholars believe it was founded soon after the invasion of the island by Magha of Kalinga. Even Sinhalese historians C.W Nicholas and S. Paranavitana have suggested that the Tamils secured control of the northern province in the thirteenth century. Thus Sinhalese and Tamil historians agree that the kingdom was certainly in existence by 1325. According to Gananath Obeyesekere, The Tamils of the present day Batticaloa and Trincomalee districts owed allegiance to the king of Kandy rather than to the King of Jaffna. Some others suggested that by 1325 the Tamil rulers were strong enough to hold suzerainty over a large area in northern Sri Lanka as far as the coast of Puttalam.


The Portuguese writer Fernado de Queyroz was in no way deluded by the banners of Christianity his fellowmen carried. He reported a visit to Ceylon by saint Francis Xaviour in the middle of the sixteenth century. On leaving the island Saint Francis took off his shoes and left on the shore, saying, that not even the dust of so wicked a land would he take with him. And as he could not have said him in a material sense, it gave matter for long discussions as to whether he spoke of the Moors who were declared enemies or of the perfidy of the natives or of the proceedings of the Portuguese or of all of these which seems most likely.


Satchi Ponnambalam, n.2, p.41.

Ibid., p.42.


Ibid., p. 50.

Ibid.


Satchi Ponnambalam, n.2, p.42.


Satchi Ponnabalam, n.2, p.43.

Ibid.


Satchi Ponnambalam, n.2. p.48-49.

Pradeep, n.1, p.41.

Ibid., p.44.

Ibid., p.223


The Citizenship Act No 18 of 1948.

4(1) Subject to other provisions of this Part, a person born in Ceylon before the appointed date (i.e. 15 November 1948) shall have the status of citizen of Ceylon by decent, if (a) his father was born in Ceylon or (b) his paternal grand father and paternal great grand father were born in Ceylon

(2) a person born outside Ceylon before the appointed date shall have the status of a citizen of Ceylon by decent, if (a) his father his paternal grand father and was born in Ceylon or (b) his paternal grand father and paternal great grand father were born in Ceylon.

5 (1) ...a person born in Ceylon on or after the appointed date shall have the status of citizen of Ceylon by decent, if at the time of his birth his father was a citizen of Ceylon

Satchi Ponnambalam, n.2. p.76.

Ibid.

Chelvadurai Manogaran, n.17, p.47.


Ibid., pp.61-62., After the 1930s, successive government dominated by the Sinhalese elite also sought to alleviate the rural poverty and unemployment in the Sinhalese regions by irrigation expansion, land development, and peasant resettlement. Government initiatives supported a significant movement of the Sinhalese population from over crowded parts of the Wet Zone to newly developed locations in the Dry Zone. It seems responsible to assert that very little migration from Sinhalese areas to these previously dry, peripheral and inhospitable areas would have taken place otherwise. In carrying out this program, the institution of electoral democracy, the goals of economic progress and self-sufficiency and concern for the welfare of the indigent rural population formed a pool of powerful legitimating instruments and symbols for the central elite.

Ibid, p.64., The Sinhalese dominated unitary state both explicitly and implicitly promoted their interests. These factors intensified the perception among the Tamils that they were being inexorably marginalized even with their own areas. The terms of trade discriminated against them in the interests of social peace in the Sinhalese areas.

M.V.M. Alagappanpan, n.31, pp.81-82.
Chapter 5

Uneven Capitalist Development in Sri Lanka

5.1 Earlier Development of Sri Lanka Settlement System
5.2 Salient Features of British Settlement System
5.3 Development of Capitalism in Sri Lanka
5.4 Ethno-Spatial Population Clusters
5.5 Conflict Over Territory
5.6 Rural Development
5.7 Urbanization of Sri Lanka
5.8 Mahaveli Project
5.9 Conclusion