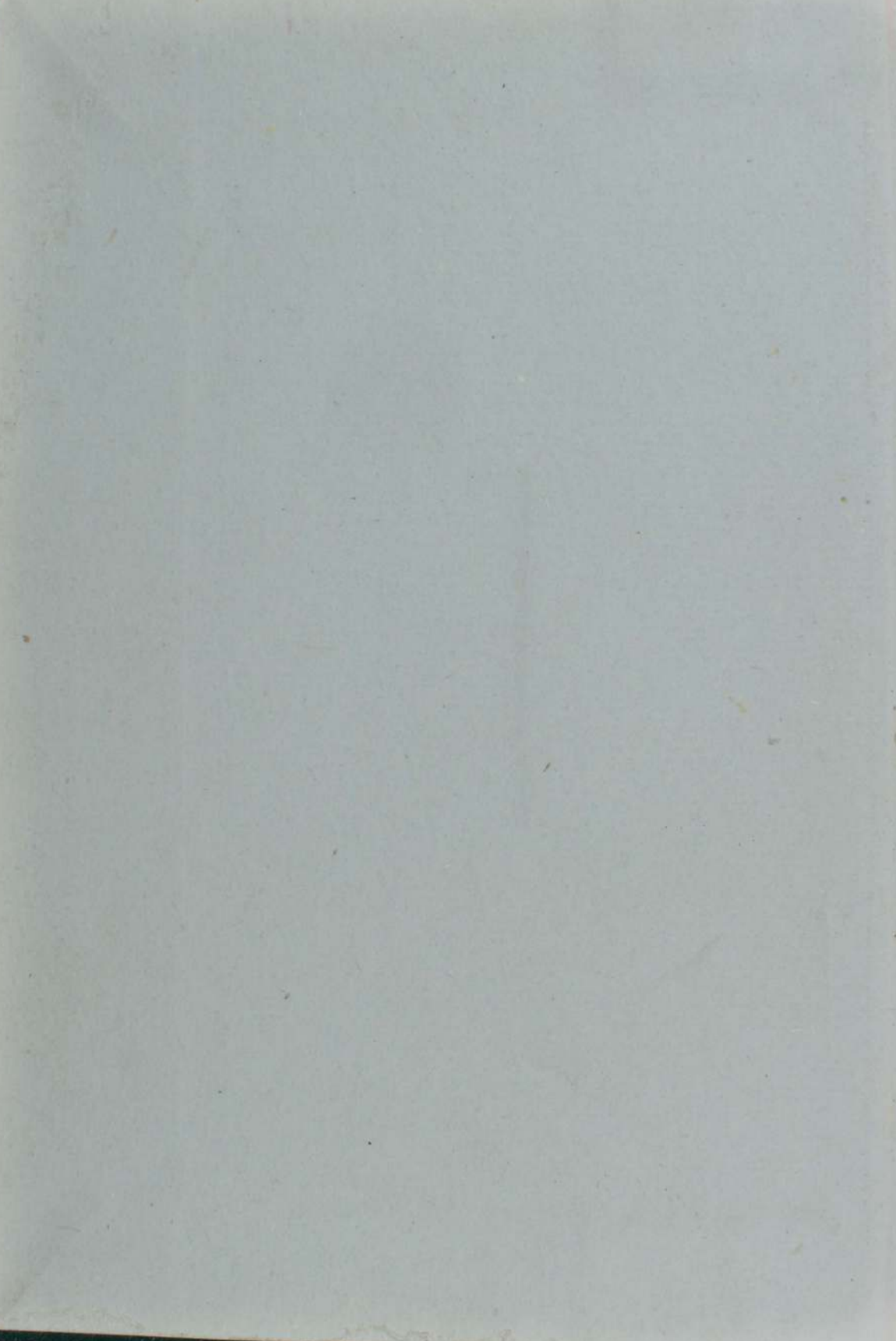


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Historical Foundation of the Economy of the Tamils of North Sri Lanka

SINNAPAH ARASARATNAM

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CHELVANAYAKAM MEMORIAL LECTURES

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Thanthai Chelva Memorial Trust
Jaffna, Sri Lanka

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Historical Foundation of the Economy
of the Tamils of North Sri Lanka

by Professor S. Arasaratnam, Ph. D. (Lond.)

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The Economy in the 17th —18th Centuries

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FOREWORD

In these two lectures, the fourth in the series of the Chelvanayakam Memorial Lectures Professor Arasaratnam deals with the historical foundations of the economy of the Tamils of North Sri Lanka. In the 1981 Memorial Lecture Professor Jeyaratnam Wilson showed how Thanthai Chelva helped to re-create the self-identity of the Tamils. In the previous year's lecture, Father Thani Nayagam dealt with their cultural identity; and reminded them of their claims on that score to a cultural and political personality. Now, Professor Arasaratnam has assembled valuable data relating to the material base of their life covering the four centuries of foreign occupation of this territory. This should be regarded as a further contribution towards unfolding the story of the Tamil Movement in Sri Lanka in modern times.

Professor Arasaratnam is a historian who has specialized in the history of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and South India in the 17th and 18th Centuries. He was born in Navaly, educated at Jaffna College and thus spent his early formative years in the heart of rural Jaffna. In talking of the evolution of the economy of the Jaffna Peninsula, he speaks of an environment of which he was a product.

Professor Arasaratnam dealt with the topic in two lectures. In the first lecture, he examined the origins of land relations, agricultural production, commerce and labour in the 17th and 18th Centuries. In the second lecture, he followed up some of these themes into the 19th and 20th Centuries, up to the achievement of independence. The lectures are partly based on the contemporary records of the two colonial powers that successively ruled over the Island, the Dutch and the British. He has also utilized the work of some of his colleagues who have written on these topics.

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A number of important issues relating to the economic and social history of the Tamil settlements of North Sri Lanka are raised here. By necessity, they have only barely been touched on, though they have been arranged in a chronological framework to explain the contemporary economic condition of these areas. If the study of these lectures will provoke interest such as to generate discussion and further research into this very important area of concern for the Tamil-speaking people, both Professor Arasaratnam and the Thanthai Chelva Memorial Trust would have been amply repaid.

K. Nesiah

Chairman, Thanthai Chelva Memorial Trust

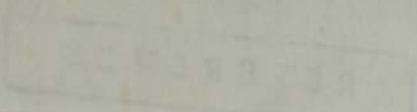
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THE HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE ECONOMY OF THE TAMILS OF NORTH SRI LANKA:

LECTURE ONE

THE 17TH AND 18TH CENTURIES

The late Mr. S. J. V. Chelvanayakam, revered leader of the Tamil-speaking people of Sri Lanka for about three decades, had a deep and abiding faith in the self-sufficiency, autonomy and integrity of the Tamils of Sri Lanka. The foundation of his political programme of autonomy for the Tamil-speaking districts of the Island was his belief in its economic viability. In these lectures dedicated to his memory, it seems appropriate to examine the evolution of the economy of the Tamil communities in the recent past and identify the bases of its strength and its weakness, the elements in its continuity and change and chart its ups and downs over a period of about 300 years.

The demographic map of the northern Tamils has shown a remarkable consistency at least from the 16th century. The Jaffna peninsula, divided into its four provinces of Valikamam, Thenmarachi, Vadamarachi and Pachilapalai, has been the solid core of the northern settlements. These have been the most densely populated settlements while, across Elephant Pass, on the mainland were scattered villages in the districts of Poonery, Mannar, Vavuniya and Mullaithivu. Unlike the Jaffna villages, the population, in these mainland settlements, did not grow with any intensity until the 20th century when they started absorbing the excess capacity in the overpopulated villages of Jaffna. There has, however, always been a seasonal movement of labour into the paddy lands of the Vanni from Jaffna.

The strength of the Jaffna settlements has been this concentration of population and their density. This has enabled them to develop viable economic relationships among themselves and has encouraged regional specializations and

exchange of commodities and services. It has also enabled the region to grow in isolation from the rest of the island and sheltered it from the vicissitudes elsewhere. Fortunately, there is some evidence of the demographic growth of the Jaffna Tamil population from the 17th century. Immediately after the Dutch conquest of Jaffna (1658), the first Dutch Commandant made an informed estimate of the population of the whole Commandement (Jaffna and the mainland) as about 120,000¹. A more regular census taken in the 1680's put the total population at 169,299² and, in another census in the mid-18th century, the population was found to be 187,599.³ About 85% of these were to be found in the Jaffna Peninsula. Thus in the 18th century, Jaffna would have had a population upwards of 150,000. This gives a crude density for the peninsula of 350 people per square mile which was high for pre-modern communities. The first Census taken after British occupation, that of 1814, records of Jaffnapatnam (the Dutch Commandement of Jaffna) a population of 103,849, a remarkable drop from the Dutch figures for the 18th century. The British 1814 figures are further followed by a 1827 census record of 123,188 for Jaffnapatnam.⁴ These early British figures cannot be explained except in terms of errors on the side of overcounting by the Dutch or undercounting by the British. That the latter ought to be the case is established by the figures of the first properly constituted census of population taken in British Ceylon. In this 1871 Census, the Northern Province, which corresponded broadly to the area of the old Commandement of Jaffna, had a population of 281,666 of which Jaffna district had 246,063⁵. This would have meant an annual population increase from the 1827 figures of about 1.3%, an increase which was not recorded in any of the subsequent decennial censuses from 1871 till 1931. After 1871, the Tamil population of the north has gone on increasing steadily but again the Jaffna peninsula continued to bear the brunt of this increase and there was no substantial shift in the density patterns of the Tamil districts.

Within the peninsula itself, patterns of settlement have continued with relatively little change over the last 400 years.

There has been little internal movement of population except within small distances in areas of little productivity and areas subject to salination. Portuguese land registers refer to a total of 128 villages. 61 in Valikamam, 24 in Thenmarachi, 15 in Vadamarachi and 28 in Pachilapalai. The Dutch Predikant, Reverend Baldaeus, who served in Jaffna from 1658 to 1664, listed 44 villages in his map of Jaffna and, in the course of his account, named and described 29 of these.⁷ Reverend Valentijn, writing about 50 years after Baldaeus, named 42 villages in these four provinces.⁸ It is clear from these accounts that population density has changed little in the intervening years. The province of Valikamam was the most densely populated among the provinces of Jaffna and the most populated villages of three hundred years ago remain so today. There has been some movement away from Pachilapalai which appears to have had more settled villages and perhaps Vadamarachi has attracted more recent settlements and an increased acreage of land brought under cultivation. There also seems to have been some movement of population towards the islands, Karainagar and Kayts. The movement towards the Vanni is a 20th century phenomenon, caused both by the increasing pressure on land in the heavily populated villages and the government's initiatives in the reclamation of tanks and in land colonization. The migration of Indian labour to some of these settlements has provided further incentives in this direction.

Next to population, an important ingredient to orderly economic activity is the establishment of permanent social institutions and a legal framework in which relations within society can be conducted. This was important for a migrant society like the Sri Lanka Tamils who brought with them institutions from a wide area of their lands of origin. The establishment of unencumbered private property in land was, in this respect, an important achievement which appears to have been accomplished by the 17th century. It is not known when the pattern of small-holdings in landed property originated. But it is clear that, by the time the Dutch began to register land holdings in 1675, this had

become the standard pattern of a Jaffna village. These holdings were of two types. There was garden land with a house in the centre, a cluster of which formed the lived-in portion of the village. Just outside the village was the farm land which was also owned in small divided plots.⁹ The growth of private property rights and the respect of these is seen in the fencing off of properties from a very early date. Colonial Secretary Tennent remarked on this feature and contrasted it with the Sinhalese areas of the south where there was scant respect for individual property.¹⁰

The growth of property rights was further underlined in the legal institutions that evolved. It is not known when or how the customs and provisions embodied in the *Thesavalamāi* first struck root in Jaffna. When the Dutch commissioned a group of Jaffna Mudaliyars to codify these customs in 1707, they had secured the force of customary law in the community. Cases were heard, probably from the period of the Kingdom of Jaffna, on the basis of these laws, with pleaders and adjudicators in regular judicial proceedings.¹¹ The *Thesavalamai* recognised three types of property: *seedhanam* or dowry property that the women received at marriage; *muthisam* or property inherited by the man from his parents; and *thedyatheddham* or property acquired by married couple after their marriage.¹² This distinction brought some regularity into the ownership and disposal of property and above all gave considerable property rights and security to women and protected children. Such a complex set of rights and obligations also produced a litigious people, and this was observed even as early as the mid-17th century. But it contributed to the stability of society, to its conservatism and its integrity during centuries of successive colonial rule.

There was then the institution of caste which evolved in ways different from the original homelands of the Tamils. The absence of a large group of Brahmins in society weakened Brahmanic norms which the Tamils had brought from South India. Castes did not have to strictly adhere to traditional occupations and there was some socio-economic

mobility. These occupations did not and could not have the same social values attached to them as in South India. Agriculture and agricultural pursuits continued as the most valued occupations but seafaring and the industries associated with seaproduce achieved a value greater than in south India and provided the means to upward mobility. The numerical preponderance of the major agricultural caste, which soon became the dominant caste in society, gave a stability to society. This also contributed to the orderly progress of economic relationships in society.

The amount of land under cultivation in the old settled areas of the peninsula was expanded by every possible means. This was done by pushing the frontiers of the village into adjoining bush land and by government schemes of reclamation of salt lands by putting up bunds against the flow of salt water. The Dutch did some valuable work in this respect in the Navatkuli area.¹³ Another means to bring more land under cultivation was to sell waste lands owned by the state by auction. These sales took place regularly from the 1670's well into the early 19th century.¹⁴ So great was the land hunger in the Peninsula that these lands were immediately taken up and cash payments made. The extension into the mainland, across Elephant Pass, took up part of this pressure right from the end of the 17th century. It gathered momentum in the 20th Century with governmental activity in reconstructing old irrigation works.

Cultivation techniques were soon adapted to suit the soil and the climate. A large part of the land was used in the cultivation of paddy as a crop for the rainy season. After its harvest a variety of dry grains were soon to provide for both man and beast. A decision was taken very early to divert land from paddy to market gardening and cash crops. It is not known when this happened, but by the 17th Century these market gardens flourished to the north and east of Valikamam and in Vadamarachi. About the same time the cultivation of that queen of Jaffna's cash crops—tobacco—was spreading. This diversification and specialization was of immense importance to

the evolution of the economy of the Tamils. It served to monetize the economy to a far greater degree than the continuance of near subsistence paddy farming would have done. It brought villages into exchange relationships with each other and led to the growth of important market-towns such as Pt. Pedro, Chavakachcheri, Atchuveli, Chunnakam and Chankanai—strategically distributed through the Peninsula. It brought commerce as a strong ingredient of the economy and contributed to making Jaffna a centre of brisk commercial interchange. Finally, it served to open up Jaffna to seaborne commerce with India and with the southern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka.

Commerce was made imperative by the growing population and by the inability of food production to cope with this rising population. By the beginning of the 17th century, Jaffna was dependent on rice imports from India—mainly Bengal, Coromandel, Tanjore and Madura—and this dependence increased as years passed. In the 17th and 18th centuries, it appears as if over half the rice consumed in the peninsula had to be imported.¹⁵ Any interruption to this import trade caused serious shortages and steep increase in prices. It was in the interest of the ruling power to keep the price of rice down as all other prices and wages rose and fell with the price of rice. The dependence on imported rice and on the purchase of local rice by those in areas that did not grow paddy necessitated the circulation of money, not merely at the higher and more affluent social levels as was the case in most pre-modern societies but among ordinary working people. The source of money supply in the country was the excess of exports over imports. The entire coinage in circulation was of foreign origin, mostly Indian. The gold coins, pagoda and fanam, were of the higher denomination and there were copper coins, the most common of which was the kasu, some of which were minted locally. Pagodas, fanams and kasus were brought in by Malabar, Coromandel and Bengal merchants.¹⁶

Exports of high value were elephants and tobacco. Elephants must have been a valuable trade commodity from the period of the Jaffna kings. They

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continued so under the Portuguese and the Dutch, fetching high prices in the 17th and early 18th centuries because of the demand in the Moghul Empire and the Nayakdoms of the south. During the peak of this trade they fetched annually upto 200,000 Dutch florins (or about Rs. 160,000).¹⁷ Buyers were the wealthy merchants of Bengal, Golcondah and Tanjore, who paid in silver and gold coins. Under the Dutch, export of elephants was a Company monopoly and the proceeds were credited to the Dutch treasury. The community itself did not benefit from the trade except in brokerage fees, handling costs and labour. The decline of the trade in the second half of the 18th century created large deficits in the accounts of the Jaffna Commandement and caused a shortage of money in the country.

The second item that brought cash into the country was tobacco. There must have been some cultivation and export of tobacco in the 17th century and earlier but it is only in the 18th century that this product reached the heights it did as an article of export and occupied an important place in the economy of the peninsula. This happened with the burgeoning demand for Jaffna tobacco in south Malabar. The expansion of the kingdom of Travancore and the emergence of that ruler as a monopolist trader in his kingdom opened a steady market for the Jaffna product. A permanent commercial relationship was established by which Travancore merchants, acting on behalf of the Rajah, sailed annually to Jaffna ports to buy tobacco. They developed a network of agents in the producing areas who advanced money to the cultivators to purchase the forthcoming crop.¹⁸ As these peasant tobacco farmers were in desperate need of this credit, the purchasers as providers of credit were able to buy the crop at very low rates. Some farmers, who were able to do so, harvested and cured the leaves and sold them to brokers at the market price. These brokers were mostly Jaffna entrepreneurs, Chetties and others, who in turn would sell the tobacco to the Malayalee traders at a profit. When faced with this prospect of a steady cash income, the acreage under tobacco

increased steadily in the second half of the 18th century Lands in Vadamarachi and East Valikamam villages were diverted to this crop. Its cultivation extended to Mannar and the Vanni.

A report of 1783 provides some detailed statistics of this trade. It appears that annually from I million to 1,300,000 pounds of tobacco leaves were exported from Jaffna.¹⁹ The best quality tobacco appears to have fetched about Rs. 120 per candy (of 500 pounds) with lower prices for lower quality leaves down to Rs. 40 per candy. The brokers enjoyed a commission of 10%. No Jaffna merchant could participate in the export trade because of the tight monopoly of the Rajah of Travancore. There was an export duty of 20% levied by the Dutch. This duty was farmed out by public auction. In the 1790's it was worth Rs. 80,000 per year.²⁰ The Malayalee exporters paid for the tobacco in pagodas and fanams which they brought into the country. Unlike the elephant trade, the trade in tobacco benefitted a wide segment of the community — cultivators, labourers, transport operators, brokers. It was soon growing into a lifeline of the Jaffna economy and for this reason was vulnerable to any shifts in demand.

Other export commodities in the 17th and 18th centuries consisted of a variety of local produce, each of small volume but adding together to make a substantial contribution to the Jaffna economy. Palmyrah timber and other produce of the tree were perhaps the most important of these. The timber was exported in large quantities to Malabar, Madura and Coromandel and the trade was in the hands of the peddling traders of Jaffna and the south Indian coast. Palmyrah produce such as dried roots and *pinaddu* were shipped south to Colombo and Galle. The timber fetched high prices in South India. There was a time when the export of timber was contributing to the denuding of trees in Jaffna and Mannar. On representations made by the people and their headmen, the Dutch issued regulations restricting the felling of palmyrah trees for timber.²¹ Another article of export

was the *chaya* root that grew in Karainagar and the islands and in Mannar. It was used in the making of dyes for dying cloth and was sold in the weaving villages of South India.²² Its export that was flourishing in the 17th century seems to have died off in the 18th, perhaps because of extensive harvesting of this shrub. There was some export of handicraft goods made out of local wood and palmyrah leaves such as mats, baskets and the like. Also exported were jaggery, coconut oil, margosa oil and *illupai* oil. In one year in the 1680's, it was reported that 256 vessels sailed out of Jaffna ports with a variety of articles.²³

The Dutch attempted to establish a weaving industry in Jaffna. There was probably a small scale weaving industry under the Jaffna kings. Under the Portuguese it had probably not been fostered but the Dutch, who entered into the textile trade in grand scale, had aims of establishing an export industry in Jaffna. During the big famine in Madura of 1659—60, they induced a number of *kaikolar* weaver families to migrate to Jaffna. They were settled in villages near the Jaffna port and in the Mannar island²⁴ Cotton yarn was imported from South India and the weavers were put to work. The finished cloth was bought from them by the Dutch. The migration of weavers dried up once conditions improved in South India and weaving never rose to the proportions of an export industry. What was produced was not enough for the internal market and large quantities of textiles had to be imported from Bengal and Coromandel. The Dutch concentrated on dying as the *chaya* root of Jaffna was believed to produce colours superior to those of South India. Plain cloth was imported from South India to be dyed in Jaffna which was re-exported to Europe and to Batavia for the Southeast Asian market. The cloth dyed in Jaffna was seen to produce reasonable profit. Some technical improvements were made to the industry. The dye root had so far been pounded by hand in rice-blocks (*utal*). The Dutch built a crusher mill for them worked by two oxen. Large copper kettles replaced earthen pots. The tank whose water was used for washing was deepened and drained of mud.²⁵ All this cut down the cost of dying and painting and the industry continued

to provide the Dutch with some export earnings till the end of the 18th Century. All weavers and dyers were kept in employment and their products sold in Jaffna, Colombo and Batticaloa and at reasonable profits.

It is difficult to assert with certainty who the domiciled merchants were. Most of the export trade was in the hands of foreign merchants, Bengalees, Tamil and Telugu Chetties, South Indian Paravas, Malayalees, Cholias or Tamil Muslim and Moplahs. Some Tamil and Telugu chetties were settled and domiciled in Jaffna. There was a Muslim community which the Portuguese had re-settled from the water-front near the port to where they are now to be found²⁶ Some Jaffna landowning and maritime families had taken to trade. These locals functioned as brokers and middlemen between exporters and primary producers. Coastal people of Jaffna sailed in small boats to Batticaloa, Trincomalee and Colombo. Dutch policies had the effect of stifling local enterprise. They did not allow competition in goods they traded in. Duties were high and shipping was subject to control by passes and regulations.

The pearl fishery provided a lucrative income to the state as well as bringing money into the country and generating economic activity when a fishery was on. It was not regular and depended on how well the pearls grew and matured. When a fishery was announced anywhere along the banks between Mantota and Kudiramalai, there was a period of hectic activity. The pearl divers came from Tuticorin and Mannar. In a good fishery about 700 boats would participate for up to about 50 days. There would be up to about 10,000 people assembled along the coast in temporarily erected sheds. Vendors of all sorts of things were there and it provided an opportunity for merchants of Jaffna and Mannar, among others, to buy and sell goods. Much of the supplies were taken from Jaffna. A good deal of money came into the country in this way, as to the market came wealthy buyers of pearls from Indian, Persian and Arab ports.²⁷ The extent of activity may be gauged from the amount of money accruing to the state in taxation. In 1753, the revenue from a fishery held off the coast of Arippe was Rs. 65,000.²⁸

The budgetary position of the Jaffna Commandement, throughout the 17th and 18th Centuries, appears to have been sound. The state revenues consisted of a variety of taxes of a personal character and taxes on land and its produce. Then there were the duties on export and import goods, on passage between passes and wharfage charges in ports, bazaar taxes, professional taxes and the like. The revenue on the pearl fishery, whenever one was held, substantially added to the revenue. To this was added the profits on monopoly goods bought and sold by the Dutch such as elephants, some varieties of textiles, pepper and spices. As compared with revenue, the expenditure in the province was generally low. There was no necessity for a large Dutch establishment and military and equipment costs were low. There were no major problems of law and order and much of the administration was done by native officers who were paid very low salaries.

The consequence of this was that, from the very first year of the conquest of Jaffna, the Dutch were realising substantial surpluses of revenue over expenditure. This situation continued throughout the period of Dutch rule, with a few exceptions when some untoward happening or some drastic mistake in policy resulted in the drying up of a major source of revenue. Throughout the 1660's, for example, Jaffna's revenues were between 200,000 and 290,000 Dutch florins while expenditure varied between 93,000 and 200,000 florins.²⁹ It is interesting to compare the budgetary situation with the two other provincial governments, Colombo and Galle. Both these provinces produced deficits throughout the 1660's, and it was only in the 1670's, after the affairs of the southern province were put in order, that Galle produced surpluses, but nowhere near those of Jaffna. Despite having larger territories and populations and despite the more brisk trading activity in the two ports, their total revenues were sometimes less than those of Jaffna and at other times not much greater. Thus Jaffna contributed to bridging the budget deficit that the whole Island suffered throughout this period.

The question arises as to why it was that Jaffna produced higher returns in personal and land taxes than the rest of the Island. Its cultivated land area was smaller, its population was less and the land generally less fertile. A number of factors help to explain this, the effect of which was to make the Tamils of the north the most taxed people in the Island under the Dutch. Unlike in the south and west of the Island, there had been no great unsettlement of cultivation and population caused by prolonged war. Both the Portuguese conquest and the Dutch expedition had been short and sharp and the country soon settled down and adjusted itself to its new masters. There was continuity in the administrative machinery at the level of the village and the district and in the important respect of laws and judicial processes. There was therefore a continuity in taxation and the methods of collection. Taxes had been clearly laid out in the Portuguese forals for each village and some of these were available to the Dutch. With their methodical attention to the creation of administrative records, the Dutch set about to provide their own land and tax registers for each village from 1674 onwards.³⁰ It is significant that the first such efforts at preparing thombos were made in Jaffna. Furthermore, the taxes themselves had less of a personal element among the Tamils than in the Sinhalese villages. Even those taxes that had begun as personal service taxes had been commuted for money and were fixed. Thus there was greater precision in the amount of tax to be collected from the various villages and peoples of Jaffna.

There were a number of personal taxes, most of which under the Dutch were commuted for cash. The most important of these was the poll-tax paid by each adult male inhabitant of the four Jaffna provinces and the Islands. Most of the men paid two to three fanams per year and merchants and artisans paid 6 fanams a year. It was more or less equal in its burden on rich and poor alike in the agrarian sector of the community. When the Jaffna tombos were completed in 1677, the poll-tax was increased to 8 fanams a year.³¹ It was done on the ground that there was increased economic activity in Jaffna since Portuguese

rule, that land prices had risen as also had labour wages. There was more money in circulation and the people could afford to pay these increased taxes. There was a big outcry against this increase and the Dutch were constrained to remit the increase in 1688.³² Thereafter the majority of taxpayers paid this tax at the rate of 2 to 3 fanams a year.

A second personal tax was what the Dutch called *officie gelden* or professional tax. It was levied on all who were free of service and was originally a communal tax on professional castes which the caste headmen then divided among members. In this form it was assessed as a lump sum from the headman of the caste. It gave rise to much abuse and corruption on the part of headmen and tax-collectors. So the Dutch in 1696 made it a tax on each individual member of the caste which appeared in the *tombo* register under his name.³³ This enabled them to increase the amount collected with the increase in population.

A third personal tax was the *adikari* tax. It originated as a tax paid by villagers to the *adikari* for his maintenance. It later became a tax of 1 fanam per person paid by three particular castes, which must have been the oldest castes in the kingdom. These three castes apparently considered it an honour to pay this tax and it is reported that other castes that wanted to raise their status were pressing to be allowed to pay an *adikari* tax.³⁴

In addition to these personal taxes, there was a personal labour service tax levied on every able-bodied male who had to perform labour for the state for a total of 12 days a year. This service was called *uliyam* and could be directed towards any public works undertaken by the state. Those able to do so could pay instead a fine of 1 Rix dollar or 12 fanams (equivalent to Rs. 2-00) per year. Generally those of the more affluent agricultural castes, *paradesis* or foreign settlers, *chetties* and other merchants and Muslims made money payments and freed themselves from labour.³⁵ A large number of others performed labour. The Dutch saw this obligation as a necessary means of getting together a labour force. There was a great increase in public works

under the Dutch. These ranged from the construction and repair of dams and canals, the transport of goods and people on palanquins, building of roads, erecting fortifications, redoubts and watchposts, provision of timber and the satisfaction of a variety of needs.

At first it was the more affluent members of society who paid cash fines in lieu of service. But gradually the numbers of people who preferred to pay the fines increased enormously. This was an index to the increasing circulation of money in the country as well as to the availability of employment for money wages. The Dutch were alarmed at the consequent reduction in the availability of free labour and there were proposals to double the fine payable in lieu of service and even to abolish the option of paying money for service. Towards the end of the 18th century, the money realised from *uliyam* fines amounted to about 75,000 florins.³⁶

Apart from these personal taxes, there were a set of taxes, on the land and its produce. There was firstly a quit-rent on land of which there were records in Tamil for each village dating from the period of the Jaffna kingdom. It was the registration of land holdings and the rents to which each was subject that the Dutch devoted their attention to in the first fifty years of their rule. A committee of surveyors went round each village, inspected the records held by the headmen, measured and described land-holdings and prepared a map of these holdings. The purpose of the exercise was to bring out into the open land held without tax obligations by influential men in the village over years of defrauding the state. It was not surprising that the new thombos showed an increase of revenue of over 70,000 florins.³⁷ The thombo for a village listed each of the holding by its traditional name, its present owner, his caste. It further listed the extent of paddy land in this holding, the extent of garden land, whether there was a house on the grounds, the number of palmyrah trees, margosa trees, and *illupai* trees.

In addition to the quit-rent on land, there was a tax on gardens and fruit-bearing trees. It was for this

purpose that the number of trees were counted and noted in the thombo. There was a tax on each palmyrah, margosa and *illupai* tree and the amount was added on to the rent that was due from the land

There was further a grain tax levied on the harvest as a tithe or a tenth of the produce. This tax was always a subject of complaint among the cultivators as an excessive burden on top of the rents which the land already bore. Quite often representations were made to the authority for remission of this tax but without avail. The tax was collected in paddy at harvest time and used to feed Dutch military and civilian personnel.

The process of land registration was accompanied by popular discontent which resulted in the only major outburst of spontaneous peasant unrest in Jaffna in modern times. When the committee of registration officials began to visit villages and summon landholders to appear before them with their title deeds, it generated a great fear among them of increased imposts. They appealed to the government to stop the registration process, offering a straight doubling of land rents in return. It is clear that there was a good deal of unregistered holding and cultivation of land for which taxes were not being paid. The richer land-owners who were influential in the village would have been the losers by this registration. They stirred up the poor peasants who have a natural fear of any effort to increase taxation. Under the leadership of the village leaders, many of these peasants evacuated their villages and absconded southwards into the Vanni. This was, all over South Asia, a traditional form of peasants protest against the state. Villages of Vadamarachi and Thenmarachi were thus denuded of cultivators. In the Vanni they had the support of Kaila Vanni, the powerful Vanniyan of Panankamam who was then engaged in hostility against the Dutch. He gave refuge to these fugitives in the Vanni villages and enabled them to defy the Dutch for some time.³⁸

The Dutch took measures to suppress this rebellion before it spread through the peninsula. They cut off

communications of the rebels between the peninsula and the Vanni, blocking off marauding bands who had come out of the Vanni and done extensive damage in Thenmarachi. A temporary military stockade was erected at Elephant pass and Jaffna was sealed off from the Vanni. Once this happened, the rebellion lost its momentum. In a few months people returned to their homes and the land registration was resumed and completed in 1677.

The economic condition of the people of Jaffna under Dutch rule is a matter of much speculation. The Dutch officials themselves were divided as to the extent of economic prosperity and misery. It is clear that the first decades of Dutch rule brought hardships. There were a number of changes to affect the ordinary life of the people. The imposition of controls on trade and business reduced the pace of economic activity and skilled entrepreneurship. Free intercourse with overseas merchants from Bengal, Golconda, Tanjore and Madura was imperilled. This affected the incomes of the local middlemen who had serviced these overseas traders. The channelling of much of this trade in the lucrative commodities through the Dutch Company led to the pushing up of prices in import goods. The number of overseas merchants sailing into Jaffna was reduced and this led to the shortage of imported consumer goods. Rice was one of the first to be affected. By the 17th Century, Jaffna had come to rely very heavily on imported rice. A shortage of rice would result in a drastic increase in its price which would in turn affect labour wage. Another consumer commodity to be so affected was textiles on which again the Tamils relied on imports from India. The heavy duties imposed by the Dutch and the discouragement of private trade in textiles reduced the volume of import and led to increase in prices.³⁹ In this context, the local weaving industry was stretched to its limit in trying to fulfil local demands.

Those officials who argued that economic conditions had improved in the 1680's based their case on the evidence of growing circulation of money in the economy. They pointed out to the rising price of paddy land which had

increased over a fifty year period between 60% and 120% depending on its quality. They noted that cooly labour wage had risen 100%. They further asserted that the fact that more and more people were commuting their obligatory service for money payments was evidence of growing prosperity.⁴⁰ This may well be true but we should relate these increases in wages to the increase in price of essentials. More importantly, what classes of society were benefiting from the increased circulation of money? What would have been the impact of an increasing cash economy on periods of recession and unemployment that kept recurring and the frequent occurrence of drought and famine in the whole south Asian region?

There are a number of indicators to show a general upturn in employment and economic activity throughout this period. Youths with some education had career openings in the Company's junior administrative service. They were employed as translators in the Company's offices, in the revenue services in a wide range of duties and as schoolmasters and catechists. Both the revenue officer and schoolmasterships were lucrative, the latter carrying with it the perquisites of commissions on the stamp duty on land transfer and other notarial work.⁴¹ All these white-collar offices carried a salary ranging from 8 to 9 florins a month rising up to 24 florins. The wages of skilled artisans—carpenters, ironsmiths, stonemasons and the like—was 18 florins and thus compared favourably with the former category. Unskilled labour was paid a wage of 6 florins a month.⁴² Where there was a serious labour shortage, to this wage was added a parra of rice. There was a great demand for labour, both skilled and unskilled. They were employed both by the state and by private employees.

It is interesting to compare these wage rates with the price of rice to which they were generally pegged. In periods of good supply, the market price of rice was $\frac{3}{4}$ florins a parra of 32 measures or 44 lbs. In times of scarcity this rose to $1\frac{1}{2}$ florins a parra or even higher. If a wage labourer's family at the lowest end of the

wage scale of 6 florins a month were to spend half its income on rice, it could buy 4 parras in a good season. This appears to be a good living wage but we must take note that everything else that that family needs—clothing, fish, vegetables, spices, edible oils—it had to purchase at increasing prices. The artisans, cash-crop farmers and the wealthier section of society could have been able to live comfortably on their incomes. As seen above, taxation took away a good share of the income of the poorer classes in cash and was fixed while employment tended to be seasonal. By the mid-18th century, the price of rice seems to have doubled to $1\frac{1}{2}$ florins a parra and stayed at that level with no evidence of a corresponding increase in wages. All the evidence points to a decline in living standards at the end of the 18th century.

The documents of the period talk repeatedly of slavery but do not give precise details about the exact nature of the slavery. Many of those who are classified as slaves appear to have been in a state of bonded serfdom than slavery. Some of these must have been depressed castes that originated from South India together with their masters of the higher castes and continued this bond in Jaffna. But over the years a number of these appear to have liberated themselves, though they may have continued to live on the land of their masters and performed some services. When the Thesavalamai was codified, the rights of slaves were carefully written in, despite opposition from the Mudaliyars. There were many who were listed as state slaves who were obliged to work for the state. After some years, the Dutch gave them a monthly wage, from the savings of which they were able to buy their freedom.

The number of slaves was added to by the import of slaves from India. It is now becoming clear that there was a brisk slave trade in maritime Asia. The unrest and commotion of the 18th century in India forced a number of people to sell themselves to slavery. The Dutch brought some slaves but more appear to have been bought privately by some Jaffna rich.⁴³ Slaves were

constantly looking for opportunities to free themselves. Nalava slaves of the Dutch in 1784 requested to be free of all obligatory service and were prepared to pay 10 florins per year.⁴⁴ There was a duty of $2\frac{1}{4}$ florins on each slave imported from India. In 1694-96 a total of 3,589 slaves were imported from Coromandel by private individuals who had to pay 11 fanams or $2\frac{1}{4}$ florins import duty for each slave.⁴⁵ These slaves would have been employed in domestic and farm labour. They were also sent to perform the obligatory *uliyam* service on behalf of their masters. In this way the master saved the fine that they had to pay in lieu of service.

The wealthier classes of society benefited from the various avenues of economic activity that were available. Merchants and brokers were among the most prosperous of them. Brokerage was a thriving business, the most lucrative being tobacco brokers and elephant brokers. Tobacco brokers dealt with Malayalee traders and with agents of the Rajah of Travancore. Elephant brokers had dealings with the wealthy Bengal and Coromandel merchants, some of whom represented powerful figures like the Nawab of Bengal, the king of Golconda, and the Nayak of Tanjore. Local and domiciled merchants traded with India and the rest of Ceylon. The mercantile community was drawn from a number of sources. There were old landowning families with the title of Mudaliyar who had taken to merchandising. There were merchants from maritime and fishing castes. There were merchants from the traditional chetty caste settled in Jaffna. And there were a number of migrants who had been domiciled in Jaffna and were powerful merchants. Muslims of Jaffna had an increasingly important role in the commerce of Jaffna. In 1675, it was recorded that there were 300 to 400 Muslim families⁴⁶ Many of them engaged in small scale coastal trading to the east and west of the Island. Others were engaged in the trade to Madura and Tanjore. There were a few very affluent entrepreneurs among them. They diversified to a variety of speculative enterprises, sometimes in partnership with Hindu Tamils.

Tax farming was an enterprise in which the wealthy local speculators featured prominently. Farming out the taxes of the state was a practice widespread in contemporary Europe and the Dutch followed the practice in Ceylon. With their numerous taxes on commodities and services, there were several such tax farms which were auctioned on an annual basis. Affluent local entrepreneurs successfully bid for these farms. Value of these farms ranged from the lease of the rentals on the fish market at Arali which was bid for 380 florins to the most expensive farm of the customs and tariffs on goods that passed through the Jaffna harbour. In 1761, this was purchased for 50,000 florins by a large combination of Jaffna businessmen of a number of castes as well as Muslims.⁴⁷ In a number of cases like this, syndicates of businessmen of different social origins came together to run a tax farm. Presumably this type of cooperation would have extended to other economic ventures as well.

To sum up, the northern Tamil areas under Dutch rule appear to have had a steady and stable period of economic growth. It appears that during these years, the foundations of the economy of the Jaffna Peninsula were laid. We see the stabilization of small-holding peasant farming in the villages of the four provinces of Jaffna. We see the transfer of some of these areas to cash crop cultivation and to market gardening. We see the continuance and growth of maritime and commercial activity and the continuing prosperity of these groups engaged in seafaring, fishing, merchandising and brokerage. And we see an expanding sector of employment of artisans and craftsmen of various skills. Wage levels for all types of labour remained well above subsistence. There was an increasing circulation of money. The population of the Peninsula was expanding. Also during these years began the phenomenon of the movement of excess population to the lands of the Vanni. Paddy and other food grains were coming into the Peninsula from the Vanni.

On the negative side, however, we have the attempts at a regimentation of the economy by the Dutch. We have

the monopolization of trade in the lucrative commodities. We have high rates of taxation in an effort to squeeze the land of all it could deliver and to make good the heavy deficits of the south. The specialization of agriculture and the growing market in food grains brought a great sensitivity to movements in food prices, particularly of rice. The shortages in India towards the end of the 18th century and the resultant high prices caused hardships in Jaffna. A report of Van der Graef, the last Governor of Ceylon, dated 1794, drew attention to the declining state of Jaffna and its people. It said that the inhabitants of the Peninsula were at one time mostly 'well-established' but were now mostly poor and getting poorer.⁴⁸ There was more sale of land and possessions resulting from insolvency in Jaffna than in the rest of the Island. Jaffna, with its dense population and its dependence on food imports had become a delicately-poised economy sensitive to any adverse changes within and without.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Memoir of Anthony Paviljeon, Commandeur of Jaffnapatnam to his Successor, Instructions from the Governor-General and Council of India to the Governor of Ceylon 1656 to 1665.* Transl. Sophia Pieters (Colombo 1908), p. 108.
2. *Memoir of Hendrick Zwaardcroon, Commandeur of Jaffnapatnam, 1697* (Colombo 1911), p. 16.
3. *Memoir by Anthony Mooijaart, 1766.* Transl. by Sophia Pieters (Colombo 1910). p. 3.
4. *Census of Ceylon. Return of the population of the Island of Ceylon.* (Colombo 1827).
5. *Census of Ceylon 1871.* (Colombo 1873)
6. P. E. Pieris, *The Kingdom of Jaffnapatnam, 1645* (Colombo 1920), pp. 47-52.
7. P. Baldaeus, *Beschrijving der Oost-Indische Kusten, Malabaar en Choromandel..... als ook het Keijzerrijk Ceylon* (Amsterdam 1672), pp. 161-72.

8. F. Valentijn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indien* (Dordrecht 1726), Vol. I Ceylon, pp. 30-31.
9. This can be seen in any one of the many extant thombos of Jaffna villages completed in the 18th Century. National Archives of Sri Lanka. Dutch Records 6822 to 6857.
10. J. E. Tennent, *Ceylon. An account of the Island*..... (London 1859), Vol. I, p. 532.
11. Baldaeus, *op. cit.*, p. 187.
12. H. W. Tambiah, *Laws and customs among the Tamils of Jaffna*. (Colombo 1954), pp. 34 ff.
13. *Koloniale Archief* (The Hague), 1164, f. 43. Letter of 30 November 1670.
14. See, for example. *Memoir of Julius Stein van Gollennesse, 1751*, Ed. by S. Arasaratnam (Colombo 1974), pp. 72-3.
15. *Koloniale Archief*, 1244, f. 81. Letter of 9 January 1681.
16. Diary of Jan Schreuder, Governor of Ceylon 18 July 1760. *Hooge Regeering Van Batavia*, 535.
17. Based on accounts of Ceylon in the V. O. C. 's papers. *Koloniale Archief*.
18. Schreuder to Van der Graaf 7 October 1784. *Mackenzie Collection. Private*, 72, III (India Office Library, London)
19. *Ibid.*
20. Memoir of Van der Graaf 15 July 1794. *Hooge Regeering*, 586.
21. Memoir of Jan Schreuder 16 August 1760. *Hooge Regeering*, 577.
22. *Memoir of Gollennesse, 1751*, pp. 77-8.
23. *Koloniale Archief*, 1322, f. 576. Letter of 18 January 1688.
24. *Koloniale Archief*, 1120, f. 160. Letter of 12 November 1659.
25. *Koloniale Archief*, 798, f. 474. Letter of 16 July 1671.

26. F. de Queyroz. *The temporal and spiritual conquest of Ceylon*. Transl. by S. G. Perera (Colombo 1930), II, p. 666.
27. For a detailed description of the pearl fishery and the trade in pearls, see p Van Dam, *Beschryvinge van de Oostindische Compagnie* (S. Gravenhage 1932). Bk. II, Part 2, pp. 412-33.
28. Memoir of Joan Gideon Loten 1757 (Colombo 1757), p. 41.
29. Information derived from V O. C. records in *Koloniale Archief*.
30. *Memoir of Rijcklof van Goens, 1675* (Colombo 1932), p 42.
31. *Koloniale Archief*, 1213, f. 261. Letter of 14 December 1677.
32. *Koloniale Archief*, 1322, f. 139 Letter of 18 January 1688.
33. *Memoir of Hendrick Zwaardecroon, 1697* (Colombo 1911), p. 21.
34. *Memoir of Zwaardecroon*, pp. 21-22.
35. *Memoir of Zwaardecroon*, pp. 22-23.
36. Memoir of Van de Graaf, 15 July 1794.
37. *Koloniale Archief*, 1213, f. 247. Letter of 9 September 1677.
38. S. Arasaratnam. 'Trade and agricultural economy of the Tamils of Jaffna during the second half of the 17th Century.' *Tamil Culture*, IX, 4 (1961), pp. 10-12
39. *Koloniale Archief*, 1252, f. 204, Letter of 16 March 1681.
40. *Koloniale Archief*, 1322, f. 576. Letter of 18 January 1688.
41. Memoir of Jan Schreuder, 16 August 1760.
42. *Memoir of Baron van Imhoff 1740* (Colombo 1911). p. 76.
43. *Memoir of Zwaardecroon*, pp. 20-21.
44. Memoir of Van der Graaf, 15 July 1794.
45. *Memoir of Zwaardecroon*, p. 21.
46. Valentijn, *op. cit*, Vol I, p. 214
47. Appendix to Memoir of Schreuder August 1760, *Hooge Regeering*, 533.
48. Memoir of Van der Graaf, 15 July 1794.

LECTURE TWO

THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES

In the previous lecture, I argued that the outlines of economic activity in the Jaffna Peninsula as it developed in contemporary times began to take shape in the 18th century. Both its strengths and its weaknesses were clearly demonstrable. Among its strengths were a well-established system of small-holding cultivation, a tendency towards diversification to cash crops and production for a market, availability of a skilled and unskilled labour force and money wages adequate to attract and keep such labour, a reasonably brisk trading activity from a few of the port outlets and a small entrepreneurial class drawn from a variety of communal groups acting in competition and in concert. Among its weaknesses were the restrictions on free trade imposed by a mercantilist colonial government, the fragility of the large paddy farming sector, the increasing dependence on imported rice, the vulnerability caused by a dependence on export markets for the cash crops and a rising population in a limited land area. Despite the undisputed evidence of declining standards of living towards the end of the 18th century, in relation to conditions in the rest of the Island, Jaffna still had the reputation of an orderly economy out of which the state could take its legitimate pickings. Lord Hobart's famous Minute has this to say on Jaffna

A most minute examination into the revenues of the province of Jaffnapatnam would be desirable, it being a fact perfectly well known, that Jaffna was the part of the Island where the servants of the Dutch Company made the largest, the most rapid fortunes.

As in the case of the Dutch, it is clear that the gathering of revenue to the maximum limit possible was the prime concern of the new government that took over the administration.

The population of the administrative district of Jaffna has been expanding at an uneven rate and a close study of this demography is necessary to set the stage for an

understanding of the area's economy. As argued earlier, the figure of 123,188 for the entire commandement of Jaffnapatnam in 1827 was an undercount as shown from the evidence of earlier and later censuses. It is possible to get a clearer picture of demographic movement from 1871 onwards when decennial censuses are held. In the first major and detailed census of 1871, the Jaffna District had a population of 276,063 out of a total Island population of 2,400,380. The district had a crude density of 200 persons per square mile but this conceals the fact that the district consisted of Poonery and Thunukkai outside the peninsula. The district is thus divisible into two regions, an arid sparsely populated one with 15 persons per square mile and a densely settled heart of the peninsula with 700 persons per square mile. In terms of density per cultivated square mile, the Jaffna district even then was the first in the whole Island, with 1,616 people.²

In the next census ten years later (1881), the population of the district had increased to 265,583, an increase of 19,520 persons or 7.9%. This increase compares with an all-island population increase of 15% during this period but this of course is largely caused by immigration from India which did not affect the Jaffna peninsula.³ During the next ten year period (1881-1891) the rate of increase of the Jaffna population was even lower. There were 13,701 people more in 1891 than in 1881, thus a 5.1% increase as compared with 7.9% over the previous period. Even the all-island increase is lower now than it had been earlier 9% as compared with 15%.⁴ During the next ten year period (1891-1901) the increase was 21,567 persons and 7.7%. This compares with an all-island growth rate of 18.6%, again these being years of large immigration movement from India.⁵ In the next ten years (1901-1911), the population of Jaffna increased by 25,861 people or 8.5% as compared with an all-island rate of 15.2%. This was the highest rate of increase since the decennial censuses were begun.⁶ The following ten years (1911-1921) see the worst rates of increase for many years, there being only 3,829 people more in 1921 than in 1911 and the rate of

increase was 1.1% as compared with an all-island rate of 9.6%.⁷ The situation reverts to normal in 1921 to 1931 when there are 24,884 more people and a growth rate of 7.5% as compared with an all island rate of 18%.⁸ the ten year census due in 1941 was not conducted because of the war and in the first post-war census held in 1946, 15 years after the previous one, there were 67,052 more people in the Jaffna district. a growth of 19.5% or a mean annual rate of 1.3% which was the highest annual birth rate on record so far. This compares with the all-island growth rate of 25.4% thus bringing the Jaffna rates somewhat more approximate to the rest of the Island.⁹ The next census was taken in 1953, seven years after the previous one and now there were 76,052 more people, that is 15.7% increase and a mean annual rate of 2.2% the highest ever on record.¹⁰

A number of factors serve to explain this lag of population growth in Jaffna as compared to the rest of the Island, beside the one major phenomenon of immigration noted above. Indeed, it is possible to relate population growth to economic, climatic and health crises experienced in the north of the Island. In the 20th century, there is also the phenomenon of immigration that is beginning to occur. In the 1880's, population growth suffers a reduction in rate and can be related to continuing crop failures, insufficient rain and sickness. This is even more acute in the period 1911 to 1921 when annual growth is down to 0.1%. These are also years of epidemics, crop failures and shortages caused by the first world war. During this period also begins to occur the migration of Tamils southwards and to British Malaya and the Straits Settlements. For the first time in the 20th century a net inflow into the Jaffna district was registered in 1946 and this was probably caused by repatriation immediately before and after the second world war. This process is reversed again in the census of 1953. The high rates of growth from the 1930's are the result of the extension of rural and environmental health and the increasing

money in circulation in the Peninsula as a result of remittances from those working outside.

Up to 1946, the increase in population was largely absorbed by the older settled areas of the Peninsula. Thus the divisions of Vadamarachi, Valikamam West and Valikamam North have a density of population of 1,000 to 2,000 per square mile. The Jaffna town and the surrounding division was always a growth area, absorbing people when conditions in the surrounding country were depressed. The Jaffna division had in 1946 a density of 4,000 per square mile. The Valikamam East division came next with a density of 500 to 1,000 per square mile, followed by Tenmarachi with 400 to 500 per square mile. The very sparsely populated divisions of Pachilapalai and Poonakari had a density of less than 50 per square mile. This trend is reversed, however, after 1946 when Pachilapalai and Karaichi show marked increases, largely the result of resettlement, colonization and desalination schemes in these divisions. In periods of depression and failure of monsoons, it is these fringe areas that are seen to be worst affected. Sickness, epidemics and malnutrition take their toll and there is also migration away from these villages. Something of this has been happening in the islands as well.

During the first decade of the new British administration, there was continuity in policies and aims. The maximization of revenues was the government's prime concern and the tax squeeze on Jaffna and its inhabitants imposed by the Dutch was continued. This multitude of taxes were farmed out annually and in the early years of British rule resulting in ever increasing revenue. The increasing population and the removal of some of the previous trade restrictions appear to have resulted in a quickening of economic activity, at least as judged from the increased value of the tax farms. Thus in 1796/97, the tax farms realised Rs. 225,000, an increase on the previous year and considerably higher than they had been under the Dutch.¹¹ A number of export and import

duties had been abolished, though the major duty on tobacco was retained. The reduction of duties and the freeing of trade had resulted in some trade expansion, though there were other conditions that impeded trade.

Gradually over the first few decades, the British began to change the administrative structure, taxation methods and economic policies. The system of tax farming was gradually abandoned with the simplification of the fiscal system, a process that was culminated with the radical reforms recommended by the Colebrooke Commission. When the farming of governmental share of the land revenue was abolished, taxes were paid direct to government officers and a large administrative machinery came into existence. The previous revenue farmers, scions of influential families in the villages, now became revenue collecting and civilian officers under the direction of European civil servants. This excluded chetty and Muslim tax farmers and other entrepreneurs of Indian extraction and based power more firmly on local land-owning families.

A number of factors combined to cause changes to traditional patterns of landownership and cultivation. The steady increase in population increased the pressure on land. There is evidence that, in the first half of the 19th century, parts of the Pachilapalai and Thenmarachi districts declined further in fertility and could not sustain even the small populations they did at marginal levels. There was thus a migration towards the older settled districts which increased in density. There was also a decline in whatever industry there had been which also had the effect of throwing more people on to the land. A notable casualty had been the weaving industry which was still active in the first two decades of the 19th century and had provided employment to some thousands of people.¹² This pressure of people on land had its inevitable consequence in the extent of individual holdings. Furthermore, there was always the incentive to switch from paddy cultivation to more remunerative crops, a factor which has operated for centuries previously when Jaffna was drawn by trade

into the Indian Ocean economy. In the 19th century this consisted primarily of an increase of acreage under tobacco. The demand for fresh vegetables and fruits led to the growth of market gardening. The biggest disincentive to paddy cultivation was the import of cheap rice from India and Burma. The availability of cheap food was an axiom of imperial policy. Wages were tied to the price of food and it was imperative that there be an abundance of cheap labour for British investment and enterprise

Towards the end of the 19th century, in the Northern Province which included the Districts of Jaffna, Mannar and Vavuniya, the total annual consumption of rice amounted to between 1,100,000 and 1,200,000 bushels. In addition about 275,000 bushels of dry grains were also consumed. Out of these food grains consumed, in a year of good harvest, 650,000 bushels of rice would be produced within the province.¹³ But these good years were few and far between. In a particular year, such as in 1893, the output would drop to a very low figure of 155,000 bushels and around 400,000 bushels seems to have been a reasonable level of production.¹⁴ In addition, there was an annual output of about 275,000 bushels of dry grains. This meant that the amount of rice imported into the province ranged from 600,000 bushels in a good year up to 900,000 bushels when the harvest had failed. Thus the province depended on imports for anything between 50% and 80% of its consumption. This dependence on imported rice increased in the 20th century, as population increased, the pressure on land grew as did also the diversification towards other crops. The total amount of rice consumed in the province rose to around 1,500,000 bushels while the local output had declined to around 320,000 bushels in a good year and an average of around 250,000 bushels. This meant that imports had to be increased markedly by about 50% to around 1,200,000 bushels. The decline in rice produced locally was caused by a number of factors. The acreage of land devoted to paddy was constantly shrinking. Because of increasing population, village settlements were encroaching on paddy land. The process of diversification of agriculture was

going on, in particular the boom in tobacco in the 1880's and 1890's was making itself felt. The pressure on land had the inevitable result of subdividing holdings which were now cultivated in small largely uneconomic holdings.

The trend was clearly visible in the inter-censal period 1911 to 1921. Paddy land owners in 1911 were 3.75% of the total population of Ceylon Tamils but had declined in 1921 to 1.02% of the population. Paddy land cultivators, that is those who lived on the cultivation of paddy but owned no land, had risen from 2.1% in 1911 to 4.57% in 1921. Another index to the declining scale of cultivation was that agricultural labourers declined from 1.41% in 1911 to 0.73% in 1921. During this same period there was a small increase in owners of tobacco plantations 1.17% in 1911 to 1.35% in 1921, an ever larger increase in labourers in tobacco plantations: 3.46% in 1911 to 4.82% in 1921. There was also a substantial increase in those categorised as general labourers 3.16% in 1911 to 5.06% in 1921.¹⁵ All this shows a shift in economic activity in the Peninsula away from paddy with enormous consequences to the monetization of the economy and patterns of consumption.

It is interesting to see the movement of wage rates in the 19th and 20th centuries and make inferences from them about the standards of living of various sectors of the population. In 1835, a cooly labourer earned 3 dt or 12.3 cents a day and an artisan 1 sh. or about 50 cents a day.¹⁶ In 1841, cooly wages seem to have risen to 4½ d. or 18½ cents a day.¹⁷ Detailed figures are available for the wages of agricultural labourers in the various provinces of Jaffna in 1842.¹⁸ Wage rates fluctuated as between provinces and forms of payment varied from full cash payment to cash plus one meal, cash plus two meals, full payment in paddy, paddy plus food. Payment in paddy and food was more common in Vadamarachi, Tenmarachi and the islands, while in the region of Jaffna town payment was mostly in cash. In Valikamam west and east, payment was in cash and food. The standard

rate seems to be 2 fanams or $12\frac{1}{2}$ cents a day to which was sometimes added one free meal, sometimes not. It appears that a meal was costed at 1 fanam or $6\frac{1}{4}$ cents per person. Muslim labour was paid more, 3 fanams or about 19 cents a day and no food. When related to the wages and prices prevailing in the 18th century, it is obvious that there had been a decline in real wages and that the money wage had not risen with rising prices of food and other necessities. It is clear that these agricultural labourers lived at or near starvation levels, a feature compounded by the seasonal nature of the demand for labour. On the other hand, skilled artisan labour wages appear to have been adequate to maintain reasonable living standards.

Detailed wage rates for agricultural labour are available for 1894 and it is possible to chart the movement of wages.¹⁹ Again rates fluctuated between provinces and in the manner in which payments were made—in cash, paddy and food. In money value, the highest paid areas were the villages around Jaffna town, because of the great demand for labour here and the outlying districts of Karaichi, Pachilapalai and Poonakari because of the inaccessibility of labour. The total money value of a daily wage was between 18 and 42 cents. Wages in and around Jaffna town were about 35 cents a day, including the cost of a meal when it was provided. A meal appears to have been costed at 6 cents a day. Wages were lower in the provinces, 18 to 24 cents in Valikamam east, 24 cents in Vadamarachi and 24 to 31 cents in Valikamam west. Where wages were paid fully in paddy, the money value of the wage was higher, going up to 42 cents a day. It appears that in fifty years time the wages of agricultural labour had risen about $2\frac{1}{2}$ times. In the absence of reliable evidence on the movement of prices of essentials, it is difficult to relate this rise in wages to rise in prices. It appears that in 1842 a measure of paddy cost 4 cents and in 1894 it has risen to 7 cents. This would indicate that wages had risen faster than the price of paddy. But rice would be only one element in the cost of living and it is reasonable to assume that a number of

other essentials of living—clothing, rents, vegetables, edible oils etc. would have risen much faster.

There is the further fact that the dependence on imported rice left the price depend on the vagaries of supply. Thus it is seen that in the first decades of the 20th century, the price of paddy could vary within weeks from Rs 2-50 a bushel (8 cents a measure) to Rs. 6-00 a bushel (19 cents a measure).²⁰ These fluctuations caused enormous hardships to the community and particularly to daily wage labourers. It appears that the rice import trade was dominated by a few chetty merchants of Jaffna and any shortage in Jaffna or a crop failure in India pushed prices up. They appear to have controlled imports to manipulate market prices. When this went out of hand, there would be threats of civil unrest in Jaffna and the Government Agent would have to intervene.²¹ When conditions were good and prices were low, the consumption of rice went up. But when local production was disrupted and prices rose, the poorer sections would look more to dry grains and to palmyrah produce for sustenance.

In this context, the contribution to the economy of the major cash crop of the Peninsula, tobacco, assumes a new importance and should be dealt with in some detail. It was seen in the previous lecture that tobacco grown in Jaffna was capturing an increasing share of the Indian market in the 18th century. But while some quantities were exported to Madura, Tanjore and the Coromandel coast, by far the largest share was taken by the Malabar coast. It appears that the tobacco grown and cured in Jaffna was particularly suitable to the Malayalam palate and nostrils. The Rajas of Travancore, who had declared a monopoly in the import and sale of Jaffna tobacco into Malabar, found it a money-spinner. Because of the symbiotic relationship experienced between the Jaffna producer and the Malabar importer, the producers became completely dependent on this Malabar market and looked no further than satisfying year by year the demands of this market.

From the very early years, British administrators realised the importance of tobacco to the economy of the province, though the main burden of their concern was on its role as a revenue raising commodity. More efficient methods of collecting the export duty on tobacco, combined with the increase in exports raised the total duty realised on tobacco exports to Rs. 232, 200 in 1798.²² Under the Dutch this duty had never fetched more than Rs. 80,000 a year. The duty on tobacco was 25%. In the first decades, with the pacification of southern India and the extension of British rule there, the demand for tobacco grew and the trade expanded. It appears that about 2½ million pounds of tobacco were exported from Jaffna annually. Of this around 68% went to Malabar, another 30% to Southeast Asia and the rest to South Ceylon. Besides the well established Travancore market, from the end of the 18th century, there was an expanding trade to Southeast Asia, mainly to Acheh and then to Penang. This trade was largely pioneered by South Indian Muslims of Nagore and Porto Novo (Cudalore) and also some Chetties from these ports in partnership with them. With the expansion of British political power over that coast and over Ceylon, these merchants are seen to act in partnership with English private traders stationed in Fort St. David.

With British power paramount in India and in Ceylon, it might be expected that the tobacco trade with India could have been put on a firm, regular footing. The subsequent history of the tobacco trade shows that this was far from being the case, that its sometimes violent fluctuations affected producers, middlemen and government revenue alike. This is a result of a peculiar characteristic of British imperial policy which bound the colony to the mother country with a tight knot but left each colony struggle against its sister colony like two independent political entities. The fact that Travancore was an autonomous protected state further complicated matters. Tobacco exports were increasingly dependent on the ruler of Travancore who used his near monopoly position to control prices and volume of exports. All attempts to effectively free

the trade on the Jaffna end met with firm opposition of the ruler of Travancore. The Ceylon government entered the market as a monopolist purchaser of tobacco in 1812 and exporter to Travancore. It also raised export duty to 50% and later 60%. This played havoc with the Achenese market which could not stand such duties. The lost Southeast Asian market could not be regained, though government introduced a scheme of refund of part of the duty for exports to markets other than Travancore. These upsets in the trade affected exports and production in the period 1826 to 1833. Many middlemen were driven out of business.²³

The decline in exports upset the financial system of Jaffna: the Indian merchants had annually defrayed about 125,000 to 140,000 Pagodas (worth about Rs. 500,000 to 600,000) which remained in circulation within the peninsula. This gold coin was used to pay for imports of consumables such as rice and textiles which had to be paid for in this coin. Besides the reduction in volume of exports, the government as monopolist buyer paid the producer in paper currency which had no value outside the island and was not acceptable to foreign merchants. It thus upset the foreign trade of Jaffna and caused a shortage of imports.

These ups and downs of policy towards the tobacco trade had played havoc with the production and affected the producers adversely. Exports had dropped from an all time high of $3\frac{1}{2}$ million pounds per year in the 1820's to 750,000 in the 1830's. The Indian Government, Travancore State and the Ceylon Government had been falling on each other in an effort to fleece the profits on tobacco as much as possible. Prices were high, duties were high, while markets were being lost and there was great uncertainty among producers.²⁴

In the wake of the tariff reforms introduced on the recommendations of the Colebrooke Commission, the export duty on tobacco was reduced to 2%. This had an immediate effect on the volume of export but the central

problem remained. The monopoly over the import and sale of tobacco in Travancore and Cochin enabled the rulers to keep prices at an artificially high level which had an enormous effect on consumption and demand for Jaffna tobacco. The Indian Government was reluctant and unable to persuade the state of Travancore to abandon this monopoly. The result was that the Jaffna product lost a chance to break away from its over-dependence on the Travancore market as high prices prevented its spread to other parts of Malabar and the Madras Presidency. Cheaper and poorer varieties of tobacco soon spread in these parts and took over the markets which were thus lost forever to the Jaffna product.

In the second half of the 19th century, tobacco cultivation and export began to fare better, having been freed from the monopoly of the Travancore Raja and subject only to an import duty in that state. Production and exports began to rise and the years 1880 to 1900 appear to have seen the heights of tobacco cultivation in Jaffna. New land was turned over to tobacco. The export for these years tell their own story and were never reached in the 20th century. The highest recorded export was in 1896 when 10,244,752 pounds of tobacco were exported for a price of Rs. 1,918,951 closely followed by 10,188,528 pounds in 1875. Exports in these years never fell below $7\frac{1}{2}$ million pounds and export earnings were between Rs. 1,400,000 and Rs. 1,900,000.²⁵ This was a valuable addition to the purchasing power of the Jaffna tobacco farmer.

But this very expansion brought attendant problems. The market continued to be a restricted and specialised one in Malabar where the particular aroma of the Jaffna leaf was very much desired. As long as this market could absorb the entire produce, things were all right. But the great expansion of the 890's caused a glut in the market. production had exceeded demand and prices fell. As this would have had a marked effect on the Jaffna economy, the authorities were constrained to look at it as a major problem. It was necessary to diversify

the export markets and to achieve this it would be necessary to introduce new varieties other than those suited to Malabar. The problem was looked at the turn of the century and with greater urgency in the first years of the 20th century when the market for Jaffna tobacco collapsed in Travancore. In 1901, the exports fell to 5,736,000 pounds at a price of Rs. 583, 660 and in 1902 even lower to 3,870,000 pounds at Rs. 454,967.²⁶ This decline was caused both by a fall in production and even more by a steeper fall in price.

This fall in price was never redressed and growers had to live with low prices in the 20th century. Through the help of agricultural experts, new varieties of tobacco suitable for cigarette making were introduced. The Travancore market picked up, though not to the previous levels. In the 1920's exports from the North were between 2½ million to 4 million pounds. Despite these fluctuations and uncertainties, tobacco cultivation provided a significant addition to earnings in Jaffna. It enabled a number of farmers to divert from unproductive paddy farming to a crop which at least enabled them to earn a living. The earning was, however, not high, particularly after the drop in prices in the 1910's. Costs of cultivation were heavy and what the producer was paid was always small. It brought money into the economy and kept a number of people employed—farm labourers, processors, transport workers, middlemen, dock workers. In 1921, there were about 25,000 labourers employed in the tobacco farms.²⁷ Looked at in relative terms, the tobacco-growing areas give an appearance of greater prosperity than many of the areas which continue to struggle along with the traditional growing of paddy.

The produce of the palmyrah is seen to continue as a stand-by to economic wherewithal in modern times. The export trade in palmyrah timber continued but was restricted by more effective regulations intended to preserve the palmyrah palm. The produce of the palm was a useful supplement to the diet of the people, particularly in areas of low productivity of paddy and incomes insufficient for

the purchase of imported rice. In the 1890's, the export of palmyrah fibre from Jaffna, the Islands, the Vanni districts began to take off. Vavaseur and Co. of Colombo opened up this export trade through an agency in Jaffna. It brought a substantial sum of money into the province and benefited the small holders of palmyrah groves, the poor labourers who collected the fibres and the middlemen. Soon after its initiation large quantities of fibre were exported. In 1891, 9,028 cwt., in 1892, 12,177 cwt. and in 1893, 8,743 cwt. It brought into the province respectively Rs. 122,559, Rs. 156,672 and Rs. 115,665.²⁸ The owner received 9 cents a pound. Itinerant Muslim traders went into distant villages and bought it at cheaper rates. Everyone wanted to get into the act. Thousands of young trees were killed in an effort to extract the fibre. Robber bands stalked the nights devastating other people's palmyrah groves. The government received innumerable complaints and village headmen impressed on it the necessity to control this destruction for fear of the extinction of palmyrah trees. Controls were imposed on the extraction of palmyrah fibre and the quantities exported were restricted to under 4,000 tons.²⁹ The manufacture of sugar from palmyrah palm juice was begun in 1916 by the Ceylon Sugar Refineries Company which opened a factory for this purpose near Valvettiturai³⁰ This provided employment to a number of people in the neighbourhood and served to increase the price of palm toddy. This in turn benefited the tapper classes. The export of palmyrah produce both to the southern parts of the Island and to South India continued into the 19th century, though rising population and therefore greater consumption and the dwindling area under palmyrah led to a decline in this export in the 20th century. In the 1850's, for example about 10,000 cwt. of jaggery was exported annually from Jaffna to the Indian coast.³¹ Large quantities of *Kilangu* and *Odiyal* were exported from Point Pedro to Colombo. These exports, though small in an overall context, were a useful boost to the incomes of poorer groups that engaged in the collection and processing of palmyrah produce. The use of palmyrah produce as food was an index to the state of the province's economy. When the paddy harvest was good, rice was

cheap and there was money in circulation, palmyrah produce was not sought after as food. In times of distress, rising price of food and unemployment, large numbers of people would resort to the produce of the palmyrah as their basic diet.

The commercial cultivation of coconut came late into the Jaffna Peninsula, in the 1840's. When it did, it was on the initiative of English entrepreneurs, mainly officers of the English East India Company serving in India. Bengal civil servants, in particular, seem to have invested in clearing land and opening plantations.³² The districts of Pachilapalai and Tenmarachi were found most suitable. Besides, it was here that crown land was offered for sale on favourable terms. The cultivation of coconut caught on with the promise of good returns. In ten years of the opening of the first estate, over 10,000 acres of Government land were purchased and planted. Over fifty estates were under cultivation.³³ The restriction on the availability of land and the fluctuation in climatic conditions prevented the expansion of cocount in the way that it was happening in the south. European investment was phased out toward the end of the century and most of these established estates were bought by the growing Tamil entrepreneurs based in the south. These plantations provided some employment in an economically depressed area and contributed some economic relief to those areas. Again, there was some diversion of land marginally under paddy and dry grains to coconut which was found to be a more lucrative crop.

Market gardening was another activity that boomed in the 19th and 20th centuries, the rising population creating a demand within the Peninsula. Tennent compared the neatly laid out market gardens of the Jaffna peasant to those of Fulham and Chelsea of his days.³⁴ Much of the produce, even in his time, seems to have been exported southwards, particularly non-perishable things such as onions, and chillies. The export of this produce had made Point Pedro an important port and we see a revival of this port which had once been active but had seen a decline under the Dutch who tried to channel everything through Jaffna.

Fishing and the sale of sea products had always played a major role in the economy of the Tamils from the earliest times. Unfortunately, there is no way of measuring its exact extent in the absence of evidence on the movement of prices of fish and other sea produce. In the early 19th century, fish markets were considered to be a lucrative tax farm in which a number of wealthy people invested. There was noted an upward movement of prices in those early decades which must have benefited fishermen. By its very nature, the fishing industry is not one that could register continuous growth in the years before mechanization and refrigeration. But the continuing growth of population, the wide popularity of fish as an element in people's diet and the short distances to the sea from every part of the Peninsula, combined to enable a number of people to be employed in the fishing industry. In the 1921 census, 10,130 men were registered as earning their livelihood by fishing²⁵. Though the industry did throw up a few entrepreneurs and capitalists in certain regions, it was nowhere as marked as the developments in the south. It remained, like peasant farming, a series of small scale enterprises with marginal returns. With but a few exceptions, fishing communities remained depressed sections with high density over small land areas.

Community health and welfare continued to be major problems in the 19th century and it was only after the 1930's that the cyclical recurrence of epidemics and the persistent malnutrition was in some measure remedied. It is difficult in the absence of records to say whether the situation worsens in the 19th century, or whether such occurrences were present even earlier and have gone unrecorded. Influenza and dysentery were the common diseases and epidemics of cholera and small pox broke out not infrequently. Climatic conditions, economic recession and poor community health reinforced each other. Widespread damage by cyclone, failure of crops through a season of drought or by excessive flooding would deprive the people of nutritional food. This in turn would leave them exposed to infectious diseases. The 1880's appear to have been a very bad period. The 1884 cyclone caused extensive damage

and was followed by four years of cholera and small pox epidemics.³⁶ The 1910's were another period of economic hardship. The death rate was heavy and population declined over a ten year period in many villages, most markedly in the villages of Tenmarachi.³⁷

Education, it has been remarked, was the largest industry opened by the British in Ceylon. Enough is known of the boom in education in Jaffna under the aegis of Christian missions, Hindu organizations and the state. The purpose here is to treat of education as a factor in contributing to the economy of the Tamils and the contribution is a many-pronged one. There was, firstly, employment generated by these many educational institutions in the north. Then there were the employment opportunities opened up for the graduates of these schools in the bureaucracy and the private sector through the Island. In 1921, a total of 10,185 Tamils were employed in public administration and the liberal arts³⁸ Thirdly, there was the opportunity to go abroad to other British colonies, notably British Malaya and the Straits Settlements. Education also had the social effect of alienating people from the land which, in the case of Jaffna where there was a pressure on land, was not a bad thing after all. With hindsight, a major criticism can be made with respect to education in Jaffna which it shared with all education in the British colonies. The education produced a nation of pen-pushers, the adverse effect of which was not immediately seen as there was a great demand for pen-pushers all over the British Empire. The neglect of technical and agricultural education was something the Tamils lived to regret, together with all other subject peoples of the British Empire. The imparting of appropriate knowledge of land use, of effective crops, of some mechanical skills in those years, when food production was beginning to lag seriously behind population increase, would have done a world of good to the Tamils. The only efforts made in this direction at Jaffna College, by the practical and far-seeing Americans coming from a milieu where an economic miracle was taking shape, were soon overshadowed, largely by a negative response of the people whom they were intended to benefit.

Emigration and the opportunities for employment outside the Peninsula opened up at a timely moment for the economic future of the Tamils. Seasonal migration to work in paddy fields south of the peninsula had always been prevalent from as far back as the 17th century. Purchase of paddy fields by Jaffna farmers immediately to the south had also begun at that time. This process extended southwards into the Vanni in the course of the 19th century. It was accelerated with the British policy of repairing and restoring minor and major irrigation works. But, even with these developments there was never any major shift of population from the peninsula to the immediate south until the beginning of the 20th century, when the population of Vavuniya district increases at a faster rate than that of the peninsula. But even this is partly caused by the immigration of Indian labour to the colonization schemes. It is even more difficult to estimate the movement of population to Colombo and other urban centres in south and central Ceylon except by noting the growth of significant Tamil populations in those places where none or very few existed before. Then, there was the emigration to southeast Asia that also becomes significant in the early decades of the 20th century.

While these numbers were not large enough to make any major impact on the demography of the Tamils, they are of great economic significance. The remittances from the south and from southeast Asia contributed significantly to the economic well-being of the community. Those who worked in British Malaya and the Straits Settlements were at a decided advantage. Money wages were higher there and when savings were converted into Ceylon Rupees they gave the person a tidy nest-egg. These savings were generally invested in property—housing and land—and there grew an elite class of F. M. S. pensioners in every village. Some statistics are available of these remittances. In 1910, remittances by money order alone from the S. S. and F. M. S. to Jaffna totalled Rs. 602, 878. By 1920 this had risen to Rs. 2,120,000.⁹⁹ The depression of 1929 and the restrictions on employment that followed put an end to these remittances

but with the revival of economic growth after 1935 they were resumed and continued till the Japanese invasion of Malaya in 1942.

I have tried in these lectures to provide a framework for the understanding of the growth of the economy of the Tamils of north Sri Lanka. I have presented a picture of continuity in change and change in continuity. The Jaffna economy has grown in these centuries in the context of a traditional society, responding to external stimulus by internal change and yet maintaining the social fabric of that traditional society. In terms of a people to resources ratio, the land occupied by the Tamils must be deemed very unfavourable. The land is admittedly poor in fertility and in its ability to replenish itself. The climate is difficult and the rains undependable. People have been the prime resource and a difficult environment has produced a hardy, thrifty, resourceful people. The levels at which the land could sustain the population have always been low. The kingdom of Jaffna, in the great days of its power, was never one of pomp or grandeur. The economy simply did not generate such surpluses as to maintain an ostentatious civilization.

The favourable side to this feature has been that society, unlike in other parts of southern Asia, has not been stratified into extremes of economic condition. The social stratification the Tamils brought with them from South India continued but economic disparities were not as marked. There were no large and extensive land-holdings. Social groups did not interact with each other in marked exploitative relationships. The area developed a money economy sooner than the rest of the Island and economic relationships were more governed by the market place in the North than any other part of the Island. This also meant that there was no great opportunity for capital accumulation in any one sector of the community. The capitalist entrepreneur was slower in developing and when he did develop he moved southwards.

The land could support large parts of the population only at marginal levels and those parts where productivity

was low were even worse off in this respect. Needs were few, luxuries absent. But this meant that the injection of some capital and the quickening of the pace of economic activity made a real difference to living standards and the effects were immediately visible. The impact of the elephant trade, the tobacco trade, overseas remittances and in our own day the onion and chillie trade are examples of prosperity induced by a little injection of cash into the system.

FOOTNOTES

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33. Tennent, *Ceylon*..... I, p 532.
34. Tennent, *Ceylon*..... I, p. 532
35. *Report of the Census of Ceylon 1921*, Vol. I.
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37. *Report of the Census of Ceylon 1921*, Vol. I.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Report of the Census of Ceylon 1921*, Vol. I.



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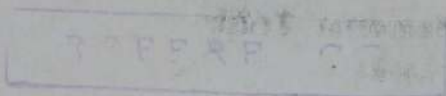
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