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EDUCATION ON THE PLANTATIONS

(text of speech delivered by Fr Paul Caspersz, S. J. at the Inter-School Prize-Giving Ceremony organized by the Education Office, Kandy and held at Asoka Vidyalyaya, Kandy on 27. 11. 87)

Your great, poet Tiruvalluvar, wrote in the **Tirukkural** several centuries ago:

*" Only those have eyes who are truly educated
those who are uneducated have sores on their face instead".*

The ceremony at which we are participating this morning is one which I think would have gladdened the heart of the poet. For it is a celebration of real progress made in the education of a whole people who for many decades, for no fault of their own, had to carry on their faces the sores of cultural deprivation and illiteracy.

Many of us are concerned with improving the quality of life of the people who live on our estates or who, from the surrounding villages, come to work on the estates. We engage ourselves with our people in programmes to improve health and sanitation, water management and housing; we have shramadana programmes; we organize indoor and outdoor games, sometimes inter-estate tournaments; we encourage the estate people to have dairy cattle, poultry and home gardens. But many of us have come to realize after several years of work in the estate areas that the most important field, the most fundamental, the most indispensable, is education. If the workers are educated, if their children are educated, then the workers and their children will be aware of the need to improve the other sectors of their lives and take steps to effect such improvement.

Those who owned the plantations also knew this. It was therefore in their interest to keep the workers and their children in ignorance. There was some need to keep the children quiet in order to allow their parents to work for the estate owners, there was need to keep the children from playing among the tea bushes and damaging them. So schools of a sort, set up by some kanganies or missionaries on some estates, were allowed to function in the 19th century. But except for a few schools which catered to the needs of the middle grade employees of the estates, all the other schools were schools of poor quality. Buildings and equipment were far below standard; the content of the education imparted was very poor.

The Colonial Government passed certain laws in 1907, 1920, 1939 and 1947 but these, patchwork and inadequate as they were, largely remained in the law books and were not implemented. Even as late as 1981, while the national literacy rate was 87, for estate Tamils it was only 67, and for females on the estates it was 55. Nearly all estate schools went up only to Grade 5 and many children did not reach even that Grade. Many schools were single-teacher multi-grade schools. I remember visiting a school on a very large and prosperous British-owned estate in 1960: there was only one teacher for 120 children, distributed into 5 grades. The Agency House which managed it from Colombo used to ask the Superintendent all kinds of questions about the cost and quality of production but, so far as the Superintendent remembered, had never asked one question about the school. On the days when the teacher was absent in this and many, many other estate schools it goes without saying that the children had no school.

Golden opportunities for improvement came with the nationalization of the estates by the laws of 1972 and 1975. There were several good intentions and many plans in order that the Ministry of Education should take over the estate schools and integrate them into the national system of education. But except for the take-over of a few schools nothing happened until the present Government came into power and Mr Thondaman obtained a place in the Cabinet. Mr Thondaman worked with determination to give the estate people their rightful place within a united Sri Lanka and he fortunately found in the President of the Republic a person who recognized the great contribution made by the estate people to the economy of the country and was sympathetic to their demands. By 1984 there were 558 government schools on the estates with 63,339 students in 11 administrative districts. About 50 schools remained to be taken over and I believe most of them have been between 1984 and today.

Many problems remain in estate education and the Ministry of Education admits them: poor buildings and furniture, insufficient and insufficiently motivated and trained teachers, high drop-out rates even in primary school, no facilities for an estate child to proceed beyond Grade 5, poor supervision, shortage of Tamil speaking officers and staff at regional and national levels of the Ministry, and many others. These problems have steadily to be met.

But the situation today is full of hope. Much foreign aid from Sweden, the Netherlands, Germany and the UNICEF is being channelled to Sri Lanka for the purpose of estate education. The two state plantation corporations are also making grants to estate schools out of their own funds. The Government Budget makes a special allocation for the improvement of estate education. The Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) is currently providing Rs 155 million for a 4-year programme to improve estate schools in Nuwara Eliya and Kalutara Districts. The programme will be extended to all other districts in which there are estate schools in such a way that all estate schools will be covered over a period of 12 years. It must here be said that this immense amount of money that is to be spent on estate education is over and above similarly vast sums of money that will flow into the estates for the improvement of housing and general welfare.

I have to end with something very important but I shall say it very briefly. Parents of estate school children, estate school teachers and the estate children must be motivated to take maximum advantage of all the schemes to improve estate education. It is in this connection that we have greatly to appreciate the work of the Regional Education Office in Kandy and of Mr Rasiah, the Education Officer. Even before foreign assistance has reached the Kandy District, Mr Rasiah with the cooperation of the Regional Director and other officers of the Kandy office has entered into the spirit of the current movement for the improvement of estate education. We have to wish Mr Rasiah and the Education Office in Kandy all success and extend to them our cooperation.

Finally we have to allude to the role played by institutions like this Asoka Vidyalaya and Students' Hostel which so far as I know was set up more than 50 years ago to serve the plantation children. It is therefore entirely fitting that we are holding this ceremony to recognize and reward the good work done in estate schools in the Kandy educational region in this Vidyalaya.

THE CURRENT CRISIS AND THE ESTATE PEOPLE

(This article was written for publication three weeks before the Indo-Lankan Peace Accord of 29 July 1987. Since it was not published then, it is now reproduced here, and not merely for its historical interest.)

The estate people have been more than ordinarily in the news in recent months. There was first the island-wide estates strike of April 1984 followed by the rise in wages and – astoundingly – the equalization of female with male wages and the stipulation of a minimum of six workdays a week. Before, during and after the strike, the Unions stood undeterred by the cajoling and threats of the plantation managers who wondered whether the government was in its senses at all when it destroyed the cherished idols of what they thought was the only possible plantation wage structure.

There was secondly the government response to the prayer campaign of early 1986. This response came in the terms of the Grant of Citizenship to Stateless Persons Act No 5 of 1986. The Act noted that in the matter of the 975,000 persons estimated to be stateless in 1964

The Government of India has given an undertaking to complete the granting of Indian Citizenship to the 506,000 persons who have applied for Indian Citizenship within six to eight months of the date of enactment of this Act

and that

The Government of Sri Lanka has resolved to solve the problem of statelessness within eighteen months of the date of enactment of this Act.

The Act therefore assured the granting of “the status of Sri Lankan Citizen by registration” to all those persons who came within the October 1964 estimate of 975,000 stateless persons and who did not come within the number of 506,000 of these stateless persons to be granted Indian Citizenship, that is, to 469,000 persons. The Act further assured “the status of Sri Lankan citizen” to every child born to every person who is granted Sri Lankan Citizenship by registration, that is, to the entire natural increase since 30 October 1964 of the 469,000 persons.

The Indian government through the Assistant Indian High Commission in Kandy has presumably completed the granting of citizenship to the 506,000 persons and their natural increase. Our government had therefore to meet the Act's deadline of 18 months since the date of

its enactment for the completion of the granting of Sri Lankan Citizenship to the 469,000 persons and their natural increase. The Act was enacted on 18 February 1986. The date by which the granting of Sri Lankan Citizenship has to be completed is therefore 18 August 1987 (unless the date is extended by the government).

As the months sped by after the enactment of Act No 5 of 1986, the plantation people organized in their Unions grew increasingly anxious that 18 August would come and go, leaving hundreds and thousands of them still with the festering sore of statelessness. They were understandably unaffected by the government's hesitation to grant citizenship prior to the actual departure to India of those who had received Indian citizenship; the departure itself could not take place because the ferry service between Talaimannar and Rameswaran stood suspended because of the ethnic conflict.

The Unions, chiefly the Ceylon Workers' Congress, cleverly led by Minister Thondaman, took the anxiety by its horns and harnessed it as in early 1986 to a plan of action. The action was, as in early 1986, prayer. This was uncanny perception of the mood of the plantation people. Long-suffering and fatalistic, it is not the ultimate, but the penultimate, act to raise joined hands to the forehead and commend the spirit to God. It is only too easy to make the popular Marxist mistake of seeing the gesture as a sign of the resignation of an oppressed people and not as a summons to revolt against a heartless world. Mr Thondaman does not make these mistakes. It has been asked of him whether his prayer campaign is an act of religion or an act of politics. But where does religion end and politics begin for a person and people unwilling to falsify life by rationalizing it into compartments which exist only in the minds of those who ask the question.

The very arrangement to pray seems to have brought the answer to prayer. There is now feverish activity in the plantations to speed up the granting of citizenship. This comes not a day too early. On the one hand, there is the worsening of the ethnic conflict between South and North/East and the blasts have begun to send tremors through the central hills. On the other hand, the violence which erupted in the Talawakelle region early last year indicates a new psyche in a new estate generation. The worm, said Mr Thondaman, has turned.

Does all this portend, as some say, an aggravation and an extension of the current crisis between South and North/East or is it, as the present writer would like to argue, an opportunity for its solution? It is indeed the burden of this article to establish the fact that the estate workers hold a vital key to the solution of the crisis and, secondly, to plead that they be allowed to use it.

The key turns in both directions.

On one side, the estate workers seem to present an inseparable pragmatic argument against separation. Culturally it is true that the estate workers speak basically the same language and have basically the same religion as the Tamils of the North and East; they also share the same caste system, having their place, however, at the bottom of the system or even beneath it. But historically and geographically, the estate workers have not been overwhelmingly in the North and East but in the Central Province, in the Badulla district of the Uva Province and in parts of the Sabaragamuwa Province. Separation can only deepen their own historical and geographical isolation, hence has no meaning for them.

In very recent years, beginning with Land Reform in 1972, there has been a steady migration of estate workers to the districts of Vavuniya, Mullaitivu, and Mannar. But it is simply not realistic to assume that this migration can in the foreseeable next generation assume proportions such that the bulk of the estate people will shift from the districts of Nuwara Eliya, Badulla, Ratnapura, Kegalle etc. to the Tamil parts of the Eastern Province, still less to the Southern frontier areas of the Northern Province. There may be some shift to the Central Province, especially to the Nuwara Eliya district, and some tendency to shift within the same district to areas of greater concentration of their own people, but that is all.

In the event of separation, therefore, the great majority of estate Tamils will have to live politically with the Sinhalese, while linguistically and religiously they will feel they are more at home with the Tamils of the neighbouring Tamil estate. The result will be for the estate Tamils a dangerous schizophrenia of the mind and a divided loyalty of the will, both of which conditions will not go unnoticed by the Sinhalese. At the negotiation table, therefore, the estate people would in themselves be a powerful case against separation.

On the other side, the estate people are an argument against the military solution either of the state armed forces or of the militant Tamil groups. The estate people until very recently were hardly ever the object of compassion or concern to the indigenous Sri Lankan Tamils and those Sri Lankan Tamils who obtained employment in estate administrative offices or as field supervisors were even more contemptuous of the lowly estate workers than the white sahibs of the former era. Yet, if the military solution of the State continues to be directed against people who speak the same language and share the

same religious culture as the estate workers, there can be little doubt as to where the sympathies of the latter will lie. The blood of those that fall will be found to be thicker than the water of the greater kindnesses received.

On their part, the militant Tamil groups will seek to open new frontiers and seek new allies. Thus the armed conflict will extend to geographical areas where the overwhelming majority will not want their young male population to be sacrificed for a cause that has never accepted as being their own. The estate people therefore are opposed both to state military action in the North and East and to the extension of youth guerilla action into their own areas.

But if the estate people are against both separation and militant violence whether of state armed forces or of armed anti-state groups what, it may be asked, are they for? A negotiated settlement honourable to both sides, no less.

Indeed, there are three identifiable groups in the country who could yet swing the country away from the current senseless violence to the imperative of a fair negotiated settlement. But while the Christians and the Marxists have either traduced or abdicated their role in the achievement of a solution of peace-with-justice, the estate people remain. Their potential is yet to be tapped - by themselves and by others, for the sake of all those for whom this island alone is home.

— Paul Caspersz

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A Plan for

SUPPLEMENTARY INCOME GENERATION FOR ESTATE WORKERS

The improvement in the standard of the plantation workers is very slow in spite of all the activities of the Trade Unions and the NGOs. Though people are eager to improve their living conditions, their income is insufficient for meeting even their minimum requirements. Trade Unions do good work in the field of industrial relations and are concerned about maintaining and increasing their membership. NGOs conduct seminars on health, education, culture, use of leisure time etc. The improvement of the economy of the estate families is not covered to any great extent. Yet, it is a dire need that the plantation people should improve their economic performance.

Though there are several self-employment schemes sponsored by the state and other institutions, often they are not within the reach of poor people, especially if they are also illiterate. The procedures for obtaining such assistance are beyond the capabilities of the estate people and as such they generally do not even apply for these schemes. Only people of influence find it easy to follow the procedures and so generally only they obtain the benefits. It is therefore necessary that some organization should assist them to obtain such assistance,

The average income of an estate worker is around Rs 500 per month which is hardly enough for three meals a day. Salaries are paid on or before the 10th of each month. But an advance of Rs 200 is paid between the 22nd and the 25th of the month. The estate worker therefore never draws a full salary at once during a lifetime. Under these circumstances, how can a proper family budget be made? A family of five where both parents work and where three children under 15 have to be supported will have to face immense difficulties in order to exist. They are deprived of nutritional food, proper education, good clothes. The children cannot study since they are malnourished and are forced to look for employment at low wages. It is thus clear that it is simply not possible to develop the estate community without improving the economy of the family.

In our experience we have found that many on the estates who have somehow succeeded to obtain education up to Grade 10 and beyond are often able to earn extra income through the rearing of cows or

goats, growing vegetables or by engaging in some business activity. While the Trade Unions agitate for wage increases, they and the NGOs should also investigate avenues of supplementary income for the workers.

The men on the estates often complete their day's work by 1.00 p. m. after which they idle and gossip which leads to crime. While some make use of their leisure time for cultivation or animal husbandry, others waste their time in idle chatter. When they are asked why they do so, they reply that they have no garden space and no animals. Sometimes traders and middlemen use such people for their own purposes.

Some poverty-stricken persons raise loans from traders to buy a cow and are ever after in debt as they have to sell their produce to their creditor at a low price and buy their requirements from the same creditor at a high price. Jewellery is pawned and children are put out to work at low wages.

The plantation workers will not be able to raise their standard of living in this century unless they can be assisted as a matter of urgency to rise out of debt and become self-reliant. Once their economy is sound, their standard of living will rise and so will their confidence in themselves.

A thorough awakening programme should be conducted so that they may be able to find ways and means to increase their income. The following factors should be a part of this programme: (i) awakening to self-reliance (ii) achievement of community participation (iii) training in areas of possible supplementary income (iv) assistance for the start-off (v) supply of seed and manure at nominal rates (vi) the setting up of self-help credit societies.

The programme could be a pilot one, targeted initially to five estates only with the aim of improving the condition of fifty families only during the first year.

The credit societies could play a vital role to expand the project to other areas. If 300 workers contribute to the fund at Rs 10 per month, a division of an estate can accumulate Rs 36,000 at the end of the year. This sum could then be utilized to provide loans to members for the earning of supplementary income. If we are successful, we need not depend on outside aid for developmental work at the end of five years.

— S. Rajalingam

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