

VOICE OF THE VOICELESS

BULLETIN OF THE COORDINATING SECRETARIAT FOR PLANTATION AREAS

THE PLANTATION PEOPLE AFTER THE GENERAL ELECTIONS

The General Elections were held after nearly 12 years on 15 February 1989. On the results the dust has not yet finally settled, so Voice has still to analyze them in so far as they regard the plantation people. The CSPA is therefore especially grateful to Comrade Nadesan for presenting at our request his preliminary views on the results in a separate article in this issue.

The emergence of the Up-country People's Front under the leadership of Panchalingam Chandrasegaran is important fall-out from the Elections. With its headquarters in Talawakelle in the heart of the tea plantations, it can have powerful appeal to the new generation of plantation youth, more educated and more aware than ever before. The UPF appears to have a working class ideology and to give consideration to ethnicity, if at all, only in the context of that ideology.

The citizenship issue also received prominence at Election time by way of the Citizenship Act passed hurriedly by the UNP Government one month only before the Elections. The Act states unequivocally that all stateless plantation people who have not applied for Indian citizenship are with immediate effect citizens of our country. This is radical indeed, and one will have to watch the fate of the Act in the next months.

The General Elections have witnessed the plantation people thinking independently on several matters. Just how independently will have to be measured by further analysis and the flow of history during the rest of this year.

There is also the Jana Saviya. How is it going to affect the plantation people? — Editorially

Voice of the Voiceless, January 1989, was No 36 in the series, and not No 37, as erroneously printed there. We request our readers to please pardon us and ink in the correction (if they still have that issue).

THE PITIABLE PLIGHT OF THE UVA PEASANTRY

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Uva up to 19th century

Some historians describe Uva, in the time of the Sinhala Kings, prior to the advent of the British, as a land flowing with milk and honey. One of the most fertile regions in Sri Lanka, Uva-Wellassa was self-sufficient in rice, vegetables and fruits. Numerous tanks in this area irrigated vast tracts of paddy lands, which gave Wellassa its name - "vel laksha", a hundred-thousand paddy fields. The people of this region owned buffaloes and cattle to plough their fields, haul their carts, provide them with milk and curd, and manure for their crops. Apart from the common garden vegetables, the chenas (hen govithen) produced the 'dasa bhoga' or ten traditional subsidiary food crops - viz. millet (kurakkan), maize (bada-iringu), green gram (mung-eta), winged bean (dambala), kollu, undu, bhuma, kudara, lima beans and thana-hal. Fruit trees such as jak, mango, banana, papaya, gauva, jambu, lime, orange, bull's heart and custard apple, gave the people additional nourishment. They were a people sturdy and strong - strong enough to repulse foreign invasion. Both the Portuguese and Dutch who ruled the maritime provinces were unable to conquer and subjugate the people of Uva. At Randeniwela, where the Ella-Wellawaya road enters the plains, there is a monument erected in memory of the historic defeat in 1630 by the Sinhala army, of the Portuguese forces led by the famous general Constantine de Saa.

The Uva Rebellion and Aftermath

The history of Uva took a sad and traumatic turn in the early years of British rule in Sri Lanka. The British conquered Sri Lanka in the early 19th century and hardly 2 years after the signing of the Kandyan Convention (1815) the people of Uva rose in rebellion under the able leadership of such heroic chieftains as Keppetipola, to liberate themselves and their country from the British yoke. The British, fearing that the revolt might spread to other parts of the country and that they may be ousted from the island like their predecessors, the Portuguese and the Dutch, embarked upon a ruthless policy of repression.

They breached the tank bunds, destroyed the anicuts, burnt the crops and homes of the people, slaughtered the livestock and

plundered the stocks of paddy to feed the troops, cut down the fruit trees, shot on sight both rebels and innocent civilians. They crushed the Uva rebellion with savage ferocity and terrorism. British colonialism in many lands is not without blemish. But this cold-blooded, no-holds-barred, scorched-earth program will always remain an ignominious blot in the annals of British colonial history.

The terrified villagers fled into the mountains and valleys and sought refuge in caves and jungles. To this day one discovers in Uva, tiny hamlets of 15 to 20 huts tucked away high up on the mountains or deep down in the valleys. The people of these hamlets have no road access. They have to walk miles along

When the Coordinating Secretariat for Plantation Areas (CSPA) was set up in 1974, the word Areas was deliberately chosen instead of Workers, so as to include the peasants in the concerns of the Secretariat. Hence this article, written in 1987, is entirely within the concerns of the CSPA.

rugged, narrow foot-paths winding through jungles, fording streams and rivers, in order to reach the nearest motorable road, boutique, school, dispensary or post office. In the rainy season when the rivers are in spate, these people are marooned for days on end. Their produce and provisions are transported on pack-oxen (thavalam harak) in gunny-bags strapped on the backs of these animals in pannier style. If someone falls ill, a makeshift "stretcher" is made of gunnies spread across 2 poles and the patient is carried on this stretcher by able-bodied men to the nearest motorable road and on to the nearest hospital. Needless to say, many a serious patient gives up the ghost long before the hospital is reached. It is incredible but true that some of our fellow-citizens do live in such harsh and primitive conditions even in this latter part of the 20th century.

Uva Villages

Uva may be broadly divided into the mountainous "Upper Uva" which roughly covers the Badulla District, and "Lower Uva", the predominantly flat country of the Monaragala district. The villages of Upper Uva are surrounded by tea plantations and are confined to the mountain slopes and river valleys. Peasants make use of the water flowing down the mountains to cultivate rice in

terraced paddy fields and grow "English" vegetables such as cabbages, carrots, leeks, beetroot, turnips, radish and lettuce. Resembling staircases carved on hill slopes, these picturesque contour terraces are often very narrow strips of land only a foot or two in width. Lower Uva's villages are found chiefly along the banks of rivers and streams, and bordering jungles.

Chena Cultivation

Most peasants of Lower Uva engage in chena cultivation, a primitive type of "slash and burn" agriculture also known as swidden or shifting cultivation. A chena is a patch of jungle cleared, burnt and cultivated for a season or two and then left fallow to be overgrown with jungle. The crops commonly grown - maize, millet, cowpea, green gram, ground nuts, chillies, bushita beans, brinjals etc. - are all rain fed. If the rains fail, the seeds do not germinate and if it rains at the wrong time, around harvest, the crops are ruined. Only rainfall at the correct time and in the correct quantity would ensure a good harvest. Completely dependent on the elements, chena cultivation is a "gamble" with a high risk factor. Much time and labour is expended in the arduous task of chena cultivation. The preparation of the land involves the felling of trees, clearing and burning of scrub and fencing. When the plants come up, they have to be protected against the ravages of wild animals - elephants, deer, sambhur, wild boar and porcupine. Every day from dusk to dawn the farmer has to keep vigil in his tiny watch-hut (pela) perched about 25 to 30 feet above the ground and built on stilts or the branches of a tall tree. To ward off wild animals, he keeps going a log-fire below his pela and from time to time shouts or lights crackers. If he falls asleep his entire crop could be devastated in a single night.

When the plants begin to bear, the crops have to be protected against the flocks of parrots, mynas, munias and other birds that descend in their hundreds. Usually the farmer's wife or children watch over the crops in the day time and chase away the marauding birds. Thus chena farmers have to struggle long and hard in order to reap the fruits of their labour.

Certain peasants who live on the banks of rivers (e.g. Kirindi Oya, Menik Ganga, Kuda Oya) are not as dependent on the elements as chena cultivators are. Using water pumps and hose, they are able to water their vegetable plots off the river. This type

of farming has a low risk element but a high cost of production due to the high price of kerosene oil.

If the weather has been favourable, farmers are rewarded with a bountiful harvest. With great eagerness they look forward to reaping the fruits of their sweat and toil. Often, hired labour has to be engaged for harvesting the crops, packing the produce into gunny bags and transporting them to a village fair or mudalali's store. Each village has one or two rich mudalalis (merchants) who sell foodstuffs and household requisites. They help the poor farmers by supplying provisions on credit and advancing loans for the purchase of seed and other agricultural inputs. In return, the farmers have to sell their produce to the mudalali who buys the lot for a song. Invariably the sales proceeds are barely sufficient to repay the loans taken during the period of cultivation. Thus, the farmer finds himself back at square one - in debt to the mudalali. So runs the vicious circle of rural indebtedness.

This tragic situation is brought about chiefly by the impersonal market forces of supply and demand - which determine the price. It so happens that all farmers grow the same type of crops which due to their seasonality are harvested around the same time. Consequently, the market is flooded with large quantities of the same type of vegetables and pulses. On account of increased supply, prices drop to ridiculously low levels, and because of the perishability of the produce, the farmers are compelled to sell at these prices.

Last week I visited some farmers in Lower Uva - at Wellawaya, Telulla, Ethiliwewa, Uva Kuda Oya and Tanamalwila. They all had the same sad story to tell me - how they had to sell their produce at rock-bottom prices. Brinjals and green chillies fetched only 75 cts. a kg. while vaga-batu, slightly larger than thalana-batu, could not be sold for even 50 cts. a kg. Some farmers who cultivate 'English' vegetables on the mountain slopes along the Ella-Wellawaya road, said that they could not sell cabbages for even 50 cts a kg. In Colombo and other big cities, these same vegetables are sold for at least 5 or 6 times this price. The wide disparity in the price paid by the urban consumer and that received by the rural producer indicates the degree of exploitation by middlemen and transport agents. A well-knit system of exploitation is in operation, where the village mudalalis collude with their urban counterparts to exploit both producer and consumer. Social workers, and NGOs cannot easily break these well organised exploitative structures. Public sector organisations like the Marketing Department and Markfed should

step in and benefit both producer and consumer by offering better prices to the former and cheaper vegetables to the latter, keeping only a reasonable profit margin to cover the costs of collection and distribution.

Housing and Sanitation

Most chena farmers live in small wattle & daub huts thatched with cadjans or illuk grass. Some of these huts are so small and dingy that one wonders how an entire family could live in them. However, when travelling along the road from Wellaway to Tanamalwila one gets the impression that the people of Lower Uva are well housed, since on both sides of the road are houses with tiled roofs and walls plastered and colour washed. But this is true only of houses that could be seen from the road. The owners were given soft-loans for improving their houses, as part of the "window-dressing" done by the State for the "Gam Udawa" held at Katara-gama in 1987. The houses further away beyond the reach of the eye remain in their same old dilapidated condition.

Toilets are a rarity in chena homesteads. It is customary for people to relieve themselves in the jungle or scrub near their houses and wash themselves at a stream or river. The prevalence of fly-borne bowel diseases among these people is no matter for surprise.

Food & Water

To most chena farmers, rice is a luxury they can ill afford. Their staple fare is "kurakkan thalapa" a mushy substance made of millet flour boiled in water. Little balls of this stuff are dipped into some gravy, popped into the mouth and swallowed. I tried kurakkan thalapa once and I swore never to try it again since this is one of the most bland and insipid foods I have ever eaten. People say that thalapa is very nutritious, but I must say that it does little credit to Lankan cuisine which is renowned for its hot and spicy dishes.

One seldom sees a well in a farmer's compound. People prefer to get their drinking water from a nearby river or stream, since well-water, they say, has a 'kivul' taste and is not suitable for drinking or bathing. A friend of mine, a foreigner, was truly shocked to see people washing and bathing themselves, washing their clothes, bathing cattle and dogs and taking pots of water home for drinking - all from the same river. The people hold the view that flowing water is immune to pollution. In times of drought, when tanks run dry and rivers are reduced to a near-stagnant

trickle. people dig holes on the tank / river bed and gather the little water that collects in these holes. Today, roadside tube-wells found in many villages provide water throughout the year. Our Prime Minister deserves full credit for this valuable service rendered to our rural people.

Displacement of Peasantry

In fairly recent times, the Uva peasantry were dealt a severe blow when thousands of hectares of fertile agricultural land in the Monaragala district were given over by the State to two trans-national corporations – the Pelwatte Sugar Co. and the Monaragala Sugar Co for large-scale sugarcane plantations. Entire villages have been displaced and thousands of peasants who have lived on this land for generations have been reduced to contract farmers or seasonal labour under these powerful agribusiness corporations. Environmentalists have issued clear warnings about the deleterious impact that the extensive deforestation would have on the ecology of Uva. The peasants, supported by political parties, peasant and labour unions, religious groups, human rights organisations, intellectuals and other concerned people, have struggled hard to protect their traditional land, sense of dignity and freedom. Despite the strong opposition and resistance, the powers-that-be have gone ahead with the projects in the name of “development” causing thereby a situation which could only be described as explosive.

Uva Peasantry and Estate Workers

For many decades it was an undeniable fact that the most oppressed sector in Lanka's population were the estate workers. Deprived of citizenship rights, paid low wages, living in dinky little “cooly-lines”, lacking sanitation, education and health facilities, they were indeed the worst off and most-to-be-pitied of all Lanka's people. Today, however, thanks to an increased social awareness among the estate workers, Trade Union action and political exigencies, these people are fast getting their citizenship better wages, housing, education and sanitation. Both governmental and non-governmental organizations are taking a keen interest in the plantation workers and much foreign aid is pumped into this sector to improve their lot.

In contrast, the Uva peasantry are not organized, they have no trade-unions, they are voiceless and largely ignored by all.

Concluding Reflections

The plight of the oppressed, exploited and marginalized Uva peasantry is indeed pitiable. To expect these people to endure their hopeless situation and suffer in silence much longer would be unrealistic. They have crossed the threshold of tolerance, and reached the end of the tether. If they find it impossible to liberate themselves by democratic means, they would be urged to try some other means. History has shown that the bullet sometimes succeeds where the ballot fails. The people of Uva rebelled against oppression 170 years ago, and history has a habit of repeating itself. Numerous acts of violence and political murders in the province of Uva indicate the desperate feelings of the people and the path they have chosen. The writing on the wall, in large block capitals, is clear and unmistakable. Uva, today, is a veritable powder keg and only one little spark is needed to start a widespread conflagration.

Derrick Mendis

NO ELECTED REPRESENTATION IN PARLIAMENT FOR A MILLION UP-COUNTRY TAMILS

The last general election ended with no elected representation in Parliament for over a million Up-country Tamil people of Indian origin. Even the Muslim minority community, through the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, won 4 seats in Parliament at the elections but not the Up-country Tamils.

It was in the 1947 general elections that the Ceylon Indian Congress was able to win 7 seats in Parliament. But the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948 robbed the Up-country Tamils of their citizenship and franchise. Consequent to the Indo-Ceylon Agreement (Implementation) Act of 1967 - which was enacted under the Sirima-Shastri Pact to resolve the problem of a million stateless people - many thousands of Up-country Tamils obtained citizenship and became entitled to vote. However, for 30 years the Up-country Tamil people were languishing without elected representation in Parliament.

It was only in 1977 that the CWC leader, Mr S. Thondaman, became the 3rd elected M. P. for Nuwara Eliya-Maskeliya electorate. Mr Thondaman joined the UNP government and became a Minister.

Though he promised that the government led by ex-President J. R. Jayawardene would solve the stateless problem, it was far from settled. So he started a prayer campaign in January 1986 while the 13 Unions comprising the Joint Plantation Trade Union Committee launched a strike to win citizenship rights for these people. The government then passed the Grant of Citizenship to Stateless Persons Act in February 1986 to extend citizenship altogether to nearly 275,000 persons within 18 months and settle the stateless problem once and for all. But the government failed dismally to implement this Act. Until November 1988 citizenship had been granted to only 39,276 persons under this Act. The nett result is that about 5 lakhs of people have continued to remain stateless.

It was on the eve of the Presidential election that the Grant of Citizenship to Stateless Persons (Special Provisions) Act was rushed through in Parliament and passed on 9 November 1988 declaring that all stateless people, who had applied for Sri Lankan citizenship, would automatically be recognized as citizens. But this belated legislation could not get the names of these people into the electoral register; even on the assumption that it would be genuinely implemented they have to wait several months for such registration. The truth is that even a large percentage of those who had obtained citizenship under the earlier Acts have not been registered as voters due to discriminatory administrative procedures followed by the government.

*A Veteran Trade Unionist Briefly Analyses
the Post-Electoral Situation*

In any case, after 4 decades, the general election in February 1989 kindled great hopes in the Up-country Tamils and they hoped to elect their own representatives to Parliament. The CWC fielded a total of 7 candidates in the Up-country areas in the UNP lists. However, on the nomination day the CWC organizer at Talawakelle, Mr P. Chandrasegaran, came to contest the election under the Democratic People's Liberation Front (DPLF). In view of this development Mr Thondaman called upon his flock to cast two votes for his nominees and one for other UNP candidates, hoping for reciprocity. This tactic boomeranged on the CWC; it only helped to boost Mr Gamini Dissanayake to get the highest percentage of votes any one polled at this general election.

All CWC candidates in the Up-country lost. Even the CWC's veteran trade union leader, Mr V. Annamalai, suffered ignominious defeat. The CWC by joining completely with the UNP not only lost its independent identity but also its chances of securing elected representatives in the Up-country. Chandrasegaran and the DPLF munched away a large chunk of its votes. The DPLF obtained 10,500 votes while Tamil candidates of the USA (United Socialist Alliance) got 3000, but none could win.

The result was that the Up-country Tamils numbering over a million people could not send a single elected representative to Parliament. This has caused grave concern among the Up-country Tamils, especially among the youth, who are longing for liberation from a life of misery and degradation in the plantations. It appears that only a leadership that can positively lead them out of this misery would be able to survive among the Up-country Tamils today.

- S. Nadesan

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NATESA IYER - A PROPHET FOR THE PLANTATIONS

Natesa Iyer is the name of an individual that needs to be remembered in the present context of our country with the highlighting of the differences in race, caste and creed. The history of 155 years of the plantation era has many heart burning stories to offer, and often the stories are tragedies. Here it is a different story - the story of NATESA IYER, a man who was primarily responsible for the awakening among the plantation workers.

He was an Indian Brahmin by birth from Tanjore. Tanjore is even now a prosperous area in South India. It was from there that Sri Wickrema Rajasinghe, the last King of Kandy, hailed. Thus it can be seen that not all who immigrated to Sri Lanka from South India in the 19th century did so only for employment in the plantations, as many people seem to think.

Natesa Iyer's life in Sri Lanka may be divided into two parts. He was a member of the Legislative Council from 1925 to 1930. Later from 1937 to 1947 he was a member of the State Council.

He had a flair for journalism. He was a Trade Unionist. His association with A. E. Goonesinha in mobilizing the urban workers and the estate workers has no parallel in the history of Sri Lanka. Finally, when Goonesinha took up an anti-Tamil stand, Natesa Iyer's critical attack on him was superbly done in his writing.

He was a lonely fighter for the plantation workers against the whole array of English planters. His was a call to the plantation workers to cease their slumber. He stood for their full emancipation. He felt that this could only be achieved by their joining hands with the Sinhalese. This eroded at a latter stage his support among the Indian Tamils. But Natesa Iyer had the courage of his convictions.

When the early estate population was of Indians alone, it was Natesa Iyer who said that the Sinhalese villagers should also be encouraged to be residential workers on estates. He believed that

The writer is the author of the Tamil book,
Desa Bakthan Ko Natesa Iyer, Colombo: Hill
Country Publishing House, 1988

this arrangement would give the required moral strength for the immigrant workers to fight injustice. He even advocated this in the State Council on 26 March 1941 in the following manner, "A few days back I had some trouble with an employer. He said, "Mr Iyer, you are playing into the hands of the Sinhalese." I said, "You have given us over to the Sinhalese. You have given us over to them, so why do you say that we are playing into the hands of the Sinhalese?" His reply was, "I love the Indian, because he is docile": (Hansard, 26 March 1941, p. 690). This is what Natesa Iyer hated. He did not want the workers to be servile.

He suggested that 25 percent of estate labour should be Sinhalese. He believed that this would help to change the docility of the Indians. He cited an incident in the State Council where a knife was used on an European planter because he had not treated the villagers properly. And he went on to say, 'I am for seeing that at least 25 per cent of the estate labour is Sinhalese in order to see that Indian labourers at least behave like men, instead of behaving like slaves' (ibid.,) p. 691).

He also proclaimed that up to then the worker's voice was a cry in the wilderness. In order to improve the standards of the immigrants on the estates and to solve the unemployment problem, he recommended that "at least 15 to 20 per cent of immigrant labour (be) repatriated to India" (ibid.). He also recommended inducements and

free passage to would-be repatriates. 'Therefore if the labourers were offered some attractive terms for repatriation, the 20 per cent I referred to will naturally go back, and the balance can be treated as nationals of this country, and thus (we can) have the matter settled' (ibid.).

Sir John Kotalawela, Mr S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Mr J. R. Jayawardena started thinking in the same way. But, after a lapse of how many years? If the problem could have been viewed in the correct perspective in 1941, we could have seen a different, better and better integrated Sri Lanka today.

Politics should not heed differences of caste, creed and race. The Sri Lankan politician should talk Sri Lankan politics. Natesa Iyer did this 46 years ago and why cannot we do that now?

Natesa Iyer was a fierce anti-imperialist. That is why he had the courage to start the first Trade Union for the estate workers in 1933. Today the strength of the Unions gives them bargaining power and the Unions have provided employment for many. For Natesa Iyer the task was not easy. The British Raj in Ceylon was at its height and it was dangerous to oppose it. Natesa Iyer dared. He was throughout his life an agitator.

— Saral Nadan

R. R. Sivalingam on

NATESA IYER AND SARAL NADAN

(R. R. Sivalingam has reviewed Saral Nadan's book on Natesa Iyer in a recent issue of *Exodus*. We here publish some excerpts from the review.)

'Publicity and popularity seem to have been his (NI's) twin passions.... But Iyer was also from the beginning to the end conscious of the fact that he was an Indian and that he was an Iyer. He does not seem to have built any institution to outlast him. He does not seem to have laid any foundation on which the Indian community could build in the future. All his work perished with him. What he has left after him is only a memory and his house in Hatton which is now Indira Hotel selling liquor. What irony for a man who campaigned against alcoholism in the plantations...

Iyer is a person who exploited every opportunity in Sri Lanka, first for his own personal glorification and secondly to champion the cause of the Indians... Iyer changed from organization to organization and moved from one cause to another to suit himself. Iyer was well known for his vindictive pen and venomous petitions. Iyer was not averse to blackmailing and intimidating his enemies... Iyer was frightened of powerful movements and powerful personalities and kept himself isolated from historical trends.

A community which commemorates and remembers its leaders is a community that has come of age. This book is therefore symbolic of the new urges of the plantation community... Saral Nadan's biography of Natesa Iyer is by any standard the most outstanding publication to emanate from the hill country in the last 30 years. It shines by contrast with politically motivated autobiographies.

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MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS OF THE CSPA

(2) PLANTATION WORKER FELLOWSHIP (PWF)

(No 1 in this series of articles - on GAMI SEVA SEVANA - appeared in Voice, No 34, July 1988. Member Organizations are requested to send in similar articles on the history, structure, aims and activities of their groups for publication in future issues of this Bulletin.)

The Plantation Workers' Fellowship consists of a group of well-oriented volunteers who have implemented Community Development Programmes amongst the plantation workers. The volunteers were working under the auspices of the Hatton Social Action Centre for a considerable period. It is very relevant to record what these animators have been able to achieve in the past so as to justify the claim that they can work alone as a separate group.

In 1973 an ambitious programme of conscientization of these workers was initiated by the Hatton Social Action Centre. It was only in 1975 that the programme could have a greater impact on the target groups. Several cultural groups were organized in the estates. They were made use of to spotlight social themes in their cultural activities.

Seminars, group discussions, performances of cultural activities etc were the major noteworthy activities of our group.

In 1975 we organized a literacy campaign. Then we had only three reading rooms in the estates. But today we have established more than twenty-five reading rooms in the areas where we work.

As PWF we have extended our work to cover some areas which were not touched by HATSAC. We organize competitions in various subjects to encourage the plantation youths hitherto neglected in many respects. We give them training in skills and after some time exhibitions where products could be sold are organized.

We are happy to state that through the activities described above it was possible to inculcate fellowship, cooperation and understanding among the estate population in the areas where we work.

Because of the very difficult situation of racial conflict and tension prevailing throughout 1984 the work of the PWF had to be curtailed. But PWF carries on its work facing the problems with confidence. The advice and the assistance of the CSPA is very valuable towards achieving its goal.

— S. T. Thiagarajah, Chief Animator : PWF

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