

Status of School Education of the Plantation Community in Sri Lanka:

Issues and Challenges for the Future



Human Development Organization
Sri Lanka



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1. Introduction

Education is an instrument and source of social development. Denial of the right to education is also the denial of the right to development of a community and a nation. Successive governments of Sri Lanka have given the highest priority to education since the introduction of universal free education in 1949. The formal education systems have been developed with an extensive network of schools and higher educational institutions in the country. Mid-day meal programmes, and the supply of free school books and uniforms for school children, are the most recent programmes launched by the government to further enhance the welfare package. Various measures introduced for further improvement of the national education¹ enabled Sri Lanka achieve higher literacy rate in the region, surpassing other South Asian Countries like India (65 percent), Bangladesh (63.00 percent) and Pakistan (54 percent).² While all these improvements were taking place at the national level, one could easily identify some groups as being educationally disadvantaged. For example, while the literacy rate of the Sri Lankan population has reached 92 percent, the plantation sector has only a 76 percent literacy rate.³ This indicates the disadvantageous position of the plantation workers in respect of education when compared to national level of achievements.

As education in a democratic society benefits all people, it must ensure that they become aware of the advantages which education can bring. The education needed to make democracy work effectively is not just any kind of education but an education which disciplines the mind; enriches the spirit and improves the living condition. Education enables people to develop skills and acquire knowledge and produces a better understanding of the social and physical environment. Yet, educationally the plantation people are disadvantaged, in comparison with the rest of the people in the country. The brief presentation here is to basically address the following issues.

¹ Extension of free education by the government of Sri Lanka in 1947, distribution of free books for school children from 1980, Introduce free meal programme from 1988, Distributes free uniform from 1992 etc.

² The figures on literacy rates have been obtained from <http://www.indiaonlinepages.com/population/literacy-rate-in-india.html> (12.10.2010)

³ Statistical Department, (2006) *Report on Consumer Finances and Socio Economic Survey 2003/04*, Central Bank of Sri Lanka.



- What are the programmes that have been implemented to uplift the plantation sector schools?
- How, it has helped to enhance the level of education of the plantation community?
- What are the educational issues still persisting among the plantation community?

These are some of the issues that will be considered here.

2. Plantation Community

Most in the plantation community are ethnically Indian Tamil. The Indian Tamils are descendents of the immigrants who came under the British rule to Sri Lanka, to work mainly in the plantations in the central highlands. The Indian Tamils are separate from other ethnic groups including the Sri Lankan Tamils who are largely concentrated in the Northern and Eastern regions of the country. Some 90 percent of the Indian Tamils are Hindus. Their religious beliefs and rituals have identity with South Indian culture. A segment of Indian Tamils reported themselves as being ethnically 'Sri Lankan Tamils' in the last two censuses, which but is indeed a different ethnic group in the country. As a result, only estimates have been made to form a point of debatable evidence, i.e. the total population of the Indian Tamils could be 1,238,800 and formed 6.41 percent of the total population of the country in 2001.⁴ Approximately 0.9 million Indian Tamils are living in the plantation sector.⁵

The World Bank in its recent study on the economy of Sri Lanka concluded that the poverty level was very high (32%) among the estate sector community.⁶ Apart from this, the Economic Management Sector Unit of the South Asia Region on Poverty Assessment Engendering Growth with Equity Opportunities and Challenges, Sri Lanka,⁷ reveals thatwhile rural poverty declined by less than 5 percentage points, poverty in the estate sector

⁴ Chandrabose, A.S., (2004) 'Demographic Profile of Sri Lanka', Rights & Power Sharing Mechanism for Non Territorial Minority Communities in Sri Lanka, FES, pp 43-59.

⁵ Department of Census and Statistics, (2001) *Preliminary Release, Population by Sex, Age, Religion, Ethnicity according to District and DS Division (provisional)*, Sri Lanka.

⁶ Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Sector Unit, (January 15, 2007), *Sri Lanka Poverty Assessment – Engendering Growth with Equity Opportunities and Challenges, South Asian Regions*, World Bank.

⁷ *Ibid*, p 85

increased by about 50 percent identifying this sector the poorest in the country. The report also went on to say that nearly 30 percent of the population in the estate sector was poor but, only 13 percent of the households interviewed, reported receiving cash transfers from the government welfare programmes. At national level, such assistance is extended to much more than 75 to 85 percent of the poor income groups. It is a well known fact that around 80 percent of the plantation workers ethnically identified as Indian Tamils, who mainly concentrate in the large scale tea and rubber plantation sector in the country and they are the poorest segment in the country.

The Indian Tamils are mainly occupied in the tea sector, while a considerable number of them are also involved in the rubber plantation sector, particularly in the southern areas of the country. The others, around 0.6 million of them, are not involved in the plantation sector. A cross section of them migrated from the plantation areas to escape from frequent attacks by other villagers and, is living in the Northern and Eastern regions. The others are mainly involved in trading in the urban areas. A considerable number of the Indian Tamils are also engaged as sanitary workers, while also engaging in shoe mending in the urban areas and they are identified as the most vulnerable groups in the country.⁸

3. Tea Plantation

Plantation industry which is highly labour intensive sector requires labour throughout the year, and the nature of work needs the involvement of both the male and female labour force. Plucking of tea leaves is an important activity and is a specialized job done by the female workforce in the country. Half of the Indian Tamil plantation work force is female. The plantation sector is of a unique character as a labour force. For a larger part, the plantations depend on a resident workforce.

Several other ancillary activities like transportation, marketing, supply of fertilizers etc. arise from the plantation sector. The crops contributed 2.2 percent to the GDP in 2009. Value of tea exports reached around Rs.1.3 billion and it was 16.7 percent of the total export earnings in that year.⁹ This was about 22 percent of the world tea output and roughly 18 percent of the total tea exports.¹⁰ As far as the export value of tea in the total agriculture is concerned, it was

⁸ K. Wijeyathilaka and F.Zackaria (2001) *Sexual Harassment at Work – Plantation Sector*, ILO, publication Colombo

⁹ Compiled the data from the Annual Report – 2009, Central bank of Sri Lanka

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.51



as high as 70 percent in Sri Lanka in 2008. The contribution of tea was roughly 2 percent to the Gross Domestic Production (GDP) in Sri Lanka in 2008.¹¹

Total tea production has been more or less stable during the last decade, producing an average of 303 million kg during 2000/02 and 304 million kg during 2007/09. In the meantime, the total rubber production had increased by 31.4 percent from 87.6 million kg to 127.3 million kg between 2000/02 and 2007/09.¹²

4. Main objective of the study

1. To identify the issues related to quality of schools available for the children of the plantation community.
2. To examine the distribution of state resources for plantation schools.
3. To study the prejudice faced by the children of the plantation workers to pursue education in their own language.
4. To identify the difficulties faced by the children of the plantation workers to continue secondary levels of education in Sri Lanka.

5. Methodology

The study is based on both the primary and secondary data. The published books reports, manuscripts are used as secondary information for this study. Apart from the secondary data, Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were conducted in order to identify the issues related to school education in the districts of Ratnapura and Nuwara Eliya in the months of May and July 2010. The members who were invited to participate in the FGDs were the senior teachers, principals, parents and well wishers in the selected districts.

6. Opening of Educational Facilities to the Plantation workers

Neglect of the plantation sector with respect to educational facility dates back to the colonial administration of Sri Lanka, who failed to provide the educational facilities to the children of plantation workers. It was their view that the children than being given education, could help their parents and, would be more beneficial to the plantation industry. Almost all the major reforms in education had left the estate sector untouched. The beginning of education in the

¹¹ *Ibid*, p 51

¹² Central Bank of Sri Lanka, (various issues), *Annual Report*



estate sector was directly linked to the entire estate system. Schools were run by the management of the estates, and, some take the view that the purpose of these schools were to keep the children occupied while their parents worked, and not to give them a meaningful education¹³.

In 1905, the WACE Commission which considered the provision of education for plantation children pointed out that the education for the estate children need not form part of the local (school) curriculum which, they recommended for the rest of the school-going population.¹⁴ They accepted the practice of having line - schools on every estate. In short, until 1907, the government did not make definite arrangements for the education of these children.

The right to education has been upheld in various international agreements and instruments including Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 13 and 14 of the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Article, 29(1) of the Convention of the Rights of the Child, Convention Against Discrimination in Education (1960) and Constitution of Sri Lanka (1978) Chapter VI 27(7) Directive principles of state policy and fundamental duties states that "the complete eradication of illiteracy and the assurance to all persons of the right to universal and equal access to education at all levels."

During the colonial era, when English schools and vernacular schools were established as part of the government's educational programs, the plantation sector was left out.¹⁵ From the early part of the 20th century the responsibility of their education had been in the hands of the plantation management, which kept educational standards of the plantation community at the lowest level. In fact, a great amount of interest was shown in the development of education at the national level during the 20th century. Commissions and Committees were appointed, and reports and white papers were published but none of these referred to the disadvantaged position of the plantation workers in respect of education. For example even the Special Committee's Report of 1945 and the National Education Commission Report of 1961 and 1964, which made proposals for a national stream of education, failed to make recommendations for the improvement of the education of the children of plantation workers.

¹³ People's Bank, (March 1980), Economic Review, *Estate Labour*, p.17.

¹⁴ Sandrasegaram, S., (1990), Educational Problems of the Plantation Community, MIRJE, No.6 Alove Avenue, Colombo..

¹⁵ Gnanamuthu G.A. (1997), Education and the Plantation Workers in Sri Lanka., Colombo.

The British Companies that managed these estates for over a century up to 1976, too did not encourage schooling, and the grades in those schools extended only up to five.

The Educational Ordinance No. 26 of 1947 was an important landmark in the history of this country, which introduced the free education system in all government schools and state aided schools including the universities. However, the estate schools were excluded from enjoying the benefits of this ordinance. In respect of estate schools, a special provision was made. The curriculum of the estate schools was limited to reading, writing, arithmetic, speech, games and drill. A few children, who sought further education, went to the town or village schools close to the plantations.

Generally the children of the plantation community could not proceed beyond the primary stage. This in turn has denied them their due share of employment in the estate sector services as evident from the ethnic wise distribution of employment in this sector.

Health and nutrition are also important factors which affect education. Anemia is widespread among women plantation workers in Sri Lanka. Generally the plantation women eat whatever remains after the men and children have been fed even during her pregnancy.¹ This means that they are undernourished and overworked and therefore they produce weak children.

The benefits of the improvements made to the national system of education could not accrue to this community as a result of the absence of a concerted policy to raise its educational levels; their schools remained and functioned outside the national system of education until they were taken over by the state in 1977. In the meantime, as around a million people of Indian Origin had been rendered stateless as a result of the citizenship laws, very few Indians were able to produce citizenship certificates for admission of their children to government schools.

It should be noted that the schools which functioned outside the national system did not recruit properly qualified teachers to teach the children of the estate workers. The teachers who taught in the estate schools were ill-qualified and poorly paid prior to nationalization of the estate schools. Of the total number of teachers appointed by the estate management which was 1115, as many as 927 were un-certificated and only 79 of them had undergone some training in 1958.¹⁶ The estimated figures show that the number of estate schools which was

¹⁶ S. Nadesan, (1993), *A History of the Up-Country Tamil People in Sri Lanka*, Nandalala Publication, p.288.



997 in 1948 was reduced to 852 in 1965, due to the sale of large scale estates at end of World War II. The greedy new land owners had no interest in maintaining the schools and, most of the schools were transformed into tea weighing sheds in the estates.¹⁷

The SLFP, which formed the government in 1970, announced the nationalization of all the estate schools. But initially only 38 schools were nationalized and, subsequently, through the effort taken by the Minister of Plantation Industry then Dr. Colvin R De Silva, it reached to around 100 estate schools (to be nationalized). However, only after the Land Reform Law of 1975, out of 721 schools 350 were taken over by the government and, the remaining ones were taken over in 1981.¹⁸

But, until 1986 the government had not taken any constructive measure to rehabilitate the taken over schools, except allocation from decentralized budget. At this juncture the late Mr. Soumiyamoorthy Thondaman President of the Ceylon Workers Congress, who was the only parliamentarian representing the Indian Tamil community provided the benefits of the decentralized budget. The pupil teacher ratio was as high as 64:1 in the plantation schools as compared to the national figure of 21:1 up to 1976.¹⁹ In Sri Lanka, improvement in the female literacy rate over the years was particularly impressive (85.2 % in 1986/87 and 89.4 % in 1996/97). But the literacy rate of the plantation women during the same period was 58.1% and 67.3 respectively. In the year 2003/04 national level literacy rate of male and female was 94.5% and 90.6% respectively. In the same year the rural literacy rate of male and female was 94.7% and 91.1%. But for the plantation sector it was 88.3% for male and 74.7% for female. Despite the admirable figures nationally, there are serious disparities in educational achievement and provision in different districts, and among all sectors, between rural and plantation sectors. The disadvantage of the estate community in relation to education was shown in the CFS report in 2003/04. This showed the Plantation community, and, particularly the plantation women, as having the lowest literacy rate compared to other communities, and plantation women being the most disadvantaged.²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid, p 288

¹⁸ Ibid, p 288

¹⁹ S. Sandarasegaram & Raja Gunawardhane, (July 1997), *Education of Disadvantaged Communities in Asia*, Public lecture delivered at the Auburn University, Alabama, USA, pp 21-25.

²⁰ Statistical Department, (2005) Report on Consumer and Finances and Socio Economic Survey Sri Lanka 2003/04, Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2005.



School avoidance in the plantation sector is relatively high as per data. For example, the school avoidance in the age group of 5 to 14 was 9.5 percent among the plantation community, whereas it is 6.6 percent in the rural sector and 7.3 percent in the urban sector during 2003/04. The statistics show that school avoidance among the females in the plantation sector as high as 10.2 percent, whereas in the urban and rural sector is 8.5 percent and 7.5 percent respectively.²¹

Until the recent times, education for even the mere sake of it was considered unnecessary and undesirable for female children in plantations because the girl's future was seen to be limited to plantation work as either tea plucker or rubber tapper. Generally a plantation woman has to work around 10-12 hours a day. Domestic works such as cooking, collecting firewood, caring for children, washing clothes, domestic livestock keeping - take much of her day. This is in addition to the hours of estate field work. Occupied for such long hours, she has little time for normal social contacts and even for social visits to neighbors within the estate community.

7. Development of Plantation Schools

Though the government, took over the estate schools it did not have a program to uplift those schools. The estate schools were mainly handled by a single teacher, and it was commonly known as 'one teacher school' to teach from grade one to grade five classes. At an interview a retired estate school teacher in Dickoya pointed out that the teachers were appointed by the estate management and monitored by the estate superintendent unlike these days. The estate school buildings were poor in condition and not on par with any of the primary schools in the rural or urban sector in the country. Only the following donors initiated development of the plantation schools.

1. The Plantation Schools Education Development Project (PSEDP) supported by Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA) which came under the Ministry of Education. This was perhaps the most important of these programs. 260 plantation schools were identified for development under the program and the target was reached by end of 1995.
2. Another major project is the establishment of College of Education (Sri Pada College of Education in Patana) by German Agency for Technical Co-operation (GTZ) to provide Teacher Training for the plantation school teachers, in 1992. Establishment of the

²¹ *Ibid*



Colleges of Education have been done by the successive governments in other areas since 1985 but such facilities were not available to the plantation sector until the GTZ intervention. Approximately 800 teachers from the plantation community have been benefited under the GTZ project. The Sri Pada College of Education in Patana offers eight different programmes. In addition to establishing the College of Education, the GTZ has also helped construct 20 schools in the proximity of Hatton in the Nuwara Eliya district.

3. The World Bank funded construction of 11 schools and Asian Development Bank helped for two schools
4. The Integrated Rural Development Project (IRDP) was also involved in the Development of the plantation schools constructing 10 schools in the Badulla district 1984 - 88.

In 1986, a 12 year program to develop 420 plantation schools, funded by the government of Sweden was initiated. These schools are currently being rehabilitated under another project funded by the same country. Another 141 schools have been developed under other projects. Still 270 schools remain in their original neglected state.²²

In addition, increased funds from a ministerial allocation under the decentralized budget, of a then Cabinet Minister became available for plantation education development. All these have undoubtedly contributed to some extent towards the improvement of schools at the primary stage of education. However, the backlog is so great that a major effort is still needed to raise the plantation schools to the national level. Table 1 shows the disparity in educational level between the estate and other sectors.

²² Navaratne, C., (2004), Major Issues in the Development of Education in the plantation (mimeographed)

**Table 1****Population by educational level by sectors in Sri Lanka 1973 to 2003/04 (in percentage)**

Categories	Estate Sector				National Average			
	1973	1981/82	1996/97	2003/04	1973	1981/82	1996/97	2003/04
Illiterates	51.7	35.2	23.1	24.6	30.1	14.6	8.2	8.0
Primary and above	40.6	44.42	76.1	78.2	37.6	84.9	91.4	92.5
Secondary and above	6.2	8.46	20.2	28.4	25.8	42.0	56.2	59.4
Post Secondary	1.5	1.71	2.1	2.8	0.4	12.8	20.7	22.7

Source: Compiled from the publications of the Report on Consumer and Finances and Socio Economic Survey Sri Lanka 1973, 1978/79, 1981/82, 2003/04., Statistical Department, Central Bank of Sri Lanka.

The Table 1 data clearly shows that there have been improvements of school education in the estate sector over the last three decades. But none of these achievements is comparable to the national level data. The estate sector illiteracy rate had significantly declined from 51.7 percent in 1973 to 24.6 percent in 2003/04. The country illiteracy rate was 8 percent in 2003/04. It can be presumed that the prime section of the 8 percent could be from the plantation community. The persons with the secondary levels of education in the country are 59.4 percent. However, in the estate sector it is only 20.2 percent. That the educational achievement of a person in the estate sector on the average is more or less half the achievement of any other average Sri Lankan is clear.

8. Distribution of state resources for plantation schools

There are 9,678 government schools and, among them 2,780 (or 28.72 percent) are Tamil schools. And, 818 of them are concentrated in the plantation districts namely, Nuwara Eliya (290), Badulla (156), Kandy (103), Ratnapura (92), Kegalle (66), Kalutara (38), Matale (35), Monaragala (12), Kurunegala (6), Colombo (5) and the districts of Galle and Matara have 4 each. Table 2 shows the distribution of different types of school in the selected plantation districts of the country.

Table 2

Distribution of different type of schools in the plantation districts*

Districts	1AB			1C			2			3		
	S	T	M	S	T	M	S	T	M	S	T	M
Kandy	37	04	08	132	15	20	209	36	09	123	43	05
Matale	10	02	04	54	04	10	97	10	02	95	13	06
N-Eliya	19	07	02	52	30	02	82	69	08	61	171	13
Badulla	29	02	02	101	16	05	145	42	04	78	87	09
Ratnapura	29	00	01	86	06	02	258	22	05	105	59	05
Kegalle	23	00	04	87	04	10	189	11	06	139	47	04
Total	147	15	21	512	75	49	980	190	34	601	420	42

S - Sinhala

T - Tamil

M - Muslim

Source: Compiled from the School Census -2007, preliminary Report, MOE, Data obtained from the project office of the plantation School unit, MOE and the statistics provided by Mr Wijayanathan, Resource Center, Hatton

* exclude the plantation sector schools in the districts of Colombo, Kalutara, Monaragala, Galle and Kurunegala

According to Table 3 there are only 15 1AB schools in the plantation districts for the children of the plantation community to study Science subjects for the General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level) whereas there are 147 schools for Sinhalese and 21 for Muslims. Vast differences can be observed in the Nuwara Eliya District which has around 58 percent of Tamil speaking communities. But only 9 schools have been developed to 1AB status, whereas the 42 percent Sinhala medium students have two times the facilities available to the Tamil speaking students in the district.

In the Kandy District, with a large Tamil population (165,000), there are only 04 1AB schools for Tamil students. In Kegalle, 1AB schools are non existent to the Tamil population which is 60,000. The Tamil plantation population in the district of Ratnapura, which is around 11 percent of the total population does not have the schools with GGE A/L sciences, while it is available for others who are less than the plantation, Tamils in the district. This type of disparities also can be observed in the district of Badulla, which has 18 percent of the Tamil population but the distribution of schools for Tamil students shows that they have the opportunity for the enrolment to the Arts and Commerce streams in the GGE A/L classes than the sciences. There are two 1AB schools in the district, located in the vicinity of the main town areas, but not reachable to many aspiring plantation children.

Out of 700 Tamil schools (exclusive of the plantation schools in the districts of Colombo, Kalutara, Monaragela, Galle and Kurunegela) only 75 (or 10 percent) are 1C type schools. A large number of schools i.e 420 (or 60 percent) are type 3 schools in these districts. The data presented here clearly indicates that the educational provision for the bulk of the plantation community is limited to primary level along with a meagre provision for collegiate education. This is in spite of various development programs introduced during the last three decades.

Mysterious deaths of Child Labuors in Plantation.

1. L. Sumathi (14) and M. Jeewarani (13) from one of an estate in Maskeliya entered two separate houses in Baudhaloka Mawatha, Colombo for job in April 2009. Both these children – one at businessman's and another, at his relative's house, were found dead on 15/08/2009 in a waste water outlet in Baudhaloka Mawatha. The deaths took place under mysterious circumstances. Both children from poverty stricken families had been introduced to the houses, by a broker.

2. R. Kumudili (15) daughter of an Estate in Deltota, dropped out of the school having reached grade 8. This was prompted by the family's financial strait and she tried to find a solution to the family's woes. This attempt ended in her securing in Mooloya Estate Superintendent's bungalow a job as a domestic aide on a monthly salary of Rs. 2000/= with the help of a job broker. In the bungalow, Kumudili who was a bright student – found another aide Jeyanthi (27).

While they both continued in the bungalow work, the Superintendent was transferred to one of a estates in the Kegalle District. Kumudili and Jeyanthi too had to go to the estate with the Superintendent's family, but, they could not inform their parents about their departure.

Parents were not aware of the daughters leaving for another estate until one day Kumudili called the parents from the Estate bungalow. Through the broker had known the Superintendent's transfer from the previous estate to to the new estate, he had not informed Kumudili's parents either.

Thereafter, Kumudili's parents went to Eheliyagoda, but their attempts to meet the daughter failed. On 10th Decemebr 2009 the Superintendent informed Kumudili's father of her death by phone. Kumudili's death which ended in a mystery ended her attempt to rid her family of hunger which had also prompted her to drop out of school.

Still the existence of a relatively smaller number of 1AB and 1C type Tamil schools is an indication that the education of a majority of the plantation Tamil children is largely restricted to primary levels of education.

A study conducted in 1994 showed that the total number of Tamil students qualified to enroll to G.C.E A/L classes in the 1AB schools in all the plantation districts, was 400 students in 1994. After a period of little over a decade, the number to qualify for the enrollment of such classes had increased to around 1800 students in 2007.

9. Availability of Teachers

Availability of teachers, particularly for science and mathematics in the plantation schools is a major challenge faced by the plantation community. In the meantime, appointing qualified teachers, and more sustaining their services continuously for the children of this community is another formidable challenge.

Steps were taken to address the teacher shortage particularly in the primary and secondary schools in the plantations, through recruitment of teachers from among the plantation community in 2008. Under this special scheme, 3179 G.C.E A/L qualified teachers were appointed. Most of them came from the plantation sector and their appointments on the basis of vacancies in schools, had to continue serving in a particular school for a minimum of ten years. These new appointments somewhat solved the problem relating to science and mathematics teaching at the primary and secondary levels, but the issue of teacher shortage for the senior secondary classes still remains.

Table 3

Different categories of teachers in the plantation schools -2006

Categories of Teachers	Graduates	Trained	Untrained	Trainee & Others	Total
Plantation Schools	701 (9.73)	4465 (61.98)	1828 (25.37)	209 (2.92)	7203 (100.00)
Sri Lanka	72,126 (34.62)	127,499(61.21)	7,087 (3.40)	884 (0.77)	208,277 (100.00)

Source: Compiled from the School Census -2007, preliminary Report, MOE and the data from the Plantation Unit of the MOE, Sri Lanka – 2006

According to a Plantation Schools Unit of the Ministry of Education source, in 2006 the number of teachers teaching in 818 schools country - wide was 7203. But this number does not include the teachers appointed in 2008. The Table 3 reveals the different categories of teachers serving in the plantation schools.

The other issue relates to the graduate teachers in the plantation schools. Most of them are external graduates and not specialized in a particular subject. Moreover, the subjects which the graduate teachers have completed do not make them competent for teaching G.C.E A/L classes. For example, most of them have followed Tamil, Hindu Culture and Philosophy for their undergraduate subjects. One more aspect is that the graduate teachers who have obtained their degrees externally are reluctant to take the responsibility of teaching G.C.E A/L subjects as they feel that they have not undergone sufficient training in the subject related areas, unlike the undergraduates in the national university system.

The figure showing the distribution of trained teachers in the plantation schools is in par with the national level figure which is 61 percent. This may be the contribution made by the Teacher Training College in Kotagala, College of Education in Pattana and the expansion of



education system by the National Institute of Education to the plantation areas. However, the number of graduate teachers in the plantation schools is far below the number of teachers in the average schools in the country. The percentage of graduate teachers in Sri Lankan schools is 34.62 percent, whereas it is only 9.73 percent in the plantation schools.

The above table also reveals that the backward condition of the plantation schools arises from the fact that most of the teachers in those schools are untrained. On an average, only 3 percent of the teachers are untrained teachers in the country, but it is as high as 25 percent in the plantation schools. This has remained an unchanged situation from the inception of plantation schools in the country.

On the one hand the existence of a lower number of graduate teachers and on the other the presence of a large number of untrained teachers could be the major factor contributing to poor performance of the plantation sector children.

10. Performance of the Students

818 schools have been categorized as plantation schools, with 197,123 students enrolled to these schools in 2006. The total number of students in the primary and secondary classes was 96,904 and 93,217 respectively. However, the students enrolled for the senior secondary i.e. Grade 12 -13 were only 7002 which is much lower than the enrolment rate of the average school students in Sri Lanka.²³

According to table 4 national data, around 244,459, or 13 percent of the students, were enrolled for G.C.E A/L classes in 2006 from their respective General Certificate Education (Ordinary Level) examinations. But, among them 6777, or 8 percent, were from plantation schools. It should be noted that the number enrolled for G.C.E A/L classes also varies from district to district in the plantation areas, lowest being from Ratnapura - which is 4.30 percent (330) of the students. Only in the Matale district, the number enrolled for G.C.E A/L slightly matches with the average national level enrolment figures. The table 4 data shows the different dimensions of student performance in the secondary and senior secondary classes in the country.

²³ Compiled from Preliminary Report School Census 2007, published by the statistical Branch of the Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka, in 2008.



Table 4

Number of students in the secondary and senior secondary classes in the country-2006

Districts	National Schools		Plantation Schools	
	Grade 6-11	Grade 12-13	Grade 6-11	Grade 12-13
Kandy	117,646	18,752 (15.93)	13,200	1,032 (7.81)
Matale	41,334	5,162 (12.48)	3,561	461 (12.94)
Nuwara Eliya	33,323	4,043 (12.13)	41,599	3,389 (8.14)
Badulla	70,957	8,890 (12.52)	18,019	1,559 (8.65)
Ratnapura	97,208	12,989 (13.36)	7,672	330 (4.30)
Sri Lanka	1,889,899	244,459 (12.93)	84,051	6,721 (8.05)

Source: Compiled from the School Census – 2007 and the data of the Plantation Unit of the MOE, Sri Lanka – 2006

The progress of the plantation children in the competitive examinations of G.C.E O/L in the recent past is not impressive. The recent statistics show that the students who passed with six subjects in their first attempt were 40.92 percent in 2006, but in the plantation schools it was in the range of between 25 and 35 percent. For the schools coming under the zonal education office of Nuwara Eliya, Hatton, Badulla and Passara where there is a large number of plantation schools, the pass rate in the first attempt of G.C.E O/L in 2006 as 26.91 percent, 31.39 percent, 35.81 percent and 25.32 percent respectively.

Most of the students who completed the G.C.E O/L level are not qualified to continue their education in G.C.E A/L classes. In the country, only 51.22 percent were qualified to be enrolled for G.C.E A/L in 2006. As far as the plantation areas are concerned the lowest percentage of the plantation children qualified for A/L studies is recorded from the Education Zone of Passara which is - 34 percent. But from Badulla Zone it is 46.71 percent. The Educational Zones of Nuwara Eliya and Hatton with around 90 percent of the children of the plantation Tamils the qualifying rate for G.C.E A/L is only 37.79 and 36.06 respectively. It should be noted that around 65 percent of the students who went up to G.C.E O/L classes left schools without enrolment to G.C.E A/L classes, the number being around 54,000 in the year 2006.²⁴

²⁴ Compiled from Preliminary Report School Census 2007, published by the statistical Branch of the Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka, in 2008.

Although some progress has been made in terms of performance in certain subjects of G.C.E O/L examination, the study conducted about the performance of plantation children shows that 89.01 percent of the students failed in mathematics in 1995.²⁵ The failure rate in English, Science, Social Studies and Tamil Language was 81.00 percent, 74.2 percent, 55.8 percent and 31.4 percent respectively. But the situation had improved considerably within the last 10 years. Accordingly, the failure rate in Mathematics had declined to 64 percent in 2006. Likewise the failure rates mainly in the subjects of English, Science, Social Studies and Tamil Language have come down to 74.7 percent, 67 percent, 34.4 percent and 20.5 percent respectively.

There are reasons for the plantation children's low level achievements in the secondary level education. One of the reasons is lack of schools in the proximity to continue their secondary level education. A retired Assistant Director of the Zonal Education Office of Gampola states the number of 1C schools coming under that Zonal Education Office was 18, and out of them 12 schools were located in the main town areas around - 15 to 20 kilometers away from the estates. The potential plantation students have to take additional trouble to travel a long distance to the 1C schools to pursue their secondary education.

In addition, the poor transport facility particularly between the estates and the town areas is one of the key challenges faced by the plantation students pursuing secondary education. One of those challenges the Tamil students (particularly in the Ratnapura, Kegalle and Kalutara Districts) face is when traveling in the public transport vehicles - buses.

11. Focus Group Discussion

i. A focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted in one of the estates in Ratnapura - Kahawatta in August 2010. Of the nine participants in the FGD one was a retired principal, one graduate teacher, three trained teachers and four newly appointed teachers from different schools in the area. The discussion was held in the retired principal's quarters on the estate in the morning hours.

According to the information provided by them, there were around 110,000 plantation workers in the Ratnapura district which is nine percent of the population of the Ratnapura district. Every estate has a primary school, the total number of such estate primary schools

²⁵ Chandrabose A.S. (1995), Present Status of Tamil Schools in the Plantations and an Action Programme for Upgrading these Schools, SSA. Colombo.



being 64 in the district. The number of Type 2 schools in the district is 20. There are around 5 schools with facilities to go up to G.C.E Advanced Level classes.

The parents try to send their children to the town schools for secondary education. Therefore the number of students in the estate school is relatively small. There are estate schools, with only 20 students. Those who join the primary schools, leave once they get admission to the secondary schools in the town. Therefore the drop out rate in the primary schools is relatively high.

According to a female teacher "the plantation students while traveling from estate to town school in private or public transport, face harassment from their Sinhala counterparts, which is a common phenomenon in this area. There is only one route which is used by students traveling from the estate to town schools. Generally the Tamil students are not allowed to take their seats while traveling in the bus".

A student of one of the Central Schools was beaten by the other school boys. This occurred in April 2010. It was simply because he was seated in the back seat of the school bus which is generally forbidden to the plantation students to do. Apart from this, the Tamil students, particularly girls, are facing a number of difficulties while traveling by buses along with other students. The education authorities did not take any action on this matter. These are the unsolved common issues for the entire Tamil plantation workers in the district of Ratnapura and the situation is same for the plantation children in the Kegalle, Kandy, Matale, Matara, Galle and Kalutara Districts.

According to a principal who participated in the FGD, teacher shortage for Science and Mathematics subjects is a crucial issue in the area. Generally the plantation schools are situated far away from the town and main road. These schools do not have proper transport and other infrastructure facilities, and teachers are compelled to walk for around one to two hours from the main road to reach the school located in the hilly areas.

There are incidents where the Tamil students are also compelled to study in the Sinhala medium schools because of non availability of Tamil medium schools. For example in Kalawana area – most of the Tamils working in tea small holdings, are sending their children to Sinhala medium schools. The Tamil speaking community concentrated in some parts of Ratnapura District, are studying in the Sinhala medium because of non availability of Tamil schools. In one of the DS Divisions in Ratnapura District, there are around 12,000 Tamils



(who are around 16 percent of the population). But there is not a single Tamil School even for primary education for this community.

These constraints not only are confined to the students, but also the plantation school teachers as well in this area. The teacher training is conducted only in Sinhala. Most of the Tamil teachers are conversant in general, enough to understand the conversation in Sinhala. But they are not proficient enough to write reports or minutes in Sinhala. The officers of the Department of Education, on the one hand expects the project report etc in Sinhala. Inability to send reports in Sinhala retards the development of the school in every respect.

One of the teachers who participated in the FGD revealed the obstacles that she had encountered while preparing the school based assessment. "I am a primary trained teacher and I prepared a project report on how to improve the Grade 5 scholarship results in my school. My plan was implementation of a project to affect an increase of 25 percent. I spent nearly 3 months to prepare the project and the total estimate of the project was Rs. 25000.00. My other colleagues in this school also helped me to plan the project. We sent it to the Zonal Education Office to get financial support. It was rejected out right because it was in Tamil Language. Now I have no way to increase the number of students passing the scholarship examination", she stated. In the meantime the teacher also stated that almost all circulars have been distributed in Sinhala language.

A daughter, who is old enough, takes over some of the work. Because she is a girl, she has to clean the house, prepare food, collect firewood and look after the younger children when her mother is tired. This is the tradition which leads to girl child labour issue. The girl does all this at the expense of her education. In order to fulfill their economic needs, several family members have to work on the estates. Many of the younger children, and especially female children, help the parents on the field, which is of course unpaid. The girls, and sometimes boys also, help their mothers in plucking tea and collecting rubber latex. Children also work with other family members in weeding or in the rubber tracts. It should be noted that many young estate children are employed as servants in other parts of the island particularly due to economic hardship.

However 61% of the women who participated in focus group discussions (Focus Group Discussion on Education and Plantation Community, organized by the Writers), admitted that education is a key element for their children and stated that they are devoting their life to the education of their children. The young women workers in particular showed interest in discussing the education of their children. It was observed during the discussions, at various places, that 'right to education of the children' had become a serious concern of the women workers. 48% of the workers felt that because of lack of education adding to other factors, they were denied their human rights, such as right to free moment, right to expression, right to get civic documents, and many of them were afraid to go to the police station to complain about human rights violations that they were subjected to or that they did not know the Sinhalese language or even to read or write Tamil language. It is observed that there is a correlation between mother's education level and children's education level. Women workers who send their children to Montessori or schools are educated more than the other women. Lack of education is also inter-related to the lack of basic civic documents. In the plantation sector, due to the educational backwardness with special reference to women, minimal attention is given to this sphere, minimal resources allocated; gender inequality, weighing girl children with heavy burdens etc have not only retarded their (women's) educational progress, but caused the down fall of the structure. The women workers thus found to be backward, are prone to marginalization and discrimination in the absence of a clear idea of human rights.



ii. Focus group discussion on 6th March 2010 in one of a Estates, Laksapana Group, Maskeliya had been organized focusing mainly on the poverty and the consequent low literacy rate of the community. Twelve male and female workers, retired persons and youths participated in the discussion.

As we, ourselves were late having had to travel a road which was narrow and with craters and pot holes, our vehicle had to swerve around to avoid them. A distance of 20 km which could be covered at normal speed, took 2 hours. This, plus the late arrival of the participants caused the discussion to start behind the scheduled time. Enquiries about the late arrival of the participants revealed that the workers on the division depend solely on the income they receive from the estate work. But there is high rate of under employment on the estate and therefore most of them go for work outside the estate.

With most of the day thus spent, they get rare chances for social, cultural or political activities. This situation best explains the prevailing low literacy among the youth and even a higher number of non schooling children and also the high dropout rate from the school in the plantation itself where the classes are found up to grade five. The discussion revealed that even though there might be a few children wanting to go for further studies after completing studies in the plantation school, the nearest schools are at Maskeliya town which is 20km a way and Douse which is 4km away. In either case, as the transport facility is not reliable, those children vying for further studies, have no alternative but walk past such terrains and some pockets where the presents of unruly and criminal elements cannot be ruled out, is not safe for children-be they boys or girls.

This situation has pushed the community in to one and the only next best course available to them: sending the boy or girl children into employment in the urban households. This hapless situation of the community is said to have been exploited by some job agencies in the nearby town. These agencies, it appears, do not wait for the parents or the children to meet them. The agencies employ various means to entice them in to seeking their good offices for deliverance from family poverty. The agencies after giving the children soothing promises about their places of future employment, take them away to cities like Colombo or Kandy. After introducing the children to the employers, the brokers collect their fees. The brokers, in such instances, make it a point to see that there is no future link between the parents and the children and direct links between the parents and the employers. Whatever ill treatment the children suffer at the hands of the employer or his or her household, is buried between the



four walls of the employers house. And when the parents come to know of the life lived by their children in the places of employment, it is too late – either the children end up as invalid or dead or the girl children are abused and sent home pregnant.

Some participants recalled two girl children Jeevarani and Sumathi, introduced to two Colombo houses, close by each other, had been reported dead and their bodies found floating in a waste water canal.

12. Conclusion

The issues in relation to the level of education that we have discussed in the text clearly states that the plantation community is not in par with the rest of the community in many respects. The British companies that managed these estates for over a century did not encourage schooling, and the school education that they extended was only up to grade five. The meaningful national education system was introduced only after the nationalization of the plantation schools. The teachers, who taught in the estate schools prior to nationalization of the estate schools, were ill qualified poorly paid.

The take over of estate schools by the government, though on a scattered and non constructive basis had been intended to rehabilitate those schools, using the decentralized budget provision. The Plantation School Education Development Project (PSEDP) was supported by Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA) and GTZ under administrative set up of the Ministry of Education. However, still quite a good number of schools in the plantation areas have not received any such facilities to improve their infrastructure.

The common issues are not only lack of schools but also qualified and trained teachers mainly in the subjects such as science and English for secondary and tertiary education in the plantation areas. It is an issue affecting the plantation districts not only in the Central Province of the country but almost all the schools in the country where the plantation worker children's education is concerned.

The study has also revealed that, in certain Tamil schools in the Uva and Sabaragamuwa Provinces where the plantation children study, Sinhala teachers have been appointed. The plantation children, who on the one hand face problems from their Sinhala counterparts outside the schools, in the schools face language and communication related problems from



such Sinhala teachers. It also amounts denial of the fundamental right of the Tamil students to study in their mother tongue, while is an uncertainty about their educational future.

The task of appointing teachers and sustainability of their services to the children of the plantation community has been a challenging one. Also the failure rate in the subjects of English, Science, Social Studies and Tamil Language are still quite high in the plantation schools.

In short, some of the prevalent factors in the plantation schools contribute to the retard of the progress of education and literacy of women and children and poor economic and social conditions, poor health and malnutrition, lack of school facilities and lack of teachers, poor housing and low literacy among the women being other. The study also reveals that these children have to bear the consequences of the absence of qualified teachers and lack of infrastructure facilities, ultimately leading to school dropouts at an increased scale and their ending up as domestic workers and in other low income jobs with adverse social consequences. These are but some of the fundamental causes for the isolation of the sector from the mainstream of the society on the one hand and an obstacle to their right to sustainable development.

These are then the status of the school education of the plantation community and the issues and challenges it faces for its future education. Making necessary provisions in the existing educational system is essential in addressing the grievances of the plantation community and providing them with the confidence that they are equal citizens of Sri Lanka.

Recommendations

The study presents a set of recommendations here below to the government, political parties, trade unions, and national and international humanitarian agencies and others concerned with the well being of the plantation community.

State:

- The Sri Lankan state should establish an independent Education Committee or Commission to prepare and implement an effective and accelerated Education Development Policy and Program for the improvement of the condition of education of the plantation community.
- The Ministry of Education should strengthen the plantation education unit with wider powers to plan, implement and monitor the administration and quality of education in the plantation schools. Consultancy services of experts could be obtained in this respect.



- Based on the recommendations of this committee or commission, the government should announce a policy framework on how to improve the plantation education system. The government should also put in place a mechanism to implement this policy.
- It should be the responsibility of the government to allocate equitable resource for the development of education.
- To ensure recruitment and effective teacher training, programs have to be organized and further investment made on the College of Education / Teachers' Training at Kotagala to upgrade the quality of teachers education.
- Vocational training for the GCE (O/L) Examination failed students should be included in the school syllabus. This will enable such students to acquire some skill training which will help them once out of school.
- The government should increase the number of 1C and 1AB type schools. It has been found in our analysis that the 1C and 1AB type schools for plantation children are grossly inadequate when compared to the number of such schools available to the other ethnic groups.
- The service of state and civil society organizations could be obtained for the following development of the plantation educational system.
 - Library and laboratory facilities
 - Provision of teaching and learning aids and equipment
 - Establishment of school clubs which will bring better understating among students of different ethnic groups in areas where the Tamil students are vulnerable to harassments.
 - Periodical arrangements for parents - teaching staff meetings in these areas.
- Effort should be made to provide education facilities to the plantation community in par with those available to their counterparts elsewhere and also in compliance with the MDG target.

Corporate Sector

- The plantation management/ companies should provide welfare facilities to the estate workers and their children.
- Crèches should play an important role, not only as a day care center but also as a center for pre- school education.
- The plantation management could launch a fund with a small percentage of its profit to develop the state of education of the children especially female children.



- Under the CSR the respective estate management should take the responsibility to maintain the roads leading to schools, allocating a certain percentage of its profit, for the purpose.

Civil Groups:

1. Civil groups such as trade unions, nongovernmental organizations particularly International Non Governmental Organizations could undertake infrastructure development of the plantation schools.
2. Civil groups may mobilize and create awareness among the plantation workers to campaign for the right to education of the community.
3. Civil groups could organize supplementary educational development programs among the plantation community members through:
 - Awareness creation and empowerment programs
 - Teacher training in special subjects
 - Supplementary educational classes, pre schools and vocational training for drop outs.



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