

The Socio-Economic and Cultural Background of Batticaloa District

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Early Society

In the Sinhalese system, theoretically, the king was the sole owner of the land. People obtained land for the services rendered. This gave more power to the land owners. In the Tamil system, theoretically, the king had no right over the land owned by the subjects. He only had the rights over the produce and to collect, normally, one tenth of it as taxes. This also may be one of the reasons for the better land use tradition in Tamil areas.

The caste system, even though Tamil structured, has no similarities with the Jaffna system. The oppressive built-in components of the Jaffna caste system is absent in the caste system of the East and Wannai. In Jaffna most of the land resources are privately owned by the Vellala caste – the only exception being the land resources in the fishing villages. Vellala caste also obtained cultural dominance in the district as the culturally upper caste and owned the main temples which control the cultural side of the rural life. Jaffna villages are multi caste villages and are economically and numerically dominated by the vellalas.

In Batticaloa land and resources are distributed among various castes. Villages are mostly unicast villages where the land owner and the landless peasants, belong to the same caste.

This area based domination of the various castes of Batticaloa together with religion become the dominant factor in shaping the local leadership on organizational matters. Apart from caste, religion also plays a major role in deciding the social and political leadership.

Like mukkuwas Muslims of the Eastern province also have the same matrilineal

"Kudi" systems. Mukkuwas influence among the social system of the Sri Lankan Muslims living in Batticaloa, Amparai, Puttalam and Ninadivu (Nagadipa) can also be observed. The function of the matrilineal kudi system is notable in the marriage arrangements. e.g. marrying within same kudies. Long standing relationships between Muslims and Tamils belonging to Mukkuwa caste continued upto fifties. Even intermarriages between Mukkuwas and Muslims were not uncommon upto that time. This relationship eroded in 60's mainly due to power politics, political manipulation and intensified competition for land resources and opportunities.

Traces of early settlements, including early Brahmi inscriptions, has been discovered in the western hinter-land. More archaeological study is necessary to develop scientific understanding of the pre history of the district. Such studies have also become the casualty of the politics of the district and the country. Scientific studies on the people of the district become sensitive and consequently non available. Some authors believe that the Muslims migrated to this area after the Portuguese occupied the kingdom of Kotte due to fear of persecution. Tamils, Muslims and the coastal Veddhas were originally concentrated in the coastal areas. Jungle hamlets of Kandyan Sinhalese and some Veddhas are also seen in the Western peripheries such as Bintenna pattu (now in the Amparai district). When Portuguese came to Sri Lanka most of the Northern province was a part of the kingdom of Jaffna and was ruled directly or through Wannai chieftains. Most part of the East, including present Batticaloa district was a part

of the Kandyan Kingdom and was ruled through Tamil and Muslim Wannai chieftains.

Early socio economic and cultural life of the Batticaloa district was based on "Podi" system. Podi is a local adaptation of the European service tenure system. This author believes that this system was created during the time of Dutch rule, based, on land grants.

In the system "Podis" the land owners allow the vassal like peasant worker to cultivate small plots of his land as remuneration. Upto the reform introduced by the British officials most of the population of Batticaloa and Amparai districts were virtually living like vassals of the Tamil and Muslim "Podis". Outside Jaffna peninsula slave system in agriculture never existed. But the podi system also informally bonded the people to the land owner, through "Poyar".

British Reforms

In Batticaloa the British administration introduced a different form of land reform which partially eliminated chena cultivation in most parts of the Batticaloa district and turned small land holdings into the predominant type. This started in 1858. In that year Sir Henry Ward, then Governor General, ordered the rehabilitation of Irakkamam tank. Reconstruction of Irakkamam tank was completed in 1860. The British administration had spent 19,754 Sterling Pounds and obtained 15,388 Sterling Pounds by the sales of the land.

In 1867 Sir H. Robinson having previously visited the district decided to construct a large tank at Rukam. This was expected to be the largest tank constructed since the Kandyan time. With this dynamic process of reconstruction of the abandoned tanks and opening new lands for cultivation standard. Some liberal minded British officers and government agents of Batticaloa district who observed that "Cultivators worked on from year to year for the "Podis" (land owner) making a precarious livelihood, never rising above the miserable conditions in which they have been born" wanted to use irrigation as a leverage for social change.

Commencement of reconstruction of irrigation tanks created an unprecedented demand for labour in the Batti-

caloa district through out the second half of the last century. British administration restricted chena cultivation in order to get the people to engage in restoring abandoned tanks and to engage in paddy cultivation in the newly opened lands. They had already stopped issuing chena land for the Tamils and Muslims living along the coastal area where employment in developing coconut and paddy cultivation was available. The extent of the chena land allocated to those people who had no other alternative avenue of income was also reduced and permission was given on the condition that each person should devote some labour on an abandoned tank which will be of ultimate use to him for the cultivation of paddy in future.

Restrictions placed on chena land forced the villagers to take up the restoration of abandoned tanks and obtain paddy land under land sale or land license scheme. Village headmen were mobilised to motivate reluctant villagers to take up the restoration of abandoned tanks and permanent paddy cultivation. Under the license scheme people were allowed to clear suitable land for rainfed paddy cultivation. Some of these settlers built village tanks with the assistance of "Jaffna tank diggers". In 1868 licenses were given to cultivate 10,385 acres of paddy but the actual extent cleared under these licenses was estimated to be between 15,000 to 16,000 acres. Whenever these lands were sold priority was given to the cultivators. Increased demand for labour and access to land under license scheme also enabled the farmers to save enough money to buy land. Land sales became the primary source of revenue in Batticaloa district during the second half of the last century. Land sales also increased the revenue obtained from other sources – such as grain tax, stamp sales etc. Increasing revenue and social mobility became the motivating factors on the side of the British officers. While the rich, and the Podis created a demand for big holdings under irrigation schemes, former chena cultivators and vassals of the Podis created a demand for small holdings and rain fed paddy lands. Under the license scheme, some of these lands were also later brought under irrigation.

These changes mostly took place in the interior lands close to the Eastern East

coast, where the population was predominantly Tamil and Muslim. Western peripheries (now in Amparai) where Sinhala villages predominate did not undergo much changes, though some village tanks were restored and some chena cultivators adapted paddy farming.

Another major development that took place during this time was the extensive effort to spread coconut plantations in the coastal strip from Kathiraveli to Arugambay (now in the Amparai district). This new development helped a broader section of the people, other than the families of the Podis and the descendants of Wannu chieftains. A cold war between British Officers and feudal families who had hitherto controlled the socio economic life of the district also can be identified in these developments.

Earlier sources of surplus creation was controlled by the Tamil and Muslim feudal families and Muslim dominated commercial elements. Upto the opening of the Colombo-Kandy railway in 1865 Batticaloa functioned as a main harbour for the supplies to the Eastern Hill country plantations. Goods were transported to Badulla by bullock cart. This also extended the market for the products of Batticaloa such as paddy, coconut, dry fish and farm products in the adjoining Moneragala and Badulla areas. Products of Batticaloa exported through the then busy harbours of Kalkudah and Batticaloa were copra, coconut, coconut oils, tanning barks, cotton goods, timber, paddy and horns. Tea from Badulla and tobacco from Thamankaduwa were also exported through Batticaloa. Supplies like rice, cloth, sugar etc. for estates in the Uva province were the main items imported through Batticaloa. Commerce and agricultural production of Batticaloa district were two of the main casualties opening of the Colombo Kandy railway. This also cut off the market of Uva province from Batticaloa producers. Trade between Batticaloa and North Central province, mainly based on the transport facilities created for the export of tobacco cultivated in Tamankaduwa, was also affected.

These commercial activities and textile weaving together with the export trade of elephants to Arabian traders brought financial surplus to Muslims. Even in the last century commercial capital existed among the Muslims of Kattankudy and Eravur.

Social infrastructures also developed hand in hand with the expansion of paddy and coconut cultivation. Health and education infrastructure was also developed and was extended to interior areas. The Civil hospitals of Batticaloa and Kalmunai, the Leper hospital in Kalmunai together with the dispensaries in Batticaloa, Kalmunai, Kattankudy, Karunkoditivu, Poluvil, Eravur, Valaichchenai and Maha-oya were installed during the second half of the century. Post and Telegraph services were extended to the port town of Kalkudah.

Fishing was one of the few avenues of development neglected by British administration during this period. Fishing with primitive technology in lagoons and shallow waters was carried out by the local people. The supply of fish from the lagoons and inland water bodies were mainly used for local consumption. A part of the catch was dried and sent to Moneragala and Muppane market. Sea based fishing was controlled by Sinhalese fishermen upto 1930's. They migrated to Batticaloa during southwest monsoons, mostly from the southern province.

The effects of the type of land reforms carried out by the British Administration in the Old Batticaloa district became deep rooted. The following observation was made by a British Officer, during the second half of the last century.

"A great number of these people who are not cultivating licensed land were formerly employed in the ruinous system of chena cultivation – which has laid waste thousands of acres of fine forest in the district....."

Batticaloa harbour lost importance and was abandoned in the early decades of this century. This affected the economy and commerce of the district. The infrastructure created by the export and import activities of the plantation sectors of Uva province also helped local trade and trade with India. In 1930's a portion of the capital, especially of the Muslim traders of Valaichchenai, was diverted to sea based fishing activities. Tamils in Valaichchenai and Amirthakali in Batticaloa M. C. area also undertook sea based fishing. Lack of training, fishing harbour facilities, fishing gear and credit facilities

became the major constraints in the development of sea based fishing activities. This situation still prevails.

Reduction of chena cultivation, led to the expansion of small holdings which become the predominant land tenure pattern of the district. Batticaloa is very often regarded as a land of milk and honey in the Tamil literary tradition. The consumption levels of the people were better during the early part of the century.

Rural poverty increased with the loss of markets and discrimination of the governments after independence. Communal clashes between Tamils and Sinhalese actually started in this district in mid fifties. These were between the Tamils and early Sinhalese settlers of the state aided colonisation schemes.

Since then communal conflicts and the discriminatory attitude of successive governments which led to the inappropriate division of the old district had resulted in the under development of the present Batticaloa district.

Caste System and The Tamils

Caste system of the Batticaloa Tamils is not oppressive like that of the Jaffna Tamils, where land owners belong to single caste considered as upper caste and landless labourers and other people who rendered different services such as washermen etc., belonged to various lower castes. Jaffna villages are of mixed caste with the upper caste dominating. In Batticaloa and in most of the Eastern province, villages are unicast and every important caste has areas dominated by them where land owner and landless worker both would belong to same caste. Two major castes of the district are Karaiar and Mukkuwas. While the less populated Northern Batticaloa district is dominated by Karaiar the comparably highly populated southern part of the district is dominated by the Mukkuwas.

Both castes were originally rival fishermen. Today Karaiars are mainly fishermen and Mukkuwas are divers.

These sea faring castes become alienated from the sea and became agricultural caste. When they migrated to the

Eastern province where land and water were plenty. As they were virtually isolated from the rest of the island by extensive forest and had no possibilities of exchanging fish for grain, this transformation in occupation become existentially necessary.

Social proximity of Mukkuwas with the Muslims was noted even during the early British time by scholars like Simon Casie Chetty. Most striking example is the existence of a similar matrilineage system called Kudy among the Mukkuwas and Muslims living in Batticaloa and Amparai districts. Relationship between Tamils and Muslims were very cordial upto 1960. Conflicts between Muslims and Tamils are taking place mostly in Mukkuwa areas of Southern Batticaloa and Northern Ampara district.

Folk Culture

The level of development of folk culture, especially songs and dances, in other Tamil areas including Jaffna cannot be compared to the rich folk tradition of Batticaloa. This is partly because of the social changes that took place during the second half of the last century. Small holders become the predominant section of the paddy cultivators in this period. Bondage with the 'pody' land owners broke down on one hand and on the other hand the ruinous system of chena cultivation was by and large removed from their mode of production.

Non-orthodox temples of the villages became the centre of folk culture. These developments which have notably broken the feudal bondages never took place in Jaffna, where high caste land owners controlled the entire society and encouraged only South India oriented higher form of classical Tamil culture. Folk art forms were considered as the culture of the less civilised.

In the 1950's the famous Sinhala artist Ediriwira Sarathchandra discovered the richness of the Batticaloa folk ballet called "Vadamodi" and reintroduced it into the Tamil elites through his historically important play "Maname" staged in 1956. Even with all this rich background Batticaloa folk culture and art still failed to get the required Government support and sponsorship.

Through some Tamil plays produced by the late Professor Vidyanandan and his student Mounakuru, 'Vadamodi' style become established in the modern Tamil theatre.

In Batticaloa Vadamodi and other folk cultural practices centered around the temple oriented village culture has been badly affected by the decade long ethnic conflict and war. The rich Tamil folk culture of Batticaloa hitherto neglected by the state thus become the casualty of the prolonged ethnic conflict and war.

Temple festivals were affected by the continuous civilian killings in this regions. People were frequently forced to displace as refugees since 1977.

In this situation without outside intervention of local NGO's and foreign NGO's 'Vadamodi,' one of the important folk ballet forms, may become extinct before the end of this century. Most of the classical "Annavis" teachers of 'Vadamodi' art are old, displaced and have become pauperised. Urgent sponsoring and facilitating the recording of the performances are immediate necessity to preserve this art form.

Social System

Even though Batticaloa district was under the indirect rule of the Kandyan Kingdom very little Kandyan influence can be noticed in the social and cultural life of the district. Land tenure caste system and culture are Tamil structured.

Religious Influences

Religion also plays a major role in the social life of the people of the area. This is mostly true for the non-hindu population.

Muslims are a religio-ethnic group. Even though mosques are the centers of the Muslim villages they are not laterally coordinated like the Catholic churches. The attempts of some fundamentalist groups to organise proper co-ordination among the Mosques have not been successful.

Traditionally Hindu religion in the East is not the orthodox hinduism based on.

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Braminical line within the temples dominated by vellalas in Jaffna. The dominance of the worship of small deities, informal folk rituals from the local castes have given and informal character to Hinduism in the east. Even though Hinduism is the dominant religion (of more than 66% of the total population) there are only a very few organisational infrastructures. With 24% of the total population of the district, Muslims are the second major religious group in the district. Most of the Muslims are living in the highly urbanized part of the coastal area between Kattankudy and Valaichchenai. A few Muslims are also living in the Western paddy lands, Muslim villages and town municipal wards are closely coordinated through the local mosque. Almost all of their social and cultural organizations formally or informally are connected with local mosques.

In the aspects of local level and district co-ordination Catholic churches have well organized formal and informal infrastructures in the district. Next come the Christian churches. Comparably mosques have more control over their community but Catholic and Christian churches are more systematically organized and coordinate locally, nationally and internationally. Friction if any, between Hindus and the Churches became submerged by the emergence of Tamil Nationalism. Hindus who have inadequate institutional infrastructures to organize relief and rehabilitation also inevitably become dependent on the churches based institutions. This is also true for the NGO activities in the district.