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## THE MARGINALISED PRODUCER

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Chena cultivation is one of the major areas of agriculture in Sri Lanka which has not received the attention it deserves. The chena system of production was not only neglected by the policy makers and the administrators of the independent Sri Lanka but there has been a lack of information on the subject almost till the eighties. Although there has been a growing interest in this system of production during the last decade what has been written so far seems to show very little enthusiasm about the system and has failed to grasp the importance of chena cultivation in the total system of agriculture in the island.<sup>1</sup> The importance of chena cultivation can be only imagined when one considers that more than a million peasants indulge in this form of agriculture in the dry zone of Sri Lanka alone.<sup>2</sup>

This lack of enthusiasm or rather the antagonism towards chena cultivation is a by-product of British colonialism in the island. Even today many administrators conceptualize chena cultivation in the same light it was seen by their colonial forbears more than a century ago. Colonial administrators repeatedly described chena cultivation as wasteful land use not so much because the land use<sup>3</sup> was wasteful but because the system of agriculture prevailing in the colony at the time did not fit into their ideas of land use and ownership of property those which existed in England at the time.

By mid-nineteenth century the industrial revolution has spread into the agricultural sector as well. Commercial cultivation with the use of artificial fertilizer and the more intensive use of labour on the land was accepted as a technologically advanced method of land use. Therefore the British masters of Sri Lanka at the time regarded chena cultivation in which the land-labour ratio was reversed as primitive and wasteful land use.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Tennakoon, M.U.A. Drought Hazard and Rural Development in Sri Lanka's Dry Zone. 1983 (unpublished): Fortunately the more recent studies are taking a very favourable stand on chena cultivation. See Gelbert Micheal. *Chena (shifting) Cultivation and Land Transformation in the Dry Zone of Sri Lanka*. Department of Geography, University of Zurich, 1988.
  2. Approximately 1.5 million hectares of high land will not come under irrigation systems in the near future. This land is mainly used for dry farming and chena cultivation is the only form of dry farm in the island. According to a world bank circular about 1 million hectares are under chena cultivation. Micheal Gelbert., p. 18 ; See also, F. Abeyratne, *Shifting farming towards stability - A study of four rainfed farming systems in Sri Lanka*. ARTI. Research Study. No. 66. Colombo, 1986.
  3. Baker, S.W., 1855. p. 35 ; Rhys Davids T.W. Report on Nuwarakalaviya. Ceylon Government Press, Colombo, 1871. "Chena cultivation prevents civilized habits and enterprise ; it is unwholesome and unhealthy ; it is imcompatible with paddy or other more remunerative cultivation because the working times clash ; it distroys forest resources and the rotation of the soil prevents any permanent improvement of the land. p. 93.

Under the system of chena cultivation returns per unit of land is undoubtedly much less than when the land is under irrigated paddy cultivation. However the corresponding fact, the very high yields for a unit of labour when the land is under chena cultivation escaped the attention of the colonial rulers. This very high productivity of labour when the land was cultivated with chena helped to solve many of the problems of the peasantry at a time when it was the labour and not land which was in short supply.<sup>5</sup> Thus although chena cultivation, perhaps combined with paddy readily solved the subsistence problems of the peasants,<sup>6</sup> at the same time it aggravated the labour problems of the colonial masters. One of the possible solutions for the acute labour shortage the colonial administration faced in the island was to create a landless peasantry who would make a living by selling their labour. This course of action was very successfully practised in England during the period of the industrial revolution in order to check the rising price of labour.

Paddy cultivating peasants particularly feel the shortage of labour during the peak periods, i.e., during the periods of cultivation and harvesting. This is because the work had to be completed within a short period of time. In the wet zone where most of the paddy cultivation is carried out with rain water this had to be so because of the seasonal nature of the rain; in the dry zone the technical arrangements with regard to the distribution of water made it imperative that it is so.

In the more dry areas of the island it is difficult for a family to obtain all its consumer and other needs if they indulged only in paddy cultivation. However when the paddy cultivation is combined with chena cultivation the produce is sufficient for the cultivator to meet the consumer needs of the family. Hence the combination of paddy and chena was a very practical way of handling the labour problems of the peasantry which they successfully did throughout the ages<sup>7</sup>.

Unfortunately such a system of agriculture which resolved the labour problem as far as the peasantry was concerned was not satisfactory to the colonial administrator. For it aggravated their labour problems. The colonial administrators were bent on promoting commercial agriculture in the island in accordance with the ideologies accepted in the West. Commercial agriculture according to the colonial administrators was the only form of agriculture which would be profitable and viable in the island. However, commercial agriculture made an increasing demand on

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4. Baker, S.W. p. 35.

5. The labour problem was quite acute in the colony from the very beginning of their administration. This is why in spite of the repeated warnings of the Colonial Office the Colombo administration of the Colony exacted the forced labour (*rajakariya*) from the peasantry. See *The Sinhala Peasants*. Ch. II.

6. See., Peiris, Ralph. 1956; Also Spencer J.E. 1966.

7. Chena cultivation was already an incorporated part of the village economy in the 16th century which is known as the *purana* system. Peiris, Ralph, 1956.

labour and for two reasons; first, in order to build the economic infrastructure : roads, bridges, railroads etc., and secondly, to serve as labourers in the plantations.<sup>8</sup>

When the colonial rulers were thus faced with a problem of meeting the demands of labour posed by their new approach to the economy of the colony, they found that the peasants were also faced with the same problem and had devised their own method of meeting it, i.e., combining the two systems of agriculture, paddy and chena cultivation. In their predicament the colonial administration followed the only possible solution to the problem, getting the peasantry into the labour market by depriving them of their traditional land holdings. In the year 1840 the notorious ordinance popularly known as the Waste lands Ordinance was enacted.<sup>9</sup> The Ordinance deprived the peasantry of the land they used for chena cultivation which in the years to follow brought confusion to a delicately balanced system of agriculture in the island.<sup>10</sup>

The colonial administrators needed a theoretical argument in order to justify their action of depriving the peasantry of their landholdings which at times led to starvation and death.<sup>11</sup> Therefore every effort was made to condemn the indigenous system of agriculture. The arguments used were deforestation, soil erosion, wasteful use of land etc.<sup>12</sup> However when thousands of forests were cleared to make room for the commercial plantations under the British the same arguments, deforestation and soil erosion found no mention. There is little doubt that the British administrators themselves realized the importance of the chena system of agriculture for the very survival of the peasantry. This may explain why the colonial administration allowed right down to the end of their rule, chena cultivation in limited districts under a licence obtained from the Government Agent of the District.<sup>13</sup>

The entire outlook of agriculture and agricultural development of Sri Lanka since independence can be regarded as one of continuation of the policy adopted by the British during the nineteenth century. All the attempts taken to develop the

8 Until 1830 when the colonial administration in Colombo was forced to give up exacting labour from the peasantry under the '*rajakariya*', this system was used to obtain unpaid labour from the peasants. Therefore after 1830 when the '*rajakariya*' was repealed the labour problem of the colonial administration became more acute. See. Hettiarachy T. *The Sinhala Peasant*. 1983.

9 Ordinance No. 20 of 1840, To Prevent Encroachment of Crown Lands.

10 See for a detailed discussion of the subject, Hettiarachy. T. *The Sinhala Peasant*. Chs. II & III.

11 Hettiarachy, T. *The Sinhala Peasant*. 1983.

12 The utter condemnation of the chena system of agriculture is typically illustrated by Baker when he wrote 'can any man, when describing the fertility of Ceylon be aware that newly cleared forest land will only produce one crop of the miserable grain called kurakkan?' Baker. S.W. P. 35. 1855. It is very interesting to note that the terms used here have been borrowed from the vocabulary of criminology. Eg. "rape" and "massacre" of forests. Thus making the chena peasants equal to criminals, See. Gelbert, Micheal. *Chena (Shifting) Cultivation*.

13. Tennant. E.J. II pp. 464-465.

peasant agriculture in the island prior to independence and post-independent periods were always concerned only with the promotion of paddy cultivation. During the 20's attempts were made by individuals and companies to grow rice on large scale in the dry zone. With the Land Development Ordinance of 1935 promotion of settlement schemes having rice cultivation as the base really started.<sup>14</sup> Since this time the promotion of agricultural development became synonymous with promoting paddy cultivation.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time the ideas of chena cultivation as conceptualized by the colonial administrators persisted right down to the present day and still influence the basic agricultural policies of the island, for chena cultivation is still seen the same way it was seen more than one and a half centuries ago.<sup>16</sup>

They still have failed to understand that the ecological conditions under which the chena is cultivated today is completely different from the past. The attitude of the administration is typically brought out in a research paper entitled 'Drought Hazard and Rural Development in Sri Lanka's Dry Zone' presented a few years ago.<sup>17</sup> In this paper the "evils" of chena cultivation are presented the same way the British administration pointed out the obnoxious features of chena cultivation more than a century ago. Such evils are categorized under two broad headings, soil modification and deforestation. Under the former, erosion, impoverishment, and the alkalinity of the soil are given. The latter category enumerates increasing aridity, dwindling timber resources, scarcity of firewood, loss of game animals, and increased demand for beef which in turn leads to a reduction of draught animals.<sup>18</sup> This perhaps is a typical way the administration follows the ideas of the past perhaps justifying them with more vigour.

In the more recent past this attitude has become even more antagonistic towards the chena cultivation. The administrators in their enthusiasm to emphasize the contribution of the Mahaweli scheme for the development of agriculture in Sri Lanka have once again started openly to condemn the chena system of agriculture. The recent teledrama 'Vanni Hamige Katawa' is typical of this new drive against chena cultivation.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Gelbert, Michel. pp. 20-21.

<sup>15</sup> See. Johnson, B.L.C. 'Sri Lanka Land People and Economy' Heinemann, London, 1987.

<sup>16</sup> Tennakoon, M.U.A. Drought Hazard and Rural Development in Sri Lanka's Dry Zone. (unpublished.) 1983.

<sup>17</sup> Tennakoon, M.U.A., 1983 (unpublished). See also Perera, Jayanta. *New Dimensions of Social Stratification in Rural Sri Lanka*. pp. 20-23; "Shifting cultivation (hena or chena) is a matter on which villagers and administrators hold diametrically contrasted points of view", Leach, E.R. *Puleliya. A village in Ceylon*, Cambridge University Press, 1961. pp. 289.

<sup>18</sup> It should be said in fairness to the author that he now admits that the paper he wrote in 1983 is relevant only to the N.C.P and that he has changed his opinion about chena cultivation since then.

During the recent past another form of agriculture has received more attention; this is known as subsidiary food cropping. Export villages are established under the government patronage and assistance but no mention is made about the chena cultivation.

Such an attitude has inevitably led to the marginalization of chena cultivation. Marginalisation has taken place in various ways. First, agriculture means either paddy cultivation or plantations. Subsidiary food-crop cultivation was added to this in the recent past. As a result all the government assistance to agriculture goes either to the paddy farmers or the plantation sector. Chena cultivation is not even mentioned in the overall system of agricultural production in the island. Subsidies, agricultural credit and extension services are all geared only to develop paddy cultivation or the commercial plantations. For example there is a guaranteed price scheme for paddy. The Paddy Marketing Board buys paddy from the cultivators at the guaranteed price. Moreover subsidies and credit are offered to paddy cultivators to buy fertilizer, and paddy in the fields is insured under a crop insurance scheme at a very nominal rate by the state owned Insurance Corporation of Sri Lanka. There are replanting subsidies for rubber, tea and coconut. However no state benefits intended for agricultural development ever reach or are intended to reach the chena cultivator.

This marginalization of the chena cultivator by the policy makers and the administrators has also led to the marginalization of the chena cultivation by the academics as well. As all the interest of the policy makers and administrators are on paddy cultivation all the academic exercises on agriculture tended to be directed towards either the paddy cultivation or the plantation sector.<sup>20</sup> Funds were made available to do research on paddy cultivation, irrigation systems, water management schemes and settlement schemes but little interest was shown in chena cultivation. If at all the chena system was studied it was to show its evils, alternatively this was a peripheral interest, the main interest being, either paddy cultivation or, female labour in the more recent past.<sup>21</sup>

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19 The recently produced teledrama shows the miserable conditions of a chena cultivator who tenaciously clings to the chena cultivation which led to more misery in his household. Finally he gave up chena cultivation and went to Mahaveli for paddy cultivation.

20 An exception is the comprehensive work of Micheal Gelbert. *op.cit.*

21 See, Tennakoon, M.U.A. Drought Hazard;..... *Op. cit.* also, Sirisena, W.M. Invisible Labour : A Study of Womens Contribution to Agriculture in Two Traditional Villages in the Dry Zone of Sri Lanka. *Modern Sri Lanka Studies* Vol. 1 No. 2 1986; also, Joke Schrijvers, *Manipulated Motherhood. The marginalization of Peasant Women in the North Central Province of Sri Lanka. Development and Change* (SAGE London, Beverly Hills and New Delhi) Vol. 14 (1983) 185-209.

The marginalization has been carried out to such an extent that the very peasants who have been making use of the chena system of agriculture, either as their primary system of production, or as a subsidiary income generating activity, have been made to believe that paddy cultivation is the one and only system of agriculture which is suitable to this country.

It is also interesting to note in this respect that in all the colonization schemes since independence no attempt has been made to incorporate chena cultivation into the overall system of agriculture.

Before any judgements are made on the suitability or unsuitability of chena cultivation as a system of agriculture for Sri Lanka it is important to understand under what ecological conditions chena cultivation is carried out today. Until the turn of the century, chena cultivation was carried out making use of the traditional system of chena cultivation known as the 'slash and burn' method.<sup>22</sup> However at present such a system of chena cultivation is almost non-existent for the simple reason that there are no such jungles to be felled. What is cleared under the chena cultivation system is not thick jungle but what is known as 'landukele'<sup>23</sup> or scrub jungle and clearing these do not involve any destruction of forests or cause soil erosion or the depletion of fertility any more than any other form of high land agriculture.<sup>24</sup> Secondly, it was very rarely that chena cultivation was indulged in as the primary economic activity of the peasantry to any significant extent in the past. In general the chena system was practised as an adjunct to paddy cultivation. Only during periods of continuous drought or when paddy fields were wantonly destroyed as a military strategy was chena cultivation practised as the primary source of income.<sup>25</sup> However at present there is a large number of chena cultivators who indulge in chena cultivation as their primary form of economic activity. As chena cultivation rarely secures a sufficient product to make a livelihood such cultivator families have diversified their economic activities in order to meet the demands of family consumption needs.<sup>26</sup> Finally chena cultivation which perhaps was carried out on an individual family basis was transformed into a Communal activity during the latter half of the 19th century.<sup>27</sup>

22. Gelbert, Micheal *op.cit.* pp. 33ff.

23. Gunasekara, Sudath 'Some observations on Hen (chena) cultivation with reference to a village in Uda Dumbara.' Sociological Association of Sri Lanka, Kandy Branch, Department of Sociology, University of Peradeniya. Seminar Series 4. 1989

24. Gunasekara, Sudath, *op.cit.*

25. See Hettiarachchy. *The Sinhala Peasant*. pp.32 ff. See also Klose, Peter. 'Land Policy and Agricultural Underproduction in a Sinhalese Village in Sri Lanka'. Institute of Cultural and Social Studies, University of Leiden. Working Paper No. 5. 1981.

26. Galpaya. *op.cit.* pp. 19-24.

27. Berugoda. S. 1981 'Land ownership problems and their effects on cadestral surveys and registration of title in Sri Lanka' Survey Department. 1981 ; See also Micheal Gelbert, *op.cit.* p.50; Also, Hettiarachchy, T. *The Sinhala Peasant*. 1983.

When it was carried out as a communal enterprise either the entire chena was communally cultivated or some selected items such as clearing the jungle, fencing, keeping the night watch to protect the chena from wild animals were carried out on a communal basis. And depending upon the method followed either the harvest was shared or individual plots were harvested by the cultivators.<sup>28</sup> But today no part of the chena labour is communally carried out; cultivation is done either by individual families or using hired labour. In essence chenas are individual family farms.<sup>29</sup> Therefore one might say without any reservations that the chena system of cultivation has lost all its traditional characteristics both physically as well as socially.

Viewed in this manner chena cultivation can be seen as an ecosystem in transition, not a fixed process as many believe and as many try to fit into the rather obnoxious system of cultivation known as 'slash and burn' or 'shifting cultivation'. Chena cultivation is rather a dynamic system of production in the country. In this process it has successfully adapted to the changes that have been taking place in the total economy of the island thus providing a viable system of agriculture to a third of the peasantry of the Dry Zone Sri Lanka.

Perhaps a comparative study of the changes that have been taking place in the two systems of agriculture, those of paddy cultivation and chena cultivation, would shed some more light on the chena system and show how the latter has adapted to the changes in the total economy. Of such changes in the field of paddy cultivation, the application of advanced technological developments in the field of agriculture occupies an important place. The use of agro-chemicals, machinery, high-yielding varieties of seeds, and water management are in the fore-front of such technological advances introduced to paddy cultivation. Along with these changes some changes also took place in the field of social relationships relevant to paddy cultivation. Tenancy systems were re-arranged and modified to the advantage of the cultivator.<sup>30</sup> The paddy cultivator is socially recognized as an important contributor to the development of the national economy and special benefits are bestowed on him. Thus special identity cards were issued on behalf of paddy cultivators and a crop insurance scheme had been introduced. There are also other changes that took place in paddy cultivation which are not so obvious but the importance of which cannot be underestimated. The more important of such changes are the gradual breakdown of the close relationship between the landlord and the tenant and the disappearance of many of the cooperative and communal characteristics of paddy cultivation.

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28. Tennant, E.J. II. pp. 463-465; See also Berugoda, S. *op.cit.*

29. *Sri Lanka Journal of Agrarian Studies*. 5(1) 1984 pp. 33-55.

30. Paddy Lands Act of 1958. Ceylon Government Press, 1958. See also Jayanta Perera, *New Dimensions*..... pp. 66-69.

Similar changes are observed in chena cultivation too. Some changes have already been pointed out. A more detailed study of such changes are necessary and for two reasons; first, to understand the social significance of such changes, and secondly, to make some projections to the future regarding the expected changes in the chena cultivation, and thirdly to examine the ways and means of manipulating such changes in a way that would be beneficial to the chena cultivators.<sup>31</sup>

A comparison of the various types of chena as practised today with the traditional system of chena cultivation will provide us with various situations that led to the development of those new types of chena. Although I have identified various types of chena elsewhere<sup>32</sup> these could be categorised under two basic groups, from a socio-economic point of view. Those chenas that are cultivated as an adjunct to the paddy cultivation can be categorized as one group while the chenas that serve as the primary source of subsistence to a section of peasantry the other.

Of the two systems of chena cultivation it is the latter which deserves more attention as a system of agriculture than the former. For, even though no statistics are available as to what proportion of the chena cultivators who indulge in chena as a primary source of income from over a million of the cultivators of the dry zone, cultivate chenas, a substantial proportion of that million shall be categorised as those who practise chena as a primary source of income. However so far as the administrators are concerned chena is not regarded as an independent system of agriculture. Even for the sake of condemnation, chena is treated only as an adjunct to paddy cultivation, but not as an independent system of production by itself.

Even as an adjunct to paddy cultivation the policy towards chena cultivation has not been consistent. It was occasionally seen as something useful to paddy farming as a way of drought handling and sometimes growing subsidiary crops to help the government to tide over difficulties of foreign exchange problems.<sup>33</sup>

But more often the officials were either indifferent or hostile to the system.<sup>34</sup> One reason for this attitude is the failure on the part of the administrators as well as policy makers to realize that the chena cultivation is an independent system of agriculture as much as paddy cultivation or commercial plantations. Once such recognition is extended to chena cultivation, and it is no longer seen as the 'problem of chena cultivation', the system of chena cultivation can be viewed from a complete-

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31. See Micheal Gelbert. Some far reaching changes in the chena system which would be very beneficial to the chena cultivator are recommended in this work.
32. *Sri Lanka Journal of Agrarian Studies*. 5(1) 1984 32-55.
33. Joke Schrijvers, *Mothers for Life*. p.70.
34. Tennakoon M.U.A. *op. cit.*

ly different angle. Perhaps it may be possible to introduce some adjustments to the chena system from which the entire rural economy may derive some benefits.

There should be a change of attitude both on the part of the rulers and the ruled, as far as the chena system is concerned if the chena system were to be integrated and developed within the total system of agriculture in the island. First the negative attitude of the administrators on the chena system should be replaced with a positive acceptance of the reality, i.e., that the chena system of agriculture is as much important a part of the peasant production system in the island as paddy. They should accept the enormous contribution made by the chena peasant to improve the total food supply of the country without any support from the government and sometimes in the face of open hostility to them. Some concrete steps should be taken to improve the system after carefully studying the ecology of different regions under chena cultivation.

Such a change of attitude on the part of the administrators will also help the cultivators to think more positively about the chena system. As mentioned earlier, generations of neglect and at times open hostility towards chena system has developed negative attitudes to the chena system on the part of the cultivators themselves. For many of them today chena is only a half-way house until they find out a better way of making a livelihood.<sup>35</sup> This is why the efforts of some over-enthusiastic extension officers who tried to introduce modern agricultural techniques to chena cultivation, such as using fertilizer, high yielding varieties of seeds, weedicides, insecticides and soil preservation methods have met with little success. It should be added in this respect that before any technological innovations are introduced to chena cultivation their social and economic implications must be carefully examined.

One final observation, everything depends in democratic societies on political decisions. Therefore a major political decision has to be made regarding chena cultivation in this country. Only an awareness of the problem, which, with regard to chena cultivation is sadly lacking, will enable the politicians to make the correct decision in this respect. Therefore it is upto the academics, to study the system more and more, thereby educating the public at large so that the politicians get the message in the end.

**Note:** (The present paper is based on two field studies carried out in the Embilipitiya region between 1981 and 1986. Based on these two studies I have produced two papers one of which appeared in the *Sri Lanka Journal of Agrarian Studies* 5(1)

1984. The second is a monograph on a chena village named 'Galpaya' which is yet to be published.)

### Readings

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