



The Changing Village in Sri Lanka

The Sri Lanka village has been in a perpetual state of change. It has undergone various degrees of change during the last 2500 years. Such changes have been slow and peripheral or fast and far reaching. In this issue we highlight some of the far reaching changes that are taking place in today's village economy and society. Here an attempt is made to portray slices of this process of change occurring at various levels.

A qualitatively big change in the Sri Lankan village scene occurred with the shift of the centre of civilisation of this country from the dry zone, in the direction of the Western coast in the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries. But a factor that was to have a dominating influence on this process of change was the Western colonisation of the coastal regions of the country from the 16th century onwards. Our survey, therefore, aims to draw attention to the nature of the economy and society during these changes and subsequent to them. Further, within the last 40 years or so there have been deep changes occurring in the rural regions resulting from new colonisation schemes, new land tenure relationships and emerging patterns of socio-economic relationships within the village.

The 'original' village before colonisation was an unequal feudal society with strong differences in position and income in the various sectors of the

economy. It was also a more or less self-sufficient economy at a level marginally higher than subsistence with comparatively little trade contacts with the outside world.

With the colonisation of the Western coast of the country from the 16th century onwards, in the form of that stretch of land under Portuguese influence (from Chilaw in the North to Tangalle in the South), the nature of socio-economic relationships between people begins to change in the villages in these areas.

With the later colonial impact of the British in the 19th century there is a further qualitative change in the rural economy. A self-sufficient—though near subsistence—economy now turns into a distorted plantation economy supplying bounty to the Western metropolis. Under the Waste Lands Act vast areas of high land are denied to local inhabitants, forests are felled and plantations spring up changing beyond recognition the nature of the rural economy in the central regions. Similar changes also occur in the Western lowlands; where coconut plantations owned by local personnel go through qualitatively a similar processes in the rural sector as did the incursion of British-owned plantations in the central regions.

With the growth of social awareness in the country, there have been

tendencies to regain the lands lost in the dry zone following the retreats in the 13th to 15th century era, as well as to remove the distortions of the plantation era. The various colonisation schemes have attempted the former whilst recent land reforms attempt the latter.

Concurrent with these changes there has also been a new resurgence of awareness at the village level, along with the emergence of new social forces and social institutions. The articles to follow describe in detail some of these changing facets. In a selection from Robert Knox, the English prisoner of Rajasingha II, we give glimpses of the nature of people and society in the times before the colonial changes. In the article by Newton Gunasinghe, we see the process by which remnants of the traditional feudal village which still exist are changing in character and acquiring new forms. Susila Ranaweera, examines such a village in-depth and shows how new patterns of domination and dependence are developing and how these affect the village. In the contribution by Bradman Weerakoon, on the other hand, some of the new socio-economic patterns of the village are chartered by describing who the new leaders are. Ariya Abeyesinghe's article on the transformation of the plantations after the recent Land Reform Laws indicates the directions in qualitatively changing colonial relics.

