

PRODUCTION ACTIVITIES IN A KANDYAN RURAL SETTLEMENT

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to provide some ethnographic details about the production activities found in a rural settlement near Kandy during 1985-86. In addition to the production activities described here, there were manufacturing activities also in the settlement. They included brick making, *beedi* making, vinegarmaking, handloom textile making. I however concentrate only on the production activities in this article. My aim is to show the diversity of production activities to be found in rural Kandyan settlements like *Rajagama*, the location of my study. The information given here also provide a picture about other topics such as labour forms used, economies of scale in production, prices prevailed at the time. I start with a brief description of the settlement.

Varahapola : The Settlement

The settlement, on the basis of which study is based, is named *Varahapola*. It is a *Gramma Seva Niladari* Division, the smallest of the administrative units. *Yatinuwara* Assistant Government Agent's (A.G.A.) Division, of which *Varahapola* is one of 41 *Gramma Seva Niladhari* Divisions, is one of 16 such A.G.A. divisions in the Kandy district. *Varahapola* is located to the west of the city of Kandy between *Pilimalalawa* and *Kadugannawa*. Both *Kadugannawa* and *Yatinuwara* are well known to the local population as areas with high concentrations of *Batagama* along with *Goyigama* and other low castes. *Varahapola* is 13 kilometres away from the Kandy City centre.

It has a land area of 577 acres of which 435 are highland and 142 are paddy land. It is also divided into five socially discrete settlements. Out of these, the two most populace are *Hondagama*, the settlement with a *Goyigama* majority and *Rajagama* with a *Batagama* majority. *Panagoda* has a

Panna caste majority whereas the bazaar called *Dalukwatta* has a significant moor population. The fifth settlement is made of 22 distinctive line rooms occupied by *Sinhala* tea plantation workers of the *Giragama* tea estate. In 1984, *Varahapola* had 387 households with a population of 2,876 of which 1,572 were males and 1,304 were females. The number of persons above 18 years of age who were eligible for voting in 1984 was 1,322, of which 668 were males and 654 were females. *Rajagama*, with which I am primarily concerned, had 110 households in 1986 with a total population of 592, of whom 302 were males and 290 females. Of these, 195 were children under age 15.

According to a count made by informants there were 162 *Goyigama* households in *Varahapola*, mainly in *Hondagama*. This number included families of sub-castes: *radala*, *mudali*, *patti* and *val*. The rest consisted mainly of *panna* (54), *radu* (14), *navandanna* (2), moors and some households with unknown caste status.

Of the 110 households in *Rajagama*, 71 do not own paddy land at all. The other 39 own 38.25 acres of paddy land. Of the paddy land, 27.75 acres are located in *Rajagama*. In terms of high land including residential plots, the 110 households own 68 acres in *Rajagama*. Of these there were 20 households owning more than one acre and the rest below an acre.

Fieldwork for this study was carried out between March 1985 to October 1986 through a combination of participant observation, interviews and a survey.

Production Activities

Rajagama, like other settlements around it, is in the wet zone of Sri Lanka and engages in the production of rice as well as crops such as tea, coffee, spices, fruits, vegetables and timber. However the scale

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and the patterns of agricultural activity do not make it into 'agrarian village' so bellowed of anthropologists. Despite a significant level of agricultural activity and production, it is not predominantly an agricultural settlement. It has a minority of persons participating in the process of cultivation. Those who derive major income from land and its cultivation are in fact those who have other major economic interests and pursuits.

Rice growing in *Rajagama* is labour intensive. Given the terrain and size of plots, no machinery is used in cultivation except in rare instances. The seeds used are high yield varieties developed in agricultural institutions and are normally bought every season. Transplanting is common and so is the use of agrochemicals. Some take their paddy to nearby towns for milling. Of the 110 households 71 do not own rice land at all. This means they have to buy rice from the shops. So are others who do not have enough supply of their rice. Only four families depend solely on cultivation.

Three forms of labour are used in the cultivation of rice. They are: (1) family labour (2) wage labour (3) exchange labour or *Attam*. Sixteen households use family labour. The need for family labour is exacerbated by the nature of nuclear family predominance in the settlement. About 11 households used wage labour. The employment of wage labour is seen by the employer and employee as a discrete act that entails no attendant or further social or moral obligations on either side. It was discontinuous enough not to be recognised as an employer-employee relationship. The exchange labour is initiated by those willing to enter into it offering their own help. A person usually goes to another's house or

farm to offer his labour by the day. Male *attam* labour is used at the stages of tilling, harvesting and threshing. Female *attam* labour is used in transplanting and harvesting. Eleven households used *attam* labour.

Those Rajagamans who have excess paddy or those who need cash to settle production costs including labour costs sell some quantity in the town market in *Talawa*. The head master who utilises wage labour estimated the production cost to be between Rs. 75 and 80 in 1986. However the government guaranteed price was Rs. 55 per bushel. The open market price varied between Rs. 67.50 and 75.00. Although different qualities of rice were produced (eg. H-1, H-4, 1-400, 11-B) such differences made negligible change to the price.

The headmaster who is a cultivator as well gives his estimates of cost. The average production per acre is 40-45 bushels. The cost of ploughing is Rs. 420 (at the rate of Rs. 105 for the buffalos and men) for four days. This would result in ploughing the plots twice, the transplanting and preparation cost would be Rs. 500 and the cost of harvesting and threshing with buffalos and men would be Rs. 400. Besides the cost of seeds, fertiliser and chemical would be Rs. 450. Thus it would cost Rs. 1800 per acre to work the land while the value of rice would come to Rs. 3000-3500. He argued that if the value of the plot and the cost of management is calculated, the rice cultivation was an uneconomic activity, especially at the government's guaranteed price of Rs. 55 per bushel.

In the *Maha* season of 1986, 33 cultivators produced 952 bushels of paddy in *Rajagama*. The *Yala* season production is estimated as between half to two thirds of the *Maha* crop. The specific plots varied in their fertility because of location, the kind of tilling employed, the kind of seeds, and the kind and quantities of fertiliser and agrochemicals used and the level of care in cultivation used at various stages. The productivity varies from a very low of 19.6 bushels per acre for the very small plots to a very high of 80 bushels. The average is 44.6 bushels. The total paddy production by Rajagamans, inside and outside, amounted to 1,770 bushels.

Major costs involved are for seeds, fertiliser, pesticides, and labour for buffalo ploughing, transplanting and harvesting.

Why do people cultivate rice then? Even if one concedes that there may be a marginal

return on rice, the question must be answered in non-profit making terms. I was told by several well-off people that basically rice was grown by them as an ancillary activity to their main occupation, because that way could 'ensure for themselves a supply of rice'. Such persons included all the teachers, the headmaster, the education department's administrative officer. Those who had little land and a small harvest, saw rice growing as self-employment besides their other occupation. For example, the laboratory assistant at the University who knew the uneconomic character of rice farming argued that he could do all the cultivation tasks 'in his spare time after work a little at a time, in time which would otherwise be useless'. The few full time farmers, had enough land, their own or on rent to practice rational economic management economies of scale and full time employment of family labour alongside the other farms. All the farmers also had substantial plots of high land on which spice and other kinds of growing was undertaken by them.

The sociological question to be raised now is; how far can *Rajagama* be described as an agricultural settlement, especially a rice growing one? Firstly, it is clear that only 35.45% of the households own land and engage in rice cultivation. Most have other occupations which produce incomes which are greater than through rice. Thirdly, since few people sell rice and rice involves cash outlays, (however small they may be), the cash must be found through other activities. The rice growing is therefore not a self-generating activity. In most cases, the quantity of rice is not enough to last the family through even half the year. It is therefore not a subsistence crop, even when some people argue that they produce it for self-consumption. The self-consumers, such as the teachers are in fact using their spare cash to secure for themselves rice at production cost rather than the market price.

Highland Crops

Rajagama is not a nucleated settlement. The houses and the gardens around them are located in the highlands. Besides the houses, in the highland, there is substantial vegetation; fruit and timber trees and spice bushes. Of the trees there are jak, mango, mangos, *sapu* (albesia), *Kotta*, Plantain-banana, coconut, arecanut and toddy palm, guava and *duriyan*, a part of which is of economic value. Whilst some of the vegetation was planted, some has grown naturally. Besides trees, there are tea and

coffee bushes and spices, specially pepper, cloves, nutmeg. In places the vegetation is so lush and dense, that it is impossible to separate that which is planted deliberately and the rest, which is natural. In old patches, therefore, there are also jungle vines and undergrowth. Further, as one would expect in an area of habitation in the highlands there are footpaths and roads, wells, electricity poles, open ground and public buildings as well. In the past, as was the custom in Kandy, the highland was used for *chena* (slash and burn) cultivation. This is evident because much of the growth is now secondary vegetation.

Of the total highland owned by Rajagamans, 5.5% (20) households own 53.8%. The highest owner has 4 acres in 4 plots. Of the 20, four are local leaders, four more are entrepreneurs (*beedi* manufacturer, timber supplier, general store owner, private coach driver). Seven get major income from farming highland. Four more are white collar workers and four are blue collar workers. Only five of these 20 derive income from farming only. Of the 11 persons who do not own any land, eight are outsiders. They are two Tamil labourers, one fish seller of *Karava* caste a cafe owner, an old widow, one carpenter, a retired man, a general store owner. Four of the owners of land live outside *Rajagama* who own 2.25 acres of land between them. They include a *Bagama* white collar worker, a low country businessman and a Muslim 'used clothes dealer' owning 0.5 acres each. The two outside owners were people who bought land from a friend needing money. This land is rented to the residents.

I now turn to an account of the crops grown on the highland by various households, their work practices and the labour employed and the income derived from crops by the families. I do this firstly by dealing with each product separately and secondly by pointing to those for whom the cultivation of a highland plot is significant to their domestic economy.

Tea

There is no exclusive tea garden in *Rajagama*. The 22 households which do have tea, have bushes alongside of other crops.

The young tea cuttings which are propagated by the nurseries are bought from the towns and planted periodically. The plant takes a year to mature, after which

chemical fertiliser is given to it periodically. Those who sell the tea leaves do so as green leaves by the weight to a licensed local tea buyer who resells them to a nearby tea factory. The tea leaves are dried on trays in the factory and sold to wholesalers in Colombo later.

The highest income reported was Rs. 3,200 by a full-time cultivator who owns .95 acre of highland in two plots. He had worked previously on a large tea plantation so he knew the methods of tea planting and nurturing. 22 persons had tea in various quantities. Among them were a leader, three entrepreneurs (2 brick and 1 vinegar manufacturers) and three full time farmers. Everyone used family labour because all the chores, including picking, on the home plots are spaced out in time. Tea generated little wage labour in *Rajagama*.

Coffee

Coffee was planted by 27 persons. Incomes reported were between Rs. 40 and 900. It is grown from baby plants found under the mature trees. Prices in 1987 varied from Rs. 35 to 40 a Kg depending upon the greenness of the beans. Coffee is also a crop obtained with family labour. It generated no wage employment.

Coconut

26 persons had coconut trees. Only 1 person reported no crop, 4 reported enough for own use only, 4 more sold coconuts regularly to get an income between Rs. 300 and Rs. 500. The rest (17) sold coconuts only occasionally. The price of a coconut was Rs. 1.50 a piece.

Three leaders, two entrepreneurs (handloom and brick) and two farmers are among the owners.

Arecanut, Plantains, Fruit and Vegetables

These are grown in small quantities. Some are used for private consumption and some sold in the market.

Timber

Although all the plots had timber in the form of trees, 12 persons reported timber as an asset for ready sale. Of them, 3 had Jak trees, 1 had toddy palm and 6 had mixed timber including *albesia* and *sapu*. Three reported sale in 1986.

Animals and Chicken

Six persons had cows of whom 2 reported selling milk. One person sold 6

bottles of milk a day which earned him Rs. 450 a month. The other sold 2 bottles a day for Rs. 180 a month and used the rest for his sister's children. A cow cost Rs. 3,000. Two other persons had 4 goats costing Rs. 200 each. The goats were bought as kids and meant for sale. Five persons had buffalo each, costing between Rs. 3,500 and Rs. 4,000. They are hired out at Rs. 45 a day or used in *attam* in rice farming. One of the problems for all the owners was the difficulty of grazing due to the lack of open grassland. Hence the animal had to be constantly fed cut grass at home. This required family labour.

Nine persons kept 75 chickens in all. The largest number was 30 kept by a labourer. The rest owned between 3 and 12. The largest owner reported an income of Rs. 200 per month from the eggs. Most others reported an income of Rs. 30 or less per month.

In 1986 the eggs were sold at Rs. 1.50 per egg in retail or at Rs. 1.25 per piece to the town traders. Keeping animals generated no wage labour, although buffalo owners worked alongside of their animals when hired.

Spices

The chief spices grown include cloves, pepper and nutmeg.

Cloves

Cloves are grown from plants bought from the nurseries in towns. A plant costs Rs. 2.50 to 3.50. It grows into a tree in 15 to 20 years and thereafter bears crop for 10 years or more. When young, the bush is fed fertiliser piecemeal at about half a kilogram per tree. The crop is harvested once a year. They are dried in the sun for 3-5 days. 44 persons had cloves on their plots. 33 of them sold crops on the market in varying quantities earning income between Rs. 100 and Rs. 1,000. The price had fallen to Rs. 165 a kg in 1986 from a high of Rs. 250 in 1983. Dried cloves give a higher price.

Pepper

Pepper vines are propagated from cuttings available at the nurseries or from cuttings of mature vines. They are usually interplanted so that vines are protected from harsh sun and rain. The cuttings reach maturity after 3 years and bear fruit for upto 10 years. The fruit can be harvested 2-3 times a year. Whilst growing, the vine has to be fertilised. Once harvested, the fruits have to be dried before selling. The pepper prices

are determined by the quality, degree of dryness of the corn and seasonality. Pepper requires a long wait, a constant watch because of thieving, tending, weeding, fertilising and careful harvesting. The activity requires, prolonged labour, and some cash investment for buying, cutting, fertiliser and pesticide. Prices in 1986 varied between Rs. 80 and Rs. 125. It is sold in *Talawa* town or to the visiting traders. 32 persons had pepper vines. Except 3 persons, others sold the crops in varying quantities in the market.

Nutmeg

Nutmeg cuttings are bought from the Government nursery in polythene bags. It takes about 10 years for the tree to mature, after which it bears fruit indefinitely. No fertiliser is used. 10 persons had nutmeg trees. All of them sold their crop in the market. Even a single tree produces spice beyond the consumption capacity of a family. It is a potent spice which is used only sparingly. Nutmeg is sold as a dry fruit at Rs. 150 per kg. It was the least important spice crop in *Rajagama*.

Stealing is a significant deterrent to devoting plot space, time and cash in growing spices. Some persons commented that spices are generally time consuming, had a long wait and the uncertainty of the market place.

Although most persons used family labour on highland plots, occasionally people used wage labour for non-routine tasks. The wages were usually Rs. 30-35 per day with food.

Because of the great variety of crop and vegetation, it is impossible to correlate in a specific manner the income from these crops with the size of the plot. Those who had larger plots derived incomes from several kinds of crop. While the individual return from a crop can be low, the combined return from all the crops in a plot is high amounting to Rs. 2000 to Rs. 5000. There were several plot owners who concentrated on one crop in order to get a high income. Such incomes however demand planning and great care at all stages including hoarding and preparing the crop for the highest price available on the market.

Concluding Remarks

The ethnographic details provided here provide a 'window' to the larger economy and economic relations spread around the Kandyan countryside. Each of the farming or production activities when enlarged into

the whole district or region or the whole country characterises a mega industry. eg. tea, rice, milk, timber, cattle, spice. Because the basis of these descriptions is a case study of a small rural settlement they provide only the fragments of the whole picture with regard to these mega industries or production activities. My aim in this paper is not so much to provide a detailed study of each of the production or manufacturing activity but to show how the fragments of these operate at the micro-level in a combined setting.

These descriptions reinforce the 'petty-commodity producer' concept. The productions are highly market oriented. The

crops are cash crops. Even as small producers, having no large quantities of land or other production inputs, they participate in the market economy, facing undue risks and seeing no noteworthy profit at times. Whatever the land available to them is put to growing cash generating crops in varying quantities. This shows how closely the capitalist economy has penetrated the Kandyan countryside. Combinations of labour inputs, excess cash earned through other occupations etc., are invested in the growing of cash crops.

The information provided here show how far and to what extent the market has

penetrated the lives and livelihood of Rajagamans. In addition to cash crops such as tea, coffee, and spices, items which can be consumed directly such as domesticated animals, fruits, rice are sold on the market either to generate extra cash or to settle debts. Some of these items have to be bought again from the market for consumption. This process of 'dual traffic' is a major characteristic of the market relations as they appear in the Kandyan countryside. The direct cultivators and others are equally caught up in the networks of the market both as producers and consumers.

