

Social Change and the Disintegration of a Traditional System of Exchange Labour in Kandyan Sri Lanka

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In those peasant societies where agriculture rests on the cultivation of fragmented small plots, relying on highly labour intensive techniques, in the absence of organically united corporate kin groups, the historical tendency is in the direction of the evolution of some form of exchange labour. When population density was low and the cultivated area could absorb the overwhelming majority of the gainfully employed population it was a system of labour mobilisation that ideally suited the techniques and relations of production. But the penetration of monetary relations into the villages, the conversion of labour and land into commodities exchanged in the market and the growth of population with no expansion of the paddy cultivated area all tend to seriously weaken the base on which the system of exchange labour rested.

Other dimensions of production and exchange inside as well as outside paddy agriculture develop structural incongruities with the system of reciprocal exchange. Confronted with the erosion of its base the exchange system does not collapse, it continues as an emasculated and rarefied entity in a distorted form, much of its former logic lost, as a caricature of itself. This paper attempts to examine the disintegration of the system in relation to the socio-economic context of 'Delumgoda'.

Attam as the system is referred to in the area is reciprocal exchange of labour limited to paddy agriculture. It is an informal contract made between two individuals which implicitly stipulates the nature and duration of the work to be performed. The contract for instance stipulates that if 'A' works in the field cultivated by 'B' for a full day in reaping the harvest, 'B' will reciprocate likewise when harvest is reaped on 'A's' field. As such, it belongs to the variety of 'balanced reciprocal exchange' dis-

cussed by Sahlins. "Balanced reciprocity refers to direct exchange. In precise balance, the reciprocation is the customary equivalent of the thing received and is without delay. Perfectly balanced reciprocity, the simultaneous exchange of the same types of goods to the same amounts, is not only conceivable, but ethnographically attested in certain marital transactions....., friendship compacts....., and peace agreements" (Sahlins: 1974 'Stone Age Economics' P 194 London). To this list of balanced reciprocities, *attam* exchange can also be added. The crux of the system is balanced reciprocity as it consists of a series of voluntary contracts between sets of individuals which stipulate the duration, nature and the type of labour to be exchanged. Though the contract is never one between two groups or an individual and a group, it is not a fragmented pact between two individuals. It achieves social nature as various individuals are involved with numerous others in contracts of exchange labour. From the point of view of the paddy area (*yaya*) as a whole, the labour gang can be seen moving from one plot (*kumbura*) to another in a system of rotation. Hence, Sahlins basic principle of reciprocity has to be extended to demonstrate the social nature of *attam* exchange and present some paddy there.

Sometimes there are signs of the perfectly balanced reciprocity of *attam* exchange breaking down. An affluent cultivator may give half a bushel of paddy as a 'gift' to his *attam* partner after reaping the harvest which the poor partner may not be in a position to return. However, it is a matter of pride on the part of the poor partner to politely decline the offer on these occasions. The affluent one if he persists may visit his partner's house would be handed over to one of the children of the household. Now it is impolite to reject the 'gift'. The recipient would accept it with a mild critique of his partner's extravagance. Such gifts to an *attam* partner are rare, they are not at all obligatory; a man may resort to gifts only when one's partner is poor; "when he has not enough paddy to last the year". It is not derived from the structural

logic of the exchange system but is connected only marginally with it. In a perfectly balanced system of exchange too, rare occurrences of imbalance may be found as exchanges are frequently penetrated by other dimensions of social relations. "The benefits exchanged at one extreme may be identical or equal. At the other logical extreme, one party may give nothing for the benefits it has received. Both of these extremes are probably rare in social relations and the intermediary case in which one party gives something more or less than that received, is probably more common than either of the limiting cases".

The balanced nature of *attam* exchange is emphasized by its absolutely binding nature. If 'A' has worked in the field cultivated by 'B' the latter must reciprocate. The reciprocation is without delay as 'A' may be reaping his harvest a couple of days later.

The various stages of work in the paddy cultivation process are mutually exclusive from the point of view of *attam*. It is impossible for a partner to receive labour for ploughing and return it in harvesting. The principle underlying the contract is a balance based on nature and duration of work. Labour mobilisation in paddy agriculture is dependent on sexual division of labour; ploughing, reaping and harvesting etc. are men's work while planting, weeding etc. are women's work. The principle of mutual exclusion of the stages dictates that one unit of male labour is not equivalent to a unit of female labour. Thus men and women have to establish their *attam* partners separately and a female labour unit received for weeding will be reciprocated likewise.

If an *attam* partner falls sick or cannot reciprocate due to some unavoidable reason, he has to send someone to take his place. A grown up son or an unmarried younger brother may be sent so that the *attam* debt (*naya*) is settled. If the indisposed partner is not in a position to find a close kin to take his place, he is obliged to send a labourer and pay his wage.

In addition to human beings, buffaloes too become involved in the exchange network. In ploughing or threshing where buffaloes must be used, according to the principle of balanced reciprocity buffalo exchanges may ensue.

It is necessary to distinguish *attam* from a system that deceptively appears close to it; the communal organisation of labour. It is not the principle of reciprocity that differentiates one from another, but the idea of balance. In Kandyan areas where corporate kin groups are absent, communal relations in the organisation of labour is to be found only within the nuclear family where one may give or receive with no idea of reciprocal balance. In *attam*, the partners face each other as economically motivated parties fully aware of their distinctive interests. The labour mobilisation in *attam* results from exchange based on egoism, whereas communal labour mobilisation is governed by an ethical code generated by a coincidence of interests held by different individuals.

The information supplied by the old informants relating to the agricultural practices half a century ago attests to the fact that labour mobilisation at every major stage in the paddy cultivation process was exclusively based on *attam* exchange. As the current situation differs greatly from the picture presented by the informants as the old custom (*parana sirith*), it is necessary to construct an historical picture of some salient elements in the functioning of the agrarian system.

(i) It is interesting to note that paddy land in Delumgoda was less concentrated at the turn of the century than it is now. In 1881 the population of the village amounted to 228 consisting of 118 males and 110 females, by 1891 the population had declined to 186; 99 males and 87 females. Paddy acreage amounted to 37 acres. The names of 18 males are mentioned as owners of paddy fields (Lawrie: 1896 : 358-359). What is important from the point of view of *attam* is not necessarily that land ownership should be fragmented among a large number of

dispersed among the peasant population. In comparison with the current distribution where nearly 45% of the available paddy land is held by one family group and a substantial percentage of the plots cultivated by wage labour, the limited information available pertaining to the past suggests that the percentage of owner-cultivators and tenant-cultivators in relation to the gainfully employed population was far higher to what it is now, and perhaps covered most of the gainfully employed population. Lawrie reports that the land in the village was granted to a feudal noble, Haliyadde Muhandiram in 1789 by the Kandyan King. However, when Erawwawela Adigar (a high official) was put to death for high treason, the property belonging to his family (among whom Haliyadde Muhandiram also counted) was confiscated. The land was later distributed among *Maduwe* people who were associated with the department of transport of the Kandyan state. The land distribution at the turn of the century derives from the dispersed donations granted to these people at the close of the 18th century. Two assumptions can be advanced. (a) Greater proportion of heads of households owned land at the turn of the century than they do now, and (b) the proportion of active cultivators (both owner and tenant) was much higher to what it is now and probably covered the entire population.

These peasants had different types of cultivation rights to plots of paddy land. They provided an ideal labour pool to be utilized in *attam* exchange from which everyone stood to gain.

(ii) Wage labour was not known in the paddy sector though it had already penetrated the village economy. Some villagers worked for wages on a nearby estate then belonging

to an European. Wage relations assume dominance in a commercially organised plantation close to the village. From there the practice spreads to subsistence agriculture, causing structural changes in the hitherto existing social relations of production. The presence of wage labour where the transaction is "labour—money or payment in kind" disorganises the principle "labour—labour" which underlies the *attam* system. The successful operation of *attam* assumes the absence of wage labour in subsistence agriculture.

(iii) Paddy was not a commercial crop. There were some Muslim pedlars who purchased paddy at the rate of Re. 1/- per bushel. But the marketable surplus was marginal, when a surplus was available it was stored in the house rather than sold. It was used as a form of money by the affluent to be paid to the poor when they worked in the highland, as payments to pot makers, blacksmiths, carpenters etc. Ready conversion of paddy into money was not known, amidst the flooding of the domestic market with cheap imported rice.

(iv) Only one season was cultivated, thus yielding a single crop per year. Sometimes in the 'Yala' season (May to September) few fields were used to cultivate a variety known as 'Heenati' which was used for medicinal purposes. This should have reduced the paddy surplus available and also would have been in itself the result of a limited labour supply. The practice of cultivating a single season with the available labour supply would not have given a reason to resort to wage labour from other possible sources. The growth of population and the serious cuts in the rice tonnage imported made cultivation of two seasons an imperative, leading to significant changes in agrarian social relations.

(v) A large number of peasant families in 'Delumgoda' owned buffaloes and cattle. The buffalo is an essential animal in paddy cultivation especially in ploughing and threshing. In ideal circumstances, the balanced reciprocity cannot work without every cultivator owning at least one buffalo, as he will not be counted as a full partner in ploughing and threshing. With the large number of buffaloes owned by the villagers, *attam* exchange would have been reinforced.

(vi) Production implements, sickles, hoes, ploughs etc. were owned by almost everyone. The custom was to bring one's own implements to work in a field belonging to another. The system of labour pooling, based on exchange, was complemented by a system of pooling production implements.

The above mentioned elements in the functioning of the agrarian system which I primarily constructed from the accounts of eye witnesses seem to be the base on which *attam* system rested. The change to cultivation of two seasons has a marginal significance. It can directly cause disintegration of *attam* system only when the man/land ratio is low, which probably would give rise to importation of labour from outside. The cultivation of a single crop however, favourably reflected on the buffalo population as the fields were used as grazing grounds during the fallow period.

The ideal *attam* partner is one who cultivated a plot of paddy land, owned one or two buffaloes and the other necessary production implements. He is the one who could fully participate in the exchange labour system and who stood to gain from it. A labour pool consisting of a number of such households is the ideal one suited for *attam* exchange.

Attam exchange still functions, but very few cultivators resort to it. Even in these isolated cases it covers only few phases of the paddy production process. For reaping and threshing

the harvest as far as male labour is concerned and planting, and weeding as far as female labour is concerned, still tends to be mobilised in terms of *attam* exchange in some plots. But the emergent pattern is to employ wage labour whenever outside assistance is required. It is necessary to stress here that landlords are not the exclusive employers of wage labour. An owner cultivator or a tenant cultivator may employ labour whenever the need arises. None of these categories are mutually exclusive. An owner-cultivator or a tenant cultivator may hire himself out to another cultivator if the opportunity arises.

For threshing, though human labour may be available on *attam*, buffaloes most often are not. This is due to a serious decline in the buffalo population. There are only 8 buffaloes in the village, 28 cows and calves and 3 bulls. The cultivation of highlands and the change to two crops per annum have seriously reduced the grazing land available to the animals.

The seven households who own the 8 buffaloes are in a position to work out a system among themselves to exchange the animals. But the overwhelming number of the cultivators are excluded from this circle. They are compelled to hire the buffaloes from one who owns them for ploughing and threshing. Thus there are some cases of threshing where the human labour is based on *attam* and buffaloes are hired for payment.

Attam exchange frequently, though not necessarily covers a large paddy area (*Yaya*). As the units of cultivation individually held are highly fragmented; a field may consist of 20-30 units. The cultivator participating in *attam* exchange cannot select individual partners; neither can he calculate the labour units he needs in different operations and limit his reciprocation only to such a number. The custom is to mobilise labour in terms of the paddy area (*Yaya*). Since 74.6% of the units are less than half an acre in extent the labour resulting from exchange exceeds the actual requirements. The cultivator is bound also to reciprocate to all these individuals, which would mean 20-30 days of unpaid labour. The *attam* partners have to be given meals by the cultivator when they come to help in his

field. Those who participate in a full day's work lasting from 8.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. now get three cups of tea and a mid-day snack of manioc or bread. To feed ten people with great economy a cultivator needs Rs. 8.00 to Rs. 10.00 per day. Since reaping and threshing is invariably done on the same day, the cultivator is obliged to give a full meal in the evening to his partners which must consist of rice and curry. An evening meal for 10 people costs at least Rs. 15.00, assuming that he does not buy rice in the market. Thus the excess *attam* labour becomes a heavy drain on the cultivator. Though *attam* is based on the cultivation of small units there is a point beyond which the fragmentation should not proceed if the system is to stand viable. The number of units into which the paddy area is divided should roughly equal the adult male labour units necessary for the cultivation of the whole paddy area. The paddy area in Delumgoda passed this point at least two decades ago.

In the case of a small cultivator (one cultivating less than half an acre) the arguments in favour of giving up *attam* and resorting to wage labour seem rather convincing. The owner-cultivator with a field exceeding an acre still stands to gain from *attam*, as the excess labour resulting from *attam* in relation to his unit of cultivation would be very much less than it would be in the case of a small cultivator. But very few owner cultivators own more than an acre of paddy. Those who own are affluent cultivators who have come under the influence of an *anti-attam* ideology; *attam* is seen as a demeaning sort of work which is suitable only for tenant cultivators and wage labourers. It should be stressed here that this stratum in village society is upwardly mobile, some being school teachers, clerks and other government and corporation employees. As such they tend to do everything possible to distinguish themselves from the common villagers. Thus the stratum which could have benefitted economically from *attam* exchange are prevented from doing so by social and ideological factors.

With its economic base eroding the importance of *attam* exchange is on the decline. As a temporary solution

to the conflict between *attam* and wage labour, a system known as *attam kontrattu* has come into existence. It solves the conflict by incorporating the elements of both forms of labour organisation. Here the exchange covers three groups of partners, the cultivator, the contractor (who himself is a labourer) and other cultivators.

The initial agreement is between the cultivator and the contractor, where the cultivator promises to pay a stipulated amount to the contractor to complete some phase of work. The amount stipulated roughly equals the wages of the men to be employed. The transaction between the cultivator and the contractor is purely monetary with no reciprocal labour obligations.

The contractor engages a number of men. In turn he is subjected to the obligation of working in their plots. Seen from the point of view of the employer, *attam kontrattu* is not radically different from engaging wage labour, the only difference being that it is an efficient form of finding workers. From the point of view of the contractor, it is a system by which he can obtain advance payment *en bloc* for work to be performed later. The cultivators who come to 'help' in the field perceive it as *attam* exchange, as the contractor will reciprocate later. Sometimes the 'helpers' may consist of landless labourers rather than cultivators. The contractor has to pay these labourers as there is no other way of reciprocation. These paid workers are not under obligation to reciprocate to the cultivators.

The contractor is most often an enterprising landless labourer. He is not in a position to join the reciprocal exchange as he is not a man with a plot of paddy. He emerges as an intermediary, but is qualitatively distinct from the well known 'middle man' as he does not engage in the exploitation of any one's labour. He merely gets paid in advance for work to be performed later.

Attam exchange rested on a base that consisted of a number of essential elements. (i) A certain degree of decentralisation of cultivation rights

in the community, leading to roughly equivalent small plots, (ii) the dependence of the overwhelming majority of the population on paddy agriculture, (iii) absence of wage labour in the sector of paddy production, (iv) the presence of buffaloes in many households and (v) widespread ownership of production implements. The penetration of bourgeois relations of production and exchange has effectively eroded this base without actually replacing the techniques of production. Increasing population has contributed to this process. Acute fragmentation of the units of cultivation, formation of a class of landless rural labourers and alienation of a substantial section of population from paddy agriculture are the cumulative results of this process. *Attam* exchange which was a form of labour utilisation corresponding to a pre-capitalist formation no longer fits the contemporary structure. But it does not disappear at once; it persists at the points of least resistance and through innovations like *attam kontrattu* attempts to gain a new lease of life.

Attam as well as the kinship organisation among the Kandyans can be linked with the system of land tenure. The general abstraction relating to the historical formation is as follows: concentration of the ownership of land and the dispersal of the rights of cultivation, thus creating a small holding peasantry cultivating roughly equivalent plots of land. Kinship is a charter of inheritance rights, where the sons and daughters inherit more or less equally. In a system where land passes to married sons and daughters, that is among heads of nuclear families, the nuclear family becomes the property holding unit rather than the extended lineage. The intense 'egoism' of the nuclear family and the absence of food sharing may be the result of the land tenurial system mediated through kinship. But the absence of sharing in other fields may be directly related to the existence of *attam*. A full investigation of *attam* in relation to kinship and land tenure is an exercise in social ontology which would carry us away from the limits that we have set for this essay. The objective of the present paper is to attempt a structural analysis of the disintegration of the system as such.