

Encounters in the North

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The problems of Lermbarai (which are by no means peculiar to it) which I was able to piece together from the explanations of the A. P. K. youths and Mahalingam, the 36-year-old bare — bodied natural leader of the 'Pallar' people of the village, could briefly be stated as follows. Their roots stretch to the recent abnormal increases in land values throughout the peninsula. This situation is aggravated by those returning from abroad, wanting to invest in land in their home areas. (I am told that in addition to professionals and migrants to the Middle East some 5,000 youths have so far gone in search of work to West Germany!). This process is naturally striking the very roots of the remaining feudal structures in the peninsula. 'Landlords' who were content with the extraction of free services from depressed caste tenants occupying even infertile tracts, are now hovering with title deeds and pushing claims to lands which they had hardly bothered to look at for decades. Events like evictions and house burnings that recently took place in Chavakachcheri are the inevitable results.

The legal claimants to the land at Verambari are members of a Malavarai (Mudaliyar) family possessing a reputation extending beyond the area, as patrons of education. The present occupiers — the villagers — descend from those that were settled in this land a century or so ago by this family. Their relationship had essentially been feudal, with the villagers performing various labour services (free labour at weddings and funerals, and compulsory labour on the landlord's properties etc.) in return for the right of settlement. They were in addition

bonded settlers who were not free to leave the village. Though the people of Verambari were never in any sense cultivators (they earn their living from fish vending and toddy-tapping) they had over the years developed the rock strewn, infertile land. In fact the segment occupied by the villagers was now in an ideal state for cultivation. According to the youths this land could today fetch as much as Rs. 10,000/- per lacham or parapu (about 1/16 of an acre) in comparison to the unoccupied and therefore undeveloped sector where the price would not be anything more than Rs. 3000/-. (Over 300 families occupy the 400 odd lachams that constitute the village). The landowners were now in an unholy hurry to obtain vacant possession of the land, especially the developed sector — and I was able to spot a number of potential buyers hovering in the vicinity that very morning.

Apart from legal means the landowners were now resorting to various ruses to push the villagers out. Firstly, a move is afoot to block all paths leading to the settlement under the guise that these were unauthorised clearings. Secondly, fines are imposed on the cutting of leaves from the palmyrah trees which the villagers proudly point out had been planted by their forefathers. Work on a temple and a library under construction by the villagers have been forcibly halted. A ban has been enforced on the construction of permanent structures and a villager is now facing trial for putting up a house with a cemented floor. I was taken to witness a pathetic sight of a 60 year-old, one-legged person, father of 6 children — Kathiran — salvaging materials from his house which had been pulled down on account of his having put up an "unauthorised" fence.

(Extract from Lanka Guardian July 15, 1980).