

SOME ASPECTS OF COLONISATION IN GAL OYA VALLEY

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The colonisation programme of the Gal Oya Development Board began in 1951. After the jungle had been cleared by machines, the first two units were established in Wavinna and Paragahakelle. The people settled were the existing jungle villagers, and displaced families from the area submerged by the new reservoir, Senanayake Samudra. Although they were the first to be colonized, these two village units remain the least developed. They have been slow to change their methods of agriculture. Surrounded by jungle, they traditionally depended on slash-and-burn (*chena*) cultivation, and it took them about a generation to get accustomed to the idea of systematic irrigated paddy cultivation mainly for the market, rather than for subsistence. The fact that nearly 75 per cent of the allottees in Unit 2 do not have buffaloes, while the number of guns owned by them is unusually high, is indicative of a domestic economy focussed on hunting and *chena* agriculture rather than systematic cultivation of irrigated paddy fields.* Their social institutions, particularly marriage, have been even more resistant to change. In Unit 2 only two marriages had been registered, while some 25 customary marriages had been contracted. In short, they have not yet accepted the treatment of marriage as a binding contract, and in many cases marriage is confined to casual cohabitation.¹ Because of their dire poverty, villagers of Units 1 and 2 often take to prostitution, and these two units have the highest incidence of venereal disease in the Valley.

Broadly speaking, there are three types of allottees in the Valley: (a) the old villagers, described above; (b) the colonists proper; and (c) the peasant expansion allottees. Village Unit 3 consists of the first colonists proper, who migrated from Kandy and Kegalle. Their lands were cleared and prepared for them before they were handed over. Village Unit 4 consists of peasants from the East Coast villages north and south of Kalmunai, a densely populated

* Data marked with an asterisk was derived from a sample Survey of the Left Bank conducted in 1963 by Dr. R. Pieris and Mr. S.A. Meegama.

1. The position is similar to that obtaining in the North Central Dry Zone village described by E.R. Leach (*Pul Eliya*, Cambridge: 1931, pp. 89-91): "It is in fact often difficult to discriminate in this society between marriage and promiscuous mating. There is a perfectly valid sense in which it can be said that, if a woman is seen publicly to be cooking food for a man, then she is considered, for the time being, to be his common-law wife . . . Divorce may be effected as easily as common-law marriage. The couple simply separate and the marriage is at an end".

coastal belt which came within the Area of Authority of the Gal Oya Development Board. They were considered peasant expansion allottees rather than colonists proper. About 15 village units of approximately 150 allottees each are occupied by categories (a) and (c), and about 25 by category (b). Some of the salient features of allotments in these three categories may now be outlined by means of data taken from village units representative of each.²

(a) *Village Unit 2 — Paragahakelle — Old Villagers of Paragahakelle and the area submerged by the Senanayake Samudra.*

The average size of an allotment is 3 acres highland and 4 acres paddyland. Only one acre of the former is cultivated with a few coconut, orange, plantain trees. This is due to lack of water in the dry season. The average yield for an acre of paddy is 30-40 bushels. The income from the allotment for a season is Rs. 1,200 plus Rs. 800 from sales to the Co-operative Societies, Rs. 300 from sales to other buyers and Rs. 25/- from the sale of produce from the Highland lot. The average income of the colonist is about Rs. 2,600 per annum.

The average indebtedness per family is about Rs. 500. They are indebted either to the Co-operative Society or to the local boutique keeper. The rate of interest at which the latter gives loans is 100%. This may be paid either in cash or in paddy. If the latter, the paddy is valued at Rs. 6.00 per bushel, in which case he makes a total profit of 300% when he sells the paddy to the co-operative store at Rs. 12/- per bushel. There are 5 boutiques in the village. The most important *mudalali*³ has 3 tractors and a sundry goods store and is worth about a lakh of rupees. His grip on the unit cannot be easily broken as he provides tractors for cultivation and provisions for consumption. When a colonist defaults he seizes the harvest or cultivates the paddy field by force. Though the forces of the law have been arrayed against him they have not been very successful in spite of a spell of imprisonment for encroachment. His control cannot be broken until the co-operative is given the facility of extending consumption loans to the allottees. He is not an old villager but an outsider. About 25 colonists have savings ranging from Rs. 1,500/- to Rs. 2,000/- over the past 10 years. They have spent about Rs. 300/- on improving their houses, on buying bicycles which cost Rs. 150/- and radios which cost Rs. 350/-. There are 12 radios in the unit and 40 bicycles while 25 houses have chairs and beds with mattresses. 25 colonists can give loans, the amounts ranging from Rs. 500/- to Rs. 1,000/-. The rate of interest is 50% to 100%.

There are 150 colonist families in the unit. They have 1,000 dependents and there are in addition 100 outsiders living in the unit. The total population of the unit is 1,250. There are 2-3 dependents families for every 10 colonist allotments.* They either cultivate a portion of the original paddy lot with the

2. The statements and conclusions presented here are based on the author's experience. The statistics, which are approximate averages, were collected by Village Officers of the Gal Oya Development Board two years ago.

3. Capitalist, entrepreneur.

allottees consent or cultivate reservations or do some *chena* cultivation. Each married dependent has on the average 1-2 children.* The unit has been extremely poor in its output of non-cultivating income-earners — only one in the category "clerk teacher or technician". However, 25% of their girls have married Gal Oya Board employees. The majority of them inter-marry within the unit. 20 families are from Bibile, which they visit once or twice a year and some of their children have married from their old village. In 1960, two marriages took place — the average age of the girls was 16 and the average age of the man 22. Three deaths took place. The ages of the dead were 25, 45, and 50.

The village unit school has a staff of 8 teachers and 175 pupils. The average of school-going and school-leaving are 5 to 8 years and 12 to 15 years. The nearest hospital is at Inginiyagala which is 6 miles away. The village unit has a midwife and Public Health Inspector to serve it.

The colonist's meals consist of rice, yams, bread and *kurakkan roti* made out of grain from their *chenas*.⁴ They spend Rs. 50/- of their income for clothing for women, and Rs. 30/- for the men. The items of clothing worn by the women are the usual cloth and a jacket which has replaced the piece of cloth thrown over the shoulder in saree fashion to cover the upper part of the body. The main part of their income is spent on the process of earning livelihood. Rs. 160/- per paddy field for a tractor to plough the land, and repaying the Rs. 300/- cultivation loan obtained from the Cooperative. Since their loans can be repaid only at the harvest the tractor owner receives about Rs. 320/- worth of paddy and the cultivation loans are often unsettled. Out of the 150 colonists, 80 settle their loans to the Cooperative, while the rest are overdue. Since the cooperative does not give credit facilities for provisions and food, the allottees avoid surrendering their paddy to the Cooperative although they could obtain the guaranteed price of Rs. 12 per bushel. Instead they sell their crop at a lower price to the boutique keeper in order to buy provisions and household requisites, and are in debt to him. The only way to pull them out of their predicament is for the Cooperative to give them consumption loans so that they will not avoid selling their paddy at the guaranteed price.⁵ The condition of the 70 colonists indebted to the Cooperative is miserable indeed, and is not an improvement of their lot before colonisation.

(b) Village Unit 29 — Colonists from Kandy and Kegalle.

The average yield per acre in this unit is 45 bushels of paddy. The use of fertilisers and improved methods of cultivation, e.g. transplanting, are responsible for this increase. The unit of land allotted to these colonists is smaller

4. *Kurakkan* = millet (*bot.* eleusine coracana); *roti* = bread.

5. Field investigation in Gal Oya five years ago revealed "considerable traffic with the boutiquekeeper and itinerant trader from the East Coast and Southern Province, traffic large enough to undermine the marketing and consumer store activities (of the multipurpose cooperatives established by the Gal Oya Development Board)" (S.J.Tambiah: The cooperatives in relation to the economic needs of the Ceylonese peasant, *Ceylon J. Historical and Social Studies*, 1/i, 1958, 50 n.)

than the extents given to the earlier settlers — one acre highland and three of paddy land. The unit was colonised in 1955/6. It is possible to get water for highland cultivation, which consequently brings an average annual income of Rs. 150/- . The average annual income from the paddy lot is Rs. 3,200/- or Rs. 1,600/- per season.

The quantity of paddy delivered at the Co-operative is 100 bushels on an average per season and about 50 bushels are sold to traders at Rs. 9/- a bushel. The average indebtedness per family is Rs. 65/- and the rate of interest is 50%. The cultivators are not so much in the grip of the creditor as in the case of Unit 2, as their higher income enables them to pay back their Rs. 300/- cultivation loan to the Co-operative. They owe about Rs. 150/- to the boutique-keeper. There are 22 boutiques and prices are lower than at the Co-operative. No particular person has been able to monopolise the trade in the village. The boutiques consist of oilmanstores, tea kiosks and sundry good stores and the owners are both colonists and outsiders.

There is an average of one married dependent to every two allotments* and about 75 of them have no land to cultivate. They either cultivate portions of the original allotment or are employed in the Gal Oya Development Board as masons, drivers, road labourers and plantation workers in the Sugar Farm.

There are 149 colonists, 1,300 dependents and 60 outsiders living in the unit — making a total of 1,500. The average size of the colonist household is 9.* 20 marriages were registered in 1960.

There were 5 deaths in 1960, (including 2 suicides) at the ages of 14 and 18 and at 56, 60 and 62. The average life expectancy in the unit is higher than in the case of old villagers. Their meals are also better — hoppers, string hoppers, milk rice and yams and such sweetmeats as oil cakes.

The Colonists' expenditure on clothing is higher Rs. 150/- per season for womenfolk and Rs. 75/- for the men. They spend about Rs. 500/- a year on their clothing or a little less than 1/6th of their income. The younger generation of men and women in this unit are noteworthy for the show they put up when occasion demands in multi-coloured sarees and white blouses and ready made shirts. There is a radio in every other house and a bicycle and furniture in every house.

They make special trips every harvest and some go once in two months to their homes. Though they have come to stay they have not cut their connections with their villages. There are private vans and regular Transport Board buses running from Kegalle to Gal Oya to accommodate them. They treat their colony allotments as their home away from home. Emotionally they are attached to their old areas and try as far as possible to recreate them in their new surroundings. They have given place names like Jayanthipura or Viji-thapura to portions of their village. During harvest time they do the traditional dances and have an almsgiving (*dāna*). Harvesting is done communally. In

time of illhealth they chant *pirit*. They have a prosperous temple close by—"Udayagiri"— which has been provided with 25 acres of paddy land. They present a community well adapted within itself and to the functions it has to perform.

The dependents seldom marry outside the unit but caste feeling is strong. The low caste people have changed their economic status considerably and have changed their attire accordingly. They attempt to change their caste by giving new names to their children. One example from personal experience — a colonist whose "ge" name was Hewayalage, nominated as his successor his son Herath Mudiyansalage. The others in the crowd wished to know "how come" but once I noted down the name there could be no objection. It would be difficult to prove his caste a generation later.

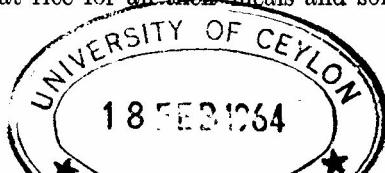
The unit has however not been very productive of skilled men. The number of clerks, teachers and technicians which they have produced is only 2 compared to the adjoining Unit 30 (Kalutara) which has produced about 15 S.S.C. teachers.

They do not save much due to the expensive habits they have acquired. In their old areas they have gained a new status by the greater extent of land they now own and they spend more to maintain that status. Whatever savings they have is in the form of hoarded cash. They invest a great deal on their cultivation — about Rs. 600/- per season on tractor ploughing, transplanting, weeding and fertilisers. This is more than twice the amount they spend on clothing. They spend Rs. 100/- on improvements and extensions to the house, buying furniture, repairs to bicycles, radios etc. Nearly 70 per cent of the allotments own 2 or more buffaloes, while the number of guns in the Unit is negligible, a fact which indicates that the colonists are primarily dependent on settled agriculture, rather than hunting and *chena*.*

(c) *Village Unit 35 — Colonists from Villages on the East Coast around Kalmunai.*

The average size of the highland lot is $\frac{1}{2}$ acre and that of paddy lot 3 acres. The highland lot too is irrigable. The average yield of paddy per acre is 25 bushels which is lower than that of the other units discussed. The average annual income of a colonist is Rs. 2,000/-. Out of this he gets an income of Rs. 400/- from vegetables, mango and other garden products from his highland lot. The most noteworthy feature of this colony unit is that the colonists go to their homes and back once a fortnight or a month. They go back for all important events in their lives e.g. marriages. Though there is a Hindu temple close by near Bakkialla, no priest resides there permanently.

More than half the colonists have not settled their cultivation loans but the average indebtedness per family is comparatively small — Rs. 250/-. This is due to their simple needs. They eat rice for all their meals and some



curd. They spend about Rs. 50/- a year on clothing for their womenfolk and about Rs. 30/- a year on clothing for the men. They have one or two radios and 19 bicycles but there is no improvement in their housing or their furniture.

The whole population of the unit is 1,250. The average size of the colonist family is 10 to 15 and they have one or two married dependents. There are 125 colonists in the unit.

This unit is a-typical of colony life as a whole but is typical of a peasant expansion settlement meant to relieve the land hunger of the peasants along the coast line. Their problems are simple and they have made little effort to change their traditional methods of livelihood. Colonisation has made very little impact on them.

I have taken three typical villages representing the various types of colonists found in Gal Oya. The old villager of Unit 2 has his own problem of adjusting himself to a highly complicated and modernised environment. The Kandy and Kegalle colonist treats the valley as an economic conquest; he lives well, eats well, and spends his money without compunction. While he invests in the valley, his ultimate ambition is to be a big man back home. The villager from the East coast finds nothing extra-ordinary in his being given extra land and a cottage and takes it in his stride. There is little or no change in his environment.

As predicted by the economic prophets colonisation is no long term cure for the problem of landlessness. The second generation of colonists is a landless generation. While some relief may be gained by intensive cultivation, population increase always outstrips the opening up of new land. A recent land kachcheri for colonist dependents in the Left Bank showed an average of 100 married dependents who applied for new land from a unit of 150 original colonist families.

The second problem is that of providing alternative means of employment. The Gal Oya Development Board has provided employment in its workshops and building activities but its development programme is coming to an end bringing with it a threat of mass scale unemployment. The possible alternative is the development of small industries with the aid of electricity, but no one has yet thought of putting this into practice.