

FACTORS WHICH INFLUENCED THE REVIVAL OF IRRIGATION IN THE MID 19TH CENTURY SRI LANKA

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Traditional agriculture in Sri Lanka was sustained by a complex system of water management utilizing rivers, canals, springs and reservoirs. The early colonial powers paid very little attention to these and as a result paddy cultivation declined rapidly.

The British realized that the economy of the areas under their control had reached a very low ebb due to the neglect of irrigation by the Portuguese and the Dutch. Their initial enthusiasm to embark on large scale restoration of irrigation facilities was frustrated by the refusal to use the revenues of the country for such purposes. This policy was justified theoretically by using *laissez faire* arguments.

During the mid 19th century, particularly as a result of the 1848 Rebellion, the problem of peasant insurgency awakened their interest again on the need for improvement of agriculture through restoration of irrigation works. By this time the discovery of complex irrigation networks used by the ancient kings provided an incentive to engage in this venture.

However, the governments reluctance to invest heavily on irrigation compelled the British to look for traditional methods of irrigation management. This resulted in a series of Irrigation Ordinances and in the revival of traditional Gamsabhava system to restore and maintain irrigation works. Here the British, despite their early disapproval of voluntary services, found the traditional system an effective means of minimizing government expenditure.

The restoration of irrigation works under the new government initiatives was both inadequate and ineffective because the government was keen to recover the money they invested in the form of water taxes and also because the voluntary system of management was no longer popular with the people. Apart from these, the settlement schemes started in the Dry Zone collapsed owing to diseases and other hardships.

The entire British policy relating to Irrigation contrasts with that relating to the plantations. Transfer of resources to the plantation sector received priority while improvement of indigenous agriculture was relegated to the background. This policy clearly illustrates the fact that colonialism attempted to restructure the economy of Sri Lanka in the interest of the metropolitan capitalist class.