

SOME ASPECTS OF CHENA CULTIVATION IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a rural agricultural system called 'chena cultivation' as it is practised in southern Sri Lanka. In the course of the discussion I shall attempt to analyse the role of chena cultivation in Sri Lanka's rural economy and to show the functioning of emerging leaders in maintaining the system. Finally a typology of chena is suggested.

INTRODUCTION

Although much has been done since Independence to promote rice-growing as the major economic activity in rural Sri Lanka, hardly any interest is shown even to understand the importance of another system of agriculture which plays an important role in the dry zone peasant society, namely, the *chena* cultivation. The very term '*chena*' evokes prejudices inculcated by the colonial administration and planters of the 19th century. In the light of this, the paper seeks to examine the agricultural system of *chena* cultivation as it is practised today with a view to demonstrate its role in the Sri Lankan's rural economy. The paper is based on the findings of a research project carried out in the province of *Sabaragamuwa*. The specific locations of study are *Muttettupola* and *Galpaya* hamlets of *Pallebedde* region, *Mirisyaya* and *Akkarapaha* hamlets of *Sankhapala*, *Bandakkayaya* of *Panamure* and *Suriyawewa* of *Embilipitiya*.

DEFINITION OF CHENA

Hena or its anglicized form "*chena*" is a well known term in Sri Lanka and is variously defined as "shifting cultivation", "slash and burn cultivation", "dry farming" or "swedden cultivation". *Chena* carries a pejorative connotation; it is regarded as synonymous with wasteful use of land, devastation of forests, soil erosion and the destruction of wild life. Although such ideas would have had some relevance a century ago *chena* farming is practised under very different ecological conditions today. The land/man ratio has been drastically changed over the past century and the expansion of human habitat has left the peasantry with hardly a forest left to be felled for *chena* cultivation. Most of the areas where *chena* is cultivated today are covered only with scrub jungle and/or *illuk* and *mana* (elephant grass). The land in these areas are permanently occupied and the same plot of land is tilled year in and year out with very short fallow periods. It has now become necessary therefore to reconceptualize and redefine the term *chena* in relation to the changed conditions.

A *chena* consists of seven fundamental elements; the land, the operator, the labour, the crop, the technique, the dwelling and finally the purpose of cultivation. The seven elements can be combined in different proportions.

LAND

The title, extent and location are the important aspects of land. Few peasants in the sample who cultivate *chenas* have titles to the land they cultivate. Table II presents five categories of land where *chena* is cultivated. The first four categories in the table are crown lands which comprise 80 percent of total land area where *chena* cultivation is practised.

It can be assumed that *chena* is cultivated on crown lands except when *nindagam* lands are involved. These cultivators no longer accept that the crown has any title to the land they cultivate and in fact, in a process called the regularization of the encroachment of crown lands some such lands have been leased out to the cultivator.

Generally the *chenas* of today are limited in extent. According to table III, 53 percent of *chenas* cultivated at present are below two acres. And only 22 per cent are above 4 acres. Only a very few *chenas* extend over 15 acres each.

Chenas are located either in the vicinity of the villages or in places far-removed from villages. *Chenas* in the vicinity of villages are cultivated by the peasants from the villages themselves; these *chenas* are regarded as an adjunct to the village itself. Newcomers to the village and outsiders are not usually allowed to cultivate these *chenas*.

The *chenas* which are far removed from the villages are cultivated either by peasants migrating from distant areas or by seasonal migrants. An interesting feature in these *chenas* is that the *chenas* which have been started in the recent past are cultivated, in the main, by peasants migrating from far-flung places.

OPERATORS

There are four kinds of *chena* operators. First, there are villagers who cultivate *chenas* in the areas surrounding the village. Traditionally, in such villages there is an area which is set apart for *chena* cultivation. Such *chenas* are not regularly cultivated but occasionally resorted to in lean years. Today in traditional villages peasants resort to *chena* cultivation if the land could be had for the purpose. Secondly, the peasants from neighbouring villages cultivate *chena* when there is land for the purpose and on such occasions, the *chena* cultivator generally settles down in the *chena*. The settlers from the government sponsored settlement schemes who also resort to *chena* cultivation could be included in this category. Third category is the migrants from far-flung places; they become either permanent settlers in

their *chenas* or make seasonal visits every year. These seasonal migrants erect a temporary hut, cultivate the *chena*, wait for the harvest and once the harvesting is over return to their home villages. The whole family or only the adults may come depending upon the age of the children and economic conditions of the family in their absence. These *chenas* are looked after by a villager who lives close by. This care-taker is often a relation of the migrant cultivator. Finally, there are *chena* speculators who are generally known as *mudalalis*. Very often these speculators come from distant places and bring along with them the necessary labour for *chena* cultivation. Their *chenas* are the largest, sometimes extending upto 15 to 20 acres each. Sometimes they operate through small holders, i.e. a large *chena* is divided among individual cultivators who work for the speculator; the cultivator is given a share of the produce. This system known as *akkare kramaya* or "one acre system" meaning that the cultivator is given the produce of one acre if he cultivates five acres. The speculators also advance money to small holder *chena* cultivators and dictate terms with regard to the selection of the crop and finally collect the crop for the money advanced.

LABOUR

Unlike in paddy cultivation in which the labour used is shared by man, beast and machinery, in *chena* the whole burden is carried by man. Labour arrangements in *chena* cultivation are threefold: family labour, *attam* labour and hired labour.

Under the first arrangement, the entire family contributes its labour. From the time of the initial clearing to the collection of the harvest, the family participates in all the operations.

Kaiya or collective labour which is common in paddy cultivation is hardly found among *chena* cultivators. On very rare occasions *Kaiya* is used for the initial jungle clearing.

Attam is a kind of labour exchange practised by the *chena* cultivators. The basic idea behind *attam* is that a peasant borrows a fellow cultivator's time and lends his time to the same party or anyone nominated by him. Thus, a peasant can 'bank' his labour when it is not utilized and make use of the same when he needs it. Many peasants make use of this arrangement to overcome labour shortages in *chena* cultivation. As peasants cultivate different types of crops in their *chenas* labour exchange becomes a very practical device. However, though peasants appreciate this system, *attam* appears to be a dying institution which is quite inconsistent with the commercialization of the agricultural activity (See Table VI).

Hired labour is occasionally used in *chena* cultivation. However, regular hired labour is rare and mostly confined to large scale speculator type of *chenas*. Several types of hired labour can be seen in difficult areas. For example *walaham* is a type of labour which is used only in harvesting coarse grains, especially *kurakkan*.

In *walaham* labour the labourer is paid 1/4 of the produce harvested by him. *Chena* peasants willingly go for *walaham* labour in each other's farms and may refuse to do the same for money. This system of payment in kind is very popular both among the labourers and those who employ them.

CROPS

Basically two varieties of crops are cultivated in *chenas* : the crops grown for consumption and those grown for the market. Traditionally, the crops grown in *chenas* are known as *katusara bhoga* meaning that these plants can stand prolonged periods of drought. *Kurakkan, meneri, amu, tana hal and badairingu* (Indian corn) are considered as *Katusara bhogas*. These are cultivated mainly for the domestic consumption. The other crops grown in *chenas* are *mung, mae, cowpea, peanuts, chillies, elabatu, pumpkins, ash-pumpkins, cucumber and bandakka*. These are grown mainly for the market. The selection of crops is governed by the price they command in the market.

Two other cash crops raised in *chenas* today are bananas and manioc. Where the rainfall is heavy a banana *chena* may survive more than one year. Banana *chenas* are very popular, especially among speculator-operators. In contrast, manioc is primarily a subsistence crop. All manioc cultivated are not harvested at once as it is an insurance against inclemencies of nature. When the peasant family runs short of food during prolonged periods of drought, it is manioc which very often maintains the family.

At the *Sankhapala nindagama* and in *Pallebedde* papaw takes the place of banana. The peasants familiar with the techniques of the collection of papein and processing prefer papaw cultivation to banana cultivation because of the attractive price paid for papein and also the durability of the product. Papaw also has an advantage over banana as a *chena* crop for it can be intercropped with any other *chena* crop.

A recent addition to the range of *chena* crops is castor, a ubiquitous plant in *Embilipitiya* and *Suriyawewa*. The plant which can stand long periods of drought has helped the *chena* peasants to tide over long droughts that is known as the "tree of drought relief" (*niyam adara gaha*). The plant also fits in well with the *chena* system, as it can be intercropped with any other *chena* crop. The plant with its extended branches and broad leaves also helps preserving the ground moisture. It starts yielding in 4-5 months and gives a continuous income to the peasant thus, making it ideally suited as a *chena* crop.

TECHNIQUES

Techniques adopted in *chena* cultivation are very rudimentary. The cultivation depends upon the seasonal rainfall. Just like paddy, *chena* is cultivated two seasons a year, i.e. *maha* and *yala*; *maha* is September to March and *yala* in April to August ; the latter often fails owing to the short/fall of seasonal rains.

The *chena* year starts in July when the initial clearing of the land takes place in expectation of the seasonal rainfall in September. Once the scrub-jungle is cleared the whole area is set on fire two to three weeks before the onset of the rains. With the initial rainfall which is called *beritora wessa*, dry grains are sown broadcast and scraped over with a mamoty to prevent them being picked up by the birds. In banana-*chenas*, banana suckers are planted well in advance of the seasonal rains and once the rains are well underway other vegetables are cultivated. Thus, the cultivation can extend from mid-August to the first or second week of October depending on the arrival of rain.

Once the seeding and cultivation is over, the main task of the cultivator is to keep on weeding and protecting the *chena* from the birds, the wild animals and the poachers. No fencing is done now because tree trunks and creepers are not available. Many peasants still practise magical rites to ward off wild animals. Encircling the *chena* with a coir rope or a creeper, circumambulating the *chena* with a folded leaf with burning sulphur in it, raising white flags in the *chena* are some of such rites.

Weeding the *chena* is a part of the natural fertilizing process. No fertilizer is used in *chenas*, not even biological matter, like cowdung which is sometimes, freely available. Peasants are of the opinion that there is no need to use artificial fertilizer in *chena* cultivation. However, when weeding is carried out weeds are collected along with scraped soil around the plants. This is done at least twice before harvesting. Such weeds which decay very quickly and the collected top soil which contains the ash from the burnt vegetation are the only fertilizers used in *chenas*.

The harvesting of the *Maha* crop starts in November depending upon the varieties of crops grown and this may continue till January when most of the grains and vegetables are harvested. However in banana *chenas* some vegetables continue to grow, perhaps invigorated by the arrival of the seasonal rains in January. The waste produce of the harvested grains and vegetables serve as manure for these plants.

Some of the *chenas* are cultivated systematically. The initial preparation of the soil is carried out thoroughly and the seeds and plants are planted in rows, at regular intervals. This makes the weeding easier and the returns, better.

Intercropping is an interesting technique practised by *chena* cultivators. By this method a farmer can cultivate even ten varieties of crops within the confines of two to three acres. In intercropping, planting of crops is staggered in such a way that short term and long term crops would not hamper the growth of each other. The system of intercropping has numerous advantages viewed from the angle of the peasant. It physically "expands" the available extent of land as several varieties of crops are cultivated in the same piece of land. The waste produce of the short term crops serve as manure for the long standing ones. Moreover, the shade provided

by large canopy plants like banana, papaw and castor preserves the ground moisture which is very beneficial to other varieties of *chena* crops. It also minimizes peasants' losses in case of a drought or crop disease. Intercropping allows the cultivator to expand the period of both cultivation and harvesting, thus allowing the peasant to cultivate a sufficiently extensive piece of land with family labour. The technique also gives the peasant an opportunity of obtaining a continuous income throughout a long period of the year. Finally, this system acts as a buffer mitigating the effects of the vagaries of market; for, when he has several crops to offer in the market at least some of them would fetch a reasonable price.

Thus, the whole technique of *chena* cultivation including seeding, planting, weeding, manuring, intercropping and harvesting can be seen as a strategy evolved by the peasants to obtain two specific goals; to extract the maximum out of a small plot of land and to minimize the risks caused both by nature and human beings.

Some kind of dwelling is always present in a *chena*. One is *Athupela*, which lasts only one season and is built of branches of trees and covered with hay, leaves or elephant grass. It gives some protection from the rain and dew at night. The other is *vadiya*.

It is a semi-permanent structure with walls of clay and mud supported by a timber frame. A *vadiya* is either covered with cadjans or *illuk* leaves. It will stand for years, if properly maintained.

The type of dwelling is a good indicator of the type of *chena*. *Athupelas* are built in the traditional kind of *chenas*. The *vadiya* tells a different story. It is the permanent residence of the farmer with no other shelter. He is a migrant, permanent or seasonal, from a far-flung region. The more permanent the structure of the *vadiya* the more likely the *chena* is permanent.

The discussion above raises two questions : Why do peasants cultivate *chenas* and why do they practise *chenas* and not other forms of agriculture? The answer to the first question can be found if we look at what the peasants do with their produce. According to the Table VII, only 10.5% of *chena* cultivators use their produce for consumption alone. And 87.5 % produce for consumption and for the market. The fact that only a very low percentage of *chena* peasants are engaged in paddy cultivation makes a majority of them dependent on *chena* produce for their subsistence. The answer to the second question is that the whole system is devised by the peasantry as a strategy of survival. This method of cultivation enables the expanding peasant population to bring marginal land under cultivation contributing only labour. The system also minimizes the risk of starvation in case of a long drawn drought, crop disease and fluctuation of prices in the market.

FUNCTIONS OF CHENA

Many scholars have seen *chena* system of cultivation as a strategy adopted by the peasantry to meet the challenge of growing population and the consequent loss of opportunities for paddy cultivation. However, over the years the *chena* system has come to serve many more functions than that simple explanation gives. Such newly developed functions attract many peasants to *chena* farming even today and *chena* cultivation still remains as one of the major forms of economic activity in many rural areas of Sri Lanka.

(i) *Establishment of Paddy Field :*

Paddy and paddy alone is second to gold in value in the minds of the Sinhala peasant. However, not everyone has access to paddy land, for unless a peasant inherits a paddy field or receives a land allocation from the government there is little opportunity for him to obtain one. Such investments are beyond his financial capacity. The *chena* system offers him an opportunity of owning a paddy field.

Over the past many centuries the *chena* system of agriculture was the only way through which new land was converted into paddy fields particularly after the downfall of the *Sinhala* kingdom in the north. This was the only means by which the *Sinhala* traditional village coped with the growing population which necessitated a re-structuring of the man-land ratio. The magnitude of land reclamation and development projects carried out by the government in the recent past has shrouded this important function of the *chena* cultivator both historically and in the present day context. According to the peasant's way of thinking land is meaningful only when it is cultivated and lofty talk about the preservation of the forests, wildlife and prevention of soil erosion are merely excuses to keep him away from uncultivated land and part of the deception perpetrated by the people in authority to prevent him from occupying Crown land. To the *Sinhala* peasant, wherever there is arable land which is not privately owned and not occupied by any other party his right to cultivate it is inalienable, irrespective of any constraints placed by the government.

For centuries the peasants who do not own paddy fields have been making use of the *chena* cultivation system to obtain a plot of paddy field in the end. The peasant is aware that the laws of the land are heavily weighted against the appropriation of Crown property, but he is also aware that his fellow cultivators have been occupying Crown lands and in fact, have very often used the same land to build their permanent residences on them. Therefore, he does not hesitate at all to occupy arable Crown land when there is an opportunity of doing so undeterred by severe laws enforced by the authorities.

The peasant has very good reasons for doing so. First agriculture is the only form of economic activity known to him. Secondly, either he has insufficient land or none at all from which to make a living. Thirdly, he has no capital for any other form of economic activity. Therefore, the *chena* system is the last resort of the peasants without the other factors of production, i.e. land and capital.

Many peasants who have been affected by the imbalance between the cultivable land in the village and the excess of village population have been making use of the *chena* system to convert uncultivated land into paddy fields, where the physical geography of the land permits it.

The first step in this conversion process is the establishment of a *chena* on the land in which the peasant decides to have a paddy field. The peasant has to make some arrangements to feed himself and his family for 3—4 months until the first harvest is collected from the *chena*. Usually he obtains help on such occasions from the parental family. However, such assistance is also provided to a new *chena* cultivator by the leader or a *chena kattiya* or *yaya**. Such leaders known in *chena* areas as *gambarayas* often advance credit in the form of grain/cash to new cultivators.

Once the *chena* is established the peasant may decide, depending upon location and availability of water on the conversion of a part of the *chena* into a paddy field. Usually the conversion starts two to three years after the initial establishment of the *chena* by which time he is able to tide over the period he requires to convert the *chena* into an irrigated paddy field. Such conversion spreads over a long period of time, each year the peasant adding a little more to the paddy fields. Peasants have found through experience that it takes four to five years to convert one acre of land into a paddy field. During these long years it is the *chena* which pays the peasants subsistence and labour hire for converting land into paddy fields.

Table I — Number of Peasants Who converted *Chenas* into Paddy Field

	<i>Pl</i>	<i>Pn</i>	<i>Sk</i>	<i>Su</i>	<i>Total</i>
	4	29	18	28	103
Total No. of families	100	100	100	100	400

Therefore, 25.75% of the peasant households of the sample made use of the *chena* method and successfully converted small plots of high *chena* land into paddy fields.

In villages where annual rainfall very often falls short of the total requirements of water needed to cultivate the whole extent of paddy fields, the *chena* system has also developed another function. There is a system of *thattumaru* (rotation) carried out whereby only a part of the paddy lands is cultivated in a given season—the extent of land thus cultivated being a function of the amount of rainfall during a given season. Every season the village leaders of the Cultivation Committee (where such institutions exist) decide upon the extent of paddy fields which could be cultivated with the available quantity of water. Such an arrangement leaves an uncultivated part of the paddy fields each season. Therefore the

*See below for *Yaya* and *Kattiya*

right of cultivation is seasonally rotated among the cultivators in the village. Every year a substantial number of cultivators are thus left without a livelihood and the problem is aggravated in drier seasons. It is then that *chena* which keeps starvation at bay. Those who are denied access to paddy cultivation always take to *chena* cultivation as a compensatory measure. Such occasional cultivation of *chena* well agrees with the traditional system of *chena* cultivation which requires land to be left fallow for several years for regeneration.

(ii) *Providing labour*

The use of tractors in paddy cultivation is occasional in many parts of the island and the bulk of the labour in paddy cultivation is still done by the human labour. Since the requirement of labour is seasonal and the labour provided by the family is often inadequate, cultivators often obtain additional labour during cultivation and harvesting time. It is the *chena* cultivator who in the main furnish the seasonal labour required by the paddy cultivator (refer Table ii)

Table II — No. of *Chena* Cultivators Involved in Hired Paddy Labour

	<i>Pl.</i>	<i>Pn.</i>	<i>Sk.</i>	<i>Su.</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
No. involved	10	57	27	47	141	35.25
No. not involved	90	43	73	53	259	64.75
Total	100	100	100	100	400	100.00

The very nature of *chena* farming allows the cultivators to provide additional labour required in the paddy fields without disrupting the work in *chenas*. Therefore, the two systems, the wet and dry farming have developed a kind of symbiosis, each system making the life of the other very much easier if not totally dependent on each other. Thus, the vast tracts of paddy fields in the *Embilipitiya* region would have been much more difficult to cultivate without resorting to machinery had it not been for the labour provided by the *chena* cultivators of the area. The *chena* cultivators would also find it more difficult to live without the seasonal labour, opportunities provided by the paddy cultivator. Therefore, in the field of labour the two systems of cultivation, wet and dry, could be regarded as one integrated system rather than two competing systems.

(iii) *Development of perennials:*

The peasant lives in a world of uncertainty and this is more true of the *chena* peasants. He is uncertain whether he will be able to collect the fruits of his labour, for the odds are heavily loaded against him; his crop could be destroyed by too much rain or no rain at all, by pests, or crop disease, by wild animals and even by other human beings. In fact his uncertainty is proverbial. All these lead to an intense feeling of insecurity among the peasants, even during the years of bountiful

harvests. The insecurity among the *chena* peasants is even greater than among the paddy cultivators, for very often the *chena* fails, leaving the peasant in semi-starvation. His only way to survival is to sell his labour wherever and whenever he can. But there would be many days without work and consequently without food, especially during the off season for paddy. The *chena* cultivators have realized over a long period of time that the only way he can counteract such a situation is by owning a small plot of land cultivated with permanent crops like coconuts, arecanut, jak, citrus, fruits and yams. Of the permanent crops, coconut is foremost in importance, not only because of its commercial value but also because the tree helps the peasant in various other ways. It ensures him food, cash, building materials, oils for lighting and materials for worship. It is particularly helpful during periods of drought. A small coconut plantation also gives him the added advantage of providing some space for breeding a few heads of cattle and perhaps poultry. Therefore, in the world of the *Sinhala* peasant, a small coconut holding even half an acre is regarded as something very desirable.

However, raising the coconut palm is quite a difficult task in the drier parts of the island where periodic droughts can nullify years of efforts. For coconuts when tender, can hardly stand the kind of severe drought which is experienced in the dry zone of Sri Lanka. Even under such trying conditions many peasants in the research area have successfully brought up coconut small holdings by making use of *chena* systems.

Apart from the adverse climatic conditions, there are other constraints which make it an extremely difficult task for the peasant to bring up a coconut small holding, such as the long waiting period before any return could be expected after a heavy investment of labour and capital.

The peasantry in the research area have adopted the strategy of the *chena* method in order to meet the demands of labour and capital in bringing up coconut small holdings. This they do by combining the two systems, i.e. *chena* and highland permanent cultivation, concurrently and on the same land. By this method the expense of labour on the permanent cultivation is reduced to a minimum and at the initial stage of cultivation both systems benefit from the arrangement.

Many peasant cultivators have developed small plots of coconut land generally ranging from $\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 acres and occasionally even larger plots by making use of the *chena* method. As a first step the peasant starts a *chena* and initially grows short-term crops. He may postpone the commencement of work on the permanent plantation until such time that his position is somewhat stabilized, i.e. the initial loans are paid, a more durable residence is built and perhaps a few heads of cattle are bought.

Table III – No. of peasants who have developed coconut small holdings

	<i>Pl.</i>	<i>Pn.</i>	<i>Sk.</i>	<i>Su.</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Peasants who developed coconut holdings from <i>chena</i>	42	29	27	7	105	26.25
Those who did not bring up coconut or other permanent crops	58	71	73	93	295	73.75
Total	100	100	100	100	400	100.00

Many peasants start with a semi-permanent crop like banana as an intermediary before starting on a coconut plantation. A banana plantation is usually restricted to a part of the total land which is under *chena*, the rest being continuously grown with short-term crops. A banana plantation properly cared for, lasts 3—4 years. The wide canopy provided by the banana plants helps to preserve the ground moisture, thereby helping the peasant to make the maximum use of the scanty annual rainfall.

Some peasants plant papaw instead of banana during the intermediary stages. This has the additional advantage in that papaw can be intercropped with any other *chena* crop unlike banana which limits the amount of sunlight reaching the ground, thus, inhibiting the growth of other crops in the plantation.

Coconut seedlings are planted in the banana or papaw plantation as and when the peasant can find time and money to buy them. The young coconut plants benefit from the attention paid to the other crops and the shade provided by the semi-permanent plantation as well as the moisture preserved by such shade are additional factors promoting their growth. In this manner a peasant brings up a coconut small holding with a *chena* as the initial step and without substantial investment of labour or capital. This method is successfully practised only where the rainfall is a little heavier than in the dry zone.

A peasant bent on making a coconut plantation using the *chena* system may adopt different strategies depending on the availability of family labour. If the family is grown up and has many members who could contribute labour, the peasant may start a large *chena* at the very outset. But if the family is young and the work force limited to the husband and the wife or perhaps to the husband because of the heavy involvement of the mother with the young children, and the household work, he would start a *chena* in a small portion of the land. The permanent crops are also immediately planted in the *chena* and he would extend the *chena* as years go by to compensate for the land lost for the permanent plantation. The process continues until the whole *chena* is converted into a permanent plantation. However, it is the general practice among the *chena* peasants to continue with a small plot of *chena* even after developing a permanent plantation because of the high yield per unit of labour in *chena*.

TRAINING FOR *CHENA* FARMING

In areas where the pressure on uncultivated land is artificially reduced by restrictions placed on outsiders cultivating *chenas* in the vicinity of villages, small plots of *chena* are very often cultivated by school children attending higher grades at school. The proceeds of these are spent by the children to buy books and clothing. A more important function of such *chenas*, is that it provides a training for them, both physically and psychologically, to take to agriculture.

PROVIDES DOWRY

Dowry is a part of the system of marriage in *Sinhala* society, wherever the bride's parents can afford it. It takes the form of business shares, money, employment, promotions in employment, land, paddy fields and even cattle, depending upon the prosperity and economic activity of the parents. So it is among the *chena* cultivators. Many *chena* cultivators embark on clearing a new *chena*, build a *vadiya*, plant a few permanent trees around it when they have grown up daughters to give away in marriage. The newly established *chena* is given as dowry to the daughter and usually becomes the residence of the newly married couple.

Thus it would seem that the *chena* system of agriculture in traditional *Sinhala* villages, has evolved many more functions over the years than the very simplistic one offered by scholars of augmenting the family food supply. The *chena* system today has become an integral part of the system of production in many areas of rural Sri Lanka where agriculture is the principal form of economic activity. Therefore, however much one would not agree with the methods followed by the *chena* cultivators it would be very unrealistic not to take into account the importance of the *chena* system of agriculture in the rural economy of Sri Lanka.

LEADERSHIP AMONG THE *CHENA* COMMUNITY

The *chenas* are generally organised as a *yaya* (a continuous stretch of fields) or a *kattiya* (a group of farmers). A *henyaya* or *henkattiya* is thus a number of families generally ranging from twenty to two hundred engaged in *chena* cultivation in a large tract of land with unspecified boundaries. The *yaya* may expand or contract due to the acquisition of more land by its members or loss of land to another *kattiya*. Very often a *kattiya* consists of a kinship group as could be seen from the various names given to *chena* areas like *kinchigune yaya*, *diyandara seenimodara yaya*, *katuwana yaya* of the settlers. The surnames of cultivators also indicate that they all belong to the same kinship group. Once a *yaya* is thus established the group takes every precaution to prevent outsiders settling within the accepted boundaries of the *yaya*.

The term *gambara* is used very vaguely among the *chena* community. One thing which is very clear about the *gambara* system is that the more recent the cultivation of a *chena*, the more numerous are the *gambarayas* and the more important role they play in the community. Thus, whereas the *gambarayas* are seldom found in *Pallebedda* and *Panamure*, the two older *chena* regions in the research area, they are very numerous and also powerful in *Suriyawewa* the last to be converted into a *chena* area. The older *chena* areas are now effectively brought under the formal administration of the country and with it the role of *gambarayas* has dwindled into insignificance. However, in *Suriyawewa* there are at least twenty *gambarayas* who play a dominant role in the social, political and economic lives of the cultivators.

Affluence in the form of ownership of paddy fields, cattle and extensive *chenas* together with the presence of a number of followers is the hallmark of the *gambarayas*. Lending grain and money and cattle for agricultural work forms a major part of their economic activity. Repayment by the cultivators often take the form of contributing labour on working the *gambarayas* field or *chenas*. To cultivate extensive *chenas* they require a large amount of labour. Therefore, the repayment of loans in the form of labour is always welcome.

The *gambarayas* also act as mediators between the *chena* community and the outside world. They are very closely associated with the local police stations. Hence, it is the usual practice for the police to contact the *gambarayas* first in any problem concerning the *chena* community. The *chena* peasants also first come to the *gambarayas* when they have any dealings with public servants especially the police.

A characteristic of *gambarayas* and other leaders of the *chena* community is their ability to command a retinue of followers. They always have a following and it is with their help that they make their importance felt. The *gambarayas* are instrumental in keeping the homogenous character of the *yayas* intact by preventing outsiders taking residence there. Even if an outsider occasionally makes an entry into the *yaya* through the purchase of a *chena* the *gambarayas* are often powerful enough to keep out an unwelcome person from enjoying his property. Some of the *gambarayas* have even taken the functions of the River Valleys Development Board and distribute water for agriculture and attend to disputes regarding water distribution.

Even though the bureaucracy feels very strongly about the usurpation of its powers and functions by the *gambarayas* there is much to be said in favour of the system. The position *gambarayas* seems to have evolved from the leaders of *chena* lands who originally migrated to a *chena* area. Being the first to reoccupy and establish their "rights" over the Crown lands these leaders have managed to exert influence over the later arrivals who happened to be either kinsmen or residents of the same village. After several families of *chena* cultivators settled down in the same area, the more adventurous among the *yaya* leaders became the *gambaraya*.

Once accepted as *gambaraya* he performs the duties of formal leader and agent of State as well as those of traditional leader. Many *gambarayas* have made their fortunes at the earlier stages of the expansion of *chena* settlements by selling Crown land to newcomers.

Access to labour and sometimes free labour is one of the ways through which the *gambarayas* consolidated their power and position. Many criminals from various parts of the island have established themselves as *chena* cultivators with the help of the *gambarayas*. The free labour of such wanted men is always used by *gambarayas* in agricultural work in return for the security afforded to them in the *chena* *yaya*. *Gambarayas* also guarantee their good behaviour to the local police station extracting their free labour for such favours. As the police station is situated miles away from *chena* areas and government officers are hardly likely to trek along the village foot paths it is the *gambarayas* who reign supreme among these cultivators.

Petty traders are the next group of leaders among the *chena* community. Unlike *gambarayas* they live in the bazaar which is the commercial and geographical centre through which the *chena* community keeps its links with the outside world. They serve both as sellers of all the requirements to the *chena* community as well as buyers of the peasant's produce for the market. They also act as bankers to the *chena* community by advancing them credit during periods of drought or other misfortune. Most of these traders very often ruin their businesses by trying to play two incompatible roles; that of traditional patrons and of commercial entrepreneurs.

There is a third group of people who operate in *chena* areas in the form of *chena* brokers. They always maintain links between *chena* areas and the original villages from which the cultivators come. Very often they maintain two establishments one in *chena* area - a *chena* or a boutique - and the other usually the regular abode of his family, in the original village. Although they pose as *chena* cultivators in *chena* areas they are interested not so much on cultivation as selling Crown property to cultivators. The land thus sold may be cultivated, uncultivated or abandoned *chenas*. These brokers shuttle back and forth from *chena* areas to the villages carrying information about the availability of land to prospective *chena* cultivators. Often transactions take place in the villages. These brokers always maintain a close contact with *gambarayas*.

When transactions of this nature take place *gambarayas* usually does the work of a notary. The document is prepared and duly witnessed often by *gambaraya's* followers - and even the stamps cancelled in the presence of the *gambarayas*. Once such a document is prepared and signed by a *gambaraya* the document is regarded as legally valid and accepted without question within the *yaya*.

Some of these leaders bring the cultivators from outside and set them up as *chena* cultivators as a means of augmenting their power in the *yaya*. Such families are provided with land to cultivate and given assistance at the initial stages, in seed grain, cash and other such requirements. A major share of the produce as well as the land of such *chenas* go to the leader. After some years a part from the *chena* land cultivated by the newcomer is formally handed over to the cultivator with a document, but the major share of the property remains in the hands of the leader.

It is almost impossible to break into a *chena* area and cultivate it without the assistance of these leaders. Very often newcomers to a *chena* area join a leader as labourers or as followers, and after some years, depending upon performance and loyalty, are placed as caretakers in one of the large *chenas* cultivated by the leader. The caretaker is given the produce of a part of the *chena*. After a few seasons the cultivator is given the same portion of the land as his own *chena*. This is called the *akkare kramaya*, or the one acre system.

These leaders have effectively prevented all the attempts made by the agents of the Central Government to obtain a correct statistical picture of *chena* cultivators and the extent of land held by each family. This is very effectively done at *Suriyawewa* where there are no boundary demarcations of individual *chenas*. In any government census of the *chena* population, the leaders put the names of their followers and even of relatives who have never been to the *chena* as cultivators of small plots of land. Such plots always have a small *athupela* to justify such claims. The distribution and collection of all the census forms are carried out by these leaders. Hence, several names are given as 'occupants' of any *chena* which exceed the two acre limit. Thus, a true picture does not emerge from the data collected by the Government.

Therefore, it appears that these *chena* leaders are an integral part of the *chena* system itself. They have filled the gap created by the absence of the agents of the Central Government in these areas. They have become an agency of land distribution and an effective means of maintaining law and order. Further, they act as banks advancing credit and helping the peasant to overcome the natural calamities. This leadership will survive so long as the formal administration is not properly established in the *chena* areas.

A TYPOLOGY FOR CHENA

Taking the seven elements of *chena* described earlier as a benchmark, let us now proceed to establish a typology for *chena*. Various types of *chena* emerge as a result of the differential combinations of the elements discussed earlier. We can identify five different types of *chenas* each named after a distinctive feature and they are the traditional type, the fixed type, the migrant type, the commercial (*mudalali*) type and the transitional type.

TRADITIONAL TYPE

This is the type of *chena* that many people visualize as being *chena*; the one that was vividly described by 19th century European writers. In fact, this type of *chena* was common in many parts of the island, some two to three decades ago, and according to the peasants even in the research area itself. However, this type of *chena* is hardly found today. This is because this type of *chena* presupposes the existence of extensive forest reserves, a situation that does not exist.

But a modified version of this type of *chena* is seen in areas that border jungles. It is customary for the peasants to turn to the bordering jungles for fresh agricultural lands when the man-land ratio is thrown out of balance. These peasants cultivate three to four acres of *chena* in jungles and abandon them after a few years only to return to them after the lapse of several years. Once such *chenas* are abandoned no one claims ownership to the land with the peasants' interest in the land ceasing upon gathering the produce.

The traditional *kaiya* and *attam* labour still prevail among these cultivators. The initial clearing, the fencing and even protection of the *chenas* are often carried out on a collective basis, even though each family cultivates a separate holding. Hired labour is totally absent in these *chenas*.

Joint ownership is a peculiar arrangement in these *chenas*. What is jointly owned in these *chenas* is the crop. On such occasions two peasants, (rarely more than two) harness their energies in cultivating *chena* and share the crop. This labour arrangement, one feels, has its origin, in the necessity to protect the *chena* from wild animals right through the whole period and the inability of one peasant family to do this. Under such circumstances the absence of the cultivator from his *chena* even for a single day could be disastrous to his crop. Peasants usually cope with this situation by both husband and wife taking turns in protecting the *chena*. However, illness, accidents and other life crises like childbirth would sometimes compel both spouses to be away from the *chena*. Joint ownership is an arrangement, devised to meet such a contingency. This is a very practical arrangement, especially with peasants who also cultivate paddy fields.

Techniques adopted in this type of *chena* are very rudimentary and conform to the traditional ideas of "slash and burn" cultivation. Broadcasting is generally followed and no weeding done. These peasants believe that weeding can be harmful as it would quicken the evaporation of ground moisture.

These *chenas* are primarily cultivated to supplement the paddy harvest and this determines the type of crops grown. Therefore, *kurakkan*, *tala*, *amu*, *meneri*, *tanahal*, *mun*, *badairingu* (Indian corn) and manioc are the crops mostly cultivated. Pumpkins are a very popular variety of vegetable as it can be kept for a long time and substituted for a meal of rice. Even for the *maha* season short term crops are preferred because long term crops call for continuous involvement of the cultivator for the protection of the *chena*. Produce of these *chenas* seldom reaches the market.

FIXED TYPE

The term "fixed *chena*" appears to be a contradiction in terms, for according to the accepted norms, no *chena* stands in one place for more than a few years. However, according to the current practice *chena* cultivated on the same plot of land is more or less the rule. The growth of population and the consequent pressure on land has led to the fixation of *chenas*. This fixation of *chenas* seems to have been a process which started several decades ago and continues down to our generation. Even though the yield gets poorer (eg. with repeated cultivation) cultivators continue to do *chena* cultivation in the same land as no fresh land is to be had. Occasionally, one finds instances where the occupied area of a cultivator is quite extensive and a part of that is kept fallow for several years.

Even though the land is cultivated as fixed *chenas* it is Crown property. Peasants consider that they have a right to them and that the Crown has no claim. The *vadiya* on fixed *chenas* are like ordinary peasants dwelling. The *chena* community generally accepts each others right to the holdings they occupy and cultivate; such property can even be sold with a "document" (*liyavilla*) which the peasants accept as "legal" even though the courts do not. A section of these peasants, enjoys a kind of legal status as they are issued with permits to their land, which are renewed every year under the accelerated food programme (1974) to grow subsidiary food crops.

In 1979 the Government started a process called the regularization of illegal occupation of Crown lands. Under this scheme land *Kachcheries* were held and the land was leased out to their respective occupants for cultivation. However, each occupant was granted only 2 acres of land. Because of this limitation many peasants whose land exceeded the two acres avoided the regularization process. Hence, large tracts of *chena* lands are not included in the regularization process.

Very often these *chenas* are located miles away from the main roads and not even cart tracts lead to them. Therefore, the produce has to be head loaded to the market.

THE MIGRANT OPERATE TYPE

The peasants who cultivate these *chenas* on Crown lands believe that they should be given alternative land if the Government were to expel them from their holdings. This type of *chena* changes hands more often than other types and such transactions are carried out with a "document". The payments on such occasions are regarded as a consideration for the "development" of the land and the construction of the temporary dwelling but not for the land itself.

Land speculation is very high in this type of *chenas*. Some brokers have made a small fortune on *chena* land speculation. Either they employ hired labour to establish such a *chena* or the speculator himself occupies the *chena*. Once such a *chena*

is cultivated for a few years and the occupants are well established the *chenas* is regarded as ready for sale. Buyers of such *chena* lands often come from areas of origin of the speculators. Such transactions take place often not in the *chena* area, but in these distant villages where land hunger is very acute. Once such a *chena* is sold, the speculator starts the process all over by setting up a new *chena* on Crown land.

THE COMMERCIAL TYPE (*MUDALALI* TYPES)

This is a kind of commercial venture which is completely different from the other types of *chena*. The motive of the operator is making a profit and not subsistence. Such commercial *chenas* had been carried out quite extensively during the last two decades, particularly when the *Uda Walawe* project was first started but they are on the wane today. Sometimes these *chenas* extend up to 15—20 acres. Today large commercial *chenas* are found only in *Suriyawewa* and *Thanamalvila* areas. Occasionally, such *chenas* are also found in the *Sankhapala nindagama*.

The most popular crop in these *chenas* in the recent past has been bananas. When land becomes less productive operators simply abandon these *chenas*. Such *chenas* often become typical *chenas* of the peasantry. For the simple reason that no single peasant family has the resources to cultivate or maintain a claim on such an extensive tract of land, such abandoned *chenas* naturally get divided among several peasant families.

TRANSITIONAL TYPE

The final type is the *chena* in transititon. Many of the *chenas* in *Panamure* and *Pallebedda* can be grouped in this category. The operators of this type of *chenas* are peasants and they have no residence other than an improved version of *vadiya*. They have simply settled down on Crown land and started cultivating *chenas*. The extent of these *chenas* range from $\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 acres and more often than not they border along roads. They look more like home gardens but the *modus operandi* is exactly that of *chenas*. However, on the land around the *vadiya* which is the permanent residence of the families are grown all kinds of permanent vegetation like jak, *murunga*, citrus, mangoes and even coconut, all perennial crops. The permanent vegetation is continuously expanding. The trees around the *vadiya* being fully grown and bearing fruits while those away from the *vadiya* being younger trees of the same crops and finally emerging into the *chena* itself. Thus, the *chena* lands are in transition from *katusara bhogas* to permanent vegetation. The peasants who own these *chenas* are no different from the other *chena* cultivators in that they are very often engaged in a more regular employment like masonry, carpentry and regular wage labour. For this reason the work of *chena* weighs heavily on the shoulders of women and children.

LOCATION MAP

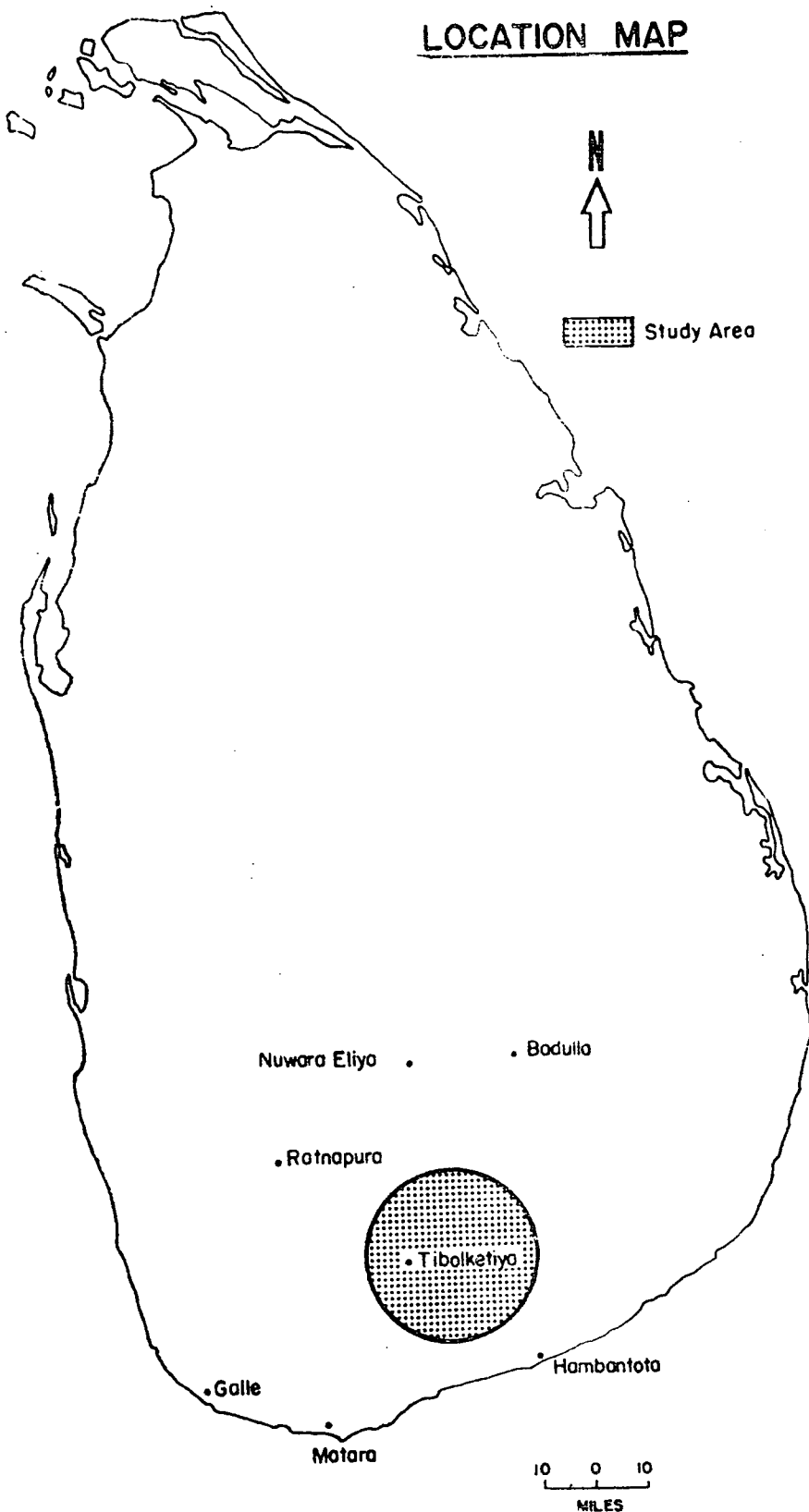


Table I
INVOLVEMENT OF CHENA PEASANTS WITH PADDY CULTIVATION

	<i>Sk.</i>	<i>Pl.</i>	<i>Pn.</i>	<i>Su.</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Per.</i>
Those who own both paddy fields and chenas	18	04	28	29	79	19.75
Only chenas	82	96	72	71	321	80.25
Total	100	100	100	100	400	100.00

Thus an 80 percent of *chena* cultivators have no paddy fields and depend in the main on *chena* cultivation for their subsistence.

SK—*Sankhapala*

Pl —*Pallebedda*

Pn —*Panamure*

Su —*Suriyawewa*

Table II
CATEGORIES OF LAND USED IN CHENA CULTIVATION

	<i>Sk.</i>	<i>Pl.</i>	<i>Pn.</i>	<i>Su.</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Per.</i>
1. Crown lands	10	36	29	66	141	35.25
2. Crown lands bought with a document	—	04	23	34	61	15.25
3. Inherited from parents	07	09	39	—	55	13.75
4. Held with a permit for cultivation	13	41	09	—	63	15.75
5. Tenants of <i>nindagama</i>	70	10	—	—	80	20.00
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100.00

Except for the *nindagama* tenants all the other occupants cultivate *chenas* on Crown lands. Even those peasants who inherited property from their parents except on rare occasions inherited property of their parents who occupied Crown lands. This is particularly the case with the *chena* cultivators at *Panamure* which was crown forest at the turn of the century.

Table III
EXTENT OF CHENAS

<i>Acres</i>	<i>Sk.</i>	<i>Pl.</i>	<i>Pn.</i>	<i>Su.</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Per.</i>
0—1.99	68	51	48	46	213	53.25
2—3.99	13	26	32	27	98	24.5
4—above	19	23	20	27	89	22.25
Total	100	100	100	100	400	100.00

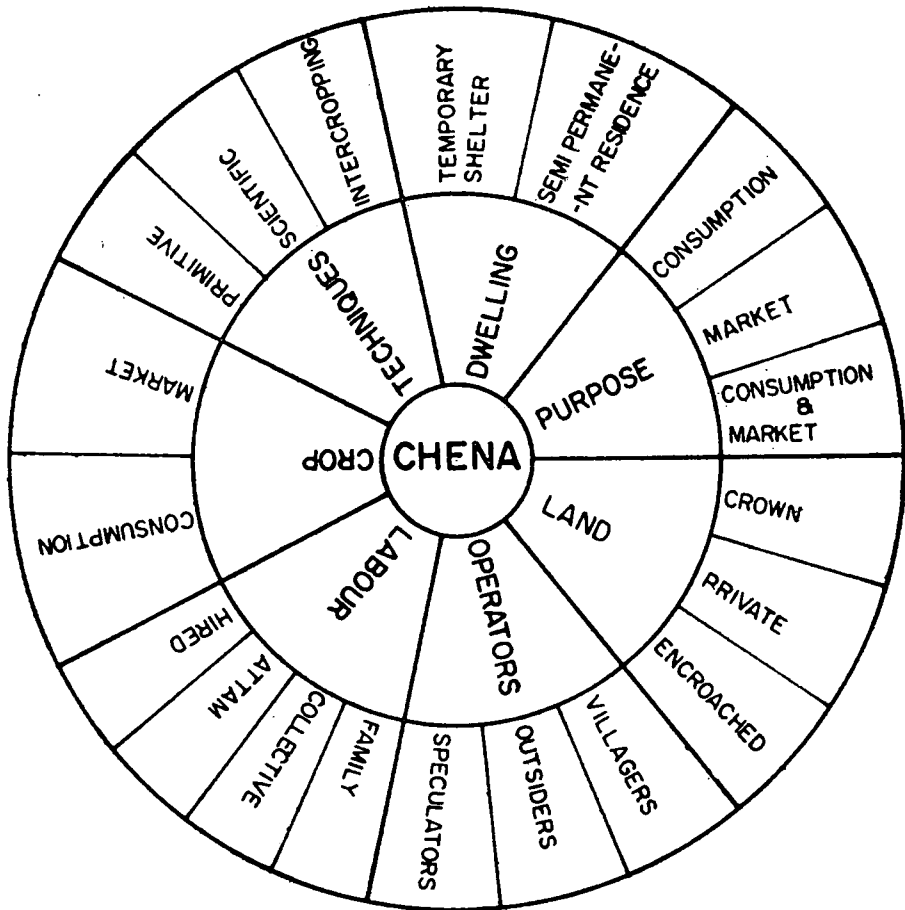
The table shows that more than 50 percent of the *chenas* are less than 2 acres in extent and only a little over 20 percent is above 4 acres in extent.

Table IV

WHERE THE CHENA CULTIVATORS COME FROM

	Sk.	Pl.	Pn.	Su.	Total	Per.
From the village	15	08	23	—	46	11.5
Form a neighbouring village	13	53	04	—	70	17.5
From a far-away region	72	39	73	100	284	71.00
Total	100	100	100	100	400	100.00

Thus the majority of the *chena* cultivators come from far flung areas



A Schematic Presentation of Chena

Table V

OTHER ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES OF *CHENA* PEASANTS

	<i>Sk.</i>	<i>Pl.</i>	<i>Pn.</i>	<i>Su.</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Per.</i>
Paddy cultivation	18	04	29	28	79	19.75
Agricultural (paddy) labour	27	10	57	47	141	35.25
Skilled labour (masons, carpenters)	02	04	04	01	11	2.75
Labour (unspecified)	43	38	39	58	178	44.5
Gemming	43	28	07	04	82	20.5
Government Service	07	05	05	11	28	7.0
Only <i>chena</i> cultivation	06	35	—	12	53	13.25

According to this table *chena* cultivators are engaged in all kinds of economic activities. This is absolutely necessary for them even to earn the minimum requirements for subsistence as the *yala* cultivation fails often owing to insufficient rain fall or no rain at all. Only a 13 percent of the *chena* cultivators are totally dependent on *chena* for their subsistence.

Note.—The percentages (or totals) do not add up to a hundred as many peasants are engaged in more than one kind of economic activity and are hence counted more than once.

Table VI

DIFFERENT KINDS OF LABOUR USED IN *CHENAS*

	<i>Sk.</i>	<i>Pl.</i>	<i>Pn.</i>	<i>Su.</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Per.</i>
Family labour	100	100	100	100	400	100
<i>Attam</i> labour	06	16	19	18	59	14.75
Hired labour (Occasional)	16	25	23	27	81	20.25
Hired labour (Regular)	03	01	03	04	11	02.75

Chena cultivation is based on family labour. However some *chenas* use *attam* labour and occasional hired labour to a considerable extent. But regular hired labour is only confined to commercial *chenas*.

Table VII

PURPOSE OF CHENA CULTIVATION						
	<i>Sk.</i>	<i>Pl.</i>	<i>Pn.</i>	<i>Su.</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Per.</i>
Consumption	17	08	10	07	42	10.5
Market	02	03	01	02	08	2.0
Both consumption and Market	81	89	81	91	350	87.5
Total	100	100	100	100	400	100.00

Accordingly to this table today's *chena* peasant is heavily involved with the market. However at *Panamure* and *Pallebedde* the *chena* peasants are not so much involved with the market as the table would have us believe. In these two areas the peasants would sell some produce at the market. But the bulk of their production goes for consumption.

Table VIII

INVOLVEMENT OF CHENA CULTIVATORS IN PADDY CULTIVATION

	<i>Sk.</i>	<i>Pl.</i>	<i>Pn.</i>	<i>Su.</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Per.</i>
As owners of paddy fields	18	04	29	28	79	19.75
As labourers in paddy fields	27	10	57	47	14	35.25
Total	45	41	86	75	220	55.00

According to this table about 55 percent of *chena* cultivators are involved in paddy cultivation either as owners of paddy fields or as seasonal labourers in paddy cultivation. Thus 45 percent of *chena* cultivators are not affected by paddy cultivation at all.