

POLICY ISSUES AND RESEARCH PRIORITIES IN AGRARIAN RELATIONS IN SRI LANKA*

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Since agricultural sector occupies a predominant place in the economy, agrarian relations are of considerable importance from growth as well as distributive points of view. In the past decade, amidst rapid growth in paddy production, agrarian relations in the non-plantation crop sector have tended to change significantly due to a number of factors.

A number of researchers have noted a wide range of such changes. Yet, for several reasons a thorough policy oriented analysis of such changes and various issues involved with such changes is still scanty. The authors through a survey of literature identify several important issues relating to agrarian relations in the non-plantation crop sector and indicate which of these should be included in a short and medium-term agrarian research programme.

INTRODUCTION

Agrarian relations are of considerable importance to economic policy makers for they have a significant bearing on the productivity of land and determine the distributional pattern of income or the surplus generated in the agricultural sector among various socio-economic strata. Often policy makers in developing agrarian economies begin to pay attention to agrarian relations, when existing relations are assumed to constitute a serious bottleneck to improvement of agricultural productivity and thereby overall economic growth and development. Also, policy makers may begin to examine existing agrarian relations when they are likely to result in elements which may constitute a destabilising force threatening the existing social and political order of the country. The state may initiate a process of land reform when presented with such a situation. Internal contradictions among agrarian classes may prod, pressurise and set limits to the form and effectiveness of state intervention but, by themselves do not determine the process of land reform. Land reform is the intervention of the state apparatus to remould existing agrarian relations in a specific way that it desires (Gunasinghe: 1982:46). Amidst these processes of reform and restructuring, agricultural productivity may continue to increase. In general, a rising trend in production of major crops in a country is likely to distract the attention of the policy makers away from agrarian relations and place them in a situation of a lull. Yet the lull period may be short if gradual deteriorations in agrarian relations, often occurring behind rising trends in crop production, begin to gather momentum. Perhaps, this is what has happened in Sri Lanka during the past decade or so.

The purpose of this paper is not to present an in-depth analysis of changes in agrarian relations in the country during the recent past. Instead the paper attempts to raise major policy issues concerning agrarian relations in the non-plantation crop sector in the country and to identify and present a broad agenda of research to be undertaken in the short and medium-term with a view to assisting policy makers.

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AGRARIAN SYSTEMS

At the outset it is important to draw attention to the diverse nature of the non-plantation crop sector in the country:

"Peasant agriculture in Sri Lanka, though possessing some basic elements in common, displays great diversity. It varies from primarily subsistence oriented, jungle surrounded villages in Nuwara Kalaviya to highly market oriented cultivation practices in the Jaffna peninsula; from the realisation of ground rent from certain tree crops in some Kandyan villages to intensive labour processes in paddy agriculture in the southern dry zone; from the bureaucratically managed large scale peasant re-settlement schemes in the river valleys to the production of agricultural raw materials for the factories of multinational enterprises".

(Gunasinghe: 1985:195)

In the context of this diversity the forces of change influencing agrarian relations and the changes resulting from such forces take different forms. In other words the same forces may produce diverse changes in agrarian relations in different agrarian systems. The quantitative as well as qualitative difference in changes in relations may produce a differential impact on productivity and distributional pattern of the surplus generated in each system. Hence it is important not only to talk in terms of the peasant sector, but also to identify the diverse agrarian systems located within it.

The importance of different agrarian systems vary in part depending on the scope of analysis (ex. national or regional) and the major consideration (ex. production growth or income distribution). For example, if one is more interested in the growth of paddy production, wet zone paddy farming systems may not attract the same attention as the dry zone settlement systems. Also, if one's scope of analysis is a region and not the national economy, then one may want to examine only certain systems.

Another important point is that an agrarian system, whatever its character and qualitative aspects, operates in a macro socio-economic and political milieu. The relationship between an agrarian system and the macro system may be weak, moderate or strong depending on a multitude of factors such as market integration and the degree of state intervention. Therefore, in order to explain changes in relation to a particular system one needs to examine the forces of change emerging from the macro system as well. Thus an agrarian system may be conceptualised as a sub-system operating in a macro socio-economic and political system.

Within the context of the peasant sector in Sri Lanka many agrarian systems can be identified; some of these systems, like the large scale peasant resettlement schemes are progressively expanding, while some systems like the old villages of Nuwarakalaviya are fast disappearing. Some systems like the Kandyan villages still retain many traditional institutions and practices, while some systems like those of the Hambantota district and Jaffna peninsula are products of rapid agricultural modernisation. Without necessarily being exhaustive, but covering a fairly extensive area of variation, the following sub-systems can be identified within the context of peasant agriculture in Sri Lanka.

- i. The isolated nucleated tank-fed old villages of Nuwarakalaviya; an in-depth study of this system is presented in Sir Edmund Leach's work *Pul Eliya* (1960).
- ii. The State sponsored capital intensive large resettlement schemes: a historical and geographical analysis of this system is presented in B.H. Farmer's "Pioneer Peasant Colonisation in Ceylon" (1957) and Sarath Amunugama's sociological study of "Chandrikaweve" (1965).

- iii. Intensive market gardening for an island-wide market: this is a system present in Jaffna peninsula where capital intensive and labour intensive cultivation occurs in minute plots of land. A short analysis of this system is presented in Gunasinghe (1985).
- iv. Peasant agriculture with a symbolic relationship with a multi-national corporation: here peasants are obliged to cultivate a product that a multi-national corporation needs such as tobacco cultivated by Hanguranketa small cultivators for the Ceylon Tobacco Company. This system too is expanding with state assistance as evidenced in the Moneragala district, where sugarcane is grown by small cultivators for sugar companies. An analysis of this system is presented in Abeysekera (1985)
- v. Peasant production of plantation crops: this system is often found in Sabaragamuwa province and Kalutara and Galle districts, where small-holders produce tea and rubber for the market. An analysis of this system based on a micro-level study is presented by Fernando (1984).

THE ISSUES

Though there are common elements, the issues in different agrarian systems appear to be different. One of the most important issues in the agrarian economy appears to be the process of marginalisation in the Peasant Settlement Schemes. Wickremasekera (1985:114) summarizes the findings of a number of micro-level studies in the Mahaweli 'H' area relating to agrarian relation:

- (a) Increased incidence of share cropping, leasing and mortgage arrangements;
- (b) A tendency towards concentration of landholdings through mortgage and dispossession of holdings;
- (c) Marginalisation of a substantial section of the rural population through indebtedness and increasing costs of cultivation;
- (d) The passing of part of the control over land into the hands of group of rich peasants, traders and public servants through the process; these groups have been able to consolidate their position mainly through money lending and trading activities.

While noting quite correctly that "the increased incidence of diverse tenurial arrangements are not a feature specific to the Mahaweli development area" Wickramasekera points out that "the peasant differentiation and tenurial arrangements have emerged in the Mahaweli settlements within a relatively short span of time".

Multitude of factors which have contributed to this process have been cited by various researchers:

- (a) The acceleration of the settlement programme. (Wickremasekera, 1985:114)
- (b) Compulsion to depend on the farm power market due to lack of draught animals which in turn was due to non-availability of grassland. (Siriwardene, 1984:13)
- (c) Crop failures or poor irrigation supply to the holding. (Wickremasekera: 1985:114)
- (d) Rising cost of cultivation, lack of capital and lack of access to institutional credit. (Siriwardene, 1984:13-14; Vidanapathirana. 1984; Wickremasekera, 1985)

- (e) Both direct and indirect inducements to cultivate cash crops such as onions and chillies which require a higher amount of working capital. (Siriwardene, 1984:13-14)
- (f) Need to engage in daily wage-labour to obtain a more regular flow of cash income. (Wickremasekera, 1985:114)

While it is clear that agrarian relations in the settlement areas have deteriorated, it is not surprising that they have moved in this direction despite the legally imposed barriers on such developments. Shanmugaratnam (1985:71) ably brings out the naive nature of the legal approach and the notion of "egalitarianism" based on a physical equality in farm size.

"The legalist approach ignores certain basic laws that operate due to inequalities in physical, financial and intellectual resources within a community. In this instance the concrete manifestation of these inequalities even when land is assumed to be equal, are found in the individual economic strengths, access to water and other inputs and institutional sources of credit, marketing etc., and technical know-how among the settlers. The cumulative effects of such inequalities lead to a differentiation..."

Distribution of holdings of equal size does not ensure an egalitarian system in a context where factor and product markets are imperfect. What is more important is the capacity to achieve the production frontier determined by the technological know-how available for the system. This capacity differs substantially depending on the effective access to crucial inputs and services thereby producing differentiation. Even the time period taken for the deterioration - whether it is rapid or slow, is in fact, determined by the resource capabilities and/or access to inputs and services. The forces emanating outside the agrarian system, but in the macro-economic and political system may, however, accelerate or decelerate the pace of changes. When viewed this way, there is nothing surprising in the emergence of different agrarian strata in the Mahaweli Settlement areas as in other settlement areas, for the simple reason that it is quite natural to occur such changes in the institutional context in which the system has been operating. What is important from policy point of view and more important to researchers too is the nature of the particular process which produced these results and the qualitative similarity or dissimilarities in the changes that have occurred when compared with the other settlement schemes.

Another important issue is whether these changes have necessarily meant a deterioration in income levels or income earning potential. When the literature on agrarian relations in the Mahaweli Settlement Schemes - for that matter other settlement schemes too is reviewed one would find a consensus of opinion, implicit or explicit, that a change in relations from land-owner status, for example, to the status of share-cropper or an agricultural labourer necessarily mean a deterioration in their incomes or income earning potential. Validity of this firm and uniform generalization is highly questionable for, in some cases, such changes may place a former owner in a better position. It is well known that the monetary wages in the rural sector have gone-up rapidly during the course of the last decade. This is however, an important empirical question which researchers have to address their minds to, in future. At theoretical level one can question the rationale behind assumed superiority of peasant land-owner over a landless agricultural labourer. It is factors such as the mobility, availability of employment opportunities and wage rates which determine whether an agricultural labourer is superior or not to an owner-peasant cultivator, from income point of view. Again, the small land holding *pre-se* may not be so important in certain situations. For instance, in Jaffna peninsula market gardening, inspite of the small size

of the holding productivity continues to be high. Thus, to show that changes have occurred in agrarian structures is not sufficient; it is necessary to show that the changes have resulted in a deterioration of income levels or incomes earning potential of those who fell to lower rungs on the agricultural ladder. This is an area which requires considerable attention of researchers.

Another aspect worth looking into in peasant settlement areas is the impact of changes in agrarian relations on productivity of land. Logically one can expect that leasing or sale of cultivable holdings to persons with resources — such as traders, bureaucrats, technocrats and rich farmers — would lead to a higher level of yields because such recipients of lands are likely to adopt better cultural practices. It is not known whether those who lease-in lands are also in a position to harness economies of scale, as far as use of certain farm machinery is concerned. It has been observed that "the leasing out of land is normally done by the poor farmers to more resourceful and enterprising farmers or traders who then cultivate the holdings with hired labour and often generate a higher production" (Central Bank of Ceylon, 1984).

However, this should not lead one to the conclusion that capital is the only constraint and if capital is provided to the settlers by way of credit, their problems may be resolved. It is quite possible that resourceful persons who lease in or obtain holdings in any other manner use their social status and political affiliation too to make use of the existing institutional structure in their favour. This may not be an avenue available to a poor farmer, even if he is provided with the full quantum of working capital on credit, for cultivation. However, this is only a tentative hypothesis which in some way discounts the excessive emphasis on institutional credit. This also means that an analysis of productivity differentials between owner operated holdings and leased-in holdings in a simple neo-classical economic framework may lead one to misleading conclusions and wrong policy prescriptions.

Another set of issues relates to the "resource transfer effects" arising out of changes in agrarian relations. Though more resourceful farmers appear to generate a surplus it is not known, for example, whether the surplus is reinvested in the system itself within agricultural sector or it is transferred to urban centres elsewhere. In the case of absentee operators in this category, it is quite possible that the surpluses are transferred out of the area. Since utilization pattern of the surplus is as important as the amount and distribution of the surplus, more intensive research on this theme is required.

Basically there are four types of questions which researchers should address their minds to:

- (a) what are the factors which contributed to a relatively rapid change in agrarian relations in the Mahaweli Settlement areas from the initial position?
- (b) What are the effects of changes on different classes involved such as share-croppers and migrant labourers? In other words, who had gained what, over whom?
- (c) What is the impact of changing agrarian relations on productivity and reinvestment of surpluses? and
- (d) What are the policy prescriptions which may be given to arrest the undesirable developments if any, from a growth point of view and also from a social justice point of view? Or is there a set of policies which can ensure growth with "social justice" under administratively and politically feasible institutional structures?

Another important issue is to what extent and under what conditions farm mechanisation, particularly tractorization has led to significant changes in agrarian relations? This is relevant not only for the Mahaweli agrarian system but also for other settlement schemes in the dry zone. It has been asserted even in early 1970s that tractor owners have begun to gain control over land cultivated by subsistence farmers. Thus, Jayaweera (1973:43) wrote:

"The subsistence farmer has acquired a new oppression, more intractable than the feudal land-owner. A new feudalism of technology has grown-up around the tractor owners.... subsistence farmers are slowly losing operational control of their paddy lots to the tractor owners."

In early 1981 Ranatunga et. al., (1981:49) pointed out that four-wheel tractor owners in certain settlement schemes have been able to increase ownership of land much faster than others. They wrote that "..... not only 4-wheel tractors lead to land accumulation *per-se*, they are especially likely to do so when farming conditions are such as to place a premium on rapid cultivation" (1981:49). This high positive correlation between tractor ownership and land accumulation has been confirmed further by Farrington et. al., (1980). Tractors represent indivisible lumpy capital. With a tractor several acres can be prepared for cultivation in a single day. Thus, tractor owners tend to establish operation of a size commensurate with the lumpiness of the tractor.

Tractorization not only leads to land concentration but also reduce the income earning opportunities of agricultural labourers and poor peasants who also depend on sale of their labour power during peak seasons of cultivation activities. As Lipton noted, if tractors do displace hired labour, "it is mainly those who formerly just found migration worthwhile who will be the losers" (1984:60). He elaborates this further: "Migrant labour to the Dry Zone provides over half the income of many very poor wet zone villages.... and such migrants depend mainly on income from land preparation and threshing: the very jobs that tractors reduce" (1984:60).

Land concentration, as some researchers have pointed out, may result in a greater demand for hired agricultural labour which may be directed towards migrants owing to the specific advantages such labour provides over agricultural labour available within the village or settlement itself. However, if, as Lipton points out, mechanisation leads to a reduction in peak labour demand that will certainly result in a deterioration of agrarian relations. It is important to note that despite available evidence on adverse effects of tractorization on agrarian relations, the state policies continue to subsidize the use of tractors through cheap credit and various other means. Whether the use of tractors should be subsidized and if so, in what kind of situations is a significant issue on which researchers should focus their attention.

Issues in agrarian relations in the Wet Zone appear to be much more complex than those of the dry zone. For example, the wet zone paddy system is characterised by a complex land tenure system, which is dominated by *Thattamaru* and *Kattimaru* cultivation systems in the districts of Ratnapura, Kalutara and Kegalle (Moore and Wickramasinghe, 1978). In addition, the incidence of *ande* tenancy has also been very high in the wet zone districts (Dunham and Fernando, 1986). Though these tenure systems are assumed to have considerable adverse effects on productivity, no reliable data are available to determine their incidence in more recent years in different parts of the zone. Due to lack of data it is not possible to analyse the trends, in the recent past in any meaningful manner. Agrarian reform acts have attempted to regulate the relations between the tenant cultivators and land owners for nearly three decades. While the impact of the Paddy Lands Act of 1958 on tenurial arrangements had been studied in

detail, the impact of the Agrarian Services Act of 1979 which was in operation during a period of rapid growth in productivity in paddy sector, has yet to be studied in detail. There is also an urgent need to make arrangements to generate these data. In the meantime it is necessary to initiate a series of in-depth micro-level studies in villages selected from different localities. As national level statistical data on agriculture are not as accurate as they ought to be, the importance of micro-level in-depth studies acquire even a greater degree of prominence. Further, national level data tend to mask regional and systemic variations which could be grasped only in in-depth micro level studies.

Available evidence from the wet zone tends to indicate that agrarian relations have become more tensed over the last decade or so. The increasing population pressure on land had undoubtedly contributed substantially to this process of deterioration. The rising importance of micro-holdings in the paddy sector is certainly a clear manifestation of the increasing gravity of the problem of agrarian relations in the wet zone. The FAO summarised various aspects of this situation and their implications for development:

"Almost invariably associated with this deteriorating man land relationship are other disabilities: his poverty, malnutrition, insecurity; his lack of access to fertilizer, other farm inputs, farm power and services, his constant subjection to exploitative marketing; his recognition as chronically credit needy but only exorbitantly, or never, credit worthy. These are not only considerations of equity. They also have significant bearing on growth since these disabilities inevitably tend towards declining individual productivity and sub-optimal national agricultural production." (Undated : 26)

The existing situation especially in the wet zone is undoubtedly undesirable from both growth and distribution point of view. Bulk of the cultivators in the region are unable to produce a surplus. Many even cannot cover the cost of cultivation, if the cost of family labour is also included. This means that holdings do not enable them to earn a reasonable return for the family labour used in the cultivation. What is even more alarming is that the existing situation will certainly deteriorate with population growth and fragmentation further, unless other sectors in the economy expand rapidly enough to absorb redundant labour on cultivated land.

It has been pointed out that the real prices of paddy also suffered a decline during the post-liberalisation period and the cost of cultivation per unit of land rose considerably (Gunasinghe : 1986). Thus, available evidence tends to indicate an unfavourable production environment for the farmers. Yet, productivity registered an impressive growth in all wet zone districts, perhaps except one or two, during the same period. Gunasinghe (1986 : 42-43) attempts to explain this apparent paradox:

"Increasing output of paddy, amidst declining real prices and rising cost of production probably occurs due to the fact that paddy is both a subsistence as well as a commercial crop. Ever since the discontinuance of the subsidised rice ration, the cultivator's dependence on his harvest for subsistence has increased. This subsistence component of peasant production is probably price inelastic"

However, when the tenorial structure, the farmers ability to pay for purchased inputs and limits to increasing productivity through intensification of labour are also taken into account, one can question whether the above explanation is adequate. It is not possible to go into this aspect in detail in this paper. Given its importance an in-depth analysis of the production growth in the wet zone districts, together with distributional pattern of the production among landlords, tenants and agricultural labour appears to be necessary.

Another important issue is the kind of policies which are required to improve the agrarian relations? Neither land settlement schemes nor legal barriers can arrest the

deterioration in agrarian relations, as past experience indicates Agrarian relations are determined by a more complex set of factors. Some are internal to a particular agrarian system while some others stem from the macro-system. Perhaps, settlement schemes may provide some breathing time. Also the country now appears to have reached the limit to settlement expansion. In this context, attention will naturally have to be focussed partly on restructuring existing relations in such a way that they contribute to both growth and better distribution of agricultural surplus. Considerable amount of work is required on this subject of restructuring existing agrarian relations in such a way that growth is achieved with equity.

An important issue in this area is whether "peasant farm system" can be continued while ensuring production growth and egalitarian distribution of income. If the "peasant farm system" tends to inhibit improvements in application of advanced technology and tends to disintegrate over time, what is the type of agricultural organisation we can propose to replace it? Several researchers have advocated group farming as one possible alternative.¹ On the other hand, how one could transform the existing structure into, for example, the proposed structure also needs to be looked into, not merely as a research exercise, but also as a possible policy option.

PRIORITY RESEARCH THEMES

In the foregoing sections, a number of leading issues in the area of agrarian relations was raised briefly and several questions that researchers should address their minds to were also indicated. Given the high relative importance of the agricultural sector in the economy and its complex nature and interrelationships with other sectors, there exists a large number of important research issues. Out of these issues we feel that in the short and medium-term the following should receive priority in an agrarian research programme:

- (i) Studies of non-legal tenurial arrangement in the peasant resettlement schemes, with an emphasis on the processes of renting - in and renting out. Identification of the socio-economic characteristics of the social stratum of settlers who display a high probability for renting - out, as well as sorting out of those who are most likely to rent-in. Impact of those processes on productivity and equity.
- (ii) Within the context of acute fragmentation and enhanced pressure on land that prevails in the wet-zone peasant sector, could growth of productivity with equity be achieved while maintaining existing agrarian systems? What are the possible restructurations that would ensure both high productivity and equity?
- (iii) In view of expanding farm mechanisation, which influences the character of agrarian relations and cultivation practices, what forms of alternative and appropriate methods of technology be adopted which ensure growth with equity.

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