

AGRICULTURE IN THE VANNI IN NORTHERN CEYLON (SRI LANKA) DURING THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY

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Nineteenth century Vanni in North Ceylon consisted of the Mullaitivu and Vavuniya districts. The occupation of the majority of the inhabitants, who were Tamils, was agriculture. Some owned land and worked on their fields while a few hired agricultural labourers.⁴ There were a few Sinhalese who were also cultivators, but their numbers gradually decreased. In 1839 the number of Sinhalese residents in the Vanni was 263 but by 1849 it was only 203⁴. Generally although agriculture was the mainstay of the economy of the Vanni, paradoxically there was neither a prosperous nor a flourishing farming community. The peasantry survived at a bare subsistence level of life, eking out an uncertain and miserable life.

Rice was the staple food of the people, and naturally rice cultivation was the chief occupation of the inhabitants of the Vanni³. The major harvest was from the **Kalapokam** (regular crop)⁴. Paddy was sown in September or October as the North East Monsoon commenced blowing in with rain and the harvest was gathered in February or March. The **idaipokam** (middle crop) was sown in February or March and the **sirupokam** (little crop) in April. This was only an ideal pattern of agricultural life because cultivation thrice annually was rarely possible, and that too only when irrigation through water taken from tanks was possible, which was rare indeed. Cultivation, mostly in the maritime **pattus** of the Vanni, depended on rainfall and rain fell in such a way that only the **kalapokam** crop was cultivated. Again, there were often years of poor rainfall when cultivation almost totally failed. There was no possibility of regular **idaipokam** and **sirupokam** cultivation because tanks very often never filled up. Rainfall was erratic, irregular and more often uncertain ; drought stalked.

Different varieties of paddy were grown in the Vanni. The variety sown for the kalapokam crop ripened in five months. The **idaipokam** crop produced a yield of paddy which ripened in five or four and three months, respectively. Even the cultivable land in the Vanni comprised three categories. There were tank-irrigated lands (**manavari** lands) which relied on rainfall and spring irrigated (**Chunaittarai** lands) which were however very few. The maritime **pattus** of the Vanni contained mostly **manavari** lands. Spring irrigated lands were found only in two villages in the Vanni ; Mulliyawalai and Thanniyutu.⁵

Drought was a recurrent and formidable obstacle to cultivation. Cultivation also often suffered a setback in the Vanni because, the poor peasant

eking out a miserable life owing to perennial drought which hit him hard, suffered in turn from a want of seed paddy. Moreover, labour was scarce, and assistance unavailable readily or easily. Chronic diseases, like malaria and water - born maladies like diarrhoea and dysentery impoverished the Vanni lands of healthy, adequate labour. In addition, regular disappointment following constant failures of crops, had made labour sometimes migrate northwards to the Jaffna peninsula or eastwards to Trincomalee in search of employment. Another deterrent to agricultural enterprise came from the want of buffaloes which were used for ploughing.⁶ Endemic attacks of murrain took a heavy toll of buffalo life. There were also other impediments to cultivation which added to the depression of the peasant's economic position. Pests and stray or untethered animals wrought havoc to the crops and no control could be exercised against such damage ; cattle marauding on crops was a common complaint for which very little remedy was then available.

Headmen systematically underestimated the crops thereby causing a reduction of the receipts from cultivation to the state thus giving an inaccurate picture of the economy.⁷ This adds to our difficulty in assessing the peasant's true economic position. However, clearly he was poor, and the state was uninclined then to help him since returns did not warrant an outlay of capital.

An important type of agricultural activity in the Vanni was dry grain or **chena** cultivation.⁸ This was relatively a poor form of agricultural activity. The cultivators could obtain comparatively larger returns of grain of an inferior nutrient value by resorting to **chena** cultivation. Hence, they engaged in this easier form of chena 'slash and burn' cultivation or cultivation similar to swidden agriculture in East Asia. But given the want of water regularly it was **chena** cultivation that kept them at least at subsistence survival levels of life.

The **chena** system denuded good forests and, as it was cultivation without replenishing the exhausted soil; the land too suffered exhaustion and ruin. Dry grain cultivation diminished paddy cultivation in the Vanni because it offered an easy distraction to the peasant. The **udayar** or headman of Mel-pattu south had advised the Government Agent that 'If permission to clear chenas were restricted much advantage would result in the increase in the cultivation of paddy land which would ensue.'⁹ The **udayar** of Puthukuddiyiruppu confirmed that **chena** cultivation was 'very pernicious in destroying young valuable trees and preventing the owners of paddy fields getting labour for cultivation.'¹⁰ Here is a reference to deforestation, which appears to have been common and harmful to the ecology of the area.

Strangely enough, the **mudaliyars**, or the superior headmen, held another view of chena cultivation in the Vanni. They felt that the cultivation of dry grain was very important to the life of the people. 'There are many who have no paddy land and no means of cultivating the paddy land of others, no

cattle and who cannot procure employment under those who have paddy lands.¹¹ This is a succinct but correct view for, whatever may have been the illeffects of **chena** cultivation, it was a necessary means of livelihood to the Vanni peasants then. There are other reasons also to account for the prevalence of dry grain cultivation in the Vanni. In the wet season, when fields were sown and tanks were full, in many villages there was no place, free of jungle, to which the village cattle, buffaloes and black cattle could be driven to pasture, but only the abandoned chenas. Thus the deserted chena land provided pasture land and fodder for livestock which were essential for agricultural activity and economic subsistence. Second, the **chena** provided an ideal avenue for growing **ellu** (gingelly)¹² Gingelly or sesame growing was quite a lucrative occupation and became a necessary and fruitful economic activity for the more enterprising and persevering peasant of the Vanni.

The dry grains cultivated in the Vanni were **kurakkan**, **varagu** and **gingelly**.¹³ The jungle was cleared in April, May or June and remnant vegetation was burnt out in July or August when the high winds blew across the sun-scorched land and kept the fire ablaze. **Kurakkan** was sown between September and November, and harvested in February or March. **Varagu** was grown in August and September in new chena lands, and in October in the abandoned old chenas. The harvest was gathered in February or March. **Varagu**, a dry cereal, was mostly cultivated in the village of Puthukuddyiruppu, where it was chiefly and popularly consumed. **Ellu** was sown in March or April and it was ready for harvesting by June or July. There was a great demand for **ellu** or gingelly because the grain was crushed to yield a highly prized valuable oil used for edible and other purposes. In some **chenas**, particularly when they were virginal, after the slash and burn operation, a variety of paddy which could thrive on very little water was also grown ; this was only an one-time experiment, and thereafter the land was not used for paddy growing again.

There were other agricultural products such as the dry or fine grains of **sami** or **meneri**. **Payaru** or green gram and **kollu** were also cultivated in small quantities.¹⁴ These products were mostly consumed within the Vanni villages or bartered to the itinerant traders in return for some household necessity or other trinkets ; traders travelling in packs with animals carrying wares, **tavalams**, were a feature of the village economy of the Vanni.

The agricultural products, mentioned in the foregoing paragraphs, were the main sources from which revenue was collected in the Vanni in the form of paddy and dry grain tithes.¹⁵ The revenue was gathered in cash either as rented revenue where the right to collect rents was farmed out to renters, or as revenue collected in **aumani**, which is direct collection of the tithes by the Government's representative, usually an headman. The land tax was collected in different ways at different times. At first it was farmed out in respect of villages and outlying areas. In fields, where the produce was expected to exceed the estimated amount, the right of collection was not leased out. The tax was collected directly from the owner, and many

paid their taxes in this manner. With the passing of time, gradually the tax was not collected in the form of grain, but it was collected in cash within the **pattus** of the Vanni. Yet, although the use of a money economy had come in later, there were still some who preferred to continue to pay their taxes in kind. The general agricultural productivity in the Vanni remained low owing to the vagaries of the weather which made cultivation irregular and precarious and many of the Vanni peasant cultivators hardly had ready money with them. As a rule, both in their fields or on their lands, the peasants of the Vanni themselves worked as labours for they could illafford to employ hired labour¹⁶ In no sense were there farms in the Vanni ; the Vanni inhabitant was mainly a small time, small plot, cultivator ; he was cultivating for his life alone lived at the barest minimum level.

The governmental patronage given to agriculture remained niggardly even though revenue was mainly derived from the agricultural produce. In villages like Puthukkudiyiruppu, tanks were left unattended and fields remained uncultivated¹⁷ Even fields on which dry grain was grown were often deserted, and government did little to encourage successful agricultural activity. The government was more interested in the plantation agriculture of the higher central lands of the island; and not in fostering peasant agriculture. There was a shift of emphasis since the economy had now become dependent on export plantation crops, which were fostered by state support.

Tanks were damaged and not repaired because the village customs which had governed the upkeep of tanks, and cultivation of fields in the rural society of the Vanni had been ignored or neglected.¹⁸ It was only in a tardy and inconsistent manner that steps were taken in these years to restore to health a diseased agricultural society. For instance, in 1832 there was an attempt to enforce a regulation for the protection of lands from damage by stray cattle.¹⁹ In 1834, there were proposals to grant advances for the repair of tanks.²⁰ But measures like these were few and far in between ;²¹ the years of enlightened governors who saw a need to resuscitate the dying peasant economy was yet to dawn. In the early 19th century the British neglected the dry zone peasant.

The tax on paddy was in these years acting as a deterrent to cultivation or was acting as a tax levied on the subsistence of the people and tended to depress paddy cultivation and discourage the application of capital, even borrowed, to utilise land for paddy growing.²² Yet, surprisingly enough, there were some years as in 1834 and 1835 when the Vanni villages produced good yields of agricultural produce.²³ This was a remarkable phenomenon, in spite of all the odds being against the poor Vanni peasant, and could be ascribed to nature being generous and providing enough rainfall in these two unusually good years ; the other years were often lean.

There were certain obstacles which impeded even some enterprising officials from effecting any improvements in respect of agriculture in the Vanni during these years. For example, there was no precise information about the extent of the tanks and the adjacent land in the Vanni,²⁴ and there was no establishment of surveyors to undertake surveying and mapping out.²⁵ Identification, plotting out of land, and surveying could not be done owing to a dearth of personnel.

Yet, on and off, measures were taken to better the agricultural conditions in the Vanni. In 1844 there were some improvements effected in regard to land holdings and steps were again taken to discourage dry grain cultivation in the chenas, within the Vanni, by the levy of a higher tax on chena produce.²⁵ But this measure to discourage chena cultivation was imprudent and could not be enforced until sufficient irrigation facilities for growing enough rice were given. However, to an extent, crown lands were leased out quite successfully for paddy cultivation in the Vanni and with good results. This indicated that if the state ventured to help the Vanni peasant he was willing to profit by the assistance offered. No wonder that the Government Agent could report in 1844 that 'no portion of the island had exhibited a greater desire for the extension of cultivation by natives'²⁶ After all traditionally cultivation had been pursued but with state patronage ; now patronage was not readily forthcoming and the peasant was helpless.

By 1849 there was a comprehensive report on the tanks, irrigation and cultivation in the Vanni.²⁷ It was evident that the tanks were largely in disrepair, and any repairs were ineffective and temporary.²⁸ There were also disputes among the peasants and the state about titles to the lands in the Vanni; titles to the lands lay with the crown.²⁹ This was a disincentive to the cultivators and to cultivation. In a government report, various measures were suggested for improving agricultural productivity in the Vanni and one recommendation was to give the peasants a sense of security about the right to their land. Even sales of land within the Vanni were not feasible because the people were poor and could not buy land at the upset price prescribed by the government.³⁰

Such official reports were made from time to time.³¹ and although the intentions were to study and improve the agricultural conditions in the Vanni very little useful action followed as a consequence ; reports were not acted upon. In spite of pleas, the taxes on paddy were levied until 1893 and the Vanni was compelled to pay although it could ill afford to do so.³²

Generally in the Vanni, paddy cultivation remained a precarious economic pursuit because rainfall was so irregular. The Vanni cultivator moreover was in a poor plight because the renters extorted as much as they could from the miserable Vanni peasantry. In some instances, the renters, who were from Jaffna, extracted actually more than double the quantity due to them.³³ This

made the plight of the Vanni peasant even worse ; periods of drought, which were constant, also hurt the Vanni peasant very severely as in the bad year of 1855.³⁴ No surprise that, without adequate water or irrigation facilities, the Vanni cultivated the least number of areas in the whole of the northern province in these years.³⁵

Only by the 1850's were the tanks in the Vanni areas really taken up for repairs and restoration ;³⁶ but even then action was slow. Till then the Vanni received occasional, and often indifferent, attention from the government, and agricultural activity was at a low ebb. The revenue received from the Vanni by the state, both on account of paddy and dry grain yet showed some increases in these years. Nevertheless, the true picture of the agricultural peasant, on the contrary and paradoxically, showed no improvement. He continued to be a person striving to survive at subsistence level, adversely affected by undependable rainfall, state negligence and indifference and exacting tax gatherers. Yet, the agricultural peasant was the principal figure, and agriculture was the principal enterprise in the economy of the Vanni, however, neglected it was. A long time had to pass before the Vanni could become richer in agricultural activity, however. The Vanni remained sparsely populated, disease ridden, thickly forested, economically impoverished, a buffer zone, that separated the peninsula of Jaffna in the extreme north from Southern Sri Lanka in the early 19th century.

1. Lewis, J.P. **Manual of the Vanni Districts (Vavuniya and Mullaitivu) of the Northern Province** (Colombo, 1895) p. 88 & p. 173.
2. **ibid.** p. 95 - 97
3. **ibid** p. 163-167.
4. For an account of cultivation see **ibid.**
5. **ibid.**
6. **ibid** p. 173.
7. **ibid** p. 177.
8. for an account of chena and dry grain growing see **ibid** p. 177-181.
9. Government Agent's Diary - entry, 19 September 1864.
10. **ibid.** entry, 9 September 1859.
11. **ibid** entry, 26 August 1842.
12. **ibid** entry, 15 September 1859.
13. Lewis, J.P. **op. cit.** 190-181.
14. **ibid.**

15. for an account of the revenue and collection see **ibid.** p. 135-142.
16. Boake, W.J.S. **Mannar - A Monograph** (Colombo, 1888) p. 35.
17. For records of complaints about unrepaired tanks see Collector's Diaries' entry, 7 May 1832 (SLNA (Sri Lanka National Archives) 20/21 lot No. 54.
18. **ibid.**
19. SLNA - 20/681 - No. 2228 Chief Secretary to Collector, 16 August 1832.
20. SLNA - 6/1192, Letter from Government Agent to Colonial Secretary, 1834, August 1.
21. For evidence of another measure to assist cultivators see SLNA - 6/1192, Government Agent to Colonial Secretary, 7 May 1834.
22. SLNA. 6/1237 - No. 137, Government Agent, Circular 6 April 1834.
23. SLNA. 6/1237 - No. 137, Government Agent to Colonial Secretary, 15 July 1835.
24. **ibid.** SLNA - 7/544 No. 170, Colonial Secretary to Govt. Agent, 17.8.40.
25. SLNA - 7/544 - No. 170, Colonial Secretary to Government Agent, 17 August 1840.
26. SLNA - 73638 - Nos. 324 - 325, Government Agent to Colonial Secretary, 19 November 1844.
27. SLNA - 20/855 - 269 - No. 168 Colonial Secretary to Government Agent, 6 July 1848 & enclosures containing copy of letter to Surveyor-General ; Annex No. 94, Colonial Secretary to Surveyor General, 4 July 1848.
28. SLNA - 6/1995 - No. 10, Government Agent to Colonial Secretary **11** January 1849.
29. Levers, R.W. **Manual of the North Central Province of Ceylon.** (Colombo, 1899)
30. **Ibid.**
31. SLNA - 6/1995 - No. 10 Government Agent to Colonial Secretary, 11 January 1849 ; also annex (A).
32. For another report see SLNA - 6/1995 - No. 169, Government Agent to Colonial Secretary, 12 October 1849.
33. Lewis, J-P **op. cit** p. 113.
34. **Ibid.** p. 141.

35. SLNA-6/A 2349 - No. 3 Government Agent to Colonial Secretary, 4 January 1856.
36. SLNA - 6/2349 - No. 34, Government Agent to Colonial Secretary 30 January 1856 and enclosed observations from the Assistant Government Agent ; also see SLNA - 7/2347 - No. 184, Government Agent to Colonial Secretary, 27 June 1856, and enclosures ; and for statistics see Lewis, J.P. *op.cit.* p. 143 - 144.
37. Rasanayagam C. **The British Period of the History of Jaffna**, (in Tamil Colombo, 1934) p. 196-197.