

The Structure and Organisation of Plantations : Brahmaputra Valley in the General Framework

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A growing interest in the study of plantation systems has been noticed in social science literature since the last few decades. This has been explained in terms of 'the continuity of form in plantation regions'. It has been further observed that 'the scale of enterprise, technology, and the scope of the market have changed, as have the institutional arrangements relating the labouring populations to the land they work. Often, the political ties linking subject and dependant areas with the metropolis have been altered. Nevertheless significant features of present-day plantation organization and plantation life are startlingly similar to those of earlier centuries.'

In spite of the fact that the plantation has been a world-wide institution, relatively little comparative study has been undertaken so far. The relevance of comparative study arises from the fact that several regularities have been observed in the structure and organisation of plantations the world over. It has thus been observed that 'the plantation had a rationale of organisation and a set of economic goals such that its particular form tended to be repeated with some fidelity in a number of different settings'.² The aim in the present paper is to examine those features of plantation organisation which has given to it a systemic character.

'Plantations' have been defined variously by different scholars. One of the most commonly used definitions is the one by Jones, who defines a plantation as 'an economic unit producing agricultural commodities (field crops or horticultural products, but not live-stock) for sale and employing a relatively large number of unskilled labourers whose activities are closely supervised. Plantations usually employ a year round labour crew of some size, and they usually specialize in the production of only one or two marketable products. They differ from other kinds of firms in the way in which the factors of production, primarily management and labour, are combined.'³

It follows from the above that plantation could be identified as instruments of colonisation and structurally as a part of an overseas economy linking metropole and hinterland in terms of a definite pattern of economic relationships. Most scholars have in their own way taken note of two basic dimensions of plantation organisation and development - 'internally' they have developed as total institutions, whereas 'externally' they have continued to depend in fundamental ways on the outside world. Viewed from

another angle, one needs to identify 'two of its systemic dimensions'. First, the plantation as a social system in the territory in which it is located, (the internal dimension) and second, as an economic systems both in the territory of its location and in the wider world community (the external dimension).⁴

Of the increasing volume of literature on plantation systems all over the world, perhaps a major part has emanated in the Caribbean region,⁵ which has witnessed one of the earliest development of the system. In fact most of the theoretical contributions have been based mainly on Caribbean plantations.⁶ There have also been significant contributions on Sri Lanka⁷, Africa, and South-east Asia,⁹ to name a few. We come to learn from such contributions that even though plantation enterprises as dominant units of production have spread their tentacles globally since the seventeenth century, they have differed in the form in which they were developed, and in their relative position vis-a-vis the regional economy and society. In many countries, 'the influence can be traced to virtually all aspects of human life because plantations are fully integrated in the economic and social order.'¹⁰ In several other cases, however, the plantation sector has been almost cut-off from the regional economy and society, with very weak or no linkages with the latter. The plantation economy of Assam, Sri Lanka are amongst others that fall within this category.

Examples of such sub-types could be multiplied. Our attempt at present would be to focus on the particularities of the pattern that developed in the tea plantation economy of the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam under colonialism within the broad framework of plantation organisation as a whole.

The region that witnessed the inception of the tea plantation enterprise in India, provides us with an interesting case study of the superimposition of the modern plantation on a traditional agrarian or artisan-based economy, since the two had coexisted in a larger geographical setting. Even though the effects of plantations were differentially felt in the diverse setting in the different parts of the world, we would outline below the features which came to characterise the system as truly in the Brahmaputra Valley as was evident in most other plantation economies and societies.

The plantation economy falls within the general class of externally propelled economies, generally associated with the tropics or sub-tropics, initiated in land surplus regions with low densities of population. The aim of the system has been continuous commercial. They have typically specialised in monocrop production for export. Such enterprises have been capitalistic in character in that the value of land equipment, etc., required the investment of money capital, frequently in large sums. Being products of metropolitan capital and enterprise, with an orientation to overseas markets, have tied the plantation to the wider world community in very precise ways.

In no real sense has there been a domestic labour market operative in plantation dominated societies. Certain non-market mechanisms with reference to labour have been known to exist.

The distinctive nature of labour recruitment and labour-force control not only came to set the pattern of social relations on plantations but have had important implications for the wider society. Plantations have normally depended on a migrant labour force giving rise to a heterogenous ethnic composition bringing forth significant changes in the societal structure of the region. On the other hand, the growth as well as decline in the magnitude of employment has normally been guided by forces operating in the world market, and not within the regional or national economy. The roles of the labouring and employing classes have been set sharply apart in a situation where the former generally accounted for more than ninety per cent of the total employment.

Another characteristic relates to the pattern of expansion. Since all supplies and capital goods used by the plantations are imported, the secondary effects of expansion have been experienced in the metropolis or elsewhere – outside the region. As a restricted high income group, the expenditures of the planter class have tended to create a diversified demand for a whole range of luxury goods. On the other hand the basic needs of the masses of work-force in the form of provisions, clothing etc. have also been met by imports. A marked change is thus reflected in the composition and volume of trade with the introduction and evolution of the plantation system in the region. This in turn leads to a concomitant development of an improved transport network with its orientation towards the port – the outlet for export and for the inflow of imports. A reflection of the development of such enterprises is also found in spatial relationships in the growth of trading centres, settlements and towns.

The Assamese tea enterprises in spite of its worldwide dominance in the sector has remained almost unnoticed in contemporary academic writings on the generalising aspects of the plantation and economy society. The present paper has aimed to be an attempt towards this end.

Notes & References

1. S. W. Mintz, *Caribbean Transformation*, Baltimore 1974, 52.
2. 'The Plantation as a Socio-Cultural Type', *Plantation Systems in the New World*, Pan American Union, Washington D. C., 1959, 42.
3. W. O. Jones "Plantations" in David L. Sills (ed), *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 12 (1968), p. 15 as quoted in G. L. Backford, *Persistent Poverty : Underdevelopment in Plantation Economies of the Third World*, London, 1972, 6.
4. Backford, *ibid*, 10.
5. These are too numerous to quote. For the basic details, see G. L. Backford, *op. cit.*; S. W. Mintz, *Caribbean Transformation*, *op. cit.*; W. Rodney, 'Plantation Society in Guyana', *Review*, Spring 1981, etc.

6. Apart from the studies mentioned above, are Pan American Union, *Plantation Systems in the New World*, op. cit; *Plantations Aroud the World*, Proceedings of the First World Plantation Conference, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, October, 1984; J. R. Mandle, 'The Plantation Economy : An Essay in Definition', *Science and Society*, Spring 1972; L. Best, 'Outlines of a Model of Pure Plantation Economy', *Social and Economic Studies*, September, 1968, etc.
7. See among others, S. B. De Silva. *The Political Economy of Under development*, London, 1982; D. R. Snodgrass, *Ceylon An Export Economy in Transition*, Illinois, 1966; A. Bandarage. *Colonialism in Sri Lanka : The Political economy of the Kandyan Highlands*, 1833-1886, Berlin, 1983, etc.
8. P. Hill, *The Migrant Cocoa farmers of Southern Ghana*, Cambridge 1963; P. Koning, *The State and Rural Class Formation in Ghana*, London, 1986; G. Austin, "The emergence of Capitalist Relations in South Asante Cocoa farming, c. 1916-33, *Journal of African History*, 28, 1984; A. W. Seidman, 'Comparative Development Strategies in East Africa', *East Africa Journal*, April-May, 1970; etc.
9. C. Geertz, *Agricultural Involution : Process of Ecological Change in Indonesia*, Berkeley, 1963; V. Selvaratnam, 'A Theoretical Perspective in the Study of Plantation Systems : The Malayan Case', *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 21, 1988; J. A. A. Van Doorn and W. J. Hendrix, *The Emergence of a Dependent Economy, Consequence of the Opening UP of West Preangan, Java, to the Process of Modernisation*, CASP, 1983 etc. A number of papers on South Indian Plantations are also useful in this context. Mention can be made of Tharian George and P. K. Michael Tharakan, 'Penetration of Capital into a Traditional Economy : The Case of Tea Plantations in Kerala, 1880-1950, *Studies in History*, 2, 2, 1986; K. Ravi Raman, *Capital and Labour in the Plantation Sector : The Case of Tea Plantations in South India, 1900-1947* (mimeo, Paper presented at a Seminar on South Indian Economy 1914 - 1940, CDS, Trivandram, April, 1988); etc.
10. Backford, op, cit, 15.