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**INTERNATIONAL  
JOURNAL OF  
AGRARIAN AFFAIRS**

Vol. I, No. 5, September 1953

**Land Settlement:  
The Making of  
New Farms**



Price 5s. 0d. net

**OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS**

**LONDON: GEOFFREY CUMBERLEGE**

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## PEASANT COLONIZATION IN CEYLON<sup>1</sup>

ON the assumption that the reader is reasonably familiar with what may be called the geographical and historical background of peasant colonization in the Dry Zone of Ceylon, all that will be attempted here by way of an introduction to the problem is an answer to three simple questions.

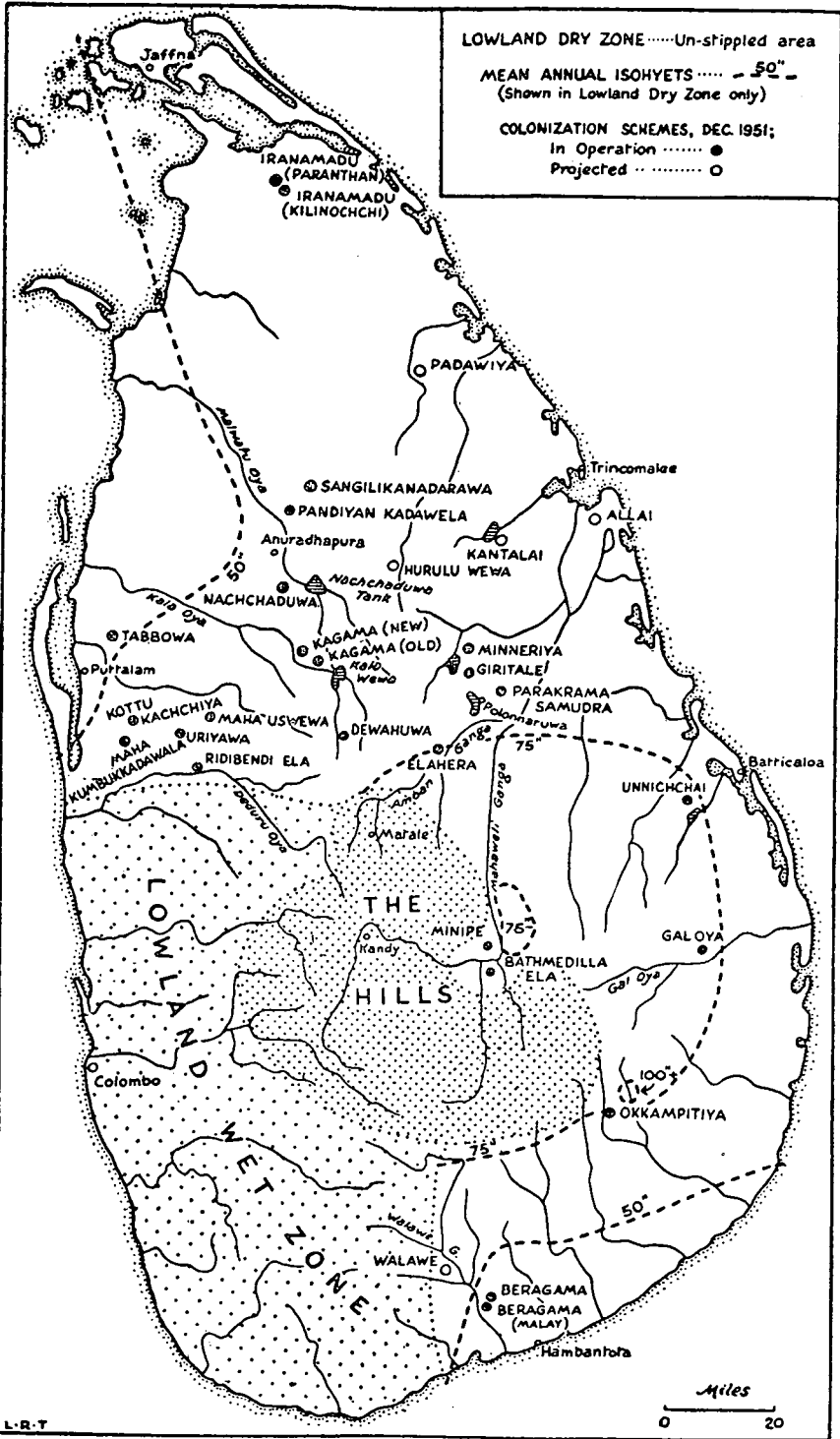
First, just what is the 'Dry Zone'? Ceylon extends about 220 miles from north to south; one can inscribe the ellipse of Ceylon inside a map of England. If one imagines the centre of a clock to be at Matale, in the middle of the island, then, roughly speaking, the Dry Zone is everything below about 1,000 feet swept out by a hand moving from nine o'clock around to six o'clock—in other words, the whole of the northern and eastern part of the island with the exception of the hillier areas. Thus defined, it comprises about two-thirds of Ceylon's land area.

Second, what are the characteristics of this Dry Zone? The Dry Zone was the seat of ancient Sinhalese civilization from very early times, possibly 700 or 500 B.C., until a period corresponding to the Middle Ages in Europe, when it decayed. Since that time the Zone has been, on the whole, sparsely peopled. There are, however, two areas which for a very long time have supported a fair number of people, namely, the Jaffna peninsula in the far north (which is the homeland of the Ceylon Tamils, the descendants of people who perhaps for ten centuries or more have been coming over from India) and the Batticaloa Coast (where there is also a fairly dense Ceylon Tamil population but one which is confined to a narrow coastal ribbon). Parts of the rest of the Dry Zone are virtually unpopulated, particularly in the east and south-east. Elsewhere in the Dry Zone, especially in the North-Central Province, around the ancient capital of Anuradhapura, there are scattered villages, with jungle between them.

Why has this region been one of such sparse settlement? Undoubtedly the dominant repelling factor has been malaria.<sup>2</sup> Malaria

<sup>1</sup> Written September 1952 and now reprinted from *Pacific Affairs*, vol. xxv, 4 Dec. 1952, by permission of the author and the Institute of Pacific Relations, 1 East 54th Street, New York 22, N.Y., U.S.A.

<sup>2</sup> See C. L. Dunn, *Malaria in Ceylon*, London, 1936.



was until recently endemic, in fact hyper-endemic, over almost the whole Dry Zone; and earlier attempts to persuade people to settle there failed because of it. Now, with the use of DDT, malaria is well under control, and the results are astonishing. If supplies of DDT can be maintained, no DDT-resistant strain of mosquito emerges, and people are not careless, then the malaria bogey may quite possibly prove to be a thing of the past. Another repelling factor has been drought.<sup>1</sup> The Dry Zone of Ceylon is climatically very much like the corresponding part of India across the water, the *Tamil Nad*, the Carnatic, which is a region of famine, largely because of recurrent drought; and, in fact, the ancient Sinhalese civilization, like the civilization of Madras, existed only because of irrigation. Most of the major irrigation works broke down during the period of the collapse of the ancient civilization, except for the smaller and simpler works which could be maintained by residual village communities. Then, locally, soil erosion, in fact loss of soil altogether, may have driven the population out and prevented it from returning. This may have been the case particularly in some of the eastern areas behind Batticaloa; it is very difficult to colonize them even with modern techniques, and it was impossible during the period from 1400 to 1930 or thereabouts. So, for all of these reasons, the Dry Zone has remained until recent times an area of comparatively few people.

The third question to be answered by way of introduction is this: what is the history of modern colonization schemes in the Dry Zone? They were started in 1932, very largely because of the inspiration and vision of the late Prime Minister, D. S. Senanayake. There was at the time a growing realization in Ceylon of the narrow basis of the island's economy, increasing landlessness because of the growing population, and mounting unemployment as a result in part of population growth but also of the general depression in the export industry which hit the island in the 1930's.

Earlier work in the Dry Zone up to about 1930 had concentrated on restoring irrigation works (a great deal of which had been done during the British colonial period) and letting the peasant come back if he would. The results were disappointing in many areas, although in the south-east, and to some extent in the North-Central Province, people did drift from the Wet Zone into the Dry Zone. It was not very far

<sup>1</sup> See E. K. Cook, 'A Note on Irrigation in Ceylon', *Geography*, 1950, pp. 75-85; and B. H. Farmer, 'Rainfall and Water Supply in the Dry Zone of Ceylon' in C. A. Fisher and R. W. Steel, eds., *Geographical Essays on British Tropical Lands*, London (forthcoming).

to go to these regions, and there was a continuous movement of the frontier of settlement. But in other parts of the Dry Zone, particularly in Tamankaduwa, the District around Polonnaruwa and the site of many relics of really great irrigation works, people did not return. The works there were restored at considerable cost, but, because there were only some 200 or 300 people served by a major work which could easily supply thousands, the capital involved remained unremunerative. Malaria and distance from the established centres of population, together with a fear of conditions in the Dry Zone, kept people away.

There was, moreover, a further factor, a tenurial one. During the British colonial period until about 1930, the initiative in the alienation of new land lay with the individual. If a man wanted land and he applied to the government for it, the lease or outright grant was offered for sale by public auction; if he was successful, he got it. Clearly a peasant living down south would have no chance of getting land in the north under those conditions. He would not know about the land; he would not know how to set the administrative machinery in motion; and in any case he would not be able to put down the money and buy outright.

Aided colonization started about 1932. At first it was a matter of advertising the fact that land was available, and of aiding peasants on a fairly modest scale. This aid, to begin with, amounted to financial help with the clearing of jungle and with fencing, in addition to a monetary grant towards the construction of a house. Subsequently the scale of aid was gradually extended until today it is one of the most generous amongst similar projects anywhere in the world. For instance, the peasants have all of their jungle-clearing done for them; they move on to a farm that is completely cleared, with most of the tree-stumps dug up and most of the main ridges in the paddy fields put in, and with a house already standing; once installed, they receive a subsistence allowance for the first six months and various kinds of financial and material aid. In fact, one can argue that the scale of aid is now too generous.

A second line of attack on this Dry Zone problem was in the field of land tenure. The new order dates from 1935, when the Land Development Ordinance came into force. Under this measure the government takes the initiative: certain land is declared available, and is advertised in the area from which it is hoped to attract peasants; and the choice of colonists is made according to merit, not by public

auction. The system of tenure is a kind of lease in perpetuity designed to avoid many of the evils of fragmentation and of mortgaging which tend to hang like millstones around the necks of peasants in Asia.

By December 1951 there were twenty-four colonization schemes of various sizes in the Dry Zone, many of them concentrated in the old *Raja Rata*, the old 'Kings' Country' of the North-Centre, which is both more fertile and better equipped with ancient irrigation works than the east or south. The size of these colonies varied enormously: some of them had only fifty peasant families, while the largest (Parakrama Samudra) had 2,539 and was not yet at full strength. Altogether, these schemes involve some 8,700 families, or about 50,000 people, plus squatters. Squatters are cultivators, traders, and others who have come in on their own initiative, for one of the results of colonization has been to dispel the Dry Zone bogey. People are no longer afraid to go there. In fact, the problem now is to find enough land for all of the thousands who wish to migrate. The colonization schemes embrace about 70,000 acres, of which some 44,000 are under paddy.

Any analysis of the economic problems of Ceylon will show that, as for most Asian countries, three main types exist.<sup>1</sup> There is first of all the internal *short-term* problem, the familiar one of providing for a population which has a low standard of living and of trying to raise that standard. What, then, can the colonies do about this? The second problem is the internal *long-term* one of a rapid increase of population. Ceylon has probably one of the highest rates of natural increase of any country in the world—at the moment about 3 per cent. per year; this means that, with an estimated population in 1951 of some 7¼ million, the present rate of increase is about 200,000 a year. What can colonization do about this? The third problem is the external economic problem. The central feature of this is that about 90 per cent. of the island's exports by value consist of tea, rubber, and coconut products. These are produced largely on estates which are divorced economically and socially from the general peasant life of the island. Ceylon has to import something like two-thirds of its foodstuffs and most of its requirements for clothing and manufactures. Clearly the ability of the island to feed and clothe its people and to provide them with amenities depends on the earnings of the three main estate products, the prices of two of which (rubber and coconuts)

<sup>1</sup> For a general discussion of Ceylon's economic problems, see Sir Ivor Jennings, *The Economy of Ceylon*, 2nd ed., Madras, 1951.

are notoriously unstable. What connexion is there between peasant colonization and this rather unstable and narrow-based external economy?

Probably 75 per cent. of the island's population have a total yearly income in both cash and kind of less than £50. This figure is necessarily approximate, but incomes are certainly very low. In established colonization schemes the incomes are far higher. This at least shows that it is possible for Asian peasants, under suitable conditions, and using what are mainly still traditional methods of agriculture with simple ploughs and buffaloes or bullocks, to have relatively high money incomes. The author tried to collect information, as he went around the colonies, about both the money income and the general standard of living of the peasantry; and, generalizing from a mass of somewhat varied information, it seems true to say that the average colonist is able to sell between one-half and four-fifths of his total rice crop. The higher yield is to be expected, of course, if only because of the larger holdings. (In the colonization schemes the peasant normally has 5 acres of paddy, more recently 4 acres, together with 3 acres of 'high', i.e. unirrigable, land, whereas the size of peasant holdings elsewhere in Ceylon is quite often 1 acre or half an acre, or sometimes even less.) When the colonist sells one-half to four-fifths of his paddy, at present prices it yields between Rs.1,000 and Rs.3,000, or roughly £77 to £230; so that the most efficient colonists on the richest land with the best systems of cultivation are, in terms of money, probably five times better off than most of the peasants in the villages.

That very fact, however, raises its own problems. In the first place, the peasant colonization schemes are tending to produce a class of richer peasants, and quite naturally the villagers, especially those in the small, Dry Zone villages near by, are jealous of the prosperity of the colonists. This is one ground, in fact, for reducing the size of the colonist's allotment. In a big new scheme in the Gal Oya valley, in the east, the amount of paddy land allotted to each peasant has been reduced to 4 acres and that of high land to 2 acres, and there has been a certain amount of discussion about reducing the holding even further. Clearly, doing so would have a number of effects: it would reduce the disparity between the peasant in the village and the colonist; it would permit more people to be settled on the same amount of land; and, if only slowly and indirectly, it might possibly ease population problems.



For, as things are at present, with this very large holding of 5 acres of paddy and 3 acres of high land, a premium is put on the large family. This, of course, is not deliberate. What happens is that when, under present conditions, ten peasants apply for each available allotment, it is impossible to examine each man's record to learn objectively which is the best potential colonist. The administrator must, therefore, have some rule of thumb. He tends to say, 'We will rule out all of the men who are reported to be poor cultivators'; and then, having to deal with the mass of applicants remaining, he tends to ask, 'Which families are most likely to be able to cope with this large holding?' In other words, he must select the families with more than, say, five children over the age of ten or twelve who can work on the land, because experience has demonstrated that a childless couple is incapable of working the standard size allotment and that, even with two or three children, a couple finds it difficult to do so. Hence, the size of the holding puts a premium on large families. To be sure, peasants do not deliberately have a large family in order to qualify for an allotment; but, clearly, if it should become government policy to encourage parents to have fewer children, proper cultivation of allotments of the present standard size would prove difficult.

Another problem raised by the increased money income in the colonization schemes is that the rise in the material standard of living is by no means commensurate with the rise in money income. It is perhaps right that, in an Oriental society, this should be so, right that material standards should not be the only ones and that people should be able to burn their money on festivals, pilgrimages, and rides around the country. Undoubtedly a great deal of the increase in the money income is consumed in such ways. The problem lies not so much here as in the fact that building and sanitation improvements and other capital investments in the holdings are not at all satisfactory in view of the colonists' relatively high money income.

Nevertheless, conditions in the colonization schemes do prove that under suitable conditions the peasant can eat well and produce a good surplus, and yet use what are basically traditional methods of cultivation. There is, however, much room for improvement in these methods.<sup>1</sup> In other words, there is no real case, at least in this context, for co-operative farming, collectivization, indiscriminate mechanization, or a number of the other remedies that are sometimes suggested

<sup>1</sup> See B. H. Farmer, 'Colonization in the Dry Zone of Ceylon', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 1952, pp. 547-64.

by people who do not know Asia intimately. In addition to feeding themselves, these people can produce a sizable surplus for consumption elsewhere in the country. Great local variety exists in the amount of the surplus, but probably the average holding in a well-run colony can feed some fifteen persons altogether. That is to say, using round numbers and approximations, that the 9,000 colonists in Ceylon today can feed something like 135,000 people, and thus are making a substantial contribution to the food problem and to the general living standards of the island.

This leads naturally to the second problem—the relation between colonization and a rapidly increasing population.<sup>1</sup> The annual net increase in Ceylon's population at present is of the order of 200,000. On the basis of the rough calculation just made, something like 13,300 families must be settled in colonization schemes each year if colonization alone is to maintain peasant living standards and feed the annual increase in population. But during the four years 1947-51, only some 1,500 colonists per year (about one-ninth of the required number) were in fact settled. There will be more in the next few years because of the very big schemes at Gal Oya and on the Walawe Ganga in the south-east, but it is unlikely that during the next ten years the average number of families settled each year will be more than 5,000—in other words, less than half of the number required to feed the increase in population, to say nothing of raising the standard of living. The rest of the food, then, will have to be found through other ways of settling people on the land, by expanding existing villages, by increasing yields and possibly by industrializing and selling industrial products abroad. Colonization can make a substantial contribution, but it is not, as people in Ceylon sometimes aver, the complete answer to the problem of population pressure.

What of the future beyond the next ten years or so? The standard colonization scheme is based fundamentally on paddy, that is, on irrigable land. The major part of the holding is irrigable, the major part of the money income comes from the sale of paddy, and the major part of the peasants' food supply comes from rice. But even though the Dry Zone apparently has miles of empty spaces, the island is coming to an end of its easily irrigable land. Almost all of the major ancient irrigation works that can be restored have been restored. The Gal Oya and the Walawe Ganga schemes are not ancient works under

<sup>1</sup> See Irene B. Taeuber, 'Ceylon as a Demographic Laboratory', *Population Index*, 1949, pp. 293-304.

restoration; they are completely new works, and, as a result, the capital expenditure per irrigated area will be much higher than elsewhere. And then, before very long, the ultimate limits will be reached; there is obviously a limit to the number of acres that can be irrigated, given the water resources of the island. Hence the Ceylon government has wisely begun experiments in 'dry farming', that is, in the maintenance of agriculture in the Dry Zone in areas which cannot be irrigated. Techniques are being developed which conserve water and soil, and which enable such crops as millet, sorghum, and other grains to be grown regularly without recourse to artificial irrigation. Clearly, if the population of Ceylon is to go on increasing, and if the limit of easily irrigable land is being reached, some method of using un-irrigable land will have to be developed.

There does not seem to be much hope of extending the existing plantation industries and hence of increasing exports to pay for increased food imports. Moreover, because of demographic and political factors, it is not easy to see where the food imports could come from, even if exports of the three main products could be increased.

Finally, what connexion is there between colonization and the externally oriented part of the island's economy? In the first place, there is not much direct connexion, since the estate economy and the peasant economy of the island are separate elements in a dual economy, and the corresponding societies, too, keep fairly distinct. There is not, in other words, much direct competition for land. The estates are confined largely to the hills, while the colonization schemes are restricted to the lowland Dry Zone. There is a possibility of capitalist agriculture in the Dry Zone, on an experimental basis, but at the moment it does not look as though there will be any conflict for land between plantation agriculture on the one hand and colonization on the other.

The 'estates' are, however, important to the colonies as capital formers. Most of the direct expenditure on colonization, that is, on restoration or construction of irrigation works, felling of jungle, building of houses, roads, and so on, has hitherto been met by internal loans, floated in Colombo, the resultant funds being allotted to the ministries responsible for colonization. Almost all of the money obtained by these loans is bound to come, directly or indirectly, from plantation agriculture. The peasant does not tend to collect capital; or, if he does so, he puts it into equipment for his own farm. Most of

the money, then, that is available for government loans comes directly or indirectly from the plantation industries. Additional capital for the maintenance of the colonies and for certain other purposes comes from taxation, and here again a very large proportion of the government revenue comes directly or indirectly from the plantation industries—for example, from export taxes on the main commodities or from income-tax (which affects mostly estate owners or merchants connected with the estate industries). Accordingly, planters often complain that the government is sucking the blood of the estate owner for the sake of schemes from which he will not benefit. The estates and estate industries are bound to be the main internal formers of capital, at least until the day (which may never come) when the paddy farmers on colonization schemes and elsewhere are able and willing to save and to invest appreciable sums, or yield large sums in taxation. (A few colonists already pay income-tax.)

The cost of establishing a colonist varies greatly from scheme to scheme, depending upon the extent of irrigation works, the difficulty of jungle felling, and so on. According to figures discussed by Sir Ivor Jennings, the average cost per colonist up to the end of 1947 was about £770.<sup>1</sup> Today it is considerably more, possibly £1,000 or even £1,500. The scale of aid could be reduced, and such a course would offer other than purely financial advantages (especially an increase in the spirit of self-help and co-operation, now at a low ebb in the colonization schemes). In any case, it would appear that the maximum possible rate of capital investment is likely to limit severely the speed with which colonization can proceed, unless, of course, substantial external aid should be forthcoming under the Colombo Plan or some comparable programme.

The colonization schemes which the late Mr. Senanayake launched are thus playing a substantial part in the island's economy. They have probably supported approximately one-ninth of the annual increase in the population of Ceylon in recent years, and in the next few years may support as much as one-third to one-half of the annual increase, in addition to offering a wide field for agricultural, social, and economic experimentation.

Another very important benefit is a psychological one. The success of these colonization schemes has given people in Ceylon confidence in the future of the Dry Zone. The files in government offices of twenty years ago and of today offer a remarkable contrast. In the

<sup>1</sup> Jennings, *op. cit.*

1930's there were frequent references to drought, to a very high death-rate, and to the impossibility of making people stay settled in colonies. The whole project bristled with problems because of the difficulties presented by the Dry Zone and popular fears concerning them. Now all that has been dispelled, and the colonization schemes in the Dry Zone have given the Sinhalese a justifiable sense of achievement. This is mixed with romantic nationalism, the feeling that they are returning to the homeland of their ancestors and recreating the *Raja Rata* of the old days; but it has a solid basis as well. The people now have a sense of confidence in themselves, of ability to conquer problems, which has helped to overcome the colonial inferiority complex noted by foreign observers.<sup>1</sup>

One final point: Ceylon is fortunate to have room for the colonization of new land. Not many Asian countries have two-thirds of their area virtually unoccupied, even though settlement there presents many problems. Nevertheless, the shadow of over-population does loom in Ceylon, even if a little further ahead than in India or Pakistan or Java; and realization of this fact is growing in Ceylon. No conscious population policy exists as yet, but there is very lively appreciation of the need for one.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Guy Wint, *The British in Asia*, London, 1947.