

## **Social Problems as Portrayed in Upcountry Tamil Novels (Up to 1980)**

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The plantation workers of the hill country are the descendants of the labour folk brought from South India to be employed in the plantains during the British regime. Right from the beginning of their arrival, the hardships and injustices they faced were innumerable. Through they tried to escape from the poverty and cruelties they had to suffer in the land of their birth and came to Ceylon with the dreams of enjoying freedom and prosperity quite contrary to their expectations, they had to face nothing but exploitation and poverty. These have been portrayed vividly by various writers from Sri Lanka, pioneered and inspired by Puthumaipitthan.<sup>1</sup> Most of their efforts have been based on portraying the life styles and domestic problems of the estate labours. However, the aim of this article is to focus on their social problems.

### **“A Hand to mouth living”**

The Indian population that flocked to the so called distant land (Akkaraicheemai) in order to escape from the poverty, unemployment and oppression in India did not take much time to realise that they had only jumped from the frying pan into the fire. For, there was scarcely any improvement in their living condition. A whole day's toil could hardly provide them with a square meal to fill their bellies. They were compelled to lead a hand to mouth living, quite different from their cherished hope of living in a land where milk and honey flowed. Their problems had never been felt particularly at a time when trade unions had not emerged. It was only after the formation of trade unions that agitations were made placing demands for increased wages commensurate with the work done. The hill country novels that appeared after these, began to depict how workers were unscrupulously exploited.

Kohilam Subbiah's novel, “Thoorattu Pachchai”<sup>2</sup> portrays the character of a

an accountant who prepared fraudulent lists of wages. Mookan, a labourer with some intelligence, having smelt this, demands the details of the wages paid to him. In reply he is tied to a tree by the estate watchers, lashed, at the instigation of the accountant, and handed over to the police as a militant to be sent finally to the jail.<sup>3</sup>

Benedict Balan's "Sonthakkaran"<sup>4</sup> (The relative) is a novel that sketches out how estate labourers raised their voices for increased wages through trade union action. Ragavan, a character in this novel leads the labourers to fight for basic rights and amenities. He joins the "Red Flag" movement and carries out his campaign against capitalism showing that the rights of the labourers could be won only through such measures.<sup>5</sup>

Another novel, "Kalangal savaathillai"<sup>6</sup> by Joseph portrays vividly, how the wages of the labourers in the estates, were swindled by officials. It had been the practice for the labourers to take their salary from the estate superintendent on pay day. There was no procedure to check the pay roll or sign it before taking what was given. Taking mean advantage of this, the estate clerk fraudulently calls out each name read against it a lesser amount than due, and it is accepted by the innocent labourer without demur. The amount that remained swindled thus unpaid, is later misappropriated without the knowledge of the estate superintendent by employing other labourers who were faithful henchmen of the clerk. In this process, labourer Kannusamy who detects this jugglery, demands to know the full details of the wages paid to him. But the Kankani tries to abuse and chase him away. However, by the arrangement of Kannusamy another labourer Kannamma goes and demands her wages a second time. Now the clerk finds himself in a huff, unable to prove that she had already drawn her salary. At this stage, Kannusamy further reveals that the clerk had paid wages to another labourer Alamelu and Andiyyappan twice. Thereby the corrupt practice comes to light and the superintendent makes arrangement for the display of salary particulars on the salary day, thereby terminating the exploitation that was hitherto going on.<sup>7</sup>

The life struggle of the estate workers is vividly portrayed in T. Gnanasekaram's "Kuruthi Malai" (Blood mountain).<sup>8</sup> Labourers who pluck tea leaves on steep slopes are exposed to heavy rains and have to often face dangerous consequences. There had been instances when women who slip down from such steep slopes had even lost their lives. Gnanasekaran very clearly portrays the fact that such women were no

shown any mercy or compassion under any circumstances.

In this novel some of the women folk who leave their slopes unable to withstand the heavy weather are vehemently condemned by the conductor and their wages for half-a-day are deducted simply for the reason that they had left half an hour early due to the bad weather. The Kankani who recruited them for work is also fined Rs. 10/-. This explains the power wielded by the estate conductors and their merciless character.<sup>9</sup> This novel also reveals the various malpractices adopted in the preparation of the wages. A labourer called Kuppan gets enraged when he is not paid anything in spite of having worked for a whole month. On the other hand, another labourer Karuppiyah who went to Vavuniya and did not turn up for work, was paid wages. Gnanasekaran further portrays how the estate administration with the assistance of the police is dealing with a labourer who protested against this.<sup>10</sup>

The novel "Mooddattthin ullai" (Within the fog)<sup>11</sup> by Puloliyoor Sathasivam portrays how the clerk keeping the Kankani within his grip, is exploiting the wages of the labourers.

The exploitation of labour was not confined to the estimate perimeters alone. Labourer Malayandy, goes to Colombo and gets employed in an institution called "Jaffna stores". He is paid a very low salary, half fed and is compelled to sleep in a store-room in between empty boxes staked therein. In spite of his honest work, a loss of Rs. 50/- from the stores, stirs suspicion against him and he is chased away with the comment, "Hill country fellows cannot be trusted". This novel also portrays a distrustful attitude that prevailed at the beginning among the Jaffna Tamils towards hill country workers<sup>12</sup>

The novel "Ini pada matten" (No more will endure...) <sup>13</sup> shows how the hill country labourers in spite of getting their citizenship in Sri Lanka, were desperately compelled to get it cancelled and leave for India as they could not enjoy any benefits out of that citizenship.<sup>14</sup>

## **Oppression**

Plantation workers were not only exploited, but also oppressed in many ways by the administrators. They were not provided with proper houses to live. Large numbers

were compelled to live within narrow and small-congested lines. Sanitary facilities were very scanty and hardly any medical facilities were offered to the sick. There was no provision of nutritional food or facilities for the education of children.

Such a situation would naturally have its adverse impacts on the mentality of the people. The younger folk tend to be undisciplined and mentally affected. Many of them I become addicted to liquor and other bad habits at a very young ages and they become completely ignorant of the oppression unleashed on them.

As a result, such oppression is generally hidden from the eyes of the outside world and little changes are there for them to know that they are a society with various problems. It also becomes favorable to the administrations to jeopardise their rights further and neither the imperialists nor the estimate could have had any hindrance in exploiting their labour at cheaper rates.

It was with these aims that oppression was unleashed on these people. However times did change and the people too were made to think and fight for their rights. Such eventualities are portrayed in many hill country novels.

The “*Thooratthu Pacchai*: is a novel that portrays the life of a newly wedded couple, Sengamalai and Valli who were compelled to spend their matrimonial days in a line packed with 10 people whereas the line could have satisfactorily accommodated only two. The couple’s anguish over their inability even to speak to each other or have any private intimacy, is very vividly portrayed in this novel.

A similar anguish of another couple in their inability to have intimacy even after a month of their wedding is portrayed in the novel “*Sonthakkaran*” by Benedict Balan Sappani the man affected by this disgusting social incapacitation, takes to liquor and becomes addicted to it. In a drunken state one night he mistakes his sister for his wife, and tries to embrace her. As the sister raises cries unaware of anything, the father of Sappani rushes to the scene and mistaking Sappani to be a housebreaker, attacks him severely Sappani totally disheartened and ashamed by the incident commits suicide. This is a portrayal of the cruel mentality of the estate administration in not paying any human consideration to the needs or feelings of the labourers.<sup>16</sup>

### **Drawbacks to education**

At the beginning there were no proper schools for the children of the estate labourers to pursue any education. As a result they had to spend their entire life as estate labourers. Even under such circumstances, a handful of parents do send their children to distant towns and try to educate them. Valli, a character in the "Thooratthu Pachchai" sells her ear-rings in order to educate her children, much amidst the ironical and sarcastic comments of her neighbourhood. This shows that the labour folk took for granted that their society was doomed to remain labourers for ever and that their children needed no education for that end.<sup>17</sup> Though such mentality among workers was favorable to imperialists, people of Valli's caliber, giving no chance to such drawbacks, try to progress in their own ways.

The later generations therefore owe much gratitude to forerunners like Valli. Today the people of the hill country have emerged as a strong force in Sri Lankan politics.

Again in the novel "Malaikkolunthu" (the mountain tender leaves) by Nanthi, Rengasamy, who realises the value of education, sends his son Malayappan to school. The author portrays how the estate administration conspires to close down the estate school with classes up to grade 5 and gives off that building to the estate dispenser and conductor to be used as a cowpen. This is a revelation of the tragedy that the administration had scant interest in the education of the children and that it purposely obstructed such educational opportunities wherever they could.

### **Citizenship**

Indian Tamils were brought in large numbers as coolies from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Their arrival did not create any problem to the Sinhala people at the beginning. Even after the emergence of estate capitalism, the Sinhalese had for themselves at least tiny plots of irrigated lands and they had no competition from the Indian Tamil. In fact there was no ill feelings or hatred towards them from the Sinhalese.

However, with the emergence of debates on constitutional changes, the seeds of hatred were sown. The Donoughmore commission in 1927 recommended that all people over twenty-one years of age should be given the franchise. This enabled for the first time a section of the estate labourers to use their voting rights.

The Sinhalese felt this as a threat, as more and more estate labourers were enfranchised. As a result, after the independence gained in 1948, agitations and cries of hatred rose against the Indian descendants in the hill country. The voting rights of the hill country labourers were completely snatched off by the introduction of the Citizenship Ordinance and parliamentary Elections act. Hundreds of thousands of Indian were thereby rendered stateless. Thereafter the signing of the Srma-Shasthri pact in 1964 led to the deportation of Indian labourers in large numbers. Such political intrigues and the violence's that erupted against the estate population from time to time, have also been portrayed vividly in the novels written by various hill country writers.

Benedict Balan's Sonthakkaran explicitly describes the deportation of the hill country people as a capitalistic plot and urges all workers to join hands and fight against it. The writer tries to address the problem from the point of view of a working class issue rather than depicting it as a racial issue. A Sinhalese character in the novel, Punchi Banda speaks to the effect that the decision to deport the labourers was not that of the Sinhalese people and that he is totally against it.<sup>20</sup>

"Thayaham" is another novel that addresses the mental agonies of the unfortunate labour folk who had been served with notices of deportation. Born and bred in this soil, and filled with passion and love to the land of their birth, their desperation and reluctance to leave this land has been vividly portrayed by the writer.<sup>22</sup> He also succeeds in revealing the cruelties inflicted on a people who came in search of a living in this land, but were frustrated by the atrocities committed on them.<sup>23</sup>

## **Sexual exploitation**

The vested interests in estate management, dominating and exploiting the labour class, were also involved in various activities of sexual abuses throughout. At the beginning ignorance and illiteracy that prevailed among the estate women folk had weakened them and prevented them from resisting such sexual exploitation. Later on, however, equipped with some education and with increased communication with the outside world, they began to resist such exploitation. Yet, the poverty, which perpetually overwhelmed and dominated these labor folk always, turned favorable to

the officials. Such social disservices have been vividly brought out by the novels based on the hill country.

K.R.David's "Varalaru Avalai Thottuviddathu", deals with a story of a hill country woman Guruwamma, who takes revenge on the estate superintendent who ruined the life of her sister Muniyammah through sexual abuse.

In general we are able to visualize the various ordeals the hill country folk endured, and the factors that were behind them. Coming all the way to eke out a living, they found no sufficient food for their bellies, no place to live and they were left only with a burden of debt. There have been even instances where they had to sell their flesh to have a square meal. Hunger afflicted, and clothed in tatters, they were further tormented by the legislative changes mooted by politicians to withdraw their voting rights. Besides, on every occasion of a political confrontation between their voting rights. Besides, on every occasion of a political confrontation between the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Singhalese, the innocent hill country laborers had to be scapegoats in the hands of the racially provoked Singhalese. These have been clearly recorded in the hill country Tamil novels. Writers like Benedict Balan, who had leftist inclination, saw that only a working class uprising could bring a solution to their distresses. Time elapsed though and the life of these people remains substantially unchanged.

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