

# Sri Lanka: Dark life under the rubber tree

Sri Lankan rubber plantation workers' sad truth of 200 years

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**In 1938, the leftist journal Samasamajaya reported the first rubber plantation workers' struggle in Sri Lanka as "the first strike of plantation workers in the history of the country".**

It was reported that a strike started on 13 July 1938 and ended in victory within a few days. Since then, have the tears of the rubber plantation workers who fought for their basic rights for 86 years had more value than the tears of those days?

It has been more than 200 years since the colonial rulers first brought workers from South India to the country for coffee, tea, and rubber cultivation. Much attention has been paid to tea estate workers, but less to rubber estate workers, a similar semi-slave labour community.

Since they were brought to this country, they have been ignored and subjected to subjugation and repression through laws such as the Citizenship Act, emergency law regulations, the Prevention of Terrorism Act, etc. They have been subjected to long-term pressure.

Having become victims of labour exploitation and national oppression, they have sacrificed blood, tears, and sweat for more than two centuries – even sacrificing their lives in some cases – making a crucial contribution to the Sri Lankan economy, yet they still face poor living conditions.

However, even though welfare programmes were implemented because of the surplus value they added to the Sri Lankan economy, these did not reach the plantation workers. Even today, they do not have the right to an inch of land in this country. They lack a wage proportionate to the cost of living – a living wage.

## Starting rubber cultivation

Because of the rubber tree that grew in the Amazon Rainforest of South America, related products became very popular in Brazil. In 1876, Sir Henry Wickham pioneered its introduction to the Asian British colonies as a commercial plantation. In 1881, the first rubber plant in the country was planted by George Thwaites in the Henarathgoda (Gampaha) Botanical Garden.

However, although it did not spread very rapidly due to the already successful tea cultivation, with the development of the automobile industry that began at the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rubber cultivation began to spread around the wet zone. Later, rubber cultivation became popular, second only to tea among the main export crops, strengthening the country's income. Along with this, in 1909, plantation owners jointly established a Rubber Research Institute in Kalutara.

Following the victory of the Cuban Revolution in 1956, Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, the Minister of Industry of the new Socialist Government, visited Ceylon and studied the rubber industry at the Yahalatenna Estate in Kalutara. The China-Ceylon Rubber-Rice Pact was also a good example of how

much rubber production had grown.

The Sabaragamuwa Province, consisting of the Kegalle and Ratnapura Districts, is where most rubber is grown. There are 435 rubber estates in the Ratnapura District. Of these, the number of estates that have been abandoned is 51. There are 354 rubber estates in Kegalle, of which 61 are currently abandoned.

In the Kalutara District, 49 estates are currently abandoned out of 302 estates. There are 153 estates in the Galle District and the number of abandoned estates is 21. Nine estates have been abandoned out of 118 estates in the Matara District. Further, there are 103 estates in the Colombo District and 14 of them have been abandoned. The area under rubber cultivation is 130,000 hectares.

The largest extent of land for rubber cultivation is 49,919 hectares in the Kegalle District. Ratnapura has 34,381 hectares, Kalutara 32,644 hectares, and Colombo 9,954 hectares. In addition, there are rubber plantations in three Divisional Secretariats in the Monaragala District. In addition, there are five rubber estates covering more than 250 hectares in the Kurunegala District.

Agalawatte, Balangoda, Bogawantalawa, Elpitiya, Hapugastenne, Namunukula, Horana, Kahawatte, Kegalle, Kelani Valley, Kotagala, Malwatte, Udupussellawa, Watawala, and Dunhinda are plantation companies involved in rubber cultivation.

### **A new working class**

The first strike in the history of plantation workers in Ceylon was launched by rubber plantation workers.

M.G. Mendis was a militant trade union leader. Lionel Sarath, who wrote Mendis's biography, noted: "Five months after he (MG) moved to Kirantidiya, a strike began at the British colonial owners' estate there. It was guided and organised by MG." The strike started on 13 July 1938 and ended successfully within a few days.

It was reported in *Samasamajaya* as "the first strike of plantation workers in the history of Ceylon" as follows.

"This strike of Annasigala plantation workers, with the help of comrade M.G. Mendis, happened for the first time in the history of Ceylon. This victory of united power should be an example for all plantation workers in the Pasdun Korale."

Although recorded as a victory ground for rubber plantation workers in history, the current situation is quite different in the Kalutara District.

"On that day, our people were brought here from Tamil Nadu and trapped in estate line rooms. Even today, our lives are in the same situation," said Usk Valley Estate Development Society President S. Pathmanathan from Baduraliya in the Kalutara District. But according to his explanations, they are living in greater difficulty today than in the past.

"When there was a funeral back then, coffins and money were given by the estate. Cement was given to build the graves. A dhobi would come to the line rooms several times to take people's clothes to be washed. A barber would come to cut people's hair. They were paid by the estate. The expenses of the kovil festival were borne by the estate. Dry food was given at a subsidised price to be deducted from the salary. There is no such relief today," he said.

According to Pathmanathan, concession cuts are common on all rubber plantations. Because of the rising cost of living, the meagre salary of Rs. 900 per working day is insufficient for these workers. They are yet to receive the daily wage that was increased to Rs. 1,000 for plantation workers.

The salary they receive is not enough to buy their children a nutritious meal, attend to their schooling, and purchase necessary equipment. Selvi, who gave up rubber trapping after 24 years due to cancer, said: "Only my husband is working now. But there is no work at the estate everyday. There is nothing on rainy days."

Chintamani is an energetic woman who has been gathering milk from rubber trees for 35 years in the Moratenna Estate, Mawathagama. In this estate, which was a tea plantation 25 years ago and is located in difficult terrain in the Kurunegala District, women dominate the process of tapping and collecting rubber milk, as they do in other rubber plantations as well.

"We need to tap 300 rubber trees in the morning. After about an hour, we have to collect the milk. We have to carry buckets of milk and travel up and down mountain slopes from tree to tree. At such times, some of our people have fallen and got injured. Besides that, they have been bitten by leeches, snakes, and other animals. Even so, we get Rs. 900 a day. It is not enough for survival," she said.

Although their daily work, which starts at around 6 a.m., is supposed to end by 4-5 p.m., if the bowser carrying latex is delayed in its arrival, they are compelled to spend more time at work.

"The prices of rice, flour, and sugar have increased, but the wages of our workers have not. The Government should intervene and give a solution to this," Chintamani, a mother of three, emphasised, noting her requirement for a living wage.

Even if both parents work on the rubber plantation, the money earned is insufficient to spend on daily expenses and the education of children. Ranjani Kumar leads a very difficult life in the Moratenna Estate, where she has three school-aged children.

"I have been working in the estate since 2004. If you work for 30 days, you will get Rs. 24,000 after deducting EPF, ETF, and union membership fees. It is not sufficient in order to attend to the children's needs. One is sitting for the A/Levels while the other is sitting for the O/Levels. My daughter is in Grade 6 and my husband is looking for another job," she lamented.

## **Health and safety**

There are many instances in which chemicals are used in the rubber industry. The use of ammonia, in particular, poses a risk to rubber workers. There is a risk of skin burns, bleaching, eye burns, nose and throat disorders, visual impairment, finger injuries, cuts, etc. In addition, the threat of animal bites has a strong impact on rubber plantation workers.

There is also a high possibility of accidents due to chemical substances as well as electrical leakages in the rubber industry. In 2018, a factory in Bogahagoda, Galle completely burned down due to an electricity leak. In the same year, a rubber factory in the Bulathsinghala area was closed because it released water contaminated by chemicals into the environment.

Although the leading companies in the rubber industry in Sri Lanka have announced through their websites that they are acting in accordance with instructions and guidelines of the World Health Organization (WHO) as well as the International Labour Organization (ILO), none of that has become a reality in the workplace.

The complaint of workers in Kurunegala, Kalutara, Ratnapura, Kegalle, Galle, etc. is that they do not receive protective clothing such as gloves, shoes, and hats. They have limited understanding about workplace health and safety practices. Trade unions have also displayed indifference with regard to informing them about their rights.

The condition of estate hospitals is pathetic, with most estate companies paying scant attention to them. "There is a shortage of doctors, workers, medicine, and equipment in the plantation hospitals. Many hospitals are closed. No attention is being paid, especially to the health of children and the elderly," said M. Chandrakumar, a schoolteacher from Ratnapura who is also the Ratnapura District Organiser of the Tamil Progressive Front.

### **Estate education**

It is the aim of every parent in the plantations to liberate their children from the decades-long rubber milk tapping lifestyle of their ancestors in order to provide them a better social status and way of life. The only way to fulfil their dreams is through better education. However, due to the poor condition of estate school education, there is a tendency for the next generation to be confined to the estate's line rooms.

Tamil medium education is in a pathetic condition in the Ratnapura District, where most of the rubber plantation workers live.

Anthony Mansilmani belongs to a family of plantation workers residing in the Doloswala Estate in Nivithigala. He is an enthusiastic young man who is trying to improve the education of plantation workers' children in the district.

"Although there are 40 schools with classes up to O/Levels, our children do not have teachers for Science, Mathematics, English, and technical subjects. If someone passes their A/Levels, it is only in art subjects. There are 22 Tamil medium schools in Ratnapura with A/Level classes, but there are no Science or Mathematics subjects. They don't accept our children to Kandy and Colombo schools," he lamented.

However, Mansilmani is rendering an immense service by holding free support classes for elementary school children together with civil society organisations.

Balangoda, Kahawatta, Pussella, Agalawatta, Dunhinda, and Mathurata are among 20 rubber estates controlled by companies. Some plantations consist of both tea and rubber crops, and only within the Kalawana Regional Secretariat is the majority constituted of tea smallholder plantations.

"There are 102 estate-related Tamil schools across the district, but they have no teachers, equipment, or facilities. There are no Science or Mathematics teachers; most teachers are appointed and come from the Northern and Eastern Provinces, but they don't stay here for a long time," said Chandrakumar, stressing the lack of representation of plantation workers in order to intervene in the district's political authority.

School education in rubber estates in the Kegalle, Kurunegala, Colombo, Galle, Matara, and Monaragala regions is also in a pathetic state.

Although there are Tamil medium classes at Saint Mary's College, Matugama in the Kalutara District, they have caused estate children discomfort due to being discriminated against by other students and teachers.

"Children from estates are not allowed to enter laboratories or swimming pools. Such restrictions

are even approved by teachers and principals. If we ask about it at the Past Students' Association, they will attack our children," said Pathmanathan.

The attempt to set aside five acres of Government land near Matugama in order to build a Tamil school as an alternative has been hampered due to a delay in approval by Sinhalese education administration officials, who form a majority in the area.

The Monaragala District, which was established in the beginning of the 1960s as 'Muppane' in Tamil, is a claimant to several areas belonging to the old Magama Kingdom as well as Vedda country. After the establishment of the district, the majority of the new residents were visitors from Matara. Out of the three Divisional Secretariat Divisions of Monaragala, Bibila, and Badalkumbura, only the latter has tea, with most of the others being rubber estates.

The Aliyawatta Estate and the Sirigala Estate, which were near the Monaragala Kumarawatte Estate, have been abandoned to the forest, leaving only the line rooms. There were once Tamil medium schools for the children of estate workers, but their lack of teachers and facilities made their education a misery.

Classes in most schools are limited to Grade 10. In order to study for the A/Levels, students are compelled to travel 6 km from the estate along hazardous roads to reach a school in the suburbs. Therefore, they give up without having completed their education and turn to rubber tapping or other forms of employment.

### **Land and housing rights**

Over the past two centuries, plantation workers generally spent their lives in a small space of 10x10 ft, which was introduced by colonial rulers as line rooms. Although they have been given work at the estates, they are yet to gain ownership of a house or plot of land. In some cases, they are allowed to repair and expand their line rooms at their own expense, but this is very rare.

"It is in this little line room that all the men and women live. Everything - cooking, cleaning, studying, and sleeping - has to be done in this small space," Selvi from the Usk Valley Estate in Baduraliya said, adding that the repeated explanation of facts to the estate manager was futile.

Some plantation companies do not allow workers to do any home gardening, and if any plants have been cultivated, they are quick to uproot them forcibly.

Line rooms also have minimal electricity, water, and sanitation facilities. Over the past centuries, many heartrending stories have been heard in every estate of workers who have lost all their earnings due to power leakages and line room fires.

According to Mansilmani, cases of workers gaining ownership of a piece of land through a random natural disaster have also been reported. "Due to recent winds, a bo tree near a row of line rooms at a rubber estate in Kiribathgala fell and destroyed everything. Because there was no place for six families to stay, they received 10 perches to build a house in whichever way possible."

However, the problem that arises subsequently is that the workers lack sufficient funds to build a temporary house. "In the Doloswala Estate, 30 worker families have been allocated four acres of land, but they have no money to build houses," Mansilmani noted.

Since 1930, no new line rooms have been built for workers. Due to population expansion, three or four families are compelled to live in one line room due to a lack of options. Even if a house is built with or without the permission of estate managers, they have no ownership over it. Many cases

brought against workers for illegal construction are pending in courts.

Workers living in line rooms receive letters in the estate's name and do not have an address of their own. The letters that come through the post are handed over to them in a very haphazard manner. In cases where several persons have the same name, the appropriate person does not receive the letter. Letters are often lost or received far too late, resulting in lost opportunities at employment and in appearing for exams as well the loss of pawned jewellery. Despite workers' requests for an address with a number for their line rooms, estate companies are yet to grant their consent.

### **The victorious battle of Bathalagoda**

The workers of the Kurunegala Bathalagoda Rubber Estate recently managed to gain a certain victory in the long-term agitation of plantation workers demanding land rights.

Bathalagoda Estate comprises 281 acres owned by 10 families. Last May, when the owners were preparing to sell a part of the estate to a private investor, the workers sprang into action, forcibly taking over plots of land in a part of the estate where the rubber plantation was overgrown with weeds.

The estate owners called the Police to evict the workers, but it was prevented by the intervention of civil society organisations, including the Ibbagamuwa Devasarana Development Centre, which has a history of intervening in the problems of farmers, labourers, and marginalised social groups in the area.

Subsequently, the estate owners agreed to grant 10 perches each to 28 worker families who had taken legal action against the sale of the estate in accordance with an agreement made between the two parties. The workers are required to vacate the existing line rooms within six months. Prior to that, they face the challenge of having to build a temporary house on the land they received on account of the lack of necessary funds.

Until last April, the daily wage of Batalagoda Estate workers was Rs. 750. Through the intervention of the Devasarana Development Centre, they were able to increase their salary to Rs. 1,000, along with arrears. In addition, they succeeded in regularising their EPF and ETF as well.

### **Harmony and conflict between estate and village**

Most of the estates located near the wet zone are in the middle of Sinhalese-majority villages. There is a clear ethnic base here, as there are Tamil workers who live in line rooms of estates and Sinhalese workers who come to work in the estates from nearby villages. Therefore, the attitudes and actions of the people in the surrounding villages are very influential in every task of the daily lives of the workers.

"There is a long-term relationship between the Sinhalese people of Moratenna and Gonagaldeniya and the Tamil people of the Moratenna Estate. There is no scarcity of participation and support from both these communities in all the cultural and religious activity of the village as well as in the work of the estate," said P. Devaraja, a social activist at Moratenna Estate.

An example of this is the struggle of rubber workers in Rambodagalla, Delhena-Raddalgoda, which was launched in the recent past, where the cooperative existence between village and estate was demonstrated. The generous support of residents of surrounding villages was of immense assistance in leading the 45-day struggle to victory.

After plantation managers cut the workers' food rations, nearby villagers intervened to satiate their

hunger. Out of 544 people from 101 families, 144 labourers were working in the estate, 66 of whom were female workers. The United Democratic Estate Workers' Union and the Progressive Women's Front were at the forefront of this struggle.

However, the situation is slightly different in the rubber estates of the Kalutara, Ratnapura, Monaragala, and Matara Districts. The experiences over the years of estate workers from Matugama have been described in chilling terms.

"The Matugama, Agalawatta, Kalutara, and Horana electorates used to be occupied by Leftists like Colvin R. de Silva, Cholomondeley Goonewardene, and Anil Moonesinghe. They received the votes of estate workers, but after 1977, this situation changed. Racism is now being practised openly. Not even Tamil songs are allowed to be played at the Lathpandura Junction in Baduraliya," said a worker who wished to remain anonymous.

Estate workers have had few positive feelings towards recently-deceased former State Minister Palitha Thewarapperuma, who was the United National Party (UNP) Organiser for Matugama. His unleashing of coercion and violence against estate workers in the area had contributed towards a sense of inferiority among them.

It is with apprehension that rubber estate workers from Monaragala traverse surrounding Sinhalese villages in order to travel to Tamil-majority areas such as Passara and Lunugala on the border of the Badulla District. As they have claimed, they only feel peace upon passing the Sinhalese villages as soon as possible.

### **Violence against workers**

Violence has been perpetrated against workers throughout history through economic and working conditions as well as ethnic and racial oppression. The situation has grown more serious following independence from the British, with a violation of labour rights being reported recently on the Dumbara Estate owned by Dunhinda Plantations Ltd.

"On 6 May, the Deputy General Manager, Field Officer, and watchman of the estate attacked a female worker for not reporting to work. Due to this attack, she was treated at the Horana Hospital for about three days. Despite a complaint being lodged at the Police station in Kiriella, the Police avoided arresting the accused, giving various false reasons until four days had passed.

"However, due to the influence of civil organisations, political authorities, and villagers, the accused surrendered to the Police. After being produced in court, they were released as the Police did not oppose bail," said Chandrakumar, a political activist, noting that the trial filed against the accused would continue.

A similar incident was recently reported from the Delathura Estate adjoining the Dumbara Estate. The watchman of the Delathura Estate and two accomplices had brutally beaten a labourer's husband because his wife had not reported for rubber-tapping duties at the estate. Subsequent to Chandrakumar's protest, however, the accused had not been released on bail, instead being remanded for two weeks.

"The watchman and his thugs hit this man with a beer bottle. He was treated in hospital for five days. The Police did nothing for three days. Later, the three accused were arrested and brought to court. Unlike in Dumbara, they weren't released because we presented the facts through lawyers and objected to the bail."

Estate workers have had to constantly face such abuse from plantation administrators. In recent

history – in 1977, 1981, and 1983, for instance – they were the most common victims of State-sponsored anti-Tamil violence.

The Sansoni Commission, appointed by President J.R. Jayewardene, revealed much information about burning of line rooms, attacks on kovils and churches, looting, sexual coercion of women, injuries, and killings at estates in Ratnapura, Kiriella, Nebada, Matugama, Galle, Kurunegala, and Kegalle. According to the report, nearly 500 Tamils were killed in the August 1977 violence.

P. Perumal, a rubber tapper at the Pindeniya Estate in Kegalle, described his suffering before the Sansoni Commission as follows: “On 19 August, a gang came and attacked the line rooms, which was followed by another attack by another gang the next day. Four rows comprising 41 line rooms were the targets of these attacks. They were looted and family members were attacked.”

Selvarani Kulendai, a female labourer residing in Gasnawa Estate, Nelumdeniya, was gang-raped by a group of villagers, she told the Sansoni Commission. On 19 August, the Estate Superintendent had told workers to seek a safe place as there was a possibility of an attack. Accordingly, she had accompanied her mother to the residence of a certain Gunapala at the edge of the estate.

That night, a mob had broken into the house and attacked Selvarani and her mother. They had taken them behind the house where six men had raped Selvarani. When she went to her line room the next day, it had been plundered. On 22 August, she had complained to the Police, identifying those who had committed sexual crimes against her. All of them lived near the Gasnawa Estate and were 20 years old.

K. Egambaram, a labourer at St. George Estate, Matugama, said that when a mob attacked the line rooms on 23 August, frightened workers had fled, but his uncle Gurusamy, who had been attacked, had died of his injuries the next day.

Testifying before the commission, Egambaram said that even though he had informed the Police both before and after his uncle’s death, the Police, who did nothing, had said: “When our Police officers are being killed in Jaffna, what does it matter that your people are getting killed as well?”

Subsequently, he had been compelled to bury his uncle’s body without a postmortem. A worker named Velu, who had been in another line room nearby, had also been shot and injured, and had received treatment in hospital for four days.

In 1981, estate workers in the Sabaragamuwa Province especially were victims of anti-Tamil violence. The attacks had started with the motion of no confidence brought by the Government against Appapillai Amirthalingam, the Leader of the Opposition in Parliament at the time.

Armed gangs boarded buses belonging to the Ceylon Transport Board and entered estates in Kahawatte, Rakwana, Nivithigala, Pelmadulla, and Balangoda and attacked workers, damaged and burned property, looted, sexually assaulted women, and killed people. About 15,000 workers became refugees after the attack on 43 rubber and tea estates.

According to the report issued by the National Council of the Ceylon Workers’ Congress (CWC) on 29 August 1981, women and men, together with their children, had fled to safety from Balangoda to Bogawantalawa, traversing rubber plantations and forests in order to survive.

Antony Masilmani survived a series of violent attacks at the age of eight. He shared his traumatic experience with the media for the first time.

“In July 1981, 30 children from surrounding estates came to the Saint Anne’s Church in Kahawatte

for Holy Communion. I too came from Nivitigala. When a group of thugs came from Kahawatte and started beating the people in the church, all 30 of us children huddled together in a small room behind the altar until they left.”

By the time the thugs had finished their operations, they had hacked to death seven individuals, as well as a small child who had been involved in the activities of the church. The shock that Masilmani and his colleagues had felt upon seeing corpses scattered across the churchyard continues to traumatise him.

“People on estates were attacked mostly in ’77 and ’81. In ’83, it was Tamil people in cities who were the most targeted, although this is not to say that estates weren’t attacked,” said Mehala Shammugam from the Pinkanda Estate in Kegalle, an activist for the Home for Human Rights organisation, adding that justice had not been meted out to victims in any of these instances.

“Rubber tappers live in the Pinkanda Estate. It was attacked in ’77, ’81, and ’83. My father was a Field Officer on this estate. In 1977, when a group of thugs entered our house, we escaped to the forest. A group of people, including a tractor driver at the estate, gang-raped a girl on the estate.

“Everyone knew about this crime but was afraid to complain. Even the Police protected the criminals. Many such incidents were heard of in those days. Such sexual crimes were planned under the guise of providing protection,” Mehala added, noting that such crimes could not be forgotten even if they had been suppressed over time.

Pointing out that racist sentiments were yet to disappear in plantation areas of the Kegalle District, she said: “A boy from the plantation is still not allowed to park his auto rickshaw at a designated parking space. Even if he manages to do so, he won’t be allowed to hire it out. We need to build harmony between plantation workers and village people first.”

## **Expulsion through Citizenship Acts**

In the elections of 1947, it was the vote of estate workers that led to the election of many representatives of these workers in the upcountry and Leftists in areas predominated by lowcountry labourers.

As a result, capitalist leaders passed the Ceylon Citizenship Act No.18 of 1948 to reduce the power of plantation workers. Certifying that the father or guardian was a native of Sri Lanka was a condition for plantation workers’ citizenship. The Citizenship Act No.3 of 1949 was subsequently passed, making the conditions more stringent.

Due to these acts, many other people, including plantation workers of Indian and Pakistani origin, lost their citizenship, voting rights, and other legal statuses, creating a serious crisis. To resolve this amicably, an agreement was signed in 1954 between Ceylonese Prime Minister Sir John Kotelawala and Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

“Since the issue could not be resolved with this agreement, 10 years later, 975,000 plantation workers who lost their citizenship on account of the Sirima-Shastri Pact in 1964 were divided between the two countries. India accepted 525,000 while Ceylon accepted 300,000. Another 10 years later, the remaining 150,000 were divided between the two countries with 75,000 each under the Sirima-Gandhi Pact of 1974,” said M. Kandaiya, the convenor of an organisation of estate workers cast out of Ceylon. A political and trade union activist, he migrated to India after Black July in 1983.

“Those who came to India found work on rubber and tea plantations. About 4,000 families work in

rubber plantations in the Kanyakumari District and in the States of Karnataka, Kerala, and Andhra Pradesh," he continued.

According to the aforementioned agreements relating to citizenship, the number of plantation workers who were expelled from Sri Lanka was 461,000. Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, and the Andaman Islands have become their places of residence. It is common for them to travel to Sri Lanka at least once a year to visit their relatives and friends.

According to Kandaiya, the number of plantation workers who fled to the Northern and Eastern Provinces in order to survive the attacks of 1977, 1981, and 1983 exceeds 200,000.

### **Impact of estate nationalisation and privatisation**

The United Front Government, which came to power in 1970, took over many major tea, rubber, and coconut plantations that were owned by the British under its policy of nationalisation.

State institutions such as the Janatha Estates Development Board, State Plantations Corporation, and Upcountry Estate Development Board were established to manage the estates. Since the management of these nationalised institutions consisted of Government allies, the lives of plantation workers saw little improvement.

Tea, rubber, and coconut plantation workers collectively demanded a monthly wage instead of daily wages. However, this request was rejected by United Front Government Minister of Plantation Industries Dr. Colvin R. de Silva, himself a union leader of plantation workers and a Left-wing vanguard.

Compiling a book on the history of plantation workers, S. Nadesan, a trade union leader of the Communist Party, noted that Minister de Silva had claimed that no country paid a monthly salary for estate workers anywhere in the world.

Although steps were taken to discard some of the rules and regulations imposed by British plantation employers concerning workers' line rooms and trade union leaders entering the estates under the policy of nationalisation of estates, the issue of housing and land ownership continued. Three-hundred estate schools that had been under the control of companies were brought under the Ministry of Education decades after the introduction of free education policies.

With the support of the CWC, a leader in estate trade unions and politics, the UNP Government in 1992 acted to privatise the estates due to weaknesses in their management under State control.

According to the 1992 Annual Report of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 449 estates controlled by the Janatha Estates Development Board and the State Plantation Corporation were brought under the control of private companies under the Government's privatisation programme. Of these, 131 rubber estates were owned by the Government.

During the privatisation of estates, a condition was placed upon companies to provide workers an allowance of Rs. 20 per day in order to match the increasing cost of living. However, the managers of estate companies displayed reluctance to fulfil these conditions. In addition, agitations commenced among workers against the deprivation of benefits they had been entitled to until then.

The People's Alliance Government that came to power in 1994, which continued the plantation privatisation programme, introduced a tripartite agreement to settle disputes between workers and plantation employers. Every two years, union representatives and estate companies would mediate on behalf of workers to sign the agreement with the Labour Commissioner who represented the

Government, where the two sides negotiated and reached an agreement on workers' wages and other concessions.

Despite some relief being obtained through it, the collective agreement process collapsed, leaving plantation workers in immense distress. The situation at present is a monopoly of estate companies that not even the Government can control.

### **The future of the rubber worker**

The rejection of the Government's decision to increase workers' daily wages to Rs. 1,700 by estate companies has created a grave crisis. Although the companies have indicated their inability to provide such an amount to workers due to an increase in production costs in the rubber industry, reports from the Ministries of Finance and Plantation indicate that rubber exports have increased in the past few years.

State Minister of Finance Ranjith Siyambalapitiya has said to the media that the export income related to rubber has increased by 39% in 2022 compared to 2021. In 2021, the income from rubber production was \$ 1,050 million, while the income in 2022 was \$ 1,463 million.

According to the Master Plan 2017-2026 announced in 2017 targeting the next few years, an income of \$ 3 billion is expected from rubber exports by 2026, according to Minister of Plantation Industries Dr. Ramesh Pathirana.

However, it is questionable whether it is possible to reach these goals without having done justice to the demands of the workers, who expect an increase in wages commensurate with the rising cost of living.

"Underweight children are being born in estates at present because their labourer parents lack the income to provide nutritious meals," said Devaraja, noting that along with an increase in wages, a cooperative system should be implemented in the estates to obtain essential food items at subsidised prices.

Low wages, cutbacks in other benefits, and job insecurity are among the reasons why most workers are tempted to leave the estates.

"Not only women, but men have also become accustomed to looking for jobs in the Middle East for a long time now. Young people are trying to find jobs outside the estate. Often, it is the children who have left the estates who work at shops, supermarkets, garment factories, and as domestic workers," says Velu Jeevaratnam, a rubber tapper at the Moratenna Estate. His wife has migrated for employment as a domestic worker in the Middle East, while he continues to work on the estate along with his children.

The fact that the area under rubber cultivation is shrinking for a variety of reasons is also a serious problem. Among these reasons is the fact that many rubber plantations in the wet zone are cleared and used for other projects; companies' preoccupation with obtaining an income from existing rubber trees instead of showing interest in the cultivation of new rubber; and the fact that some companies replace rubber trees with other economic crops such as oil palm, dragon fruit, and vanilla.

According to Rubber Research Institute reports, as of 2014, Kegalle, considered to be the district with the largest extent of rubber cultivation, had 34,453 ha of rubber cultivation, while Kalutara and Ratnapura had 24,195 ha and 22,065 ha, respectively. In terms of land, this represented a decrease in rubber cultivation by 15,466 ha in Kegalle, 12,316 ha in Ratnapura, and 8,449 ha in Kalutara

compared to the previous year.

In 1989, the Gam Udawa programme was conducted under President Ranasinghe Premadasa in the Buttala area by clearing rubber plantations. In addition, large rubber estates in the Horana area have been sacrificed for the construction of industrial parks and many requests have been made to give abandoned estates to workers for cultivation or for animal husbandry.

Rubber estate workers, who have sunk to the depths of poverty despite having contributed significantly to the country's economy, should be given a living wage, housing and land ownership, and basic facilities such as education, health, water, and transport, as well as the status of respected citizens, fostering brotherhood and cooperation, enabling them to uplift their lives at least to a certain extent.

The rubber industry will not be able to reach its desired goals or achievements if it continues to exploit the labour of workers without providing them adequate wages and by depriving them of relief. This will only lead to workers' struggles against such oppression.

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**Ishankha Singhe Arachchi**

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**P.S.**

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