

Labour Exchange Patterns in Ancient Sri Lankan Villages

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Abstract: This paper discusses on labour exchange patterns practiced by peasantry who lived in Sri Lankan traditional village. Social and economic background of the traditional village based on the facts of labour, reciprocal labour exchange methods practiced by peasantry are mainly taken into consideration in developing this paper. Here, "*Attama*" and "*Kayya*" were discussed deeply as the major reciprocal labour exchange methods of Sri Lankan traditional peasant communities. As the methodology of this paper, literary survey method is followed to gather information and facts by using relevant literary sources to accomplish the objectives of this paper. The findings of this paper shows that traditional labour exchange methods were most beneficial for traditional village communities to accomplish labour requirements in agricultural and many of other activities which built up unity, peace and cooperation in the society and even today the salient characteristics are still identifiable in most of the village areas.

Keywords: ancient village, extended family, reciprocal labour, gifting of labour, folk poem.

I. INTRODUCTION

The present study examines the labour exchange patterns practiced by peasantry who lived in Sri Lankan traditional village. Here, the social and economic backgrounds of the traditional Sri Lankan village based on the facts of labour, reciprocal labour exchange methods practiced by peasantry are mainly taken into consideration in developing this paper. As the major reciprocal labour exchange methods "*Attama*" and "*Kayya*" were discussed deeply in this paper. "*Attama*" is a way of working in harmony and "*kayya*" is the group of persons who are participating in "*attama*". Ancient village and the society, Labour Based Agricultural Economy, Exchange Patterns of labour, Labour as favour and the Role of women in the labour provision process are the major topics of this paper. It is noted that there are many Sinhala words (including poems and songs) displaying in italic form for easy identification.

II. ANCIENT VILLAGE AND THE SOCIETY

The word "*gama*" (village), which came to Sinhala language based on the words "*grama*" in Sanskrit and "*Gama*" in Pali, was commonly used in referring to an area of a human settlement. It is believed that a unit which can be classified as a "village" first originated in Iraq in 6750 BC and villages emerged in Atlantic Europe and West Africa in 5000 BC and 1500 BC respectively.[1] According to *Mahawansha*, the first villages in Sri Lanka were created by *Vijaya* and the Aryans. The most ancient of Sri Lankan kingdoms, Anuradhapura was introduced as a village called "*Anuradhagama*". A Sri Lankan village is typically a collection of areas of land which are situated in one specific locality. [2]. It is possible to think that the first village was created by a group of people coming from related families and who cut down the forest, built a "*wewa*" (a large tank) to satisfy the need for water, constructed houses to live and engaged in agriculture close to the "*wewa*". Though the exact boundaries of a village were not defined clearly in the past, the people who lived in a village knew the boundaries of their village. The village society which developed from the people who lived in the village soon became an interconnected network similar to a web as a result of blood relations and inter-marriages[3]. It can also be called a small collective which produced food for domestic consumption.[4] This is the reason for many anthropologists[5] to refer to Sri Lankan society as a "primitive village society".

What helped to recognize the identity of a village was its sign name. In any village, the origin of its name is based on the specific features of its environment, the nature of its location and special incidents. Ancient villages have received their names from hills, mountainous regions, rivers and streams, “*wew*” (large tanks) and forests.[6] At the same time, the origin of village names has also been the result of certain special events. In fact, the ancient people gave names to villages with a solid rationale and not in the present haphazard manner where beauty is the only focus. It is a special feature that every village has its own legend about how its name originated. They are a special aspect of Sinhala folk legends.

It is apparent that the ancient village in Sri Lanka developed as a geographical unit with a group of people accustomed to an agricultural life style. Since it was essential for people whose occupation was agriculture to live in a setting which was appropriate for agricultural purposes, there was a special interest in selecting a land mass which consisted of forests, rivers, streams and small tanks. In particular, foreigners have reported how they encountered ancient villages where the village was located in an environment which was conducive for the cultivation of paddy since it was paddy cultivation that was the “life walking stick” of villagers.[7] “When observing the “*wewa*” from an elevated position, it looks like an interminable spotted forest because of the shining pool of water with an adjacent golden paddy field.” The central village, a special feature of the “*wewpalatha*” (“The Province of Tanks”), consisted of a series of houses near paddy fields. An orchard with vegetables and fruits surrounded every house. A house which was built with mud walls and roofed with hey usually had two rooms and an entrance (“*baradha*”). An “*atuwa*” (“store room”) was built to store grain. Behind the house there was a cow shed and a place to keep agricultural items. [8] (Phear 1880: 174-175). On this occasion, the notes made by Rober Knox, who spent around 20 years in Sri Lanka as a prisoner living in a Sinhala village experiencing the village environment and village life, are of special relevance. According to him, there was a temple or a kovil in a village. The houses were built adjacent to each other in rows. The farmers lived separately in farms which had a mound and a moat built to prevent cows/bulls from harming the vegetables/fruits. Traditionally, every village, if the village was close to the road, had 40-50 houses and if it was a suburban area, had 100 or more houses [9]. In generally the people in a village were live as a correlated group of families and they belonged to a particular caste [10].

It was a community who lived in a village. A community means a social group with a small population. Toennies’ [11] “*Gemeinschaft*” and “*Gesellschaft*” concepts differentiate between a “community” and an “organization” and according to “*Gemeinschaft*” concept, a “community” is created based on natural purpose. Therefore, even in an ancient Sri Lankan village, there was a “*Gemeinschaft* community”. That community lived as extended families. The characteristic of an extended family is that parents and children of a family lived with their relatives. The “*mahagedara*” (“mansion”) was the residence in which this extended family lived. “families in which grandfather, grandmother, ‘mama’ (brother of the father/mother), ‘*nenda*’ (sister of the father/mother), ‘*lokuthaththa*’ (the eldest brother of the mother/father), ‘*lokamma*’ (the eldest sister of the mother/brother) and other relatives living in one house as one family was a very popular feature in Sinhala society”[12].

I. Labour Based Agricultural Economy:

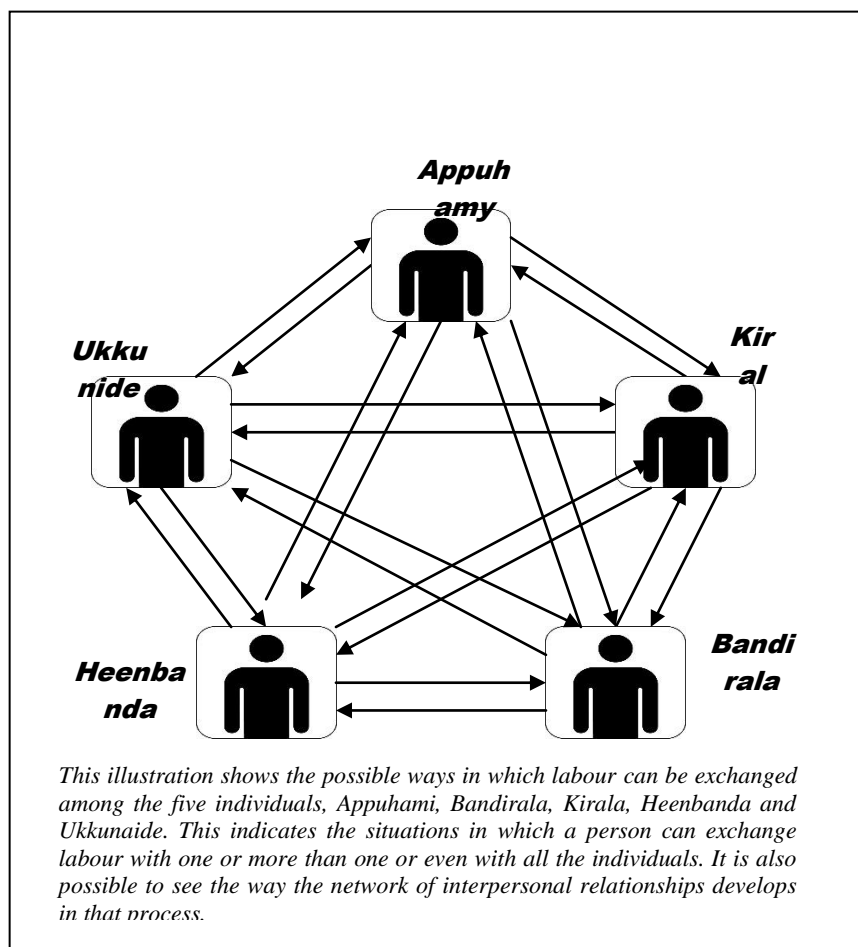
Labour was the main force that powered the agriculture based economy of traditional Sinhala society which was built on cooperation and harmony. The ancient people experienced the benefits of a self-sufficient economy because they were able to manage human labour and produce everything they needed within the village. Agriculture was considered the most prominent of all the occupations and both human labour as well as the labour of animals were used in agriculture related work. The custom of the ancient village was to do everything through cooperation. The Sinhala people were apt in using both human labour and animal labour in major activities such as preparing the field, cultivating paddy, removing weed, harvesting and thrashing related to paddy cultivation and in other activities related to “*chena*” cultivation, such as removing weed, planting seeds and harvesting. The smallest social unit, the family and the smallest administrative unit, the village were both built on the smooth flow of labour. Unity, harmony, division of labour, ethical bond, and durable social values were some of the integral features of the ancient villages and the people in such villages lived according to extended family systems. In ancient villages, extended family was the settlement unit and a series of houses with such a family system was called a village [13]. This family unit helped to provide labour for agricultural purposes through one’s own family and it was also important for protection. During agricultural activities and on many other occasions, this labour of one’s own family was not sufficient and others’ help was needed. In such situations, labour requirements were fulfilled through traditional labour provision methods based on age-old concepts such as cooperation and harmony.

II. Exchange Patterns of labour:

The ancient people experienced the benefits of a self-sufficient economy because they were able to manage human labour and produce everything they needed within the village. The reason to consider agriculture the best of all professions was the glorified position it received in Buddhism. The villagers followed different labour provision methods; at times they shared labour among each other in agriculture and in other similar activities which required a lot of labour and on other occasions, they followed labour provision methods where labour was provided as help without sharing labour. This traditional process of providing labour was referred to as “*kaiyya*”, “*pin kaiyya*” and “*nikamatawadakireema*”. One of the major ways in which labour was provided in ancient society was the “*aththam*” method. This is defined as “cultivating for another person, i.e. working out of gratitude because the other had done service to you” [14].

While this method was used in any situation which required labour, it was frequently used in agricultural activities. The villagers worked in harmony in various activities related to paddy cultivation such as plowing and harrowing the field, planting, harvesting and thrashing. This way of working in harmony is called “*aththam*” method [15]. In paddy cultivation, in this “*aththam*” method a person helps another because the person being helped will also dedicate a similar number of days or an equal amount of labour for paddy cultivation. So “*aththam*” is a labour exchange programme. In this manner, they provided their own labour to carry out activities such as plowing and harrowing the field, planting, harvesting and thrashing to help a single individual. Then the same activities are done to help another and this process continued till they helped the very last individual. The basic principle in the “*aththam*” method is that if the individual “A” dedicates one whole day for the paddy cultivation of the land belonging to the individual “B”, then the individual “B” should assist the paddy cultivation of the land owned by the Individual “A” in a similar fashion [16]. According to this method, the number of the individuals participated in the labour exchange process was determined by the scale of the labour activity. Therefore, the “*aththam*” method was used between two individuals as well as among many people. That process is explained in figure 1 below.

Fig N: The functioning of the “*aththam*” method



The people who are involved in an “*aththam*” are called a “*kaiyya*”. In fact, the word “*kaiyya*” is sometimes used to refer to “*aththama*” as well. Therefore, “*aththama*” and “*kaiyya*” appear to be the same method of providing labour. The use of the two words, “*aththama*” and “*kaiyya*” with adjectives is also a special feature. Some such examples are, “*puranaththama*”, “*nelumaththama*”, “*assaddumaththama*”, “*kapumaththama*”, “*Mulanketumaththama*”, “*hevillumaththama*”, as well as “*goyamkaiyya*”, “*nelumkaiyya*”, “*porukaiyya*”, and “*kurahankaiyya*”.

In the past, the invitation for a “*kaiyya*” was done ceremoniously, by presenting betel leaves [17]. Similarly, even in “*chena*” cultivation, the invitation for an “*aththama*” was done by giving betel leaves. The following folk song presents a situation where a “*chena*” became a failure even after a farmer had cultivated it with 40 relations having invited them for an “*aththama*” by giving betel:

*"sadabulathsathalisnetikapa sita
meda rate sitineyosema denata
sadaamuthunekathuthbalawasondata
medahenaberiuineayinemata"*[18]

Meaning:

"I have prepared forty betel leaves to invite all relatives who live in everywhere for my 'attama';

I selected an auspicious time too; Unfortunately, I was unable to cultivate my chena"

When it comes to the labour tasks related to paddy cultivation as well as “*chena*” cultivation, harvesting is of special importance for farmers. Because it is the moment on which they will be able to reap the benefits of the labour, time and money spent for their agricultural activities. Therefore, the harvesting was considered a noble event, usually done harmoniously and according to auspicious times:

*"yodawa nekathath goyam kapanne
udesanama ke aya ek wanne
sada thibuna dekethi gen denne
beda bulath ka wedata basinne"*[18]

Meaning:

" The invited people gather Early in the morning, at the paddy field; The farmer provide sickles to them;

They get down to the paddy field after chewing of betel; then they are doing harvesting together"

It was the responsibility of the farmer to entertain the ones whom he had invited for the “*Aththam*” with food and refreshments. Since offering betel leaves is a mandatory custom of the Sinhala people, they made sure that there would not be any lack of it. At the same time, as the thirst will also be felt by the gathering, it was essential to provide water:

*"lolewadanagoviyagedarataduwathi
welebulathhunudumkolasahaganithi
kalepura pen adunokaragenayathi
balenevedamenikenumbalatapinethi"*[19]

Meaning:

"Often the fascinating farmer goes home to bring us betel chew and water; He serves us cordially; lass, this is due to your fortune; isn't it?"

Even those who had been invited for the “*Aththam*” had expected the best treatment. Since it was the custom of the Sinhala people to prioritize betel leaves even more than food in labour demanding tasks, the invited villagers would make initial judgments of the generosity of the one who invited them for the task by the way he offered betel leaves to them.

The following folk poem illustrates how the villagers considered it a symbolic gesture of the lack of generosity of the inviter when they were not offered enough betel leaves and arecanuts:

*"Kayyatabulathekadenakotabea kiyamu
layyatabulathdekenakota ha kiyamu
layyatapuwalbeadenkotabea kiyamu
kayyatapuwakgedidenakota ha kiyamu"*[20]

Meaning:

"Let's say 'no' when the farmer give us one betel leave,
Let's say 'yes' when the farmer give us two betel leaves,
Let's say 'no' when the farmer give us a half of an arecanut,
Let's say 'yes' when the farmer give us a full arecanut"

If there was a shortcoming in terms of entertaining the invitees of an "Aththam" with food and refreshments, it would make the invitees unhappy, indifferent to the task or even abandon the task half way. Therefore, the inviter of the "Aththam" did the best of his ability to make sure that delicious food was prepared for the invitees with the inclusion of a few curries. In fact, dry fish and meat were added to make the meal more complete:

*"waralkapalunukadakarawala uyathi
urumaluuyalakayyata bedathi" [21]*

Meaning:

"Cleaned salted dry fish and pork are cooked by the farmer; and he serves them for the people who work for him"

Certain "Chena" cultivators who provided normal curries while keeping delicious food hidden at home were condemned by those who worked in the field. Mentioned below is an occasion where a woman suggested the other women to stop cutting finger millet ("kurakkan") and go home because the "Chena" cultivator had served them cooked mushrooms while he had dry pork at home:

*"urumaludummessewanaa laa
apatakannapurukandahathuuyaa laa
aawatawenuwa me issarakapaa laa
yamaw genu araisarakapaa laa" [22]*

Meaning:

"Though the pork is stored in the kitchen, this farmer has cooked mushrooms for us; so, my dear ladies let's go without completing remain works"

The inviter to the "Aththam" also had to consider the differences in the food habits of those who provided labour. The following folk poem shows how a woman who did not eat meat became sad and disappointed with the meal and how she rejected it in tears when she saw the inviter adding game meat to make the meal more delicious.

*"kapathikurakkankayyaksedee laa
uyathi bath maaluhimiyageta wee laa
damathimaaluwatadamaskapaa laa
andathimelanda mas demmakiyaa laa" [23]*

Meaning:

"A group of women are harvesting finger millets; the farmer is cooking rice and curries for their lunch;
He is adding some pieces of meat into a curry; a vegetarian lady is crying due to adding meat into curry"

The people believed that those who were helped by them according to the “*Aththam*” method would return the favour. It was even possible for someone else to provide labour on behalf of another who was supposed to do it as a way of repaying those who helped him. In situations like thatching the roofs of village houses with coconut fronds, the “*Aththam*” method was adopted without informing beforehand but according to the situation. The “*Aththam*” that was used to thatch the roof was referred to as “*Hevillumaththama*” [24]. Whenever a villager wanted to thatch his roof, it was accustomed to hoot after removing the old hey or coconut fronds. This was called “*Hevillumhoowa*” [25]. Those villagers who heard the hooting would understand the need and provide their labour to build the roof of his house.

III. Labour as favour:

In ancient society, there were also ways in which labour was provided merely on the basis of helping each other, one of the fundamental concepts in Buddhism. Whenever a person became sick, suffered a misfortune or a disaster and could not do his agricultural tasks or any other tasks, the others provided labour without expecting anything in return. On such occasions, the villagers ‘gifted’ their labour. This kind of gifting of labour was considered a meritorious task and when a group of people contributed their labour for the benefit of a person who was weak, it was called a “*pin kaiyya*”.

Not only when helping individuals, but this kind of communal labour was also used in constructing temples, public wells, roads, buildings, cleaning lakes and tanks. In fact, when the villagers provided their labour in cleaning, repairing, or constructing a new section of the village temple, it was called “*pin aththama*” [26]. Even the word “*Shramadhana*” (“Providing labour for charity”) had come to popular parlance because such gifting of labour was considered a meritorious deed. Apart from this, some people would generously provide their labour without expecting anything in return. This was called, “*nikamatawadakireema*” (Working for free).

When labour was provided without expecting anything in return or without labour exchange, the receiver of such labour might not even serve refreshments to those who provided labour. At times, another person or a group of individuals would serve those who provided labour as a favour. At the same time, some people provided labour for others without expecting anything in return. This was done specially for those who were unmarried or for ones who did not have anyone to help. Even in this method, the custom was to serve food and refreshments to those who worked even though they did not expect any service in return.

IV. The role of women in the labour provision process:

In the ancient agricultural society both man and woman had taken over specific duties. Economic prosperity of the nation was based on the production processes related with livelihoods. Therefore, the active contribution of both males and females was essentially needed for the production process. However, the women's role was huge in the production centers of agriculture such as the home garden, paddy field and “*chena*”. So, the women contributed to the labour equally or in a secondary level in the economic process. Specially, the woman played the prominent role in preparing and delivering food to their husbands. While the husbands were practicing heavy works at the paddy field or “*chena*” using mamotee, scythe, chopper, axe, hoe etc. the woman was practicing domestic works using winnowing fan, ekel broom, grinding plates, mortar, pestle etc. In addition to that, she contributed to all other labour activities in farming.

Tilling the land, which is the basic step in paddy cultivation, was a ceremonious event called “*Wapmagula*” organized by the ancient kings. Even though the activity was done in mud, the king and the rest of the gathering had participated in it wearing beautiful dresses. Even the bullocks that were used for the task were dressed up in attractive jewelry. It is said that even women participated in the event having worn jewelry and dresses. “In the same manner, the women folk from the houses wearing jewelry and dresses also engaged ceremoniously in cultivating paddy” [27]. The women contributed to the “*chena*” cultivation in the same manner. In fact, in the book, “*Sihalawaththupparana*”, in relation to the story of King Dutugamunu, it is mentioned how a certain poor woman went to the “*chena*” carrying a vessel (“*labukataya*”) filled with seeds [28]. Folk songs also mention how women came dressed up in dresses and jewelry even for the “*aththams*” for harvesting “*kurakkan*”. The following folk poem narrates how women arrived as angels wearing beautiful dresses, necklaces, earrings, hair sticks and with lips reddened by chewing betel:

"malgawaalaakondabayendalaahinathadakarasalupalanda gene
piyayurunimalaenalemausulaasalupotakinwasamin thadine
siriyaldeela kata rathukaralaanaadalu men thol dilisenne
deviyanyedalaahenatavendalaapatanganimudeakethi regene" [29]

Meaning:

"They (women) have decorated their hair with flowers and woe the clad tightly;

They have covered the beautiful breast with a shawl;

They have made the lips red as buds of iron wood;

They begin work after praying for the God and worship the chena"

It is apparent that women engaged in providing their labour performed their task with a thorough understanding. Even the planting of the paddy was done in a particular scientific method. They had a skillful knowledge about the number of plants and the extent to which they should be buried under the mud. The folk poem mentioned below elaborates on how women provided their labour in planting paddy:

"Peliyakataindakumburenewee laa
satharakulayagenasithethabaa laa
komalaathinpeladekadekagena laa
deagulgananatayatasituwaa laa" [30]

Meaning:

They stand as a row in the field, They keep the four casts in mind,

They take paddy plants two by two in hand, and plant them on the mud"

During the occasions on which traditional ways of providing labour were adopted, the singing of poems was an essential feature mainly because it was the main medium which provided both entertainment and solace from tiredness. In fact, it is apparent that a group involved in an "aththma" was called a "kaiyya" because of the custom of singing "kavi"(poems). The fact that the situation when two or more people get together and talk incessantly is called "kaiyyagahanawa" also indicates the importance given to singing poetry by the villagers when they unite for work or for any other purpose. When women's contribution was received for an "aththam", the women who were good at singing poems were considered highly. The following folk poems illustrate how the singing skills of women who joined an "aththam" for reaping paddy were appreciated:

"kawudaada ape nelumataaawe bolan
kawudaada ape seepadakeewe bolan
kawudawenakenekennatainne bolan
kawuda ape nangiwitharaiaawe bolan"[31]

Meaning:

"Who has come to our reaping work;

Who has sung our poems;

Has somebody to come to sing poems ?

No, No, only our younger sisiter has come"

"ihala gedara loku ayyage un dea
kayye nelumata kawadath en dea
eeye kee kavi ada nokiyan dea
deyyoma rekapan ayyage un dea"[32]

Meaning:

May the god protects the elder brother's wife!

She is comming everyday for reaping;Please dont sing poems which were sung yesterday;

The women's labour was needed not just in agricultural activities but in other tasks related to traditional industries. The women involved in the reed ("Pan") industry had performed tasks such as uprooting the reed plants by working in groups:

"panmitibendalaaaragaththuwa iasata
 yankiyalaaanganosedune pelata
 manbesalaaanganosedune ruwata
 Pan iralawiyamuwapedural ewita" [33]

Meaning:

"Bundles of uprooted reed are on the heads of beautiful ladies;

They walk in a line on the road; their aim is to weave a mat after processing the reed"

IV. CONCLUSION

In the traditional process of providing labour, apart from human labour, it was customary to exchange agricultural tools and animals. Therefore, the villagers who went for an "aththam" apart from carrying tools needed for paddy cultivation such as hoe, plough, yoke and plank, took their bullocks with them as those animals were needed for tasks which required animal labour such as ploughing and leveling the field. In fact, human and animal resources along with the farming tools and equipment were the capital of traditional agriculture. In the ancient labour provision methods, the villagers received help from others in fulfilling their labour requirements. It was not limited to agricultural tasks. Even during functions and ceremonies which focused on joyous as well as sorrowful events, the traditional villagers accomplished what they needed by working in harmony.

Even at present, one may observe the remnants of the labour provision methods prevalent in ancient village society. In fact, "Shramadhana" which are conducted to carry out common tasks both in villages and in cities is an extension of ancient collective labour provision methods. Such remnant usage shows that interrelationships and social integration which emerge out of the exchange of labour among each other are perennially important to the survival of society. However, due to the challenges of global village coupled with complex socio-economic and cultural trends as well as the influx of scientific and technological marvels with every approaching moment, the simple and traditional village life style is undermined, which is indicative of social deterioration. In such a situation, it is difficult to prevent the establishment of methods that focus on "money for labour" that replace the traditional labour provision methods. It is also felt that this situation is a primary factor in weakening the interrelationships in the modern society.

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