

INDO-SRI LANKAN RELATIONS AND THE PROBLEM OF INDIAN PLANTATION LABOUR, 1910-1931

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The Sri Lankan plantation industry, especially tea and rubber, was almost totally dependent on Indian labour during the period 1910-1931. The system of recruiting Indian labour during the 1920s was apparently defective when viewed in the light of human rights. Thus the Central Government of India, backed by the Madras Presidency, could show many just reasons for an intervention in policy followed by the Government of Sri Lanka towards the Indian population. On account of this Indian intervention, the socio-economic conditions of these labourers gradually improved from the 1920s and in the 1930s these conditions became even considerably better than some of the indigenous peasants and villagers in the island.

Under the prevailing recruitment system Indian labourers were recruited by non-professional Kanganies selected from among Indian immigrants. These Kanganies usually went to India to recruit people, but in some cases, they remitted money to their relatives to do the needful and have the recruits sent to the island. The Kanganies who went to India generally brought relatives and friends from their native villages.¹

There existed the Ceylon Labour Commission set up by the planters in 1905 to finance recruitment and supervise recruiters. This commission was headed by the Ceylon Labour Commissioner who was also appointed by the planters, with headquarters at Trinchinopoly. He was assisted by an Assistant Labour Commissioner and Agents scattered over recruiting areas in South India.

The Tin Ticket System came into being to give the recruiting system some regularity. According to this system, a special kind of little discs of tin punched with a letter and two numbers were available to the planters at every government kachcheri. The letter denoted the district to which the particular estate belonged, and the two numbers denoted respectively the number of the estate in the official register and the particular category of labour the estate required. The planters buying these tickets at the rate of Rs. 2.50 per hundred, sent them to their Kanganies or to the Ceylon Labour Commission. Kanganies

1. *Report of the Committee on Recruitment of Indian Labour for Ceylon* (Colombo, 1918), p. 1.