An Analytical Study of the Cultivation of Tea, Coconut, and Rubber in Sri Lanka During British Rule

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DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.907000391

Received: 11 July 2025; Accepted: 17 July 2025; Published: 19 August 2025

ABSTRACT

With the independence of Sri Lanka from British rule, the country, having lost its agricultural-centric monarchy, introduced new economic policies aimed at maximizing the use of existing resources. The primary focus of these policies was the plantation industry. For the first time, a system of production based on small plots and smallholdings emerged, particularly through cinnamon cultivation. Sri Lanka's plantation economy began to develop in the 1830s, with the British introducing coffee as the first major cash crop. Subsequently, the cultivation of other cash crops such as coconut, rubber, cinchona, cocoa, and sugarcane further integrated Sri Lanka into global trade and established a strong export-oriented economy. The study also examines the emergence of a capitalist society, especially following the Colebrooke Reforms of 1833. The objective of the research is to assess the impact of economic and social transformations on the indigenous population and to analyze how traditional self-sufficient communities transitioned into a more commercialized economy. This study employs a qualitative research methodology, which is considered the most suitable approach for this type of analysis. By the latter half of the 19th century, plantations had become the dominant sector of the Sri Lankan economy. The country shifted from a subsistence-based system to one heavily reliant on foreign investment and export-oriented agriculture.

Keywords: Agriculture, Capitalist, Cultivation, Transformation

INTRODUCTION

The English had a profound influence on Sri Lanka, following the earlier periods of Portuguese and Dutch rule. They occupied the coastal areas in 1796 AD and brought the entire country under their control by 1815. During this period, the English made significant efforts to expand plantation cultivation, especially in Sri Lanka. Since the time of the Rajarata civilization, the natives maintained a self-sufficient agricultural economy based on paddy cultivation and "chena" cultivation. However, with the arrival of European powers, the influence of a commercial economy driven by international trade led to the decline of traditional agriculture. Under British rule, commercial crop cultivation spread rapidly across the country through their policy. Much of the land previously owned by local farmers was taken over for the cultivation of commercial crops. In the commercial economic system that emerged with the Industrial Revolution in Europe, the profit-driven British focused on expanding plantations, neglecting traditional agriculture, which was the primary source of livelihood for the natives. Between 1823 and 1825, when the paddy harvest failed, the British were even compelled to distribute rice free of charge among the people (De Silva, 1953).

Meanwhile, the Colebrooke Commission also focused on the development of the local agricultural economy. Colebrooke proposed that farmers should be encouraged to improve irrigation by reducing grain taxes, with the expectation that this would address both food shortages and flood threats (Mendis, 1956). Furthermore, the Commission anticipated that abolishing the compulsory labor system would allow people to cultivate their land more freely by easing the strict regulations related to labor, which were closely connected to traditional agricultural practices. However, the benefits of abolishing compulsory labor were ultimately reaped by the commercial plantation sector rather than by local agriculture. Not only was cultivated land lost, but with the introduction of large-scale plantation cultivation on these lands, the native population was pushed into small

villages. The economic and social changes brought about by this shift are best reflected in the collapse of the indigenous self-sufficient economic model and the transition to a commercial economic system. As a result, the once-simple lifestyle of the indigenous people became increasingly complex due to the influence of plantation agriculture.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In addition to using sources from the library and the National Archives, interviews were also conducted for data collection. Selected individuals were interviewed using the oral history approach within the in-depth interview method, and a substantial amount of qualitative data was gathered through open-ended questioning. This data was analyzed using the Prior Coding Method of qualitative research. Furthermore, the data was examined using the Historical Comparative Method and Thematic Analysis, through which conclusions were drawn.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the face of the decline of the previously mentioned eco-coffee cultivation, attempts were made to fill the gap with cinchona and cocoa. However, apart from eco-coffee, tea cultivation emerged as the most popular crop among Sri Lankan plantation owners and became an attractive commercial venture for planters (Munasingha,19-10-2023).The rapid spread of tea cultivation was the primary reason for its popularity. It is evident that tea cultivation significantly contributed to the wealth of plantation owners and enabled them to rise within the social hierarchy. Thus, tea cultivation became a means of creating a wealthy class and an educated middle class through the next generation. It is important to identify the regions where this cultivation spreads and its trajectory. In 1841, a Chinese tea planter named J. B. Vermes cultivated a small plot in the Pussellawa estate. However, it was deemed unsuitable for the country due to its high cost—at the time, a pound of tea cost five pounds. Consequently, planters shifted to the Assam tea variety, which produced a better yield (Rajaratnam, 1961: 4). As tea cultivation expanded in India, Sri Lankan planters also developed an interest in it. Thewetes noted that tea was a suitable crop not only for European planters but also for the Sinhalese people. They further predicted that, in the future, the entire hill country would be covered in tea (Wickremarathna 1973: 137).

In 1867, the Planters' Association led the expansion of coffee cultivation. That same year, James Taylor cleared 20 acres of the Loolecondera Estate and, together with others, began cultivating coffee (Rajarathnam 1961: 5). The period from 1867 to 1870 marked the peak of coffee cultivation, and significant attention was given to it during this time. By 1870, approximately 250 acres of land had been dedicated to coffee cultivation (Wenzlhuemer 2008: 79). Two notable enthusiasts of coffee during the colonial period were G. H. K. Thewetes and Arthur Morris.

In addition, in 1882, the Deputy District Agent of Kegalle, R. W. Ievers, encouraged the cultivation of yams in all districts and reportedly agreed to receive technical advice from Hubert Wace. It is revealed that ordinary farmers were not familiar with yam cultivation and the preparation of yam leaves. Efforts were made to promote yam cultivation in the Kegalle and Kalutara districts, as well as in Udahewa Hata, Walapane, Kotmale, Wallaboda, and Kalpe Patthu Veda around Galle, and in the Morawak Korala of the Matale district, Weligama Korala, Gagaboda Putthulawe,AkuruPasa,Welimada, and Kegole.(Wickramaratne 1973: 139–140, 150). The London market in the 1880s saw high prices for Indian and Ceylonese goods (Waughusmer 2008: 81), and there was an increase in the area under cultivation during this period.

Table 1- Growth of tea cultivation between 1880-1890.

(Source: Ceylon Blue Book 1880 – 1890)

Year	Acres (amount of land)
1880	14266
1881	14350
1882	12482

1883	19797
1884	57626
1885	120808
1886	164758
1887	199647
1888	231601
1889	207413
1890	235794

Small landowners also turned to cultivation (Rajaratnam 1963: 86). In the 1890s, the price of tea fell, and profits from cultivation decreased. As a result, the tea industry in Sri Lanka declined to some extent. However, it recovered in the twentieth century (Iriyagama 2012: 64–65). By the beginning of the twentieth century, tea cultivation had become the island's main export cash crop (Adagama 2015: 265). Somathilaka states that there were approximately 1,200 large-scale tea estates in the country, with about one percent located in the districts of Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, and Badulla (Somathilaka 2018: 93).

From the first to the fifth decade of the twentieth century, Cha Tissa Iriyagama maintained clear records of the expansion, contraction, booms, and recessions in the tea industry, especially during the first decade (Iriyagama 2012: 64–69). In 1947, export earnings from cotton totaled 687,000. With the development of the cotton industry, Sri Lanka became a prosperous economy. A prediction once made by Thewett's came true: "*the mountains were covered with cotton"* (Wickremarathna 1973: 137). At one time, Sri Lanka was also known as "**Lipton's Garden"** (Iriyagama; 2012: 70–72). In this way, cultivation spread to the western, southern, central, and Samaragamuwa districts (Rajarathnam 1963: 89).

Table 2- Coffee cultivation-Nations

(Source: Furguson 1883: 70)

Period	**States**	**Natives**
1881-1882	5,22,919	41,949
1880-1881	4,15,456	38,302
1879-1890	6,22,306	47,308
1878-1879	7,67,293	57,216
1877-1878	5,51,046	69,246
1876-1877	8,51,201	91,846
1875-1876	6,26,636	93,791
1874-1875	8,55,661	1,13,033
1873-1874	5,21,193	96,149
1872-1873	8,61,575	1,33,918

According to the above chart, although the number of natives cultivating coffee increased in the early 1870s, both the size of the plantations and the number of native cultivators had decreased by the end of the decade. In this way, coffee cultivation can be identified as a major cash crop that brought about a significant change in the plantation economy, giving rise to a class that accumulated considerable wealth from it.

Evidence suggests that coconut cultivation was a homestead crop during the transitional period from the ancient

Anuradhapura civilization to the Indian Ocean civilization. Although coconut cultivation was widespread in coastal areas during Dutch rule, it remained primarily a homestead crop for farmers, as it was not considered a commercial commodity at the time (Adagama, 16-02-2024). It is surprising that the coconut tree, which had existed for centuries, received little special attention from the Dutch. However, another source notes that it had already gained popularity as a commercial crop (Somathiyaku 2018: 94). During the early period of British rule, coconut oil was exported, and a steam-powered oil mill was established in Sri Lanka (Kurunananda 2016: 260–211). Even Colebrooke pointed out the importance of developing this valuable cash crop (C.O. 58, CCP II: 314). Coconut cultivation spread rapidly (Cave 1938: 516), and efforts to develop it as an export plantation crop had been underway since the 1840s (Adagama 2015: 260). Coconut was a significant export crop during the colonial period (SCE Riced; Bertolacci 1817: 141–149). Trade records related to the Galle port around 1850 also highlight this development (Tennent 1859: 199). Thus, by the second half of the nineteenth century, a noticeable expansion in coconut cultivation can be observed. This growth began in the late 1850s and accelerated during the 1860s (De Silva 1981: 287). This view is further supported by L. A. Wickramaratne and Michael Roberts, who estimate that by 1860, the number of households in the country had increased from 250,000 to 850,000 within a decade (Kurunananda 2016: 128).

Between Katukanda and Giriulla, 10,000 acres of forest were cleared, and between Kutulanda and Delpategedara (a distance of three miles), 5,000 acres were cultivated with coconut (Roberts & Wickramaratne 1973: 103). The main farmers who cultivated these lands were Sri Lankans, primarily low-country Sinhalese, along with a small number of Sri Lankan Tamils (Bandara,23-10-2023). In this way, coconut cultivation created opportunities for the emergence of five generations of indigenous capitalists (Adagama 2015: 261).

Referring to the land in the North-Western Province, it is said that their number increased by 300% (De Silva 1981: 287). Furthermore, while the area under coconut cultivation in 1860 was 200,000 acres, by 1900 it had increased to 600,000 acres (Rajaratnam 1964: 92). It is also noted that only about 10% of the estate owners were locals. In 1871, coconut cultivation accounted for 37% of cultivated land, and by 1900 this figure had risen to 41% (Roberts & Wickramaratne 1973: 104).

The southwest coast played a major role in the expansion of coconut cultivation. Especially in the Coconut Triangle cities—Colombo, Kurunegala, and Chilaw coconut cultivation was successful, extending to all coastal districts, including the Jaffna Peninsula in the north and Batticaloa in the east (Roberts & Wickramaratne 1973: 104). This same view is expressed by Sabaragamu in his article in *A Concise History of Lanka* (Adagama 2015: 260).

The success of the coconut industry in the Chilaw district in the late nineteenth century was welcomed by the local population, particularly the Black community, who were instrumental in its development (DeSilva 1981:296). By the 1880s, Kandy was reportedly under occupation (Ferguson 1883: 49). Local capitalists were inclined toward coconut cultivation because it required less capital investment compared to tea or coffee cultivation. While tea or coffee cultivation required ten to two workers per hectare, coconut cultivation required only one worker per hectare, making the availability of local labour especially important (DeSilva1981:287). Additionally, the cultivation of crops such as coconut contributed to the development of roads and railways.

It should be noted that the " industry, especially the arrack trade**,** transport services**,** food supplies**,** timber trade**,** and barrel industry, supported several small-scale industries and household needs (Roberts 1973:105). The labor involved in coconut production contributed significantly to these sectors. Among these were industries such as copra preparation**,** coconut oil production, and the coir industry (Bertolacci 1817: 128- 150). According to Ferguson (1883:47), between 22 and 500 people were more inclined toward these occupations. Coconut was also cultivated in the wet paddy fields of the North-Western Province. By the early twentieth century, the income generated from sol cultivation had reached 14%.

Rubber cultivation was introduced to the lower hilly areas in 1886 and remained at the experimental stage until the 1890s (Somathilake 2015: 102). Since the two rubber varieties known as *Castillo* and *Sira* were found to be unsuitable for the country, it was decided that the *Para* rubber variety was more appropriate (Rajarathnam 1964: 92). Rubber became an important commercial crop in the secondary phase of the commercial plantation economy

only after 1890 (Iriyagama 2012: 73). It was recognized as a prominent surplus crop among other cultivated crops.

Due to the decline in the prices of existing commercial crops in the last decade of the nineteenth century, rubber gained a significant position as an alternative crop. Oct. M. De Silva reports that rubber cultivation was introduced to Ceylon in 1877 and that by the 1890s, Sri Lankans like the British planters were successfully cultivating rubber on a commercial scale. Initially, rubber industries in the Kalutara and Kelani Valley districts were prominent (Wickramaratne 1973: 430), and cultivation later spread to the Western, Central, and Southern Provinces (De Silva 1981: 291). From the very beginning, rubber cultivation attracted a number of Ceylonese capitalists and entrepreneurs. Compared to other crops, rubber was particularly popular among local capitalists. This popularity stemmed from the fact that both Europeans and Sri Lankans were well aware of the commercial potential of rubber cultivation, especially in terms of employing village laborers for plantation work.

It is evident that by 1900, approximately 1,750 acres of rubber were under cultivation. This figure rose to 203,000 acres by 1910 (Rajarathnam 1963: 93). By that year, rubber had replaced coconut as the island's major export crop (De Silva 1964: 93). The main consumers of rubber on the island were the UK and USA (Colonial Report 1909: 14).

Table 3- Rubber Consumption

(Source: Rajarathnam 1964: 108)

Year	U. S. Country	England
1919	225	35
1920	215	24
1921	170	18
1922	285	10
1923	305	27
1924	335	22

In the 1910s, rubber became an important export crop (Roberts 1973: 117; Wickramaratne 1973: 428, 437). In 1910–1911 and 1920–1925, about 11.5% of Sri Lanka's rubber needs were supplied by Malaya, 55.5% by Java and Sumatra, and 25% by other countries (Wickramaratne 1973: 433). By the 1930s, agreements had been made with other rubber-growing countries (Somathilake 2018: 107). During the 1920s and 1930s, the area under rubber, cotton, and cocoa cultivation increased. However, between 1929 and 1931, rubber cultivation declined (Raratnam 1963: 104). The global economic downturn had a significant impact on Sri Lanka. The island's main cash crops, coffee and rubber, accounted for 90% of its exports. As the prices of these commodities could not be controlled, it was difficult to prevent the local economy from weakening. The British benefited the most from this plantation economy. The income and profits they earned were mostly repatriated, as there was no mechanism at the time to prevent the outflow of wealth.

However, the emergence of new and old castes that developed through wealth accumulated from the plantation economy is an important subject of study in this research. It is undeniable that the plantation economy was a key factor in the formation of these social classes (De Silva, 26-09-2023). Those who gained wealth by investing in plantations consistently sought to elevate their caste status.

Spencer Hardy, who visited England in 1847 and returned to Ceylon in 1862, reported a remarkable increase in the number of houses with tiled roofs and the rising prominence of upper-caste families (Ferguson 1883: 89). Furthermore, Ceylon tea had surpassed that of China, England, and India in other countries and had become the dominant export crop (Ferguson 1883: 101). In this prosperous economic context, estate owners and planters were looking to future generations to breed a new type of cattle.

CONCLUSION

It is well established that the British interests, as well as those of the Sri Lankans, were more significantly influenced by the commercial plantation economy than by plantation agriculture alone. However, it is evident that the social classes emerging from the plantation economy also accumulated wealth through other commercial ventures and adopted a lifestyle more aligned with that of the Western elite. Beyond plantation agriculture, a social group emerged that amassed wealth through commercial activities such as rice and cattle trade, the barrel industry, and contract farming. Thus, both traditional and newly formed social groups that accumulated wealth were shaped by the plantation economy. It is clear from this context that the plantation economy had a profound impact on the socio-economic landscape of Sri Lanka.

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ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume IX Issue VII July 2025

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