Trade unions in the Sri Lankan tea plantations: Women worker struggles and ethnic identity politics

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Abstract:
Union strategies in the Sri Lankan tea plantations are embedded in ethnic identity politics. As Hill Country Tamils, the plantation workers represent an inter-ethnic community that is struggling against dominant Sinhala as well as Tamil nationalisms. While women workers in the plantation form a majority of union members, they also play a pivotal role within the Hill Country Tamil community. Nevertheless, the plantation women workers are faced with union strategies that continue marginalise their struggles. By describing the changing realm of representative politics and limits of dominant union strategies or political unionism, this paper argues for revitalising movement politics of unions. In redefining their relations with political parties, transforming male biased practices within unions is central for mobilising not only women workers, but also the Hill Country Tamils as a community.

Introduction
Trade unions in the Sri Lankan tea plantations are embedded in ethnic identity politics. As an inter-ethnic group subordinated by the both Tamil and Sinhala nationalisms, the Hill Country Tamil workers represent the most organised sector of the economy, among the most poverty stricken and marginalised workers. With women forming a majority of union members, this marginalisation highlights the contradictions of union compromises with party politics, as well as state strategies promoting Sinhala Buddhist nationalism.

This paper focuses on the marginalisation of both Hill Country Tamil and women workers’ voice because of union subordination to political parties, and to representative politics. With the 1977 launch of neo-liberal state strategies the realm of representative politics has dramatically changed by a militarised state promoting Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. In
describing the contradictions of union compromises with political parties, this paper argues for revitalising movement politics of unions. Movement politics involve social mobilisation in the realm of civil society aimed at democratising the state, as well as radicalising civil society (Gibbon, 2002). While encouraging contentious collective actions, movement politics is also about transforming representative politics along with authoritarian ethno-nationalist or communal (religious) social movements. In terms of the plantation unions, there are new tendencies towards encouraging movement politics by building alliances with other civil society actors. However, transforming male biased cultural practices within unions is vital not only for asserting women’s voice but also for mobilising the Hill Country Tamil community.

Hill Country Tamils and women workers

The Hill Country Tamil community is based on tea plantation workers, who are geographically fixed by the labour process, which necessitate their near permanent retention in the estate (DeSilva, 1982). While in the lower altitudes, the Hill Country Tamil communities are more integrated with surrounding Sinhala village economies, in the higher altitudes they are in a marginalised enclave setting (Silva, 1991). With a population of around 1.5 million, the hill-country Tamils are also dispersed in the main city of Colombo as well as the North and Eastern provinces (Sivathamby, 1984). In 2000, there were around 425,000 workers in the privatised plantations, which accounted for nearly 20% of the agrarian labour force (Labour Department, 2000). In effect, the dominant plantation union, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), which originates in 1939 as the Ceylon Indian Congress (CIC), remains a formidable regional party representing Hill Country Tamils.

As migrant indentured labourers, the plantation Tamil workers, ‘Indian Tamils’, remain subordinated within the Tamil ethnic hierarchy dominated by the ‘Jaffna’ Tamils (Sivathamby, 1984). Although plantation workers gained limited franchise in 1931, in a divide-and-rule colonial policy, these rights were retracted following independence in 1948 (Jayawardena, 1985; Sivathamby, 1991). In highlighting the generations that have made the estate their home and community, the Hill Country Tamil identity is counter-posed to the official ‘Indian Tamil’ identity in order to recognise their rights as citizens (Sivarajah, 1991;
The articulation of a Hill Country identity or hill-homelands (Malayalam) as a counter movement emerged with the formation of the Up-Country Youth Front in the early seventies (Sivarajah, 1991). Since 1974, a number of organisations have asserted the need for a Hill Country identity project for cultural revitalisation contesting the Sinhala ethno-nationalists, Jaffna Tamil hegemony as well as the ‘cooler’ culture of master-servant relations (Sivarajah, 1991). The emergence of the Up Country Peoples Front in 1988 as a splinter group of the main plantation union, the CWC, demonstrated the limits of dominant union-party compromises with state strategies.

Women workers form the core labour force in the plantations. They not only work longer hours plucking leaves but they also do most of the household labour, as well as ‘ritual or religious work’, described as a ‘triple burden’ (Phillips, 2002; Kurien, 1998). This ‘triple burden’ illustrates how the plantation labour process maintaining caste hierarchies, through the barrack type houses or clusters of lines, as well as cultural festivals, is rooted in patriarchy (Karder, 1996; Kurien, 1998; Phillips, 2002). While lower caste women are relegated to plucking leaves, the higher castes males access positions of power in supervisory roles, including trade union leadership (Hollup, 1994; Kurien, 1998, 1999). Although women gained equal wages in 1984, they have limited control over their wages, with men often collecting the women’s wages (Kandasamy, 2002). This subordination of women workers, sustained by a complex set of class, ethnic, caste and spatial power relations, also reflect party politics shaping state strategies (Hollup, 1994; Kurien, 1998, 1999).

**Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalism and party politics**

The plantation union strategies are shaped by party politics that are intertwined with ethno-nationalist identity politics. In terms of party politics, the two main parties, the UNP (United National Party) and the SLFP (Sri Lanka Freedom Party) are elite, top down, market-driven parties, entrenched in Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. The UNP (1977-94), often represented as the pro-Western liberal party, renewed the SLFP’s pre 1977 ethno-nationalist project with a new fervour. The absence of more secular working class parties, particularly after their embarrassing defeat at the 1977 elections, as well as the early repression of labour militancy were key factors enabling ethno-nationalist forces (Obeysekera, 1984). Following the
banning of the main Tamil party (TULF) in 1983, the CWC was propelled as a key minority party and an important ally of the ruling UNP (Jayawardena, 1985; Sivathamby, 1984). While the CWC and the UNP unions expanded, the authoritarian state actively promoted Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalist politics undermining the labour movement.

The influence of ethno-nationalist Sinhala Buddhist forces over representative politics is instrumental for legitimising authoritarian state strategies. After seventeen years of repression, the labour movement re-grouped marginally under the People’s Alliance (PA) in 1994 led by the SLFP. However, the UNP returned to power from 2001 to April 2004, forming a coalition with minority ethnic parties (Tamil and Muslim) and declared a ceasefire agreement with the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) in February 2002. But, the president, the leader of the PA, intervened claiming that the peace process has undermined national security and took control of the defence, media and interior ministries. The political stalemate between the president and the UNP, ended with the 2004 April parliamentary elections, in which an SLFP led coalition returned to power. The SLFP’s coalition with the JVP (Janatha Vimukhi Peramuna or Peoples’ Liberation Front) positioned in a mix of Sinhala Buddhist nationalist and Socialist politics and the JHU (Jathika Hela Urumaya or National Sinhala Heritage Party), a newly launched Buddhist monks’ party, is symbolic of a renewed Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist wave. For the 2005 presidential elections, the SLFP again drew on the support of the JVP and the JHU, which opposes the devolution of power along a federalist arrangement, arguing that the political-ethnic conflict is a ‘terrorist’ problem demanding a military and not a political solution (Ganguly, 2004:903-918). This strengthening of Sinhala Buddhist nationalist tendencies emerges in 1978 with a shift towards an authoritarian state.

The 1978 constitution introduced an executive presidential system, which extended wide-ranging interventionist powers to the president overriding parliamentary as well as electoral processes. With the enactment of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) in 1979, the state institutionalized political violence which included torture, disappearances along with a culture of secrecy and fear (Obeysekera, 1984; Uyangoda, 1992; Senaratne, 1997; ARC, 2006). From 1985 to 1998, armed forced personnel increased by 80.5 per cent and by 1998, per capita defence expenditure in Sri Lanka was US$ 39.2 compared with US$ 29.3 in
Pakistan which was next highest in South Asia (World Bank, 2005). The authoritarian state that emerged under the UNP rule (1977-94) concentrated state power around the president, few individuals within the ruling party and the bureaucracy (Stokke, 1997).

Although the 1978 constitution centralised the state, it extended voting rights for plantation Tamil workers to participate in local elections and made both Sinhala and Tamil national languages (Sivarajah, 1991). This was further enhanced by the 1987 Thirteenth Amendment, which accepted Tamil as an official language and established the provincial council system. While the Provincial Councils was a key democratic piece of legislation, the framework of a unitary state and a presidential system of government continues to create tensions within the system (Uyangoda, 1992). While the provincial councils have some limited authority and resources, cultural discrimination against Tamil language endures in the provincial councils as well as most state institutions in the hill country such as the legal system, police, labour tribunals, and the health care system (Cruise, 1996). This increasingly constrained realm of representative politics is intertwined with the privatisation process, which further restricted union strategies.

**Privatisation of plantations**

The neo-liberal policies, described as ‘liberalisation’, were launched in 1977 under the UNP government. While the plantations were nationalised under the previous the United Front government (1970-77), the de-nationalisation or the privatisation of plantations was delayed until the mid 1990s for economic and political reasons. The plantations were a key foreign exchange earner and the CWC, was significant actor for ethno-nationalist and coalition politics. Under the advice of the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), privatisation was preceded by a decade of ‘restructuring’ (1980-89), which resulted in a highly centralised plantation administration led by key ruling party ministers (Shanmugaratnam, 1997; Manikam, 1995). In June 1992, the management of plantations was contracted-out and in 1995, the plantation assets were sold and the land leases extended to the new owners, who were mostly local and regional (Indian) agri-business companies (Shanmugaratnam, 1997; Maliyagoda, 2000).
The two largest plantation unions, the CWC and the UNP union, the *Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Unions* (LJEWU), supported the privatisation process. These two unions with nearly 70%-75% of the unionised workers gained access to collective bargaining (Maliyagoda, 2000). Meanwhile, the Joint Plantation Trade Union Centre (JPTUC) comprised of independent and working class party unions – the Communist Party (CP) and the *Lanka Sama Samaja Party* (LSSP) – officially registered as a union federation in order to enter collective bargaining agreements. Unlike the LEWU, the UNP party controlled union, the CWC is mostly a union, which has emerged as a dominant party among the Hill Country Tamils.

The CWC was led by a Tamil plantation owner, Saumyamurthi Thondaman for over fifty years until his death in 1998. Illustrating the influence of elite families on party politics, he was succeeded by his son who continues as the leader into the present, amidst protest by senior leaders. Thondaman senior manufactured a demagogic image of himself, emphasising a benevolent paternalist role while downplaying his political ideology and orientation (Hollup, 1994). The rise of ethno-centric identity politics reinforced his role as a minority ethnic community leader transcending his union leadership role. Thondaman was central for the UNP government strategies (1977-94) to repress and de-legitimise working class parties, labour militancy and the Tamil nationalist demands. Nevertheless, in his role as a community leader, Thondaman supported a coalition of unions and parties under the *Vamsavali Makkal Perani* (Indian Origin People's Front) for contesting the 1999 Provincial Council elections (Satyapalan, 2000). The coalition, which emerged nearly ten years after the introduction of Provincial Councils in 1989, managed to win several provincial council seats. However, it disbanded due to internal conflicts, particularly the CWC attempts to dominate (Satyapalan, 2000).

The privatisation process restricted the scope of collective bargaining over conditions of work and living, which meant the new employers rejected their customary obligation to maintain and co-ordinate social provision to the resident labour (Maliyagoda, 2000). In response, the Plantations Housing and Social Welfare Trust (‘Trust’) was launched in 1993 to co-ordinate housing, sanitation, healthcare, agricultural development, education, and micro-business development. However, the plantation companies which control the Trust continue.
to avoid needed investment in social provision (Kandasamy, 2002). The high rates of malnutrition and illiteracy in the plantations directly relates to the lack of adequate health and educational services. In 2002, 30% of the estate population were in poverty, while among the rural population 25% were in poverty (World Bank, 2005). This impoverished context illustrates limits of political unionism strategies that neglect union capacities to mobilise.

**Political unionism and the hill country Tamils**

The dominance of political union strategies in Sri Lanka, and South Asia in general, relates to union mobilisation as a part of labour, popular and working-class struggles for independence. This role was significant for the class compromises which established developmental states and regulated economies. Encouraged by the developmental state strategies, political unionism reinforced union subordination to political parties and engagement in representative electoral politics (Nadesan, 1993; Fernando, 1988).

While political unionism strategies extended worker rights, particularly under a ‘closed economy’ period (1956-77), the post 1977 shift to neo-liberal strategies and the eruption of an ethnic war has reconstituted the party-union relationship (Fernando, 1988). The new terrain of representative politics restraining unions is characterised by: the dominance of market-driven politics, the militarized state, the ascendance of ethnocentric identity politics, the weakening of working class parties and the lack of an alternative vision to neo-liberal strategies. In 2000, five years after privatisation, a prominent union leader (JPTUC), Jayaratne Maliyagoda, expressed the contradictions of party-union relations in this way:

‘… workers in the Third World countries [need] to be free from the authoritarian grip of the political party. This does not mean that the workers should withdraw from politics. What I mean is when the political parties directly control trade unions (deceptive political power blocs), unions become tools of power politics and the exercising of free will by workers will not be feasible. Furthermore, if authoritarian political parties control unions, the freedom of workers and the inner democracy of unions will be in jeopardy. This is an experience we have gained from our own trade union history’. (Maliyagoda, 2000:10)

The positioning of the main party subordinated unions at times of anti-Tamil violence reveals the contradictions of political unionism. Anti-Tamil violence against plantation workers was...
incited at various places and moments in the post-independence period (Sivathamby, 1984; Sivarajah, 1991; Nadesan, 1995). However, the 1983 July anti-Tamil program which unleashed mob violence, was a decisive moment of ethno-nationalist politics (Senaratne, 1997). All major plantation unions except for the ruling UNP party union, the LJEWU, condemned the violence unleashed in July. Although the CWC leader Thondaman protested, his alliance with the UNP revealed his contradictory positioning.

With the on-going war and the increasing militarization of the state, Tamil plantation workers face numerous forms of discrimination and violence, from humiliation and harassment at checkpoints to arbitrary arrests and detention. In this context of violence, the privatisation of tea plantations has stripped away the content of collective bargaining agreements, exacerbating working and living conditions. While dominant unions remain focused on representative politics, some unions are reinforcing their movement politics by building new alliances.

**New Alliances**

In experimenting with new ways of engaging with other civil society actors and social movements, some unions are building new alliances. These alliances also reflect changes in labour internationalism or global labour solidarity, which highlight the need for a new orientation towards movement politics (Waterman, 2004). The World Social Forum, an offspring of the Global Justice Movement (GJM), has encouraged a range of similar forums across the globe. A new network promoting labour rights for tea plantation workers was launched during the 2004 World Social Forum in Mumbai. By bringing together ‘stakeholders’ or owners, management, government, trade unions and workers, an International Tea Day (December 15th) was established to raise awareness and work towards a Universal Declaration of Rights of Tea Workers and Small Tea Growers (CEC, 2006).

The Social Forum of the Plantation Sector (SFPS) launched in 2005, is a key outcome of the Mumbai WSF. The changing employment relations with restrictive collective agreements as well as the rise of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism are key reasons for the emergence of the SFPS. While the Colombo based labour movement and civil society activists are yet to organise a similar network, the initiative of the SFPS depict new possibilities for
strengthening union alliances with the community in order to reinforce their movement dimension. While union-community alliances are significant, union capacities to mobilise suggests cultural innovations capable of strengthening women’s voices. With women carrying the ‘triple burden’ of labour in the plantations, it is not surprising that most women union members are often unaware of the name of their own union (Kandasamy, 2002:54). The dominant unions continue to represent women primarily as mothers, wives and daughters rather than as citizens and workers. Moreover, these male biased practices continue to downplay the violence against women in the plantations (Phillips, 2002). While union-community alliances reflect new union strategies, transforming male biased practices is crucial for mobilising not only women workers, but also the Hill Country Tamils as a community.

Conclusion

The strategies of plantation unions in Sri Lanka illustrate compromises that have maintained the marginalisation of Hill Country Tamils as well as women workers. These compromises with neo-liberal policies and Sinhala Buddhist nationalism have reinforced authoritarian state forms repressing worker struggles. In contesting political unionism, a few plantation unions are building new alliances with other civil society actors. While these alliances are significant for gaining union autonomy from political parties, transforming male biased practices within unions is also critical for mobilising both women workers as well as the Hill Country Tamil community.

References


