

CONTRIBUTION OF *EELAKESARI* IN SOUTH INDIAN ESTATE WORKERS PROBLEMS – A HISTORICAL VIEW

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Abstract

In the middle part of 20th Century with the reformation of Donoughmore constitution Mr.N.Ponaiyah introduced the Tamil news paper the Eelakesari in Sri Lanka which was based in Jaffna. This paper explained clearly the activities of Tamil communities to the people. This is an important document which helps to know about the history of Sri Lanka Tamils. Further this news paper had the keen interest in Sri Lankan Tamils' political economical and social development. At the same time this news paper had its contribution to show the socio economic and political rights of the South Indian estate workers who spoke Tamil and lived in groups were enchantedly invited to Sri Lanka as slaves by the British to work in Sri Lankan estates.

It explains clearly, the South Indian estate workers' arrival, in justice given to them, imposing state control against them and the rebels which were done by the workers. The main purpose of this article is to analyse the contribution made by Eelakesari Tamil news paper for the sake of the estate workers and during that period the estate workers' problems were arised in high level. This article analyses on the basis of social and historical approach. The Eelakesari Tamil Paper was used mostly as the primary source in this research. The contemporary news papers and books written in Jaffna and articles were used as secondary sources.

The Arrival of Eelakesari

On 30th June 1930 a weekend news paper called The *Eelakeasri* published at Chunnakam and it had done its services for 28 years to show the political and socio economic growth of Sri Lanka. The so called First edited paper in the region called *Eelakesari* had the followings as its aims. They are eradicate the class variation and create the national integrity. This news paper had the unique state in the world and it had never divide the political affairs and it joined the political affairs with the environment of art, literature and cultural tradition. The political, socio economic factors were the supporters of the origin of this *Eelakesari* news paper. This paper arised for the purpose of showing the defects in Donoughmore constitution, untouchable that were found in Tamil society, superstitious believes, the behaviours like killing, economic state of Jaffna, Malayala tobacco trade, agriculture, and eradicate the defects in the incomes of Malaya trade etc, and this news paper had achieved the success in its aims.

The Displacement of South Indian Workers

In 1820 a certain society people brought from South India to Sri Lanka by the British to do the work in coffee estates, they were called estate workers (Vedavalli, L.1994, p.08) and also these people were called as Indian Tamils. The estate workers were brought in groups after the invasion of Kandian Kingdom by British in 1815 to work in the coffee and tea estate. Really the British in 19th century had some aims to promote the countries which were come under control of them like Sri Lanka, India and other common wealth countries. This economic aims are the main reasons to the displacement of workers in large number from India to other countries(Santhirasegaram,S.2001, p.02).

During this period especially in most parts of South India the famine was seen in village sides, which were doing the agriculture as their main job. Due to that reason there were no difficulties were seen in brought to these people to Sri Lanka. The people brought to Sri Lanka in different periods were settled in most parts of the hill country. The British were interested in cinnamon even though they gave up the cinnamon cultivation and they paid the keen interest in coffee due to some reasons. These are the down fall of coffee cultivation in west Indian islands, increasing of coffee drinkers in British, the proper Weather condition and suitable landscape to do the coffee cultivation in rilanka(Jandendrieson,I.H.1953, p.18)The British administrators and officers were provided the investment to this cultivation.

The Estate Workers Problem on the View of Eelakesari

During the period of *Eelakesari* publication the South Indian workers problem is one of the main problems. The problems of South Indian workers continued even though the life expectancy period of *Eelakesari* was over. This news paper had allocated a separate page to focus the problems faced by the workers to the outside world. The majority politicians had not take in to consideration about the increasing arrival of workers in the early period. The Sinhala people helped to create the coffee estate by doing the activities like deforestation, cutting trees etc. (Ibid,p.19). But they would not like to live in the under control of British. So we can say the Ceylonese had accepted the traditional rural life. According to British, they had invited the workers because this class of people can do hard work for the small amount of wages.

Until 1930 these people were not seen as the dangerous people to the leaders of majorities. At the same time we cannot say these workers did not get the opposement from the leaders. When in 1902 Anagarigatharmapala pointed out about Indian workers he says in British period the low caste people from South India were admitted to our Island (Jeyawardana, Kumari, 1987, p.49). Generally the Kandian farmers considered these people as “*coolies*”

In the latter part the majority politicians thought that these people might be arouse as the enemies of highly influenced politicians and for that purpose the majority politicians were involved in the opposing activities of the arrival of estate workers. The efforts of controlling the arrival of these workers and their rights were made through the implementation of the following laws. They are citizenship act in 1948 India - Pakistan citizenship act in 1949 Parliament act in 1949. And the Only Sinhala act in 1956 etc. (Ibid). For that reason the workers were affected by physically and mentally. The initial stage activities of them were implemented in high level after 1920s. The racial propogandas were taken by the majority politicians against the political rights of the workers (Ludowvck, E.F.C1966, p.220). Any way the direct activities against the control of Indian oppositions. Were arisen in the following fields. They are trade, state administration, city field workers and political etc. (Mohanraj,p.66)

In 1935 on words the *Eelakesari* news paper began to publish the news about Indian workers with the high interest. During this period the minister D.S.Senanayake brought a law called land bill. Through this law the obstructions were brought in purchasing and using the lands by the estate workers. So that reason the *Eelakesari* pointed out defects in the law of land bill against the workers through one of its publication and it was pointed out its idea as follows.

“ Sri Lankans when they themselves cannot make their land cultivatable, they are willing to seek the help of Indians very much we can not approve of creating hurdles to the Indians buying land for their livelihood”
(*Eelakesari*,1935,Feb.3,p.06)

In 1936 the Sri Lankan government had created a union to make the inquires and submit the reports about the arrival of Indians. In this instance the *Eelakesari* had made a question about the activities of Sri Lankan government against the workers that is the news paper was question like this why the Sri Lankan state had failed to consider British as the alieners (*Eelakesari*,1937 Jan 24,p.08). Here we can point out that the Indians did not work only hill country side in Ceylon. They engaged in harbour works and trade activities in most parts of the country including the parts of vanni. So the activities taken by the state against the workers generally affect all Indians. During that period regarding the controlling of South Indians has two different ideas in Northern part. The Jaffna union had arranged the meetings to support the arrival of Indians and the political leaders like S.J.V.Selvanayagam had delivered the speeches in Parliament by denoting the injustice implemented to the workers (National state assembly,1972 oct.03,pp.729-730). Even though we can identify through *Eelakesari* news paper, some

Tamil politicians and an organization called Chundikkuli maha Saba had made their propagandas against the estate workers. (*Eelakesari*, 1937 Feb 14, p.05).

According to *Eelakesari* it has not the rigid state about the increasing arrival of Indians. Because its publication in 1937 denotes about the arrival of estate workers as follows.

“Consider the benefits of Ceylonese avoid to come the disadvantage to our country. The further arrival of Indians should be controlled. Without the aid of Indians we cannot develop the wealth” (Ibid, p.08).

Really the *Eelakesari's* view seems to be instability policy of control the arrival of south Indians. The *Eelakesari* and its editor Mr.N.Ponaiyah were closely had a connection with Tamil Nadu for long period. At the same time this paper was acted interestly in patriotism and national integrity. These reasons might be the background of its instability. In considering *Eelakesari* if we say briefly it had not failed to criticize the injustice made for the workers and at the same time it was opposed the arrival of the workers.

Rural Laws and other Activities

The Rural law was enforced by government to control Indian labourers activities in Sri Lanka. In 1937 this law was enforced by S.W.R.D Bandaranayake, the minister of internal affairs of that period. According to the former rural law which was implemented in 1889, the ethnic groups like Europeans, Burghers and Indians had no rights to participate in these organizations. The reason was said that these people were closely interconnected with rural life. This law was revised in 1957 and it said the levies should be recovered to gardens which were located in rural parts the rights should be given to Burghers and the rights should not be given to Indians. Some efforts were made to deviate hill country Tamils from through these local government elections. Further the purpose of this law was the deviation of these societies and treat them as new slavers under the administration of estate (Op.cit.Mohanraj p.78). Anyway the main purpose of this law was to control the Indians to participate in the rural union elections. At this time the *Eelakesari* said its views as follows. The Sri Lankan government had to provide voting rights to the Indians who had Sri Lankan as their own living place (*Eelakesari*, 1937 Nov 28.p.08).

Some oppositions were appeared for against these type of law. Many Indian unions situated in Sri Lanka had denounced to the Sri Lankan government owing to confiscation of descent of Indians rights. The *Eelakesari* says that if this law will be implemented many Indians will loose their jobs and further it said that do not send Indians again (*Eelakesari*, 1939.Apr02, p.06). Further, we can know some information through *Eelakesari*, persons those who appointed in government offices after 1st April 1934 on the basis of daily wages will be dismissed within one month prior notice from 1st of July 1939. This was put up in the notice board from June 1956. (*Eelakesari*, 1939 June 11.p.03). In a Stage the Sri Lankan government had decided to recover the levies from Sri Lankans who had bid the Indian workers to do the works. This activity was objected by the *Eelakesari* and focused the following news to the world.

“Is there any other act of injustice than this should the Sinhalese try to satisfy their racial prejudice by denying all rights of citizens. It is condemnable that the government should impose” (Ibid,p.08)

Sri Lankan leaders were engaged in some activities like Indian rationalization and storming of labourers after the period of 1930s (Robini, 1993, p.15). Political dispute was arisen between two countries in this regard and it affected business agreement. New agreements and current agreements were not able to renew in view of this dispute.

According to the *Eelakesari's* Colombo reporter's statement 'minister S.W.R.D Bandaranayake had planned to leave the labourers from the country, inducing boycotts against shops which belong to foreigners, fund collection for war, recruitment of forces, and not recruit the persons for job who were

not belong to Sri Lanka' This paper had denounced the above said activities. It put forwards its views as follows.

“If the impulsive and angry Sinhalese mass without minding the consequences, resort to such boycotts, we can only expect the terrible consequences” (Eelakesari, 1941Mar 23.p.01).

The origin of Sri Lanka - India Congress

This organization was started on 15th July 1939 in order to represent Indian people who live in Sri Lanka. This organization was formed in collaboration with the organizations like Serva union and Marxist Indian board etc (Thevarajah,P.1985,p.233). The main purpose of this organization was to monitor welfare facilities of Indian people who live in Sri Lanka.

This paper appreciates the origin of this organization and at the same time it did not failed to denounce the people who speak class disputes from in this organization. A denouncement was put forwarded when the meeting of organization was held in Nuwaraeliya, where the workers treated badly than the animals. This paper criticize as follows, that every year the summits are arranging, criticize on the Sri Lankan people and it is the job of Indians. (Eelakesari, 1946may05, p.01)

In 1941 a workers' union had formed after the formation of Sri Lankan - Indian congress (Malini, K, 1992, p.78). In 1953 the Sri Lankan – Indian congress had changed its name as Sri Lankan democratic congress. Any way in 1957 owing to the deviation of this organization it was failed.

Universal Suffrage

The right of suffrage was given to 4 percentage of educated and wealthy people before the reformation of Donoughmore constitution. When the Indian workers had not got the rights. Any way two people were appointed to take care the welfare of the workers in the legislative council. In1931 the estate workers had got the rights of voting. For this purpose the argument were held in and outside of the legislative council. At last they had decided to give the voting rights to the people with some restrictions. According to this law, the particular person should live or born in Sri Lanka for at least 5 years. This law further pointed out, during this period a Person who couldn't live outside of the country for more than 8 months (Jeyawarkana, Kumari, 1987, p.69).

There were so many reasons for the opposition of Sinhala leaders to give the voting rights to this people. They had expected that most of the Sinhalese people lived in Kandy, so that their voting strength will decrease in that area. The Sinhala leaders believed if an Indian Tamil competes with them, there are many chances will occur for his selection. According to the census of 1931, the population of estate had contained 75686 Sinhalese and 69308 Tamils. Further according to Donoughmore constitution approximately 100,000 persons had got the voting right(Ludowyk, E.F.C P.220). The *Eelakesari* published the ideas prescribed by D.S.Senanayake in the legislative council about the workers voting rights, as follows.

“Sinhalese were the unlucky communities. Their nature of generosity was refused. They were misunderstood. I did not believe that no other communities in the world sacrifice themselves for the sake of others like Sinhalese” (Eelakesari, 1940 Sep 05,p.04).”

In 1936 1,45000 persons and in 1959 2,25000 persons had got the right for casting votes. Likewise the hill country side estate workers' strength had arised and in 1941 the government had decided to conduct the general election and at the same time its aim was to control the right of casting votes of Indians. In this stage the *Eelakesari* had pointed out its ideas as follows.

“we cannot accept the unwanted restrictions of getting voting rights to Indians. The rights should be given like other class of people to all who live in Sri Lanka by descent”. (Ibid)

In 1948 the estate workers had engaged in a boycott in large scale. Approximately 85,000 people had involved in this boycott. This boycott had arisen due to the purchasing of Urulivelli plantation by the state and this was happened due to the act of get rid of the Indian workers from the plantation. The *Eelakesari* had criticized the act as follows, Senanayake and his comrades had built the castles in the air by having the unlimited believe in European imperialism instead of having the friendship with the neighbouring nearest and approaching the independence country (*Eelakesari*,1948 Dec05,p.06) Laws of Franchise.

After the independence of Sri Lanka the Sri Lankan Parliament had created 3 acts regarding the Citizen.

1. In 1948 the Act of no 18 the Act of Sri Lankan Citizenship Act
2. In 1949 the Act of no 3 the Act of India Pakistan Citizenship Act
3. In 1967 the Act of no 14 the Act of India - Sri Lanka Agreement(Athavan,1967,p.27).

These acts had enforced several conditions. According to this law, if a person wants to get the Citizen his/her father or grandfather or fore father should be born in Sri Lanka and If a person have not been born in Sri Lanka his/her father or grandfather or fore father must have been born in Sri Lanka.(Ibid)

Really these acts seem to affect the Indians who were living in Sri Lanka. The national right was refused in first time to the people who had the Citizen before, in front of the people who lived in Sri Lanka for several years and disconnected the relationship with India. According to the put forwarded law the traditional Citizen and registered Citizen were seen as rigid and it was considered as the barrier. According to this act in 1947 8 members were seen in the Parliament but in 1952 no one was remained. Here we can pointed out the Tamil leaders did not unanimously show their opposition when the government had taken the one sided activity.

So the *Elakesari* news paper pointed out this bill as the law of repatriation of the Indian workers. In the meantime trade minister Mr.C.Sundaralingam had asked the Parliament to make the alternation in this bill but it was rejected by the Parliament and he was resigned from his post. The *Eelakesari* had supported this and published the speech made by Mr.C.Sundaralingam in the board of representatives. (*Eelakesari*,1949Oct18,p.01). Approximately 700000 workers had affected by this activity. *Eelakesari* had shown its opponent regarding the law of franchise as follows.

“Whatever the justifications the government may give, the steps they have taken on the citizenship issue is wrong. There should not be any difficulty in registering those born in Sri Lanka as considering it as their mother country, as citizens of that country. If it is not decided and acted upon quickly, there will be great agitations and conflicts soon” (*Eelakesari*, 1952 Apr27, p.04).

This bill was not only affected the Indian Tamils but also it affected the Sri Lanka people who lived in Malaya and it was very difficult to get the franchise in Sri Lankan when the Sri Lankan child was born in Malaya. After two years later the implementation of this law approximately 500 people were registered as Ceylonese. Most of the Indians had lost their voting right when the general election was held in 1952. Further the people who were eligible to pay their vote had also lost their names from the voters list. The government has decided to conduct the election on the basis of the voters list in 1950. This news paper had proclaimed this act was an activity of conspiracy and it had given its suggestion to add the missing names of the persons very soon (*Elakesari* 1952 Apr 20 P.01)

Controlling of Foreign Exchange

After 1930 there was a feeling of fear seen among the Sinhalese leaders and this feeling of fear was continued after the independence of Sri Lanka. The *Eelakesari* says it is not a proofable fear and this

Paper explains this through the editor's headlines with prophecy as follows.

“Why make such a fuss in this pretty matter? Why should Indians annex Sri Lanka with India.....? Is Sri Lanka a resourceful country? By annexing Sri Lanka, India would not get any benefit..... It is not desirable for Sri Lankan leaders to understand Sri Lanka Indians noble and well- intentioned policies” (Elakesari 1949 May 01P.06)

The Sri Lankan government has an aim to get rid of the Indians from Sri Lanka and so it bid the pressures. The foreign exchange to Sri Lankan Indian people is one of them. The currency control system of 1949 made the Indians desperate. *Eelakesari* warned that this would affect the relationship between two countries. The following questions had been asked in the application form which had been designed for Indians desirous of sending money to their next kin. (*Elakesari*, 1954May 09, p.01) The application form which was designed for this purpose had questioned like this.

- The income of the people of Indian origin
- The place where they work in India
- The reasons to leave the job in India
- If they paid income tax there, the evidence of paying income tax.

The barriers were implemented to Indians. Even though there were seen no barriers for the Europeans who lived in Ceylon. This was criticized by *Eelakesari* (*Elakesari* 1954Jun 20, p.01).

The Efforts of Solution

During the publication of *Eelakesari* there were so many efforts of solutions made for the problems of Indian estate workers. Among them, there were so many efforts were seen as unfulfilled one and changed them as country less people. In 1939 Indian Prime minister Nehru came to Sri Lanka and discussed with the Sri Lankan leaders about the Sri Lankan Indians' long term problem. The importance was given for the two solutions.

1. Who had the quality of getting Sri Lankan residence among the 8,00,000 Indians in Sri Lanka.
2. Which type of people can add into the category of Sri Lankan (Kodikara,S.U,1965,p.102).

These talks were ended in failure so that the Indian government had prohibited the arrival of estate workers to Sri Lanka. In 1954 the talks were held between Nehru and Kotalavala about the estate workers. And they have identified the following ideas during the talks.

1. According to the law of India-Pakistania citizen the registration of the person should be fulfilled within two years
2. The voters register should be maintained for 10 years.
3. The persons who failed to register in Sri Lanka should be induced to apply for Indian register.

These restrictions were restricted to the Indians who lived in Sri Lanka, but at the same time there were no controls on Europeans in Sri Lanka. This contrast was pointed out as discrimination by this news paper (*Elakesari* 1957Feb 15P.06).

Through *Eelakesari* we can know about the agreement and the problems arised during the implementation of this agreement.

“Agreement Did not give Permanent solution to Indo – Sri Lankan tangle. It seems there is difference of opinion between to countries in considering the condition of Indians in Sri Lanka and resolving the issue” (Eelakesari, 1957 Feb15, p.06).

Eelakesari prescribed the state of agreement had implemented after two years later as follows.

“The Sri Lankan – Indian agreement had created and implemented in previous year and it seems to approach its ending state” (bid).

There were so many agreements and talks had seen in between the states in period to period during the period of publication of this news paper. After the publication was over this was continued.

Conclusion

Indian estate workers’ problems were considered the main problem during the period of the publication of the *Eelakesari*. These people were controlled by economic and political did. In the early part the majority politicians not show the opposing to the arrival of estate workers. But after some periods later they thought these people might be changed as competitors against them in political and they were engaged in the above said activities. During this stage the news papers like *Eelakesari*, the workers’ unions and some political leaders were come forward to give their voice for the sake of the estate workers. The talks and dialogues were continued after the life expectancy period was over to *Eelakesari* paper. It had done its work to show the problems of estate workers to the world. This paper had commenced the injustice against the Indians and also at the same time it had pointed out the necessity of limitation of increasing arrival of the workers.

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