

Land fragmentation in rural Sri Lanka: A Sociological analysis of a Southern Sri Lankan village

L.D. Sarath Vitharana¹

Land fragmentation is one of major social issues in rural Sri Lanka and this problem emerged under the British rule. However, the gravity of this problem is continuing in current rural society of Sri Lanka due to various reasons. The main objective of this study is to explore the nature of land fragmentation in rural Sri Lanka in order to recognize its consequences over a number of social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental issues.

Under the influence of colonial land policies that enabled Europeans to encroach the virgin land for introducing commercial plantation (The Crown encroachment Land Ordinance in 1840, Grain Tax in 1885 and The Waste Land Ordinance in 1897), land ownership of indigenous people was strongly threatened and changed. Meantime, local elite, enriched under the colonial power, crossed the threshold of commercial plantation and they mainly participated in low country commercial plantation. Their direct and opprobrious activities led to enclose and narrow down the land ownership of villagers. Hence, villagers were forced to limit their space and live in a small plot of land. Ownership of land has been considered as the most significant symbol of social affluence in Sri Lankan society, because, land was the main source of gaining revenue and social recognition. Hence, people tried to acquire even a small plot of land. Population growth and social changes which took place during the post-colonial period have escalated the problem further. In this historical background, the present study is focused on the patterns of land alienation and its impact in the current rural society of Sri Lanka.

The focused study area, village Ehalakanda, which was directly affected by commercial plantation initiated by local elite, is situated in Pasgoda Divisional Secretariat in the Matara district. In this study, historical method and case study method were employed. Land fragmentation has been identified as a severe issue that the village community had to cope with for a long period. This situation has directly affected number of socio-economic and environmental issue such as decrease of agricultural productivity, deforestation, and desertification. In addition, since the Independence, there is a habit of encroaching on government and privately owned lands by politically aligned gangs. Apart from that, land fragmentation also has contributed to increase of the number of land disputes among the villagers and defuncting of social integrity of the rural society. Obviously, an ultimate consequence of land fragmentation is the increase of the level of poverty among the rural society.

Key Words: Land fragmentation; Rural society; Commercial plantation; Land Ownership

¹ Department of Sociology, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. E-mail:lvitharana@yahoo.com