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The Kangany System in the Plantations of South India : A Study in the Colonial Mode of Production

S.Suresh Kumar

1.1 The objective of this paper is to study the linkages between colonialism and modes of production and its influence upon the economy and society in general, especially in determining the nature of capitalism in India. The hypothesis is whether the colonial mode of production can be treated as a distinct and discrete social formation or a mere transitional process in the emergence of a capitalist mode of production. The study focuses on the *Kangani* system that prevailed in the plantations of South India prior to independence. The *Kanganies* were the principal agents of recruitment of labour for plantations in South India, the other agents of recruitment of labour being the estate gangs.¹

1.2 Many historical factors inherent in the colonial system had conspired to bring into existence the *Kangany* System. In founding the plantations the planters faced many problems. Firstly, the areas most suited for tea cultivation were covered with thick unhealthy forests which had to be cleared. Secondly, most suitable places for the establishment of plantations were in areas where labour supply was sparse. A high wage rate would possibly have induced more workers to migrate to these areas, but the planters were not willing to pay these workers well. It is in this context that the *Kangany* System came to be introduced.²

1.3 A special feature of the plantations was that it required a large resident labour force consisting of men, women and children. The initial attempts to hire the locals, particularly tribals, by the pioneer planters ended in a dismal failure. Some of the recruits died in transit and in the estates, other fled away.³ These conditions might have compelled the Englishmen to think in terms of something like the Zamindari System which was successfully implemented about a century ago. The result was the Free Contractors System. In the Assam tea plantations these contractors were known as *Sardaris*. A variant of the Sardari System obtained in South Indian Plantations was the *Kangany* System. The *Kanganies* like their counterparts in the foodcrops production, the Zamindars, formed the chief instruments of British Colonialism. The ingenuity of the colonists found its full play in the evolution of the *Kangany* System on the patterns of the Zamindari System. Initially most of the

Kanganies were drawn from the ranks of the estate labourers themselves, unlike the Zamindars.⁴ But later the position became heritable and thus *Kanganies* belonged to the same or related families. In an estate at Ponmudy in Trivandrum the members of a family from Tirunelveli were the *Kanganies* for generations till it was abolished in 1956.⁵

1.4 The Kanganies usually received remuneration at the rate of 10-15% on the checkroll earnings of the labourers supplied.⁶ The higher commission was given for increased attendance of the workers, or if the *Kanganies* had received no advances to be given to workers or if he had brought at least 80% of the workers he had agreed to.⁷ Besides, the *Kanganies* received remuneration proportionate to the amount of work done by their labourers. The *Kanganies* were given the freedom to dictate the terms of settlement with the labourers recruited by them and under one pretext or other the *Kanganies* withheld the payments to the labourers. Thus in South India, a plantation labourer belonged more to the *Sardar of Kanganies* than to the estate. The annual settlement was just in paper. In effect, the labourer was condemned to stay there till his death.⁸ The *Kanganies* usually took up contract work from the managers especially for weeding and in order to make better profits employed women and children on the work and extracted more labour from them. As the settlement of wages was affected through the *Kanganies* they would retain the whole amount under one pretext or other.⁹

1.5 Typical of a capitalist production system, the role of the Government was supportive rather than interventionist, providing the conditions which were necessary for the economy to flourish. The then Travancore Government lavished funds for the creation of infrastructural facilities in plantations.¹⁰ The British Government came in with various legislations like the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act of 1859, Estate Migration Act etc. In fact, the former Act was intended to prevent the captive labourers from fleeing from the plantations. It specifically provided the plantations with the power to prosecute defaulting coolies.¹¹ How much was the State in collusion with the capitalists in perpetuating this tyranny can be well gauged from the reply given by UPASI (United Planters Association of South India) to a questionnaire prepared by the Labour Investigation Committee of the Government of India in 1945. "No Law has been passed to prohibit the employment of children under ten on plantations".....No special machinery has been set up in South India to safeguard the interests of workers in regard to recruitment and repatriation.....There are no wage Boards for the planting industry.....Estates do not maintain any service or registration cards of the workers nor any age statistics. Retirement is usually the result of infirmity arising from old age".

1.6 Even though some estates did have a written agreement with the *Kanganies* stipulating that the labourers supplied would work for ten months by and large there was no legal contract entered into between the labourer and the employer.¹² This precluded any sort of formal relationship between the planter and the labourer. However, it provided for hierarchical relationship which gave it a feudal outlook.

A chief feature of the *Kangany* recruited labour force in Travancore was that around 80% of the labour came from the neighbouring Tamil Districts of Madurai and Tirunelveli, one of the major recruiting centres for plantation.¹³ This meant much cheaper labour was available outside Kerala and the Planting Companies took advantage of such a situation.

1.7 In an essay on colonial Asia Breman noted "outsiders were far easier to bring and keep under control. Labourers coming from elsewhere are often not familiar with the local customs and language. They are defenceless in the face of the power exercised over them. This vulnerability is exacerbated by a system of diversified recruitment among the migrant population".¹³ The recruitment of indentured labour from outside the region was thus due to colonial compulsions and a miniature of it is obtained in the plantations of Travancore.

1.8 These features of the *Kangany* System defy an easy categorisation in terms of capitalism or feudalism. The type of economic organization obtained in plantations had most of the features of the capitalist system: (1) private ownership and control of the economic instruments of production i.e. capital, (2) the gearing of economic activity for making profits, (3) a market framework that regulated this activity and (4) the appropriation of profits by the owners of the capital.¹⁴ In a capitalist system the labour is by workers who are free agents, but here we get a lord-serf relationship.¹⁵

1.9 Since plantation was a component of the socio-economic formation in which it existed the *Kangany* System was allowed to exist and was protected because of the larger socio-economic system viz., the colonial system. As India became independent, the Government passed many laws protecting the plantation workers and provided them with a degree of security, the most important of which was the Plantation Labour Act of 1951. The *Kangany* System itself was abolished in 1956. The *Kanganies* became supervisors. It was not merely a change in nomenclature but a change which had far-reaching implications. The service conditions of the supervisors and labourers were regulated and their relationships were defined in concrete legal terms. Most of the vestiges of the old feudal pattern vanished as a consequence

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