

Constructing a plantation labour force: The plantation-village nexus in south India

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Plantation agriculture has commonly been cast as a universally homogeneous system of production. In seeking to nominate the definitive features of plantations as production units, William O. Jones' description has provided a starting point for a number of later writers. Jones nominates 'the way in which the factors of production, primarily management and labour are combined' as the primary, distinguishing feature of plantations. According to Jones, plantations differ from other forms of agricultural production because they employ only a few, skilled supervisor-managers to closely direct large numbers of labourers 'whose principal skill is to follow orders'.¹ Sounding a broader note, G.L. Beckford has argued that the distinctiveness of plantation agriculture has also arisen from the historical circumstances which led to its establishment by Europeans in tropical colonies. Beckford stresses the international character of plantations: while they commonly employed labour imported from other tropical areas, their origins, export markets, sources of capital and enterprise all lay in Western, capitalist economies.² These features have served to set plantation production apart from subsistence cultivation which was characteristic of the colonies in which many plantations were initially established. This rigid division has been noted by Dick Kooiman who comments that, 'Handbooks on Asian History do not stop reminding us that plantations are not local plants, but foreign implantations.'³

The view that colonial plantation agriculture was distinctly different and separate from indigenous cultivation in Asia has also derived much impetus

¹ William O. Jones, 'Plantations', in David L. Sills, ed., *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 1968, Vol. 12, p. 156.

² G.L. Beckford, 'The Economics of Agricultural Resource Use and Development in Plantation Economies', in Henry Bernstein, ed., *Underdevelopment and Development: The Third World Today*, Harmondsworth, 1976, pp. 117-19.

³ Dick Kooiman, 'Plantations in Southern Asia: Indigenous Plants and Foreign Implantations', *South Asia*, New Series, Vol. 15 (1), 1992, p. 53.

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from some explanations of underdevelopment in the Third World. According to the Dual Economy school, colonial economies can be neatly divided into two economic sectors. Plantations and other colonial industries were part of the Western, capitalist, export orientated sector which was characterised by its dynamic and progressive nature. In contrast, the Asiatic, subsistence, domestic sector is said to have possessed social and cultural traits which inhibited its own economic development.

Empirical studies of industrial development in South Asia have already established a more complex picture than that presented by the Dual Economy school. The importance of pre-capitalist, Indian mores in determining social and contractual relations in colonial enterprise has been clearly demonstrated in Dipesh Chakrabarty's study of the Bengal jute industry,⁴ and acknowledged to a lesser degree across a broad band of colonial enterprise.⁵ In colonial labour markets, Gail Omvedt has asserted that the pre-capitalist nature of Indian agriculture remained 'and influenced the forms of exploitation existing in factory and plantation sectors.'⁶ With respect to plantation agriculture, both Kooiman and Bandarage have indicated that plantation and village are closely interlinked.⁷ Kooiman, in particular, has pointed out that while many of the sources on which historians rely attribute the growth of planting enterprise to European initiative and perseverance, commercial coffee production in both Travancore and Ceylon preceded European development of the industry. Moreover, many small-scale producers were engaged in both subsistence cultivation and the production of coffee for export, and they therefore 'straddled both sectors that the dual economy had so carefully set apart'.⁸ Kooiman's conclusion that 'many of the barriers to (indigenous) entrepreneurship came from the supposedly "modernizing presence" of the plantations and the colonial state'⁹ runs counter to both the segregation of Western and Asian economic sectors by Dual Economy school theorists and to their argument that the domestic sector was solely responsible for its own lack of development.

⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal 1890-1940*, New Delhi, 1989.

⁵ Ranajit Das Gupta, 'Structure of the Labour Market in Colonial India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Special No. 16 (44-46), 1981, pp. 1788-89; Eamon Murphy, *Unions in Conflict: A Comparative Study of Four South Indian Textile Centres, 1919-1939*, New Delhi, 1981, pp. 3-4; Richard Newman, *Workers and Unions in Bombay, 1918-1929*, Canberra, 1981, p. 1.

⁶ Gail Omvedt, 'Migration in Colonial India: The Articulation of Feudalism and Capitalism by the Colonial State', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 7(2), January 1980, p. 203.

⁷ Kooiman, 'Plantations in Southern Asia'; Ashoka Bandarage, *Colonialism in Sri Lanka: the Political Economy of the Kandyan Highlands, 1833-86*, Berlin, 1983, p. 325.

⁸ Kooiman, 'Plantations in Southern Asia', p. 56.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

This paper contributes to an understanding of the interrelationship between the Western and domestic sectors in colonial economies by examining the growth of economic and contractual ties between British tea plantations in the Nilgiri hills of southern India and those Tamil villages which came to supply the bulk of the plantation labour force by the end of the nineteenth century. The development of capitalistic enterprise in the form of tea plantations in the Nilgiri district did not automatically engender the rise of a modern wage labour force permanently committed to the new workplace. Rather, this new labour force had to be deliberately created by planters from surrounding communities still steeped in pre-capitalist production relations. Although plantation labour supply always lagged behind the growing needs of an expanding planting sector in the Nilgiri hills, the planters' success in creating a large-scale, circularly migrating labour force was made possible by the unequal interrelationship of village and plantation economies and by the interplay of their respective mores of labour recruitment.

The development of Nilgiri district as a region of plantation agriculture began in the mid-nineteenth century. Large tracts of virgin forest and sparsely populated grasslands were cleared by British planters and cultivated with coffee trees. In establishing and cultivating their estates it is apparent that the planters were initially able to secure local tribal labour to meet their demands. However, as in most areas of colonial plantation agriculture, the local population was insufficient to meet the planters' labour needs. From 1846 coffee planters on the Wynaad plateau,¹⁰ north-west of the hills proper, were dependent upon labourers from the Ernaad taluk of Malabar, from Coimbatore and Salem districts and from Mysore state to open their estates.¹¹ By 1865 the Collector of the Nilgiris reported that approximately 80 per cent of the estate labour in the district came from Mysore.¹² Overall, it is likely that Mysoreans remained predominant among migrant workers on Nilgiri plantations until at least 1876.

This migration of plantation labour was seasonal rather than permanent. Having planted their crops at the time of the first monsoon, the labour migrated to work on the coffee estates in the Nilgiri hills until harvest time in the home village. The timing of these migratory flows altered from region to region, while the length of an individual labourer's stay on the plantation could vary from a few weeks to the full season. Coffee planters were able to readily accommodate these variations since coffee did not require the same degree of attention throughout the year. Moreover, the

¹⁰ The Wynaad region was included in Malabar until 1877. In that year it was divided between Malabar and Nilgiri districts.

¹¹ *Planting Opinion*, 21 November 1896, p. 14. See also Rhodes Morgan, 'The Wynaad', in John Shortt, ed., *The Hill Ranges of Southern India*, Part 4, 1870, pp. 60-61.

¹² *Report of the South of India Planters' Enquiry Committee*, Madras, 1896, p. 10.

peak season for coffee extended from November to March when grain harvests in the plains had already been reaped.

Although coffee remained the dominant commercial crop of the district until the twentieth century, the introduction and rapid expansion of tea cultivation from about 1860 was instrumental in shaping plantation labour relations in the area. The growth of tea estates and the widespread replanting of unprofitable coffee fields with tea after 1880, led to a rapid increase in the demand for labour. Moreover, tea production was more labour-intensive than coffee,¹³ and unlike coffee it required a year-round labour force. This increased demand for labour came at a time when the labour supply, already insufficient to meet the planters' needs, began to contract.

In the decades following the great famine of 1876 the migration of Mysorean labour to the Nilgiri hills declined. The famine itself was partly responsible since it greatly reduced the pool of available labour. As a result of the general shortage of labour within Mysore state, agricultural wages there rose dramatically. High agrarian wages allowed many a plantation labourer to become a small landholder,¹⁴ especially as uncultivated land was more readily available in Mysore after the famine.¹⁵ Nilgiri coffee growers found it increasingly difficult to match increases in agricultural wages particularly as they were beleaguered by falling prices of coffee and by the infestation of their coffee trees with the 'coffee bug', *Hemileia vastatrix*.¹⁶ Additionally, the development of the Kolar gold fields after 1881 attracted a proletarian workforce which was well paid.¹⁷ By 1891, census officials stated that the demand for labour on the Kolar gold fields and on coffee estates located within Mysore had been responsible for an overall reduction in emigration from the state.¹⁸ Similarly, in 1901 the Marikaname irrigation project employed a large number of Mysorean labourers, thereby increasing the state's capacity to utilise its own labour.¹⁹ This rapid and continuing decline in the migration of plantation labour from Mysore to the Nilgiris is evident in the Indian census statistics. Whereas in 1881 Mysorean migrants comprised more than half the total migrant population enumerated in Nilgiri district, by 1901 this proportion

¹³ L.A. Wickremeratne, 'The Establishment of the Tea Industry in Ceylon: The First Phase, c. 1870 to c. 1900', *Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies*, Vol. II (2), 1972, pp. 142-43. Wickremeratne estimates that tea cultivation required two field labourers per acre whereas coffee could be worked with less than one.

¹⁴ J. Daniel Moore, 'Plantation Development and Labour Response in Nineteenth Century Mysore', Ph.D. thesis, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1983, p. 282.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

¹⁶ C.G. Warnford Lock, ed., *Coffee: Its Culture and Commerce in all Countries*, London, 1888, p. 84; W. Francis, *The Nilgiris*, Madras District Gazetteers, Government of Madras, 1908, pp. 175-76.

¹⁷ Robert H. Elliot, *Gold, Sport and Coffee Planting in Mysore*, London, 1894, pp. 198-204.

¹⁸ *Census of British India (hereafter CBI) 1891*, Vol. XIII, Madras, 1893, pp. 202ff.

¹⁹ *CBI, 1901*, Vol. XV, Madras, 1902, p. 28.

had shrunk to less than one-quarter.²⁰ Furthermore, this trend is lent additional credibility by the findings of the South of India Planters' Enquiry Committee which calculated that Mysorean labour comprised only 38 per cent of Nilgiri plantation labour in 1896.²¹

This decline of a longstanding labour source was crucial to Nilgiri planters, and particularly affected tea growers. In order to extract maximum profits, tea planters required a sufficiently large and preferably stable labour force. Neither local tribespeople nor Mysorean labourers were suitable sources of the new tea plantation workforce since they were often primarily committed to agricultural production in their home villages. More importantly, they could not be obtained in sufficient numbers. In an attempt to satisfy the rising demand for relatively permanent plantation labour in the Nilgiri hills, planters were forced further afield to locate suitable labour pools from which the new tea plantation workforce could be moulded.

However, such labour had to be available cheaply. In the labour-intensive business of tea production, Nilgiri planters could only remain internationally competitive if the very cheapness of the labour they employed outweighed the significant disadvantages they bore in the form of higher freight charges in relation to Ceylon and Java, and in inferior quality in relation to Assam. The planters' economic position was further eroded by the government's closure of Indian mints in 1893. As the value of the rupee rose in terms of sterling exchange, the tea planters' export earnings were reduced and their international competitiveness declined. The planters petitioned the Government of India to provide them with economic relief by permitting the free fall of the rupee,²² but as this policy would have had serious repercussions for all of British India, it was never seriously contemplated. Faced with an unfavourable rate of exchange and low world prices for tea, the planters' slim profits could only be increased by lowering the costs of tea production. However, there were few cost-cutting measures available to planters. They could not, for instance, turn easily to advanced technology to reduce their outlays. Further mechanisation of tea production was difficult and in any case would have favoured the larger corporations rather than the undercapitalised individual planters who comprised the bulk of Nilgiri growers. Significantly, the drive to reduce expenditure coincided with the planters' rapid development of the Tamil speaking plains of Coimbatore and adjacent districts as a labour-recruitment zone.

²⁰ *CBI, 1881*, Vol. II, Madras, 1886, Tables X, XI, p. 173; *CBI, 1891*, Vol. XIV, Madras, 1893, Table XI, p. 150; *CBI, 1901*, Vol. XV-A, Madras, 1902, Table XI, p. 123.

²¹ *Report of the South of India Planters' Enquiry Committee*, Appendix IX, p. 94.

²² *Indian Currency Commission, 1898, Minutes of Evidence taken before the Committee to Inquire into the Indian Currency, together with an Analysis of Evidence*, Part I, Sessional Papers of the British House of Commons, 1898 Session, Vols. lxi (c. 9037), Readex Microprint Edition, p. 460.

However, there was little to attract plains labour to permanently commit itself to work on plantations in the hills. For example, early attempts to retain migrating labour in the Nilgiris were often undermined by environmental conditions. The climate of the Nilgiris was commonly recognised as 'too cold and wet for the natives of the low countries.'²³ Aside from bitter cold and a prolonged, severe monsoon season to which they were unaccustomed, labourers also stood a high risk of contracting malaria on tea plantations, especially in the Wynaad plateau in the district's west. European residents and visitors to the Wynaad commonly claimed that the area was infested with fever.²⁴ With the growth of tea cultivation malaria became more common. The malarial 'season' began soon after the onset of the first rains. Tea estate labour was present in the hills at this time, whereas the majority of coffee workers were usually absent until June or July. This fact alone may account for the extraordinary rise in deaths due to fever in Gudalur taluk (which encompassed the Wynaad) in the early part of the twentieth century. Statistical records for the district indicate that between 1898 and 1902 fever in Gudalur caused 20 deaths per one thousand head of population.²⁵ In the quinquennium 1908–12 this rate accelerated to an average of 76 deaths per one thousand. In this period the prevalence of fever in the Wynaad was the major cause of Gudalur taluk's high death rate which ran at approximately twice the rate recorded in the two other taluks of Coonoor and Ootacamund in Nilgiri district.²⁶

Nor did plantation wages appear to provide substantial inducement to potential plantation labourers in the late nineteenth century. In this period the standard of living prevailing amongst plantation labour fell in the Nilgiri hills. Between 1898 and 1903 daily wage rates remained static but grain prices rose, even though the dire food shortages which had marked the famine years of 1896 and 1897 had disappeared. By 1903 workers on fixed wages were only able to purchase 63 per cent of the quantity of *ragi* (the major grain consumed by both Mysorean²⁷ and Tamil labour²⁸) that they had been able to buy in 1898. Similarly, their capacity to purchase rice had also been reduced to around 80 per cent of the 1898 figure.²⁹ By 1903 workers clearly had less purchasing power with regard to foodgrains than they had on average in the famine year of 1896. While Dharma Kumar

²³ E.C.P. Hull, *Coffee Planting in Southern India and Ceylon*, 2nd Edition, London, 1877, p. 25.

²⁴ See for example M.A. Handley, *Roughing it in South India*, London, 1911, p. 155.

²⁵ *Madras District Gazetteers, Statistical Appendix for the Nilgiri District*, Government of Madras, 1905, p. 4.

²⁶ *Madras District Gazetteers, Statistical Appendix for the Nilgiri District*, Government of Madras, 1915, p. 8.

²⁷ *Report on Conditions of Tea Garden Labour in the Duars of Bengal, in Madras and in Ceylon*, Shillong, 1904, p. 12.

²⁸ *Planting Opinion*, 26 June 1897, p. 389.

²⁹ All calculations in this paragraph are based on data tabulated in *Madras District Gazetteers*, 1905, p. 15.

has documented a corresponding fall in agricultural wages,³⁰ it is apparent that the purchasing power of plantation wages was declining at a much faster rate.

While the use of average rice prices reveals the long-term decline in the purchasing power of plantation labourers, it simultaneously conceals both periods and pockets of severe distress in Nilgiri district. In 1896 the district average price of *ragi* is given at 17.3 seers to the rupee, but a perusal of the planters' periodical, *Planting Opinion*, indicates that over a period of three months the price of *ragi* ranged from a low of 30 seers per rupee³¹ to a high of 11 seers to the rupee.³² With individual monthly consumption estimated at 36 seers,³³ a labourer in 1903 would have required approximately Rs 3 per month simply to purchase grain at the district's average annual price. In 1896, when daily wage rates equalled those of 1903, the actual monthly earnings of labour were reported to be no more than Rs 3 'at the outside'.³⁴ Where earnings were equal to immediate expenditure on a staple food it is obvious that any increase in the price of *ragi* above the annual average price was a critical blow to labour.

In a similar fashion, local variations in grain prices were disguised by the use of district averages. The 1900 average district price for *ragi* at 14.7 seers per rupee fails to show that in Gudalur taluk the average annual price was as low as 17.6 seers per rupee while the comparable price in Coonoor taluk was 12.8 seers per rupee.³⁵ Large differences in grain prices have also been recorded between small settlements located within a dozen miles of each other.³⁶ Similarly, on isolated estates where grain was supplied by only a few merchants, prices could be easily inflated.

The failure of Nilgiri planters to raise a workforce commensurate with their needs was also partly due to their inability to match the remuneration offered to emigrant Indian labour. Competition for labour from overseas colonies was sorely felt by Nilgiri planters, even in the nineteenth century. As early as 1874, planters in the Wynaad complained to the Governor of Madras, Lord Hobart, that:

though suffering from an increased want of labor [*sic*], we are unable to compete with settlers in other more favoured countries, who are attracting our own coolies from the very districts which should supply us, and are, moreover, able to keep them.³⁷

³⁰ Dharma Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India*, Cambridge, 1965, pp. 163-65.

³¹ *Planting Opinion*, 24 October 1896, p. 6.

³² *Ibid.*, 21 November 1896, p. 6.

³³ *Report on Conditions of Tea Garden Labour*, p. 12.

³⁴ *Planting Opinion*, 24 October 1896, p. 10.

³⁵ *Madras District Gazetteers*, Madras, 1905, p. 15.

³⁶ *Planting Opinion*, 19 December 1896, p. 6.

³⁷ India Office Library and Records (hereafter IOLR), *Madras Judicial Proceedings*, 1875, Nos. 31-36, Wynaad Planters' Association Memorial to Lord Hobart, 9 January 1874.

In Ceylon, as in the Nilgiri, the changeover from coffee to tea cultivation created an increased demand for plantation workers. This, coupled with an acceleration in public works programmes in Ceylon, affected Tamil labour catchment areas.³⁸ Between 1871 and 1901 the annual net emigration of Tamils to Ceylon rose from approximately 123,000 persons to 440,000.³⁹ In the twentieth century, Trichinopoly and the surrounding districts of Salem, Tanjore, Ramnad and Madura, provided the bulk of emigrants to Ceylon.⁴⁰ By 1902 keen competition for estate labour led recruiters in these districts to offer large advances ranging between Rs 50 and Rs 90 per person.⁴¹ Coimbatore district, which was rapidly becoming the major supplier of labour to the Nilgiris, provided only small numbers of recruits for Ceylon estates⁴² but this was only because Ceylon planters provided minimal competition for estate labour in the district. However in districts immediately east of Coimbatore, recruitment for Ceylon very probably restricted the attempts of Nilgiri planters to draw in labour from further afield. When south Indian planters conducted recruitment drives in western Trichinopoly, southern Salem and northern Madura, these campaigns produced only small numbers of recruits for the Nilgiris.⁴³ Where migrating Tamil labour had the choice between long-range destinations such as Ceylon (and after 1900, Malaya⁴⁴) and the Nilgiri hills, it clearly preferred the former.

To the potential plantation labourer, emigration to Ceylon appeared more lucrative than migration to a Nilgiri tea estate. By 1894 wage rates in Ceylon were calculated by south Indian planters to annually exceed those of Nilgiri district by an average of Rs 20 per adult male.⁴⁵ Significantly, the cost of living in Ceylon was also dramatically higher.⁴⁶ However, the information required to make such calculations, subject as they were to large local variations, would not have been available to the freshly recruited labourer. A simple statement of wage rates, rather than actual earnings, coupled with a high advance often proved sufficient inducement for

³⁸ R. Jayaraman, 'Indian Emigration to Ceylon: Some Aspects of the Historical and Social Background of the Emigrants', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (hereafter *IESHR*), Vol. IV (4), 1967, p. 326.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 325.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 333–34.

⁴¹ United Planters' Association of Southern India (hereafter UPASI), *Annual Proceedings*, 1902, pp. 44–45.

⁴² Jayaraman, 'Indian Emigration to Ceylon', p. 333.

⁴³ *CBI, 1931*, Vol. XIV, Part I, Madras, 1932, p. 81.

⁴⁴ Although south Indian labour emigrated to Malaya well before this date, it is only after 1900 that the number of emigrants increased dramatically. (Kernal Singh Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya, Some Aspects of their Immigration and Settlement, 1786–1957*, Cambridge, 1969, Appendix 1, pp. 304–5.)

⁴⁵ UPASI, *Annual Proceedings*, 1894, p. 4.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

emigration. That Ceylon tea estates were able to retain their labour may be attributed more to the impact of labour laws on the island⁴⁷ than to either superior conditions of labour or higher standards of living.

Nevertheless, the lack of attractiveness of plantation employment in the Nilgiri hills was reflected both in the actions of the plantation labour force and in its composition.

There can be no doubt that labour abscondence was a common occurrence in the Nilgiris prior to 1903. Labourers were most likely to desert estates during harvest time in the plains.⁴⁸ At this time landlords in the plains offered the highest wages for casual agricultural labour. It is likely that these wages were well in excess of plantation earnings, although the data available allow for only a rudimentary comparison. In Coimbatore district between 1898 and 1900, government officials estimated that permanent agricultural labourers received on average Rs 4 per month which was paid in second sort rice.⁴⁹ On Nilgiri tea plantations the earnings of field labourers were roughly equivalent but the purchasing power of those wages in terms of grains was probably lower since its transportation from the plains added to its price. As the earnings of casual agricultural workers were higher than those engaged permanently, it is clear that absconding tea plantation labour could earn more in the plains at harvest time than in the hills. Additionally, where wages at harvest time were paid in grain, many Tamil labourers had the opportunity to consume rice which they considered superior to *ragi*.

The readiness with which tea plantation labour deserted the Nilgiri hills, particularly during the plains' harvest season, puts paid to the planters' claim that labourers were pulled into plantation employment by high wages at the turn of the twentieth century. When alternative employment was available in the plains, tea estate labour frequently absconded. Similarly, planters experienced increased difficulty in recruiting labour in years when the plains' harvest had been abundant.⁵⁰ If conditions of labour and real earnings in the tea fields had been sufficiently attractive to draw agricultural labourers out of their home villages, then the plantation labour supply would have been more constant and absconding labour less frequent.

⁴⁷ A comprehensive coverage of labour law pertaining to Ceylon plantations is contained in Vijaya Samaraweera, 'Masters and Servants in Sri Lankan Plantations: Labour Laws and Labour Control in an Emergent Export Economy', *IESHR*, Vol. 18 (2), 1981, pp. 123-58.

⁴⁸ IOLR, *Madras Judicial Proceedings*, 1876, No. 26, Secretary, Wynaad Planters' Association to Chief Secretary to Government, 6 March 1876.

⁴⁹ Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India*, pp. 163-64.

⁵⁰ IOLR, *Madras Judicial Proceedings*, 1879, No. 98, H.B. Winterbottom, Secretary, Wynaad Planters' Association to Chief Secretary to Government, 14 June 1878; IOLR, *Annual Reports on the Workings of the Madras Planters' Labour Law of 1903*, 1908, Government Order (G.O.) No. 589, L.E. Buckley, District Magistrate, Nilgiris, to Chief Secretary to Government, 12 February 1908.

The composition of the plantation labour force in the Nilgiris also reflected the low rates of remuneration offered on tea estates. The census statistics compiled in Nilgiri district provide a rare opportunity to examine the age and caste structure of an internally migrating labour force. This examination is possible because the boundary of the administrative district largely corresponded to the limits of tea cultivation in the region, plantation employment was the only significant employer of migrating labour in the district and prior to the introduction of British rule, the plateau had been occupied exclusively by tribal peoples. The results of the Indian censuses of 1891, 1901 and 1931 afford a comparison of the age structure of male and female populations in the Nilgiris with their counterparts in the Madras Presidency as a whole. These figures clearly demonstrate that the age structure of the population of Nilgiri district was, over at least four decades, skewed by the inclusion of large numbers of people, predominately male and aged between 10 and 40 years. At the same time there was a dearth of children, both male and female, and also of aged men and women in the Nilgiris.⁵¹

Planters often declared that their policy was to encourage family migration but such a policy was at odds with their desire to create the most productive labour force possible. In reality, dependants, such as grandparents and infants, were frequently left at home. As a result, plantation workers were largely drawn from that sector of the population with the least potential for ill-health. Moreover, plantation workers were also largely relieved of their familial obligation to provide time-consuming care of the old, the infirm or the very young. In short, they were remarkably free to work.

At the same time the new labour force was largely composed of those castes which ranked lowest in the social order. Although there are inherent difficulties in the census statistics concerning castes,⁵² it is, nevertheless, possible to calculate the proportion of outcastes in the Nilgiri population for the years 1871, 1881, 1891 and 1901.⁵³

⁵¹ *CBI, 1891*, Vol. XIV, Table XIII; *CBI, 1901*, Vol. XV-A, Table VII; *CBI, 1931*, Vol. XIV, Part II, Table VII.

⁵² The data contain in-built errors because of numerous problems with nomenclature and the desire of some peoples to upgrade their caste status. Additionally, the strength of non-Brahmanism in Madras Presidency in the 1920s led to the widespread use of terms such as *Adi-Dravida* in place of caste names in census returns. For this reason any detailed analysis of caste origin after the 1911 Census is precluded.

⁵³ In 1871 the census report showed Chakkili, Mala, Madaga, Pariah, Pulayan and Valluvan peoples grouped under the category of Pariahs. In the 1881 census the castes grouped under the heading Pariah were not given. In order to aid direct comparison, the functional grouping of castes employed in 1891 has been applied to the 1901 census. However, it should be noted that the 1901 total outcaste numbers only included those castes whose membership amounted to more than 200. Therefore the percentage of outcastes appearing in Table 1 against 1901 should be considered a minimum figure.

Table 1
*Outcastes as a Proportion of Population in Nilgiri District, 1871-1901*⁵⁴

Year	Outcastes as % of Hindu Population
1871	47
1881	39
1891	53
1901	50

From Table 1 it is readily apparent that outcastes formed a very significant proportion of the Hindu population in Nilgiri district. That proportion, varying from 39 per cent to 53 per cent, was unusually high. A direct comparison with the whole of Madras Presidency is afforded by the 1881 census which concluded that the average proportion of outcastes in the total population of the Presidency was only 15.6 per cent.⁵⁵ While it is impossible to distinguish the caste composition of the immigrant population of the Nilgiris from that of the district-born population on the basis of the quantitative data available in the censuses, the information contained in the census reports does indicate that it was these outcastes who comprised the bulk of plantation workers in the Nilgiri hills. In 1921 when the number of Pariahs was everywhere found to be on the rise except in the Nilgiris, the Census Report attributed this to the fact that there had been 'less recruiting on the tea estates'.⁵⁶ In 1931, census officials concluded that 'practically all the labour recruited for these estates is drawn from the depressed classes.'⁵⁷ In order to account for the composition of the new plantation workforce it is necessary to look beyond the general provision of employment opportunities by the planter, to examine the economic circumstances in which potential workers were already immersed and the interaction of the planters' recruitment system with the pre-existing systems of contractual relations.

Initially, the severe famine years of the 1870s may have prompted the migration from Coimbatore, then a district hard-hit by famine, to the

⁵⁴ *Report on the Census of the Madras Presidency*, Vol. I, Madras, 1874, p. 328; *CBI, 1881*, Vol. I, Madras, 1883, Table V, p. 305; *CBI, 1891*, Vol. XIII, Table XVI-A, pp. 358-77; *CBI, 1901*, Vol. XV-A, Part II, Table XIII; *Madras District Gazetteers*, 1905, p. 5. In the 1901 census the Kota and Toda tribal people were included in the Hindu population. If their number is excluded then the proportion of outcastes in the Hindu population rises to 52 per cent. All figures are rounded to the nearest whole number.

⁵⁵ *CBI, 1881*, Vol. I, p. 305. Note that this proportion may have been slightly lower than normal for it was also reported by census officials that famine in the 1870s fell more heavily on the lower castes. However, if this proportion remained even roughly constant, then the high proportion of outcastes in the Nilgiris must be seen as a peculiarly distinctive feature of the district's population.

⁵⁶ *CBI, 1921*, Vol. XIII, Madras, 1922, pp. 158-59.

⁵⁷ *CBI, 1931*, Vol. XIV, p. 81.

Nilgiri hills. Although no district-of-birth figures are available in the 1871 census to aid comparison, it is possible to demonstrate that migrants enumerated in the Nilgiris in 1881 were more often from famine areas than from non-famine ones. The 1881 census shows that 16 per cent of males and 13 per cent of females in the Nilgiris were born in famine districts. In contrast only 11 per cent of the district's male population and 9 per cent of the female population originated in non-famine districts.⁵⁸ This breakdown of Nilgiri immigrants according to their origin in famine and non-famine regions indicates that Nilgiri district must be excepted from the statement contained in the Madras Census Report of 1881 claiming that no significant migration from famine districts to non-famine ones had occurred.⁵⁹ In addition, the presence of migrants from the famine districts of Salem, and especially from North Arcot which is relatively remote from the Nilgiris, may also be significant evidence that famine promoted pathways of out-migration which continued to be utilised long after the threat of famine ceased to be imminent.

The growth of a plantation labour force was also made possible by the continued economic interrelation of plantations and labour's villages of origin. Prior to the famine of 1876, the relatively high earnings of plantation labour had allowed workers to accumulate savings and this surplus was channelled back into labour's home villages at the end of a working 'season'. As early as 1870, Mysorean, Tamil, and west-coast plantation workers in the Wynaad who accumulated savings were reported to be returning home and investing it in land.⁶⁰ It is highly probable that this influx of plantation earnings contributed to the decline of agrestic bondage in Mysore State as Nilgiri planters claimed.⁶¹ High wages partly redressed the unequal relations between landlord and bondsman—a development acknowledged both by contemporary observers and modern researchers.⁶² However, by the end of the nineteenth century, dramatic reductions in the purchasing power of plantation earnings had undermined labour's capacity to save and this contributed to the preservation of the pre-existing socio-economic order in labour's home villages.

The lack of a true family wage characterised employment on tea plantations from around 1890. In 1904, a government enquiry into conditions on tea estates in the Madras Presidency accepted that the food expenses of an adult, male estate worker were approximately Rs 4 per month.⁶³ At the same time the maximum male wage per month would probably never have

⁵⁸ *CBI, 1881*, Vol. I, p. 130.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Morgan, 'The Wynaad', pp. 60–61.

⁶¹ UPASI, *Annual Proceedings*, 1893, p. 18.

⁶² *Hindu*, 27 April 1889, p. 4; Moore, *Plantation Development and Labour Response*, pp. 186–89, 214, 226–228.

⁶³ *Report on the Conditions of Tea Garden Labour*, p. 12.

exceeded Rs 6 and 14 annas.⁶⁴ Real earnings were commonly a great deal less than the stated wage rates since illness often prevented labourers from working and because it was customary for most planters to make regular deductions from wages for lateness, short work and other misdemeanours. Real earnings for adult males probably hovered around Rs 3 per month⁶⁵ and the planters' claim that male workers were able to save between Rs 24 and Rs 33 per season is undercut by their view that, 'Tamil coolies are as a race improvident, and many of them save nothing.'⁶⁶ Even where planters made rent-free land available, workers proved unwilling to settle permanently near plantations.⁶⁷ Although planters continued to believe that they would be better served by a resident workforce, plantation wages had become insufficient to support non-working dependants.

The skewed age structure of the Nilgiri population and the predominance of males in the migrant stream illustrate that plantation employment did not, and could not, engender true family migration. Where women and youths migrated they generally did so as workers, and not as the dependants of a working male. As a result, the non-working population of dependant family members was frequently maintained at home by small family plots of land and alternative sources of income. Plantation wages were insufficient for familial maintenance and the real cost of reproducing the labour force was borne in the home village, not on the tea plantation. In this sense plantation employment constituted labour exploitation.

Whereas surplus earnings had originally flowed from plantation to village in the period before 1875, by the turn of the nineteenth century the direction of this flow had been largely reversed. Originally Mysorean coffee workers had retained their village ties by choice but in the late 1890s low earnings among Tamil labourers created an economic imperative for the retention of village ties. For tea planters, labour exploitation was a significant factor which helped to offset some of the economic disadvantages of their geographic location. Tea cultivation continued to expand in Nilgiri district partly because it was subsidised by the pre-capitalist economies of Tamil villages.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* The figure has been calculated by taking the maximum daily rate of pay for 22 working days per month. Although labourers were expected to work for six or even seven days each week, an individual worked on the average 20 to 22 days per month. (*Report on an Enquiry into Conditions of Labour in Plantations in India*, Delhi, 1946, p. 146.) Many planters regularly made deductions from their labourers' wages, but these have not been taken into account here. On Nilgiri estates it was not customary for labourers to earn supplementary pay. (*Report on the Conditions of Tea Garden Labour*, p. 12.)

⁶⁵ *Planting Opinion*, 24 October, 1896, p. 10.

⁶⁶ *Report of the South of India Planters' Enquiry Committee*, p. 14.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11. In the mid-1940s less than 10 per cent of plantation workers in south India were estimated to be permanently resident on their estates. (*Report on an Enquiry into Conditions of Labour*, p. 119.)

The planters' exploitation of Tamil labour was made possible in part by the forces of economic change which were acting upon the wider socio-economic order in south India. At the beginning of the census period and probably 'even before the impact of British rule was felt,' there was a sizeable group of agricultural labourers in the Tamil speaking regions who could not for 'economic or social reasons, hold land of their own'.⁶⁸ The commercialisation and alienation of traditional landholdings on the plains swelled the number of these landless labourers and provided more potential recruits for plantation employment. The impact of these forces was particularly felt in Coimbatore district where they were exacerbated by an unreliable rainfall pattern.⁶⁹ Tea planters specifically sought those landless labourers who ranked lowest in the economic and social hierarchy of the village. In addition, planters targeted those groups who ranked marginally higher, but whose economic circumstances were being eroded by poor harvests, by population increase in marginal areas, and by rack-renting, all of which undermined their retention of small plots of agricultural land.⁷⁰ Circumstances similar to these have already been acknowledged as providing the impetus for labour migration to Bombay's cotton mills,⁷¹ and for the in-migration of that city's considerable corps of sweepers.⁷² On Nilgiri tea plantations, depressed class agricultural workers formed the core of field labour which ranked lowest in the plantation's occupational hierarchy. Fieldwork was both the least skilled and the poorest paid employment on tea estates. Migration for unskilled work was a selective process and the 'bottom of the industrial hierarchy was formed in the main, by those at the lowest rung of the traditional social order.'⁷³ In this respect, the existing village social hierarchy was broadly replicated in the new workplace despite capitalist transformation of the rural economy.

While labourers suitable to estate work were available in the plains, they needed both the will and the means to migrate. The willingness of Indians to engage in long-distance work migration is demonstrated both by the large numbers of indentured and contracted emigrant labourers in the nineteenth century, and by historical studies of the colonial labour

⁶⁸ Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India*, pp. 189–91.

⁶⁹ For further discussion see B. Evans, 'From Agricultural Bondage to Plantation Contract: A Continuity of Experience in Southern India, 1860–1947', *South Asia*, New Series, Vol. 13 (2), 1990, pp. 47–48.

⁷⁰ F.A. Nicholson, *Manual of the Coimbatore District in the Presidency of Madras*, Madras, 1887, pp. 267–70.

⁷¹ Dick Kooiman, 'Rural Labour in the Bombay Textile Industry and the Articulation of Modes of Production', in Peter Robb, ed., *Rural South Asia*, London, 1983, p. 134.

⁷² Jim Masselos, 'Jobs and Jobbery: The Sweeper in Bombay under the Raj', *IESHR*, Vol. 19 (2), 1982, pp. 108–09.

⁷³ Ranajit Das Gupta, 'Factory Labour in Eastern India: Sources of Supply, 1855–1946, Some Preliminary Findings', *IESHR*, Vol. 13 (3), 1976, p. 326.

market.⁷⁴ On the same point, Chatterji notes that the availability of local labour was never a major consideration in determining the location of factories in the colonial period, since labour was prepared to travel long distances to exploit new economic opportunities.⁷⁵

However, it is also apparent that the majority of labourers, including migrating plantation labourers in south India, required financial assistance prior to their departure. Since planters preferred able-bodied labourers who were in the prime of their working lives, some provision had to be made for the sustenance of those family members left at home. Additionally, the journey of the new recruit had also to be funded. At the same time, many potential workers were debt-bonded to local moneylenders and village landlords. By providing advances to cover the villager's obligations at home and the costs arising from his migration, the planter freed the labourer for alternative employment on plantations.

Plantation advances to debt-bonded labour were increasingly channelled by planters through indigenous, peer group recruiters termed *maistris*.⁷⁶ Initially, Nilgiri tea planters, like other colonial employers, used a variety of means to attract labour: professional labour suppliers were used on occasion while estate clerks were sometimes expected to possess a labour connection which could yield field labourers for the plantation.⁷⁷ However, the *maistri* system had already been extensively and routinely utilised by coffee growers in the region and it soon became the conventional means by which Nilgiri tea planters obtained the vast majority of their migrating labour.

The use of the *maistri* system was not confined to the Nilgiris nor did it originate there. In Ceylon the system had been used to obtain south Indian plantation labour from about 1820,⁷⁸ while J. Daniel Moore in his study of the Mysorean coffee industry has asserted that the *maistri's* original position was that of a spokesman for a migrating, agricultural labour gang. He was a leader, either elected or simply acknowledged, who led his gang in search of work, saw to their welfare, and mediated in the case of disputes either between gang members or between the gang and the planter. He also

⁷⁴ Morris D. Morris, 'The Labor Market in India', in Wilbert E. Moore and Arnold S. Feldman, eds., *Labor Commitment and Social Change in Developing Areas*, New York, 1960, p. 199.

⁷⁵ Rakhahari Chatterji, *Working Class and the Nationalist Movement in India*, New Delhi, 1984, p. 17.

⁷⁶ Although the term *maistri* is commonly translated as labour contractor, this definition is far too narrow. Aside from recruiting labour, it was usual for a *maistri* to assume responsibility for both the supervision of his workers on an estate and for their welfare needs. Planters made a clear distinction between *maistris* and professional labour contractors who merely delivered workers to estates. While the terms *kanganni* and *maistri* were used interchangeably on Nilgiri plantations until the 1930s, the latter term was more frequently employed in south India and it is for this reason that it is used here throughout the text.

⁷⁷ *Planting Opinion*, 26 September 1896, p. 6.

⁷⁸ Jayaraman, 'Indian Emigration to Ceylon', pp. 320-21.

negotiated on the gang's behalf with the planter in such matters as the size of the advances paid, the duration of the labourer's stay on the plantation, and the wage rate. Moore designates this type of labour foreman an 'old' *maistri*, adding that he was usually a man of some importance in his village though not a caste leader. His gang would frequently include his relatives and acquaintances. Moore claims that the 'old' *maistris* dominated plantation labour supplies in Mysore until about 1875.⁷⁹

In the Nilgiris there is scant evidence concerning the pioneering planters' employment of the *maistri* system. A.A. Wright, who was engaged in 1845 and 1846 to establish coffee fields in the south-east Wynaad, later recalled that gangs of workers were imported with 'great trouble and expense', their *maistris* being paid monthly salaries and no commission. The fact that Wright expressed surprise that the members of such gangs would 'bolt away without the knowledge of even their maistry' indicates that a personal tie commonly bound gang members to their 'old' *maistri*.⁸⁰ However, it would be easy here to make too much of a flimsy record of evidence. On smaller plantations, office clerks continued to share the supervision of field-workers with *maistris*,⁸¹ whose coercion of their workers is implied in their early description as men not only of superior intelligence and influence, but also of superior 'physique to the average run of cooly'.⁸² These facts would appear to seriously undermine the notion advanced by Moore that 'old' *maistris* originally functioned as labour spokesmen rather than as labour foremen on the early coffee estates. Moreover, Moore's assertion that the *maistri* system 'was in existence long before the British introduced new cash plantation crops'⁸³ is unsubstantiated and doubtful in any case. Francis Buchanan who took a particular and detailed interest in agriculture whilst traversing much of south India at the turn of the nineteenth century, makes no mention of *maistris*.⁸⁴ Lastly, the source materials cited by Moore in depicting 'old' *maistris* are circumscribed and they have the additional disadvantage of being composed around a quarter of a century after the 'old' *maistri* was replaced by a system of estate *maistris*.⁸⁵ Rather than accept Moore's views, it is more probable that the *maistri* system of recruitment was imported by pioneer planters and grafted onto a pre-existing system whose contractual arrangements were already marked by relations of inequality. These established arrangements also served to

⁷⁹ Moore, *Plantation Development and Labour Response*, pp. 216–17.

⁸⁰ *Planting Opinion*, 19 December 1896, p. 22.

⁸¹ *Planters' Chronicle*, 1 September 1945, p. 274.

⁸² *Planting Opinion*, 1 April 1899, p. 240.

⁸³ Moore, *Plantation Development and Labour Response*, p. 216.

⁸⁴ Francis (Hamilton) Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar*, Vols. I, II & III, London, 1807.

⁸⁵ Report of 28th Annual General Meeting of North Mysore Planters' Association, 10 March 1908, reprinted in the *Planters' Chronicle*, 1908, pp. 79–82; 'The Labour Question', *Planting Opinion*, 1 April 1899, p. 240.

make plantation practices readily acceptable and legitimised the *maistri's* position. Once this process had taken place, planters could subsequently claim that their handling of labour was in line with long standing Indian conventions.⁸⁶ In the Nilgiris this system was then adapted so that it grew to resemble that of earlier Ceylon coffee plantations where many south India tea planters had gained their initial experience of planting.⁸⁷

Although the origins of the *maistri* system are uncertain, it is evident that the planters transformed the *maistri's* position to meet their own ends. According to Moore the recruitment of coffee plantation labour in Mysore after 1875 was increasingly undertaken by men promoted by planters from the plantations' permanent labour ranks.⁸⁸ Similarly, Roberts reports that in Ceylon by the 1850s the *maistri* had become merely a planter's agent.⁸⁹ These 'new' *maistris* were selected for their long service and loyalty to planters. The operation of the 'new' *maistri* in the Nilgiris was probably accelerated by the rapid increase in the demand for labour which accompanied the changeover to tea production. By the 1880s the 'new' system was firmly entrenched.⁹⁰ In 1896 the South of India Planters' Enquiry Committee found Nilgiri planters to be heavily reliant on annually migrating labour recruited by *maistris* and concluded 'that the employment of maistris for recruiting plantation labour is absolutely necessary.' Each 'new' *maistri* was said to have recruited between 100 and 250 labourers who would often arrive at estates in gangs of 20 to 40 under the control of the *maistri* himself or a headman termed a *cole-maistri*. However, the composition of the gang appears to have been little different from Moore's description of the gang under an 'old' *maistri*: the members would be drawn from a single village or at most several villages, they would often be accompanied by close relatives and by their own caste members.⁹¹ If, as Moore asserts, the 'new'

⁸⁶ Lalita Chakravarty has noted that owners of colonial enterprises often quoted village and caste traditions in order to resist attempts to curb the power of *maistris*, *daffadars*, *sardars* and other labour contractors. (Lalita Chakravarty, 'Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in a Dual Economy—British India, 1880–1920', *IESHR*, Vol. 15 (3), 1978, p. 283.)

⁸⁷ This extended even to the transfer of occupational titles. For instance, 'KP' (*kanaka pillai*) was the term commonly used for field overseers both in Ceylon and in south India. However, the origins of the term itself pre-date commercial coffee culture in Ceylon. S. Arasaratnam has reported the growth of *kanaka pillais* as subsidiary functionaries to European cloth merchants operating in the Coromandel in the seventeenth century. As there is no evidence that KPs were drawn from higher castes than common labourers on tea estates, the caste titular 'pillai' may have been used by planters to convey to labourers the field overseer's dominion over them. (S. Arasaratnam, 'Indian Commercial Groups and European Traders, 1600–1800: Changing Relationships in Southeastern India', *South Asia*, Vol. I (2), September 1978, p. 48.) On the migration of planters from Ceylon to south India see John Ferguson, *Ceylon in 1884: The Leading Crown Colony in the Empire*, London, 1884, p. 100.

⁸⁸ Moore, *Plantation Development and Labour Response*, pp. 216–17.

⁸⁹ M.W. Roberts, 'Indian Estate Labour in Ceylon during the Coffee Period, (1830–1880)', Part I, *IESHR*, Vol. 3 (1), 1966, p. 12.

⁹⁰ Lock, *Coffee: Its Culture and Commerce*, p. 209.

⁹¹ *Report of the South of India Planters' Enquiry Committee*, pp. 12–14.

maistri drew heavily upon those labourers 'who knew little or nothing about him'⁹² it is not readily apparent in the Nilgiris by 1896. Even in 1930, Nilgiri planters still considered that *maistris* would be likely to recruit labour through 'a family connection'.⁹³

Under the 'new' *maistri* system the personal ties between the gang members and their leader were replaced by an economic bond. The 'new' *maistri* bound his labourers by an advance of money prior to their commencing work on an estate. That the new debt-bond came to utterly supersede a personal tie to the *maistri* was evident in the words of one 'new' *maistri* before the 1930 Royal Commission on Labour who declared, 'unless I give them (labourers) an advance I will have no hold on them.'⁹⁴ It is for this reason that a competent *maistri* would only advance money to labourers he knew thoroughly.⁹⁵ In the 'new' *maistri* system, the *maistri* and his labourers had separate economic interests, and it was the *maistri's* knowledge of his workers which protected him from being defrauded.

The feature which most readily distinguished 'new' *maistris* from 'old' *maistris* on Nilgiri tea estates, and simultaneously signalled a step in their conversion to the side of capital, was their receipt of a commission. Both the South of India Planters' Enquiry Committee⁹⁶ and A.A. Wright⁹⁷ noted in 1896 that *maistris* now commonly received 10 per cent of their coolies' wages as commission. Commissions in reality reduced the earnings of labourers. This, irrespective of whether the *maistri* arose from within the gang or was promoted from the estate workforce, exemplified that the 'new' *maistri* and the planter had a common interest in ensuring that the maximum number of workers turned out to labour in the fields each day. In order to extract the largest commission the 'new' *maistri* assisted the planter in extracting the maximum profit from labour.

Despite the changes evident in the 'new' *maistri* system, sound economics underpinned plantation labour's retention of village ties. Maintenance of these ties was necessary to secure plantation employment. While plantation wages were not high, the migration of workers to the hills could, at the very least, reduce a family's demands for sustenance when alternative, local employment was not forthcoming.

There can be no doubt that the advances proffered by *maistris* were essential to mobilise depressed class labour. Advances were employed throughout the Tamil speaking regions amongst castes such as Palli, Pariahs and Pallans, who were traditionally employed in agricultural work; as casual day labourers, as share-croppers and debt-bonded workers. Existing

⁹² Moore, *Plantation Development and Labour Response*, p. 218.

⁹³ *Royal Commission on Labour in India*, Evidence, Part II, London, 1930, p. 355.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁹⁶ *Report of the South of India Planters' Enquiry Committee*, p. 12.

⁹⁷ *Planting Opinion*, 19 December 1896, p. 22.

indebtedness and agrestic debt-bondage amongst recruits were nominated by planters as factors which made the provision of advances essential.⁹⁸ Further, the predominance of outcaste labour in the Nilgiri migrant stream reinforces the argument that there was a strong nexus between labour recruitment to plantations and various forms of debt-bonding.

The predominantly depressed class migration of plantation labour to Nilgiri plantations was, in Coimbatore, also partly the result of the different recruitment practices of plantation *maistris* and labour recruiters from the town's burgeoning textile mills. Potential recruits to the cotton mills sometimes provided gifts or free services to the mills' jobbers and this practice has led Murphy to conclude that 'perhaps abject poverty inhibited mobility amongst the very poorest, who were mainly the low castes and Untouchables.'⁹⁹ Moreover, plantation employment was not well regarded by those higher ranking Gounder cultivators whose insolvency had forced them to seek alternative employment, and those within the mills exercised their influence in favour of their relatives and caste fellows whenever vacancies arose.¹⁰⁰ In contrast, the system of pre-employment advances used by tea planters amongst the same population gave the poorest the means of accepting alternative employment on tea estates. On Nilgiri tea estates no barriers existed to the employment of outcaste field labour. From the outset, planters treated field labour as a cost of production and regarded individual labourers as undifferentiated, interchangeable units of labour power. This view was encouraged by the nature of plantation employment since all fieldwork was unskilled, training was experiential and no task contravened caste prohibitions. Nor was the supply of plantation labour ever sufficient to allow for caste clustering in specific occupations as had occurred in other colonial industries.¹⁰¹ In Coimbatore district, the development of capitalist enterprise resulted in two separate labour streams whose composition was largely determined by the interaction of different methods of recruitment with labour's pre-existing socio-economic order.

Although the *maistri* system was employed by planters to mobilise and discipline plantation labour in order to reduce labour costs, it was also the means by which the cultural divide between the pre-capitalist world of the rural village and the capitalist realm of the plantation was bridged for labour. In accepting plantation advances, recruits to Nilgiri estates were provided with a continuity of experience in relation to their terms of employment. By providing an advance against work to be completed, the planter acquired a traditional hold over labour which was a powerful and familiar instrument of coercion. The widespread use of the *maistri* system

⁹⁸ *Report of the South of India Planters' Enquiry Committee*, p. 19.

⁹⁹ Murphy, *Unions in Conflict*, p. 33.

¹⁰⁰ David Arnold, 'The Gounders and the Congress: Political Recruitment in South India, 1920-1937', *South Asia*, No. 4, October 1974, p. 4.

¹⁰¹ Newman, *Workers and Unions*, pp. 54-55.

encouraged the simple transposition of existing relations between landlords and the agrestic poor to plantations. The labourer's debt bound him to both the plantation *maistri* who had recruited him, and to his new employment. Advances made under contract attracted the added advantage of legal backing, but in the majority of cases it is clear that planters and *maistris* relied not only on labour's fear of prosecution, but on labour's inability to check methods of debt and earnings calculations, as well as the traditional responsibility which south Indian labourers accepted for clearing their debts. Recruits simply transposed village mores regarding debt to the *maistri's* advances. The degree to which this process took place can be gauged from the promotional pamphlet of one foreign labour recruiter, who advised fieldworkers on Shevaroy estates to rid themselves of their *maistris'* grip and:

Go to Ceylon gentlemen . . . with the chit of Goodfellow As soon as the labourers arrive on our estates they will be given free, two cloths, a woollen blanket and a cooking vessel . . . (and) a present of Rs 2 to each man and woman They are not bound to clear the debts of their parents and ancestors.¹⁰²

There is no evidence to suggest that *maistris* in the Nilgiris ever attempted to dispel labour's belief that their new debts were heritable. In summary, it was the *maistri* system of labour contracting which facilitated the transposition of pre-capitalist constraints governing agrarian labour in the dry Tamil speaking regions of Madras Presidency to the capitalist sector in the Nilgiri hills.

The relationship between *maistris* and their labourers is best described in pre-capitalist terms, despite the agri-industrial character of plantation enterprise. The term patron-client can profitably be applied to this relationship. Clearly the *maistri* had patronage to distribute: he could offer or deny employment, vary the amount advanced to any worker, supply credit, allocate housing and grant other petty favours on estates. The more intensely the labourer exercised his claims to his *maistri's* patronage, the more difficult it was for him to sever the relationship. In this way, the labourer's working season was commonly extended beyond the contracted period. Similarly, the *maistri's* practice of distributing supplementary advances when labour was entitled to return to their villages could extend indefinitely the period for which labour was obliged to work.¹⁰³ By these means the *maistri* hoped to command the diligence and the loyalty of the labourer because any loss of labour power would reduce the *maistri's* commission and would require time and expense to replace. However, the two parties

¹⁰² UPASI, *Annual Proceedings*, 1912, pp. 76–77.

¹⁰³ *Planting Opinion*, 18 December 1896, p. 22; *Royal Commission on Labour in India*, Evidence, Part 2, Vol. VII, p. 214.

in this relationship cannot be considered as equals. The *maistri* clearly had the lesser obligation. For these reasons, it is as apt to speak of industrial servitude as agrarian bondage when describing the relationship between *maistris* and Tamil labourers on Nilgiri tea plantations.

The history of labour recruitment in the Nilgiri hills indicates that no clear boundary can be drawn between the economies of colonial tea estates and villages engaged largely in subsistence production. Prior to 1875 plantations provided surplus earnings which spurred development of the Mysorean rural economy. However, by the end of the nineteenth century plantations were extracting rural surpluses from Tamil villages to subsidise their own operations. The 'unequal interdependence' with which Kooiman has characterised the relationship between jobbers and Bombay mill labour¹⁰⁴ appears as marked in the economic relationship between plantation *maistris* and their labourers as in the economic interdependence of Nilgiri tea plantations and Tamil villages. By the end of the nineteenth century plantation labour's maintenance of village ties had been transformed from a matter of choice to a necessity dictated by economics. In the interplay between rural life and an encroaching and enveloping world economy of development and capital, the village had become economically subordinate to the needs of the planting sector.

The economic subordination of the Tamil villages was facilitated by the customising of plantation contractual relations to their specific cultural setting. While *maistris* had their equivalents in other migrant labour streams to colonial enterprise, the history of labour recruitment in the Nilgiris provides a rare opportunity to examine how planters were able to adapt pre-existing practices among agrarian labourers and to then attune these practices to capitalistic ends. Plantation contractual relations retained both a traditional facade and the traditional mechanism of debt-bonding. These developments help to explain why, in the interaction of these rural and industrial spheres, the pre-capitalist social order was partly replicated on tea estates rather than transformed in labour's home villages. Similarly, the planters' employment of the *maistri* system provides the primary explanation why pre-capitalist forms of exploitation and subjugation, which remained at the core of other colonial enterprises, also characterised production relations on the Nilgiri tea estates.

The international character of plantation agriculture in the Nilgiri hills was not merely due to the contrasting origins of factors of production such as labour and management, land and capital. Rather, the mechanics of labour recruitment indicate that indigenous socio-economic and cultural mores were of prime importance in shaping the terms on which these factors of production would be interfaced. This is plainly evident in the

¹⁰⁴ Kooiman, 'Rural Labour in the Bombay Textile Industry and the Articulation of Modes of Production', *South Asia*, Vol. 15 (1), p. 142.

composite origins of plantation contractual relations. For this reason there is little value in regarding plantations as a universally homogeneous system of production. Neither were their economic activities confined within the bounds of a Western, capitalist, export orientated sector. Those Tamil villages which represented the subsistence, domestic sector in this study, did not bring about their own economic subordination to the colonial planting industry. Rather, this was the product of wider forces such as poor harvests, increasing alienation of land and the lack of alternative employment, coupled with the Nilgiri tea planters' persistent exploitation of the economic opportunities that these circumstances provided. At the same time, the economic downturn experienced by tea planters in the hills was readily transported to labour's home villages via reduced wages and exploitative systems of labour recruitment and retention. In drawing their particular mechanisms for interrelating labour and capital from both the labourer's realm and their own, tea planters indicated that their plantations were neither Western nor Asiatic in design but distinctly colonial.