

The Erosion of Traditionalism in Rice Farming: the Case of Seasonal Migration

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ABSTRACT: *This study was undertaken to examine the persistence of the traditional relationships in agriculture by examining the migration of workers to transplant rice. A survey was carried out in Kegalle and Kandy districts of a random sample of villages. Data analysis was done using non-parametric methods, supplemented with qualitative data. The determinants of migrant behaviour are both social and economic. The availability of work during a short period of time during which a relatively high amount of money can be earned without jeopardizing the domestic responsibilities, makes migrant work most acceptable to these workers. On the average each worker was able to obtain about 20 days work while the average earnings per season was Rs. 600.00. The majority of respondents liked to provide their services to known employers regardless of kinship ties. The wage rate paid by the relatives and non-relatives, the seasonal income earned and the working conditions are not significantly different. There is insufficient evidence to conclude that the kinship ties dominate and has a negative effect on the economic relationships. The stigma associated with migrant work is dealt with by a process of rationalizing based on kinship obligations.*

INTRODUCTION

Migration is the movement of people between locations. It occurs due to an imbalance between human resources, natural resources and development activities (Census of Population and Housing, 1981). Migration is broadly classified into external and internal. Internal migration can be the movement of people within, between and among regions such as rural to urban, urban to rural, urban to urban or rural to rural migration. Urban migration occurs when there is development and expansion of urban centers in commercial and administrative activities. Rural migration occurs due to rural or agricultural development activities such as colonization or land development schemes (Country Monograph, 1976; Census and Population and Housing, 1981).

Migration may be permanent or for temporary purposes. Permanent migration is where the person completely uproots himself and moves to a new location to start life. On the other hand, temporary migration is where a person moves to a location for a shorter period of time and later moves back to the original home area or to a completely new location (Census of Population and Housing, 1981).

Temporary migration, when observed at a regular time interval, is known as seasonal migration. In Sri Lanka, seasonal migration occurs in sugarcane cultivation, rice cultivation and in the coastal fisheries industry (Crook and Ranbanda, 1981; Premadasa, 1978; Economic Review, 1977; Jayatilaka, 1990).

The history of seasonal migration of labour in rice farming in the dry zone can be traced back to the 1930's. This phenomenon becomes a common feature in the social landscape with the development and expansion of irrigation settlement schemes in the dry zone of Sri Lanka (Farmer, 1976). But very few recent studies have attempted to examine the different aspects of seasonal labour migration in the rice sub-sector in Sri Lanka.

A large extent of land in the dry zone is used for paddy cultivation annually. The establishment of rice is generally carried out by two methods, namely direct seeding and transplanting. Of these two methods, transplanting is superior due to the ease of post-planting operations, mainly weed control (Guntz, 1987 ; Jayatilaka, 1990) and comparatively less requirement of seed paddy (Guntz, 1987). Transplanting of rice, however, is labour intensive.

The non availability of labour coupled with the method of water issue results in a high seasonal demand for labour to transplant rice. But the family labour and locally hired labour are insufficient to complete both land preparation and transplanting in large rice fields within this period. Hence, farmers utilize migrant labour for land preparation and rice establishment (Perera and Gunawardana, 1980; Crook and Ranbanda, 1981; Guntz 1987; Jayatilaka 1990) particularly in the major rice farming areas of the dry zone.

Agriculture is a socio-cultural phenomenon. This is well seen when one considers rice cultivation. The factors that determine human activities in rice cultivation are not only economic. The cultural and

social factors play a dominant role (Brown, 1980; Hettiarachchi, 1984). This is amply seen in the way the resources are shared: labour in the attam systems (Brown, 1980; Gunasinghe, 1975), land and water use in the kattimaru, and thattumaru systems, the various ritualistic observations that precede different cultural practices and also post harvest operations, and also due to the national-ethos that surrounds the cultivation of rice. Hence, any activity in rice cultivation can be hypothesized to be strongly influenced by the socio-cultural factors.

In modernizing rice cultivation, a major effort is to change the attitudes and values of farmers to make them more rational, progressive and entrepreneurial (Mosher, 1966, Shultz, 1964). However, this may be seriously impaired if the cultural aspects of the sustenance work is dominant. In rice cultivation the fact that the incomes of the farmers have not increased (Weerahewa and Abeygunawardene 1990) and they have not become entrepreneurs may be due to the socio-cultural or socio-psychological factors. The seasonal migration of women to transplant paddy is a regular phenomenon which is one activity in rice cultivation that can be examined to identify the relative importance of the social and economic factors.

OBJECTIVES

This study examines the importance of the socio-cultural factors affecting the seasonal migration behavior of women for paddy transplanting. More specifically it attempts to do the following:

1. Assess the importance of social factors versus the economic incentives provided in agricultural work to migrant workers.
2. Determine the inter-relationship between kinship ties and decision to transplant rice in the dry zone.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The behaviour of people engaged in agricultural activities is a result of economic, social and cultural determinants. Rice cultivation which has assumed a significant position in the culture of Sri Lanka, has many actions and decisions taken on non-economic grounds. Migration

behaviour is also determined by both economic and non-economic factors.

Economic determinants of seasonal migration

A major reason why people migrate annually to the dry zone for work in the paddy fields is due to the non-availability of regular remunerative work in their villages. The activities that are labour intensive such as land preparation, planting, and harvesting offer work opportunities to those outside these areas. This assured availability of work results in a regular stream of migrants moving during the season to the dry zone for work. The wages offered in addition to board and lodging provided by the employees enables many to earn an income within a short period of time and return to their homes once the work is over thus earning income until all cultivation work in the area is completed.

The wet zone area which is the major donor of migrant workers to the dry zone rice fields is abundant with labour. The unemployment rates in the wet zone districts outnumber those of the dry zone districts.

Socio-cultural determinants of migration behaviour

Activities carried out in agriculture are based on decisions made by each individual. Since the activities are carried out in predominantly family or other forms of collectivities, the decisions are influenced by the collective sentiments and interpersonal obligations. Much of the rice cultivation activities are carried out in collective forms of labour use. These range from getting the irrigation canals ready for water issues, land preparation, crop establishment, and harvesting. The attam system of labour sharing and exchange is a major system in all rice growing areas.

The collective forms of labour use in agriculture in Sri Lanka are said to be changing. Although these are changing to monetized wage labour, kinship ties may still persist in certain locations and in certain activities. One could expect certain types of obligatory relationships of labour sharing to persist particularly in the settlement schemes where the

family connections between the wet and dry zone rural communities still continue.

The extended family kinship network is a form of a primary relationship. The members of the primary group have face-to-face associations and informal personal relationships, ultimately forming a "we" feeling and they share experience, hopes, plans, problems and fulfill their need for companionship. This kind of orientation that is dominated by the interest of the group tends not to have strong economic goals (Chitamber, 1973; Ritzer, 1983). Extended family ties may form a strong personal network of the relationships between communities of the wet zone and those of the dry zone. This may result from the continuity of extended family relationships across geographic regions due to separation of families by settlement of wet zone families in the dry zone colonization schemes. It is well known that the family helps those who go to the dry zone to get settled. The initial preparatory work which involves a lot of support of the family system in the original villages is assisted by the family members, some of whom do not migrate to the dry zone. These bonds will persist and be reflected in family members continuing to go to the dry zone areas to assist those who have settled, in their agricultural tasks as well as in other activities like house construction and family functions.

Other than the above kinship ties, non-kinship obligatory relationships of patron-client type may also persist in rural areas. The agriculture activities may also reflect these relationships. These are either based on friendship or on the existing relationship with land owners, traders and those of higher economic status due to obligations of prior exchanges of favours or goods and services.

The strong family connections that bind the families of the wet and dry zones will reflect in the quality of relationships between the employees and the seasonal migrant workers. The quality of board and lodging provided will most likely be better for those who work for members of the extended family, the hours of work, working conditions and support during sickness and wages will be non-exploitative, reflecting the dominance of the social relationship. The non-exploitative patron type relationship between the employee and the workers will also help in the strengthening of the relationship and the continuity of supply of labour to the relations in the future. The difference in the quality of the working conditions between those who

work for relations and non-relations will be known and will be reflected in the sentiments expressed by the workers.

RESEARCH METHODS ADOPTED

The economic conditions of the work is measured in terms of the income earned. The working conditions are measured in hours and time of work, type of board and lodging provided, recreation facilities provided, and assistance provided during illness.

In this study, the decision of workers to migrate in transplanting rice is measured by two variables. First, the desire to migrate in the future and the most desired employer - relation or non-relation. Among the persons are, relatives, friends, known employers and unknown employers.

The study examines the interrelationship between kinship ties and the worker's decision to migrate to the dry zone to transplant rice.

Data collection

In this study, female migrant workers were contacted to obtain information using a questionnaire. This questionnaire was pretested with ten workers chosen from Pilimalawa, in Kandy district and Kaalwana, Kegalle district, both donor villages.

Sampling

Kandy and Kegalle districts, two major areas where migrant workers reside were selected for the study. Two agricultural officers' segments in the Kandy district and one agricultural officers' segment in the Kegalle district were selected. As a sampling frame, 61 female migrant labour donor villages in Kandy district and 96 such villages in Kegalle district were identified with the help of extension officers, including KVSNN, Agricultural Instructors and Agricultural Officers.

Thirty donor villages were randomly selected from each segment. From each village two respondents were selected at random. The total

sample size was 120 respondents. The breakdown is shown in the Table 1 below.

Table 1. The distribution and size of sample

District	Total No. of A.D. segments	Selected A.D. segments	Donor villages	Selected donor villages	Selected sample of respondents
Kandy	4	2	61	30	60
Kegalle	2	1	96	30	60
Total				60	120

The chi-square values and the levels of significance for relationships between employers and workers, for the different indicators of working conditions are given in Table 2.

Methods of analysis

Simple tabulation of data, comparison of means, and chi-square test to check the equality of cell frequencies were used to test the hypothesis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The relationship between social relationship, measured by extended family size and the type of working conditions provided by the employers was tested using several measures of the working conditions. The percent distribution of workers on the dimensions of the working conditions considered and the type of relationship between employer

Table 2. The nature of relationship between employer and migrant workers and indicators of working conditions.
(N = 20).

Indicators of working conditions	Relationship between employers and workers (percent)				
	Relation	Non - relation	Total	Chi square	P
Accommodation:					
a. In farmers house	35.0	46.7	81.7		
b. Outside shed	10.8	7.5	18.3		
Total	45.8	54.2	100.0	51.66	0.001
Assistance during illness by employer:					
a. Yes	40.9	53.8	94.6		
b. no	1.1	4.3	5.4		
Total	42.0	58.1	100.0	66.02	0.001
Recreational activities organized by employer:					
a. Yes	28.3	26.7	55.0		
b. no	17.5	27.5	45.0		
	45.8	54.2	100.0	3.66	0.050
Meals by employer:					
a. Yes	45.8	54.2	100.0		
b. no	0.0	0.0	0.0		
	45.8	54.2	100.0		
Extra payments made by employer:					
a. Yes	29.2	27.5	56.7		
b. no	16.7	26.7	43.3		
	45.8	54.2	100.0	4.59	0.050
Employer allows to earn extra money:					
a. Yes	22.5	32.5	55.0		
b. no	23.3	21.7	45.0		
	45.8	54.2	100.0	3.66	0.050
Preference of workers for different employers:					
a. Relations (family)	15.0	5.8	20.8		
b. Non - relations	30.8	48.3	79.2		
	45.8	54.2	100.0	50.19	0.001
Decision to migrate in future to the dry zone:					
a. Yes	34.2	42.5	76.7		
b. no	11.7	11.7	23.3		
	45.8	54.2	100.0	35.79	0.001

conditions considered and the type of relationship between employer and workers, the chi-square values and the level of significance are given in Table 2.

The effect of family ties on the quality of accommodation provided was examined. The relationship between the workers and employer and types of accommodation provided by the employer to the workers is significant at $\alpha = 0.001$. About 82 percent of the workers are provided accommodation in the employer's house regardless of whether the employer is a relation or not. About 35 percent of the workers provided accommodation in the farmer's house are relatives. For the remaining 47 percent, accommodation is provided in the farmer's house, in the absence of any family ties. Only about 18 percent of the workers are provided accommodation in an outer shed. Eventhough, the cell distribution of frequencies is significantly different, on examining the individual frequencies, the expected relationship between the type of employer and the type of accommodation provided, did not showup. The type of accommodation provided did not vary with the type of employer. This suggests that providing accommodation is mainly a customary practice of incentive being offered to a helper.

The nature of the relationship was also examined considering if workers were satisfied with the assistance provided during times of illness. About 94.5 percent of the workers are provided satisfactory assistance during times of illness regardless of who they worked for. Nearly 5.5 percent of the workers are not satisfied with the assistance provided to them. About 41 percent of the workers who worked for relations were satisfied with the assistance provided, whereas for those who worked for non-relations, this percentage was 54. This suggests that the employers links to the workers through family ties do not determine the level of satisfaction of the employees of the services provided during illnesses.

The workers when in the dry zone, partake in recreational activities during free time particularly during poya days, mostly of a religious nature. We could expect those who work for family members to partake in more religious activities with the family than those who work for non-relations. However, the cell distribution of frequencies show no significant difference, suggesting that the type of recreational facilities provided or organized by the employer is not related to, family ties.

The employers may provide the workers with meals and lodging, to ensure that they can be retained. However, they could provide accommodation and let the workers prepare their meals. But those who employ family members will be more inclined to provide meals to the workers. This was not found to be the case. All employers irrespective of the type of workers they have – family members or not, provide meals to the workers. This has become a norm in the area.

The workers are provided with extra pay incentives for work. This was expected to be less among those who work for relations. The frequency distributions show approximately half of those who worked for non – relations received these payments, while 3/5 of those with family links were provide with extra payment. About 57 percent of the workers are provided extra inducement payment regardless of the family ties. But 43 percent of the workers are not provided the extra inducement. Further, almost the same percentage(29 and 27.5 percentages) of workers are provided the extra inducement payments irrespective of family ties. Hence, this variable too was not found to confirm the expected relationship.

The relationship between extended family ties and permission given to earn extra money while in the area was examined. The percentage distribution of the workers on their family ties and the permission given to them by the employers to earn extra money by working in the outside fields is shown in Table 2. The distribution of responses was different from the expected, significant at $\alpha = 0.05$.

The relationship between the extended family ties and the workers' desire of providing their service was found to be significant at $\alpha = 0.001$. About 15 percent of the workers who worked for family liked to provide their service to the relatives and friends in the future. However, among these, about 31 percent liked to work for known employers among the dry zone farmers. About 48 percent of the workers who do not work for family liked to provide their services to the known farmers. As a whole, about 79 percent of the workers liked to provide their service to known employers regardless of the presence or absence of the extended family ties with the dry zone farmers. Hence the over – riding factor in determining if the workers will work for them in the future, is the familiarity of the employer and not the kinship ties.

The relationship between extended family ties and the worker's decisions to migrate in the future show a difference in the cell distribution of frequencies (Table 2). The distribution is different from the expected, and is significant at $\alpha = 0.001$. About 34 percent of the workers who have family links with the employers, said they will migrate in the future. But 42.5 percent of the workers who did not work for family members said they will migrate in future. Hence, extended family ties do not have a major influence on the decision to migrate in the future. About 77 percent of the workers, decided to migrate in future to transplant rice regardless of the presence of family ties with the dry zone farmers.

The nature of the relationship between the employer and workers was expected to have an influence on the wage rate. Wages paid for family members were expected to be low due to the dominance of reciprocal and obligatory relationships. However, the mean wage rate for workers who worked for relations was Rs. 24.73 while the rate for those who worked for non-relations was Rs. 24.31, a slightly lower figure. The mean seasonal earnings were also compared for the two types of worker relationships. The mean seasonal earnings for those who worked for relations was Rs. 636.36, while the earnings for others was Rs. 674.60, once again a slightly higher figure. However, these were not significantly different. Thus although suggestive, there was insufficient differences to confirm that those who worked for family members were underpaid when compared to those who work for employers who were not of the same family network.

CONCLUSIONS

The labour migration to the dry zone villages for rice cultivation was started with the emergence of the colonization schemes in the dry zone. Initially this type of labour migration developed due to the extended family ties between workers (labourers) and the dry zone farmers, which considered the agricultural activities as a reciprocal and mainly a social activity.

This type of work relationship in many Asian countries is thought to continue because of family ties between workers and their employers. Further, the extended family relationships is a very strong criteria of connecting each other in rice cultivation.

The results of this study suggest that based on the indicators examined such as the provision of meals, accommodation in the farmer's house, satisfactory assistance during illness, extra inducement and other facilities provided, is mainly due to customs and norms that have developed in the rice cultivation culture in the dry zone as necessities to ensure continuity of worker migration where the family links play little influence on the actual quality of the benefits derived by the migrant workers.

If the family ties are very strong, the worker's desire should be to provide their service to their relatives. But the results indicate that most workers preferred to work for a known employer irrespective of whether they were family members.

The wage rates and earnings of those who work for members of the extended family were slightly lower compared to those who worked for others; however the differences were not statistically significant. There is inconclusive evidence to suggest that the family relationships dominate and has a negative effect on the economic relationships. The low wage rates for extended family members need to be investigated further.

Hence, the above evidence suggests that the migration behaviour of the female workers to transplant rice is dependant not on the extended family ties which they have with the dry zone employer, but is more connected to economic factors of work availability and income earned. Further, the evidence suggested that effects of the cultural and social factors play a less dominant role in determining the nature of the relationships in at least this aspect of rice cultivation.

Most workers when interviewed showed a reluctance to be identified with the "migrant workers" as a whole, due to the stigma attached to indulging in menial work in the dry zone. Many rationalize this action by saying that they work only for family members or relations and very strongly insist that they do not go to the dry zone like other women who work for non-relatives. However, the above suggests that the activities in agriculture, particularly rice farming which is considered to be dominated by social and cultural factors are changing, being substituted by economic relationships and criteria in decision making.

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