CHAPTER TWO

THE SYSTEM OF PRODUCTION AND ITS CHANGES

V. S. Vyas has identified a number of factors which are important for understanding the structure of an agrarian production unit, namely the basis or size of land holdings, gross or net produce, value added, capital employed, extent of wage labour, extent of marketable surplus, and gross or net worth of the enterprise.¹ These factors can be used as indicators of change in a system of agrarian production. The system of peasant production in the region under study was, however, too simple to apply to such a complex scheme. I suggest three factors derived from Vyas’s scheme to understand changes in the system: the level of rice production, the pattern of land consumption in various branches of production, and the organisation of labour.

Level of rice production

Despite determined efforts made by the Company to increase the output of rice production, which was far and away the chief production activity of the peasant, with a few exceptions it hardly exceeded the subsistence level. Several areas produced a sizeable surplus from which the Company received significant revenue in paddy. If we consider only the western maritime possessions of the VOC, some parts of the Matara District exceeded all other areas in rice production. Villages known in the Dutch sources as ‘Baijgam’² and Giruwaya Pattuwa were rich rice-growing areas which provided the major part of the VOC’s paddy income.³ These high productivity areas were, however, located outside the south-western wet zone ecological system, the region on which this study focuses. Ecologically these high productivity areas were closer to the northern, north-eastern, and eastern dry zone. Soil conditions in this ecological zone⁴ were more favourable to paddy cultivation. Low annual rainfall meant that the paddy-field had to be fed by irrigated water, which gave the farmer the ability to regulate the water supply properly.

Within the core area of this study, there were two important rice growing systems, which I shall identify tentatively as the ‘Gampaha system’ and the ‘Weke system’. These were fed respectively by the Attanagalu Oya River and the Keleni River. There had been a fierce competition between the VOC and the indigenous chiefs to control the paddy-lands in these
two areas. To all intents and purposes, by the mid-eighteenth century the VOC had gained the upper hand over the indigenous chiefs. In 1751, Governor Julius Valentijn Stein van Gollonesse triumphantly declared that he had been able to recover these areas for the Company: ‘The valuable villages of Gampaha and Weke were, immediately after my arrival on this island, withdrawn for the Company and according to Their Excellencies’ express order these fields may never be accommodated or given away to anyone under whatever pretext.’

In general, the Company employed several methods to increase rice production in its possessions on the island. In the early stages of its administration, the Company was keen to bring more land under paddy cultivation. When the shortage of labour was deemed a major problem, the Company even resorted to buying slaves in South India and setting them to work in the paddy-fields. In the late eighteenth century, great attention was paid to repair abandoned irrigation works. A massive scheme of repairing tanks in northern areas was launched with a view to increase the extent of paddy-lands under cultivation. Under Governor Iman Willem Falck (1765–85) there was a most ambitious project to increase the rice production in the area surrounding Colombo. The aim of this project was to reclaim some 21,000 morgen, or 40,000 amunu of land in the large marshy area of Muturajawela, situated between Colombo and Negombo, and to bring them under cultivation. The project, however, failed to meet expectations and had to be abandoned.

The caste composition of Alutgama (Hina/Māda), discussed in Chapter One, reveals that the Company may have brought people into rich rice-growing areas that were under its direct control to increase the amount of lands under cultivation. It was also mentioned that this village was a maintenance village (dispense dorp) of the governor. The large concentration of people of the Padu caste in this village was not typical of caste distribution in the area. It is therefore probable that the Company used this submissive caste community, which was always vulnerable to excessive exploitation, as a source of labour for the cultivation of land in the villages under its direct control.

There were two major structural obstructions that militated against any attempt to increase production: first the productivity per unit was very low; and second, the area of land that one person was capable of cultivating was small. The latter fact was mainly attributable to the fairly rudimentary tools available to the peasant. As far as can be discerned, there was no major effort made to eliminate these two structural barriers.

Compared with many other Asian rice-growing areas, the yield in Sri Lanka during this period was quite low. The best comparison can be made with areas such as Bengal and Sumatra. Speaking about the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Chandra R. de Silva mentions that