CHAPTER THREE

LAND TENURE AND ITS CHANGES

Because land was the focal point of the extraction of the peasant’s surplus by the ruling class, land tenure was an important issue. Land tenure refers to the way in which the control and use of lands were defined in terms of the relationship between the cultivator and the sovereigns who claimed either a share of what those lands produced or part of the labour of the cultivator. This chapter attempts to understand the impact of the colonial intervention on land tenure in the western maritime region of Sri Lanka in the mid-eighteenth century. It will explain the changes brought about in the traditional pre-colonial system of land tenure as a result of the ways in which the VOC administered its interests over lands and their tenants. Two factors brought about changes. On the one hand there were changes in the ways in which the sovereign’s share was calculated, administered and collected. On the other hand, innovative measures were taking place as to how lands and land revenue were used as a source of remuneration for servants of the state.

In general, a non-producing outsider could forcefully extract a peasant’s surplus by robbing and pillage (not a rare occurrence in human history), or via a hegemonic relationship by which the peasant would deliver the surplus by ‘consent’ rather than by force.

Claims for the surplus could be justified in a number of ways. In the case of the peasant, the basic justification was the theory of the ‘Lord of the Land’ ((Sinhala: bhupati, or Dutch: heer van de lande). As will be discussed later, this theory has been defined in several ways, but however one interprets the theory, the amount of the surplus that the peasant ultimately delivered depended upon at least three factors: the peasant’s living standard, the level of the ruling class’s demand and, last but not least, the bargaining power of each party—the class struggle between the cultivator-producer and the ruling class. It has already been shown that the demand for surplus under the colonial rulers was much higher than under the pre-colonial rulers. Since the level of production hardly exceeded the producer’s subsistence level, an intensification of class conflict could be anticipated.

The mid-eighteenth century was a crucial stage in this class struggle. In the 1730s a wave of peasant insurgencies kept VOC rule at bay. Although certain administrative reforms brought temporary harmony, the problems were not completely resolved. Insurgencies re-emerged in the late 1750s
Figure 3.1 The theory of land tenure (the simple model—stage one)

King
bhupati
(Lord of the Land)

Service tenure
shares (pangu)

Figure 3.2 Ideal model of pre-colonial service tenure (stage two)

King
bhupati
(Lord of the Land)

gamladda
(village grantee)

pangukarayo
(share-holders)

muttettuwa
(demesne)

Unpaid labour of pangukarayo for the cultivation of muttettuwa

gamladda has the right for the full enjoyment of the produce of muttettuwa