



THE ROLE OF UNITED PLANTERS' ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHERN INDIA (UPASI) FOR THE INTRODUCTION OF CAPITALIST AGRICULTURE IN MALABAR

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Abstract: This study has been discusses the role of the United Planters Association of South India (UPASI) in the introduction and expansion of capitalist agriculture in Malabar, particularly focusing on the development of plantations in the region. The establishment of coffee, tea, and rubber plantations in the highlands of South India, especially in Malabar and neighbouring areas, marked a significant shift towards commercialization of agriculture. UPASI played a pivotal role in shaping this plantation economy, promoting mono-cropping, and industrializing the agriculture sector. The association's efforts in improving transport, communication, and infrastructure, along with the introduction of modern agricultural practices, contributed to the transformation of the region into a significant part of the global capitalist system. The article also highlights the labour system, the challenges faced by workers, and the socio-economic impacts of plantation agriculture in Malabar.

Index terms: United Planters Association of South India (UPASI), Capitalist agriculture, Malabar plantations, Coffee, Tea cultivation, Rubber industry, Labour system in plantations.

Introduction

The transformation of agrarian economies in colonial India was marked by a gradual shift from subsistence-based traditional agriculture to a more commercially driven, export-oriented model. This transition, often referred to as the advent of capitalist agriculture, was neither spontaneous nor uniform across regions. In the case of Malabar—a historically significant agrarian region on the south-western coast of India—the shift was deeply influenced by colonial economic interests and the institutional mechanisms they fostered. One of the most pivotal agents in this transformation was the United Planters' Association of Southern India (UPASI). Founded in the late 19th century; UPASI emerged as a powerful collective voice of European planters operating in the southern parts of India. Its formation coincided with the increasing commodification of land, labour, and agricultural produce, aligning closely with the interests of the colonial state and global capitalist markets. In Malabar, UPASI played a strategic role in facilitating the entry and expansion of plantation agriculture, especially in crops such as tea, coffee, and rubber. Through lobbying for favourable land policies, investing in agronomic research, and influencing labour laws, UPASI not only advanced the commercial interests of its members but also laid the structural foundation for capitalist modes of production in agriculture.

This article explores the multifaceted role of UPASI in the introduction and consolidation of capitalist agriculture in Malabar. By examining historical records, policy shifts, and economic data, the study seeks to analyse how UPASI functioned as an intermediary between colonial authority and local agrarian systems. It

further investigates how this transformation impacted traditional landholding patterns, labor relations, and ecological practices in the region. Understanding UPASI's role provides critical insight into the broader dynamics of agrarian change in colonial South India and the enduring legacies of plantation capitalism.

The Role of UPASI in the Introduction of Capitalist Agriculture in Malabar

The United Planters Association of South India (UPASI) has played a pivotal role in shaping the agricultural landscape of South India, particularly in Malabar. As an organization representing the interests of planters, UPASI traces its origins to the individuals who introduced capitalist agriculture to the highlands of South India, including areas in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala (S.Muthiah, 1993:11). This transformation began in the late nineteenth century when large-scale deforestation took place to establish plantations, drastically altering the region's environment. The term 'Plantation' first mentioned in the accounts of the Francis Buchanan in his travelogues.

Historically, India has been an active participant in long-distance trade, especially along the Coromandel Coast and the Malabar and Konkan coasts, where Western traders sought valuable goods like silk, cotton, ivory, spices, timber, and diamonds. The commercial shift began in the early nineteenth century when Europeans started introducing plantation agriculture to India. This process marked the beginning of the commercialization of agriculture, starting with crops such as cotton, indigo, and jute in Bengal. Over time, this industry spread to southern India, particularly in the Malabar region, where the British introduced crops like coffee, tea, and rubber. UPASI played a key role in advancing the plantation industry, contributing to the development of a world capitalist plantation economy in Malabar.

UPASI's history reflects the efforts of those who cleared vast stretches of land and pioneered the cultivation of new crops in the region. This system of mono-cropping became known as the plantation or estate system, with individuals referred to as "planters" who employed workers often called coolies, peasants, or labourers. These workers came from various regions, and the combination of planters and peasants contributed significantly to the rise of the plantation economy, pushing the commercialization of agriculture further.

The Arab influence on India's plantation industry cannot be overlooked. While the Arabs were the initial pioneers of the plantation system, it was the Europeans who expanded it on a much larger scale. Baba Budhan Sahib is often credited with introducing coffee seeds to Karnataka, from which coffee cultivation gradually spread to Malabar (Joy Varkey, 2009:216). This was the beginning of the coffee plantation industry, and by the late 1800s, Wayanad's wild coffee had earned a reputation in markets like Bangalore, Srirangapatnam, and even Europe.

In Wayanad, wild coffee emerged around the time UPASI was formed. The association's efforts were instrumental in the promotion of crop planting in Malabar, and it regularly published a journal titled *Planting Century*, which chronicled the development of plantation agriculture in India. Established in 1893 in Coonoor, Tamil Nadu, UPASI started the journal *Planting Opinion* in 1895, aimed specifically at planters, offering insights into the growing plantation industry. Inspired by the Duff brothers, UPASI pushed forward the cultivation of tea and coffee in South India, with Wayanad being particularly notable for its production.

Coffee cultivation in Wayanad gained prominence in the 1800s, especially due to the efforts of Parry and Company, who were encouraged by the Maharaja of Mysore (Joshy Mathew, 2011: 72). Land was provided to the local peasantry under the Batai system, a sharecropping arrangement that further supported the establishment of coffee estates. The first British commercial plantation in southern India, the Mananthavady Coffee Estates, marked the dawn of the modern plantation industry in the region.

At the same time, tea cultivation also began flourishing in Wayanad, with support from the Maharaja of Mysore. UPASI played a central role in establishing tea plantations in the high ranges of Travancore, particularly in the Idukki-Munnar region. The Kannan Devan Hills in Kerala became renowned for their tea cultivation, and UPASI's operations in these regions helped solidify the foundation of the global tea market.

Rubber is another important crop planted by the UPASI in South India, especially in the Malabar region. Rubber originated in South America and was introduced to the world through a French scientific expedition in 1745. In 1770, Joseph Priestley discovered that rubber could be used to erase pencil marks. Later, Samuel Peal found that rubber could be dissolved in certain chemicals to form a thin, water-resistant film.

Thomas Hancock invented the process of rubber mastication and played a key role in the development of the rubber industry. In 1823, Charles Macintosh of Glasgow patented a method for waterproofing cloth and established the second rubber factory. Eventually, Hancock and Macintosh merged their factories, establishing British leadership in the rubber industry (S. Muthiah, 1993:151).

Gradually, rubber cultivation spread to India with the help of the Brazilians in the early 1810s. The botanist Roxburgh and his assistant M.R. Smith discovered *Ficus elastica* growing wild in the forests of Assam, which was then tapped in Northeast India and Burma (Ibid:152). During the Second World War, rubber production in India increased significantly, contributing a large quantity measured in hectares and tonnes.

Dietrich Brandis took a keen interest in planting rubber in South India around 1873, particularly along the west coast and in Travancore. From there, he promoted the cultivation of Hevea rubber. In 1878, approximately 28 Hevea plants were brought from Ceylon and planted at Nilambur in Malabar. Ferguson obtained the same type of plants from Ceylon in 1886 and carried out experimental planting of Para, Ceara, and *Castilloa elastica* (Panama rubber) at the Government of Madras Plantation House in Calicut and Punoor.

As a result of these efforts, several plantation companies were established in different parts of Malabar, Travancore, Cochin, and other regions of South India. The Thattekkad Rubber Plantation Company was the first among them. The first rubber plantation in Kochi was started in 1905 by Nicoill. The Nilgiri Rubber Plantation was established in 1881 through the efforts of R. L. Proudlock, who planted both Para and Panama rubber there.

UPASI and the Rise of Modernity

As UPASI continued to foster the plantation economy, it introduced modern practices, boosting the industrialization of plantation agriculture. One of the first major changes was the improvement of transportation and communication networks. UPASI played a significant role in the development of the South Indian Railway, which was essential for the growth of the plantation industry, allowing for the easier movement of goods and workers. Before the railway, transportation relied heavily on pack animals and palanquins, but the introduction of the ghat road in 1903 and the railway helped expedite the movement of goods from the hills.

Tea and coffee cultivation rapidly expanded in regions like the Nilgiris and Wayanad due to UPASI's efforts. The region's climate and soil proved ideal for these crops, and by the early 20th century, the Nilgiris became a major hub for tea production, with numerous tea factories established (Mohandas, 2005: 12). These factories produce millions of kilograms of tea annually, sustaining the legacy of UPASI's early work.

In addition to cultivating coffee, tea, and rubber, UPASI developed the bulk of plantations in Malabar and Travancore, laying the groundwork for the modern plantation economy in South India. The organization constructed a network of infrastructure, including roads, railways, and bridges, to facilitate the movement of goods. In addition to these, they built residential areas for workers, schools, hospitals, and places of worship, improving the quality of life for those living in and around the plantations. Cultural events like tea parties and sports such as football became regular fixtures, contributing to the social and mental well-being of plantation communities.

The UPASI played a crucial role in the development of modern education among the plantation labours. They established schools and community hall for them .Tribal people also entered in there. The planters took interest for the emancipation of tribal society into modern ways. They teach them how to plant the tea, coffee and other crops in a scientific way.

The UPASI introduced the scientific method in the field of Industry. For the production of Coffee, tea, rubber, cardamom and palm-oils. They also conduct the industrial exhibition in south India especially Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka. In there, they opened industries and allowed the native people in their industry. They gave the financial aid to the workers and ensured the housing facilities. They also played important role in the development of trade and commerce .they established global market in different parts of India.

A significant part of UPASI's success lay in its labour system. Initially, labourers worked as coolies, facing harsh conditions in the plantations. Disease outbreaks, attacks by wild animals, and difficult working conditions made their lives arduous, but their labour contributed to the profitability of the plantation economy. The introduction of better infrastructure, including labour welfare programs, helped mitigate some of these challenges over time.

Conclusion

The establishment of the plantation economy by the Europeans in Malabar, aided by organizations like UPASI, represents a significant shift in India's agricultural landscape. The Europeans capitalized on India's land and labour to build a system that benefited them while reshaping the region's economic and social fabric. Through the cultivation of coffee, tea, and rubber, the Malabar region became a key player in the global capitalist economy. The efforts of UPASI and the planters contributed to the transformation of South India, especially Malabar, into a major hub for the global plantation economy.

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