

Land, Religion and Under-Development: Elements in the Development of a Colonial Economy in Ceylon

By L. MARASINGHE*

1. AN INTRODUCTION

Buddhism becomes relevant to Development in the Sri Lankan context, particularly, when one examines the methods used by the British Administration in the then colony of Ceylon for the acquisition of land to establish a plantation economy. After it was agreed by the British Government that as a matter of colonial policy the new Crown Colony shall have a plantation based economy, the next step was to find land suitable to implement that policy. The land in the Maritime Provinces raised some basic problems which made them unavailable for the new plantation industry. For one thing, the Maritime Provinces had been colonised since 1505; first by the Portuguese (1505-1656) and then by the Dutch (1656-1796) and, therefore, land in those geographical areas of the new colony had become utilised to the fullest extent. The second problem was that ownership of land in the Maritime Provinces was governed by the Roman Dutch Law and under that law much of the land was found to be 'tied up' by the institution of *Fideicommissum*. Untying of such land was found to be a somewhat difficult problem. The British Administration, however, found room in the Maritime Provinces to introduce the Liberian coffee plant which was to become by 1845 a major export product. The Liberian coffee plant required humidity and warmth, as it had found in its mother country, Liberia. The Maritime Provinces provided those ideal conditions. However, stricken with blight, the coffee industry, by 1875, had begun to be replaced by the tea industry as the principal export product. It was the introduction of the tea plant in Ceylon which made Buddhist temporalities an element in the colonial development of Ceylon.

The tea plant, unlike the coffee plant, required a higher elevation because of its need to grow in a cooler environment. The Maritime Provinces, therefore, proved unsuitable for the tea plant and the British administration in Ceylon was at this stage compelled to look towards the Kandyan provinces in its search for land.

* Professor of Law, University of Windsor, Ontario, Canada; Visiting Professor, Faculty of Law, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka.