

PLEANARY SESSIONS

From the Centre Stage to the Margins of Society: Struggle for Upward Social Mobility among Rural Youth in Sri Lanka

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Sri Lanka's post colonial, 'nationalist' development project facilitated by 1956 political transition and the economic and social reforms that followed not only led to an expansion of the rural land-owning peasantry but also created opportunities for upward social mobility of a large and growing rural youth constituency, mostly belonging to the majority Sinhala community. An expanding state sector accommodated and provided employment to many of these upwardly mobile youth. Political mobilization of rural youth by radical youth political parties from the late 1960's onwards brought this youth constituency to the center stage of politics in the country. However, more recent economic and social reforms have curtailed opportunities for upward social mobility of rural youth, making the conventional avenues of social mobility such as education increasingly irrelevant for many of them. The expanding areas of employment such as the informal sector, migrant labour, labour-intensive urban industries and construction work rarely provide opportunities for much desired upward mobility. These developments appear to have marginalized rural youth in an increasingly globally integrated economy which is largely dominated by a transnationally oriented urban business elite and a western educated intellectual elite, both ideologically and materially.

This paper is based on data derived from both recently completed national youth surveys and secondary sources such as the Department of Census and Statistics and The Ministry of Education. The paper argues that many disadvantaged rural youths have adapted to the new economic realities under neo-liberalism but their politically active brethren continue to struggle to regain lost political ground and social influence by advocating a return to the pre-liberalization moral economy or an increasingly unrealizable utopian socialist society, at least in the near future.