



Voice from the Hills: The Malaiyaga Tamil Community in Sri Lanka Unflagging Dedication for Two Centuries...

In the heart of Sri Lanka, nestled within its verdant hills and lush landscapes, exists a community with a remarkable history: The *Malayaga Thamilar*. As the calendar turns to 2023, it's a significant milestone for the Malaiyaga Tamil people (Hill country Plantation Tamils) in Sri Lanka. After two centuries of existence and unflagging dedication to propelling the nation's economy forward, the Plantation Tamil workers stand at an intriguing juncture in Sri Lanka. Their substantial contribution to the country's income inevitably raises the question of whether they should rightfully share the same rights as their fellow citizens. Paradoxically, despite being an economic backbone, this group finds itself enduring a life of profound oppression across social, political, cultural, and economic dimensions. This calls for a closer look at their journey and the challenges they continue to face on their road to recognition, dignity and equality. Plantation Tamils, hailing from Indian roots, embarked on a transformative journey to Sri Lanka (Ceylon) during the 19th and 20th centuries, assigned to work on the island's flourishing plantations. This community, often referred to as Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka, traces their lineage predominantly to laborers dispatched from caste affected groups, in Tamil Nadu, situated in the southern part of India. Their narrative is one of migration, adaptation, and vital contributions to shaping the history of both lands.

Identity crisis of Malaiyaga Tamil Community:

According to the 2012 Census & Population of Sri Lanka, Indian Tamils accounted for 4.2% of the population, with a count of 842,323 individuals. While referred to as Indian Origin Tamils (IOT) by the Sri Lankan Government and Department of Census, this community also embraces identities like Up Country Tamils, Hill Country Tamils, Plantation Tamils, and Malaiyaga Thamilar. Interestingly, a segment of Indian Tamils who attained Sri Lankan citizenship opted to identify themselves as Sri Lankan Tamils due to citizenship rights intricacies. This choice arose from the historical absence of such rights. This topic has spurred debates within civil and political circles, yet a unanimous agreement remains elusive. For greater inclusivity and the preservation of diverse identities, the Government of Sri Lanka/Department of Census could consider introducing the option for individuals to identify themselves as **Malayaga Thamilar**, reflecting the nuanced and multifaceted tapestry of this vibrant community.

Locations:

The Malaiyaga Tamil community finds its stronghold nestled amid the central hills of Sri Lanka, particularly in the administrative districts of Nuwara Eliya, Badulla, Ratnapura, Kandy and, Matale. (They also live in other districts like Kegalle, Kalutara, Moneragala, Galle, Matara Kurunegal etc... The core of this community revolves around the tea and rubber estate sector. The Central region, graced by ideal weather conditions, encompasses the hill country regions where the areas of Nuwara Eliya, Hatton, Maskeliya, Badulla.. thrive as epicenters of vibrant tea plantations. This geographical alignment has not only shaped their livelihoods but also contributed to the economic, social and cultural tapestry of the nation.

Economical Contribution:

Behind the world-renowned Ceylon tea brand is an army of dedicated tea plantation workers who have been the backbone of the nation's economic growth. Their efforts don't just cultivate tea leaves; they cultivate prosperity and wealth. The economic significance of these tea estates cannot be overstated. Beyond their aesthetic charm, these plantations drive a substantial portion of Sri Lanka's foreign income through tea and rubber exports. The *Ceylon Tea* that graces the cups of millions worldwide finds its origin in the hands of these hardworking women and individuals. However, behind this success story lies a tale of stark contrasts. As consumers savor the flavorful brew, the lives of the diligent tea plantation workers remain cloaked in shadow. While Ceylon Tea adorns cups around the world, those who labor to cultivate it find themselves dwelling in *Line Rooms*, far removed from the limelight. This seeming paradox highlights the unsettling truth: that amidst the industry's accolades, the workers grapple with enduring marginalization.



Poverty:



A harsh paradox unfolds as the most poverty-stricken population in the nation remains the unsung heroes of its economic pursuits. Astonishingly, the Household Income and Expenditure Survey Statistics in 2017 (HHI&ES) indicated a drop in the poverty rate among these individuals to 8.8%, (compared with 1.9 percent for the rural population) a significant plunge from the 32% recorded in 2006/07. Yet, this statistical improvement invites skepticism and scrutiny, leaving the reality of their lives still veiled. While the numbers might suggest progress, the tangible hardships they face reveal a different story. Limited access to education, healthcare, public services, and basic amenities persists, casting a shadow over

the seemingly optimistic data. As Sri Lanka's economy evolves, it's essential to acknowledge the disparity that lingers, impacting the most vulnerable. The challenges these communities confront extend beyond percentages and statistics. Their voices, experiences, and daily struggles remind us that true progress encompasses not just numbers on paper but the holistic well-being and protection of rights of all citizens. Bridging this gap demands comprehensive efforts that empower those trapped in the cycle of poverty to work towards creating a more equitable, equity and democratic society for everyone.

Right to food:

The recent economic downturn and ensuing food crisis have inflicted severe damage on vulnerable communities, particularly the plantation people, including estate workers, women, children, farmers, and daily laborers. Sri Lanka faces an alarming 57.4 percent food inflation rate as of June 2022, causing a debilitating impact on the ability to secure nourishing meals. While specific data for the people in plantations is lacking, evident are food-based coping strategies involving reduced intake of preferred and nutritious foods due to skyrocketing prices.



The intertwined challenges of limited education among women, low socio-economic status, and food insecurity exacerbate the cycle of malnutrition in the plantation sector. Sri Lanka ranks among the top ten countries with the highest rates of malnourished children, notably affecting women and children in plantation communities. The ongoing economic crisis prevents families from affording essential goods, hindering children's nutrition and education. This dire situation perpetuates malnutrition among children on plantations. With food insecurity and healthcare shortages, Plantation children attending school face drop-out risks as basic needs supersede education. High-risk child protection incidents like sexual assault and physical abuse have surged in key plantation districts. Urgent intervention is imperative to break the cycle of malnutrition and safeguard the well-being and rights of the children, women and the community.



Land and Housing:



The land and housing rights of hill country plantation people remain a contentious and complex issue. Shockingly, 67.8% (HHI&E Survey 2012/2013) still reside in colonial-era *Line Rooms* without ownership of either the line rooms or the land beneath them. While commendable housing projects have been initiated, during the past successive governments, their execution requires acceleration and a broader reach.

Another pressing concern is **language rights**. These communities face a distressing lack of Tamil-speaking officers in government institutions, particularly in areas where they predominate. This deficit of representation has plunged them into a predicament. To address these challenges, a multi-faceted approach is needed. The 13th Amendment underscores language rights in Sri Lanka, aiming for equitable linguistic representation. Ensuring rightful land ownership, modernizing housing conditions, and promoting linguistic inclusivity are crucial steps. Additionally, expediting and expanding housing initiatives can provide tangible improvements in the lives of plantation workers. Equitable land and housing rights, combined with linguistic inclusivity, are essential for uplifting the lives of these marginalized communities and empowering them to thrive in a fair and just society.

Access to Public Service:

In the Nuwara Eliya District, an impediment looms over the Tamil communities' access to public services. The staggering population, ranging from 225,483 and 232,466, falls within the ambit of each Ambagamuwa and Nuwara Eliya Divisional Secretariats. This congestion poses a significant challenge to the efficient delivery of state services to these areas.



Article 33 of the Pradeshiya Sabha Act further exacerbates the situation. It curtails the local authority services accessible to these communities, underscoring the pressing need for implementation of legislative amendment. As the Tamil population grapples with restricted access to essential public services, this issue calls for comprehensive reforms. Addressing this concern requires not only redressing the overcrowding issue but also advocating for equitable access to services mandated by the Pradeshiya Sabha Act and the recent Cabinet Decision (2019) on the increase of Divisional Secretariats. Through legislative changes, steps can be taken to ensure that state services are accessible to all, transcending barriers that currently hinder the rights of the Tamil communities in the region.

Education and Health:

Education and healthcare remain uphill battles for Sri Lanka's plantation people. While the government has allocated resources at the national level, the hill country regions still face stark disparities. Presently, there are only a handful of 1 AB schools equipped with science education and residential facilities. Illustrating the imbalance further, the Nuwara Eliya District holds a significant Tamil population, yet a few schools cater to their needs, compared to other communities. This glaring disparity speaks volumes about the unequal distribution of physical and human resources. These inequalities ripple beyond statistics, impacting the well-being and potential of the plantation communities. Access to quality education and healthcare is fundamental to breaking the cycle of poverty and empowering these marginalized populations. Addressing these issues require concerted efforts to bridge the gap and ensure equitable access to education and healthcare. Through targeted investments and policies, we can work towards leveling the playing field and providing every individual, regardless of their background, with the opportunity to thrive.



The Plantation Medical and Health Service:



Elevating the plantation medical and health service is an imperative step towards aligning with both national and international standards. Particularly concerning is the underdeveloped state of children's and women's sexual and reproductive health services within these communities. Presently, the majority of plantation dispensaries are overseen by estate medical assistants. This system poses a significant challenge to the overall national health framework. Addressing this issue calls for a comprehensive transformation of the healthcare infrastructure within plantations. By adhering to higher standards, ensuring specialized care for vulnerable groups, and training qualified medical professionals, the quality

of medical services can be elevated. Recognizing the importance of accessible, quality healthcare for all, this endeavor not only improves the lives of the plantation community but also contributes to building a healthier nation. Through collaborative efforts and strategic interventions, we can move towards healthcare equality and a stronger, more equitable healthcare system.

Right to livelihood:

The right to a livelihood is fundamental, yet the hill country plantation people face an uphill battle to secure it. Their daily wage hinges on collective agreements, which have remained stagnant for last few years due to a lack of renewal. Negotiations between trade unions and the employer's federation have hit an impasse, raising questions about adherence to corporate social responsibility and the UN Global Compact. Inequity prevails as plantation workers receive the lowest daily wage in the nation, both compared to counterparts in other sectors and non-formal sector workers. This dire reality propels them into perpetual poverty, a plight that resonates deeply. To address this issue, urgent action is warranted.



Revisiting wage agreements, fostering fair negotiations, and upholding responsible business practices are crucial steps. Prioritizing the livelihoods of the community is not just a moral obligation but also a path towards creating a more equitable society. By ensuring that their fundamental right to a livelihood is upheld, we can contribute to breaking the cycle of poverty and empowering these marginalized communities. Plantation communities face multiple hurdles and biases in accessing development services linked to their social, economic, and political rights. However, the presence of companies or state agencies (JEDB, SLPC or EPL) on many plantations brings deficiencies that impede both national development projects and equitable benefits reaching these marginalized groups.

Constitutional Reform:

To enhance Sri Lanka's political integrity and uphold democratic good governance, a reintroduced senate system with equal minority and professional representation is recommended. This system would foster checks and balances, ensuring credible political practices. Notably, all introduced bills should undergo scrutiny by the Senate before parliamentary approval, reinforcing transparency and accountability in the legislative process.

Political Representation:

The call for change from the current corruption-prone and violence-associated proportional representation system is gaining momentum. This shift is deemed crucial for a fairer political landscape. Interestingly, the proportional representation system seems favorable to demographic minorities, including Malaiyaga Tamil Community, and Muslims. Thus, political parties and civil movements advocate for a hybrid parliamentary and political system under the new constitution, combining electoral and proportional representation. This innovative approach is believed to empower not only scattered Malaiyaga Tamil community but also dispersed Sinhala and Muslim populations across the Northern, Eastern Provinces and the nation. By intertwining these representation systems, the envisioned outcome is broader political inclusion, ensuring the rights of diverse groups. As Sri Lanka navigates its political future, this proposal seeks to foster a more representative and harmonious democratic framework.

Recommendations

In recent times, after 200 years, discussions surrounding a paradigm shift in Sri Lanka's plantation sector have taken center stage. At the heart of this discourse lies the imperative to redefine plantation workers as more than just labor, a transformation that can only be realized through the constitutional guarantee of their fundamental rights as equal and full citizen.

Key to this transformation is the introduction of a living wage, meticulously crafted to address the prevailing economic challenges and the unique needs of the community live in the plantation sector. But this journey transcends the monetary realm. It necessitates a comprehensive overhaul of the health and education sectors, with a dedicated plantation development program at its core. Central to this endeavor is the integration of plantation health facilities into the national healthcare system, ensuring that quality healthcare becomes accessible to every individual. To bridge historical divides,



affirmative action and targeted development programs must take center stage. These initiatives, born of a commitment to inclusivity, endeavor to level the playing field and uplift the marginalized. Yet the transformation envisaged stretches further. Addressing land and housing concerns is pivotal. Clarity in land rights and the formulation of modern housing plans that underscore ownership set the stage for dignified living conditions and the assurance of welfare facilities, ultimately underscoring the inherent right to a decent life. The fabric of this transformation embraces livelihood diversification, marked by the identification and provision of a multitude of avenues. Supported by rigorous training and access to land, capital and production resources, this approach breathes life into sustainable progress and individual empowerment. A short term and long term plan of action, program and a mechanism to be established to expedited the sustainable development of the community. Promoting linguistic diversity stands as a cornerstone of this journey. Enforcing the 13th Amendment is a nod to linguistic rights, an endeavor that promises to honor and include every voice. In tandem, the establishment of a Commission on Malaiyaga People emerges as a watchful guardian, safeguarding the rights of ethnic, religious, cultural, and gender minority groups. Sri Lanka's path toward transformation is layered, intricate, and interconnected. It's a collective endeavor, a commitment to a future characterized by fairness, justice, and prosperity. As this nation ushers in a new era, the transformation of the Malaiyaga Tamil Community (plantation sector) reflects a resolute dedication to building a society with dignity that values and empowers every citizen in Sri Lanka.

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