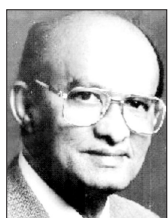




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Plantation Tamils in Sri Lanka

As a school boy, teacher, accountancy student and accountant, the author, a regular contributor to WSN, has had the experience of observing Plantation Tamils in the estates and possesses intimate knowledge of the squalor, economy and political conditions in which they have lived. WSN presents this first-person report which should serve as a primer for the uninitiated about Sri Lankan affairs



Suppiramaniam Makenthiran

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Living in the central hill part of Sri Lanka, Plantation Tamils, as they are generally called and mocked at as 'Indian Tamils', this community has been oppressed as chattel by successive Sinhalese governments since independence of the country in 1948.

In Sri Lanka, formerly called Ceylon, there are three major communities – the majority Sinhalese, the minority Tamils and Muslims. In 1948, the population was about 8 million, of which Sinhalese were 66%, Tamils 26% and Muslims 7%. Tamils were from two regions - the Eelam Tamils of the coastal Northeast Province, and Upcountry Tamils from the central highlands of Central, Uva and Sabaragamuwa Provinces.

The Northeast Tamils were the original inhabitants of Ceylon (Eelam or Ilankai, as known earlier) descending from the great king Ravanana or Ravanaeswaran, the Lord of Lanka. The Sinhalese came to Ceylon in 6th century B.C, when Prince Vijaya and a few hundred members of his men, having been banished from North East India, were stranded on the high seas and landed in Puttalam. As history would have it, they became powerful and gradually pushed the Tamils to the Northeast coast. They married local Tamil women and formed the Sinhala race. The Tamils of Northeast and Central Plantations speak the same Tamil language and are mostly Hindus. However, they are two separate communities due to historical factors.

Immigration in the nineteenth century

Plantation Tamils, also known as Upcountry Tamils were brought by the British at the beginning of the 19th century from South India to work on plantations. They are different from Eelam Tamils by virtue of their origin but they share ethnicity with them. Similarly other people of Indian origin, taken by the British as indentured labourers are found in South Africa, Malaysia, Singapore, Guyana, Fiji, West Indies and other places.

The first batch of Tamil labourers came around 1823 from Tamil Nadu, which was then called Madras Presidency. They have completed close to two centuries of habitation in Sri Lanka. They have toiled on the tea, rubber and coconut plantations.

Appalling living conditions

Tamil workers migrated as part of an indenture – an agreement to serve the master, which condemned them to slavery, first of the British and then of the Sinhalese. They lived in labor lines like the slave rows in the United States. Each family was given a room and large families of ten or twelve children were crammed in one room. They had to use common toilet and a common tap. Men and women had to bathe in the open. This continued even after independence. Health and educational facilities were also deficient. There were dispensaries but no doctors. Unqualified dispensers were attending to the sick. Schools were only up to the fifth standard. The vast majority lived in abject poverty and ignorance, though the sons of some of them were better off.

Conditions under colonialism

In 1931, the Donoughmore constitution introduced universal adult franchise and the Plantation Tamils were also granted the right to vote.

In the thirties, the Sinhalese led by D.S. Senanayake, agitated in the Legislative Council to send back Indians and to discontinue and deport Indians in government service. In 1939 Jawaharlal Nehru (who later became the first Prime Minister of Independent India) arrived to look into the problems faced by people of Indian origin. Soon after, the Ceylon Indian Congress was formed to lead the Upcountry Tamils. It later emerged as a powerful political party and trade union.

Saumiyaamoorthy Thondaiman emerges as leader off Upcountry Tamils

Born in Tamil Nadu in 1913, Saumiyaamoorthy Thondaiman, came to Ceylon in 1924 at the age of

11. His father had migrated to Ceylon as a kangany and through hard work and enterprise; he became the owner of an estate. He became a planter and so did many members of his extended family. In 1940 he entered politics as Chairman of the Reception Committee of the Gampola Branch of the Ceylon Indian Congress. He led his people through thick and thin for nearly six decades

Developments after independence

The Ceylon Indian Congress led by Thondaiman secured 8 seats in the first Parliament out of a total of 101. Thondaiman was elected from the Nuwara Eliya seat. Upcountry Tamil votes influenced 12 other electorates in favour of the left parties. Then like a bolt from the blue, came the terrible betrayal of the Tamils by Prime Minister D.S. Senanayake and the U.N.P. In the very year of independence, Upcountry Tamils who numbered over a million were rendered stateless. In a blatant act of perfidy, Senanayake passed the Ceylon Citizenship Act, depriving citizenship to Upcountry Tamils-almost over half the Tamil population, who had lived in Ceylon for many generations. It was followed in the next year by the Ceylon Elections Amendment Act depriving voting rights to Estate Tamils, who constituted nearly 13% of the population. As a result, in the next elections in 1952, not a single Tamil member was elected from the Upcountry, where half the Tamils in Ceylon lived.

Tamil fraternity fails to unite

Even in such perilous times, the Tamils failed to unite. To their dismay, G.G. Ponnambalam who posed as the champion of the Tamils and minorities, voted in support of these discriminatory acts against fellow Tamils to enable him to continue in the cabinet. The Plantation Tamils, who were already living in pathetic conditions, were left without a political voice.

Tamil honour was partly salvaged by S.J.V. Chelvanayagam, who voted against those despicable Acts of discrimination and broke away from the Tamil Congress Party of G.G. Ponnambalam. In

1949 S.J.V. Chelvanayagam formed the Federal Party to agitate for a federal constitution to safeguard Tamil rights. He was the first Tamil leader to alert the Tamils to the dangers of unitarianism and Sinhalese hegemony.

The Upcountry Tamil leader Thondaiman and his party, the Ceylon Workers Congress carried on a hopeless and ineffective Satyagraha against unjust laws. Unfortunately, during those trying times, the Tamils failed to unite.

Having seen the conditions in which these poor Tamils lived in Ceylon's Hill country and how the Tamils lived in apartheid-ridden South Africa, I can safely say that the Tamils in Ceylon estates were treated more shabbily. The Tamils in South Africa were also denied political rights, but they were economically much better off than the Estate Tamils of Ceylon's Hill country.

On the social front, the Sinhalese disparagingly refer to Upcountry Tamils as 'kallathonis' -illicit boat people and the Northeast Tamils as 'para damalos' -pariahs. How deep rooted is this prejudice can be gauged from the fact that just a few months back during the course of a high-level meeting, the brother of the present President of Sri Lanka, Mr. Basil Rajapakse, publicly lashed out at a delegation of Plantation Tamils, saying, "Para Demalo get out" -Pariah Tamils get out.

Renaming of Ceylon Workers Congress

In 1950, the name of Ceylon Indian Congress was changed to Ceylon Workers Congress and it became a powerful force as it controlled a large and strong trade union. This was done as the nomenclature 'Indian' was misleading and mischievous.

Eviction of estate Tamils under the Sirimavo-Shastri Pact

Without any consultations, Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri colluded with the Sinhalese leadership by agreeing to the repatriation of 600,000 of the one million Upcountry Tamils to India under the Sirimavo-Shastri Pact of October 1964. The