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Repatriation of Plantation Workers and its Impact on Caste Composition and Cultural Life in Plantations in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Introduction: The caste system is an integral part of the social life in South India and the practice is continued by migrant South Indians engaged in the plantation sector of Sri Lanka. Though the plantation system is significantly different from a South Indian village, the plantation sector operates as an economic unit and rewards are based on the achievements in the system. The caste based hierarchical order and the cultural background of the migrant Indian Tamils have played a prominent role and has placed a distinct culture in the plantation sector of the country (K. Sivathamby:1993, S.Balasundaram:2009 and Chandrabose:2014). Indeed, the hierarchical system and the cultural background has undergone significant changes amongst the plantation community at the time of implementation of repatriation programme from 1965 to the 1980s in Sri Lanka. This study will be exploring the existence of the caste based hierarchical system in the plantation sector

prior to the completion of the repatriation scheme and its repercussions in the social life of the plantation community in Sri Lanka.

The Tamil speaking plantation community of Sri Lanka is mainly employed in the tea and rubber cultivation industries in the country. The community is ethnically identified as 'Indian Tamils' in Sri Lanka. The estimated figures shows that the total number of Indian Tamils living in 2011 are around 1.3 million and roughly 1 million of them are concentrated in the tea and rubber producing plantation districts of the country. Most of the Indian Tamils living in the plantation districts are residing in the estates. They are housed in rows of rooms, which are generally called *labour lines* in Sri Lanka. Plucking of tea leaves is an important activity and is a specialized job done mainly by the female workforce in the country.

The successive governments of Sri Lanka have introduced several changes in the industry after the independence. The tea plantation was owned by multinational companies such as 'Sterling' and 'Rupees' until it was nationalised under the land reforms of 1972-75. The nationalised plantation sectors were handed over mainly to the government institutions of Janatha Estate Development Board (JEDB) and the Sri Lanka State Plantation Corporation (SLSPC). The government embarked upon a number of projects for rehabilitation of the nationalised tea plantation sector. However, the targets that were expected by the implementation of rehabilitation programmes did not sufficiently materialise and thus the financial problem reached a crisis point because of the proportions of heavy borrowing from the state banks and widespread corruption and mismanagement of the tea sector (Ranasinghe Sudatta:1995 and Shanmugaratnam.N:1997). Subsequently, the government dissolved the management of the tea plantation and handed it over to the private companies under the recommendation of the Plantation Restructuring Committee (PRC) in 1992. Accordingly, the tea sector was distributed amongst 23 Regional Plantation Companies (RPC) and had the extent of 89,581 hectares under tea cultivation and it was roughly 42 percent of the bearing tea land in the country in 1995 (Statistical Information on Plantation crops -2011:p.151). Currently, the extent of tea land of the RPC has now declined and bearing around 85,000 hectares which is 40 percent of the total tea land in the country in 2013.

Tea workers come under the category of wage earning and the daily wage is determined at the collective agreement between the trade unions and the Employer Federation in the country. The daily wage includes the basic wages and other allowances which have been continuously altered, but the amount has always been low when compare to the rural and urban workers of Sri Lanka.

The main objective of the study:

1. To illustrate the hierarchical system of various caste groups in the plantation prior to the implementation of reparation scheme in Sri Lanka.
2. To analysis the impact of caste composition and cultural life of the plantation community aftermath of repatriation in the country.

Methodology: The study is based on the observation of the author who lived in the Wanarajah estate which is located five kilometres away from the Hatton town along with the main road that leads to Maskeliya in the district of Nuwara Eliya in Sri Lanka. The author lived in the estate for a period of 25 years from 1965 to 1990s. Apart from the author's observations in the estate, the author also use the experiences that he had with the community while conduct various programme in the estates. The study also used published books article etc. to support for the analysis.

Caste system in the Plantation: The caste groups in the plantation sector can be divided into two, namely high caste and low caste. The high caste groups are popularly known as '*Kudiyavar*' and identified as the caste groups of *Vellara*, *Ahamudayar (Servai)*, *Naicker*, *Reddiyar*, *Muthuraja*, *Ambalakkaran*, *Maravar (Thevar)*, *Kallar*, *Konar (Yadavar)*, *Udaiyar*, and *Naidu*. The low caste are identified as *Pallar*, *Parayar* and *Chakkiliyar (PPC)*. The PPC also identified as *Adi-Dravidas*, Untouchables or *Harijans* caste in Tamil Nadu. The emigrant workers who come under the category of *Kudiyavars* are relatively much for better off than the emigrant PPC. The various castes of *Kudiyavars* constitutes to around half of the migrants and they were land holders, tenants and agriculture workers. But, the lands that belonged to them were very small, poorly built, Therefore these agricultural workers were forced to sell some of their property and take up jobs as plantation labour. Most of them were from the driest and most barren parts of the districts of Trichinopoly, Salem, Pudukottai, Ramnad, Madurai and Tanjore in the state of Tamil Nadu. Another half of the migrants were landless agricultural field labourers and occupied the lowest rank in the existing caste system such as *Adi-Dravidas*, Untouchables or *Harijans* (Chattopadhyaya:1979).

A few families belonging to the artisan castes and some to goldsmiths (*Asari*) were recruited or migrated to Sri Lanka. People belonging to specialist castes like barbers, Washerman (*Vannan*) and temple priest (*Pandaram*) were recruited for the purpose of fulfilling the growing estate community's need for special services in connection with their rituals and religious practices (Odduvar Hullop:1994). The PPC were segregated from the rest of the village in Tamil Nadu on its outskirts, in a settlement cluster called *Cheri*. They were mostly low-paid agricultural workers striving hard to make ends meet. When demand for labour opened up on the plantations in Sri Lanka, these people were ready to embark upon the hazardous journey. A great number of the PPC labourers were mainly from Trichinopoly-Namakkal Taluk triangle and from the district of Ramanathapuram in Tamil Nadu.

Among the caste group that migrated to Sri Lanka, the *Vellalar*'s significantly improved from others. Even though, they migrated either as a labourers or for the purpose of trade and business. Some of them were designated as Head *Kanganis* and became quite wealthy, purchased small estates and others were able to enjoy upward mobility as they provided good education for their children. Quite a number of the *Vellalars* were earning enough

money so that they could return to their village in Tamil Nadu in their old age (Odduvar Hollup 1994).

It should be noted that, unlike the Indians who migrated to other countries i.e Mauritius, Fiji, the Caribbean and Guyana, the migrants to Sri Lanka were largely homogeneous and consisted of mainly Tamils with their family members. As a result, caste kinship and their village ties were better maintained than the other overseas Indian community. The plantation system, the travel plan imposed by the planters and the restriction made through the Labour Ordinance for migrant Indian labourers compelled the Indian Tamils to continue to be living in the plantation. The estate management also allowed the estate workers to entertain their religious activities and rituals in the respective estates.

Upper Caste Families in the Wanarajah Estate: The tea estate of Wanarajah is located in the district of Nuwar Eliya which was managed by the Mackwoods Tea company during the British rule and then under the Janatha Estate Development Board (JEDB) up to 1992 and at present under the management of the Bogawanthalawa plantation company. The Wanarajah estate was divided into thirteen divisions and employed a total of 2500 families in the estate. The lower division of the Wanarajah estate constituted to around 300 families and roughly around 20 percent of them belonged to upper caste families and they also lived side by side with PPC in the line rooms of the estate. The majority of the upper caste families applied for repatriation and possessed the Indian Passport known as the “red colour passport”. The commencement of repatriation began in 1972 and completed towards the end of 1982. The upper caste Tamils lived in the lower division of the Wanarajah estate and mainly belonged to the Castes *Thevar*, *Aghamudiyar*, *Padaiyachi* and *Konar*. There were few families that identified themselves as the *Malayaly* and the caste group of *Nadar* and *Pandarm* also lived in the estate. The rest of them belonged to the caste group of PPC in the estate. However, the upper caste community played the major leading roles in the estates. Apart from Estate work, most of them were heavily involved in part time agricultural activities in the estate and many of them were cattle rearing and supply milk to the milk board as well as for others in the estate. The local level leadership of the trade union was also under their leadership. The proactive estate level trade union leader Mr. Sellaiah, belongs to *Aghamudiyar* caste was very popular amongst the workers in the Wanarajah estate and was also well respected in other estates in the vicinity. Apart from the trade union leadership the estate temple committee mainly consisted of the upper caste estate workers as well and they usually belonged to the castes *Thevar*, *Aghamudiyar* in the estate. They were very keen in performing annual festivals, popularly known as *Mariamamma Thiruvilla* or *Sammikumbudu* in the estate. The members of the temple committee were from the upper caste. The committee also regularly organized other religious festivals such as *Kamankoothu*, *Margali Bajan* etc. The upper caste aforesaid families were also considerably involved in the Ganesh Temple popularly known as *Wanarajah Pillaiyar Kovil* located in the outskirts of the estate. The upper caste estate workers took the leadership in both religious activities and cultural functions that were observed in their respective estates which was similar to what one might find in their ancestral villages in South India. Apart from the involvements in the temple

and religious activities of the upper caste families in the estate, they also very keen to send their children for secondary level of education in the nearest town schools. The educated youth also conducted night schools known as *Irravu Palli* mainly targeting the children of the PPC in the estate. It should be noted that a few Christian families of PPC also had the privilege to send their children to missionary schools located in the Hatton town to continue their secondary education. The upper caste families also were considerably involved in the circulation of money amongst the estate workers. The monthly serving such as *Seetu* system was very active in the estate. Most of the elite upper caste workers who worked in the plantation took time off from their estate jobs and visited their villages in South India periodically and on return they continued their activities in the estates.

Repatriation Upper caste family: The repatriation programme of Sirima-Shastri Pact of 1964 had reversed the situation in the estate. A total of 459,000 of people were repatriated under the provision of above fact signed in 1964. Majority of them were upper caste Indian Tamils lived in the estates. As far as Wanarajah estate is concerned except three family the others around 55 families belongs to upper caste were left the country within a period of 10 years from 1972. Repatriation of those elites created a gap in terms of continuity of several cultural practices in the estates and a lull persisted until the 1990s. Though the upper caste communities had lived with the PPC in the estates and they did not associate with the low caste community in terms of performance cultural activities in the estates. It took several years for the emergence of new leadership in the estates after the repatriation of upper caste community. Coincidentally, the nationalisation of estate schools in the 1980s and the expansion of opportunities for outside work for the educated youth paved the way for new leadership in the estates. Subsequently, a new culture also emerged amongst the estate community which mostly harmonised with the Sinhalese. Provision of education and opportunities for the lower caste plantation youth to associate with the Sinhalese as compared to the upper caste Indian Tamils living in the urban areas are leading to the formation of a uniquely new community in the country

Several development programmes like the distribution of land to landless communities for growing of tea and housing programmes have been implemented during the last two decades by successive governments, but the benefits have not reached significantly to the Indian Tamil tea estate workers in the country. Many of them are living in very old line rooms which were constructed during the British times. At present the line rooms are owned by the privatized tea estate owners and labour is provided for the tasks performed on a daily basis.

Apart from the economic vulnerability Indian Tamils who are living in the estates also severely affected by the ethnic conflict that was between the government of Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan Tamil separatists of the North and the East. Undoubtedly, Indian Tamils are not part of these separatist movements. But many people living in the South cannot distinguish them from those living in the North and East. On several occasions Indian Tamils were suspected casualties that occurred in the armed forces in the War front. This situation prevailed for the last thirty years beginning from the 1980s. The estate Indian

Tamil mainly belongs to the PPC is not on par with the majority community in the allocation of resources in the fields of education, employment and infrastructure.

Several of the Indian Tamils living in these districts are fluent in the Sinhala language and fascinatingly they use the language even amongst their own family members. Indeed, the orientation of Sinhala was heavily instigated during the crucial North and East War in order to conceal their identity as Tamils in public places. Moreover, they also ascertain to follow several customs that are connected to Sinhalese rituals in these districts. For example in the Southern province the *Devasam* ritual in the Hindu religion has been converted to *Dhana Gethra* of Buddhism and all associated Buddhist rituals are followed. An interesting observation is that the language the Indian Tamils commonly use for calling their children in the south is different from that of the Indian Tamils living elsewhere. Indian Tamil call a son *Putha* to a son instead of *Magan*. Likewise the daughter is termed as *Duwa* instead of *Makal*. Several of the Tamil women are wearing Sinhalese dresses for their ceremonies like weddings etc. It should be noted that there is no evidence to prove any institutional arrangements or announcement on conversion of the Indian Tamils in to Sinhalese even during the crucial War period by the Sinhalese or Buddhist monks in the Southern province.

Conclusion: The study highlights the multidimensional status of the Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka. The Indian Tamils who migrated have adjusted to a new economic activity of plantation system in Sri Lanka. Large numbers of the Indian Tamils are still living in the large scale housing schemes of the plantation sector in the country. The rest are living in cities as a business community and in the rural sector elsewhere in the island. Among them the people who are living in the tea smallholding sector in the Southern province are the most vulnerable community. The business community of Indian Tamils relatively continue their strong relationship with their ancestral villages in South India. But it is not the case with Indian Tamils living off the plantation sector studies show that they have preserved most of their cultural identity as Indian Tamils. However, the Pact of 1964 and ethnic violence made a significant impact on their cultural identity in the country. The study also highlighted the hardships which are affecting the cultural identity of Indian Tamils living in the Southern province and the adaptation to the Sinhalese culture. It seems that they becoming a new inclusive in the existing Sinhalese society is inevitable. Hence, Indian Tamils need a very strong institutional support to retain their traditional culture and their identity as Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka.

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