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3. BUILDING A DISTINCT ETHNIC IDENTITY: A STUDY OF THE INDIAN ORIGIN TAMILS IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract:

The Indian Origin Tamils are of relatively recent origin. They have come to the island nation during the British colonial period and have worked and lived in the plantations for many generations. They exhibit an identity that reflects their historical past and since they are a plantation community, their culture is a combination of the traditions inherited from their ancestors and the one that has developed in the plantations throughout the years. The community considers itself as a part of the Sri Lankan nation in every sense, as the community does not have any desire to have a separate territorial entity but do aspire to have equal political and economic rights. At the same time they also want to be recognized as ethnic group with a distinctive identity from that of the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Tamils in India. The paper shall discuss the bases and sources for assertion of a distinct ethnic identity by the Indian Origin Tamils. For this, the author shall analyse the history and the attributes of their ethnic identity.

Keywords: Tamils, Plantations, Kangany, Ethnic Identity

Introduction:

The Indian origin Tamils of Sri Lanka are a creation of the British colonial rule of the nineteenth century. The Indian Tamils were brought as indentured labourers by the British planters from erstwhile Madras Presidency to the plantations in Kandyan highlands of Ceylon (Sri Lanka). They were socially underprivileged and impoverished group arriving on the plantations with myriad expectations of a better future unshackling them from social bondages. But within the confines of the

plantations they lived lives of almost captive labourers upholding their social structure under the authoritative control of the Kangany. The culture that is inherent within them is continuation from their ancestors, adapted in the new environment of the plantations. After a continued residence of nearly one hundred and fifty years in the plantations, they have developed a community's distinctive identity. The Indian Tamils have undergone numerous hardships in their lives as they were denied of citizenship rights for many decades after Sri Lanka's independence from British colonialist. This perpetual state of statelessness has certainly impacted their socio-economic conditions and they are group of people who have the largest percentage of people in poverty. They were stateless persons for almost four decades because of the stringent laws of the Sinhalese government that targeted them and sought to coerce them to go back to their ancestral villages. With persistent efforts of the political parties and the trade unions representing the Indian Tamils, they have finally achieved Sri Lankan citizenship.

The community faces an ambiguity in terms of its identity. Generally, the Indian Tamils are categorized as communities who speak the Tamil language, by belief follow Hinduism and are Dravidian in race. Their features make them similar to the Sri Lankan Tamils though their geographic location, caste system and occupation are different. As a 'plantation community' of Sri Lanka, they are in many ways unique, yet most often the Sinhalese associate them with the Sri Lankan Tamils. After attainment of citizenship rights and due to frequent exposure to the outside world beyond the plantations, the Indian Tamils at present have many reasons to assert their ethnic identity.

Since the Indian Tamils are of relatively recent origin, the attributes of ethnic identity of the group have developed in the last century. Traditions and customs remain unchanged from their ancestors and have been juxtaposed to the daily lives and duties related to the plantations system. The author shall broadly discuss the bases of ethnic identity of the community and will also deal briefly with the challenges that the Indian Tamils are facing in Sri Lanka. In conclusion the author shall focus on the assertion of the Indian Tamil identity, which is being strengthened by growing consciousness

among them to distinguish themselves from the Sri Lankan Tamils of Northern Sri Lanka.

The Population Distribution of the Indian origin Tamils

According to the 1981 census, around 78 per cent of Indian origin Tamils are settled in the plantation sector and they consist of 6.41 per cent of the Sri Lanka's total population (Chandrabose, 2004). The tea plantations are located in the districts of Nuwara Eliya, Kandy, Matale, Badulla, Ratnapura and Kegalle. The largest population of Indian Tamils is in the district of Nuwara Eliya with 51.33 per cent (359,386), next is Badulla with 18.22 per cent (141,086) and the other districts of Ratnapura, Kandy, Matale and Kegalle constitute 1.95 per cent, 8.35 per cent, 5.27 per cent and 5.86 per cent respectively (Chandrabose, 2004). In the district of Colombo, the Indian Tamil populations comprise 1.16 per cent of its total population. In addition, there are clusters of internally migrated people from this community in the North Eastern Tamil Districts of Mannar, Vavuniya, Batticaloa and Mullaitivu (Sinnathamb, y M. and Vijesandiran, S., 2004). Most of tea regions lie within the Wet Zone, but there are few estates in the Uva Basin and around its margins, which lie within the Dry Zone. According to the Preliminary Release of the Census of Population and Housing Survey-2001, the estimated total estate (also called plantation) population in that year in Sri Lanka was 900,713 of which 88.4 per cent were Indian Tamils (Sinnathamb, y M. and Vijesandiran, S., 2004). Almost 90 per cent of this Tamil population is of Indian Tamil origin. As such the plantations can be called as the homeland of the Indian origin Tamils.

Bases of Ethnic Identity formation

The Indian origin Tamils are marginalized sections of the Sri Lankan society. The identities of the Indian Tamils have evolved with the inter-relation of many factors from their common experience in the past to the present struggles they are under going and this is responsible for the formation and development of the Indian origin Tamil community in the plantations. The bases of ethnic identity formation of the Indian origin Tamils are discussed here in four segments which are in congruence with the

definition of Anthony D. Smith. Anthony D. Smith defines '*ethnie*', as a "social group whose members shares a common origin, claim a common and distinctive history and destiny, possess one or more distinctive characteristics, and feel a sense of collective uniqueness and solidarity" (Smith, Anthony D.,1981).

1. A common historical origin
2. A distinctive culture
3. A specific geographic location and
4. A collective name

A Common Historical origin

The development of the plantation economy can be closely connected with the needs of industrial capitalism in Britain in the nineteenth century (Kurien, Rachel,1998). Before the British came to the Kandyan Highlands, it had dense forest and the region was sparsely populated. There were Sinhalese peasants who had adequate land for cultivation of crops. The British occupied the Kandy region in 1815 and soon after a network of roads and railways were built linking the area with the rest of the island. The isolation of the old Kandyan kingdom was broken and the process of modernization of economy began. Edward Barnes, the Governor of the Kandyan region, established coffee plantation in his own estate at Gannoruwa. Later the forest and the Highlands came under the Crown Land Ordinance of 1840 and Waste Land Ordinance of 1897. The prospective planters bought this crown land at a nominal price. Tennent writes that in 1836, "Nearly four thousand acres of mountain forests were felled and planted and in an incredibly short time the sale of crown land exceeded forty thousand acres per annum" (Nadesan, S., 1993). Coffee plantation was replaced by tea plantation by the end of the nineteenth century. Tea production required a large residential labour force who would agree to work at a nominal wage in the plantations. The Sinhalese peasants had their own land and found the work of a tea labourer below their dignity and freedom. The unwillingness of the Sinhalese peasants to work compelled the British Planters to bring cheap labour from Madras Presidency. They were landless labourers who were impoverished due to famine in South India. The flow of Indian labourers to Sri Lanka began with establishment of

coffee plantation in 1830s. In 1837 there were 5,000 acres under coffee cultivation in Ceylon with 10,000 South Indian labourers working on them (Jayaraman, R., 1975). A common feature of the Indian labourers were, they all belonged to Madras Presidency and were Tamils. Majority of the immigrants came from districts of Madurai, Tinnevely, Ramnad, Trinchinopoly, Salem, South Arcot, Chingelput, Tanjore, Mysore, Malabar and Travancore. These districts of Madras Presidency were overwhelmingly populated. These are some societies for which emigration is a necessity (Tinker H., 1977). Due to excess population and scarcity of land, the Indian labourers were compelled to immigrate to the plantations. They anticipated better earnings, so that they could purchase property, settle debts and improve their living standards. In 1939, short-term migration to the coffee plantations began. The social structure of South India was based on a rigid caste system. There were certain caste groups, which were landless agricultural labour who lived in the state of penury for many generations. They were the 'Untouchables' from the lowest caste categorised as 'Adi *Dravida*' in social hierarchy and belonged from the castes of Paraiyan, Pallan and Chakkiliyans. The Pallans were agricultural serfs of landlords of the dominant castes, the Paraiyans who were also agricultural serfs, in addition they beat tom-toms for Non Brahman funerals, guard cremation grounds and remove dead cattle from the streets of landlords (Gough, E. K., 1960).. The Chakkiliyans considered to be the lowest caste (their name is derived from the Sanskrit word *Shatkuli* i.e. 'flesheater'), were often given the task of sweeping (apart from the usual field work for the estate production) (Gough, E. K., 1960). Their lot was pitiful, and when a demand for labour opened up in nearby Ceylon in the 1840s, they were ready to embark upon the hazardous journey to the estates (Gough, E. K., 1960).. According to Donovan Moldrich, landlessness and casteism were the two main factors that drove these people to the plantations. Migration to the plantations continued till 1939 after which a ban was imposed on immigration of labour.

The journey to the plantations was long and hazardous. They were brought in thousands as indentured labourers. The labour gangs walked from their villages in

India to ports on the southern sea-board (Driesen, I. V., 1998). They followed two principle routes- Mandapam-Paumben-Dhanuskodi-Talaimannar rail-cum-ferry route and Tuticorin-Colombo sea route. The first route was convenient for the emigrants from north Madurai, Tanjore, Trinchinopoly and the adjoining districts, whereas the second route was preferred by those who emigrated from South Madurai, Tinnevelly, Trivandrum and the adjoining districts (Chattopadhyaya, H., 1979). The long journey was too perilous for the poor labourers, trying to sustain themselves without food and water, consequently many died on the way and only a few managed to reach the plantations. Initially, only male labourers arrived in the plantations to work. With passage of time, they came along with their families, as women also could work in the tea plantations. Although from 1850 through 1860, according to the admittedly incomplete official statistics, 85,872 women and children were recorded as immigrants who came to the plantations (Chattopadhyaya, H., 1979). The proportion of women and children in the coming years increased dramatically. The functional division of labour in the colonial economy and cultural difference (including language and religion) kept the south Indian estate labourers apart from the Sinhalese peasantry in the neighbouring villages (Bandarage A., 1983).

The Indian origin Tamils were recognized as a separate ethnic group in the 1911 Census of Sri Lanka with a total population of 530,983. Regular migration of Indian Origin Tamils was still going on in the plantations but there was absence of ethnic bonding within the group, since they only came to the plantations for an economic activity and believed that they would return to their native land one day. The Indian Tamil labourers in the plantations had a hard life and one of the main reasons was that they were monetarily always indebted to the kanganies. The method initially adopted by the planters to obtain the supply of Indian labourers, was based upon the principles of indenture but their frequent desertion and the proximity of their homeland rendered the indenture system as the method of recruitment untenable (Chattopadhyaya, H., 1979). As a result, the indenture system was abandoned and the new system of Kangany or labour contractors was introduced.

Under the Kangany system the recruitment of Indian Tamil labourers was more rapid. The Kanganies were from the Non-Brahman caste and they brought labourers from the same villages where they resided. The Kanganies maintained their caste hierarchy in the plantations also so that they could show their authority over the Indian Tamil labourers who mostly belonged to the caste category of 'Adi *Dravida*'. The social structure that was prevalent in the South Indian villages was followed in the plantations also. The Kangany acted as a mediator between the British planters and the Indian Tamil labourers. The British planters gave the wages of the labourers to the head kangany and they kept their share of money from the daily wages of the labourers and paid the rest to them. The Indian Tamil labourers did not have direct access to their wage. They received a meager pay which did not suffice to meet their needs and had no alternatives than to borrow from the Kanganies with high interest. The indebtedness of the Indian Tamil labourers became more severe and, as a result, they lacked the independence to go back home. They were limited to the plantations and worked from dawn to dusk, trapped in the debt-bondage of the Kangany system.

To curb the various menaces of the kangany, the planters had to put forth certain restrictions on them. Planters founded the Labour Federation of Ceylon in October 1898 and in 1904, the Ceylon Labour Commission (CLC) was founded to prevent the crimping of coolies and to regulate the kanganies. However these measures were not successful and the British planters again continued to rely on the kangany for regular supply of labourers in the plantations.

In the pre-independence period of Sri Lanka, the Indian Tamil worker constituted about one-sixth of the total population. After enjoying franchise rights in the elections of 1931, 1936 and 1947, virtually all of them were deprived of citizenship rights soon after Ceylon became independent (Phadnis, U., 1967). The Soulbury Commission which arrived in Ceylon in 1944 to discuss about the constitutional reforms regarding the citizenship questions of the Indians living in the country finally entrusted the

Ceylon government with power to decide the citizenship question of the Indian origin Tamils. Majority of Indian Tamils were reduced to stateless citizens excluded from national politics and this issue came in prominence in most of the Sri Lanka-India talks held in the post independence era. The denial of right to citizenship resulted in political, economic deprivation and also social discrimination.

Brief historical background of the Indian Tamils in Madras Presidency:

The historical interpretation of the Indian origin Tamils journey is musically described in their folksongs. This tradition of narrating a story with a song or poetry has been engraved in the Indian Tamil culture itself. In the folk songs they describe the sufferings of their ancestors who came to the plantation. E. Valentine Daniel (1992) terms this legacy of the Indian Tamils as 'bardic heritage'. Such traditions of storytelling through drumming and a song are common among the Indian origin Tamils. There are myths of their common origin and the reason for segregation from the larger society. Since the Indian Tamils belonged to lowest of caste, in their native land they had separate settlements away from the main village often treated as inferiors who can even contaminate the air they breathe. They were landless labourers living at the mercy of the landlords and were outcastes in all social gatherings of their villages. It was peculiar to Indian society that agricultural servitude was a function of caste; only members of certain castes could be made serfs or 'slaves', and what is more, it appears likely that at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the bulk of the agricultural labour castes were following their traditional occupation (Kumar D., 1965). The Indian Tamil folklores also depicted these forms of segregations in the songs and believed that they had committed a sin for which the Gods punished them to have a life of indignity and sufferings. So when an opportunity came for them for working in the plantations they had nothing to lose. In the plantations, they at least were able to have regular meals and were given wages. The caste system though maintained in the plantations, yet it was less rigid since most of the Indian origin Tamils irrespective of their caste were employed as tea labourers, which was unlike their villages where their occupation was, related to the caste they belonged to.

A Distinctive Culture

The distinctive culture of the Indian origin Tamils can be understood by differentiating them from that of the Sri Lankan Tamils. The culture of the Indian Tamils is largely being preserved by the community and some of its uniqueness as said earlier has evolved in the plantations. The Plantation Tamils constitute a distinct ethnic group, separated by caste, occupation, manner of speech (dialect), time of arrival to the island, political affiliation and regional location from the Sri Lanka Tamils, who live in the north with its historical capital in Jaffna and eastern parts of the island (Hollup O., 1998) . The Sri Lankan Tamils are traditionally staunch Saivite Hindus who deem themselves to be unique compared to other Tamils in their customs and heritage (Sahadevan, P., 2003). Sri Lankan Tamils are fairly educated and have benefited from a well-organized, highly competitive educational system in the north, whereas the estate Tamils¹ are poorly educated, hardly beyond primary level and with a high degree of illiteracy, especially among the women workers (Hollup Oddvar, 1992).

In the caste hierarchy the social status of the Sri Lankan Tamils is higher than the Indian Tamils. Though they belong to the same Dravidian race, following a common religion, yet they are separated from each other on the basis of caste, occupation, geographical location and religious practices. The Tamil language that is spoken in the plantations is inferior in quality compared to the one spoken in the north and the Sri Lankan Tamils call the dialect of the Indian Tamils as '*koduntamir*' (coarse or corrupt Tamil) and the Sri Lankan Tamils speak Tamil which is called '*centamir*' (elegant Tamil) which according to them has 'linguistic purity'. On the other hand, the Tamil spoken by the Indian Tamils is unique to them, developed in the plantation having their own folklore of poetry, song, drumming and the art of storytelling. This folklore relates to their arrival in the island, their hardships, and joys and sorrow.

S. W. R. De A. Samarasinghe has given the following reasons for the lack of close bonds between the two groups. First, the mostly upper class Sri Lankan Tamils

considers the mostly depressed-caste Indian Tamils to be their social inferiors. Second, because of continued links maintained by many Indian Tamils with their home villages in South India, they have generally been considered to be temporary immigrants, in contrast to the permanently settled Sri Lankan Tamils. Third, there is vast gap in education between the poorly educated Indian Tamils and the generally better educated Sri Lankan Tamils. Fourth, the Indian Tamils are predominantly working-class, whereas the majority of the Sri Lankan Tamils consider themselves to be either farmer-class or middle-class. Fifth, the two groups occupy two different parts of the country (Samarasinghe, S.W.R.de A.,1988). Hence, the Sri Lankan Tamils have a 'cultural hegemony' and are economically well off than the other Tamils in the country.

The historical interpretations of the various ethnic groups determine the understanding of the relationship among each other. E. Valentine Daniel defines the ethnic relation between the Sinhalese and the Tamils in context to history and heritage. The Sinhalese Buddhist believe that they are entrusted by Lord Buddha to preserve and defend Buddhism in its pristine form against all threats from its non believers and the Jaffna Tamils see themselves as the living embodiment of Tamil linguistic and religious tradition (Daniel V. E., 1992) According to the Sinhalese, the historic confrontational relationship they had with the Tamils has not only continued through the colonial period but its major repercussions were felt with the ethnic riots that started in the 1980's. Hence the Tamil nationalism began in a militant manner not because they wanted to establish a Tamil kingdom in Jaffna but to protest against the injustices they met under the Sinhalese majoritarian government. In case of the Indian origin Tamils they were for long not regarded as citizens of Sri Lanka and faced discriminatory treatment not only from the government but also the Sri Lankan society at large. The Sinhalese perceive the Jaffna Tamils and the Indian origin Tamils as one ethnic group due to their origin from South India.

The caste system in the plantations was followed in accordance to what had been in the South Indian villages. The Indian Tamils belonged to the Adi Dravida category and the Kanganies who brought them to the island were from the Non-Brahman category. In the plantations only these two categories of caste people came, so the hierarchy of caste and its pattern of behaviour between them were maintained. The Kangany kept the Indian Tamil labourers under his subordination and continued his superiority and authority over them. So the kanganies who were mostly Non-Brahmans followed the caste system. The Indian Tamil labourer lived in congested line-rooms away from where the kangany lived. This spatial distribution and segregation of the caste correspond in large measure to their occupation and mutual ritual rank (Jayaraman, R., 1975). This social structure has strong resemblance to the South Indian villages they once called their home. The continuance of the caste system is also due to the geographic proximity to India. The journey between India and Sri Lanka was short and so they resumed their caste practices in the plantations also. The Kangany and the labourers who came along with him, were usually from the same village and they recognized his position in the village. Besides the labourers were hesitant to change the caste practices, as they believed that the moment they returned to India they would be subjected to the discipline of caste Panchayats (Jayaraman, R., 1975). The British planters also encouraged the caste practices under the kangany system, as this would keep the labourers disciplined. The old kangany system and the organization of caste-based labour gangs have been abolished since the 1960s, but the new labour supervisors are still called kanganies and are recruited from both upper and lower caste (Philips A., 2005).

The plantations that have been the source of livelihood for the Indian origin Tamils are termed as '*Thottam*' (garden). The tea bush symbolizes many meanings. The woman signifies the *korontu* (two leaves and bud). When a girl is married off at a young age she is described as "plucking an arumpu", a virgin girl in her late teens is likened to a *korontu*, ripe for plucking and a woman in the mid twenties is compared to a *kattai ilai*, the third leaf and an "old maid" is a *karattai ilai*, a mature and coarse

leaf (Daniel, V. E., 1997). The women also refer the tea bush as their 'children' since they contribute to the dual image of women as producers (tea pluckers) and reproducers (of tea and children) (Philips, A., 2005).

The traditions and customs of the Indian origin Tamils are similar to their ancestors who lived in drought prone and poverty stricken regions of Madras Presidency. They worshipped God to bring rainfall and to have a better harvest. Similarly, when they came to the plantations, they worshipped non-Sanskritic lineage deities (*Kula theivam*), family deities (*kudumpa theivam*) and communal deities (*samuha theivam*) who are responsible for the well being of families, workers and the tea bushes (Philips, A., 2005). They also worshipped Sanskritic deities such as Lord Shiva, Parvati, Murugan, Vishnu, Ganesh etc. They celebrated festivals like Pongal, Deepawali, Kaaman Koothu, Shiva Ratri in a similar manner like that of the Tamils in South India. The male deities who protect the plantations are Muniandy, Karuppan, Rodaimuny and Madessamy and the female protector is Mariamman. The shrines and the stone image of these deities are found in every estate, near the brooks, line rooms and at the edge of a forest. The customs and practices of marriage are same as the ones they had in their villages in South India. In these adverse situations, where Indian Tamil labourers are constantly exploited by the plantation authorities and humiliated for their lower status in the society, they have still managed to maintain their culture and traditions.

A specific geographic location

The Indian Tamils of the plantation system are an ethnic minority living in a Sinhalese dominant surrounding region. The whole plantation system can be regarded as a 'total economic institution' (Bercford, G. L., 1971), which involves cheap labour and large-scale productivity, meant for export purpose. According to George L. Berckford, the plantation systems are large areas of land, having a rigid hierarchical structure where the owners or the managers are Europeans and the unskilled labourers from Africa and India are at the bottom. This system is a unique combination where people from varied race and culture get together to a new land, purely for economic activity.

The salient features of a plantation system as mentioned above are reflected among the Indian origin Tamils of Sri Lanka who constitute a 'plantation community'. The British introduced the Indian Tamils to the plantations when there was shortage of labourers. The Indian Tamils were by race, religion, and caste different from the Kandyan Sinhalese. They came to the plantations for economic activity and were mostly confined to the plantations that had rigid working hours. Social relations were limited to the other Tamil labourers within the plantations only. There was no change in the social structure of the Indian Tamils even though they lived in a territory far away from their place of origin. They remained in the plantations for almost one hundred and fifty years. Many generations of Indian Tamils continue to live there and are an integral part of the plantations, since they have never been to their ancestral homeland.

The labourer leads a disciplined and monotonous daily life. The woman worker starts the day at 4.30 A.M. with the domestic chores and both men and women workers have to report for duty at 6.30 A.M. and continue to work till 5.30P.M. or 6 P.M. in the afternoon. Women workers do the primary work of plucking and tipping and men work in the factory, nursery, and shops and as labourers to build public roads. On most occasions, it is the women workers who are actively involved in tea plantations. The children of the tea labourers are also forced to work in the plantations at a young age. This deprives them of their childhood and education. Until recently, the Indian Tamil children were only given elementary education in the estate schools. The estate workers were not allowed to cultivate any land for growing cereals or vegetables for their own consumption rather they were provided with rice, dhal, cereals, spices, vegetables, flour sugar and oil from the Cooperative store (Daniel V. E., 1997). The plantation system maintains the hierarchical organization where the head of the estate is the Planter, a European and below him was his assistant followed by the office staff accountants and book-keepers and the Indian Tamil labour force were last in the hierarchy. The planter who is called as *Periya Dorai* lives in a lavish bungalow, the assistants (*sinna dorai*) live in houses with lower scale of luxury compared to the

planter, the office staff live in single or twin cottages of moderate size and the workers (*coolies*) live in 'line' rooms, barrack structures with one room allotted to each family (Kurien, R., 1998). Such system of hierarchy is strictly followed and the social relations among these groups are accordingly maintained, which is very effective for production.

According to Daniel Bass, the Indian origin Tamil community has become Lankan in character (2001:16). They converted the space of the plantations as a living place for themselves. By implying the word 'place' to the plantations Bass explains that the Indian Tamils have given meaning to the plantations by dwelling in it and constructing their socio-cultural identity. This has been seen, for example, in the building of numerous Hindu shrines and temples in the hill country and in alternate Tamil names for estates that coexist with the remaining English names, such as *Lutchmi* (Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth) for Kirkoswald estate and *Nallathani* (Good Water) for Dalhousie estate, located at the base of Sri Pada, also known as Adam's Peak and *Siva Adipadham* (Bass D., 1983).

Geographic isolation of the Indian origin Tamils has added to their insecurity. They were attacked brutally by the Sinhalese thugs during the communal violence that took place in the country from 1977 onwards. This was a result of the growing ethnic tensions between the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Sri Lankan government. Simultaneously, Sri Lanka was going through an economic transformation that led to the unemployment of many Sinhalese youths as well. On the other hand, the Sri Lankan Tamil youths violently resented against the discriminatory policies of the government. The innocent victims of the clashes between the Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan Tamils were the Indian Tamils.

A collective name

The Indian Tamils of the new generation, born in Sri Lanka, and consequently, developed a different orientation, saw India as their cultural home rather than their homeland (Sahadevan, P.,2003). In other words their '*ur*' (home town, native place) is

in Tamil Nadu but their '*giramam*' (village, residence) is invariably on the tea estates (Bass D., 2001). They want to form an independent identity of their own. But the Sinhalese have categorized them to be belonging to the same group as that of the Jaffna Tamils due to their Tamil Hindu identity. During the riots of 1983, between the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Sinhalese, the Tamils of the plantations became the victims. Since the Indian Tamils lacked political position after independence they were not able to assert their distinctive identity. With the expansion and growth of the plantations they have also developed and adopted themselves with the plantations system. Even though they lead a life that is full of struggle and hardship this is their home to which they belong. According to Oddvar (1998:77), the impact of the plantation regime, the hill country, and the "memory" of village life in South India have shaped the identity of the Indian Tamils.

The Tamils of Indian origin in the plantations still require an appropriate name to represent themselves as a separate ethnic group. They are often mentioned as 'Indian Tamils', 'Estate Tamils' (*tottattu tamilar*), 'Plantation Tamils', 'Indian origin Tamils', 'Tamils of recent Indian origin', 'Tamils of Indian origin', 'Up-Country Tamils' or 'Malaiyaha Tamils' and 'Hill Country Tamils' (*malai nattu tamilar*). But these names have both their advantages and disadvantages and not all the Tamils of estates agree and so lacks universal acceptance. The Indian Tamils are slowly emerging from their status of being segregated from the wider society to the status of showing their presence felt as one of the ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. They require a name that would reflect their individuality as a separate ethnic group different from the Sri Lankan Tamils and also as an ethnic group, which has emerged and developed in the plantations situated in the Hill country. According to Valentine E. Daniel the Indian origin Tamils can be called as 'New Tamils' due to their recent arrival in the island and the Jaffna (Sri Lankan) Tamils who have been in the island for some centuries to be called as 'Old Tamils'. But after interviewing several Indian Tamils and Jaffna Tamils, Daniel found disagreements among them in respect to the name attributed to each of these groups. The Indian Tamils are of the opinion that even though they are

of recent origin in the island, they are an ancient race from Tamil Nadu and retaining culture and tradition. The Jaffna Tamils feel that the connotation 'Old Tamils' is inappropriate for them as they are a community which is vibrant and modern in its perception. The two terms 'Estate' Tamils and 'Up-Country' Tamils are attributed in accordance to their place of dwelling. But many young Indian Tamils who have migrated from the tea estates to Colombo or other Sinhalese regions or even to the Northern province for job or business purpose feel that this name is inaccurate as they no longer stay there. On the other hand majority of the Indian Tamils prefer to remain in the plantation as they are a minority outside the estates and they fear for any repercussions of ethnic violence on them. The other common term used by this community is 'Up-country' Tamil or 'Malaiyaha Tamils', which was popularized by R.Sivalingam. Malaiyaha Tamil is preferred over the 'Estate' Tamil, since both its Tamil translation, *Thotta Thamil*, and especially its Sinhala translation, *Wattu Demalu*, are considered extremely derogatory terms for the community (Bass D., 1983). The term 'Indian origin Tamils' which is used by the author as one of the names for the Tamils living in the estates of Sri Lanka is one of the English name for identifying this group. According to the author this name seems appropriate, as they are a group of Indian origin people who have continued the same culture and way of living. The Indian Tamils have been in the estates for a long time and many generations have lived here as member of the plantation community and as a part of the Sri Lankan society at large.

Challenges of the Indian origin Tamil community

After independence of Sri Lanka the Indian origin Tamils faced many challenges. Some of these challenges that affected the community are given below. Under the Citizenship Act of 1948, the Government of Ceylon made stringent laws that disenfranchised the Indian origin Tamils. Due to absence of political representation of the community they became stateless persons. The community did not receive support from the Sri Lankan Tamils political parties who were more focused in demanding greater autonomy and recognition of the Tamil language rather than assisting the Indian Tamils in restoration of citizenship until the mid-1980s. It was the trade unions

of the plantations that relentlessly fought for the cause of the Indian origin Tamils socio-economic-political rights.

The community came across another challenge, the process of Nationalisation. With the policy of land reforms and nationalisation in 1972, the plantations that were once owned by different foreign and domestic agencies were passed over to the State under this provision. The government mandated that the ratio of workers to cultivated land be increased from two to five workers per acre (Daniel, V. E., 1997). The government aimed to reduce unemployment among the Indian Tamils youth and it also opened the estates for the employment of the Sinhalese youths from the surrounding villages. Under the land reform bills, parts of the estates were re-colonised by the Sinhalese villages. Thousands of Indian Tamils were left homeless and unemployed. They suffered another crisis of food shortage due to rise in the prices of food commodities and there was rise in unemployment as many of the Indian Tamil workers were thrown out of the plantations. Referring to the post-reform estates a medical officer writes (Nadesan, S., 1993): “Our detailed investigations of the sociological aspects of the state labour admitted to my ward have shown that though they may not have been asked to leave the estates, they are not given work, which is now given to the villagers. The estate labourer continues to live on the estates at night and try to find work in the towns or beg on the streets by the day”. (Quoted in Nimal A. Fernando: “Land reform and the plantation sector-Effects on employment and income”, paper presented at SLFI Seminar, Colombo 14-16 Dec 1982, p.13).

From 1977 onwards, ethnic riots erupted in Sri Lanka between the Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan Tamils. Geographically, the Indian origin Tamils live in a disadvantageous location in the Central province where the Sinhalese also reside. These underprivileged sections of people who do not have a representation in the Parliament often have to suffer the torment of being a minority living in the territory of the Sinhalese. They were already facing a hard time, as most of them were stateless persons. The violent communal attacks on the Indian origin Tamils aggravated after 1977 when there was a clash between the Sinhalese police and the Tamil youth in

Jaffna. In retaliation thousands of Indian Tamil workers were killed and looted. The Tamil shops were looted and the Indian Tamil women workers were being raped. Such attacks on the Indian Tamil Workers were evident in the estates of Ratnapura, Kirielle, Neboda, Panevila, Teldeniya, Matale, Elkaduwa, Kurunegala, Kegalle, Hewahette, Galaha, Kadugannawa, Hangwankette, Dettota, Rekillagaskada, Ulapane and Dolosbage (Vije1987:64 (Nadesan, S., 1993)· cited from Sansoni Commission Report, Pp. 133-143 and 192-237). The Sansoni Commission (a commission appointed to investigate the 1977 violence) agreed that in the 1977 August incident, the law enforcement of the machinery of the state, and in particular the Police, by and large failed to discharge its functions of protecting the victims and preventing the incident (Mayan Vije 1987: 64-65 cited from The Sansoni Commission Report). Although the Commission recommended that the Indian Tamil workers should be compensated for their losses, the government did not take any concrete action. The conditions of the Indian origin Tamils workers were terrible as they went through physical and mental torture in the hands of the Sinhalese mobs. They were forced to leave the plantations and many went to hide in the jungles, take refuge in the temples and some managed to travel to the Northern peninsula.

Communal violence in the plantations reoccurred in 1981and later in 1983 when the intensity of the ethnic conflict was much more. The police went on a rampage in Jaffna destroying the market, the TULF headquarters and finally burning down the Public Library containing 95,000 volumes of books. This communal violence led to havoc and bloodshed in the lives of the Indian Tamil community. An editorial in ‘The Hindu newspaper’ (India) of August 18, 1981 stated that “a close look into the riots would show that behind them is planned and systematic efforts to aggravate racial animosity” (Leary, V. A., 1983). The Sinhalese mobs who attacked the Tamil workers were organized group of gangs, believed to have nexus with the government as the police and the army men did not intervene when they were being attacked. The government even did not take any further action to track down the culprits. Once again in 1986, a similar violence against the Indian Tamil workers was witnessed. It was for the first time that the Indian Tamil workers revolted against the atrocities of

the Sinhalese thugs. Around 40,000 workers staged a strike to protest against such inhuman violence. The police and the army arrested many Indian Tamil workers.

The Communal violence against the Indian Tamils continued in the coming years. Whenever there was a clash between the Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan Tamils, it was the Indian Tamils who had to face the consequences. In June 1995, a Buddhist monk was murdered. He opposed the Tamil separatist group LTTE and it was assumed that the LTTE had killed him. In the Galle district several houses of the Indian Tamils were burnt in retaliation. In another incident, in June 1998, the Sinhalese mobs torched a Hindu cultural center in the estates of Kandy, in response to the bombing of the sacred Buddhist Temple of the Tooth, which was supposedly done by the LTTE. R. Slater claims that many Estate Tamils viewed the violence, which they experienced, as locally organized, rather than the work of a nationwide organization, but most probably it was a combination of both (Leary, V. A., 1983).

Changing perception of the Indian origin Tamils

There has been significant change of attitude of the Indian origin Tamils who are increasingly asserting their identity as an ethnic group. Throughout the years there have been considerable changes in the plantation even though such progress was slow. It led to change of perspective, which has empowered them greatly and henceforth the Indian Tamils, have become more progressive in outlook. They no longer think within the limits of the plantations. They aspire to have greater power and better future. The factor, which has led to, the attitudinal change of perspective of the Indian Tamil community, is spread of education. The scope of education has widened in the plantations after the take-over of the estates schools by the government, due to the demands of the Indian Tamil political parties and with interventions of the foreign donors who have contributed to the welfare activities.

S. B. de Silva notes that “education was not a part of plantation culture; it was neither technically necessary nor it had any survival value. For labourer’s children, education is a means of emancipation, but to the planter it is potential threat to the labour supply (Little, A. W., 1999)” The British Planters had no intention to educate the Indian Tamil labourers as they were brought to work as tea labourers and this did not require

any educational qualification. Elementary schools were set up within the plantations that imparted education in an informal manner.

Until 1977 the Sri Lankan government did not initiate any steps for the expansion of schools in the estates. The CWC leader was elected as the member of the parliament and this was a turning point for the Indian origin Tamil community. The Indian Tamil political representation led to the development of the education system in the region. Beyond the political and trade union activities in the estates, there was among the labourers a transformation of approach towards education. The Indian Tamil political parties articulated the issue of citizenship in parliament. The Indian Tamils trust on them increased and was hopeful that they need not leave the plantations anymore. As a result their view towards education changed and they now perceived education as one of the empowering factors for the community. Moreover several foreign donors came forward to fund welfare activities in the estates. They gave finance for the building of many schools within the estates.

The Sri Pada College was opened in the Central province in 1992 to provide teachers training so that they could teach in the plantations. The College aimed to recruit Indian origin plantation workers for the training. There were comparatively less Indian Tamils eligible to apply in the institute. The Indian origin Tamils are lagging behind in education and it will take some time to be at par with the other ethnic groups. Nevertheless the Indian Tamils have started taking education as a means for better future and more and more people are going for further studies. The transformation is quite evident with the change in political status and welfare programmes in the estates. The younger generation refuses to have a stagnant life in the plantations. But the overall employment situations in Sri Lanka are at present dismal as the rate of unemployment is increasing. Sometimes the Indian Tamils are denied jobs outside the plantations because of their ethnic identity. However the Indian Tamils have taken education as a positive direction for strengthening their group identity.

Conclusion

The name 'Indian origin Tamils' does not represent the community's hopes and aspirations, instead it connotes the their hardships of the past and the political struggles it has been able to withstand. It neither represents the community that has developed in the plantations nor its unique culture that was evolved with time. Hence, a change of name for the Indian origin Tamils would be beneficial for the community.

The Indian origin Tamils are a part of the British colonial legacy. With the beginning of the plantation agriculture in the early nineteenth century these poverty-stricken landless lower caste Tamils of Madras Province came to the Kandyan Highlands to work as labourers in the plantations. They have integrated themselves with the estates where they have survived with very limited resources and choices. They have a common history and culture with roots still in South India and at the same time a uniqueness developed in one fifty years, influenced by the plantation system. The geographic isolation of the Indian Tamils has perpetuated to retain their culture and tradition as it is. Besides they have accommodated themselves to the estates so well that it is no doubt that Sri Lanka is their homeland. The whole process of tea production is a part of their daily life. They no more wish to go back to India, the land of their ancestors.

Throughout the years, the political parties-cum-trade unions in the estates have been a mediator through which the Indian origin Tamils have made their presence felt in the national politics. Political parties-cum-trade unions like the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the Up-Country People's Front (UCPF), and Democratic People's Front (DPF) have represented the Indian Tamil community in the parliament and they have often allied with national political parties in forming the government. However these political parties have not succeeded in neither increasing the daily wage of the plantation workers or in improving the living standards of the community. According to the Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2006-2007 (Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka), poverty in Nuwara Eliya is the highest (33.8 percentage) among districts of Sri Lanka. Hence a majority of the Indian Tamil population is

entrapped in the vicious circle of poverty, still struggling to have the basic necessities of a decent livelihood.

Defying all odds, the community is slowly asserting its identity. This has been possible as they are empowered with the help of education that is rapidly spreading in the plantations and due to the interventions of the foreign donors. The distinct identity of the Indian origin Tamils is essential for their growth and development in the society. They want their identity fixed on the basis of their history, culture and political struggles.

Recently the stateless persons of Indian origin Tamils who were staying as refugees in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu and unable to become the citizens of Sri Lanka were allowed to become citizens of the country in 2007. They earlier failed to qualify because they did not have continuous stay in the island from 1964 onwards. But with the amendment of the Grant of Citizenship to Persons of Indian Origin Act 2003, these refugees whose homes are the plantations will be able to come back as legal citizens of the country. The Indian Tamils have come a long way from the state of statelessness to ultimately gaining political rights. This is a positive development, which would empower the Indian origin Tamil community, and a better future can be predicted.

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