

Briefing Notes

Sri Lanka Briefing Notes | Issue No 30 – September 2023



PORTRAITS: 200 YEARS OF SERVITUDE



A metal suitcase passed from generation to generation of the earliest migrants from the HTC community from South India is still being used in 85-year-old Kadiravelu Malai Attal's family.

**The Story and Expectations of Sri Lanka Hill Country
Tamil Community [Malaiyaha Tamil Community]**



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All photographs and interviews (Nov 2022) by the author if not otherwise mentioned.

Sri Lanka Brief thanks Sri Lanka Advocacy for continuous support for Sri Lanka Briefing Notes and Sri Lanka brief Updates.

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INTRODUCTION

Two hundred years on since South Indian Tamils were brought to Sri Lanka by British colonisers to work on the plantations, their lives have seen little change.

The history of the Sri Lanka Hill Country Tamil community dates to the 19th century during the British colonial period. The British, who ruled Sri Lanka at the time, introduced a plantation economy focused on growing tea, coffee, and rubber. To meet the labour demands of these plantations, they brought in large numbers of Tamil workers from southern India.

Inter-changeably known as Hill Country Tamils (HCT) or Malaiyaha Makkal, they constitute 1.5 million of the population and are mostly fifth and sixth-generation descendants. In this report, the term HCT will be used.

The first groups faced the rigours of a sea voyage, a 130 to 160-mile trek from Talaimannar to the Central Hills, and battled inhospitable terrain, sharply contrasting climates, cholera, smallpox, and little or no access to medical facilities. On the plantations, they were at the mercy of the Kanganis (Tamil supervisors belonging to the “upper classes”) and with no effective wage legislation, forced to work even when ill. They endured callous neglect by planters.¹

These Tamil workers were primarily from the “low caste” communities and were recruited through labour agreements known as “kanganies.” The kanganies acted as middlemen, responsible for recruiting and managing the labour force. The workers were brought to Sri Lanka under indentured labour contracts, often leading to harsh working conditions and limited rights.



Although there are no visible cemeteries of generations of the HTC community who worked and died there Periya Kanganies' (head supervisors) tombs stand high in plantation areas.

The Tamil workers settled in designated plantation areas, mainly in the central highlands of Sri Lanka, such as Nuwara Eliya, Hatton, and Badulla. Later settlements expanded to law lands as well. They lived in line rooms, which were basic housing units provided by the plantation companies. These line rooms were often overcrowded and lacked proper sanitation and infrastructure.

During this period, the Hill Country Tamil community faced various challenges, including exploitative labour conditions, low wages, and poor living conditions. They were subject to long working hours, minimal legal protections, and restricted mobility. The workers and their families were isolated from the rest of society and experienced social and economic marginalization.

Following Sri Lanka's independence in 1948, the plantation workers faced further difficulties. The government implemented policies that favored the majority Sinhalese population, which led to the marginalization and discrimination of the Tamil community, including the plantation Tamils. The plantation Tamils were often denied citizenship rights, faced language barriers, and had limited access to education and healthcare.



Lack of access to higher education and unavailability of proper education facilities are among the serious impediments to the progress of the HTC community.

IN BRIEF: HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES

The Tamil plantation community in Sri Lanka has faced several human rights issues over the years. Here are some of the key challenges they have experienced:

Displacement and Land Rights: The Hill Country Tamil community has faced displacement and land rights issues. Many Tamils were evicted from their original lands in India during the colonial era and were resettled in plantation areas in Sri Lanka. However, they often do not have legal ownership of the land they live on, which leads to insecurity and limited access to basic amenities.

Labor Rights: The Tamil plantation workers, often face exploitative labour conditions. They work long hours for low wages, lack job security, and have limited access to social security benefits. The absence of effective labour laws and enforcement mechanisms further exacerbates their vulnerability.

Discrimination and Marginalization: The Hill Country Tamil community has historically faced discrimination and marginalization. They have been treated as second-class citizens, facing barriers in accessing education, healthcare, and other essential services. Discrimination based on ethnicity and language continues to hinder their socio-economic progress.

Lack of Political Representation: The Hill Country Tamil community has had limited political representation, which hampers their ability to advocate for their rights and address their specific concerns. This underrepresentation has hindered their ability to influence policies and decisions that affect their well-being.

Limited Access to Education: The Hill Country Tamil community faces challenges in accessing quality education. Many schools in plantation areas lack adequate infrastructure, resources, and qualified teachers. The language barrier further hampers their educational opportunities, as most schools predominantly use Sinhala as the medium of instruction.

Access to Justice: The Hill Country Tamil community often faces barriers in accessing justice and seeking legal remedies for human rights violations. Limited access to legal aid, language barriers, and cultural biases within the justice system contribute to the difficulties they encounter in pursuing justice and holding perpetrators accountable.

Gender Inequality: Women in the Hill Country Tamil community face additional challenges, including gender-based discrimination and limited opportunities for economic empowerment. They often work in harsh conditions in the plantations, with limited access to maternity benefits, healthcare, and social protection.

Cultural and Language Rights: The Hill Country Tamil community has faced restrictions on their cultural and language rights. There have been instances where Tamil cultural practices and traditions have been suppressed, and the Tamil language has not received equal recognition and support.

Efforts to address the issues faced by the Tamil plantation community have been ongoing, including demands for land rights, improved labour conditions, and access to basic services. Organizations and activists continue to advocate for the rights of the plantation community and work towards achieving greater equality and social justice.

For decades, until the advent of tourism, the apparel industry and overseas employment opportunities, tea, rubber, and coconut were Sri Lanka's main sources of foreign exchange earnings and continue to play a vital role in the economy. An income earned on the backs of HCT labour.



Gathering of British plantation owners and Tamil Kanganies at a Ragala, Nuwara Elys tea state (private collection)

However, their hard work is rarely featured on plantation company websites promoting Ceylon Tea. Rather, the glowing accounts are reserved for the colonial government and British planters for their role in establishing the tea industry, mirroring histories written by elite ruling classes that leave out the contributions and sufferings of the working classes.

Now in the evening of their lives, the third generation of HCT is the last group of people that experienced colonial rule, nationalisation, State management of plantations, and a return to the private sector.

These then, are their stories.



KADIRAVELU MALAI ATTAL: GOING BAREFOOT



*Kadiravelu Malai Attal (85)
in her relative's line room.*

Kadiravelu Malai Attal Amma, walked up to us with the aid of a walking stick. After exchanging greetings, we invited her to share her story.

“I was born in Notting Hill Estate in 1938, on the 12th of the ninth month. My parents were from that estate. My father’s grandparents were from India.

My parents were Malaitya and Kadiravel, my grandparents were Ella and Periya Thambi. Though they told us stories of the early days, I don’t remember everything.

I was barely 10 years old when I started working on the tea estate. Many others my age also plucked tea leaves. I was paid two rupees a day. My sister was a kitchen helper in rich households.

We faced many hardships, as there were many children at home. Often there was no food for us. Plucking tea leaves all day was not easy for children, but our parents needed the money.

In those days there was a school on the Estate for Tamil children. There was also a tavern.

I married in 1956. At that time, I didn’t even know about love (laughs).

After marriage, I moved to Muwankanda rubber estate. Tapping rubber trees for latex was new to me, and it took me two months to learn everything. I was paid 12 rupees a day.

We left home at five thirty every morning for work, walking three and a half kilometers to reach morning assembly. I carried a latex-filled heavy basket on my head to the factory.

Rubber trees yield more latex in the mornings. After lunch, we do the weeding, digging, and laying of gutters. During the White gentleman’s time, we were paid separately for that work. After that, I cut grass for our cattle and carried it home on my head. I also did all the housework by myself. Men ruled the household.

My husband was a shop assistant. Though we lived in a small room we hardly spoke to each other. In the estate culture, wives don’t speak their husband’s name.

Our line room is about 12x10 feet. That’s where we cooked, ate, and slept. The kitchen was moved outside when the children grew up.

When I retired in 1978, I was earning 14 rupees a day. I received 625 rupees as a bonus. I worked for 50 years but received no pension after all those years of hard work.

Since the time of my grandparents, we have lived in this line room of 10X12 feet. We own no land or house. We have no postal address. We are abandoned.



Kadiravelu Malai Attal (85) vividly recalls her story spanning three stages of management.

In the early days, estate management maintained roads and gutters and even the line rooms, unlike now. The drinking water was good.

The current owners only care about making money, not about us.

Only one of my children completed fifth grade. Estate schools were only up to grade 5. Since we left home early for work, most children played truant. Sometimes the teachers would find them and take them to school.

We got to vote only after 1987 when we got our citizenship.

Since the time of my grandparents, we have lived in this line room. We own no land or house. We have no postal address. We are abandoned.

I remember the 1958 riots. Some Sinhalese came and took all our stuff. Then the White owner helped us hide in the forest all night. Even today, when there is a riot, we think we must hide.

The sun rises differently for different people.

On the estates, there is also caste discrimination. We are not allowed to enter the Periya Kangani's house, (Tamil, Head Supervisor, higher caste). We sit on the ground and food is given to us on a leaf.

I walked and worked barefoot all my life, even among the rubber trees. I continue to do that today. When I leave here finally, I cannot take my footwear! (laughs)."



After 5-6 generations living in the estates thousands of Tamil plantation workers do not have their own postal address, which leads to many obstacles in their lives.

People without an Address.

Fundamental rights petition currently filed in March 2023 before the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka seeks relevant authorities take steps to provide a registered postal address for plantation workers.

The petitioner is a resident of Muwankanda Estate, where Kadiravelu Malai Attal lives.

The petition states that 300 families on the estate, 400,000 plantation workers spread throughout 277 estates of the Janatha Estate Development Board (JEDB), and 966,700 individuals belonging to 244,500 plantation families living across Sri Lanka have no registered mailing address.



Dilapidated line rooms are part of many tea states

What is a line-room house?

“[I] visited these houses in Kandy district and was alarmed at the undignified, inhumane and degrading living conditions. Typically, five to ten people have to - share a small space of 10 x 12 feet, and many of the line houses do not have windows, a proper kitchen, running water or electricity. There is also a limited number of basic latrines, with results that several families have to share one latrine. These substandard living conditions, combined with the harsh working conditions, represent clear indicators of forced labour and may also amount to serfdom in some instances.”² (UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences. 2022)



Periannan Nadesan retired, does the Kovil duty, and is still working on drying coconut in his old age.

PERIYANNAN NADESAN: FOUR GENERATIONS IN RELIGIOUS SERVICE

When we reached the 1000-acre coconut estate managed by the JEDB, the watchman told us we could not enter without permission. We asked if we could tour the large bungalow built a hundred years ago, by British owners, but were told, we could only look at it from the outside.

It was not a Bungalow but a fortress. Thirty-five rooms. Huge watch tower. Separate servant's quarters, and a basement dungeon. It is maintained well. A huge contrast to the line rooms where workers live.

At the Hindu Kovil, 80-year-old Periannan Nadesan told us his story.



Mini sculptures of their gods are from South India

"I am the Pusari of this Kovil. My mother Rosalyn is Sinhalese, and my father Perry Annan is Tamil. My grandpa's parents came from India to this estate.

Grandpa's father built a small Kovil here in those days and was the Pusari. My father returned to India to look after their land and died there.

Performing religious rituals and looking after the Kovil is honorary work. All my family have worked as labourers on this estate. We have lived in the same line room for more than a hundred years since my grandfather lived in it. That's five generations.

I began working on the plantation at 18 on a salary of 2.50 rupees per day. I married a Sinhalese and have three children, who all work on this estate.

It is a life confined to plucking, husking, and drying coconut. I earned 625 rupees to husk and dry 1000 coconuts which took six to eight days.

During the White gentlemen's era, the Andigala Farm estate had a Tamil school which was closed after the government took over in 1972. There are around a hundred families on the estate, and the children go to the Sinhala school. We try to teach them Tamil at home but are not getting anywhere.

“To leave the estate, we needed a permit which we had to leave at the gate and obtain a temporary card, much like a prison camp. The White managers worked us hard, under tough rules. They built the one-roomed houses and cursed us to this life. For long, we had no citizenship.”



He and his wife live in 100-year-old line room.

After the government took over, the dispensary and nursery on the estate were discontinued. Under the White owners, a doctor visited us weekly, and the sick received medicine. The seriously ill were sent to hospital. There was also a weekly market on the estate.

To leave the estate, we needed a permit which we had to leave at the gate and obtain a temporary card, much like a prison camp.

The White managers worked us hard, under tough rules. They built the one-roomed houses and cursed us to this life. For long, we had no citizenship.

There used to be a Union on the estate, but no longer. When I retired in the 2000s, I received a small gratuity. To survive, at age 80 I still continue working, rolling coconut copra to dry it.”



35-room luxurious bungalow with a watch tower built for the British estate supervisors of Farm Estate is now being used by local managers while likes of Periannan Nadesan live in line rooms (below) that do not fit a civilized human dwelling.



Language Rights of HCT Community

Sinhala and Tamil are official languages in Sri Lanka, and all public officials must be able to communicate in both languages; However, a large number of interlocutors stated that Tamil workers were often not able to report instances of abuses to the authorities in Tamil since, as many only spoke Sinhala, effectively limiting their access to justice and remedies. The language barriers resulted in unequal access to education and decent work in some parts of the country.

With regard to the HCT community children, their access to quality education is limited, particularly in rural areas. Despite the fact that most of the plantation schools were brought under the national education system in 1975, the quality of education is reportedly still substandard.



Araiee had been a tea estate worker and an activist, now lives in a house built by her children on estate land.

ARAIEE: A FEMALE PLANTATION WORKER AND A TRADE UNIONIST

The road leading to Ragala was narrow, lined by Tea plantations and centuries-old line rooms. We were on our way to meet a retired female plantation worker. She belongs to the upper class and was also a trade unionist. In the early years, Trade Unions were led and dominated by Upper Class Tamils.

She lived in a new house with a tiled roof.

This story highlights caste issues in the community, to a certain aspect.

Eighty-three-year-old Araiee and her eighty-nine-year-old husband Jeganathan welcomed us with a cup of tea.

“My grandparents came from Danuskodi, India.

I was born in 1934. My father was a Muruga Kangani (Supervisor). I began working as a tea plucker even before I reached puberty. That was in Spring Valley estate, Badulla. I earned 1 rupee and 45 cents a day. I worked until 1995.



Line rooms of the estate

....
**Need to pluck tea leaves at the edge of deep gutters of the estate.
 If the foot slips a little, we will be in the gutter. Must run home to cook rice.
 If there is less salt in the rice, you are beaten by your husband.
 This is the fate of women in the tea mountains.
 That's our sorrowful life."**

Until the day I married I had not met my husband, because, in our community, parents arrange marriages. We have been married for 63 years.

In 1958 I became a citizen of Ceylon, as my grandfather had registered himself at the Badulla Registry in 1914. My husband became a citizen in 1960.

The year I became a citizen, riots broke out in Badulla. About 40 Sinhalese came by bus and surrounded the estate.

Tea pluckers were treated better then and were also paid on time.

We dropped off our babies in the morning at the nursery on the way to work. At 9.30 a.m. we returned to breastfeed them. The older children were at home, and they had the leftovers from dinner. We picked up our babies around 5 p.m. on our way home

from work. There are no such facilities now. The White gentlemen wanted us to work instead of staying home with our children.

We had to work hard, and the Kanganis were ruthless. But, the line rooms, gutters, roads etc. were much better then.

At a young age, I became a trade unionist. Once I went to Colombo for a Satyagraha. In the 1950s, I was the secretary of the Badulla Women's wing of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC).

In a speech I made at the 25th anniversary of the CWC, I said "We work in the rain while leeches suck our blood. To get out of this situation we need to give good education to our children."



If I speak about problems of female estate workers, men may ask Who is this old woman telling us what to do? says Araiee with a smile.



All office bearers of the CWC were from higher castes those days.

Here's a song we sang while we worked:

*“We have to get up at five in the morning
Then need to dress up and prepare the children.
The rotis need to be baked before the bell rings for work.
After rotis are done, the children should be taken to the nursery and run to the work line.
If we are 4 minutes late, the Kangani sends us back saying no work today.
So, we are working breaking our back.
The big boss wearing a gold watch and keeps checking the time walking in front of us.
If five minutes late, you will be scolded.
Need to pluck tea leaves at the edge of deep gutters of the estate.
If the foot slips a little, we will be in the gutter.
Must run home to cook rice.
If there is less salt in the rice, you are beaten by your husband.
This is the fate of women in the tea mountains.
That's our sorrowful life.”*

Those problems have not changed at all.

Men treat women badly. Alcohol is an issue on estates, even my husband drinks daily and sleeps. Fifty years ago, I sang for better housing and work conditions. Even today we own no land. This house was built by our children, but the company owns the land.

Although my grandfather planted the tea on this estate, we have no land rights. If we have that, we can die peacefully.

The estates are in bad shape now, with wild plants growing over tea bushes. Not only snakes but now we have to deal with mountain tigers too.

After hours, I worked as a housemaid and earned enough to give our four children a good education. They live outside the estate and have government jobs.”

The Issue of Land Rights

Land is an issue that affects the HCT community in three areas: home ownership, livelihood, and political identity.

The political identity of the HCT community is intrinsically intertwined with where they live.

Since 1948, citizenship laws, repatriation agreements with India, development projects and deliberate Sinhalaisation projects have led to fewer HCT representatives being elected.



Alphonsus has bitter words for the government and private firms for neglecting their estate.

ALPHONSUS: SAW ESTATE BECOME A JUNGLE!

We saw an abandoned tea factory and a dilapidated building in Walapane, enroute to Ragala, and learned it was a private estate named Mahauwa. The road too was in disrepair.

We spoke with some men who were in the vicinity, and they showed us the pathetic conditions they lived in. The owners had also neglected the plantation.

The oldest amongst them, Alphonsus, 76, told us their story.

“We worked here for generations. During our time the estate was in a good condition. In the late ‘70s the government placed it under the ‘Janavasama.’ It was well run then, but in the ‘90s it was handed over to the Bayer Company.

This is a 1000-acre tea estate with 421 families. Now, most of the tea bushes are overrun by wild plants, and buildings are destroyed. The four-story factory is in disrepair. Several other tea estates around here are in a similar state.

The Bayer company dismantled the storehouse and other buildings and removed any equipment that could be sold.

Two thousand tea bushes were allocated to one working family when the company took over. Workers are only allowed to sell the leaves to the company.

The company pays 80 rupees per kilo of tea leaves, while in the village below a kilogram fetch rupee 200. As the bushes are not healthy, only about 12 kilos can be plucked daily. The company is profiting from our labour.

Abandoned Estates.

The lack of formal institutional structures to oversee affairs in abandoned estates means services such as health care are suspended. Where plantations are owned by individuals, development work is ad hoc, with little or no access to public services offered in the area. Workers on such estates are forced to seek manual labour opportunities in neighbouring villages and cities.

Many recreational facilities like the volleyball field are no more. The line rooms are in disrepair and when it rains, the water comes in through the roof. Neither the estate management nor the government cares for us.

There isn't enough work for people like us who gave our life to the plantations. We are nobodies.”



Jungle is taking over the Mahauwa estate.

The HCT community continues to face centuries-old racist prejudices, exploitation, and threats to their social, cultural, and political identity. Without humane and democratic reforms, they will never be treated as equals as any civilized country should.

This community remains one of the most oppressed among the working class and is isolated from mainstream life.

THE ABSENCE OF PEOPLE’S HISTORY

The absence of a people’s history deprives society of its richness and more importantly erases evidence of their endeavours in building a nation. It not only denies them justice but ignores their very existence.



Recording their oral history is integral to incorporating reforms that will give them the recognition and justice that continues to elude them even 200 years later.



A Ragala primary school: For their future a holistic approach is necessary.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To secure human rights and improve the quality of life for the Hill Country Tamil community in Sri Lanka, several recommendations can be made:

Land Rights and Tenure Security: Ensure legal ownership and secure tenure of land for the Tamil plantation community. Address land-related grievances, conduct land surveys, and provide land titles to protect their rights and prevent forced evictions.

Labor Rights and Fair Employment Practices: Enforce labour laws and regulations to ensure fair wages, reasonable working hours, and safe working conditions for plantation workers. Strengthen mechanisms to monitor and address labour rights violations and provide avenues for workers to report grievances.

Education and Skill Development: Improve access to quality education for children in the Tamil plantation community. Establish and upgrade schools in plantation areas, provide adequate infrastructure and resources, and ensure the availability of qualified teachers. Promote vocational training programs to enhance skills and employment opportunities for youth.

Healthcare and Social Protection: Improve healthcare services and facilities in plantation areas, including maternal and child healthcare. Provide accessible healthcare centers, qualified medical staff, and adequate resources. Ensure the inclusion of plantation workers in social protection programs, including healthcare, insurance, and pensions.

Political Representation and Participation: Enhance the political representation of the Tamil plantation community through inclusive policies and affirmative action. Encourage their participation in decision-making processes at local, regional, and national levels to address their specific concerns and promote their rights.

Access to Justice: Strengthen access to justice for the Tamil plantation community by establishing legal aid clinics, providing support for navigating the legal system, and ensuring that language barriers are addressed. Sensitize and train legal professionals on the specific challenges faced by the community.

Address Discrimination and Marginalization: Implement anti-discrimination policies and programs to combat discrimination based on ethnicity, language, and social status. Raise awareness and promote inclusive practices to foster social integration and eliminate prejudice and stereotypes.

Community Development and Empowerment: Promote community-led development initiatives and empower local organizations within the Tamil plantation community. Support capacity-building programs, entrepreneurship opportunities, and access to credit and markets for small-scale businesses.

Cultural and Language Rights: Protect and promote the cultural and language rights of the Tamil plantation community. Ensure the availability of Tamil language services in public institutions and promote cultural preservation through cultural events, festivals, and recognition of cultural heritage.

Monitoring and Accountability: Establish mechanisms to monitor the implementation of policies and programs aimed at protecting the rights of the Tamil plantation community. Hold accountable those responsible for human rights violations and ensure transparency and accountability in land management, labour practices, and service delivery.

These recommendations aim to address the specific challenges faced by the Hill Country Tamil community and promote their rights, well-being, and dignity. Implementing these measures requires the collaboration and commitment of relevant government authorities, civil society organizations, tea industry stakeholders, and the wider community.

The End.



- 1 *The plantation people of Sri Lanka: towards a study of colonialism and other variables affecting their status and role – p. Capersz*
- 2 <https://reliefweb.int/report/sri-lanka/report-special-rapporteur-contemporary-forms-slavery-including-its-causes-and-consequences-tomoya-obokata-his-visit-sri-lanka-ahrc5126add1>