

Special Report No 4

# SULLEN HILLS

## THE SAGA OF UP COUNTRY TAMILS

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### BLANCHED HEARTS AND PARCHED LIVES

*Do the hills weep, and the tears*

*gush forth as the roaring cataract?*

*Nay, these waters are hill folks' sorrows*

*My senses are dull, brother, I see not*

*Do these shrubs this fragrant nectar yield?*

*Or is this priceless Tea oppression's blood?*

*Boundless treasure did yield these sullen hills,*

*Which wheels of nation and empire turned.*

*The thoughts of these people are lofty as the hills*

*As abundantly hath her muses blessed her sons.*

*But woe to the hillfolk whose blood enlivens my veins*

*Our squalor and misery no depth can plumb.*

*Ye the unseeing praise this matchless loveliness,*

*Beautiful the cataract scattering the first beams of*

*[dawn*

*Like as its waters flow down fretted banks,*

*So ebb our lives leaving dry blached hearts.*

*Ye who marvel and ask not how justice was slain,*

*Ask ye when our lives too, will beauty attain?*

*Say ye these labour and do not feel?  
Imbibe ye their Tea calling it a drink ambrosial?  
These who through frost, wind and sultry heat  
to whose fell blows forest and glebe did yield,  
dwelling in squalid line rooms with cotton-blached  
[hearts,  
Our lives are parched, like trees, when rains have  
[failed.*

*S.Gunaratnam*

*[Translated from Tamil,*

*Virakesari', 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1992]*

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**SULLEN HILLS:**

**THE SAGA OF UP COUNTRY TAMILS**

**PREFACE**

Events in the North-East had largely overshadowed developments in the hill-country until it began to be noticed that this region had not been immune from the growth of militancy in the former. The massacres in two Sinhalese villages in the Moneragala District in April 1991 brought about allegations from the security establishment that hill-country youth were being recruited by the LTTE. Some weeks later, "*The Sunday Island*" quoting security sources, said that youth from hill-country families who settled down in the Vanni following the anti-Tamil violence of 1977 were now joining the LTTE in considerable numbers. The latest and the most sensational of events was the arrest of three leaders of the Upcountry Peoples' Front (UPF), an incipient political force with a large following, followed by a continuing crackdown of its supporters and office bearers. This front is accused of links with the LTTE and of sheltering Varathan, the alleged mastermind behind the bomb explosion at the Joint Operations Command (JOC) in Colombo on 21<sup>st</sup> June 1991.

A natural question that is being asked now is what has been happening to the Up Country Tamils all this time, who are after all over a quarter of the Tamil speaking population in this

country? This report attempts a qualitative presentation of their experience, and is based on conversations with several people of this region.

In presenting this report, we were faced with several questions. As Tamils based in Jaffna we had been critical of our own leaderships as well as of the government whose actions will crucially influence the collective destinies of the people of this country. In the case of Tamils of Indian origin, we can be seen as outsiders where they are concerned, although things have been rapidly changing since the 70s. Are we right in evaluating the performance of the leadership of a very deprived and exploited community, while the affairs of a relatively privileged community such as ours, have been badly mismanaged?

Up to the early 50s the politics of the Ceylon Tamil elite cared as little for the Up Country Tamils as did that of the Sinhalese elite. With the rise of the Federal Party in the Tamil areas, the question of giving citizenship to Hill-Country Tamils made stateless by the legislation of 1948/49 became an emotional issue in Tamil politics in a symbolic sense. One could hardly expect a deeper level of understanding or commitment from a section of Ceylonese society ridden with caste and class. The Federal party did raise the question of citizenship of Hill Country Tamils in negotiations leading to the **Bandaranayake-Chelvanayakam** pact of 1957. The forging of emotional links was strengthened when the CWC, under **Thondaman**, called a token strike in the plantations in support of the Federal party's satyagraha in 1961. This process went a step further, when in response to the SLFP led coalition's openly communal stance, the Tamil United(Liberation) Front, which included the CWC, was formed in 1972. Although in name it united the so called Tamil leaders, it never united the Tamil people for their liberation. Instead, it was a temporary and opportunistic alliance formed at the behest of the UNP's anti -SLFP front. In the economic and social spheres however the two communities remained largely distinct.

Events of the 70s brought about some tenuous convergence in the articulation of the two communities. Nationalisation and starvation in the plantations brought Hill-Country Tamils seeking new lives into the North-East. Fragmentation of the traditional Left resulted in much intellectual ferment and the formation of new groupings centred around university students. Links were forged between student activists from the plantations and from the North-East in the universities of Peradeniya and Jaffna. During this period many Left-wing political activists from the North-East became known in the plantations, while the reverse also held. Some intellectuals of plantation origin became very influential in the early days of Tamil militant politics.

An important but abortive link between the hill -country peoples' struggle and the North - Eastern struggle was formed by the militant groups EROS and EPRLF in the late 70s and early 80s . The EROS represented the struggle as one encompassing all Tamil speaking peoples and arbitrarily drew a map of Eelam incorporating the hill country. Being an acclaimed Marxist movement they thought of the plantation workers as the vanguard of their movement and at the same time they promoted the slogan "We are Eelavar, Our language is Tamil and Our nation is Eelam" as their motto. Although this link was received enthusiastically by many among the plantation youth, it remained mostly artificial, with little understanding of the diversity in historical experience as well as interests, particularly with regard to the effects of the Eelam struggle on the hill country community. The same line was taken by the EPRLF which broke away from the EROS. During the course of this association several individual cadre from these groups came to a deep understanding and sympathy for the Hill Country Tamils. But this had little influence on the overall outlook of these groups,

which was still governed by a utilitarian approach. The association thus finally amounted to an attempt to use the Hill Country Tamils rather than help them. More than that, it is in a sense another outcome of trying to impose Jaffna hegemony on the hill country Tamils without showing our solidarity for their struggles on a more equitable basis, respecting their own specificities.

The exodus of Hill-Country Tamils to the North-East following the 1977 violence reached such proportions that in the early 80s there was much talk of the hill-country based CWC extending its activities in Vavuniya. The CWC had already established an office in Vavuniya headed by Mr. Maruthapillai in the mid-70s. Its first office in the North-East was established in Mannar in 1970, which folded up shortly after 1977. The North-Eastern Federal Party (main predecessor of the TULF) established a trade union in the hill country with its head office in Kotagala, which still functions.

The process of convergence was sharply reversed after the July 1983 violence which was followed by civil war. The new mood of repression went hand in hand with the decline in left-wing activism.

Once more the Hill-Country Tamils are back to a situation in some ways resembling the early 40s - half a century ago. That was the first time when through a wave of spontaneous strikes, the Hill-Country Tamils by themselves realised a capacity to influence their destiny. It was then that the Ceylon Indian Congress Labour Union, the predecessor of the CWC (Ceylon Workers Congress) was born.

The Hill Country Tamils are now back on their own resources, facing the future with few friends. Until the civil war is over and a new sense of enlightenment descends on the North-East, they will have no meaningful solidarity coming from that direction.

The most important reason that motivated us to write this report is the force of recent developments since 1983 that have gone unnoticed. Owing to their own feeling of powerlessness and alienation, the militancy of the North-East has posed a powerful attraction to the hill-country youth. The numbers may not be very large, but several youth of hill country origin are fighting and dying for the LTTE, which in ideological terms, of all the militant groups, offers the least to the Hill Country Tamils.

The violence to which Hill Country Tamils were subjected in July 1983 showed that the repressive instinct of the Sinhalese elite towards the minorities has changed little from state council days of the late 20s, [see Kumari Jayawardena(8)]. But the civil war which followed immediately afterwards gave the plantations a crucial economic importance, with defence spending forming about 15% of the national budget. The situation is somewhat similar to that which prevailed following the outbreak of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, preceded by the depression of the 30s, which were in a sense parallel to 70s. In the early 40s the British colonial government and the local elite were forced to come to terms with a new militant unionism on the plantations.

With the new importance of the plantations today, the government is trying to manage the situation using carrot and stick methods. **As always the preservation of the plantation economy with its regimented low cost labour has called for repression. This means policing and dirty tricks of the kind which led the collapse of attempts by Natesa Aiyer to unionise the workers in the late 20s and early 30s.**

On the other hand, the raising of the citizenship issue by the Federal party and then by the Tamil militant groups at Thimpu in 1985, the starvation of the 70s and the violence of July 1983 which made international headlines, and the new economic importance of the estates have served to internationalise the issues surrounding the Hill Country Tamils. As the result of this several Western NGOs and agencies have been working on programmes in co-operation with the government and the CWC and other unions to improve conditions, such as in health and education in the estates. With regard to education, ambitious programmes have been devised, involving chiefly the (Swedish) SIDA and the (German) GTZ. According to optimistic predictions this would revolutionise education on the estates. A managerial view of the situation may be that if these welfare programmes go according to plan, they would dampen militancy on the estates, while change goes on at a pace that would not upset the apple cart.

While this, at least at the present stage, may seem to be more enlightened than the manner in which the Tamil question as a whole has been handled in the past, is it in fact controlling militancy, or, are the hill country leaders supporting the government being driven to more unenviable positions?

**It is our experience that justice and dignity for a people are inseparable and are not negotiable in any political sense. A sense of loss of dignity necessarily finds its outlet in violence . The term “concessions” with regard to political negotiations is a dangerous illusion. This is what we have to offer from our own experience and applies as much to the Hill Country Tamils as to the Muslims.**

In writing this report we were treading unfamiliar ground and kept coming across things that we had been ignorant of. Further there appears to be no definitive work on the political and social history of Hill Country Tamils although invaluable individual contributions in certain areas have gained definitive status. There are also several areas where scholarly knowledge is lacking. In making certain assessments we have had to rely upon our experience and instincts. This report is offered with these possible shortcomings.

Finally, we are aware that a description of the Hill Country Tamils' predicament without taking into account the international economic order would be incomplete. One aspect of the plantation economy is that dependence on it was imposed by the colonial power. But in the 40 years since independence no serious action has been taken to reorient the economy of this country so as to make it less dependent on the vagaries of international trade or to increase the efficiency of the plantation sector, to make it more competitive in the world market. Although slogans were raised expressing such aims, the governing parties neither had the will nor power to achieve them. Things have rather been allowed to drift.

The developed countries while on one hand castigating successive governments over the conditions of plantation workers, have paid little heed to the fact that the ability of those countries to control market prices of primary products has been used against the interests of third world peoples. In the present unfair international economic order, social and economic crises arising in the third world cannot be analysed in isolation. The cost of tea is a marginal expense for the people in the West . If they could increase the price of tea by just one percent and ensure that the increased proceeds (£ 3 million) be spent on improving conditions of workers, the result could make a huge difference. But the market forces have their own logic which do not take into account the plight of the powerless.[\[Top\]](#)

October 1991

## **SECOND PREFACE**

Much of the work on this report was completed a year ago. The time lag in its release has proved useful in testing some of the conclusions drawn. In the meantime the privatisation of the management of state owned estates has gone ahead. The present standing of the tea industry, central to the life of hill country workers, can be summarised as follows:

During 1991 Sri Lanka's tea production hit a record of 240 000 tonnes. (Owing to a drought early in the year, the 1992 crop is expected to be 180 000 tonnes). Ceylon has outstripped India as the world's leading producer of tea. Nevertheless the industry itself is in poor shape. The average yield per hectare in Sri Lanka is 1100 Kg compared with 1700 in India and 2000 in Kenya. The tea industry, nationalised for 17 years, was run by the two giants SLSPC and JEDB. Since 1980 the first recorded profits in only five years, while the latter in only two. For a once profitable industry, the two state corporations, it is estimated, were subsidised to the tune of Rs 400 million(US \$ 10 million) a month.

Prior to nationalisation in the early 70s, tea accounted for 70% of Ceylon's foreign earnings. Now at 30%, it is still the largest single export item. (Textiles, the other major export item, comes close).

Only 24% of the tea land had, by 1990, been replanted with high-yielding varieties. Tea production is still orthodox with only 3% CTC (cut, tear and curl) production which accounts for 68% of the world market in tea. Much of the factory machinery is about a century old. Of the 502 state owned estates, 449 were grouped into 22 enterprises, the management contracts for which were put out to tender. The remaining 53 were considered too run down to be put on offer.

Management contracts will run for an initial 5 years with extension subject to performance. The new companies which are expected to absorb any operating losses are to receive payment on a profit sharing basis, with 10% of profits to the workforce. However the government retains control over hiring and firing of staff. [Source: David Pilling, in the Financial Times Supplement on Sri Lanka, 27<sup>th</sup> October 1992].

The same report raises fears in some quarters that the present management contracts carry a temptation to 'short termism'. A world bank report comments on these arrangements as unlikely to provide the incentives for adequate investment and longer-run profit maximisation that would come from private ownership. Senior government officials have privately expressed the view that the present arrangement is transitional and the ultimate aim is fully fledged privatisation.

The postscript looks at these developments and those already referred to, from the viewpoint of Up Country Tamils themselves. These views and observations are nearly all taken from the Virakesari feature 'Kurinchi Paralkal'.

What comes through is a people, though not known for exporting professionals to the West, are yet very intelligent and articulate in their own way. Their understanding and concern for their environment reveals an intimate love for the land, such as few others have.

The developments following the privatisation of the managements of estates raises in the minds of the workers a legitimate practical and moral question. It was not the fault of the workers that a once profitable industry was brought to its knees and that corrupt hands milked it for private gain. That in their own interests, the estates should become profitable and in the long run utilise labour efficiently are not being questioned. The situation here is one where subsidies have been cut and private managements are obliged to show a quick profit. They cannot lay their hands on those responsible for their ruin. It comes natural to them, given few options, to squeeze the only two things they could lay their hands on - namely the workforce and the environment. There are indications that this is happening. (See 5.5)

The postscript goes into matters which are not conventionally associated with human rights. But this becomes necessary to show that the lives of these people are far richer than a series of complaints. Without this the human rights question acquires a patronising, lopsided aspect that is unfair to the community.

These people are not beggars putting their sores on display in a bid to attract sympathy. They have been producing for others a wealth, for which they received a pittance in return. Christian Aid, in a recent campaign message, pointed out that tea that is sold to the West at 97p(US \$ 1.50) a kilo fetches £4.50 when it is sold as tea bags at a Western supermarket. This means that these workers contribute about £500 million or more annually to economies of the West. This sum is close to what Sri Lanka receives annually in loans and grants from the Western aid consortium. This community is only demanding its due.

As long as better education and alternative means of economic advancement are denied to this community, attempts to trim the workforce or to put estate land, perhaps, to more rational use, will lead to friction. If this community is given its due, the path to a more efficient and streamlined tea industry will be a smooth one. This requires political initiative from the government and is well beyond the scope of mere privatisation to deliver. [\[Top\]](#)

November 1992

## CHAPTER 1

### Reaping the Whirlwind:

#### A sketch of recent developments

### 1.1 The early 70s: Starvation and Violence

Between 1948 when they were disenfranchised and made aliens by acts of parliament, and the food crisis which hit several parts of the country and worst of all the Hill-Country Tamils starting in 1973, the Hill Country Tamils passed almost unnoticed. Until this time they were responsible for over 60% of this country's foreign earnings (They are still responsible for over 30%). During this quarter century, academics and the press hardly noticed that they existed. A general attitude of contempt for this community came naturally. The awakening of this community came with starvation which descended on them in 1973 and hit them so hard by vividly demonstrating their vulnerability.

The starvation resulted from twin processes set off by the Left-coalition led by Mrs Bandaranaike. In a bid to raise local food production in the wake of a worldwide shortage and declining foreign currency reserves, Dr.N.M.Perera, Minister of Finance, virtually halted the import of all food items. With a view to bringing marketing under the state, the transportation of food items from producing areas was also severely restricted. The Hill Country Tamils having next to no political clout, hardly any food reached their areas although food was available in the Amparai District. Also their rations were drastically slashed.

The other process was the nationalisation of British owned estates and the acquisition by the state of local private holdings in excess of over 50 acres in extent. This was again the brainchild of minister for plantation and constitutional affairs Dr.Colvin R.de Silva of the LSSP. The result was ad hoc land grabbing by local Sinhalese with the blessings of leading politicians in Mrs.Bandaranayake's SLFP. In consequence a large number of families from the Indian (Hill-Country)Tamil labour force found themselves evicted, without land and without work.

A large number of these starving, displaced persons arrived in towns in the region- Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Badulla, Hatton-and out of it, in the hope of at least scrounging their scantier dustbins. Many for the first time started going North - Vanni & Killinochi -in search of work. Many women turned to prostitution and children were given away as servants, often to middle class Jaffna Tamils, on the modest condition that they would be fed.

Badulla hospital was a scene of Hill Country Tamils literally 'dying like flies'. Adult kwashiorkor was much in evidence - emaciated skeletal figures with eye-balls popping out. The situation was made worse by the poor medical facilities available to them. A group of 150 estates was under the nominal care of a doctor resident in Colombo! Infant mortality was thrice the national average. Patients admitted to hospital were often ignored by doctors who felt no obligation to speak to them in Tamil.

One of the most poignant scenes took place in Badulla, which in 1974 had a number of epidemics including cholera and hepatitis. The local municipal authorities, with all their accumulated communal prejudice, held these fugitives from starvation responsible. They were willy-nilly loaded into lorries and buses and taken to uninhabited jungles 40 or 50 miles away

where they were dumped. A senior Tamil doctor in Badulla, angrily wrote to the local authorities: “ *Cholera is caused by a virus and not by Indian Tamils!*”.

During this period the hill -country workers lost every thing they had, from jewellery and good sarees down to brass vessels. All these were sold for food. Food shortages were common at that time, and those in other parts of the country could locate black market sources or even have servants, children or themselves join bread queues before dawn. In the case of estate workers their work routine and isolation made this impossible.

Ironically, this harrowing experience for a whole community was triggered off by two LSSP ministers, who 25 years ago had looked upon this community as a prospective power base and had strenuously opposed its disenfranchisement by the UNP led coalition. Now after losing all hope in a revolution, they were unwittingly and insensitively stirring up revolutionary fervour in a docile people. Some rightwing amateur writing history in the future may well describe this a sinister Trotskyite plot.

1973 saw an instance of how the plantation workers were affected adversely by an opportunism-ridden Left driven to suicide and by rivalry among their own unions. The unions, upon nationalisation of the plantation sector, demanded monthly wages. Dr.Colvin R.de Silva, the Leftwing minister for the plantations, replied that nowhere in the world are plantation workers given monthly wages. The CWC went on strike, with the DWC refusing to join. A week later DWC decided to strike. Then the cWC pulled out after negotiating terms short of their arguably reasonable demands - all other state and corporation employees were employed on secure terms.

Not content with what had already been done to these people, some of the SLFP figures in that area launched into a game of Sinhalese Cowboys and Indian Indians in the manner of Westerns popular at that time. The game was to chase the Indians and settle the land on which they had lived with Sinhalese. Typical of such raids was one lead by a posse which left Gampola in April 1977, a few months before the general elections.

They left in PWD jeeps and MPCs lorries for Delta North Estate, Pusselewa, armed with weapons including knives and shot guns. Their war cry was ‘Jayawewa’ (Hail) juxtaposed with the name of the MP for Gampola. They proceeded to loot and burn line rooms. Six injured Tamils were refused treatment at the local hospital. The elderly father of a lady who had a ear ring pulled out had a knife cut across his face.

The Jaffna University Science Students’ Union sent three representatives to Pusselewa investigate the incident. In a dispassionate well presented report, they concluded that such actions were the result of a hostile police attitude leading to either inaction or complicity. A few days earlier on 11th May, at Sanquhar estate in the same area, a mob had attacked and looted line rooms. The police took no deterrent measures in the way of arrests or investigation. On the same day, the police had shot dead a picketing labourer in the Hatton area. The report concluded that the violence was communal in intent from the fact that a line at Delta was spared when a Sinhalese lady resident falsely told the attackers that all living there were Sinhalese.

Another reason behind these attacks was the fact that with at least the blessings of Hector Kobbedaduwa, Minister for Lands, government survey teams were being sent to the estates to survey the land for distribution-in practice exclusively to Sinhalese. Cornered by the

experience of starvation in the recent past and the threat of once more being driven to beggarmdom, the Upcountry Tamil workers for the first time resorted to collective action and organised pickets to prevent the entry of survey teams. It is in this context that the police shot a worker. Further attacks over the next few years, under a UNP government, followed more deadly elaborations of the same pattern.

By this time, the LSSP was out of the government. The SLFP lead government very shortsightedly alienated these people to such an extent where they would not trust the SLFP or the Left again for a long time. In yet another irony, the UNP which disenfranchised them, allied to the CWC (the hill-country workers' trade union led by **S.Thondaman**), was to realise in the Hill-Country Tamils, a crucial block vote.

The UNP'S landslide election victory in July 1977 did not leave the Hill-Country Tamils any less subject to violence, although their leader **Thondaman** became minister for rural industries in the new government. Violence against them by UNP elements erupted in August 1977, August 1981 and in July 1983.

The UNP government's attitude to the Tamils is epitomised by a typical incident in 1977. Local Tamil citizens of Wattedagama presented the police with a list of 26 names of persons, many of them UNP supporters, responsible for violence against Tamils. No action was taken. It is reliably learnt that a member of the UNP youth, a Sinhalese, raised the matter at a meeting with the local MP, who was also a senior minister in the new government. The minister reportedly replied, **"How can I take action against these boys who worked hard for the party during the elections?"**. Two years hence such ministers did sign detention orders for dozens of Tamil youth under the controversial PTA. Such became the dignity of the law of the land.

## **1.2. Links with the North - East:**

Following the violence of August 1977, a large number of Tamils of Indian origin flocked the North-East as refugees -from Tissamaharama in the deep south to the hill- country, as well as from Colombo. Acting under moral pressure, the government had transported them from refugee camps in the South to the North-East - to places ranging from Pottuvil to Trincomalee and the Vanni. The attitude towards them by Tamil nationalists was ambivalent. Some were motivated by genuine human concern. Others openly regarded them a suitable buffer population on the borders of the North- East.

Because hill country folk had come to the Vanni in search of food and work during the preceding bout of starvation, the Vanni now became their natural refuge.

Under the impact of the experience of violence and injustice, activists in the hill country then for the first time thought of training their youth in some form of defensive warfare. They looked with natural admiration towards the incipient militant movement in the North. With the social links forged by the refugee exodus, several of these activists made regular visits to the North-East. On the other hand there were a number of Left -leaning intellectuals and students from the universities, operating outside the traditional Left, who though mainly from the North, formed close political links in the hill - country in addition to paying regular visits.

Among those who worked with great sincerity to provide a new life for the hill country refugees in the Vanni, was Dr.Rajasundaram of the Gandhiyam. Though not a man readily

sympathetic to the use of violence, he advocated that each settled village should have about two persons trained in the use of fire-arms, so as to counter attacking mobs sent at the behest of communal politicians in the South. In the course of his work, he became associated with the PLOTE. The PLOTE in time became strong in the Vanni.

But the hill country activists were clear about one thing. They knew that hill-country youth becoming involved in the Eelam struggle for a separate state in the North- East would be a disaster for Hill Country Tamils. With the communal attacks on Tamils of July 1983, where the state was blatantly involved and where Nuwara-Eliya and Badualla in particular saw some ugly carnage of Tamils, it was with mixed feelings that several activists in the hill country approached militant groups based in the North -East, particularly the PLOTE,EROS, and the EPRLF, to provide defensive training for hill-country youth. There was then the big question of how to get them back after training. Some of the youth who set off even got picked up in the Eastern province before they could go for training. The exercise was abandoned very early.

## CHAPTER 2

### Political Legacy

#### 2.1 A myth.

Although the population of Tamils of Indian origin increased sharply between 1830 and 1920, they were not subject to verbal attacks by Sinhalese elite politicians until the discussion of Donoughmore reforms in the late 20s. Until this time it was generally the much smaller minorities who were successful in commerce and earned the ire of their Sinhalese rivals that came in for criticism, often clothed in the language of religio-mysticism. A prominent exponent of this line was Anagarika Dharmapala, a scion of a commercial family turned Buddhist reformer. This lack of attention was because as numerous as they were, the hill country Tamils were regimented and isolated in estates performing highly profitable work for little in return. It was the question of giving them political rights that set alarm bells ringing.

Prejudice against them had nevertheless existed. Among several disparaging remarks made against these Tamils by Anagarika Dharmapala is that made in 1902: **“Under the English administration, the out -castes of Southern India are allowed to immigrate into this island.”** Powerful echoes of this sentiment can be heard down to this day. It has thus become commonplace for Sinhalese in general to evade the human issue by blaming the presence of Hill Country Tamils squarely on the British. How valid is this assumption?

In 1936 Tamils of recent Indian origin formed 26% of the labour force in government departments. Following the Donoughmore reforms of 1931, most functions of government had been devolved to elected local representatives and a council of ministers. Responding to the depression and the resulting unemployment, the government got about retrenching mainly workers of Indian origin in the public services and repatriating them to India. Administrative means were also being pursued to restrict political rights of Indian workers in general. (Their voting strength was reduced from 225 000 in 1939 to 168 000 in 1943). But in the meantime Tamils continued to be brought from India to work in the plantations. The LSSP leader Dr.N.M.Perera in response to this opportunism of the government introduced a motion in the state council in 1937, calling upon the minister of labour to issue no further licences for estate

labour immigration. This was defeated 29 votes to 5 with 1 abstention, with all the Sinhalese ministers voting against.

**Thus Kumari Jayawardana observes : “Hence in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the estate Tamils were not targets of ethnic violence; nor was there agitation for their repatriation. As long as they remained a captive labour force, isolated geographically in the hills with no trade unions or other types of organisation, possessing neither political nor economic rights, and posing no threat or competition in terms of employment, they could be tolerated inspite of their numbers”.**

What follows is that the Sinhalese polity, and the Ceylonese elite in general, had as much at stake in a captive Indian labour-force turning the wheels of the plantation economy as did the British colonial power. Little has been done in the last 50 years to change that overwhelming dependence on the plantation economy. Blaming the British alone is thus a convenient fiction, when we were all part of the process, complaining little when the going was good.[see Kumari Jayawardana(8), C.Devaraj (3) & Shelton Kodikkara (11)].

## **2.2 Late 20's to 1960**

One of the finest champions the plantation workers ever had was K.Natesa Aiyer, a South Indian Brahmin nationalist and journalist. In 1925 he championed the cause of Indian workers by entering into a partnership with A.E.Goonesinha in the Ceylon Labour Union. The economic boom of the 1920s helped to cement working class solidarity devoid of ethnic divisions. Successful strikes were launched -i.e. harbour workers in 1927 and tramways - where Indian and Sinhalese workers stood by each other. Subsequently Goonesinha and Natesa Aiyer parted ways. However Goonesinha had in 1928 given his support in strong terms to voting rights for workers of Indian origin when Donoughmore reforms were being debated.

As the economic boom gave way to the depression of the 30s, working class solidarity began to show cracks. The perception that Indian workers were stealing jobs of the Sinhalese reinforced the communal aspect of the Buddhist revivalist movement's ideology in formulating which Anagarika Dharmapala had played an important role. Although the Buddhist revivalist movement had an anti colonial thrust, due to its inward looking nature it contained the incipient communal ideology which in the long run thwarted the anti-colonial struggle by creating division among the people.

Goonesinha joined the bandwagon that had been set rolling in 1928 by right wing politicians who in the legislative council took alarm at the prospect of enfranchising the plantation labour under universal franchise as envisaged by the Donoughmore Commission. This group of particians included **D.S.Senanayake, Francis Molamure, C.W.W.Kanangara and V de S Wicremanayake** who raised the bogey of an Indian menace. Speaking in the Legislative council at that time, **C.H.Z Fernando** of the Labour Party accused the former of dishonesty and saw in this cry the beginning of a dangerous communalisation of politics. Goonesinha through his paper, **The Viraya**, launched a virulent campaign against urban workers of Indian origin, particularly the Malayali's.

The Donoughmore reforms gave the vote to workers of Indian origin in 1931 subject to conditions based on 5 years residence, income and property qualifications or having a certificate of permanent settlement.

It was against this backdrop that Natesa Aiyer in 1931 launched the Ceylon Indian workers Federation in Hatton. The union's activities took the form of seeking redress for individual grievances through petitions, public meetings in towns and the issue of literature critical of the estate regime. But the depression went against the success of the union. The reforms won in 1927 which included a minimum wage payable direct to the workers rather than to the kangany (labour supervisor of a higher caste) began to be openly flouted. Other actions by planters included police action such as identifying and penalising activist workers, and preventing union officials from entering estates to campaigning against Natesa Aiyer personally through their paper '**Ooliyan**', and by exploiting social divergences in Indian Tamil society. By 1934 the union had virtually folded up. But Natesa Aiyer continued his campaign by being elected by the workers to the state council in 1936.

Goonesinha's drift to the Right continued with ethnic divisions creeping into the workforce and with the workers gradually changing their allegiance to the newly emergent Left, particularly the Trotskiite LSSP, launched by the young Dr.N.M.Perera in 1935. Goonesinha finished up as Minister of Labour in the first post independence government which took away the franchise from plantation workers in 1949.

N.M.Perera, Pieter Kenuman and Colvin R. de Silva with others from the Left continued as doughty anti-communal champions of working class solidarity for 25 years, until their volte-face in the 60s on considerations not dissimilar to Goonesinha's. But during these 25 years they did much to sustain the tone of politics and of political debate at a higher level, and left something for posterity to learn from .

The next stage of union activity on the estates was given 'symbolic' leadership by the Left. A wave of 'spontaneous strikes' erupted in the tea districts in 1939/40. The Left saw these workers as the vanguard of the struggle against imperialism. The ordinance of 1935 calling for compulsory registration of trade unions had effectively legalised plantation workers' unions. As it was to become clearer in later years, basing union activity on a Marxist inspired millennial vision had its strengths and weaknesses. While people believed in the ideology, it could inspire selfless and idealistic energy. A loss of this belief could on the other hand lead to cynicism and catastrophe.

The advent of the second world war once more gave the plantations a new economic importance. Successful strikes in the tea districts in 1939/40 led to the seven -point agreement between the Planters Association and some of the unions. This established the competence of the unions to represent workers' demands and established procedure for negotiations. In response to hostile attitudes on the part of the government, the Ceylon Indian Congress was formed in 1939, by merging several associations, under the patronage of the Indian National Congress represented in person by Jawaharlal Nehru then on a visit to Ceylon. In 1941 the CIC Labour Union was formed, which the hill country workers joined in large numbers. The CIC thus largely became the party of hill country workers.

In 1942 the LSSP was banned for subversive activity and under the Essential Services Order strikes in the tea and rubber industries were forbidden. The unaccustomed militancy displayed by the plantation workers had disturbed both the British colonial government and the local elite. In the elections of 1947 prior to the granting of independence under the Soulbury constitution, 6 out of 95 elected members were from the CIC and 20 from the Left. The Indian worker vote influenced the election result in about 20 seats, including the election of 7-9 Sinhalese Left wing candidates as against a total of 45 seats won by the party of the ruling

elite led by **D.S.Senanayake**. This was a situation unacceptable to the dominant (local & foreign) interests - fears of which had been first expressed in the language of religio-communalism in the late 20s.

In February 1948 Ceylon received independence under the Soulbury constitution which had failed to define citizenship, an omission which Kumari Jayawardena describes as '**singular and intentional**'. Parliament subsequently proceeded to 'rectify' this omission by acts whose passage required only simple majorities in favour. In 1948/49 '**The Ceylon Citizenship Act**', '**The Indian and Pakistani Residents (Citizenship) Act**' and the '**Parliamentary Elections (Amendment) Act**' were passed in quick succession. These acts first made the overwhelming bulk of Indian arrivals during the British period non-citizens, then defined impossible conditions for citizenship, and finally imposed the very reasonable condition that a voter must be a citizen. It represented a sleight of hand revealing its conspiratorial character. The three acts, seemingly defensible when looked at singly, in sum produced something momentarily unjust and indefensible.

These bills were stoutly and very logically opposed by Sinhalese on the Left, who pointed out that speeches from the government benches were reflective of some of the worst and paranoid traditions of racism. The second of these bills was passed 52 for and 32 against. The Ayes included nearly all Ceylon Tamils (among the few exceptions being **S.J.V.Chelvanayagam** and **C.Vanniasingam**), and all Muslims, among the minority MPs.

**Pieter Kenuman**, the leader of the Communist Party, pointed out in the course of the debates that he, like **Dudley**, son of **D.S.senanayake** the prime minister, could not satisfy the citizenship clauses because their fathers' birth certificate could not be traced, registration of births not being done in those times.

This deprivation of the franchise of a section of the population which was legally contested by the Federal Party, first succeeded in the Kegalle district court, and then failed at both the supreme court in Colombo and the Privy Council in London. Britain's role throughout in the Machiavellian coup, together the economic interests involved, left the impression of the white sahib getting his junior brown counterpart to do the dirty work - a task too awkward for the ruling British administration to have accomplished earlier.

Following these acts however, the parliamentry Left became less active in the plantations where there were no votes to be gained. The CIC and its labour union renamed the Ceylon Workers' Congress in 1950 continued in trade union activity, now virtually the sole champion of the plantation Tamils. **S.Thondaman** was the leader of the CWC from its inception, having earlier, in 1947, been elected to parliament as a CIC candidate. Other opposition parties, including the Left and the Federal Party supported the CWC's satyagraha campaign in the early 50s.

For the next decade the CWC remained hostile to the government because of disenfranchisement. But its links with the anti-government and more militant Sinhalese labour movement became strained. In 1956 the more radical wing of the union led by **Aziz** broke away from the CWC to form the Democratic Workers Congress (DWC). The CWC then became a more communally based organization.

### **2.3 1960-July 1983: The dominance of the CWC:**

In 1960s the two prominent unions in the plantations besides the CWC and the DWC were the Lanka Estate Workers Union (LEWU) affiliated to the LSSP and the Ceylon Plantation Workers Union (CPWU) affiliated to the Communist Party (CP). The latter two started losing their significance after their affiliated parties allied with the SLFP and become passive towards ever increasing communalisation politics. Due to the split in the international communist movement the Ceylon Communist Party also split into two factions. The faction which rejected parliamentary politics, aligned itself with Chinese Communist Party and took away the bulk of the CP Trade unions with it. The party came to be known as The Communist Party of Ceylon (Peking) and was led by **Shanmugathasan**. This was born in 1963 and the plantation union which affiliated to it was called the Red Flag Union.

As we pointed out earlier, the leadership of such a union saw itself primarily as part of the vanguard of a millennial struggle and not simply given to managing workers' disputes from day to day. The CP(Peking) thus attracted a new crop of idealistic commitment, idealism which in the old CP had become tarnished. The CP(Peking) thus infused revolutionary ideals among many young and left its mark in memorable agitation, such as against caste oppression in Jaffna, and thus made a definite contribution. Although the partial struggles against certain types of oppression were successful to an extent, they had never been able to link up with the general struggle against institutionalised oppression due to their conceptual limitations regarding the nature of Sri Lankan society coupled with their dogmatic and mechanical application of Maoist theory. When its political future started to fade so did its effectiveness together with its union strength.

In consequence the CWC gained as the largest and best organised union, very capable in terms of managerial skills to handle day to day disputes of members.

If there is one statement that best describes the outlook of the CWC, it is the one made by its leader **Thondaman** in defence of his joining the 1977 UNP government as minister for rural industries. He argued that it was in the interests of the CWC not **'to wage struggles to find solutions to our common problems but ... to ask and obtain our rights at cabinet level'**[see Kurian(9)].

**This notion ran counter to the established wisdom of democratic politics. According to this the natural human tendency of those who hold political power is to abuse it, thus making it necessary to constantly and openly challenge those in power and hold them accountable. To compromise this obligation and take the easier course of making a virtue of secret deals or requests, is also to compromise dignity and invite danger. A vulnerable minority faced with hostile and insensitive odds can ill afford, contrary to what is commonly believed, to dispense with principle and auction its dignity. This can be seen in the experience of the Tamils as whole.**

A political philosophy of the CWC's ilk was contrary to that of **Natesa Aiyer**. **Natesa Aiyer** squarely confronted everyone who stood against justice for the workers. His heart burned for their cause. He simultaneously confronted the colonial administration, the ruling local elite, the planters, the kanganyes and the emergent Sinhalese chauvinism. If he was defeated by the economic depression of the 30s, the CWC was saved by the civil war which began in 1948. But in judging the CWC, we must also keep in mind the betrayal by the Left.

The CWC has pursued the stated policy consistently from the 60s. **Thondaman** was appointed MP in the 1960-65 government of **Mrs. Bandaranayke's** SLFP. This government

in 1964 came to an agreement with the Indian government (**Sirimavo -Shasthri Pact**) which agreed to give 300 000 Tamils of Indian Origin Ceylon citizenship in return for India granting citizenship to 525000. The deal was a slap in the face to a community that had shed so much sweat and blood to earn for this country a prosperity in which it did not share.

In December 1964 **Thondaman** voted for a motion of no confidence which brought down the SLFP government, and both he and **Annamalai** from the CWC became appointed MPs in the new UNP government of **Dudley Senanyake**. The one concession made by this government was to soft pedal the implementation of the **Sirimavo- Shasthiri Pact**. That is for every 7 estate Tamils receiving Indian citizenship, 4 were to be granted Ceylon citizenship. The physical removal of the former was not insisted upon as did the SLFP. The act for its implementation was passed on 4<sup>th</sup> June 1967 - exactly 20 years before Indian Airforce planes symbolically violated Sri Lankan airspace.

This period also saw personal anger against **Thondaman** combined with virulent chauvinist attacks against Tamils and Hill Country Tamils in particular, by the SLFP. It should be noted that the parliamentary Left was part of the SLFP alliance and played a passive role, allowing this to go on. During the next SLFP led Left coalition government of 1970 - 77, there was considerable vindictiveness against Tamils shown in the making of the new constitution. The Hill Country Tamils were at the receiving end of gangsterism blessed or led by SLFP MPs.

During **Thondaman's** tenure as cabinet member in the capacity of Minister for Rural Industries in the 1977- 88 UNP government led by **J.R.Jayewardne**, the Hill Country Tamils suffered three bouts of violence in 1977, 81 and 83. The last and the most serious of the bouts with thinly disguised participation by the state followed just 7 months after the Tamil parties rendered the government an indefensible political service. The CWC openly and the TULF passively, helped Jayewardne with crucial marginal votes to win the shameful and undemocratic referendum of 1982, to circumvent elections and prolong the life of parliament for another term. This act of the government (i.e the 1983 holocaust) reflecting both ingratitude and contempt, with murder of innocent civilians thrown in, was in many senses a consequence of the unprincipled opportunism of the Tamil parties. The TULF lost its initiative to the militant groups, but the CWC survived for other reasons.

This survival is remarkable considering how far the CWC was compromised. As a member of the cabinet the CWC leader shares collective responsibility for a series of repressive measures then aimed at curbing the Tamil militancy and universally unpopular with Tamils. These include the Prevention of Terrorism Act (1979) and the new emergency regulations of May 1983 permitting the disposal of dead bodies without inquest. (The number so disposed over the years must now be over 50 000)

How much, inspite of its ready compliance, the government cared for the CWC and the people it represented, was evidenced in widespread reports of complicity by government MPs and even ministers in the violence of July 1983. These were reported in the foreign press. On 24<sup>th</sup> July 1983 the police officer in charge at Nuwara Eliya, a man well regarded, detained several Sinhalese hoodlums as a preventive measure. On the 29<sup>th</sup> a very senior government figure was seen going to the police station. Subsequently the hoodlums were released and Tamil blood flowed in Nuwara Eliya. Shortly afterwards, addressing a meeting of the LJEWU, this same figure, referring to a speculative Indian intervention, said, "India will take 14 hours to arrive. But within 14 minutes Tamil blood will be spilt". Some government figures such as Renuka Hearath in Walapone and Anura Daniel in Galaha did earn respect by

being in their areas to protect Tamils. This protection, it is said, largely took the form of restraining their own party men. It thus came to be generally accepted, that whenever there was violence against Tamils, it was only when local government representatives wanted it.

When thousands of Tamils, including Hill - Country Tamils, had been killed in late July 1983 and legislation (6<sup>th</sup> Amendment) was conceived in early August to effectively ban TULF MPs, there was little display of anger or defiance on **Thondaman** 's part. He typically objected to the legislation 'at cabinet level'. [See **Kumari Jayawardna(8), C.Devaraj(3), Charles Kemp(10), Rachel Kurian (9) & Paul Capersz(1)**].

## 2.4 Post July 1983:

Several things happened in a short space of time which affected the future of Hill-Country Tamils. The militant mood among the young had been heightened by the inspiration of North-Eastern militant groups. India had, by sending first Narasimha Rao at the height of the July 83 violence and others including **G.Parthasarathy** subsequently, signalled a direct interest in the Tamils of this country. The EPRLF and EROS, two among the five most influential militant groups, drew maps extending their concept of Eelam to include the plantation areas. Although their relationship with the Hill- Country Tamils themselves remained paternalistic and failed to come to terms with their needs or understand them, many of the cadre of these two groups came to feel a sense of solidarity with Hill- Country Tamils, who in turn appreciated it. Subsequently, the militant groups attending the Indian sponsored Thimpu talks with the Sri Lankan government in July 1985, placed citizenship for all Hill- Country Tamils as one of their key demands. Also very importantly, with the formation of the Ministry for National Security in January 1984, the government was gearing up for a long and costly civil war with defence spending somewhere around 15% of the budget, and perhaps much higher. The government thus became very dependent on the plantations, then supplying over 40% of foreign earnings. These developments were the culmination of chauvinistic politics through decades, which also internationalised the plight of plantation Tamils. The CWC which was the best organised body in the plantations, with no effective rival, was presented with these mixed blessings, giving it thus a new lease of life. Peace in the plantations was absolutely essential for the conduct of the war and also with the international community breathing down its neck, and the ever present fear of an Indian military intervention, the government needed to address the plantation workers. Toying with them as in July 1983 was by far out of the question. All considered, the government was lucky to have the CWC to talk to. In 1984 the unions successfully struck for higher wages.

It would be an exaggeration to credit the CWC, as is often done, with the passage of two bills in 1986 and 88 to solve the residual citizenship question. The government accepted in the course of these two bills, the granting of Sri Lankan citizenship to the difference between 600 000 whom the **Sirimavo- Shastri and the Sirimavo-Indira Pacts** envisaged would apply for Indian citizenship and the 506 000 who had actually done so. It would be more convincing to argue that the developments above and the fact that repatriation had been stalled in August 1984 owing to the massive Tamil refugee exodus to India from July 1983, had left the government facing a fait accompli. 1986 saw the eruption of the new militant mood in Talawakelle. [\[Top\]](#)

## 2.5 Riding the Storm.

There are several parallel developments to be discerned between the politics of the Ceylon Tamils and that of the Hill Country Tamils. That of the former stemmed from a class that was adversely affected by discrimination in education and government jobs and whose elite viewed the apex of attainment as a successful professional life in Colombo and owning property in the South. But in appealing for support from people with a diversity of concerns, which called for socio- economic development at a local level and problems such as caste and colonisation, this class lacked the depth and seriousness to address these issues concretely and effectively. There was hardly any mobilisation around these issues. The use of Tamil nationalistic slogans remained their principal and potent appeal, thus mirroring the dominant Sinhalese politics. But the mood of militancy and a host of exacerbations of neglected problems grew independently of them. When the militant ferment was aired by unarmed Left

wing groups as in the 60s and 70s, who talked of internationalism, socialism and worldwide revolution through working class solidarity, they could be shrugged off with slander and ridicule. But when an armed militancy airing the same Tamil nationalist slogans as the elite took root in the 70s, the Tamil parliamentary leadership adopted the strategy of compromise, conviviality and negotiations in Colombo and theatrical militant posturing at home. It could be argued even today that this same class has no essential contradiction with the LTTE because the latter is deferential to those who regard the apex of attainment as a life in the West. With these crucial limitations however, the Tamil leadership could point to a series of agreements, legislation and successfully raising particular issues in parliament and refer to them as achievements.

The CWC like its counterparts in the TULF had serious limitations, but could also point to achievements. It has a powerful organisational base unlike what the TULF ever had. It has given the Hill Country Tamils a symbol of identity, and it can be approached to have a variety of day to day problems effectively resolved. It could also be argued less convincingly that the relative stability in the plantations secured by the CWC's co-operation with the government has enabled beneficial welfare programs by NGOs to be implemented in the estates, in fields such as health and education, which will on the long run challenge the existing social hierarchy.

One of the CWC's limitations which has persisted to this day is that its leadership, perhaps necessarily in the 40s, is dominated by an elite property owning class largely incorporated into the Colombo establishment. **'Even after the second world war, positions of prominence within the CWC were taken by head Kanganies and their sons who, realising the head Kangany system was under attack from above and below, threw in their lot with the workforce'. [See Charles Kemp(10)].**

The CWC becoming 'increasingly reformist in policy, opportunist in strategy and 'communal' in its appeal to the workforce', can be seen as stemming from the interests of its elite leadership, and underlies its actual performance. Again its organisational effectiveness, which its rivals could not match, is linked to good ties and a wide variety of mutually beneficial contacts with the establishments in Colombo and India. There have been instances when the workforce had problems in estates owned by the leadership, and other unions took up the matter. When the estate nationalisation issue came up in the 70s, the Hill Country and Ceylon Tamil elite had concerns differing from those of the workforce.

Thus while individuals go to the CWC to find solutions to day to day disputes, there is also much disquiet about its conduct. The ultimate question of dignity and humanity remain unaddressed. Many who have worked with the CWC complain that initiative is looked upon with suspicion and that leadership positions are weighted in favour of the elite rather than towards the workforce. They also complain of disproportionate paranoia towards possible rivals. The leadership thus found itself maintaining its increasingly tenuous hold by resorting to a theatrical militancy very different from the reality of its dealings, so as not to be outdistanced by the growing mood of militancy in the estates and the influence of the North-Eastern militancy.

In keeping with this approach, the CWC in the early 80s employed Nagalingam, a close associate and relative of the PLOTE leader **Uma Maheswaran** as its Director of Workers' Education. According to inside sources Nagalingam was given 'unrecorded leave' to carry out diplomatic missions that kept the CWC in touch with the India based militancy. **Thondaman**

today is one of the strident advocates of the position that the LTTE is the sole representative of the people of the North-East, totally ignoring the plight of the Muslim minority as well as the history of his own community. In the same interview [Sunday Times, July 1991], he could say without any apparent discomfort, that he had sacked **Chandrasekaran**, who later formed the UPF, from his party for being an LTTE supporter. Also ironically but not surprisingly, the CWC has been wary of LTTE influence in the estates. Some youths who had lived in the North and had later been questioned and released by the police in Talawakelle who suspected them of LTTE links, have alleged the involvement of an ex-policeman now working for the CWC, in the arrests. (The presence of this policeman in Tamil Nadu in the mid-80s led to allegations of his spying for the Sri Lankan government).

The situation is one common in human affairs, where those who have made a virtue of subservience, have therefore, a natural sneaking admiration for others who indulge in defiant, but destructive, violence unmindful of the cost to themselves and to others. Unless the CWC is able to rethink and articulate a clear non-violent politics that does not compromise dignity, others who attempt to provide alternatives will find it difficult to break away from this stifling political culture. The tragedy of the North-East may then find echoes in the hills. The experience of the UPF points a destructive ambience. [\[Top\]](#)

## 2.6 The UPF experience

A young academic from the hill-country confessed, “When I was younger, we were very angry. I belonged to a revolutionary group. We went about telling the workers that they must liberate themselves if need be, with sticks, stones, mamotties and bare hands. I now realise that it was all foolish”. That reflects the general mood of helpless anger with which many youth set about to struggle against generations of oppression, confusion and of self imposed subservience and indignity, into which the CWC was guiding them. The inertia of history places constraints on the kind of mass movement that can emerge in these conditions, and even brilliant, highly motivated leaders are easily overtaken and frustrated by this inertia.

**The communal violence of July 1983 was a crucial turning point in the history of upcountry Tamils. By this time the conditions of poverty and neglect surrounding the hill country repatriates in India were well known. From about the middle of 1982, worsening conditions in the North made the option of setting there untenable. The government demonstrated its hostility to these Tamils finding new lives in the North-East by forcibly transporting under the cover of the July 1983 violence, hundreds of these victims of the 1977 violence from the Vanni and Trincomalee sectors, and dumping them in the hills. Once again, without intending it, the government created in these Tamils the defiant realisation that the hill country was their only viable home. Despite the terrible violence inflicted on them during July 1983, like it or not, there was now no going to India or to the North-East. If need be, they must fight to live in dignity. This mood also spurred them into increasing contacts with North-Eastern militant groups.**

Something unusual happened in Talawakelle in 1986 which made the government sit up and take alarm. During a Hindu festival, some Sinhalese hoodlums attempted their normal prank of trying to humiliate the Tamils. For the first time in the hill country, the Tamils struck back as an organised force and proved that they for ever cannot be pushed around. The man behind this organisation was **Chandrasekaran**, a much respected social worker, then an organiser for the CWC. In 1986 he also organised a protest fast on the citizenship issue which reportedly incurred the displeasure of the CWC leadership. According to informed sources,

**Chandrasekaran** was thereafter marked by the leadership as a dangerous nuisance. But it was not in Chandrasekarans's nature to challenge **Thondaman**. When the Provincial Councils elections were to held in 1988, it is said that **Chandrasekaran** in return for the support he drew, wished for a nomination. According to these sources, **"The CWC leadership asked Chandrasekaran to hold on, and gave him a strong indication that he would have a nomination at the coming general elections. Came January 1989, and Chandrasekaran discovered late that he was not getting a nomination. It was too late for him to file as an independent candidate. He rejected a suggestion that he should contest as a USA (Left Alliance) candidate. Using his own contacts, he filed as a candidate for the PLOTE's political wing, the DPLF. He obtained an impressive 10 000 votes. Owing to the split vote neither he nor the CWC secured a seat in the Nuwara Eliya District". "Ironically, had Thondaman the foresight to nominate Chandrasekaran, he may have been very grateful. Far from what Thondaman now claims, Chandrasekaran's alleged support for the LTTE was never an issue"**.

Thus as often happens in history, the Upcountry Peoples' Front (UPF) was born due to a mixture of political necessity and a quirk of fate. **Chandrasekaran** teamed up with **Cader**, his long-standing friend, and **Tharmalingam**, a school principal. **Chandrasekaran** is described as a good hearted man of character, who completely trusted and did not question his friends. **Cader** is described as intellectually very able, well read in Marxist theory and a former activist in the **Ceylon Teachers' Union**. He was earlier detained under the PTA for his alleged links with the Northern-Eastern militancy. Just after the 1983 communal violence, he had brought out in India a publication detailing the agony of the hill-country Tamils under a pseudonym. His closest links had been with the **PLOTE** and the **EPRLF**. His release in 1988 was secured at the request of the EPRLF. To **Cader** is credited the observation made about the Tamil militant groups shortly after July 1983 : **"They are building several armies like the Srilankan army"**. **Tharmalingam** is described as a man of action. This team thus ran an organisation different from the CWC - one without an all -powerful leader. Its popularity, although confined to the Tallawakele area, frightened both the government and the CWC, who joined forces in an attempt to break the UPF, as evidenced in its history of harassment.

Though the UPF is now accused of links with the LTTE, this if true in any sense must be seen in a different light. We have remarked that given their state of powerlessness and confusion the Hill Country Tamils admired the militancy in the North - East, without expecting much from it. The natural and past links of the UPF were not with the LTTE. Ideologically the LTTE, of all militant groups, offered the least to the Hill Country Tamils. The LTTE's ideological antecedents lay with the Jaffna elite. Its demand of separation for the North-East, if realised, could not but leave Hill Country Tamils more isolated and vulnerable. Moreover, when it suited the LTTE, it was prepared to cast aspersions on Indian Tamils and Muslims for transient gain. During the campaign against the EPRLF dominated North-Eastern provincial council, the attack on its chief minister Varatharajaperumal in Jaffna had been very much based on his Indian origins. Posters had appeared in Jaffna questioning his legitimacy to lead Jaffna people and asking him to pack up and go to India with the IPKF as it was his mother country. But LTTE had attained to a position of prestige, not least by the legitimacy conferred on it by the government through relations of intimacy during 1989/90. Such adulation coming from a powerful state is difficult to ignore for a people who are weak and helpless.

The government is now moving to completely uproot the functional base of the UPF. The manner of police surveillance and arrests has left the people in a state of fear. This combined

with past developments suggest that no political activity which challenges the government is going to be tolerated in the hills. Since the municipal elections earlier this year, some government officials from Tawakelle, including an officer of the Youth Services Council have been transferred following, according to information, a high level consultation about their political sympathies. There has been much local talk of more transfers in the offing. Underneath their fear, the people are left feeling that they have been deprived of something that showed promise.

It will be a great pity, if the discredited PTA is used to justify this repression and to bring convictions against UPF leaders. This would only show that the government is bent on destroying every democratic force when they feel its potential. The PTA clauses against incitement and harbouring have after all been selectively applied. There was plenty of incitement through television speeches at the height of the July 1983 violence. During the IPKF presence the government forgot all its laws and acts, including the PTA, to arm and support the LTTE. By comparison any support enjoyed by the LTTE in the hill country comes far less from sinister conspiracies than from despondency and confusion. The democratic forces should pressurise the government **not** to use the PTA particularly in this instance. If not, an angry people would get the message that the only form of politics that works, is the use of terror-terror to deter informants and to frustrate the police. Then we would have the tragedy of the North-East coming rapidly to the hills. That is surely something these people, who have been through continual tragedies, do not need. The need for these people to nurture a mature, liberating politics of their own must be respected.[see 5.6][[Top](#)]

## CHAPTER 3

### **The Socio-Economic position of the UpCountry Tamils**

#### **3.1 Land:**

It has sometimes been maintained that Hill-Country Tamils are privileged in comparison with neighbouring Kandyan Sinhalese because those working in estates are guaranteed regular wages of about RS 42/- a day. It is true that there are mixed areas where Kandyan Sinhalese share the abject conditions of their Tamil neighbours. Both are at the bottom of hierarchical structures dominated by those with capital, and both have questions to ask their leaders. In some areas relations between the two communities are good, both being bilingual from childhood and sharing in the joys of friendship. But Tamils in the hill-country are generally exempt from political patronage in respect of quality of schools and in particular housing and land distribution. The politics articulated by the dominant section is that Tamils do not belong here and have no right to land. In the land grabbing days that followed nationalisation in the 70s, Tamils were often violently displaced by mobs enjoying political patronage.

The Tamil workers generally live in line rooms on estates and most often lack amenities to add to their income by having a small vegetable plot or by keeping a cow. Those who do this, do so on a tenuous basis, using derelict land in some corner of the estate. While they receive wages, they have little in the way of hidden income that comes from land and from political patronage, in the way of amenities such as housing and education. A curiosity which one encounters even today is that while Hatton is a town in a fertile tea-producing region, the vegetables in its market are mostly brought in by middlemen, from Nuwara-Eliya. This was part of the background to the starvation that hit the estates in 70s.

An important means of making these people less vulnerable to the vagaries of government policy and market forces is to give them land to create for themselves an economic buffer. Their complaint is that they have been generally exempted from all land distribution and housing schemes that have been implemented since 1977. Schemes such as the NADSA, the national housing scheme with a target of a million houses, the MP's development allocation, and the Mahaveli scheme, have benefited the Hill - Country Tamils very minimally. Activists have pointed out that one important reason why this community looks to India is that they do not have a piece of land and a house to call their own.

With the projected privatisation of estates, there is a fear that those who have added to their incomes by utilising unused land on the estate, may be deprived of it. Thus the minimal measure of confirming to the occupants the ownership of line rooms prior to privatisation, is deemed grossly inadequate. Some have advocated the reasonable demand that land should be given to workers to form a village community with houses and garden plots, prior to privatisation. This would be consonant with legislation from the 50s, including the paddy lands and housing acts, which have devolved considerable rights in favour of users.[see 5.3] [\[Top\]](#)

## 3.2 EDUCATION

### 3.2.1 1842 -1972

While American, Anglican, Methodist and Roman Catholic missions were establishing schools elsewhere on the island, it was the Baptist mission that first established a school in the coffee plantation area near Kandy in 1842, in the face of opposition from the colonial establishment. The school closed down in 1844. The next attempt at education was made by the Tamil Cooly Mission established by evangelical Scottish Presbyterian planters. Whatever education was given remained grossly inadequate and rudimentary. In the 1920s for instance, the level of literacy did not exceed 20%.

The first time legislative provision was made for education in the estates was in 1939, under part VI of Ordinance No 31. This was amended in 1947 and 1951. These obliged the estate superintendent to provide a school-house and teachers. The teachers themselves could be hired and fired at will and had no assurance of tenure. The whole exercise was conducted with an air of indifference. Furthermore the management appeared to have a vested interest in an uneducated workforce. Most of the pupils dropped out very early.

In 1943 the special commission on education chaired by **C.W.W Kannangara** decided on a national education scheme with compulsory free education, including free education for those who entered university. The estate schools were not included as part of the national scheme and were left a private preserve of the estate management. In 1947 however, under pressure from parliamentary representatives of plantation Tamils, **Kannangara** who was minister for education agreed to bring estate schools under the national scheme. Shortly after that the estate workers were disenfranchised, and the promise was forgotten. This situation continued into the 70s. In the few areas which had good elementary schools, it was because individual superintendents or their wives took a personal interest.

Some educationists argued that estate children should be encouraged to use facilities in neighbouring towns as many Sinhalese children were doing. [**L.Rajagopal(13)**]. But there were many evident practical and material obstructions.

It is of interest to note that in 1960, the time of the takeover of mission schools, among the better schools in Uva catering for estate children, as opposed to those of the upper and middle classes, the Roman Catholic ones had a prominent place. [\[Top\]](#)

### 3.2.2. 1972 -Present:

Despite nationalisation being a painful experience for estate workers, it also brought in some long term benefits. 60% of tea land was taken over and managed by the state-run JEDB and SLSPC. For one thing it loosened the socially constricting estate regime. Where education was concerned it shifted the onus for running estate schools from the estate management to the state, leaving no argument against incorporating estate schools into the national scheme. The SLFP government of 1970-77 did in fact agree to incorporate the schools into the national scheme. In the meantime with nationalisation and mismanagement, the annual tea production fell sharply from the 215 000 tonnes realised in 1972. This figure was never reached again. With the overall economic crisis and the government's political orientation, spending on estate schools was among the least of priorities. Thus nothing much happened.

Although the CWC became part of the new UNP government of 1977, there was no appreciable change in educational expenditure in plantation schools. What made a significant difference, at least in the Nuwara Eliya District, was the MP's development budget or "**Thondaman's budget**", which was used to improve schools in the area, similar to what Kanagaratnam, who contested on a TULF ticket and later switched to the UNP, did in Pottuvil.

With respect to educational facilities, some figures are significant. In 1987 while the national literacy level was 87%, it was 67% in the plantations. In 1984 while the pupil: teacher ratio was 55:1 in the plantations it was 34:1 elsewhere. 22% of teachers in the plantations were volunteer teachers ( in general not fully trained and employed casually). While the drop out rate by grade 6 was 70% in the plantations, it is only 10% elsewhere.

As we have pointed out, the civil war which followed July 1983 placed the plantation workers in a stronger position. In 1985 a five year development plan for the plantation areas prepared by the ministry of education was approved by the cabinet. This set the scene for the involvement of international aid organisations in the education of plantation workers. All this was, where the government was concerned, an exercise to manage the plantation workers. But as the case of the German funded Sri Pada College of Education showed, with an administrative machinery steeped in Sinhalese chauvinism, even rationally conceived efforts at managing a crisis could go awry.

At present most young adults have had some schooling and thus literacy is improving. Beyond this the education has little to commend for itself. Many complain of a notable disparity in facilities available to Sinhalese and Tamil schools in the same area. Many students are now passing their O.L's with fails in one or more of Science, Mathematics and English. There is a severe shortage of teachers in these subjects that is not being met. One activist described the Tamil Schools in Kandy town as pavement schools. Typically, High School, Kandy, is the only government school in the area offering science in the Tamil stream at the A.L's for girls. It has no qualified teachers in some crucial subjects . The only good Tamil schools in the Nuwara Eliya District are Highlands, Hatton and St. Xavier's, Nuwara Eliya. The children have to rely on private tuition. The good students from the hill country who went into universities have largely graduated in the humanities.

This also brings out one aspect of the stunted Tamil nationalism that took root in the North. While it used the grievances of the Hill Country Tamils for propaganda, little was done to improve their lot. Young Jaffna Tamil graduates who went to work in the Hill-Country often regarded it a stepping stone. If the liberation struggle, instead of raising the cry of Eelam alone, had motivated young graduates to make it an urgent task to raise the educational level and self-esteem of Hill Country Tamils, the present position of the Tamils overall would have been very different. [\[Top\]](#)

### **3.2.3 The Sri Pada College of Education:**

An agreement for a joint venture was signed between the German Agency for Technical Co-operation (GTZ) and the Ministry of Education to start a college of education in the hill-country. According to a document issued by the Hatton Professionals Forum (HPF) on 8<sup>th</sup> April, 1991, the original agreement anticipated that those enrolled would be Tamils from the tea plantations. It was meant to overcome the educational disabilities of Hill Country Tamils stemming from a teacher shortage by taking in the best available and giving them pre-service training over a number of years. The result was the emergence of a beautiful well planned campus in Kotagala, near Hatton, with accommodation for 500 students, aimed at turning out 188 teachers every year.

True to what locals began to suspect, envious eyes from among the authorities were prepared to go far to prevent Hill Country Tamils from realising something so splendid. Suspicions appeared to be confirmed when the institution was named the Sri Pada College of Education. Sri Pada being the Buddhist traditional name for Adam's Peak - Sivanolipatham being the Hindu.

It became known that the authorities had cited national harmony as the reason for the government's being in favour of multi-ethnic institutions, and according to the HPF, changed the admission policy to 75% Hill-Country Tamils and 25% others. There were then other questions such as whether candidates with required A level requirements could be found to fill the hill country quota and who will be selected for the administrative staff. According to the HPF document,

**“ Upto the time of writing this letter, it seems to be that no Tamil typewriter is available at the college. It is said that only Sinhalese typewriters are available in a college catering for 75% Tamil students.”**

There were thus legitimate grounds from the above, and from past experience, to be suspicious of the government's long term intentions. The process is partly deliberate and partly the invisible and ingrained nature of the state's administrative machinery. The matter appears to be resolved for the present following representations made by the CWC and other organisations, by allowing for admitting underqualified Hill Country Tamils and coaching them up to the required admission level, so that the 75% quota will be filled by Hill Country Tamils.

The principle of multi-ethnicity is however not being applied to the Tamil Teachers' Training College sited in an out of the way, abandoned tea factory near Talwakelle. Also a number Hill Country Tamils who qualified for university admissions had to forgo a university education because they were posted to the University of Jaffna in the war torn North, while being refused transfers to universities in the South where they lived. [See Postscript 5.1]

### **3.2.4 Development Agencies and the Future of Education.**

Some of the main international agencies involved in improving education in the plantations are the GTZ (German Agency for Technical Co-operation) and the SIDA (Swedish International Development Assistance). The GTZ in addition to the College of Education has also involved itself in developing some schools. The SIDA has been much involved in the Plantation Sector Education Development Programme (PSEDP). Phase I which ended in 1990 concentrated on improving facilities for primary education in 251 of the total of 722 plantation schools (131 in the Hatton area, 70 in Kandy and 40 in Kalutara). Phase II which commences this year (1991) is expected to last 10 years (until 2001). It is anticipated that another 300 or so schools will be developed very soon. The thinking behind is that once a solid base for primary education is established, it will have a knock-on effect, creating a drive for further education.

There is at present a deficit of 2163 teachers in the plantation sector and 975 in the Hatton area alone. Sri Pada College of Education will in a few years time start producing about 150 teachers a year for the plantation sector. There are also plans to recruit 900 well qualified and experienced graduates from the North-East and South India, 300 at a time on 3 year contracts, to teach at collegiate level. [See G.Gnanamuttu(5), Angela Little(12), Paul Caspersz (2), S.Sandarasegara (14)].[\[Top\]](#)

### **3.3 Unemployment and Corruption:**

It has been part of the news for some time that the state giants the JEDB & SLSPC, which run the nationalised plantation sector have been making huge losses. In view of this jobs are being frozen and employment denied to hill country school leavers, introducing into the hills a pool of unemployed youth. To the bitterness resulting from unemployment is added the sting of stories of widespread corruption in high places. These are current among the responsible and educated, and the young, alike. They feel that when the British ran the estates, they were able to find competent people from among them to work under the superintendents, who were well trained and knew the business well. Now, they say, the management is stuffed with incompetents brought in under state patronage. Among the charges made by them is that now planters spend little time in their estates, spending more time in towns like Kandy where their Pajero jeeps can be seen outside Trinity College, at closing time. Others dealing in estate supplies alleged that the salary of a planter is mere pocket money and that many of them easily make several times their salaries on purchases and other expenses like vehicle maintenance. It is also alleged that a number of persons holding high management positions spend more time putting up guest houses in Kandy's residential suburbs like Aniwatte. One, it is said, used iron girders taken from a tea factory in Matale for that purpose, so that even if the estate crashes, his tourist business would thrive. Even if these stories are only partly true, the huge losses in a once profitable industry, and anger and the cynicism about the establishment, are very real. This is combined with a feeling of powerlessness. [The Financial Times(27-10-92) reported that the two state corporations together received subsidies estimated at US \$ 10 million a month]

According to persons familiar with the plantation industry, the crucial problem is the loss of the structure of accountability from the top which the British maintained to keep the profit high. Then the planter was held responsible for production in his sector. A fall in quality or volume was immediately looked into. On the other hand the worker was exploited, the estates were isolated and the security of workers from communal attacks was maintained. Thus seeds

were sown for permanent division between Sinhalese and Tamils in the area. Now in addition to the planter being often absent, nationalised estates have become open territory facilitating attacks on Tamil labour.

Exploitation still continues without accountability to the workforce. Instead of acting to counter the so called British divide and rule policy and involving the workers in the nation building process, we continue to blame the British and act as they would have wished. We have not created a politics to overcome the inertia of the colonial past, make the people become conscious beings of present reality, and thus build a new nation. The anti-colonial and anti-imperialist rhetoric was and still is superficial. It is being used merely to cover up the bankruptcy of ruling class politics. The working class movements which once spear-headed the struggle against colonial manipulation eventually capitulated, one way or other, to the ruling interests.[See second Preface, 5.3 & 5.5][[Top](#)]

### **3.4 Citizenship: Was repatriation compulsory or voluntary?**

#### **3.4.1 Early attempts at resolution:**

During the late 30s there were moves to retrench Indian workers particularly in the government sector following some virulent anti-Indian campaigns by the Right. The resulting insecurity experienced by resident Indians was discussed with Ceylonese leaders by Nehru during his visit in 1939. In 1940 exploratory talks were held informally between the governments of India and Ceylon on this issue. Some conclusions were reached after further talks in 1941. With regard to franchise it was agreed that those entitled to vote must either possess some literacy and property qualifications or must satisfy certain conditions of permanent domicile. The report was repudiated by India in 1943. The reason for this was apparently the vagueness surrounding the notion ‘**permanently settled**’. The Donoughmore commissioners in 1928 estimated the percentage of Indians permanently settled as 40-50, the Planters Association in 1936 as 70-80, the Jackson report in 1938 as 60 and the Soulbury report in the 40s as 80.

What **D.S.Senanayake** himself thought was indicated in a statement he made on 8<sup>th</sup> November 1945, that the franchise should be restricted to those deemed to be citizens of Ceylon and that the plantation workers would be excluded. In hindsight, thus, it appears remarkable that attention was not prominently drawn to the fact that the Soulbury constitution which came into force with independence in February 1948, had omitted to specify citizenship. We have mentioned the passage of 3 bills in 1948/49 which first excluded plantation workers by defining citizenship, then specified very tough conditions for the granting of citizenship, and finally restricted the franchise to citizens.

Nevertheless 237 000 applications covering 824 000 persons were made under the Citizenship Act. This means that nearly all plantation workers applied for citizenship. Devaraj observes: “**Applications were rejected on the most flimsy grounds. The rejections were so arbitrary that some felt that the entire exercise was a meaningless one. To crown it all there came to light an administrative circular in which deputy commissioners who were semi-judicial officers were asked to reject applications on the basis of a percentage**” (3).

It transpired that while **D.S.Senanayake** was intent on giving citizenship to only 50 000 persons, the proper implementation of the Act was entailing a far greater number. The problems created by the scale of rejections impelled Dudley Senanayake who succeeded D.S.

as prime minister in 1952 to take the matter up with Nehru at a Commonwealth meeting. While Dudley proposed a more liberal implementation of the Citizenship Act by granting citizenship to 400 000 persons, he also envisaged a compulsory repatriation to India of 300 000 persons. Nehru rightly disagreed with the last.

**Kotelawela** who succeeded **Dudley Senanayake** talked to Nehru and put forward in January 1954 a set of proposals essentially replacing compulsory repatriation by 'inducements which were to be offered to those not registered as Ceylon citizens to apply for Indian citizenship'. The matter remained unresolved.

**S.W.R.D.Bandaranaike** of the SLFP who became prime minister in 1956 took up the position that the government would go on registering persons under the Citizenship Act, and upon completion, take up the matter afresh with India.

Nothing further happened on the matter until the **Sirimavo- Shastri Pact** of 1964, **Sirimavo** succeeding her husband S.W.R.D.Bandaranaike and Shastri, Nehru.

The number of stateless was estimated at 975 000 in 1964. This pact dealt with 825 000 persons who were to be granted Indian and Ceylon citizenship in the ratio 7:4. Thus 525 000 were to receive Indian citizenship and 300 000 Ceylonese over 15 years. Also importantly, those applying for Indian citizenship would do so voluntarily. The CWC leader **Thondaman** was an appointed MP in **Mrs.Srimavo Bandaranaike's** government. The fate of the balance 150 000 was left undecided.

That the CWC was not essentially in disagreement can be discerned from the fact the **Mr.Annamalai**, one of the CWC appointed members voted with several members of the Federal Party for the implementation act moved by Dudley Senanayake's UNP government of 1965-70 .It appears likely that this would have weighed with the Indian government in signing the pact in the first place. Mr.Thondaman, the other appointed CWC member, was apparently not in the house when votes were taken on 4<sup>th</sup> June 1987. His name does not appear on the list [Hansard].

The one concession made by the UNP was in the interpretation-by not insisting that 7 granted Indian citizenship be physically removed to India before granting Ceylon citizenship to 4 others. In 1974 an agreement between **Mrs. Bandaranayake** and **Indira Gandhi** decided that the 150 000 whose fate was left undecided in 1964, with their natural increase, should be split equally between the two countries.

The following tables give many aspects of the story of recent Indian migrants to Ceylon since 1911 when for the first time the group Indian Tamils was so classified. The figures in brackets indicate percentages with respect to the total population. The population figures are in

thousands:

Year	1911	1921	1931
Ceylon	528	517	599
Tamils	(12.8)	(11.5)	(11.3)
Indian	531	602	819

Tamils	(12.9)	(13.4)	(15.42)		
Year	1946	1953	1963	1971	1981
Ceylon	734	885	1165	1424	1886
Tamils	(11.0)	(10.9)	(11.0)	(11.2)	(12.7)
Indian	781	974	1123	1477	819
Tamils	(11.7)	(12.0)	(10.6)	(11.6)	(5.5)

See 5.2

### 3.4.2 Was repatriation voluntary or involuntary?

In this whole question of repatriation the Government of India since 1940 has correctly adhered to one constant principle. That is that repatriation should be voluntary and that the individual concerned should be free to choose the country of his or her own choice. Thus if the **Srimavo-Shastri Pact** and its extension in 1974 envisaged 600 000 being given Indian citizenship and proportionately 375 000 Ceylon citizenship, it also meant that if the 600 000 could not be attained voluntarily, that would become a new problem requiring fresh talks. When the Sri Lankan government in 1986 found that only 506 000 (with natural increase) had actually applied for Indian citizenship with the pact having expired, given the new contingencies and its own weak position, it decided to accept the balance 94 000. Had it called for fresh talks with India the result would probably have been the same.

We examine here whether those repatriated to India actually went voluntarily. We have already pointed out that following the Citizenship Act of 1948, nearly all Tamils of recent Indian origin applied for Ceylon citizenship (i.e 237 000 applications covering 824 000 persons). Though there was a campaign urging persons to apply, it is understandable that the bulk of them having been born here, or having been here for a long time, wished to remain here.

Again **Mrs. Bandaranaike** informed parliament in December 1972 that under the **Sirimavo-Shastri Pact**, about 240 000 applications covering 625 000 persons were received for Ceylon citizenship. This meant that the number voluntarily applying for Indian citizenship would have been far below what was envisaged. Even this followed upon adverse developments for Tamils starting in 1956.

In retrospect it might appear that the **Srimavo - Shastri Pact** was a dangerous document. It is very credible that much of the free lancing violence and disabilities to which Hill Country Tamils were subjected during the SLFP led government of 1970- 77 and often associated with SLFP figures, and the bouts of violence during UNP rule from 1977 - 83, again associated with prominent party figures, apart from communal ire, also had 'voluntary' repatriation in mind. The team of students from Jaffna University who inquired into the violence against Hill Country Tamils in Delta North Estate in May 1977 came out with some of the possible motivating causes for the attack. One, interestingly, according to some locals was that the MP for that area wanted to secure his electoral advantage by chasing out Hill Country Tamils. (He lost his seat in July 1977).

With the starvation of the 70s during which many families sold their last brassware and good clothes for food, and the violence of 1977 where 10 000 hill country families lost everything [

**Paul Casperz(1)**], left Hill Country Tamils thinking in terms of sheer survival rather than of a home. Lacking organisational coherence, many withdrew applications for Sri Lankan citizenship and went with their withdrawal forms to apply for Indian citizenship. This is how the 'voluntary' figure of 506 000 was made up. The 15 year pact was to have expired in October 1979. After giving it a two year extension up to October 1981, the Indian government held that it was no longer operative.

On 30<sup>th</sup> January 1986, '**The Grant of Citizenship to Stateless Persons Bill**' was debated in parliament in which the government proposed granting Sri Lankan citizenship to the shortfall of 94 000 persons who had not applied for Indian citizenship when the pact expired in 1981. Prime Minister **Premadasa** told parliament that 421 207 of the 506 000 who had applied for Indian citizenship had been granted it (together with their natural increase of 170 582). Of them 337 066 (plus natural increase of 123 835) had been repatriated to India. This meant that 84 141 (plus natural increase) of those granted Indian citizenship were remaining in Sri Lanka. Of the 240 688 (plus natural increase) entitled to Sri Lankan citizenship under the agreement, only 197 535 had received it. Repatriation together with the **Talaimannar-Rameswaram** ferry had stopped in August 1984.

Later in 1986 the parliament accepted that the balance 94 000 (the difference between the 600 000 whom it was envisaged would apply for Indian citizenship and the 506 000 who had actually done so) will be granted Sri Lankan citizenship. Since the registration process was still very slow, another bill was passed in November 1988 to try to expedite the process. This was just before the parliamentary and presidential elections.

Another aspect of repatriation is that those opting for Indian citizenship had little idea of what to expect in India. Sri Lanka was dumping them, while the Indians were fulfilling an unnecessarily acquired obligation. Stories that came back were not encouraging. A small minority was relocated in estates where they continued their former lives. Of the rest, some received plots of land in dry waterless places which they abandoned. Others received a total of about Rs 5000/- (minus commissions) to become self employed. Having had no experience in ventures, they spent the money on food and became penniless. Most of them are now paupers in towns. When the news started coming back, those who had applied for Indian citizenship started changing their minds. A research worker who visited repatriates in India, described them as '**destitutes and prostitutes**'.

The harrowing violence of July 1983 created in the Hill -Country Tamils a mood different from their response to previous bouts of violence. Going as refugees to the North-East had become unpropitious. Those who had gone to India had simply been cheated by both governments. The new mood increasingly impelled them to remain where they were and fight it out. Many who had fled to the North-East in the 70s had either been brought back involuntarily by the state or were coming back on their own.

During the brief interval of 'peace' in early 1990, the government raised the issue of repatriating over 100 000 Upcountry Tamils holding Indian passports. The matter was stalled again as the fresh outbreak of war caused the Tamil refugee population in India to rise to over 200 000. In the meantime activists have raised with the Indian embassy the involuntary nature of these repatriations and have called upon the Indian government to halt the exercise altogether. These Indian passport holders are being urged to return their passports to the Indian embassy by post. At first the embassy started sending their passports back. Later, this was stopped. [\[Top\]](#)

### 3.4.3 Discrepancies:

According to official statistics the Indian Tamil population was 1 477 000 in 1971 (11.6 % of population) and 819,000 (5.5% of total population) in 1981. According to the statistical abstract of 1985, the loss by migration from 1971-81 was 462,000. **Prime Minister Premadasa** informed the parliament in January 1986 that, 460 901 had been repatriated [Hansard]. However one

interprets these figures, there is a discrepancy of 200,000 or considerably more, or 100 000 or more if one excludes Indian passport holders.

Out of the Hill Country Tamil population of about 1150 000 in 1964, approximately 337 000 (plus natural increase) had been repatriated to India (Premadasa's statement in parliament). This would have left behind 813 000 remaining in this country. If this number is adjusted to a modest natural increase of 20% per 10 years (less than 2% per annum), the population of Indian Tamils in 1981 should have been about 1 113 000 as against the census figure of 819 000. This gives a shortfall of about 300 000 (or 185 000 excluding Indian passport holders).

A researcher said that he had grave doubts about statistics, figures and electoral lists maintained by the government concerning Up Country Tamils. He added, “ **I have come across many instances where Tamils who had received polling cards at one election did not receive them at the next. In Westhall Estate, near Nawalapitiya, for instance I found 76 workers who had been earlier voters and had not received polling cards. I cannot see how this can happen accidentally. But there is no institution with the means to pursue this systematically**”.

Paul Casperz speculates other reasons for this discrepancy: “ Family planning through a subtle mixture of financial incentive, persuasion and coercion, and through the provision of woefully inadequate housing”. [See Casperz (1) ]. He refers to the fact that barrack style line rooms with 180 square feet of space has sometimes to be shared by 3 generations. Another possible reason referred to by Fr.Casperz is that many Hill Country Tamils may have changed their ethnic nomenclature either by choice or marriage.[See 5.4]

[ See C.C.Devaraj(3), Kumari Jayawardna (8), University of Jaffna SSU(6), Paul Casperz(1)].[\[Top\]](#)

## CHAPTER 4

### Concluding Remarks

For the Hill Country Tamils it has been a tortuous journey of 150 years from their original homes in **Tanjore, Trichy, Arcot, Madurai, Pudukkottai and Ramnad Districts**. In the early days they were marched through disease ridden jungles where large numbers did not survive the journey. The changeover from coffee to tea in the 1860s called for a settled rather than a seasonal labour force, and hence led to communities living on estates. To make regimentation in the interests of production and profit acceptable, their traditional social and caste mechanisms were built upon. Under this system kanganyes who were from a higher stratum of the same society and shared their culture, were not just labour recruiters, but were settled alongside them and undertook far-reaching responsibilities for their welfare, from being money lenders to arbiters of disputes, to maintaining ties with home and they also got

involved in a variety of activities from the social and religious, to the provision of amusements. The planter (mostly European until recently) was often responsible for about 2000 persons. His relationship with the workforce is described by Forrest(4) as one of **'gruff paternalism deepening often into respect and even affection on both sides'.** **The affection involved in such relationships, while often having some admirable sides to it, takes an immovable social gulf for granted, and thus in general debases humanity and is not liberating for either party.**

Further, and very significantly, the workforce needed to be kept socially and physically isolated from the Sinhalese living alongside their estates. This separation began in colonial times and largely sustained by post independence politics, prevented the hill country workers and Kandyan Sinhalese from feeling part of the same community and nation. This made it easy for the elite to disenfranchise them without any significant protest from ordinary people.

The Hill Country Tamils today carry with them the burden of this legacy, although developments, both intentional and unintentional, are slowly breaking this down. There is thus an increasing tension between militancy and submissiveness. For a long time to come, besides hill country workers and their leaders, NGOs and foreign aid agencies too will also be imprisoned in the mould of this legacy. **A crucial factor here is the absence of a leadership coming from the workers, that can mobilise them and represent wishes coming from a free articulation of a consciousness of dignity. Communication is thus seriously handicapped. Those who work on projects among them can therefore easily lapse into paternalism and a smug sense of self-satisfaction, while the workers themselves appear submissive in front of their benefactors while retaining their criticism and scepticism for private talk.** Even where support has been coming from international organisations such as the ILO (International Labour Organization) and IFPAAW(International Federation of Plantation Agricultural and Allied Workers), the conception of workers education has been narrow. Support also came from Japanese and Scandanivian trade unions to help the CWC establish an ICFTU training centre at Kotagalala. The Scandinavian unions withdrew afetr the government, in which the CWC was partner, used harsh measures to break the 1980 general strike. The CWC's workers education programme has been mainly concerned with union technicalities. Many concerned observers have stressed the need for educational activities and programmes to develop political awareness and a capacity for disciplined action.

**An important role of education is to give them knowledge as a source of power in shaping their scope of social and political awareness. This is the challenge that the unions will have to face. The Sri-Lankan polity in general will have to be sensitive to this need for political freedom, as being in the long term interests of the country as a whole. In the meantime the diversity of unions and of bodies of opinion will have an important role to play as pressure groups or even agents of transformation of the present dispensation into a more humane and equitable one (3,10,12).**

The Hill-Country Tamils have been among the most oppressed of peoples in Sri Lanka. To exploit them and deny them the most basic rights had been connived at by ruling interests well before independence. Their abject legal position is unparalleled in the former British colonies which imported Indian labour. But the government's present security and economic troubles have impelled it to try and manage them with some concessions.

A key factor that made the minorities in Ceylon, particularly the Hill-Country Tamils, vulnerable and subject to violence is the communal politics of the Sinhalese elite which allied

itself to Western capital. This vulnerability was greatly exacerbated by the servile communal politics of most minority leaders, which through a lack of principle robbed the minorities of dignity. This was a politics of contracting and distributing patronage.

This was evident at several crucial moments in the country's history. MPs from the Ceylon Tamil and Muslim communities voted for the bills of 1948/49 which disenfranchised another minority, the Up Country Tamil Labour. The government was supported in its controversial referendum of 1982 by most minority political groups either actively or passively. Then the LTTE, militant successor to the Tamil parliamentary party, the TULF, for its survival contracted a most undemocratic and unprincipled arrangement with the UNP government in 1989/90. The resulting image of the minorities has been most unhelpful to them and has helped to entrench the politics of hate and division. [\[Top\]](#)

## CHAPTER 5

### A POSTSCRIPT

#### 5.0 Introduction

The work for the main part of the report was completed some months ago. In this postscript we shall allow the Hill Country Tamils to speak for themselves. Much of it is based on the feature 'Kurinchi Paralkal'. This weekly feature from the Sunday Virakesari brings out several facets of the spirit of Hill Country Tamils. There is innocence, a love for the land to which they are bound by ties of sweat and blood and artistic aspirations that are struggling for a place under the sun-many of whose blossoms have sprung through a crust of oppression. There is much anger against the state, which may express fine intentions, but in its actual working is seen to descend to the pettiest levels to ensure that the Hill Country Tamils remain deprived.

When land belonging to state-owned estates is taken over for ventures such as a textile centre or a housing scheme, the Hill Country Tamils are invariably thrown into resentful suspicion. It has been their experience that in spite of high unemployment among their youth and a dire need for decent housing, they are almost totally exempt from the benefits of these ventures. They see more and more Sinhalese colonies being planted in their midst to marginalise their voting strength.

Even in areas where the Tamils form a majority, or are a substantial part of the population, they are mostly served by Sinhalese officials often down to village headman (grama sevaka) level. Quite often, even to receive the most elementary benefits, the Tamils have to go through unscrupulous agents incurring huge costs, disappointments and heart burns. Tamil schools face systematic neglect. Tamil teachers are often unable to transact official business in Tamil. For inter-school sporting events the Tamil schools are not informed in time. An educational event in the Tamil majority district of Nuwara-Eliya was conducted exclusively in Sinhalese, without a single Tamil speaker. Tamils who are entitled to register themselves as voters face enormous obstacles. Later developments concerning the Sri Pada College of Education that was a gift from Germany to train much needed Hill-Country teachers, has left a bitter taste.

There is little doubt in the minds of these Tamils that what surfaced as a crude manifestation of chauvinist intentions in July 1983 is being continued in a subtler form. It would be hardly

surprising that as the Tamil population is decimated by deprivation and the planting of Sinhalese villages in their midst, they are under increasing pressure to register themselves as Sinhalese. This has been the actual experience of some refugees from the war and violence of the last decade.(See 4.5.3).

Whether such a policy will work is another question. This experience makes them more conscious of their identity with a strong drift of sentiment towards India and even towards their erstwhile British masters.

The graceless manner in which the detention of the UPF leaders is being handled and the continued detention without trial of several tens of Hill Country youth is hardening convictions. The governments's attempts to manage these Tamils is showing dangerous cracks.

Had there been a healthy politics at national level with a policy of land utilisation that was seen to be non-communal and addressed the fears of minorities, the Hill Country Tamils would have welcomed it. It would have given them a dignified alternative livelihood to that provided by the estate regime. The fact that Hill Country Tamils have been pushed into fighting for the paltry benefits the estate regime gave them, and feel every alternative use of estate land as a body blow to their community, is a grim measure of their desperation.

Ecological issues are also addressed, such as the greater propensity for landslides resulting from the neglect of estates and drainage, and the diminishing of essential forests because of estate managements wanting to sequester the firewood allocation.

There is also much self-criticism with regard to health and education and a good deal of skepticism about their own leaders and those who attain to positions from their midst. The latter are often seen to become distant from their people, serving rather the interests of their oppressors. Several of their disabilities are attributed to rivalries among their trade unions.

The poems and writings that have come from their midst have become established in the world of Tamil letters. These show a vibrant people, at times confused, angry or sad, but well into the process of sundering their chains.

What comes out most charmingly is gratitude, in its simplest and most unpretentious forms. The praise of Mr.Anthonipillai, the founder of Holy Rosary Tamil High School, Bogawantalawa, may be strange reading for those who attended so called 'big schools'. It has its own rural charm and the heart-warming quality of some of the Dickensian benefactors.

Given below are excerpts from articles and where appropriate, explanatory remarks.[\[Top\]](#)

## **5.1. EDUCATION**

### **The importance of Sri Pada College of Education for Hill Country Tamils - S.Chandrabose - 23 August 1992:**

Sri Lanka has nine colleges of education to which candidates with A'Level passes are admitted and given three years of training to become teachers. Of these six function in Sinhalese except the one at Pastunrata which functions in English, the one at Attalaichchenai

which instructs Muslim candidates in Tamil and Sri Pada College. The last campus now provides instruction in Tamil and Sinhalese.

It is sited opposite the beautiful Devon falls, 5 miles along the Hatton - Talawakelle road. It is a complete modern campus built by the German agency GTZ at an expense of US\$ 7 million, to meet the specific educational backwardness of the Indian community.

Following the completion of works, the campus was handed over to the ministry of education on 5<sup>th</sup> February 1991. Although the staff received their appointments, owing to the lethargy and majority-communalism of the authorities, instruction did not commence for a whole year. The role and function of the college had hitherto been taken for granted. In spite of this there were needless disputes on a range of matters from the naming of the college, the admission of students, to the appointment of ancillary staff.

The college was created to provide instruction in Tamil for hill-country students. But the majority communalism of ministry officials would not allow it. Despite there being six Sinhalese medium colleges, it was decided to allocate 25% of the places in Sri Pada to Sinhalese students. Finally 225 candidates were selected according to a ministry directive that 50% should be Hill-Country Tamils, 25% Sinhalese and 25% Ceylon Tamils and Muslims. Those selected were, Hill Country Tamils:105, Sinhalese:61, Muslims:31, Ceylon Tamils:28 (Tamil:161, Sinhalese:61).

Those with O'Levels had also applied on the understanding that they could be selected and given an extra year's training. But none was selected. Nor were any Tamil candidate who passed A'Level Commerce on the grounds that he had not done Tamil as a subject.

A Tamil lady is now the principal. The deputy principal (administration) is Sinhalese. Deputy principal (academic), the registrar and librarian have not been appointed. Of the 26 teaching staff (lecturers & assistant lecturers) so far appointed, 14 are Tamil and 12 are Sinhalese. Overall, of 99 employees, 38 are Tamil, 60 Sinhalese and 1 a Muslim. Such is the fate of an institution built to serve the urgently needed advancement of Hill-Country Tamils.

### **The plight of students in the Nuwara-Eliya District - Mani -2<sup>nd</sup> August 1992.**

Outside the North-East, it is Nuwara-Eliya that has a Tamil majority. Within this district the Hatton educational region has derived notable benefits, thanks to agencies such as the GTZ. Let us examine the plight of the Nuwara-Eliya-Walapone region which has a total of 129 Tamil schools - twice the number in Hatton. A breakdown according to grades would be 1 AB:3, 1C:3, 2:15, 3:108, i.e. there is not a single grade 1A (Central High) school. The grade 1AB Tamil schools are St.Xavier's, Nuwara Eliya, Good Shepherd Convent, Nuwara Eliya and the Talawakelle Tamil High School. The second consists of a Tamil stream in a Sinhalese school, and the last, functioning since 1979 in a dilapidated tea factory and totally unsuited for teaching or learning. Further, for the 32,314 Tamil students we need 41 science laboratories and a further 623 teachers(including 23 graduates). For the 129 schools we are in need of 122 teachers to teach English from the beginning and 266 teachers at primary level. One could imagine the plight of these students.

The region has only one Tamil deputy director. A Tamil director who was transferred has not been replaced. The entire regional office has not a single proper Tamil type-writer. Circulars are largely issued in Sinhalese. Salary details are dealt with by persons who do not know

Tamil. For this reason Tamil teachers are often unable to secure their allowances and raises. Because of political changes in donor countries, agencies such as the SIDA have also slowed down their work.[\[Top\]](#)

**Could we too be a cause of our backwardness?**

**Sri Shanmuganathan - 30 August 1992:**

In earlier times many of our teachers used to come from places such as Jaffna, Batticaloa and Trincomalee. Though strangers to the hill country they found rented accommodation, ate, if needed, in boutiques, and dutifully performed their teaching tasks. They went home mostly during vacations. No quarters were then provided. But they did their duty, going to work punctually.

It is now a matter of pride that those from our community are becoming teachers. But the speech and the ways of some of them cause much grief. Some cite transport difficulties and report for work late. Whether able teachers or not, some are experts in leave regulations. On receiving a posting some go on leave until a transfer is secured.

Perhaps it is only fair to ask how we are to work in schools without provision for quarters. But it becomes a joke when quarters are rejected on the grounds of not having a supply electricity.

It is far from adequate to blame teachers from elsewhere of disrespect for us and of simply whiling away their time. If so why can we not rectify such deficiencies when the opportunity is with us?

**Examinations and extra-curricular activities Sri Shanmuganathan:**

At one time there was a compulsory regulation that all sporting and cultural events must be completed in the first (spring) term. But now distracting events and functions at local, regional and national level are held throughout the year. Consequently a whole series of payments are demanded from students who can ill-afford them.

But when it comes to public examinations many students are filtered out and prevented from appearing for them. The purpose of this is to give the school a high performance rating. Is it then fair to keep 'backward' students in school simply to get their money and contribution for other events? Can they not be given timely career advice? Are not the schools duty bound to see that students exercise the facility of sitting for examinations and coach them to do just that?[\[Top\]](#)

## **5.2. CITIZENSHIP AND VOTING RIGHTS**

**Why another inquiry? - V.D.R. - 11 October 1992:**

The citizenship question of plantation Tamils was brought to an end in 1988. Accordingly it was decided by parliament that all those who had not applied for Indian citizenship would now be deemed Sri Lankan citizens.

Those who had a need to prove their Sri Lankan citizenship were only required to produce an affidavit. If a citizenship certificate was needed, they were required to apply to the office registering persons of Indian origin, and the office was obliged by law to supply this within 60 days.

But on 30<sup>th</sup> September, this office conducted a session in Hatton to hear appeals from those wanting Sri Lankan citizenship. About a hundred families were in attendance. Some were granted citizenship after inquiry. Many others were sent away empty-handed on the grounds of insufficient documentary evidence.

This raises the question of whether this office is reopening wounds that have been closed by law. Why have an inquiry when the office has all the documents of relevance-in particular those pertaining to applications for Indian citizenship. All it needs to do is to call for Sri Lankan citizenship applications and issue certificates after checking its records.

### **One foot in the river and the other in the mud K. Sivapatham - 12 July 1992.**

In recent times the question of citizenship certificates has mysteriously raised its head among the hills. This only further confirms the government's step-motherly approach to the problem. Every Hill Country Tamil seeking registration as a voter is being called upon to produce certification of citizenship. This is in every sense unjust. On the one hand village headmen (grama sevakas) and associated state officials are refusing to register persons without citizenship certificate on voters lists. On the other, trade unions and political leaderships maintain that such certificates need not be produced. But no further energy is being spent on breaking the deadlock. The people are being left out in the cold.

These trade unions whose establishment was supported and welcomed by the people have ceased to be accountable to them. Moreover they are disunited and narrowly opportunistic in seeking solutions to fundamental issues confronting the people. [\[Top\]](#)

### **5.3. ALIENATION, LAND, UNEMPLOYMENT**

#### **The story of a people - S.Ramiah -**

**27 Sept.& 4 Oct. 1992:**

Our spring holy festival used to be a moving occasion. Brightly lit processions with floats from the estates at Wewessa, Mapagala, Selvakanda and Akkaratenne used to move towards the bazaar. Young men and women used to dance and sing on the festive night. The richness of our culture was on display. When the five cars bearing the deities met, that very moment my heart would melt. The violence of July 1983 ended all that. This used to be our land. But it is all being changed.

The changes along the Haputale - Colombo road bring sad thoughts to mind. Many of the flourishing tea and rubber estates that used to straddle the road between Haputale and Ratnapura have vanished. Balangoda was covered with tea. Now it has colonies within estates, and plots of tea inside colonies. I have no quarrel with these other people getting land, except that we have yet to live in proverbial line rooms measured in eight and ten feet.

One can hardly recognise the site of Opanayake railway station. The white men used to have a three feet gauge railway from here to Avisavella to bring in the tea and rubber. Now many small dwellings have obscured the road of steel. From Opanayake to Hantane, one needs to pass villages. We are the ones who cleared and planted the whole area upto Sinharaja forest. But today those from the majority community have been allocated permanent dwellings in this area through housing projects, while we are confined to the four walls of line rooms. I could go on ....Nivitigala, Ratnapura, Eheliyagod.... Kegalle, Kandy, Galaha ... Gammaduwa, Laggala .... Many estates like Midland, Nikaloya and Bambaragala in the Gammaduwa region from which the white men used to derive huge profits, are so run down that they can hardly be leased to private companies.

We were once in a position to elect a parliamentary representative from Matale. Now colonies have been planted in such a manner that we could hardly elect a local councillor.

### **Struggles of the Workers and Communalism - Thadi Valavan (Beard Grower)- 30 August 1992:**

The process of attrition by which estate lands are taken over still continues. Land is taken over for a variety of purposes, both legally and illegally, with the backing of powerful interests. The purposes for which land is taken over by the state include town development, village expansion, amalgamation of villages and so on.

Recently there was a distribution of land belonging to Rothschild Estate, Pusselawa. When this was opposed by the workers, some majority communalists tried to intimidate the workers by stirring up communal antipathy.

When some prime agricultural land in Hatton Estate was taken over for a textile factory, this was opposed by the workers. This being unheeded, the workers went on strike.

Lord Siva-Letchumana, do not visit again these desolate hills upon which thy blood was shed. If further, the land too is taken away, what would be our plight? We are told that we will be given employment in textile factories that are being built. All such assurances have so far been empty.

Hundreds on this estate are making applications for housing, and are being driven to exhaustion spending their money going by turns to the police, proctors, lawyers and the courts.

Chairs are being warmed, but neither duty nor purpose is warm. If there is no unity in the union, how can there be unity in the councils? Their energies are being frittered away in propaganda wars against each other. It is strike at the drop of a pin. Our ear drums are fatigued. Our leaders have become justices of peace and have been elected to local and provincial councils. Perhaps, their rubber stamps would in some way help us![\[Top\]](#)

### **Neglect of educated Hill Country Youth**

#### **Bathulayoor Bharathy - 27 September 1992:**

Two or three textile factories have been installed so far in the Uva province and employment has been offered to about a thousand youth. Although these factories are sited inside estates,

estate youth, particularly Tamils, have sadly been kept out of employment. Provincial councillors voted in with our support lamely cite the technical excuse of our youth not being enrolled on the 'Janasaviya' scheme for unemployed as the reason for keeping them out. Representatives from our own community have found themselves helpless in this matter.

Applications to work were recently called for the three factories to be installed in Badulla. Two trade unions printed application forms and distributed them. Young men and women came to their offices from distant places and stood in queues to collect forms. These were to be certified first by the local head man, then by the AGA (Assistant Government Agent) and finally returned to the respective union.

In the case of a young lady, following certification by the head man, the AGA refused his signature. The lady then approached a union with her problem. A responsible official of the union refused to help her on the grounds that she had collected her application form another union.

By making their own people victims of their rivalries, the unions are losing the peoples' trust. They must unite their voices to fight injustice done to workers. It should not become as though we buried our own rights. Instead of using technicalities to refuse employment to our children, the government must, like in other spheres, adopt communal quotas based on population ratios. [\[Top\]](#)

#### **How foreign aid becomes a mirage - R.Selvarajah - 8<sup>th</sup> November 92:**

Out of sympathy for the utter deprivations faced by plantation workers for over a century, foreign aid agencies have come forward to improve their conditions. **This aid is being spirited away before the eyes of the workers in masterly legal fashion by estate administrations, with no protest from any trade union.**

When elections are nigh, workers and union activists become extremely dear to the politicians. They are tirelessly praised as being the backbone of the national economy. We have bitter memories of what comes after.

**Tens of millions have been donated by agencies such as SIDA, MDIB, NORAD and UNICEF to improve basic amenities to do with health and hygiene. Whether even 25% of this reaches the plantation workers is a big question.**

Sinhalese from villages neighbouring the plantations do come there to labour. **Giving the pretext that they too lack basic amenities, 75% of the aid is taken to the Sinhalese villages.** Recipients of these benefits, it is said, include all manner of persons who do not work on the plantations. This fraud is committed by politicians in a bid to capture Sinhalese votes, in conspiracy with estate administrations. This happens in diverse places as Kelani Valley, Deraniyagala and Dehiowita.

Although large sums have been donated for toilets and clean water, the workers mostly continue to perform their ablutions in an undignified manner among tea bushes and in jungle recesses. Will unions which regularly collect dues from workers raise the matter? [\[Top\]](#)

#### **5.4. RETURNEES IN INDIA & INDIAN PASSPORT HOLDERS**

### **Reprinted from Viduthalai - 6 September 1992:**

200 families of returnees under the Sirimavo Shastri Pact were, under the prevailing rehabilitation scheme, given employment at the Andhra Textile Co-operative factory at Kundakkal. The factory closed temporarily on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1987. Representatives from 178 of these families met the Commissioner for Rehabilitation in Madras. He took the position that had the factory closure been permanent, these families could receive relief in Tamil Nadu. In the event the closure was temporary and thus it was the state government of Andhra that was responsible for relief, he said. Shortly after they applied to NTR, Chief Minister of Andhra, for relief, the factory reopened in March 1988 and 3 months later these families were laid off on grounds of loss of production due to running down of machinery.

The 178 families asked the Minister for Textiles to give them employment on the consideration that they were refugees living below the poverty line. They were told that the central government had been asked by the Andhra government to provide them employment in Tamil Nadu. Later they were told that the request had been granted and the Kundakkal revenue officer gave them signed authorisation to proceed to Tamil Nadu.

On 14.9.91 Mr. Bhujangrao, development officer for Tamil Nadu, Madam Leelabedi, officer for handicrafts in Andhra and Madam Vanajaj, rehabilitation commissioner for Andhra conferred long in Hyderabad. As a result it was decided to employ the 178 families in Tamil Nadu. When nothing further happened, the families petitioned Andhra home affairs minister Mysoor Reddy, and so it went.

The 178 families still languish in the factory quarters. Since the factory closed permanently in August 1991, they are without electricity and water. They have to walk long distances to get water. Not knowing Telugu they cannot find alternative employment outside.

There have been cases of returnees once employed in textile factories and a tire factory in Andhra, who have in the event of closure, been provided with alternative employment in factories and tea plantations in Tamil Nadu. But these 178 families have suffered total neglect, not even receiving the minimum of a permanent habitation and home, which they were entitled to, as part of rehabilitation of returnees. [\[Top\]](#)

### **Tales of Indian Passport Holders - S.D. Vasanthakumar - 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1992**

The Srimavo-Shastri Pact of 1964 was a terrible blow aimed at Tamils in Ceylon of Indian origin. Families were sundered, and howls of grief resounded everywhere in the hills - in the line rooms and in every railway station as the forms of loved ones receded into the mists. This pact between the governments of India and Sri Lanka which divided a community as though sharing out cattle at an auction, was universally regarded as inhuman. Whether this tragedy will be repeated is a question which now arises. The likes and dislikes of the people were never consulted by those who took decisions on their behalf. The same approach is now being taken in the matter of Indian passport holders in this country.

### **Three Tragedies**

**Muniandy(40), Baduragala Estate :**

My father applied for Indian passports following the anti-Tamil violence of 1977. Of the seven in my family, five including my parents went to India. My younger brother & I married and live here. The fact that we received Indian passports was not the result of our decision. The letters we have been receiving from our family are to the effect that conditions in India were unfavourable. My family spent several months in Mandapam camp and went to Andhra amidst many difficulties.

Our visas to remain in Sri Lanka expired while the boat service was still working. Using this excuse the estate administration deprived us of work. I have been employed temporarily since 1991. I have neither money in hand nor a home in India. If the authority of the law is used to force me to go to India, I must go like a beast to the slaughter.

#### **Gopal (45), An estate in Horana:**

My father took an Indian passport. He asked us to follow him to India saying there was land and a house.

We too took our passports under the S-S pact. When we took all our benefits and were preparing to go, the 1983 violence broke out and the ferry service to India was stopped. Since then I have worked temporarily for several years. My father is now old and his movements are physically limited. How are we to take him there? In his present state he could hardly attend to our property matters. Going there is now meaningless...

#### **Munusamy (58), Matugama :**

I took an Indian passport because of pressure from my parents. I have been on the estate with my wife and children and continue to work there. As soon as I received my Indian passport I claimed my benefits. During the violence of July 1983 we were in a refugee camp in Kalutara. All our goods at home were looted. Without our father our property matters in India cannot be resolved. We do not wish to go to India... [\[Top\]](#)

### **5.5. ENVIRONMENT AND NEGLECT OF PLANTATIONS**

#### **The Wattawala Landslide - Periannan - 12 July 1992:**

Recently a goods train travelling 3000 feet above sea level on the Uva line toppled over into a ditch. This was on a hill-slope where there used to be tea bushes above and below the tracks. This condition did not begin today or yesterday. There was a massive landslide in 1947. Since then landslides have been a regular feature with loss of life and property. The main cause for this is large quantities of rain water flowing down over the surface, forming rivulets, loosening boulders and creating unstable conditions in the water logged soil.

All but two settlements of plantation workers in Upper - Wattawala have vanished without a trace. The tea grows wild and the land is in a state of neglect. As a result the risk of landslides in the Wattawala region has increased several fold. Apart from further derailments, the people most at risk are Hill Country Tamils. Even at this late hour, urgent priority must be given to civil engineering works that will direct the water along safe channels. Moreover those communities at risk must be relocated.

## **The Situation following the privatisation of the management of state owned estates - R.Selvarajah - 11 October 1992:**

When Englishmen ran our estates, in order to make a profit on a sustained basis, they also looked into environmental aspects. For every 100 acres, 10 acres was reserved for forestry, cattle fodder and cultivation. Thus there were some safeguards for the environment, and the plantation folk were able to meet part of their food requirements.

Now in the Nawalapitiya area the estate managements have ceased buying firewood that was required on the estates, apparently to make sizeable savings. Instead forests cultivated by former English planters are being cut down for firewood. Is this a move to maximise short term profits and turn the region into a desert?

Some unwanted changes are being imposed on the workers which have led to strike action. Practices which were developed through more than 100 years of experience are being suddenly changed. A rubber tapper once responsible for 250 trees is now being asked to tap 275. The workers have rejected this and continue as before. They are in turn being subject to punitive pay cuts.

There is also another aspect to the changes. Planters used to have perks under recent state management, such as using official vehicles and petrol on estate account to go to provincial towns over week-ends and live it up. These perks have been stopped by privatised managements, causing some resentment. This has led to widespread allegations of sabotage at the workers' expense.[\[Top\]](#)

## **The sinking land of Oxford Estate and the plight of the workers - M.Nesamani - 1 November 1992:**

On 15<sup>th</sup> July 1992, Wattedoda experienced an unprecedented 3.6 inches of rain. This resulted in a landslide affecting 15 acres of land in Oxford Estate. The following day cracks could be observed in about 85 buildings, including workers' dwellings. The bank above the dwellings was tilted with its edge coming down about 20 feet, leaving a crack a foot wide and half a mile long. Rocks and trees on the bank had sunk about 8 feet into the ground. Several loose rocks had rolled down, just missing the dwellings. On 7<sup>th</sup> October 1992 there was 4.2 inches of rain causing further tilting of cracked banks. A team of geologists from the University of Peradeniya declared the entire 15 acres unsafe and recommended that all 360 residents, including 193 children, should be relocated.

The signs that such disasters could take place had long been there. There used to be two water tanks 300 feet above the dwellings. The larger artificial one on the other side of the hill was built by the estate management and water piped from it was used to generate electricity for the tea factory. In 1942 a planter Mr. Flamont, while swimming in the tank, was drowned after being sucked into the pipe. The tank was later abandoned when it was thought that it was causing landslides and the factory was closed. Today the two tanks are dry and it is believed that their water sources have become subterranean streams.

Again in 1949 following rains, the hill above the Hindu temple at Oxford bearing 100 acres of tea folded in three distinct parts and a long crack appeared. Not only was the demand to shift the then existing single line of dwellings go unheeded, but more dwellings have been built over the years.

During 1974 there was massive landslide in Devon Estate, opposite Oxford estate across Kotmale River. A whole line dwelling was buried and 27 workers died needlessly. There have been many signs over the years, such as the sinking of known landmarks, to suggest that the land was sinking in stages because of subterranean streams.

**The Response of the Management:** Oxford Estate is presently managed by Hayleys, a long standing British Firm. Of the 360 residents, 36 families in two lines were considered affected parties by the management. They was asked to move to Deniyaya with the offer that each family to move will receive US\$120 (Rs.5000) and that work will be provided for those 18 years and above. The workers who had lived there for generations were reluctant to leave the district.

The management then advised that 20 families could move to Hill No.10 and 16 to Hollyrood where they could construct temporary dwellings using materials from their former lines, with the management paying Rs.5000 per family in five equal monthly instalments. This too left the workers dissatisfied.

The workers see the management's approach as a devious means of tackling a problem where there is danger to all 360 living in the affected area. They feel that the management should relocate and house them in a safe place. They feel that public money from the President's Housing Fund is meant for just such a purpose. The rumour has been around that the management opines the workforce to be in excess of the work available. The management's approach to the disaster smacks of using it to divide the workers in a bid to reduce their numbers. [\[Top\]](#)

## **5.6. DETAINEES FROM THE PLANTATIONS**

### **Detained without trial for more than two years V.D.Rajah - 4 October 1992:**

During the latter part of 1990 and during the early months of the following year a large number of hill country youth were detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). The pretext was that terrorists from the Eastern Province had infiltrated into Uva and were sheltering in estates. Except for those released after questioning, the rest were taken to Colombo for further inquiries. Justice Jayalath gave an assurance in January 1991 that inquiries will be quickly concluded and those deemed innocent will be released. A number of representations were made at high level and similar assurances were given.

Subsequently the matter was taken up with Defence Secretary, General Cyril Ranatunge by State Minister M.S.Sellasamy. The minister was informed that 10 had been released, inquiries for a further 21 had been concluded and had been referred to the attorney general and that police inquiries into a further 10 are continuing.

It is known that over 40 youths have been detained for more than 2 years without being charged in a court of law. Calls for their release have been made by a number of workers' organisations. Not only are these youth being alienated, but families of those detained have lost their bread winners.

**Note:** The nature of these detentions and the numbers bear a close resemblance to the North-Eastern situation in the mid-70s. Although the government may yet, at this point, hesitate to

bring to the Hill Country Tamils the more depraved methods of 'law enforcement' in the sensational manner witnessed in the rest of the country, the signs are alarming.

Disenchanted Sinhalese youth could repose some hope for change on the opposition and await the next elections. The middle class Tamils and many from Jaffna could hope to go abroad as has happened. It is the Eastern peasantry and rural Tamil youth who were not offered an alternative that have formed from the beginning the backbone of the Tamil insurgency. The tone of the foregoing excerpts is one of utter hopelessness in the hill country with no alternative in sight. Their experience of the state and the Sinhalese polity has been one of unmitigated oppression and deceit, with little light even in the cracks. They see their own leaders as shortsightedly opportunistic and insincere. A combination of an oppressive state using a leadership receiving its patronage to manage them, tends to thrust even potentially good leaders into mafia type operators. The result is an explosive mixture. Who is going to channel this reservoir of resentment and how, will crucially determine the future of these people and that of the country in general.

It is this that makes the state's persecution of the UPF and its leader Chandrasekaran both fatuous and shortsighted. After nearly a year of being detained without charges and subject to torture, a fundamental rights petition led to the supreme court declaring on 4<sup>th</sup> May 1992 that the arrest and detention of the three UPF leaders was illegal, and ordered their release if indictments were not served by 18<sup>th</sup> May. This by itself conveyed the strong impression that there was either no case against them or that the case was extremely weak. A fresh indictment was served against them in the Kandy High Court on 18<sup>th</sup> May under the PTA to facilitate their continued detention. This bungling, discreditable and graceless treatment of a political leadership is being seen by ordinary hill country folk and even those who knew little about them, not just for what it is, but possibly worse. Moreover, having crippled their organisation, they are required to come up with astronomical legal fees that are accessible to locals only through crime or commerce. This is one aspect of the PTA and emergency regulations that over the years has enabled persons to be detained for 4 years and more on the basis of trivial charges unsustainable in a court of law. The legal process has been given over to increasing contempt as fattening the purses of a few straddling the legal profession and the security services, while bringing ruin to common people and their families. Chandrasekaran being a leader with a mass following, and not just an individual, the whole system is being put on trial.

In making an appeal for US\$ 13,000 to cover the UPF leaders' legal expenses, the Tamil Information Centre in London has quoted well placed hill country sources as attributing their detention to 'trade union rivalry'. This euphemism, very much on the tongues of hill country folk as our extracts show, hides much darker rumours gaining currency in the hills. The CWC, the government's main plank for managing the hill country, is being seriously damaged. Its position in this matter is inevitably being seen as unprincipled, insincere or both. It becomes ever more urgent that the government must lay off and encourage genuine democratic activity in the hills. Further, the grievances voiced by whatever leadership that emerges should be heeded.[\[Top\]](#)

## **5.7. CULTURE & LETTERS**

**Breathing new life into the cultural quest of hill country artistes - V.Vinotha - 12 July 1992:**

The communal violence of July 1983, it is said, sounded the death knell for the cultural advancement of Hill Country Tamils. So grievous was the blow that some have used this context to raise questions as to whether the Hill Country Tamils have a culture that is in any way distinct or vibrant. As if in reply to this skepticism, cultural and artistic events have sprung up all over the hills.

In Uva the Ven Pura (White Dove) Theatre in Badulla has opened a new chapter in the cultural quest of Hill Country Tamils. From this theatre eleven cultural events have been carried into the estates. The last event was at the Akkaratenne Estate in Passara. As an outcome of this, you will be surprised to learn, a centre has been established in Akkaratenne. This has been named 'Ratnasamy Institute' after the owner of 'Morden Cinema' in Badulla. It was here that the troupe from White Dove Theatre performed to an audience of 2000. An innovation here was that artistes from among the plantation workers joined the regulars. While it is said that artistic skills of Hill Country Tamils should be developed, no concrete measures have been taken. Jaffna and Batticaloa have established institutions for the fine arts.

The manager of the White Dove said at the recent festival that they were not in a position to purchase even a musical instrument. We are in need of an institution to further our arts. All the money currently spent on bringing Indian artistes to grace our functions ought to be channelled into the advancement of our own talent.

### **Short Story Gems - from a review by G.Senathirajah - 11 October 1992:**

“Among short stories authored by Ceylonese writers, those from the hill-country possess a refreshing radiance”, observed the late Professor K.Kailasapathy. The truth of this saying is amply evidenced in the recently released second volume of 'Kathai Kannikal' (Short Story Gems). The first volume appeared in 1971. The second with 11 stories was selected and compiled by Mathalai Karthikesu.

The raw material for these stories consists of the hill country folk, their lives, disabilities and their struggles. These deal with the consequences of lacking basic rights, alienation, hunger, absence of social stability and the internal drama of human relations. M.Sivalingam, Paripooranan, C.Pannirselvan, A.Solomonraj and Maathalai Vadivelan are involved observers of the saga of Hill Country Tamils. Therefore their creations have a marked immediacy and realism. Underlying these stories are the qualities of inner discipline, a knack for story telling, love of humanity, and a strong social commitment.[\[Top\]](#)

## **5.8. LIFE, HEALTH, GRATITUDE**

### **Health & Hygiene - Kurinchi Parathy - 10 May 1992:**

There is an established structure under a regional co-ordinator to maintain health and hygienic conditions on estates. In the structure are sweepers and lavatory cleaners at the bottom and then health supervisors and estate medical officers. But an unpropitious mix of stereotyping by authorities and donors, together with a lack of civic sense among the workers has conspired to yield very poor conditions on estates. On the one hand is neglect resulting from a feeling that such conditions are normal for these people. Some estates do not have lavatories or have ones in a state of disrepair, now almost hidden amongst wild sunflower bushes that have taken over from civilisation. Donors who come forward to build new lavatories, instead of going for modern ones, often build ones of a more primitive design than

what prevailed. On the other is the lack of civic sense in the community that helps stereotyping. There is little collective attempt to make the best of what exists and make a case for things better. If tanks to collect drinking water are built, either rubbish starts collecting in the tanks or the fittings get stolen.

Some estates have health advisers. Often, sadly, their main concern seems to be to earn commissions on taking people for sterilisation. But because of poor post-sterilisation care, many have fallen ill and sterilisation rates have fallen sharply because of fear.

Quite often when the sick go to estate medical officers, they are told that medicine is not available. But monthly orders for medicines are sent to city stores and these orders are converted into cash. The workers then go to the same cities and pay for private care, which brings immediate relief.

The sure means to rectify this situation lies with the trade unions. Instead of talking down to the people in the company of others who help to entrench stereotyped notions about workers, the unions must provide leadership at community level. Once the workers possess a higher self-esteem and a disciplined desire to improve their lot, then the existing system will work to their benefit.[\[Top\]](#)

### **May - Day Slogans - V.D.R - 10 May 1992:**

May Day was observed in the hills with great festivity. The tradition of May Day observance marks a new chapter in the annals of working peoples that must be viewed with pride. It was born of sacrifice. Its slogans, far from being empty, have a historical significance. They inspire us to face the future by reminding ourselves of the past. Let us examine some of the slogans we heard on May Day and the lessons they have for us.

Minister S.Thondaman addressing, the CWC's May Day rally in Kotagala called for an end to the 'little divisions' among the people. This, he said would smoothen the path to the peoples' victory. He laid stress on unity.

In truth, as is well known, there are no divisions among the people. Our leaders also regularly put forward the slogan 'Workers of the World Unite!'. Until we put the question, 'Leaders of the Workers When Will You Unite?', our dawn will remain a day dream.

The DWC leader V.P. Ganeshan also put forward a May Day request: 'The leaders must think about one union for the plantations? Indeed, the workers too must think through this in depth. If the workers begin to think, they will arrive at the truth. Then the dawn will not be long awaited.'[\[Top\]](#)

### **Life in the Lines - An occasional feature by Thangam:**

This series features individual experiences, often of an exemplary nature. They are stories of individuals and their community.

Thomas took a keen interest in music through the beneficence of those few good souls who shared their precious wireless sets with others in the lines by playing them aloud from the entrances to their rooms. Being unemployed on the estate, he found work with a firewood contractor. Even good trees were felled in the process of obtaining firewood. Once when a

'Chenpaka' tree was felled, Thomas pleaded with the contractor for a 3 feet long circular section. The contractor who was impressed by Thomas' honesty granted his request. Thomas regularly gave his day's wages to his mother and asked her for a small sum for himself. Over a period of devoted craftsmanship during his spare time, the wood took the shape of a 'dolak' drum. In time Thomas became a skilled carnatic musician. Plain Thomas became Dolak Master Thomas, around whom the children flocked. He heads a musical group much looked forward to at local functions around Sheppelton Estate.

Adaikkan ran away from home in Chinnagolla Estate at an early age and apprenticed himself to a Sinhalese wood craftsman. Much later, after he had been given up for lost, adaikkan returned home. Subsequently he received from the craftsman a parting gift of a box of tools. Over the coming years Adaikkan shared his knowledge of Sinhalese and his skills with his new found friends, and with their help perfected his faltering Tamil and also learnt from them the basics of English and Arithmetic. He further advanced his learning through postal education. In time a shop sign in English, Tamil and Sinhalese went up amongst the lines. Within five years Adaikkan's fame spread through the region. His handiwork adorned the lines and beyond. Adaikkan with his family went to the 'motherland' about 20 years ago. He now has a workshop in Tamil Nadu employing a hundred or so workmen.[\[Top\]](#)

### **Principal Anthonipillai - Parathy - 7 June 1992:**

Despite educational conditions having vastly improved from those prevailing 40 to 50 years ago, not so with dedication to duty. The selfless labour of a young man in the 1940s led to a Tamil school being established for estate children around Bogawantalawa. He is Anthonipillai, who came to be venerated as 'Father'(Iyah) by estate folk. There was then no school for Tamil children of the area. At school-time in the mornings Anthonipillai would walk among the line rooms ringing his hand-bell. Some children would assemble. Some were brought by the parents themselves and surrendered to his care. Others would try to hide. Anthonipillai first tried appealing to the latter. That failing, the cane he bore in his other hand would do its job. If the provocation was excessive, his foot too would land on the appropriate soft spot. No parent took offence, and the pain was accepted as being for the child's good. The classes were conducted in the premises of Holy Rosary Church-Anthonipillai's wife 'Savariamamma Teacher' as she was fondly known, was one of the helpers.

When mission schools were taken over in 1960, there were then no school buildings. Classes were conducted in the evenings in the premises of St.Mary's Sinhalese School, a mile away. Yet the students achieved all-round excellence, including in sports.

On occasions when Anthonipillai encountered pupils on the streets, he would affectionately greet them as 'son' (Rasa). When bereavement visited a family, he would go uninvited, fall on his knees and lift up his voice in prayer. Thousands who passed through his hands, wherever in the world they may be, are grateful for the precious opportunity he gave them. Anthonipillai is now in his seventies. At a recent felicitation, attended by a grateful people, he said with reverence, "I did nothing in the expectation of future praise. It was all God's doing".[\[Top\]](#)

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