

Changing Identities of the Plantation Community in Ceylon:Challenging the legacies  
of slavery, nationalist politics, Class and Ethnic Discrimination

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**Abstract**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century plantations in Ceylon initially relied on migrant labour from the Tamil Districts South India to meet the needs of production. The spread of plantations and the increased demand for more and perennial workforce led to a more settled Indian community in the Island. This paper analyses how the legacies of slavery and the struggles against class, ethnic and political discrimination shaped the identities of this community in Ceylon. Using the concepts of political articulation, appellation and framing, it analyses how the Ceylon planters, with the support of the colonial state, recruited migrant workers from the Tamil districts of the Madras Presidency in South India from the 1830s, and incorporated them into a form of production that retained the labour controls and the ‘enclave’ nature of the slave plantation, and complemented these through debt bondage and new forms of legal coercion to ‘enslave’ workers. The spread of plantations in Ceylon led to a permanent and settled population of Tamil workers by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The paper shows how trade unionism and franchise rights from the 1930s resulted in the awareness of their identities as part of the working class and as stakeholders in local politics, while links with the Indian national movement also reinforced their identity as part of the Indian Diaspora. The post-Independence government enacted laws in 1948 and 1949 that rendered the vast majority of the population stateless and without franchise. Four decades of struggles and negotiations, as well as strategic intervention in the prevailing civil war were necessary to gain significant labour and full citizenship rights for all members of the community. In the process, they also challenged the prevailing discourse and frames of identification, and claimed their identity as a separate, distinct and regionally-based ethnic minority in the country.

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The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century plantations of Ceylon were established after the abolition of slavery employing ‘free’ migrant workers from the Tamil districts of the Madras Presidency in South India. This paper demonstrates that planters, with the support of the colonial retained legacies of slavery, most visibly manifested in the enclave nature of production and the harsh treatment of workers. These forms of restraints were complemented by debt bondage as well new forms of legal coercion in line with maintaining a cheap and controllable labour force. The expansion of plantation production in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century increased demand for workers and, as a consequence, larger numbers migrated with their families to Ceylon, becoming a relatively settled community in the hill-country region by the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This paper analyses the changing and multiple identities assumed by the plantation community as they experienced structural disadvantages in plantation production, experienced social, economic and political discrimination and struggled for their labour, franchise and democratic rights in Ceylon. It argues that these processes transformed an Indian migrant group of workers into a distinct ethnic minority with full citizenship rights in the country, while remaining a part of the Indian Diaspora.

The paper is developed along the following lines. Section 1 develops a conceptual framework that discusses the ‘complex’ identities of individuals and groups, and how political parties and their leadership, as well as social mobilisation influence identity formation. Section 2 discusses the legacies of slavery and how these shaped and framed the identities of the plantation workers and their families in Ceylon. Section 3 focuses on the contestations around the labour and political rights of the workers under colonialism and the role of the different groups, including the trade unions, the government, the Sinhalese majority, the Left groups and the Indian government in the shaping the perceptions and identities of the plantation community. Section 4 deals with the problems of disfranchisement and statelessness that was imposed on the plantation

community by the post-Independence government. Section 5 reflects on the role of the plantation community in negotiating their interests in the context of ethnic tensions and civil war. Section 6 shows how the workers and their families mobilised and claimed their rights and how these processes also gave rise to new identities and claims.

### **1. Complex Identities**

In the novel “In the name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong” Amin Maalouf has emphasised the danger of assuming that people have one “deep down inside” identity but that individuals usually embrace a mixture of components reflecting a ‘complex’ identity’ (2000,2) characterised by different allegiances, conflicting loyalties, and often “difficult choices” (2000,4). Social affiliations, such as those based on race, class, gender or ethnicity can also form the basis of identification. While these are often considered social divisions, they have assumed political significance, particularly in the context of contestations about power and distribution of resources, giving rise to new and complex identities of communities.

The classic writings of Gramsci have elaborated on how groups in political power, constituting a ‘historical bloc’, promote ideological consensus in civil society to maintain hegemonic power (Gramsci 1971). Advancing Gramsci’s concept, Stephen Gill argues that the new historical bloc is “the outcome of ‘conscious, planned struggle’ on the part of its leaders in politics and civil society (61), using “persuasive ideas, arguments and initiatives that build on, catalyse and develop its political networks and organization “(2002,61). De Leon, Desai and Tuğal have shown that, in the context of competition, political parties also sometimes construct social divisions by creating perceived grievances against specific groups, discounting in this process the divisions that internally exist, viewing it as a form of *political articulation*, defined as “the process through which party practices naturalize class, ethnic, and racial formations as a basis of social division by integrating disparate interests and identities into coherent socio political blocs” (2009,200). They develop Louis Althusser’s notion of ‘interpellation’, which they view as “a process of imaginary identification with a cause ... which gives coherence and unity to the multifaceted and potentially contradictory or politically meaningless life histories and experiences of individuals” (DeLeon et al., 2009, 198). They link interpellation to the need of the leadership of political parties need generate ideas that hold together the different groups that it comprises, constructing (or reconstructing) certain issues as “grievances”. Yilmaz has used this framework to suggest that this “new hegemony” creates antagonism between

‘us’ and ‘them’, which she identifies as the ‘new historic bloc’ (Yilmaz, 2015, 39). Along the same line, Gale suggests that the leadership of populist parties often used the ‘us and them’ identification to promote the politics of fear through portraying migrants (in the more contemporary setting ‘refugees’), as aliens which could destroy the national identity but essentially concerned with enhancing their own economic and political status (Gale 2004).

In addition, it is relevant to recognise that new identities have emerged through individuals and marginalised groups socially organising to challenge mainstream ideologies and discourses. The social movement literature has highlighted the importance of frames and framing processes to understand the dynamics of such movements and how they could shape, among other aspects the construction of collective identities (Benford and Snow 2000, 626). Reviewing the literature Benford and Snow suggest that collective identities could be established by indicating common characteristics with possible forms of relationships and actions, as well as by simply participating in identity discussions with the other participants (2000, 632). They note that while framing processes were “ not the only mechanism that accounts for the correspondence between personal and collective identities, of course, but it can be argued both theoretically and empirically that it is one of several mechanisms that facilitates this alignment and thus the enlargement of personal identity in movement contexts (2000, 626).

These concepts inform the analysis of how structural relationships and identities of the plantation community have been influenced by outsiders through process of political articulation and appellation. It also shows how the community responded through trade union and political mobilisation as well as by strategic interventions and alliances to counter their social, economic and political discrimination, claim their citizenship and franchise rights, as establish their identity a specific minority ethnic group in the country.

## **2. Legacies of Slavery**

The development of coffee, and subsequently tea and rubber plantations of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries Ceylon was dependent on obtaining an adequate supply of labour of relatively cheap ‘free’ labour, as slavery was formally abolished in the British colonies. Local Sinhalese labour was unavailable for the regular work on the plantations leading

planters to recruit workers from the Tamil districts of the Madras Presidency in South India, where large numbers of mainly 'low-caste' workers faced both destitution and unemployment. These workers were hired through what came to be known as the *kangany* system of recruitment. Planters gave advances to them via local labour contractors, or *kanganies*, who accompanied the recruits to the plantations, oversaw their work, and were also involved in managing their work, financial affairs and living arrangements (Jayawardena and Kurian 2015, 32). The spread of tea plantations and the associated demand for more and perennial labour resulted in the recruitment of more workers from South India, but involvement of wives and children in the migration (Kurian 1982, 18), the numbers of estate rising from 84, 4000 in 1867 to 772,600 in 1935 (Kurian 1989, 351-353).

These workers were incorporated in a form of production that retained many aspects of the 'classic' slave plantation. The plantation had a clear geographical boundary and the planters preserved its 'enclave' nature by discouraging interactions of workers with the villagers, while using guards to prevent 'bolting' of workers. Other legacies of slavery included the absolute authority of the planter, the use of harsh management methods and punishments to control workers, and the incorporation of race and colour in the labour regime and living arrangements (Jayawardena and Kurian 2015, 35-39). These workers were kept in perpetual debt, the latter stemming from the provision of advances that could not be redeemed due to infrequent payments and low wages. The *kangany* was a key figure in enforcing these different controls on workers. As the medium for the payment of advances, the workers were, in effect, in debt to him, and he also lent them more money, thereby increasing his power over them. He was the *de facto* leader of the workers, negotiating with the management on their behalf, but also being paid by as a supervisor on the fields. The pattern of group migration also promoted the retention of caste prejudices and control that were institutionalised in the labour regime and living arrangements on the plantations, while women workers were subject to 'multiple patriarchies' prevalent in the nature of plantations, as well as in caste, religion and local societies (Kurian and Jayawardena, 2016). These divisions also played a role in hindering the development of trade unionism on the plantations, which did not begin till 1931. Like their slave counterparts, these workers also used songs, cultural events and drama to highlight their deprivations (Shanmugalingam, June 2010).

The enforced isolation of these workers and their families, even while they increased as a settled population in the Island, meant that their identities were associated with their role as plantation workers in Ceylon. Within the framework of interpellation and framing, they were identified as a ‘migrant’ Tamil-speaking group, but distinct in terms of caste and class from the Tamils who resided in the North and East of Ceylon. The imposed identity was one of ‘foreign’ labour from India doing low-status work that the local population was unwilling to undertake.

### **3. Contestations on Rights under Colonialism**

While the education facilities on the 19<sup>th</sup> century plantations were either absent or abysmal, the pressures placed by Ordinance No.8 of 1907 and the Education Ordinance of 1920 led to the growth of a sizeable group of literate workers who challenged the controls and malpractices of the *kangany* and the employers. These educated workers also helped in keeping the community in touch with local and Indian politics through Tamil and Indian newspapers. Education helped establish the first union, the All-Ceylon Estate Labour Federation in 1931, under the leadership of the Indian journalist, K. Natesa Aiyar. His union spearheaded the campaign against the role of the Head *kanganies* and the planters. Natesa Aiyar also had close links to A.E. Goonesinha the labour leader of the urban workers. He was appointed as Legislative member in 1924, where he highlighted the dismal living and working conditions of the workers indicating that there had been little change since the 1870s (Legislative Council, 24 Feb 1927). Education and labour mobilisation significant the plantation workers’ identity as a significant part of the labour movement in the country, capable of collective bargaining organising for their labour rights.

The Indian and trade union links were strengthened in the discussion with the Ceylon government on the level of wages on plantations. In 1922, the Government of India brought up the proposal that plantation workers should be provided a Minimum Wage. An investigation of cost of living of estate workers by the Indian Agent in Ceylon concluded that based on a family expenditure budget 40% of the Indian workers seemed to be unable to earn a living wage and said “... ill health, inefficiency and low

wages form a vicious circle.”<sup>1</sup>The insistence by India, including the threat of banning migration, led to the enactment of the Minimum Wage Ordinance in 1927 in spite of considerable controversy and anger on the part of some of the planters (Jayawardena and Kurian, 2015, 108). When planters wanted to reduce the minimum wage in light of the World Depression in 1931, was opposed by the trade unions and the representatives of Indian interests in government. The Indian Agent in Ceylon (K.P.S. Menon) and Jawaharlal Nehru (who was at that time on a visit to Ceylon) viewed the lowering of wages as “monstrous” (Ceylon Daily News, 14 July 1931, cited in Jayawardena 1972, 351). The protests by the workers and the Indian government were a clear concern for both the planters and the Ceylon government who viewed them as a threat to their economic and political interests.

It was the issue of franchise rights that saw the rise of ethnic chauvinism and Anti-Indian rhetoric in politics. The Sinhalese political leaders were most vocal in their opposition to granting voting rights to the plantation community. They used a range of reasons, including lack illiteracy, ethnic differences and xenophobic language to reflecting practices of interpellation - to create antagonism between the plantation community and the rest of Ceylon society. One member stated that the “Indian Labourer” did little than work and remain in his “coolie lines” he had no knowledge of local politics and was thus “not fit or competent to give a vote on matters political. (V.de S. Wickramanayake, Hansard, 2 Nov. 1928). Others voiced the fear of Sinhalese becoming a ‘political minority’ particularly in the Kandyan region the heartland of the plantations, while it was also suggested that granting franchise to the plantation community would result in Sinhalese being dominated by India as its bigger neighbour. According to D.S. Senanayake, who later became the Prime Minister:

The Sinhalese are... an unfortunate community... the Sinhalese have been misunderstood and even their generosity forgotten... I do not think there is any other community like the Sinhalese who have consented to penalize themselves in order to give privileges to others... the Indians... have a big country. *We have*

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<sup>1</sup> *Report of the Agent of the Government of India 1926*, p.10 cited in Jayawardena 1972:348.

*only this small bit of land for ourselves... we want this country for ourselves.*

(Hansard, 8 Nov. 1928; emphasis added)

This form of political articulation on the part of the Sinhalese leadership reflected a process of interpellation where the Indian labour was identified as the source of grievance and economic problems, grievance, subsuming in this process, the class differences that existed between the political leadership and the workers.

In spite of these protests, the British colonial government, following the recommendations of the Donoughmore Commission of 1927, granted universal suffrage to given to all persons over 21 years of age who were of a) Ceylon domicile of origin or choice (domicile of choice to be dependent on five years' residence) which allowed a substantial proportion of the plantation community to vote in the subsequent elections. The general elections in 1931 saw the election of the two Indians, Peri Sunderam (Hatton) and S.P. Vytilingam (Talawakelle) from the plantation region. Peri Sunderam also became the Minister of Labour, Industry and Commerce in the new State Council. This success was repeated in the 1936 elections when S.P. Vytilingam (Talawakelle) and K. Natesa Aiyar (Hatton) – both plantation centres were elected. These factors were significant in their growing identity as full citizens in Ceylon.

By the end of the 1930s in the wake of the World Depression and the widespread unemployment, Ceylon government, influenced by Sinhalese leaders who insisted that the unemployment was due to free migration of Indians, decided that all daily-paid workers hired after 1st April, 1934 were to be retrenched and repatriated (Peebles 2001:202). In 1939 the State Council attempted to put into effect its policy on 'non-Ceylonese' daily-paid workers in government departments. The Indian government regarded the repatriation of urban workers of Indian origin as a direct form of discrimination against all Indian workers in the island with different Indian associations in Ceylon, and yet another method of restricting the rights of Indians. In July 1939 the All-India Congress Committee passed a resolution condemning the employment policy of the Ceylon government and sent Jawaharlal Nehru to Ceylon to explore ways of avoiding a conflict on this issue. An important follow-up of the Nehru visit was the amalgamation of 16 Colombo associations of Indians and the subsequent inauguration of the Ceylon Indian Congress (CIC), and its labour wing, the Ceylon



Indian Congress Labour Union. In August 1939 a ban was placed by India on the emigration of unskilled labour from India to Ceylon.

These antagonisms also served to strengthen and radicalise the trade union movement on the plantations through the formation of the All-Ceylon Estate Workers' Union in October 1939, which was linked to the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), the first Left party in Sri Lanka that was formed in 1935. It has been argued that while this was the smallest union, it introduced militant trade unionism into the plantations, reflecting the ideology of its leaders "who regarded the planters as the embodiment of both imperialist and capitalist interests in Ceylon" (Jayawardena and Kurian 2015,130). And while the colonial government was prepared to support trade unionism, the period from 1939 to 1940 witnessed a series of militant strikes that demanded a series of labour rights, including the right to association, grievances against *kanganies*, under the leadership of the three main unions, Natesa Aiyar's Ceylon Labour Federation The Ceylon Indian Congress the LSSP union, the Ceylon Estate Workers' Union.

The active participation of the plantation workers in these labour struggles reinforced their identity as the largest organised working-class and organised group in the country. Their activities included publishing and distributing pamphlets and tracts, making clandestine visits to the plantations in violation of the criminal trespass laws, holding meetings in places near the plantations (Jayawardena and Kurian 2015:157). Workers were also "urged to take action in defence of their rights, to join unions, and to strike to secure their demands... The spirit of unrest was, however, so pervasive that demands were put forward and strikes launched even without trade-union leadership; the absence of such leadership did not deter the workers from combining and seeking the redress of their grievances "(Jayawardena and Kurian 2015:157). And while the Colonial Office intervened and established industrial relations in the 1940, there were again major upsurges of industrial unrest after the end of the World War between 1946 and 1947.

The CIC Labour Union increasingly gained popularity and took up the case of basic rights of all Indians in Ceylon. In the elections of 1947 (under the new constitution, the plantation workers were extremely influential as also the Left Parties. The Ceylon Indian Congress, with its trade-union wing exercised a considerable influence in the

plantation areas winning 7 out of the 8 seats they contested. Furthermore, where they did not field their own candidates, the plantation workers supported left-wing candidates, thus having a sizeable influence in 13 or 14 constituencies. All these factors and processes promoted multiple identities – as workers, trade unionists, Indian Diaspora and citizens of the Ceylon.

#### **4. Disfranchisement and Statelessness**

As noted earlier, the labour and political gains of the plantation community were viewed with concern by the Sinhalese bourgeoisie, particularly in the Kandyan region where the plantations were concentrated. The Tamil bourgeoisie from the North, who considered themselves to be of a higher caste and status from those belonging to the plantation community, were also worried about the threat posed by of a large working class group. The continued propaganda of some extremist Sinhalese used the propaganda that the plantation community could result in an Indian ‘take-over’ of the country. All the groups combined their electoral strength in the new-elected government after the country gained its independence in 1948 and passed the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948, the Indian and Pakistan Residents (Citizenship) Act of 1949 and the Parliamentary Elections Amendment Act of 1949.

The 1948 Acts allowed eligibility for Ceylon citizenship only if members of the plantation community were able to prove that two out of their three immediate ancestors in the paternal line were born in the country, a serious problem as registration of their births had not started until 1895. This requirement was not necessary for the Sinhalese. The scholar and historian, Shelton Kodikara, concluded that the Act was “not intended to provide for citizenship for the vast majority of Indians in Ceylon” (Kodikara 1965, 109). An editorial in the Bulletin of the Coordinating Secretariat for Plantation Areas, commenting on this issue at a later date, noted that the “estate worker and other 19th century Tamil immigrants alone were asked to prove that they were citizens. Not being able to produce proof, they were declared to be non-citizens, stateless”(Voice of the Voiceless, March 1986, 4). The Ceylon Indian Congress criticised the Acts pointing out that the provisions were “humiliating, discriminatory and anti-social”. (quoted in Kodikara 1965, 111). The third Act, the Parliamentary Elections Amendment Act No.

48 of 1949, restricted the franchise to those who were citizens of the country. As the well-known historian K.M. de Silva has observed:

Thus the new citizenship legislation not only served to assuage the fears and suspicions of the Sinhalese in general and the Kandyans in particular, but also to demolish a potentially powerful prop of the left-wing groups. The immediate effect of this was to distort the electoral balance even more markedly than before, and to make the Sinhalese rural voter the arbiter of the country's politics. (de Silva 1981, 493)

The provisions of these Acts effectively rendered the vast majority of the plantation community 'stateless' and 'disfranchised', and removed the electoral influence of the plantation community which were unable to elect a single representative in the 1952 elections. The fate of the community was negotiated between the governments of India and Ceylon, leading to what was referred to as the Sirimavo-Shastri Pact of 1964 and the Sirimavo- Gandhi Pact of 1974, reflecting the Prime Ministers that participated in the negotiations. The actual granting of citizenship, and repatriation of workers, however, was much slower than had been anticipated, and the implementation was slow and fraught with delays and administrative difficulties (Kodikara 1978, 71; Congress News January 1976, 1).

## **5. Ethnic Tensions**

The post- Independence period witnessed increased ethnic tensions between the majority Sinhalese community and the Tamils in the North and East of the country as the latter protested against what they viewed were discriminatory actions taken by the prop-Sinhalese governments. These conflicts climaxed into civil war in the 1970s, catalysed by the new republican constitution in 1972. The latter did not take on board the demands of the representatives of the Tamils of the North and the East for greater federalism, the halt to state-aided colonization and citizenship for Indian Tamils. While the name of the country was changed from Ceylon to Sri Lanka, the special status accorded to Buddhism in the Constitution and the official recognition of Sinhalese as sole national language were major concerns for all the Tamil communities in the country. They came together in 1976 to form the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF)

in 1976, and passed a resolution, which, among other elements, called for the establishment of a separate state, “Eelam,” for the Tamils.

The plantation workers and their families, while still being largely politically excluded, were also economically and politically affected by the discriminatory clauses in the 1972 constitution, and the delays in the provision of citizenship. Furthermore, the government nationalised the plantations in two stages in 1972 and 1975. These measures were stated to be a socialist form of reform, Unfortunately, they also resulted in workers not being paid for the work done, denial of benefits, the closing of schools and dispensaries leading to “unmitigated tyranny where workers were made victims” (Congress News, September 1976:3). In October 1973, the government reduced rice rations and restricted the flour ration to one pound a week resulted in death and starvation on the estates. The policy of estate land alienation led to land and work on the estates being increasingly given to Sinhalese from the surrounding areas as part of official policy of increasing employment at the cost of the resident Tamil population, as the latter were often expelled and replaced by the Sinhalese workers (Kanapathipillai 2005, 174), resulting in many families experiencing “poverty, destitution and untimely death” (Congress News 1st December 1976,1).

The change of government in 1977 was viewed as a relief to the plantation community, particularly as the new United National Party (UNP) led-government, headed by J.R. Jayawardena had promised in its election manifesto to create a *Dharmishta Samajaya* (righteous society) and address the needs of the Tamil people. The President of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) S. Thondaman, was also invited in 1978 to join the cabinet.<sup>2</sup> He accepted this position viewing it as a means of “securing the rights of the Tamil community of recent Indian origin which still suffered many disabilities” (Thondaman 1987: 168). The government also made changes to the Constitution accepting Sinhalese and Tamil as national languages and all religions were guaranteed “freedom of thought, conscience and its religion speech and expression” (Article 9)

But ironically, the plantation community, who had little to do with the wider ethnic tensions between the Sinhalese and the Tamils of the North and East, also became targets of anti-Tamil violence in 1977, in 1981 and in 1983. The Sansoni

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<sup>2</sup> *Ceylon Workers Congress Report of Activities 1971-81*, Colombo, 1982, p.29.

Commission Report provided important evidence of the displacement experienced by the workers in 1977, including the shooting arson and physical violence on several estates in “a wave of communal terrorism” in 1977(1980, 269). The CWC condemned these actions, while accusing the state of dereliction of duty” also decrying Indian Government which had “acted the role of a passive spectator “ when the workers on estates were attacked in May 1977 and accused them of taking action only after “mass demonstrations” had been undertaken in Tamil-Nadu (CWC 1977, 2-3). In 1981, the plantation workers were again subject to communal violence at a time when their leader S. Thondaman was Minister of Rural Industrial Development. Again this violence was condemned by the CWC and other trade unions. The CWC on 29 August 1981 expressed shock at “the fresh wave of violence” which had opened their barely healed wounds of August 1977, but were now opened “more painfully and with increased venom, terror and horror”. As a result of these attacks, plantation workers had been “forced to flee their line rooms,” and been made “targets of hoodlums and thugs” who had had a “field day, looting, murdering, maiming and raping these defenceless people.” It observed that the attack on the plantation workers seemed to have “followed a pattern,” and that as before, “the machinery established to provide safety and security to members of the public” remained “passive and mute while rowdies went on the rampage and ruled the roost against members of one community” (CWC 1981). In July and August 1983 the third flare up of anti-Tamil violence took place with again affecting, among others, the plantation community members.

These attacks led to increasing militancy on the part of the community, including armed retaliation and the setting up of vigilante committees. Thus, while the 1983 pogrom was the bloodiest attack on the Tamils in the South of the island, the plantation workers were able to protect themselves more effectively in 1983 than in the previous years. At the same time, there was frequent debate among the workers on their role and identity in these conflicts, including criticism by youth of the more compromise policies followed by the leadership. The next section shows how the plantation community developed new strategies to frame and claim their rights, and in the process constructed new identities of their role in the country.

### **Mobilisation and Claiming Rights**

The involvement of their leader, S. Thondaman in the government, paved the way speeding up the process of attaining citizenship with passing of the Indo-Ceylon

Agreement (Implementation) Amendment Act No. 47 in 1981. Another important law that gave power to the plantation workers was the repeal in 1978 of the Local Bodies Election Ordinance, which had prevented plantation workers from participating in local-body polls, even if they could vote in parliamentary elections. As a consequence of this repeal, CWC nominees were elected to urban councils in the plantation districts of Hatton-Dickoya and Talawakelle. Furthermore, plantation candidates were nominated in the District Development Councils – government appointed bodies - in Colombo, Nuwara Eliya, Kandy, Ratnapura and Badulla Districts' Development Councils. The net effect was increased involvement in the politics of the country and greater representation for plantation workers in key local institutions.

This increased power was also reflected in new strategies and new identities on the part of the workers. It was clear that the youth were dissatisfied with the years of political exclusion and were also aware that the plantation sector was the most important source of finance for the government's war against Tamil Eelam. In 1984, the workers went on strike, their key demands increase of wages, the equalisation of pay between women and men and a guaranteed monthly wage for all plantation workers. They also called on other major trade unions to support their demands. The timing of the strike – the flush was exceptionally good and prices of tea were high in the world market – was strategic. President J.R. Jayewardene stated that the government had lost Rs. 60 million a day as a result of the strike – something that the government could ill-afford with the increasing defence expenditure resulting from the ethnic conflict. In spite of pressure from the government, the strike was called off only after nine days, and after all the major demands had been agreed. The strike involved not only the participation of the vast majority of plantation unions (except the government union) but also gave rise to action among other categories of workers on the plantations.

The economic gains by the plantation workers were also important in spurring them to struggle for their political and citizenship rights. The escalation of the ethnic conflict and the stagnancy in the 'statelessness' problem in the 1980s increased concern amongst the youth that the leadership was not adequately dealing with the situation. In response to this growing turmoil in the sector, the CWC announced on 29 May 1985 that they would hold a "prayer campaign" to focus on making the atmosphere more "spiritual" and conducive to non-violence, supporting the Delhi agreement for peace talks between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil militants, and to end the issue of statelessness. Thondaman also indicated that he would step down if the 'statelessness' problem was not

resolved by 31 December 1985. (Sabaratnam 1990: 158). In the light of the intransigence of the government, a three-month prayer campaign<sup>3</sup> was initiated by the CWC to begin on the 12<sup>th</sup> of January (*Thai Pongal* day) and end on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April (to coincide with the Tamil and Sinhalese New Year celebrations).<sup>4</sup> Part of this decision to undertake this campaign was a response to the increasing restlessness amongst the plantation youth. The CWC leader S. Thondaman was forced to take action to maintain his own credibility as the youth were “already up in arms” and accusing him of failing to “get the government to solve the stateless problem for eight years (quoted in Sabaratnam 1990: 164)

The campaign of January 1986 was specifically called to end the ‘statelessness’ of the plantation workers. It had the support of practically all the main trade unions on the plantations. The strike had barely started before the Sri Lankan government accepted the demands of the trade unions and agreed to grant citizenship to those who wished to have it, without regard to the proportionality agreed upon earlier between the two countries. Commenting on Thondaman’s “brinkmanship” in waging a “plantation strike” under the guise of “campaign”, the reporter Jeyaraj noted he had got himself admitted to a hospital and had the no-visitors rule implemented to avoid personal pressure being brought upon him to end the strike. The success of the ‘campaign’ did not result in a “triumphant boast” by Thondaman. "Prayers can move mountains. Our prayers have been answered," he said in a deadpan tone (Jeyaraj 1999).

Participating in these successful protests and gaining both labour and democratic rights also gave rise to new perspectives on the identity of the plantation community in the country. One of the more radical changes was the formation of the *Malaiyaha Makkal Munnani* or the Up-Country People’s Front in 1990 under the leadership of the Periyasamy Chandrasekaran who left the CWC in 1986. The name of the party was important in that it was a shift from defining themselves either with regard to their work on plantations but associated with a separate and definite geographical space. The name was also de-linked from India, although the official categorisations still used terms such “Indian Tamils” or “Tamils of Recent Indian Origin” to refer to the community. The party reflected in many ways, “voices of political and social

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<sup>3</sup> The announcement of this campaign had been made on 3 December 1985, with a declaration adopted by the joint meeting of the executive and national councils of the CWC

<sup>4</sup> The idea was that workers would pray between 7 a.m. until 12 noon and then return to work, and the estate management would adjust their workloads so that they could work in the afternoons, and thus be eligible for pay.

activists in the upcountry Tamil community” who were “articulating a specific state reform agenda from below, from the perspective of an ethnic minority” (Uyangoda 2011,1). Their demands included parity of both languages (Sinhalese and Tamil) in the plantation regions, security, adequate political representation at different (local, regional and national) levels and the claim to development rights, reflecting that the plantation’s community’s “ collective political rights.... go beyond citizenship and trade union rights” (Uyangoda 2011, 11-12). The result was the emergence of a new ‘malayaha identity’– people from the Hill country, associated a specific and contemporary geographical space of origin, as a specific regionally based ethnic minority group in Sri Lanka. According to A.Lawrence, the important aspect of using the term Malayaha Tamil as an “identity concept” was that it arose from within the community itself and was “integral to their historical consciousness and self-understanding as a community” (2011, 14). These developments suggest that collective identities were established by reflecting on common characteristics and simply participating in identity discussions with the other participants.

### **Multiple and Evolving Identities**

Understanding the identities assumed by the plantation community over a period of nearly two centuries involves reviewing not only the identities imposed by others on the group but also taking into account how struggles shaped their collective identities from within. Given these processes, it is also problematic to view the community as having one essential identity but rather a complex one including those based on their trade union and political party affiliations, as well as a specific ethnic minority in the country, associated with a particular geographical region. What is particularly significant in their history is the strategic intervention in the political process through using their position, as the largest organised working class group in the country in a sector that was vital to the economic interests of the state, to gain their labour and citizenship rights. Their association with India also framed their politics, and they remain part of the Indian Diaspora.

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