



## **Up-country Tamils Charting a New Future**

### **Summary**

Since the British period, the Up-country Tamils have lived at the margins of Sri Lankan society and politics, while being an integral part of the import-export economy that came to be established in the country. This conference will focus on the ways in which the Up-country Tamils continue to be marginalized, how far they have entered the mainstream and the difficulties that they have faced along the way. The present moment provides an opportune time for considering the role of the Up-country Tamils, and the interactions between majority and minority, and between margin and mainstream in contemporary Sri Lanka. Since the end of the war in May 2009, most political and academic debate and discussion about ethnic reconciliation have centered on a simplistic Sinhala-Tamil binary, ignoring other ethnic groups and the multiplicity of Tamil identities on the island.

### **Background**

What does it mean to be a Tamil in post-war Sri Lanka? The end of the war has brought some relief concerning the most pressing issues the country has faced in the past three decades in ending the brutal violence that caused the deaths, debilitation and displacement of thousands of Sri Lankans. Yet, it has not resolved many issues relating to majority-minority relations and power sharing in the post-colonial Sri Lankan state. Despite political proclamations, limited progress has been made in regard to post-war ethnic reconciliation in the country.

Up-country Tamils are the descendants of migrant workers from South India, who were brought to Ceylon between the 1830s and the 1930s, to work on coffee, tea and rubber

plantations in the island's central highlands, loosely identified as the up-country. At Independence in 1948, the population of the Up-country Tamils formed a significant proportion of the Tamil population of Sri Lanka, but often the other communities saw them as migrants of Indian origin insufficiently rooted in the country. This perception became a reality with the passage of the Citizenship Acts in 1948 and 1949, and repatriation of approximately 40% of the community, starting in 1967. The outbreak of the war in 1983 ended repatriation, but led to further problems, as violence engulfed much of the island. This conference will address the many problems that Up-country Tamils face today, politically, economically and socially, as well as the historical origins and structural determinants of their current predicament. Participants will pay particular attention to the changes that have taken place for the Up country Tamils since the end of the war, and their implications for the future of the community.

Since 1911, "Indian Tamil" has been the official term that the government of Sri Lanka has used to identify this community. While this term explicitly refers to their historical origin, it implies that the community is non-indigenous, and, therefore, not truly Sri Lankan. Such a view underlined the move after independence to deprive this community of citizenship. As a corrective to this, the term "Indian-origin Tamil" came to be used as a self-referent over the course of the twentieth century, especially among Colombo-based elites of Up-country origin. In contrast, the terms "Plantation Tamil" or "Estate Tamil" refer to those who still live and/or work on the estates, and who continue to make up approximately 80% of the total population in the community. Few choose that identification, since it has negative and derogatory connotations. Over the past few decades, "Up-country Tamil," a translation of the Tamil term "*Malaiyaka Tamil*," has become a preferred term, since it includes not only those Tamils on the plantations, but also those historically connected with them but living in other areas in Sri Lanka. It stresses their attachment to their present place of residence as against the country of their ancestral origin, with which fewer and fewer Up-country Tamils continue to have any connection.

Although the majority of Up-country Tamils still live and/or work on tea plantations, they increasingly identify with the Up-country as a whole, and not just the estates. In both colonial and post-independence Sri Lanka, the governing authorities viewed Up-country Tamils as an alien community, thus legitimating their continued economic and political marginalization. In contrast to their official (census) designation as Indian Tamils, their self-identification connects them to the places where they were born, have lived and worked for generations. In doing so, the Up-country Tamils assert their firm foundation in Sri Lanka, although their fellow Sri Lankans may not necessarily share these sentiments. The Up-country Tamils have asserted their identity as Sri Lankan

citizens, yet often they are made to feel that Sri Lanka is neither their home nor their homeland even after the end of the war.

### **Examining the Past and Present Charting the Future**

In addressing issues of belonging, citizenship and identity, this conference will also focus on the political economy of the plantation system in the era of globalization. The privatization of the plantations in 1993 initially brought significant capital investment after years of stagnation, neglect and mismanagement under government ownership. Tea is no longer Sri Lanka's main foreign exchange earner, having fallen behind garment exports and remittances from workers abroad. Twenty-four years after privatization, Sri Lankan tea plantations are at a crossroad, as they encounter a changing global market and deteriorating local infrastructure. Many plantations have found new economic opportunities in tourism, specialty marketing or planting other crops. While all stakeholders agree that the present plantation system is not economically sustainable in its current form, no consensus has emerged about what changes need to be introduced, especially in order to retain the resident workforce increasingly reluctant to work on the plantations under the existing terms and conditions.

While tea plantation workers are paid more than what was paid to previous generations, their Rs. 730 daily wage (as of October, 2016) does not go very far, due to inflation and the rising cost of living. Furthermore, their working conditions, housing and medical care on the plantations have not improved significantly in decades. A majority of tea plantation workers are women, and it continues to be one of the few jobs accessible to Up-country Tamil women born into the plantations. The large numbers of women in the plantation workforce gives it a gendered as well as class and ethnic character, and the traditional gender norms persist, especially involving household chores as a woman's duty side by side with longer work hours in the plantations. The changing labour dynamics on the plantations and the increased outmigration to urban areas, overseas employment and for education will receive considerable attention in this conference.

Few Up-country Tamils want to work on tea plantations if they have any other options. In recent decades, thousands of Up-country Tamils have migrated to urban areas, especially Colombo, for work in garment factories and in the informal sector, especially domestic work for women and shop assistants, drivers and construction labourers for men. Among Colombo elites, the up-country is renowned as a source, not only for

quality tea, but also for domestic helpers. While Colombo work has relatively high status in the up-country, especially in comparison to estate work, these new forms of labour are neither unionized nor protected by existing labour legislations. While many Up-country Tamils live and work in Colombo and other urban areas on the island, most still consider the up-country their home, especially since part of the family remains anchored in the plantations.

During the war, some researchers blamed the war as a major impediment to political and economic development in the up-country as well as elsewhere in Sri Lanka. Over the past several years, some deeper structural problems have emerged. The Up-country has not witnessed the economic boom seen in Colombo, and this conference will address the various reasons for this situation and possible ways to overcome the resulting regional and social imbalances. In addition, as the plantation trade unions have entered parliamentary politics their role as political parties has meant that they relate to their constituents more as voters than as workers. The Up-country Tamils increasingly view their unions as more invested in power dynamics at the centre and preserving their own power and vested interests than in serving their constituencies, yet no other viable alternatives are present in the up-country.

Many changes in the up-country in recent years were caused by broader technological changes and globalization processes rather than by local political and economic processes. The spread of mobile phones, digital television and internet access throughout Sri Lanka, even to up-country tea estates, has dramatically changed Up-country Tamil society and culture. Migrants to Colombo are now able to maintain contact with their friends and family in the up-country much more easily than before. The Up-country Tamils now have access to a range of Tamil-language news and entertainment avenues unlike in the past where they were preoccupied with the popular Tamil cinema. This global access has not necessarily led to cultural homogenization, though it has forced Up-country Tamil leaders to be more proactive in protecting and promoting Up-country Tamil musical, literary and other artistic traditions. In the face of rapid changes, many communities try to reinforce and reinvest in those aspects of culture that make them distinctive from their neighbors. This process alters cultural practices, changing everyday activities into expressions of cultural traditions and ethnic identification.

This conference will bring together representatives from organizations working with Up-country Tamils, researchers on Up-country Tamils in Sri Lanka, including historians, economists, sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists, representatives from Central, Provincial and Local government, and representatives of

the private sector and civil society organizations to approach opportunities and challenges facing this community from multiple disciplinary perspectives.

The Up-country Tamils have always held a precarious position in Sri Lankan society, politics and economy, and this conference will examine the vicissitudes of their life, livelihoods and identity dynamics in relation to other communities in Sri Lanka and abroad. Participants will analyze the changing dynamics of identity politics, with a focus on ethnicity, class, caste and gender. In addition, the conference will examine the nature of citizenship and rights in the light of changing social, political and historical context.

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