

# **Cultural Identity of Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka: A Measurement of Multi-dimensional Status of the Indian Tamil Society in Sri Lanka**

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## **Abstract**

*The plantation system was a new economic activity when compared to the traditional agricultural occupations of those Tamils who migrated from South India. The politically motivated citizenship issues imposed on the migrant Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka and the thirty years of ethnic conflict had a considerable impact on the cultural identity of Indian Tamils. The business community of Indian Tamils is mainly concentrated in the capital city of Colombo and a few other urban and rural areas in the country. A considerable number of children of the plantation workers have also emerged as members of the business community in the cities in recent years. Ironically, they did not have any type or associational relationship with the traditional upper caste business community in the cities until now. Certainly the social recognition of the Indian Tamils who obtained the status of 'citizen by descent' and 'citizen by registration' is much better than the 'stateless person' status of Indian Tamils. They were declared as Sri Lankan Tamils in order to make a distinction between them and the historic stateless persons of Indian Tamil origin in the country. The Indian Tamils living in the Southern Province are mostly concentrated in tea smallholdings and the rubber plantation sector in the country. Several development programmes like the distribution of land to landless communities for the growing of tea and housing programmes have been implemented during the last two decades by successive governments but*

*the benefits have not reached significantly, the Indian Tamil tea estate workers in these districts. The study also highlights the hardships which are affecting the cultural identity of Indian Tamils living in the Southern province and their adaptation to the Sinhalese culture. It seems that them becoming part of the existing Sinhalese society is inevitable.*

## **Introduction**

Indian Tamils are the descendants of emigrants from South Indian districts who became engaged in the plantation economy in Sri Lanka. The plantation system was a new economic activity when compared to the traditional agricultural occupations of those Tamils who migrated from South India. Around sixty per cent of the Indian Tamil migrants from South India were able to cope with the new system of the plantation economy with its special characteristics such as its regimented type of work, 'wages for work', 'work on all six days' 'living in line rooms' 'carrying out tasks dictated by the planter' and so on. The others went back to their original destination in South India.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, certain traditional practices have continued among the social organisation of Indian Tamils (See Balasundaram et al. 2009). Politically motivated citizenship issues imposed on migrant Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka and the thirty years of ethnic conflict had a considerable impact on the cultural identity of Indian Tamils. The main objective of this study is to discuss the context in which the cultural identity of Indian Tamils has transformed in Sri Lanka.

## **Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka**

The migration of Indian Tamils to Sri Lanka was unique and in contrast to the indentured labour migration in most countries.

The migrant labourers were free to move between their homeland in South India and the work place in the Sri Lanka from the 1830s up to 1923. In 1871 there were around 123000 Indian Tamils involved in the plantation sector and this increased to 235000 by 1891. The term 'Indian Tamils' was first used officially in the census of 1911 to distinguish the immigrant Indian Tamil population from the indigenous Sri Lankan Tamils. The population of Indian Tamils was 531000, a 12.9 per cent of the total population of the country and its counterpart of Sri Lankan Tamils was 13.2 per cent. It should be noted that the total number of Indian Tamils in the subsequent censuses in 1921, 1931, 1946, 1953 and 1963 was nearly equivalent to their corresponding population of Sri Lankan Tamils (See Mookiah 1995). However, the population of Indian Tamils has not been accurately enumerated in the last two censuses (1981 and 2001). In these censuses many Indian Tamils had declared themselves as 'Sri Lankan Tamils' instead of the census category 'Indian Tamils' (Department of Census and Statistics 1986: 117-8). The estimated number of Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka is 1.3 million or roughly 6.4 per cent of the total population in the country in contrast to five per cent according to official census figures.<sup>2</sup> When Indian Tamils came to Sri Lanka they had to shape their own culture according to the needs of the new situation. In other words, the culture which is seen among Indian Tamil plantation workers in Sri Lanka today is a transformed version of the original Indian culture. Many things have been added and some elements of the original culture were given up leading to the formation of a distinct culture (Suryanarayan 2001).

The distribution of the Indian Tamil population in Sri Lanka could be put in two categories, viz. district-based distribution, and sector-based distribution (urban, rural and

estate). As far as the share of Indian Tamils in the district population is concerned, the district of Nuwara Eliya, which is the prime tea planting district in the country, has more than fifty per cent of Indian Tamils (**Table 1**).

<b>Plantation Districts</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Nuwaraeliya	51.3
Badulla	18.2
Kandy	8.45
Ratnapura	7.8
Kegalle	5.9
Matale	5.3
Kalutara	2.7
Matara	2.2

**Table 1: Distribution of Indian Tamil Population in Sri Lanka. Courtesy: Preliminary Report of Census and Statistics, 2001.**

As far as sector wise distribution is concerned a total of 883232 Indian Tamils are living in the estate sector, which is around 76 per cent of the total Indian Tamil population in the country. The rest is distributed between urban and rural areas as 6 per cent and 18 per cent respectively.

Majority of Indian Tamils concentrated in the urban sector are involved mainly in trade related livelihood activities. Most of the trading activities are inherited from parents. The inherited trading communities are largely upper caste groups such as *Vellelas*, *Kallans*, *Agamudaiyans* and other non-Brahmin caste groups. A part of the generation of the plantation workers also emerged recently as a trading community in the cities and they belong to *Adi Dravida* caste groups which collectively form the majority of the Indian Tamil population in the country.

It should be noted that the movement of Indian Tamils into the rural sector is a recent phenomenon. The reasons for the migration of Indian Tamils from the estate sector to the rural sector can be one or many of the following:

- a. implementation of land reforms;<sup>3</sup>
- b. requirement of manual labour for the expansion of farming activities in the Northern region; and
- c. racial violence by the native villagers against Indian Tamil plantation workers.

The lands vested under land reforms were distributed among the village community and ironically Indian Tamils were left out. There were also frequent attacks by the villagers who forced these Tamils to move to different locations. Those who had discontinued estate occupations due to the impact of land reforms and violence had moved either to settle in the nearest village or migrated to the northern region particularly to the districts of Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu and Vavuniya between 1975 and 1985. In addition to the impact of land reforms, racial violence and the shortage of food supply in the 1970s also made life difficult for estate workers, since the plantation sector does not have consumable products and solely depends on the supply of food from village farmers. Thus the only alternative was to leave the estates for other parts of the country. Many of them left the estates and settled in the Wannai District which is mainly involved in subsistence agriculture and is inhabited mainly by Sri Lankan Tamils. The estimated population figures shows that the total population of Indian Tamils living in the Wannai District is around 135000 which is roughly 35 per cent of the total population in the district. The distribution of estimated population of Indian Tamils in other districts of the Northern

province is as follows: Kilinochichi 2.4 per cent, Mannar 13.3 per cent, Vavuniya 19.4 per cent and Mullaitivu 13.9 per cent (Devaraj 2006).

The Indian Tamils who moved from the estate sector to the rural sector have a better social status than the Indian Tamils in the plantation sector. The Indian Tamils who moved to villages had the privilege to construct their own houses. They also have their personal addresses along with street names etc. something which their predecessors did not possess. Moreover, by being in a village community Indian Tamils also have gained access to benefits given by the local government that are not available through the management of the estate sector.

Thus it is clear from the above facts that Indian Tamils living in the country could be divided into three groups, viz.:

- a. The business community which continued their traditional cultural characteristics along with a strong relationship with their ancestral villages in Tamil Nadu,
- b. Plantation workers who continued their traditional cultural characteristics with very little or no relationship with their ancestral villages in Tamil Nadu, and
- c. Indian Tamils who adapted to the Sinhalese identity.

### **The Indian Tamil Business Community**

The business community of Indian Tamils is mainly concentrated in the capital city of Colombo and a few other urban and rural areas in the country. The large majority of the business community of Indian Tamils is concentrated in Colombo and Kandy and distributed also in urban centres like Hatton-Dickoya, Nuwara-Eliya, Matale, Maskeliya, Nawalapitiya, Badulla, and Bandarwella, which are located in

the middle of the plantation areas. Most of the businesses of Indian Tamils have been inherited from their parents or relatives. They have a distinct identity as a major group of Indian Tamils. Various castes belong to this group like *Vellelas*, *Kallans*, *Kowndan*, *Chettyar*, *Nadar*, *Agamudaiyans*, *Naidus* and other non-Brahmin caste groups in Sri Lanka. The major business of the upper caste Indian Tamils are confined to sale of clothes, groceries, jewellery, pharmacies, hardware and the supply of stationery in cities. A considerable number of them are running vegetarian restaurants elsewhere in the country. Most of the upper caste businessmen play a very important role in temple trusts in the cities notably contributing to retain the cultural values of Hindus in the country. The establishment of the Hindu Cultural Centre in Kandy and a Hindu temple in Matale town are few examples of land mark achievements of the business community of Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka.

A few businessmen of the upper caste Indian Tamils also invest in garment factories and import cinema films particularly of the Indian film industry. However, many of them could not continue these investments after ethnic violence erupted in 1983. In the past, caste has been a determining factor in the recruitment of workers of estate origin for positions such as sales assistants in Indian Tamil owned businesses in Colombo and other cities (Jayaraman 1975 and Hollup 1994).

The rituals and practices of this upper caste community still continue as is done by their predecessors in South India. Among the upper castes the *Vellelas* caste of the Indian Tamils is prominent in continuing the South Indian culture. Most of the *Vellelas* are from the district of Trichy and constantly go to their ancestral village not only for matrimonial purposes but also to attend funerals. They have formed an organisation called *Aru*

*Nadu Vellalar Sangam* (AVS) in order to secure their caste unity. AVS carries out a number of promotional activities to increase their membership. One of the major activities is to give financial assistance to promote education of the poor families of *Vellelas*. Financial assistance is also extended to aspiring poor *Vellelas* children to pursue their higher education in both local and international universities. The organisation also facilitates counselling for fixing marriages, etc. The *Vellelas* accept only intra-caste marriages and they have strong objections to inter-caste and inter-religious marriages. *Vellalas* are considered as a high caste group as that of Indian Brahmins.

The hold that this upper caste had over the business centre has now changed. A considerable number of children of the plantation workers have also emerged as the business community in the cities in recent years. Surprisingly, some of the new businessmen are also actively involved in various promotional activities for the estate workers. Ironically, they did not have any type or associational relationship with the traditional upper caste business community in the cities until now.

### **Indian Tamil Plantation Workers**

Indian Tamils engaged in large scale tea estates also continue their cultural identity within the country. Indian Tamils living in large scale estates are either third or the fourth generation of migrant workers from South India. The plantation system was a structure as far as the early migrant Indian Tamil workers are concerned. Much of the migrant workers did not have any experience in living in the cool climate in the hills of Sri Lanka. The families were compelled to live in 'line rooms' which were non-existent in their ancestral villages in India. The leadership



given by the chieftain call *Kangany* who had facilitated the migration in the early days was a new experience for the migrant Indian Tamils. Moreover, work for wages that linked them to a labour ordinance was also a completely new phenomenon of the life in the plantation sector. They had to work six days a week and the involvement of not only both male and female workforce but also the recruitment of children for the estate work also introduced them to a new world of work in the plantation sector.

However, the workers continued their cultural traits in the plantation sector. Most of their cultural activities are similar to those within the subsistence agricultural system of their ancestral villages in Tamil Nadu. The major festivals begin with the celebration of *Thai Pongal* in the month of January every year which is a major festival of Tamils.<sup>4</sup> Other festivals include the popularly known *Sami Kumpudu* which is the annual temple festival of plantation workers that is celebrated during the month of March or April. The *Sami Kumudu* is an appeal to the Goddess *Amman*, for sufficient rain and the elimination of diseases. Apart from the annual *Sami Kumpudu* the *Margali Bajan* from the middle of December up to day of *Thai Pongal* in January is also celebrated in the estates. Indian Tamil plantation workers continue to perform certain folk arts like *Kaman Koothu*, *Ponnar Sangar*, and *Arjunana Thavas* in the estates. *Deepawali* is popularly known as the festival of lights. This is also celebrated on a day which falls in the month of October or the beginning of November every year. However, several aspects influenced the cultural identity of Indian Tamils. Among them were the repatriation scheme implemented under the Sirimavo-Shastri Pact in 1964 and ethnic violence which began in 1978 and was widely executed in July 1983. These were the major reasons which disturbed the continuity of their traditional

culture. Indeed, the distribution of various castes is quite typical and persisted for a long time as analysed by R. Jayaraman (1975) and Hollup (1994). Accordingly, around 23 per cent of Indian Tamils of the plantation sector consisted of upper lower caste Indian Tamils. Tamils and Sinhalese were represented by 65 per cent and 2 per cent respectively in the plantation sector.

Upper caste Indian Tamils mainly belonged to *Mottai Vellalas*, *Reddiyar*, *Ahamudiyar*, *Muthuraj*, *Ambalakkaran*, *Kallan*, *Naidu*, *Mudaliyar*, *Udaiyar*, *Padaiyachi* and *Kavundar* castes. The upper caste estate workers played a prominent role in the estates. Apart from the *Kangany*, the trade union representatives of the estate committee were mainly from the upper caste community. The temple ceremonies were managed by them, and the night schools popularly known as *Irravu Palli*<sup>5</sup> both for school going children and the adults were conducted by the upper caste people. There was a practice of reading the great epics of Ramayana and *Mahahaparatham* in the night school for adults. Major events like *Kamankkothu*, *Ponnasangar*, *Archunanathavas*, and *Margali Bajan* were mostly patronised by the upper caste workers in the estates. Most of the school going children who continued to follow secondary education were either from the children of the upper caste community or the children of Christian parents among the Indian Tamil estate community until the middle of the 1980s. The upper caste estate workers were also heavily involved in the circulation of money among estate workers. The monthly *Seetu* system that was widely spread among Indian Tamil workers in the estates which involved lending money with collateral valuable items like copper, silver and jewellery was also handled by the upper caste estate workers.

Interestingly, the involvement of the *Kangany* (chieftain) in the process of early migration and his later role in the plantation system occupies a distinct place among the Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka. The *Kanganies* have played a dual role among the Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka. They not only supplied workers to the plantations, but also possessed the leadership elements necessary to run the operation. The *Kanganies* also thought of themselves as playing ‘half the role of the British planter’ amongst the plantation workers. They also wore different kinds of clothes to distinguish them from the workers. They wore a coat with a long white sheet (*Vellai Vetti*), white shirt, and turban. The *Kanagnies* wore the coat as part of the ceremonial dress of British planters. The style of wearing a coat has been harmonised with the traditional Tamil attire by *Kanganies* to project themselves as ‘the other half of the British planter’ while dealing with workers. Indeed, the action of wearing the coat like a British man was initiated during the migration of Indian Tamils from Tamil Nadu and continued by the *Kanganies* until the British left the estates during 1970s and 1980s. Later the dress code of the *Kanganies* became the symbol of the Indian Tamil plantation workers in the country.

However, the continuity of cultural practices of Indian Tamil plantation workers suffered a significant drawback during the implementation of the repatriation scheme of the Sirima-Shastri pact of 1964.<sup>6</sup> Under this pact a large scale reverse migration took place from Sri Lanka to South India. Most of the repatriates of the Indian Tamil plantation population belonged to the upper caste community. As mentioned before, the upper caste Tamils who lived in the estates had been an integral part of the plantation system and represented the elite group within the social system. The upper caste estate workers took the lead in cultural activities in the estates despite the fact that the majority

population consisted of low caste estate workers such as *Pallar*, *Parayar* and *Chakkiliyira*. Thus repatriation of those elites created a gap in terms of continuity of several cultural practices in the estates. For example, many temples in the estates could not perform the annual festival because suitable persons were not available to perform the traditional rituals. Likewise, there was stagnation in many other activities as well, and a lull persisted until the 1990s. Some of the traditional cultural activities have now been rejuvenated and are handled by the educated new generation of the Indian Tamil plantation community. The role of the upper caste in performing such events has been transferred to the educated children of the estate workers in the plantation sector.

Further, the Sirima-Shastri Pact in 1964 also made a considerable impact on the identity of Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka. Paradoxically the 1964 pact divided the Indian Tamils into four categories:

- a. Indian Tamils with a document to prove the category of 'citizen by descent',
- b. people with relevant documents offered by the Indian mission for repatriation,
- c. people who had received Sri Lankan citizenship through registration, and
- d. stateless persons.

Most of the repatriates moved back to Tamil Nadu and were identified as Indians. However, other categories of 'citizen by descent', 'citizen by registration' and 'stateless persons' have caused distress. The classification of 'stateless persons' led to a new definition of the status of citizenship of Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka. Indeed, stateless persons of Indian Tamils were

humiliated on several occasions and even denied school education and housing.

Certainly, social recognition of Indian Tamils who obtained the status of 'citizen by descent' and 'citizen by registration' is much better than that of the 'stateless person.' They were declared as Sri Lankan Tamils in order to make a distinction between them and the historic stateless persons of Indian Tamils in the country. This was also reflected in the national censuses particularly the census reports of 1981 and 2001. In fact, the two censuses failed to give the actual number of Indian Tamils living in the country.

### **Indian Tamils who Adapted to Other Cultures**

Apart from Indian Tamils of the business community and those in the plantation sector, Indian Tamils also live in other parts of the country and are in the process of adapting to other cultures in the country. Indian Tamils who are living in the Southern province constitute around 20 per cent of the total Indian Tamil population while in the North and the Eastern provinces they constitute roughly 10 per cent and 4 per cent respectively. The concentration of Indian Tamils in the North and Eastern provinces is a new phenomenon whereas the concentration of them in the Southern province dates back to the inception of the tea industry in the country. The distribution of Indian Tamils in Southern districts is shown in **Table 2**. A total of 67000 are living in the districts of the Southern Province.

Indian Tamils living in the Southern province are mostly concentrated in tea smallholdings and the rubber plantation sector in the country. Several development programmes like the distribution of land to landless communities for growing of tea and housing programmes have been implemented during the last

two decades by successive governments. But the benefits have not reached the Indian Tamil tea estate workers in these districts. Many of them are living in very old line rooms which were constructed during the British times. At present the line rooms are owned by the privatised tea estate owners and labour is provided for the tasks performed on a daily basis. The wage rate per day in the tea smallholding is Rs. 380/= and work is offered roughly 8 to 10 days a month.

<b>Districts</b>	<b>Numbers</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Kalutara	30000	2.8
Galle	18000	2
Matara	19000	2.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>67000</b>	

**Table 2: Distribution of Indian Tamils in the Southern Province. Courtesy: Chandrabose, 2004.**

The maximum wage that could be earned at tea smallholdings is Rs.3800/= from 10 days of work. Therefore, workers are forced to find jobs elsewhere for the remaining days. It is a daunting task to find jobs for their survival and as a result they are compelled to be a poor community among the tea small-holding sector in the country. It is clear from this fact that Indian Tamils have been sidelined from the development projects implemented in these districts and they are placed in an economically vulnerable situation.

Apart from the economic vulnerability Indian Tamils who are living in the Southern province were also severely affected by the ethnic conflict that was between the government of Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan Tamil separatists of the North and the East. Undoubtedly, Indian Tamils are not part of these separatist movements. But many people living in the South cannot

distinguish them from those living in the North and East. On several occasions Indian Tamils were suspected for causalities that occurred in the armed forces in the war front. This situation prevailed for thirty years beginning from the 1980s.

The distrust of certain Sinhalese towards Indian Tamil workers in the south has led to differential treatment of the latter in the Southern province. The Indian Tamil is not on par with the majority community in the allocation of resources in the fields of education, employment and infrastructure. Therefore, schools for Tamils are not maintained with sufficient resources. This situation has forced Tamil students to study in Sinhala medium or at Muslim schools for their basic education. Ultimately, the children of Indian Tamils become competent in the Sinhala language rather than their mother tongue which is Tamil. Moreover, a number of projects for housing were implemented but none of the Tamil estate workers were given such facilities. Many villages have obtained basic facilities like renovation of roads and supply of drinking water and electricity, but these have not reached Indian Tamils significantly. Moreover, Indian Tamils are not in a situation to promote their cultural activities in these areas.

Several of the Indian Tamils living in these districts are fluent in the Sinhala language and fascinatingly they use the language even among their own family members. Indeed, the orientation of Sinhala was heavily instigated during the crucial North and East war in order to conceal their identity as Tamils in public places. Moreover, they also ascertain to follow several customs that are connected to Sinhalese rituals in these districts. For example in the Southern province the *Devasam* ritual in the Hindu religion has been converted to *Dhana Gethra* of Buddhism and all associated Buddhist rituals are followed. An

interesting observation is that the language the Indian Tamils commonly used for calling their children in the south is different from that of the Indian Tamils living elsewhere. Indian Tamils in the South call a son *Putha* instead of *Magan*. Likewise the daughter is called *Duwa* instead of *Makal*. Several of the Tamil women wear Sinhalese dresses for their ceremonies like weddings etc. It should be noted that there is no evidence to prove any institutional arrangements or announcements on converting Indian Tamils in to the Sinhalese culture and Buddhism even during the crucial war.

## **Conclusion**

The study highlights the multidimensional status of the Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka. The Indian Tamils who migrated have adjusted to a new economic activity i.e. the plantation system in Sri Lanka. Large numbers of the Indian Tamils are still living in the large scale housing schemes of the plantation sector in the country. The rest are living in cities as a business community and in the rural sector elsewhere in the island. Among them the people who are living in the tea smallholding sector in the Southern province are the most vulnerable community. The business community of Indian Tamils relatively continue their strong relationship with their ancestral villages in South India. But it is not the case with Indian Tamils living in the plantation sector. Studies show that they have preserved most of their cultural identity as Indian Tamils. However, the Pact of 1964 and ethnic violence made a significant impact on their cultural identity. The study also highlighted the hardships faced by Indian Tamils that affect their cultural identity especially of those living in the Southern province where they adapt to the Sinhalese culture for survival. It seems that their absorption into the existing Sinhalese society is inevitable. Hence, Indian



Tamils need a very strong institutional support to retain their traditional culture and their identity as Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka.

### **End Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Not all of Indian Tamils who migrated were compelled to stay in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon). For example in 1839 the number arrived from India was 2719 but 2202 returned to India in the same year. However, the arrival and departure pattern had changed subsequently over a period of time and more people tend to return to India than arriving in Ceylon. For instance, the number of Indian Tamils that arrived towards the end of 1951 was 54721 but return was 58794. This number includes persons who arrived on previous occasions (See Sandirasegaran 1989: Table 1-77-80).

<sup>2</sup> For details of estimated population of Indian Tamils see Chandrabose (Colombo, 2004), pp. 31-42.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed study of the process of land reforms and its impact on the plantation agriculture see Peiris (1984).

<sup>4</sup> *Thai Pongal* is celebrated on the first day of the month Thai (January) of the Tamil calendar. *Pongal* is the preparation of sweet rice and is a thanksgiving ceremony in which farmers thank nature, the Sun and farm animals for their assistance in providing a successful harvest.

<sup>5</sup> *Irra Palli* (in Tamil) is a night school that was popular in many estates until the estate schools were nationalised in 1989.

<sup>6</sup> The 1964 Pact stated that there were 9.75 lakhs of stateless persons in Sri Lanka. It was agreed that Sri Lanka would accept 3 lakhs of people while India agreed to accept repatriation of 5.25 lakhs of people. The remaining 1.5 lakhs of persons were

shared in equal numbers by both countries under the 1974 Srima-Indra Pact. It should be noted that until 1983 only 360000 people obtained Indian Citizenship and were actually repatriated.

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