

# Sri Lanka: The ghosts of the colonial past

Friday 21 November 2014, by [SRINIVASAN Meera](#) (Date first published: 21 November 2014).

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Plantation workers of Sri Lanka have historically been subjected to much adversity and oppression before they rightfully became citizens. But not much has changed since

At the end of a back-breaking day, only one question awaits tea plucker Velu Parameswari: “How many kgs?”

That is all “dorai” (supervisor) asks every day, said the 47-year-old, who began plucking tea as a 16-year-old. Despite working 22 days in October, all she made for the month was six dollars, most of which was deducted to repay her outstanding loan.

“My husband is also a plucker,” she said, tilting her head and narrowing her eyes as she checked the reading on her weighing scale. Two other workers swiftly loaded one sack after another onto a truck parked at the curving road margin in Haputale in Sri Lanka’s Uva Province. The scenic town is less than 30 kms away from Koslanda, which on October 29 experienced a massive landslide that claimed at least 12 lives. Over a hundred people are still missing.

Ms Parameswari, along with several others from her estate, was part of a solidarity march held soon after the disaster. “After all, they are our people. If we don’t stand by them at such a time, then who will?” she asked.

Following the landslide, politicians, diplomats and media crews rushed to the spot in Koslanda where the landslide swept away homes of over 60 families. The misery of the victims grabbed headlines and prime time space for the following few days. Sri Lanka’s ‘plantation Tamils’ or ‘upcountry Tamils’ suddenly became newsworthy because of the tragedy that hit them.

## Disenfranchised to stateless

For over a century now, the Tamil-speaking community has been toiling in the country’s plantations spread across the Sinhala-majority Central and Uva Provinces. The British brought them down from South India — they are officially called Tamils of recent Indian origin — in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as workers in the estates where coffee and later tea was grown.

From being disenfranchised to being rendered stateless persons, this community has historically been subjected to much adversity and oppression before they rightfully became citizens of Sri Lanka, but not much has changed since.

The British may have left the country, but ghosts of the colonial past seem to linger. Workers still refer to their supervisor as “dorai,” a term earlier used to address the British owners or managers.

The line rooms — rows of small homes with essentially a 10\*10 feet room — built at that time, almost a century ago, are yet to give way to decent homes.

“When it rains outside, it rains inside our home too,” said B. Neelalochini matter-of-factly. “What can you expect, these homes are so old.”

A ‘line’ usually connotes two rows of tightly packed homes facing each other, with only a narrow path in between. “This is our home,” said R. Nalini, ushering me into her living-cum-bedroom. As in her family’s case, it is not uncommon to find six to seven people living in such a home.

Having worked in the estates for generations, the nearly 9 lakh-strong-community has only been neglected by successive governments. Poor housing is a major concern and some of the lines located higher up in the hills have virtually no road connectivity. “We have to climb up all the way and it gets really slippery during the rains,” said C. Saraswati. If housing is pathetic, education needs are completely ignored. “It is still a huge challenge for even one student from this community to become a doctor or engineer,” said a teacher in Haputale. The schools which offer up to A-levels (plus two) are fewer in number around the estates and none offers math. University education is a distant dream for a majority of the children from the community. Many drop out before completing school, according to A. Shanmuganathan, principal of a school in Koslanda.

Finding jobs is the next hurdle. Estate worker K. Manonmani’s daughter scored well in her A-levels, but could not study further. “We had no option but to send her to Colombo to work in a departmental store. She is such a bright girl,” the mother broke down.

As of 2012, over 2 lakh people were part of the plantations’ labour force, official records note, a stark fall from the estimated 530,000 workers employed by the sector in the 1980s.

Following monsoon failures and the subsequent closure of some tea factories, regular jobs have become harder to come by, said workers, who are constantly looking for other daily wage jobs. Some families are in heavy debt, in many cases forcing women to migrate to West Asia as domestic help.

Those who manage to find jobs in the estates don’t have it easy either. E. Agnes, barely 20, leaves her one-year-old child at the estate crèche as she plucks tea leaves all day. “It is a cramped space. The only play area is muddy and dirty,” she said, adding that women employed in the estates had no support systems.

### **Meagre wages**

Despite labouring all day, the workers’ wages are barely enough to buy minimal provisions for the family. Wages and salaries are tied to the quantity of tea a worker plucks, and the number of days she turns up for work every month. In most cases, pluckers get paid at the rate of \$4.75 per day if they work at least 25 days a month, meeting the target of 18 kgs per day. Even one day less would fetch them only a wage rate of \$3.50 per day. From this, several deductions such as EPF, insurance premium, union subscription and crèche fee are made.

With a sense of being abandoned by the state and the private companies — which run the estates on leased government land — coupled with the absence of new industries or job opportunities, the plantation Tamils are trapped in a spot where the only reality appears to be consistent exclusion. Their plight figures nowhere in the story of ‘Sri Lankan Tamils,’ which has focussed only on those inhabiting the island’s war-torn north. Even the political parties representing the plantation Tamil community — the dominant Ceylon Workers’ Congress founded by Savumiamoorthy Thondaman is

aligned to President Mahinda Rajapaksa's ruling coalition — or the unions affiliated to them seem to offer them little hope.

Critical of his union, S. Palanisamy, an organiser, said: "Around election time leaders come, give away tin sheets to mend our roofs and promise to give us new homes. We are so desperate that we vote them back into power. After elections, we are forgotten."

Saying this was someone who has been, for decades, contributing to one of Sri Lanka's primary sources of foreign exchange earnings, which according to a 2013 report of Sri Lanka's Plantation Industries Ministry, stood at \$2.4 billion. For the workers though, the numbers remain abstract figures.

When Ms Saraswathi, sporting a headscarf and carrying a sack, climbed a rocky stretch effortlessly, it was like a visual straight out of one of the many promotional videos on Sri Lankan tourism. As she left for her estate, she said: "Can't be away too long, I have to get back to work."

Meera Srinivasan

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\*<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-ghosts-of-the-colonial-past/article6618761.ece?css=pri>  
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