

Sri Lanka: Tracing our roots to win our rights

Friday 21 July 2023, by [Collective / Multiple signers](#) (Date first published: 21 July 2023).

We are re-tracing the journey of the first groups of men and women brought to this country to work in the plantations in the hill country. Over the years thousands landed in Mannar and made the dangerous trek on foot to Matale. They endured diseases, cleared jungles and braved wild animals. Many, as high as 40% in some groups, died on the way and were buried or disposed of. We are inviting all of you to join us on this journey, a pilgrimage to reflect and connect with the first generation who made this arduous trek two hundred years ago.

The malaiyaha ezhuchchi payanam is also about the *future* - it is about the demand of the malaiyaha tamil community to be recognized as free and equal citizens of Sri Lanka. Since the community came to this country 200 years ago its existence here has been one of struggle. The demands flow from their continued appeals to the successive Sri Lankan governments for recognition and equal treatment as distinct and integral people of Sri Lanka. This echoes the community's struggles for an identity as a constituent people of independent Ceylon/Sri Lanka on par with other main communities.

The malaiyaha ezhuchchi payanam is also a conversation with our fellow citizens. This journey is aimed at raising a basic level of understanding about the history, struggles, achievements, contribution, current socio-economic and political status and the aspirations of the Malaiyaha Tamil community among the Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamils, Muslims and other fellow citizens.

This malaiyaha ezhuchchi payanam is open. We invite all to join and walk with us to show your appreciation for the contribution of malaiyaha women and men over two centuries and to add your voice in solidarity with the *Malaiyaha Tamil Makkal*. You are welcome to join for a few kilometers, for a day or for the full distance. You can also attend the many events organized along the route.

Those who are unable to attend this journey in person, are encouraged to initiate activities in their own localities to coincide with the walk and to creatively support the walk through drawings, writings, songs, videos and social media posts in solidarity. We encourage our fellow citizens to engage in a dialogue and conversation about the past, present and future of Malaiyaha Tamil Makkal in their journey to be treated with dignity and participate fully and meaningfully in the life of the country.

Talaimannar to Matale Route and Events Schedule*

Date	Route/Location	Distance	Events so far
28 th July 2023	Talaimannar		Inaugural Event
29 th July 2023	Talaimannar to Pesalai	15 Km	
30 th July 2023	Pesalai to Mannar Town	16 Km	Event in Mannar
31 st July 2023	Mannar Town to Murunkan	26 Km	

1 st August 2023	Murunkan to Madhu	26 Km	Event in Madhu
2 nd August 2023	Madhu		
3 rd August 2023	Madhu Junction to Cheddikulam	23 Km	Event in Cheddikulam
			Also - Event in Vavuniya
4 th August 2023	Cheddikulam to Medawachchiya	26 Km	
	Also - Vavuniya to Medawachchiya	26 Km	Event in Medawachchiya
5 th August 2023	Medawachchiya		
6 th August 2023	Medawachchiya to Mihintale	22 Km	Event in Mihintale
7 th August 2023	Mihintale to Thirappane	18 Km	Event in Thirappane
8 th August 2023	Thirappane to Kekirawa	22 Km	Event in Kekirawa
9 th August 2023	Kekirawa to Dambulla	22 Km	Event in Dambulla
10 th August 2023	Dambulla		
11 th August 2023	Dambulla to Nalanda	22 Km	Event in Nalanda
12 th August 2023	Nalanda to Matale	24 Km	Closing Event

**The schedule with event venues and more details will be updated*

The Talaimannar to Matale journey and events are organized by the '**Collective for Maanbumigu Malaiyaha Makkal**' comprising of the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka and a wide group of Civil Society Organisations and Individuals who are from and/or working with the malaiyaha community.

If you want to get involved, participate and/or volunteer please contact

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The Appeal

The Malaiyaha community in commemorating the 200 years since their arrival have an appeal to become full and equal citizens, participating fully/ meaningfully in the life of Sri Lanka. In addition to the walk from Mannar to Matale being one of reflection, this is also a solidarity walk in support of their appeal.

In order to become meaningful citizens of Sri Lanka the Malaiyaha Tamil people call for

- (i) Acknowledgement of our history, struggle and contribution
- (ii) Recognition as a constituent people of post-independent Sri Lanka with a distinct identity on par with other main communities.
- (iii) Affirmative action on Education, Health and Social safety measures to achieve parity with national averages
- (iv) A living wage, decent work, legal protection and equal pay for men and women workers
- (v) Land with secure tenure for housing and livelihoods
- (vi) Equal use and parity of status for Tamil Language

- (vii) Equal access to Government Services
- (viii) Demarcation of plantation human settlements as new villages
- (ix) Protection of domestic workers
- (x) Preservation and promotion Malaiyaha culture
- (xi) Equitable and inclusive electoral system and power sharing that give a meaningful role in governance at all tiers of government

Background to the appeal for recognition as equal citizens

The demands articulated by the Malaiyaha Tamil people since independence have included their recognition as full-fledged citizens on par with Sri Lanka's other communities. The demands have been for equality, non-discrimination, security and for political and administrative arrangements that safeguards the interests and identity of the community. These demands were made so that the community will have the requisite voice and power to live with dignity, self-respect, peace and security and manage the affairs of its people who live in a concentrated manner in the Nuwara Eliya district and in a dispersed manner in several other parts of Sri Lanka.

The Malaiyaha Tamil community were brought to Sri Lanka, then Ceylon, from India since early 1820s by the companies under the British crown. Their labour was the foundation on which the 'Plantation Raj' was built by the British in this country. They were an essential component of the colonial enterprise. This community was the second largest ethnic group at the dawn of independence. But they were deprived of citizenship immediately after independence, in violation of the provision for the protection for minorities found in Section 29(2) of the Independence Constitution of Ceylon. Thereafter many were subjected to arbitrary and involuntary repatriation to India. These greatly diminished the political status and socio-economic wellbeing of this community.

Through bilateral agreements with India, including the Sirima-Shastri pact (1964) and Sirima - Indira pact (1974) tens of thousands were expatriated to India and thousands made stateless. The community was not properly consulted. This caused immense anguish among the members of this community, many of whom were separated from their kin. It took several decades of struggle to resolve the statelessness issue and to grant formal citizenship to members of this community. But progress on many other political, administrative and socio-economic areas remain slow and limited.

The current status

The current status of the Malaiyaha Tamil Community, including over 500,000 living in plantations as residents, has been a result of past history of involuntary expatriation, imposed statelessness, uncertainty around citizenship and lack of franchise. This has impacted on the community's socio-economic wellbeing. The most affected segment has been those living and working in the plantation estates. They have become the most marginalized group in the country registering lower measures on almost all human development indices compared to every other community in the country. This has seriously impaired their transition from workers - tied to and dependent on their plantation employers - to full-fledged citizens of Sri Lanka with equal rights as others.

A large proportion of the plantation community mentioned above still live in line room houses with poor water and sanitation facility. Most health and nutrition indicators including infant mortality, birth weight and stunting show a generational lag compared to national averages. The plantation children remained outside the national education system for decades creating a significant deprivation that is still to be rectified fully. The health facilities servicing estate population are yet to be mainstreamed. Similarly, the educational attainment rates including population with O/L and University education are significantly lower for this segment of the population. In comparison to other communities the Malaiyaha Tamil community's presence in public sector employment and

tertiary education is abysmally low and access to land, administrative services and welfare programs remain grossly unequal. Many do not have an address. The poverty rates among the community members are significantly above the national average. They are among the most vulnerable to disasters but least integrated into government disaster preparedness and mitigation measures.

We believe that the political status of the community and the socio-economic wellbeing are closely linked. Prolonged periods of discrimination, statelessness, disenfranchisement and the decline of the population that followed, continue to cast a long shadow to date and have shaped the contours of our demands. The cycles of structural violence that oppressed them, the resultant internal and external displacements, discriminatory and unfair treatment and continued marginalization suffered by this community, have added greater urgency to our appeal.

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Collective for Maanbumigu Malaiyaha Makka

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