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**Malaiyaha (Up-country) Tamil
Identity and Politics
in the Twenty-first Century**

Address by

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Introduction

In September 1999 I came to Sri Lanka to begin research for my dissertation in anthropology at the University of Michigan. I was based in Hatton for the duration of my stay, which lasted until November 2000. The following paper is an initial, preliminary attempt to make some sense of the multitude of information I collected over the thirteen months that I spent in South Asia.

Tea and Politics

My research has been framed by two events in the recent political history of up-country Tamils that are critical factors in determining the fate of the community in the twenty-first century. The first is the death of Saumiyamurthy Thondaman in October 1999 after fifty years as head of the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC), historically the largest trade union of estate workers and the largest political party in the up-country. Thondaman was a commanding figure not only in up-country politics, but in Sri Lankan politics in general. He was a member of both United National Party (UNP) and People's Alliance (PA) governments since his initial election to parliament in 1977 and was a minister in both administrations. He was a man of many contradictions, somehow being able to serve with both the PA and UNP, to be an estate owner but also leader of an estate workers' union, and to lead strikes against government-owned estate companies while serving as a cabinet minister.

These contradictions in Thondaman's personality and politics were mitigated by both his charismatic and his autocratic tendencies. Most of the more than fifty trade unions currently operating in the estate sector formed as a result of splintering off from the CWC. These splits were caused as much by ideological differences as personal issues, including caste, but over time, as is often the case in Sri Lankan politics, the political became personal. Granted, many union leaders who left the CWC formed significantly more leftist unions, such as Abdul Aziz's Democratic Workers' Congress (DWC) and V. K. Vellayan's National Union of Workers (NUW). However, some of these splits could have been avoided if Thondaman practiced more internal democracy. Dissenting opinion was not permitted in the CWC, and no young leader was allowed to rise too high in the union, unless of course he was a blood relative. A recent example is S. Sellasamy, the former General Secretary of the CWC, who was pushed out several years ago to allow Arumugam Thondaman to rise to a position of power. Though Sellasamy has formed the Ceylon National Workers' Congress (CNWC), a court case regarding his status and possession of the CWC's electoral symbol drags on.

Dissatisfaction with Thondaman was present not just among the union leadership, but among the rank and file as well, and with his death a year ago, a lot of frustration, anger and resentment has emerged. As Arumugam Thondaman has tried to fill the shoes left to him by his grandfather this past year, another split erupted in the CWC. This split is only the most recent example of the many political changes that have occurred in the up-country in recent years. The old political order, over which the CWC presided as the main, and sometimes seemingly as the only, union, party and voice of Estate Tamils, is no longer operative. However, a new political order has yet to take final shape. The parliamentary elections held on 10 October are the first step in establishing this new social and political formation in the post-Thondaman era of the twenty-first century.

Before I address the recent elections, though, I want to go back several months to the power struggles within the CWC that flared up in the spring, and the strikes in the estate sector in June and September. Soon after Thondaman's death, Arumugam Thondaman became the leader of the CWC. Previously, Arumugam had been financial secretary of the CWC, and many senior members of the CWC had some issues with his

use of funds and lack of financial transparency. These were brought to the attention of the senior Thondaman, but in his own unique way he was able to brush off these concerns and make sure that they were not pursued any further.

By May 2000, these concerns over Arumugam's financial administration of the CWC, including the mortgaging of several properties that the union had owned, including their headquarters in Colombo, had come to a head. Of the eight CWC MPs, five of them, S. Sathasivam, S. Rajaratnam, V. Sennan, A. M. D. Rajan and P. P. Devaraj, pushed for Arumugam to open up the account books and explain his past actions, if not to step down as leader. By August, no resolution to this problem was found, and these five MPs left the PA-aligned CWC to contest the parliamentary elections with the UNP. Arumugam has never fully answered the dissidents' concerns with financial irregularities, and has tried to oversee the CWC with the same arrogant style as his grandfather. However, he does not have the same charisma or political experience as his predecessor. The dissidents raised critical issues, since millions of rupees of union dues had apparently been lost or misused. However, they seemed to have raised the issue too late to have significant impact. The power of Thondaman was so strong as to muffle their dissent during his lifetime, and even immediately afterwards, when they chose Arumugam as party president, even though they had their reservations about his abilities and accomplishments.

In the recent parliamentary election, Arumugam, along with S. K. Jegatheeswaran and Muthu Sivalingam of the CWC, ran on the PA ticket in Nuwara Eliya district, the heartland of the tea country, while Sathasivam ran with the UNP, along with Puttirasigamani of the UNP and P. Chandrasekeran of the *Malaiyaha Makkal Munnani*, or Up-country People's Front (UCPF). The Up-Country People's Front, along with its affiliated union, the Up-Country Workers' Front (UCWF), was formed in the late 1980s by a young generation of former CWC members as a more radical alternative to the CWC (see Sivarajah 1991). While Thondaman still spoke of Indian Tamil estate workers, the leaders behind this new party saw themselves as *Malaiyaha*, or up-country Tamils with no significant connection to India. The issue of the appropriate name for up-country Tamils of Indian origin is a heated one, and I have dealt with this at length elsewhere in a paper for the Marga Institute

which will be published as a monograph before the end of this year, and translated into Tamil and Sinhala early next year.

In short, debates over names are manifestations of larger debates over identity and the place of this community of Tamils in contemporary Sri Lankan society and politics. The lack of an agreed-upon term is a reflection of the ongoing nature of this debate, and certain terms are more appropriate in certain situations. The choice of names, among *Malaiyaha* Tamil, Up-country Tamil, Indian Tamil, Indian origin Tamil and Estate Tamil, is often a reflection of one's politics. In calling themselves the *Malaiyaha* People's Front, this party marks a clear break with the traditional, accommodationist approaches of Thondaman and the Ceylon Workers' Congress. They no longer defined themselves by their status as estate workers, but by their living in the place of *Malaiyham*, the up-country or hill-country of Sri Lanka.

On December 31, 1999 the collective agreement between the Employers' Federation of Ceylon, representing the twenty-one major tea and rubber estate companies, and the major estate trade unions, represented by the CWC, the UNP-affiliated Lanka Jathika Estate Workers' Union (LJEWU), and the Joint Plantation Trade Union Centre (JPTUC), consisting of the UCWF, NUW and eleven other unions, expired. Due to the death of Thondaman in October and the presidential elections in December, negotiations for a new contract were delayed until February 2000. By June, negotiations had arrived at a stalemate over the critical issue of wages.

Actually wages were the only issue on the table, and other important areas of importance to estate workers, such as housing, workplace conditions and occupational safety were not discussed. However, estate trade unions have never aggressively fought for such issues during contract negotiations, although they are in a position to do so. The unions and estate management companies could come to some agreement on such non-monetary benefits, thus improving both the daily lives of estate workers, for example, by providing protective uniforms and more ergonomic tea baskets, as well as the productivity of the plantations, a seemingly win-win type of situation. Although housing might not initially seem relevant to contract negotiations, since housing in estate lines is ostensibly granted on condition of current or former employment on the estate, it could conceivably be included despite most

estate companies' desire to ignore this vestige of the colonial plantation system.

So, the unions and management had reached an impasse. The daily wage for a tea estate worker in the last contract was Rs 95 plus a Rs 6 price supplement, on which no EPF was paid. Going into negotiations, the CWC was pushing for a daily wage of Rs. 131, while many unions in the JPTUC were asking for Rs 150 and some were even demanding a monthly wage. By mid-May the unions had lowered their demand to Rs 123 and the management had upped their offer to Rs 115 (*Sunday Times Business*: 1). On June 11, the CWC led the other unions in a prayer campaign, during which workers would go to estate temples rather than to work first thing in the morning, and then report to work late while also starting a go-slow action.

Such a measure was called instead of a strike because President Kumaratunga had declared the country on a war-footing, which included the banning of strikes, a few weeks previously. To what extent a go-slow action counts as a strike is debatable, but since the CWC was a part of the PA government, I assume that either they did not want to be perceived as going against the declarations of the president or they felt that a partial strike would be a more effective bargaining tool. This go-slow action continued until June 20, when a new contract was signed. The CWC, which had led the go-slow, claimed victory, but the new contract turned out to be a major victory for management, a situation only exacerbated by the September strike.

The union actions in June were fairly effective, and after seven working days, the go-slow showed no signs of slowing down, at least on one estate near Dickoya where I have focused my research, which I will call Lydon estate. Over the course of the union action, an average of two-thirds of the workers on Lydon showed up for work later than the normal 8:00 a.m. starting time. While in the fields, an average of 78.4% were on a go-slow, plucking less than the usual number of kilograms of tea. Lydon normally has a daily crop of about 5,000 kg of plucked green tea, but during the go-slow action, their daily crop was an average of just 2,113 kg, or 42% of normal productivity. Roughly similar situations existed on other tea estates in Nuwara Eliya district, and the available data show that the union actions seriously hurt estate companies and that members' participation did not decrease over the course of the go-slow action.

In my conversations with workers on Lydon and neighboring estates, they all showed a vast willingness to continue the go-slow even longer than seven working days to get a higher wage. Price increases had begun in May, and these daily wage workers were beginning to feel the brunt of the rise in the cost of living. When I asked workers what wage they thought was reasonable, the overwhelming consensus was that Rs 150 was a fair wage. No matter what union they belonged to, almost all workers I talked to felt that Rs 150 would be a wage worth fighting for. None of the union leaders, though, seemed to be listening to the concerns of their members. In fact, they did not seem to be asking them about their problems, issues or demands throughout the process of negotiations. Decisions on negotiations were made in offices in Colombo, rather than on the estates in Hatton, Talawakelle and Haputale where the results of the contract would be most felt. Estate Tamils are no longer the isolated, ignorant and illiterate population that past leaders have presumed them to be, and they are frustrated that their voices are unheard in union decision-making.

The new collective agreement increased the daily wage to Rs 121. However, the base wage was just Rs 101 with a Rs 6 price supplement. The extra pay was in the form of attendance incentives. If a worker worked for over 85% of working days offered in a month, they would get an extra Rs 8 per day. If they had an attendance rate of over 90%, then an extra Rs 14 was given. As the manager of Lydon estate told me, this was a "total coup" for management. With the attendance bonus in place, worker out-turn and productivity both increased significantly in July and August. The new contract and wage structure were very much in management's favor, even though the go-slow action had put the unions in a position of relative strength prior to settlement.

A major reason for this is that the day before signing the contract the devaluation of the rupee was discussed in parliament, and a devaluation of 5% occurred the next afternoon. This came at the end of a series of price increases in basic commodities and utilities, such as diesel, electricity, cooking gas, bus fares, and telephones. Management saw the writing on the wall and wanted to sign a contract the morning of June 20 before the devaluation was finalized. The CWC and the LJEWU readily agreed, which forced the smaller unions in the JPTUC to go along with the deal. Although Arumugam Thondaman, who led the CWC ne-

gotiating team, despite having no experience in union negotiations, was a cabinet minister, presumably with access to such information on the government's economic policies, the actions of the CWC in June seem to indicate a lack of awareness of the larger economic contexts of the tea industry. Although workers got an increment of 7 to 20%, in terms of real value they lost out, as prices for most goods increased by up to 30%. This failure by the new leadership of the CWC to deliver a fair and just contract to their members was the final straw that led to the latest split by the dissident five MPs.

In many ways the go-slow actions in June were a failure, especially since sources close to the Employers' Federation have informed me that management was prepared to settle for Rs 130 or 135. Workers' real wages have decreased despite the wage increase, and with general elections around the corner, the sufferings of the ordinary estate worker could not be ignored by the political leadership. The rising cost of living was one of the critical issues in the past election, and the CWC did not want to appear unconcerned about it. Therefore, on Sept. 10, Arumugam called a snap strike to demand that estate workers get the same Rs 400 per month cost-of-living allowance that other private sector employees had gotten in an executive order in July. The presidential decree specifically exempted any group that signed a collective agreement in the first six months of 2000, presumably since their negotiated wage increases would have taken into account the price increases. Some estate union leaders feel that this had been designed to specifically target the tea industry, but even if it was not, tea estate workers did not get the Rs 400 monthly allowance to offset the rising cost of living.

The strike, which lasted from September 11 to 19, was widely seen on the estates and especially among non-CWC union leaders as a political ploy. Workers were not clearly informed why the strike was called. Many had said that they thought the Rs 400 increment had been promised to them earlier, and the management was holding it back. While many of the unions supported a wage increase for workers in theory, the timing of the strike action reeked of political motivations. It therefore lacked widespread support, unlike the go-slow action in June. On Lydon estate, an average of 85% of CWC members, 40% of CNWC members and 85% of non-union members were on strike, while all members of the UCWF and LJEWU went to work after the first day or two. Further-

more, the CWC had already missed their opportunity for a substantial wage increase during negotiations in June. In addition, the strike itself went against the collective agreement signed in June, which requires two weeks' warning for any union action, and a court case regarding this issue is still pending. The strike in September was called to cover up the CWC's earlier failings and provide them with a popular issue on which to run an election campaign. Election results seem to indicate that it worked to win them votes, but it failed to bring workers a wage increase.

The strike was called off with the establishment of a presidential commission of inquiry into estate workers' wages, but no recommendations have been announced, although the original deadline has passed. However, when payday came around just days before the parliamentary elections, the effects of the strike were strongly felt. The strike did not achieve a raise for workers, and ended up hurting their pay by far more than just losing seven days' worth of pay because of the attendance bonus agreed upon just months before. The number of workers on Lydon estate who qualified for a bonus of Rs 14 in September was half of what it was in July and August. Assuming a plucker on Lydon worked all 18 days of work offered outside the strike, she would have earned Rs 1926 in September. However, had she worked 23 days, thus qualifying for the Rs 14 bonus, she could have earned Rs 2,783, a difference of Rs 857 for just five days' work, or a potential 45% increase.

Going on strike always necessitates a certain amount of sacrifice by workers, though they are usually motivated by the prospect of increased wages at the end of the strike. However, estate workers did not get any wage increase after this strike, and the wages they did earn in September were decreased. About half of all workers on Lydon estate got no pay on payday, 6 October, due to advances, allowances and other deductions, since their earnings were significantly lowered by missing the attendance bonus. The only reason they got any money at all was that the Deepavali festival advance of Rs 1250 was given out.

Overall, the strike appears to have been a significant failure for the CWC, at least in terms of its capacity as a trade union; it seems to have been unhurt politically, thanks to the advantages of being aligned with the governing PA. In fact, Arumugam Thondaman was chased off a stage at a rally in Bogawantalawa, near Hatton, a week before the election by workers demanding to know where their Rs 400 was. In the end,

the September strike was an entirely political venture, and did not have the long-term interests of the workers in mind, only the short term interests of certain unions cum political parties.

In the recent parliamentary election, five of the seven MPs elected from Nuwara Eliya district are *Malaiyaha* Tamils, Arumugam Thondaman, S. K. Jegatheeswaran and Muthu Sivalingam on the PA ticket, and P. Chandrasekeran and S. Sathasivam with the UNP. However, no *Malaiyaha* Tamils were elected from any other district. On the other hand, former CWC vice-president P. P. Devaraj, CNWC leader S. Sellasamy and K. Kanakaraj from the UCPF have gotten seats on the UNP national list, and Marimuttu of the CWC got a seat on the PA national list, bringing the total of *Malaiyaha* Tamil MPs to nine, through the national lists. How these MPs will perform in parliament is anybody's guess, but the election of *Malaiyaha* Tamil MPs on both the PA and UNP tickets is a sign of political maturity of the community. However, this has led them to lose their previous minority-party "king-maker" status, a position now occupied by Muslims and Jaffna Tamils. The recent failures of the CWC as a union alongside their political success reveals the problems inherent in this dual role. *Malaiyaha* Tamils are working on the estates much less than in previous years, and with their changing socio-economic roles, their political interests have also been transformed.

Repatriation and Identity

In July and August of this year, I took a break from my research in Sri Lanka to go to Tamil Nadu for five weeks of research on *Malaiyaha* Tamil repatriates there. By comparing the lives of repatriates in India with those of estate Tamils in the up-country, the political and social changes among *Malaiyaha* Tamils can be better understood in the wider context of identity formation in contemporary South Asia. Before I left for India, I had expected repatriates to be facing extreme difficulties, but most of the problems they had faced due to their status as repatriates had been solved by the mid-1990s. Repatriates in India have more or less integrated with the local population, and they no longer face problems solely because they are repatriates. They face plenty of problems in regard to poverty, caste, employment, education and health care, but so do millions of other Indians. While it has taken over 150 years and sev-

eral generations for Tamils of Indian origin to start to be accepted as Sri Lankans, Sri Lankan repatriates in Tamil Nadu have become Indian in the span of just one generation.

Although the *Malaiyaha* Tamil community in Sri Lanka has witnessed a lot of progress in recent decades, in comparison to their cousins who went to India, their achievements seem meager. While *Malaiyaha* Tamils now celebrate the fact that many students from the estates are passing their O/levels and A/levels, repatriate youth in Tamil Nadu are not just finishing secondary school, but going on to higher education, getting B.A.'s, B.Sc.'s and M.A.'s. Despite the relative educational achievements of up-country Tamils, the vast majority of estate youth have only a handful of job choices available to them. They can be a worker on the estates, a low-status job that no estate youth wants; a worker in a garment factory, a more desirable job though in a worse work-place due to the lack of union representation; a domestic servant, mostly in Colombo though a few do go to the Middle East; a teacher, really the only option for estate youth with some amount of education; or a worker in a shop or hotel, but this is an option only for men.

For practically all estate youth these five jobs are the only ones available. Granted, there are lawyers, accountants, government servants and other professionals whose parents were estate workers, but their numbers are very few. As one *Malaiyaha* Tamil lawyer told me, after he got his degree in the early 70s, one of his professors gave him a certificate honoring him as the first Estate Tamil to get a law degree, but he was ambivalent about the honor. After being in Sri Lanka for over 150 years, having one lawyer among a population of over one million was seen by him not necessarily as a source of pride, but more as a source of shame.

While employment opportunities are limited in Sri Lanka, repatriates in Tamil Nadu have had much more success, since the whole occupational field is open to them. Much of this is because of the restricted opportunities for education and employment available to Tamil-speakers in Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, a lack of knowledge of English and/or Sinhala is a serious impediment to any professional career, while in India this is not as much of a problem. In addition, since about 60% of all repatriates are from Paraiyan, Pallan, Sakliyan, or other Dalit groups, many have been able to take advantage of reservations for scheduled castes. Such affirmative action policies have never been implemented in Sri Lanka,

except for those in favor of the majority community. Reservations for scheduled castes have turned repatriates' caste status from a source of shame into a source of pride, but such a transformation in identity has yet to become possible for *Malaiyaha* Tamils.

The fact that over four hundred thousand Tamils left the up-country for India between 1968 and 1984 has had an enormous impact on those that remained behind, especially since a disproportionate number of the small but significant Indian origin Tamil middle class left the country. More important than the numbers that left, though, is the choice by the majority of *Malaiyaha* Tamils to stay in Sri Lanka. With the end of the ferry service to India in 1984, repatriation also stopped, making *Malaiyaha* Tamils' residence in Sri Lanka permanent. This coincided with political changes, as most up-country Tamils became citizens over the course of the 80s, and with social changes, especially the growth in education. Ever since Tamils came from South India to work on coffee, and later tea plantations, over 160 years ago, they have been accused of being a transient population and more Indian than Sri Lankan. The end of repatriation and the extension of citizenship to nearly all remaining *Malaiyaha* Tamils meant that such allegations could not be effectively used against them in the future. *Malaiyaha* Tamils are as Lankan as any other resident of the island, although they have yet to be fully recognized as such.

When I asked repatriates about the differences between India and Sri Lanka, a standard response was that in Sri Lanka they were able to earn money easily, but in India they have freedom. This of course is something that money cannot buy. The sense of freedom that repatriates feel is due to the absence of what I will call the ideological dimension of the ethnic conflict, the suspicion, harassment and mistrust that pervades everyday life in Sri Lanka. Even I felt this difference, for example, when traveling great distances in India without passing a single checkpoint. Repatriates' lives in Tamil Nadu are still constrained by factors like class and caste, but they are free to be as Tamil as they want to be, something they could not do in Sri Lanka.

While many repatriates complained about their difficult financial situation, the majority of them are now as well off or better off than their relations back on the estates in Sri Lanka. For example, about three-quarters of repatriates in Kodaikanal now own their own homes. How-

ever, many faced extreme difficulties after they first arrived in India, leading them to conclude that if they knew things were going to be so bad in India, they would never have left Sri Lanka. Many repatriates initially went to their *èr* (native place), expecting to be able to farm on their family's land. However, many of them found their distant relations living there to be less than accommodating once they arrived. Also, almost none had any experience with agriculture outside of the tea estates. The Indian government gave land to repatriates, but much of it was not very fertile. In some cases, corrupt officials grabbed the only decent land in repatriate settlement schemes, leaving the repatriates themselves to try to farm dry or rocky land, often far from water. Those repatriates who have remained in the plains tend to be doing not as well as those in the hills, except for the lucky few who secured government jobs.

The difficulties in the plains led many repatriates to go to the hills, either to Kodaikanal or to towns in the Nilgiris, like Kotagiri, Conoor, Ooty and Gudalur. One of the major reasons was climate. They were used to the cool hill country of Sri Lanka and had a hard time adjusting to the hot and dry conditions of places like Pudukkottai. Those who went to the hills directly from Sri Lanka or soon after arriving in India have thrived, although newcomers have had more trouble due to the early arrivals' snatching up all the good jobs. The main jobs in Kodaikanal were in construction and logging, which were booming industries until recent years when environmentally conscious regional planning has come into force, limiting the number and extent of new construction and deforestation.

In the Nilgiris, most repatriates got jobs on tea estates, since that was the only job with which they had any significant experience. Conditions on the government-owned TANTEA estates, which were created especially for repatriates, and on larger private estates are much better than those of Sri Lankan estates. Standard daily pay, for example, is 75 Indian rupees, roughly equivalent to about 135 Sri Lankan rupees, though the cost of living is much less in India. In addition, the housing, medical and crèche facilities are much better maintained in the Nilgiris, since the buildings were built in the 1970s, not the 1870s. However, not all tea workers in the Nilgiris were able to get such relatively lucrative jobs. Many repatriates work as day laborers on private small-

holdings, owned by Badagas, the local land-owning "tribal" group, earning wages of Rs 40 to 50 per day, and without the other benefits of large estate work. For these day laborers, life in India is tough, and the lack of regular income is a sharp contrast to their lives working on the large tea estates in Sri Lanka.

More than economic hardship, though, the strongest factor affecting repatriates' feelings about India and possibly returning to Sri Lanka is the presence of other relations. Three repatriate women whom I met in Kodaikanal and Kotagiri were the most vociferous in their desire to return to Sri Lanka. All of them faced economic difficulties as day-laborers in tea small holdings, construction or logging, but so did dozens of other repatriates I met who had no desire to go back to Sri Lanka. All three of these women came to India with their husbands and their husbands' families; none of their blood relations repatriated. Economic problems in and of themselves were not sufficient for people to want to give up on India and return to Sri Lanka. The lack of a social and emotional support system to help endure such financial troubles is what led these women to want to come back. I interviewed two of these women with their husbands, and it became quite clear that this issue was a bone of contention between both couples, with the husband having little or no inclination to return to Sri Lanka.

The case of Selvi, one of these three women, provides some valuable insights into the process of identity formation that repatriates underwent and highlights some of the problems *Malaiyaha* Tamils have faced in Sri Lanka. Selvi, however, is Sinhala, but married to a Tamil. After being in India for 18 years, though, she feels that she has become more Tamil than Sinhala. Both Selvi and her husband are from the same tea estate near Bandarawela, and both had worked on the estate before they repatriated. When they came to India in 1982, they came directly to Kodaikanal, where he got a job in construction and then house-painting, while she did logging work. Despite many years of economic problems, they have been slowly building their own house over the past six years. It was nearly complete when I met them this past July.

Both of them grew up in estate line rooms, but now were homeowners, a position that is not easily available to estate Tamils in Sri Lanka. It is a possibility for Sinhala estate workers, though. Both of Selvi's brothers have built houses in the new village that has come up right next

to the estate where their sister still lives in a line room. While Selvi's family in Sri Lanka spoke of the ethnic harmony among estate workers, which are roughly half Tamil and half Sinhala on this estate, the divide is clearly seen in housing, with all Tamils living in the line rooms, and none in the adjacent village. The boundary between the estate and the village is not easily apparent; the only way to tell is by the changes in housing, from line rooms to single-family dwellings.

The contrasts between repatriates and estate Tamils become even greater when comparing the younger generation. Selvi has three children. The eldest, a son, 24, works at one of the large tourist hotels in Kodaikanal. The next oldest, a daughter, 22, works in a government textile shop in town. While the son's job is not atypical for estate youth in Sri Lanka, the daughter's is, since I know of no young estate women working retail. They will work as domestics, on the estates or in garment factories, but not in shops and hotels. This shows how estate Tamils have absorbed some of the more conservative mores and middle class values concerning female propriety from their Sinhala neighbors. The youngest child, a daughter, 20, is studying at the recently established Mother Theresa Women's University in Kodaikanal. In comparison, higher education is something almost totally unavailable to estate youth in Sri Lanka. Of the few dozen university students from the estates, almost all are the first person from their estate, most with populations in the thousands, to go to university.

Initially I thought that Selvi's children did not provide much of a contrast with the situation in Sri Lanka, since, had her family not repatriated to India, her children would probably have been raised bilingual in Sinhala and Tamil and could have gone to Sinhala schools and easily continued on to university. However, none of Selvi's nieces and nephews living on or near the estate in Bandarawela have studied past their O/levels. While limited educational facilities in their mother tongue is not the limiting factor, as it is for most estate Tamil youth, their being from a rural background gives them little opportunity for further education. What this story indicates is that even three Tamil youths who could have had all the educational and employment opportunities available to Sinhalas if they had stayed in Sri Lanka are doing better in Tamil Nadu than either their Sinhala or Tamil cousins back on the estates and nearby villages. The over-arching reason for this difference is the ethnic con-

flict, which places limits not only on the possibilities open to estate Tamils, but also to similarly poor, rural Sinhalas.

Dimensions of the Ethnic Conflict

Two years ago, when I started planning my research in Sri Lanka, I had a very strong desire to focus on aspects of contemporary Sri Lankan life and culture that were not related to the ethnic conflict. I thought that by doing work among up-country Tamils I could bracket off, though not ignore, the ethnic conflict. I did not want it to take over my work; I wanted to somehow find a subaltern stream of Sri Lankan society and culture working positively in spite of or even against the ethnic conflict. Looking back on this after over a year in Sri Lanka, I realize that I was deluding myself. One cannot discuss or research contemporary Sri Lanka without addressing the ethnic conflict to some degree or another, and this imperative becomes even stronger if Tamil Sri Lanka is the focus of study. I have been amazed at how easy it seems for *Malaiyaha* Tamils to go about their daily lives in the up-country, but in so many small ways the ethnic conflict puts limits on their future possibilities, whether in education, employment, or just enjoyment of life.

Though I have not been the first to discuss it in this way, I see the ethnic conflict as having three dimensions, which I refer to as the military, the legal and the ideological, all operating simultaneously and sometimes in tandem with each other. Additionally, solving the conflict on one dimension won't necessarily solve it on another. The first, military, dimension is the civil war occurring mainly in the North and East and occasionally in bombings in the South. Up-country Tamils have by and large not been involved in this violence, while the other two dimensions have affected them greatly.

The second, legal, dimension is the lack of attention given to Tamil interests and grievances in the political, social and economic spheres. It is this dimension which a new constitution is intended to solve. The third, ideological, dimension is the daily discrimination and harassment that Tamils in Sri Lanka endure, as well as the continued mistrust and suspicion between Tamils and Sinhalas. This dimension is the most subtle, the most difficult for many Sinhalas to grasp, and the most persistent. Even if the war ends tomorrow and a new constitution is

ushered in next month, this dimension will continue for at least another generation. The effects of this dimension of the ethnic conflict is what most strongly limits opportunities for *Malaiyaha* Tamils, especially their attempts to fully integrate themselves as respected and accepted parts of Sri Lankan culture, politics and society. However, all three dimensions of the ethnic conflict put up barriers to up-country Tamils.

Conclusion

Malaiyaha Tamils have made significant strides in the political and social spheres over the past twenty years, but the ongoing ethnic conflict places a glass ceiling over any further achievements. Those *Malaiyaha* Tamils who repatriated to India faced enormous problems at first but have been able to prosper in ways that up-country Tamils in Sri Lanka have not been able to do. However, *Malaiyaha* Tamils are gaining more political power and are slowly coming to be recognized as equally legitimate citizens of Sri Lanka. The coming years are a critical time in the history of the *Malaiyaha* Tamil community, since they provide opportunities to finally fully integrate into the national mainstream in all aspects of modern life. However, the continuation of the ethnic conflict is the largest, but not only, deterrent to such developments, with poverty, poor education and political divisiveness also being factors. Suffice it to say, even with the ethnic war, discrimination, harassment and mistrust, the twenty-first century will easily be a better one for *Malaiyaha* Tamils than the nearly slave-like conditions of the nineteenth century or the struggles and violence of the just-finished twentieth century.

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