



Roots & Resilience

A Pictorial Journey across 200 Years of the Malaiyaga Thamilar Community in Sri Lanka





The Institute of Social Development (ISD) is a non-governmental organization based in Kandy, Sri Lanka. It was established in 1991 by a group of civil society activists who had a keen interest and passion for human rights, minority rights, labour, gender and the marginalization of Hillcountry Tamils from the national development process. The group identified that even though there have been major development activities since 1948 by both government and non-state actors, there have been no positive impacts on the lives of the marginalized communities in general and Hillcountry Tamil community in particular. Thus, the organization was formed with the view to addressing issues related to social injustice, inequality, marginalization, exclusions and discrimination experienced by ethnic minorities. The organisation is committed to empowering Hillcountry Tamils and advocating for equal rights, democracy, and good governance.

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The Tea Plantations : a captivating tapestry of natural beauty





"You have nothing to lose but your chains..."

Karl Marx

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Foreword

The Malaiyaga Thamil community in Sri Lanka, whose history spans over two centuries, has played an integral role in the development of the country's plantation industry and has faced countless struggles in their journey towards recognition and acceptance.

In Sri Lanka, the British who colonized the entire country in 1815 introduced coffee, and later, tea, rubber, and coconut cultivation. However, the local people declined to work in the British-introduced plantations. As a result, the British brought in indentured labour from South India from 1823 to 1941. Since 1847, the migrant South Indian Tamil community has become one of the major migrant communities in Sri Lankan society. This book seeks to document the community's journey, from their migration to Sri Lanka as indentured labourers to their fight for citizenship and political rights. Through vivid photographs and compelling stories, the book highlights the community's contribution to Sri Lanka's social, economic, and cultural fabric.

The Malaiyaga Thamil community in Sri Lanka has a story of struggle, resilience, determination, and success. They were not allowed to become citizens of Sri Lanka by the native and political leaders who took discriminatory measures that excluded them from national development and deprived them of citizenship and political rights for decades. The issue of statelessness was finally resolved in 2003 due to the struggles of the Hill Country Tamil community. This book celebrates the 200-year history of this community and serves as a tribute to their struggles and accomplishments, while also reminding us of the ongoing work needed to ensure that all communities in Sri Lanka are recognized, respected, and empowered.

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The Early Days: tea plantations from the bygone era



Preface

It is with great pleasure that ISD (Institute of Social Development) presents this pictorial highlighting the journey, contribution, success, and aspirations of the Malaiyaga Thamilar community in Sri Lanka. The history of plantation workers in Sri Lanka is one of struggle and resilience. For over 200 years, the Malaiyaga Thamilar community has worked tirelessly in the estates of Sri Lanka, contributing significantly to the growth of the country's economy. However, their journey has not been an easy one.

From the early days of indentured labour to the present day, the community has faced numerous challenges, including discrimination, exploitation, and marginalization. The community's contribution to the country's economy was often unrecognized and unrewarded, excluding them from mainstream development by disfranchising them for decades. This book is an attempt to document their journey, highlighting their struggles, victories, and contributions to the country's development.

The book covers a selected range of topics that we believe are milestones in the history of the Malaiyaga Thamilar community in Sri Lanka. It includes their arrival and early days, their early struggles, working conditions, key figures and their cultural and social practices. It also delves into the community's struggles for citizenship and political rights, and the various initiatives that helped to address these issues. The book is a result of ISD's extensive experience working with the community. As we celebrate the 200-year history of the Malaiyaga Thamilar community in Sri Lanka, we hope that this book will contribute to a better understanding of their journey, their challenges, and their achievements. We also hope that it will inspire future generations to continue the work towards creating a more just and equitable society for all.

P Muthulingam

Executive Director, Institute of Social Development – ISD

Kandy, Sri Lanka.



Children from the plantation returning home from school, Nuwara Eliya

1. The Arrival of Malaiyaga Thamilar Community to Sri Lanka

With the fall of the Kandyan Kingdom in 1815 that had managed to withstand foreign invaders until then, the British conquered the entire island. A few years later, the Governor of Ceylon, Sir Edward Barnes, asked the Director of the Peradeniya Royal Botanical Garden, Mr. George Bird, to research whether the central highlands were suitable for coffee cultivation. Mr. Bird initiated coffee cultivation in the Peradeniya Botanical Garden, which became successful. The first coffee plantation was then established in Sinhapitya Gampola and the second plantation was started in Gannoruwa,

These coffee plantations needed workers for planting and harvesting. Initially, the southern Sinhalese who worked in the coffee estates declined to work as labourers, making the British look to other countries for workers. They had already experienced bringing labourers from South India (current Tamil Nadu) to construct roads and other infrastructures in Colombo and the suburbs. The British decided to bring workers from South India to work in the coffee plantations. They pasted posters in South Indian villages advertising the opportunities in Ceylon's coffee plantations. In 1823, a group of South Indian Tamil workers voluntarily migrated to Ceylon to work in the coffee estates, when they did so they did not expect to remain in the island permanently.



Woman picking coffee in the earliest coffee plantations of Ceylon



Women working on processing coffee in the early plantations



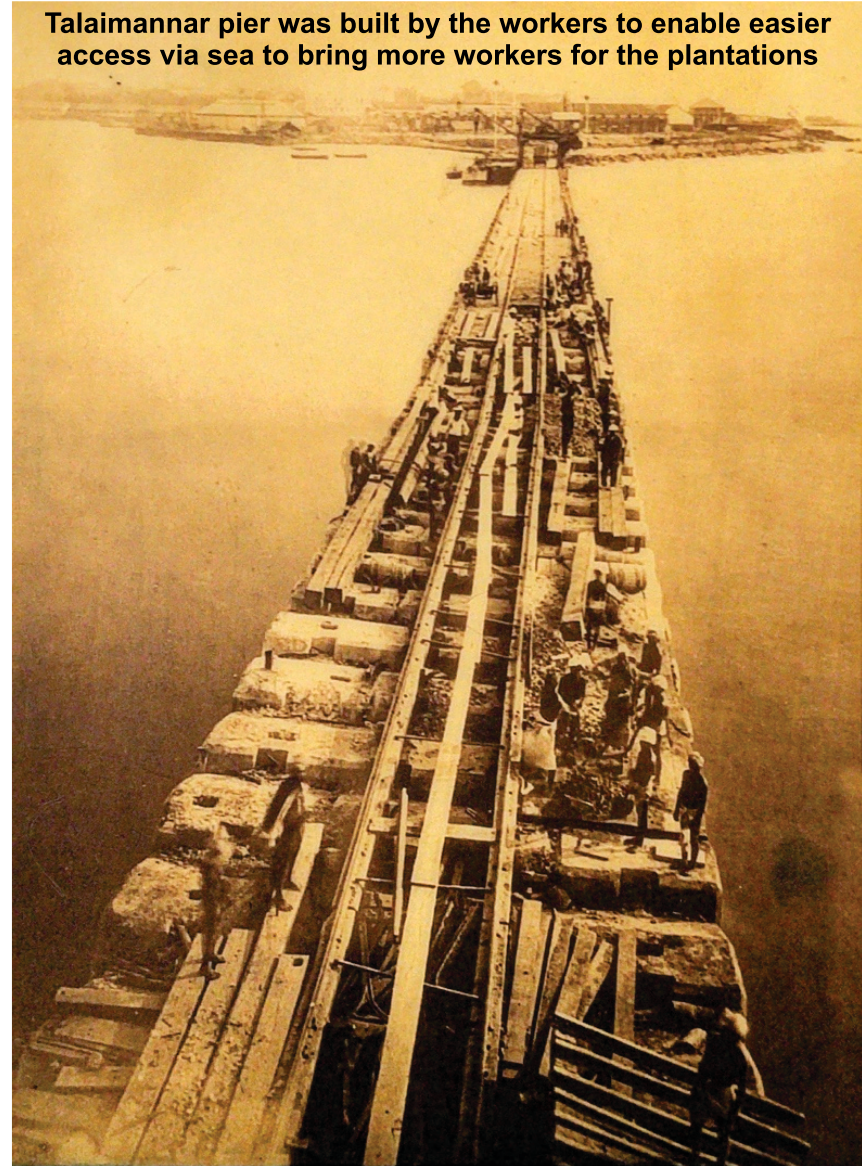
Coffee workers at the Glenlit Estate

With an increase in coffee estates in 1824, the owner of Black Forest Estate, Mr. Henry Byrde, sent one of his employees to South India to bring some labourers for the estate. The employee went to South India and brought down 14 labourers. This is the first instance where organized indentured labourers were brought to Ceylon by the British. Meanwhile, South India faced severe famine, the villagers who were of the lower caste and landless were severely affected.

The painful journey of the first workers from India to the Central Hills of Sri Lanka



Talaimannar pier was built by the workers to enable easier access via sea to bring more workers for the plantations



Kamala Markandaya, in her book *Nectar in a Sieve* describes how workers for the plantations in Ceylon were recruited from the most remote and rural villages in India: *One morning, Selvam rushes into the house to announce that drums are beating in town. Rukmani remembers the morning when Arjun made a similar announcement about the tannery workers' arrival, and feels a sense of dread. As it turns out, some people have arrived in town to recruit labourers for tea plantations in Ceylon. Arjun and Thambi see this as a good opportunity for them, a way to escape "hunger and idleness." Nathan and Rukmani are extremely reluctant to see their children go so far away, asking how they will make such a long journey and what they will do if their employers break their promises. Rukmani points out that money is not everything, but Arjun counters that they cannot make even a meagre living as things stand in the village, and that they are wasting their youth here. In the morning, after kissing their parents' feet, the boys leave. Rukmani knows she will never see her sons again* (Markandaya, K. 1956) .

During this period, Tamil labourers who had no land or money voluntarily left their villages and walked towards Pamban/Rameshwaram. They then took small boats called *thonies* to the Mannar seashore at Arippu, from where they walked another 131 miles to reach their destination, Matale. Later, the British hired middle -level steamboats to help the labourers cross the sea, but due to overloading, some of the boats capsized during the journey. The labourers who managed to reach Talaimannar had to walk 148 miles through dense jungle to reach Matale. Some of the labourers went to Tuticorin and sailed to Colombo, while others went to Ammpatnam or Thondi and sailed to Colombo. Unfortunately, during the journey, many of them lost their lives due to dysentery, fever, and starvation. If anyone fell sick on the way to Matale, they were left behind, and the rest continued. Sadly, those who were left behind often died due to illness or attacks by wild animals.



Dilapidated roads



Lack of access to clean water



Inadequate sanitation facilities



Decrepit preschools and childcare centers



Poor housing

Despite two centuries of labouring in the plantations, the Malaiyaga Thamilar community still lack access to basic human requirements.



Participatory Development: laying pipes to access clean and safe drinking water

2. A History of Injustice, Discrimination and Marginalization



Plantation owners used Kangani (the supervisors/overseers pictured above with their masters) to get down labourers from India

As the small and medium boats sailed to the seashores of Ceylon, tragedy struck multiple times. Many lives were lost, yet there were no records to show for it. One of the first recorded incidents occurred in 1853. A schooner named Colombo had set sail with 150 coffee workers onboard.

The Kangani System

The plantation owners gave money to workers, known as Kangani, to bring labourers from South India. The Kangani also provided advance payment to those who agreed to come to Sri Lanka with them. When a person joined the Kangani, they became a member of that particular gang and were treated as slaves.

The Kangani would register the labourer's name under them and keep a record of it called *Thundu* (Tin). The *Thundu* was a record containing all the information of a worker who came from South India to work on the estates. Once a worker arrived at the estate, he could not leave without the *Thundu*. If he left without it, he would be arrested by the police and sent to jail or back to the estate where he worked. If a worker deserted the estate without permission, both the *Kangani* and the estate Superintendent would severely punish them. When a worker fell sick, they were made to work as long as possible for the sake of the head money.

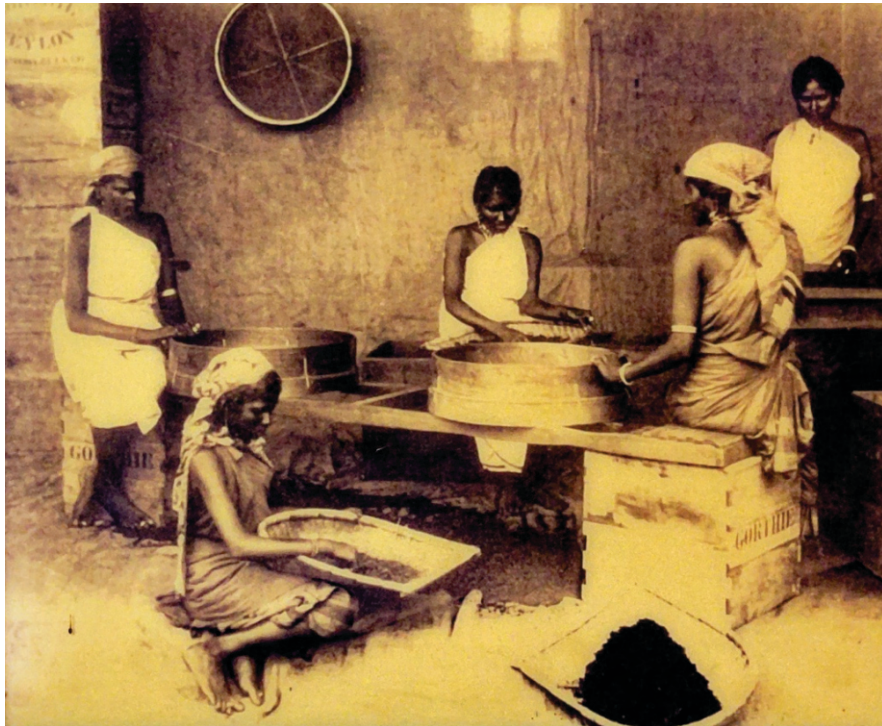
Sadly, it sank shortly after leaving Colombo, resulting in the death of 100 workers. Years later, in 1862, the Ceylon government immigration service began operating a ferry service. However, this did not prevent more disasters from happening. In February 1864, the government immigration vessel called *Audy Letchmy* was carrying 120 workers from Vangalai to Paumpan when it sank. Only seven workers survived, while 13 of the 14 crew members made it out alive. Just a few months later, in June of the same year, the vessel named *Sarah Armitage* sank off the coast of Chilaw with 60 workers onboard. Only two bodies were recovered from the tragic incident, which became known as the Bitter Berry Bondage.

A planter once wrote that *One could fill two carts with the skulls of those who have been abandoned unburied on the road.* Another planter, William Boyd, wrote that *cartloads of skulls might have been collected along the Great North Road showing the numbers of poor Tamils who had fallen victims to this scourge (cholera), aided in many cases by starvation which had overtaken them in their panicked flight to their distant homes on the overcrowded coast of South India.* Observers estimated that between 1841 and 1848, around 70,000 people, or approximately 25% of the workers who had come to Ceylon, died of various causes. Another planter, P.D. Mills, wrote in his book *Thirty Years Ago: Reminiscences of the Early Days of Coffee Planting in Ceylon* that coolies (Tamil



Some of the very first workers getting some respite from their work in the fields

labourers) often left aged parents in their villages to work on coffee estates. When news of their deaths reached their families, it was heart-wrenching to hear their wailing and lamentation. Accidents were often fatal, as their comrades could not wait for the ill or injured. Disabled members of the group were abandoned deep in the forests amid wild beasts and snakes, left with only a little food and water resulting in imminent death.



From Leaf to Cup: The Labourers of the Tea factories



The beauty of the surrounding hill country and natural habitat lies in stark contrast to the living and working conditions of the Malaiyaga Thamilar Community, the community is fighting to ensure better living and working conditions for future generations



Workers from India were also deployed in the Rubber plantations that were first introduced to Sri Lanka in 1876. By the early 20th century, Sri Lanka had become one of the world's leading rubber producers. Despite the challenges confronting the rubber industry in Sri Lanka at present, both Sinhala and Tamil workers continue to rely on rubber plantations for their livelihoods.



Children discussing their plans for continuing their education during COVID

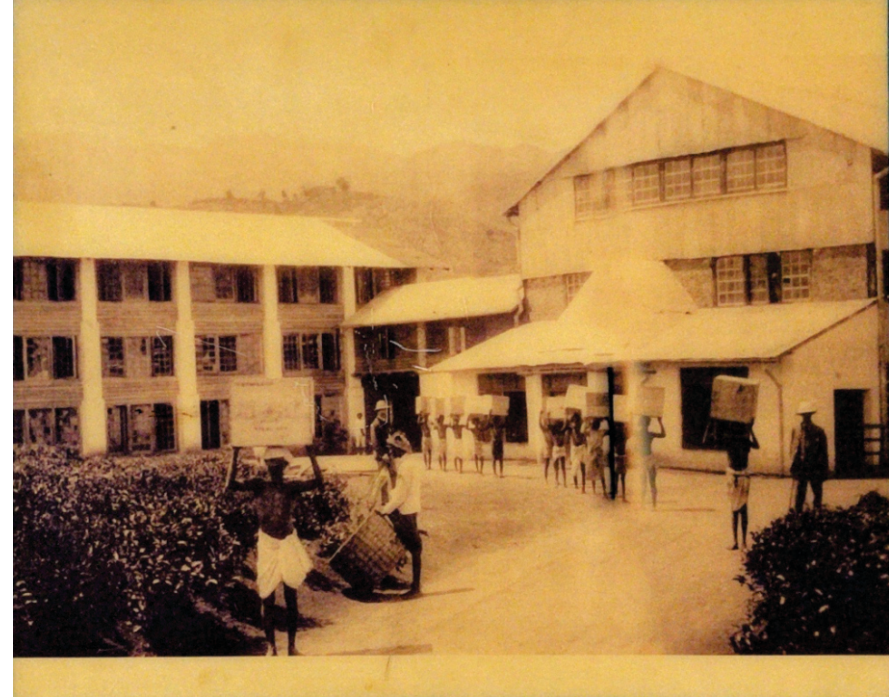
3. The Struggle for Labour Rights and Cultural Identity



The Brave Women Who Paved the Way in Ceylon's Tea Fields

During these early years, workers were confined to the estates and rarely had the chance to venture into the outside world. K. Nadesa Iyer, an Indian-born trade unionist who worked with the pioneer trade union leader of Ceylon, A. E. Goonasingha, took initiative to learn about the plight of plantation workers. He disguised himself as a petty trader and entered several estates to observe the workers' living conditions and have dialogues with them. In 1931 Natesa Iyer and his wife Meenatchiammal founded a trade union called the All-Ceylon Estate Labour Federation. The formation of the trade union marked a significant turning point in the history of plantation workers in Ceylon.

In 1935, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party formed the All-Ceylon Estate Workers' Union and mobilised the plantation workers to demand wage increases and better living conditions. At the end of December 1939, the workers of Mool Oya Estate in Hewaheta, who were members of the All-Ceylon Estate Workers Union under the leadership of the Sama Samaja Party, initiated a strike, demanding wage increase and reinstatement for the worker leader who mobilized the workers under the union. The strike continued until 10th January 1940, when the Superintendent of the estate requested the police to threaten the workers. To disperse the strikers, the police sergeant fired his weapon, and as a result, the estate worker Govindan, a father of two children, was shot dead.



from field to cup workers play a key role in the tea leaf processing process

The All Ceylon Estate Workers Union (ACEWU), led by the LSSP, gained widespread publicity following the well-known "Bracegirdle incident" in 1937. Mark Bracegirdle, an Australian who came to Sri Lanka to train as a planter, was disturbed by the way the workers were being treated and the deplorable conditions in which they worked and lived. He sought to raise workers' issues and accused the planters of inhumane treatment. Eventually, he was dismissed from his job and ordered to leave the country. Instead of leaving, Bracegirdle joined the LSSP and actively participated in its activities supporting the rights of plantation workers.

In 1939, Sri Jawaharlal Nehru visited Ceylon to assess the issues faced by the Indian Tamils. At his request, the Ceylon Indian Congress (CIC) was formed on July 25th 1939. The first president of the CIC was V.R.M.V.A. Lakshmanan Chettiar. In August 1939, the first district committee of the CIC was established in Gampola, and Savumiamoorthy Thondaman was unanimously elected as the president of the Gampola District. In 1945, he was elected as the president of both the CIC and the Ceylon Indian Labour Union at the convention held in Nawalapitiya.



From the beginning women tea pluckers have played a pivotal role in the tea estates, working under hard and arduous conditions to ensure that the leaves are plucked and ready for processing



It is believed that God Maduraveeran will provide safety to communities in the plantations



Communities in the plantations hold their Gods in high esteem and want to always have them close to where they live and work. Photos depict shrines for worship set up by the workers in the fields where they work. Gods are an important aspect of life on the plantations.



Workers going back to the fields after dropping their first batch of leaves at the collection center



Children learning about the importance of personal hygiene for combatting the pandemic, Monaragala

4. Remembering the Resistance and Sacrifices

The first martyrs of the Sri Lankan working class were these estate workers who sacrificed their lives to the gallows while proclaiming that the fight for justice and better working conditions must continue. Despite the threat of death, these workers remained steadfast in their convictions and refused to back down from their fight for justice. Their bravery and sacrifice continue to inspire generations of Sri Lankan workers who have followed in their footsteps in the struggle for workers' rights and social justice.

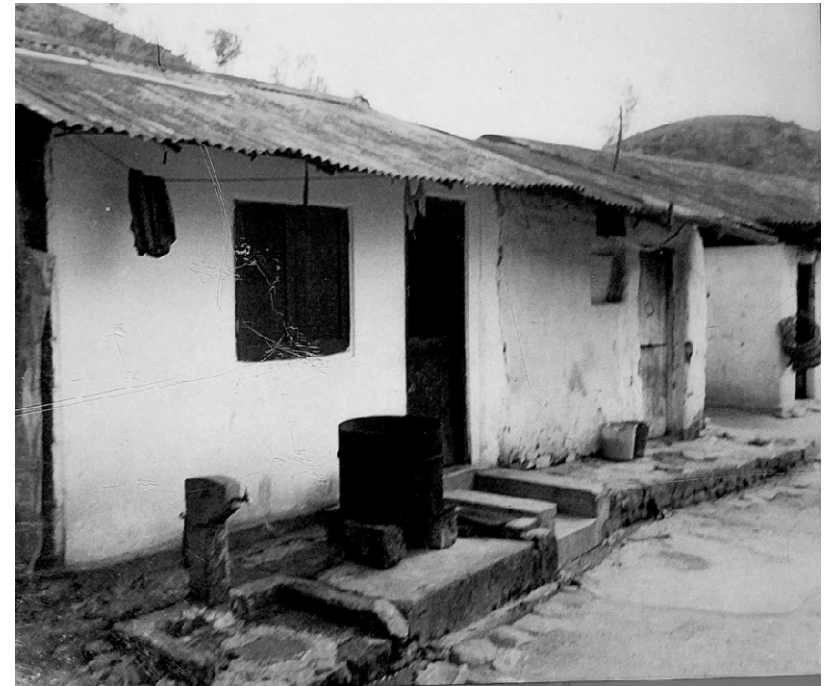
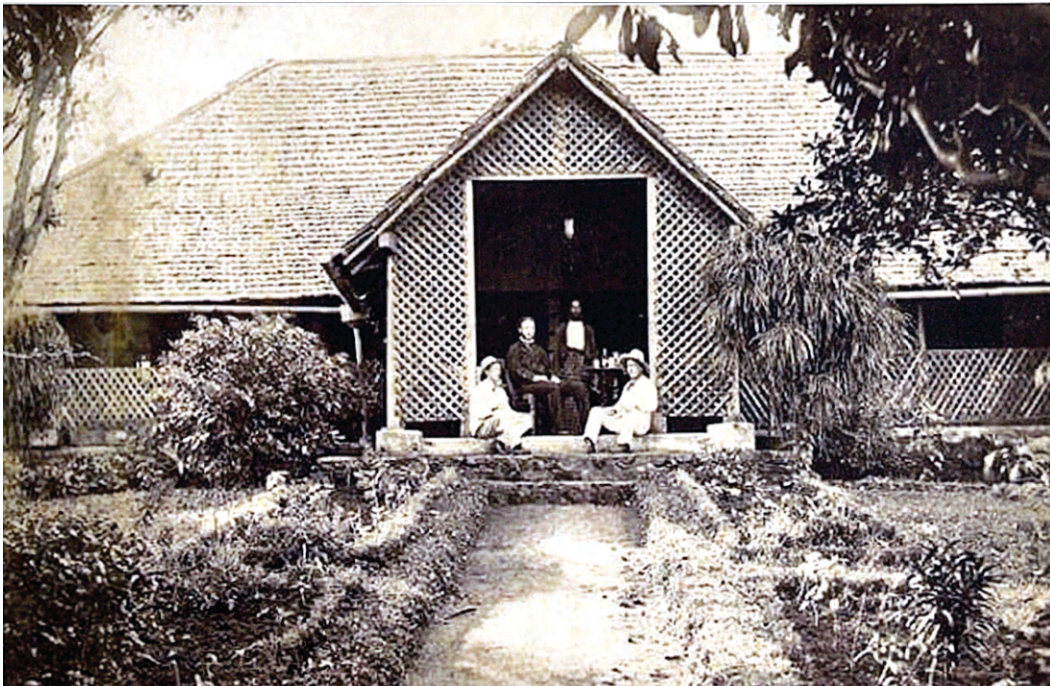
In 1940, in the Stellenberg Estate, the Superintendent refused to allow workers to form the All-Ceylon Estate Workers Union, which led to unrest. He also dismissed Maiyappan, the union secretary at the estate, and obtained a court order to evict him. This incident outraged the members of the union, and Ramasamy Weerasamy, a union member, planned to eliminate the Superintendent. On May 9th, 1941, Iyan Perumal Velauthan and his friend Weerasamy, with the support of other workers, killed the Superintendent on his return from dinner with his friend at LeVallon Estate. Both Velauthan and Weerasamy were executed on February 27th and 28th 1942, at Welikada Prison.

Last words before execution

*Revered Sir,
This is our humble and devoted letter to you sir, who have been so full of sympathy for us. We thank you for all that you have done to try to save us from the hangman's rope. You tried your best sir but failed. The fault is in our stars. Long live the workers' Raj! All power to our Sangam!
Yours,
Velauthan.*

In May of 1940, the workers at Wewessa Estate joined the All-Ceylon Estate Workers Union. They formed a union branch and wrote a letter to the Superintendent requesting that the union be recognised. They also demanded that two *Kanakka Pillai* (supervisors) be removed from the estates, the estate tavern be closed down, the Head Kangany's shop stop demanding workers to purchase goods, and that their salary be increased by 65 cents. Despite their request, the Superintendent did not respond to the workers' demands. In protest, the workers went on

strike. The Superintendent called the police to break up the strike, but the workers overpowered the police and took their rifles. The workers formed a committee and ran the estate for a week. Eventually, a dialogue was initiated, and the dispute was settled. However, the police took revenge against the workers. 216 labourers were taken into custody in connection with the strike and were tortured until they passed out from loss of blood. They were then kept hanging by a pair of handcuffs. The Wewessa Struggle is a story of workers fighting for their rights and facing brutal retaliation from those in power.



Estate owner's bungalow vs estate workers line room: As different as night and day

In 1946, the Knavesmire rubber and tea estate, spanning 777 acres in the Kegalle district, was owned by Mr. E.L.M. Ibrahim Lebbe Marikkar. The leader of the state council, D.S. Senanayaka, decided to buy the estates and evacuate the estate workers, later settling Sinhala peasants under a

government-sponsored scheme. The estate was bought, and the government superintendent, Mr. D.R.M. Rajapakse, was appointed. He asked 360 worker families to leave the estate within 38 days. The workers protested this decision, but they were not offered any work. Finally, under the trespass act, the court jailed the workers. (Source; "My Life and Time" by Thondaman, p. 29).

In 1956, workers at the Dayagama estate staged a protest demanding recognition for their unregistered trade union, the Democratic Workers Union (DWC). The planters association only allowed the CWC to function in the estate, refusing to discuss labour issues with the DWC. Many labour issues went unresolved, leading to protests on May 2nd 1956. Over 10,000 workers from the Agarapatana area joined the protest. The estate management tried to force workers into the fields, which resulted in violence as over 100 CWC members disregarded the protest. A 23-year-old man named Afraham Sinko and his group attempted to calm the workers, but they refused to listen. The estate manager called the police to the scene, and they began shooting without understanding the situation, tragically killing Afraham Sinko. Following this incident, Prime Minister SWRD Bandaranayake ordered the Planters Association to recognize all registered unions and not to permit police to enter estates unnecessarily. Despite the tragic loss of life, this was a significant achievement for the workers' movement.

In 1977, the United Front government, led by the SLFP, decided to take over 7,000 acres of land in the Nuwara Eliya - Maskeliya electorate and distribute it to villagers. This decision put hundreds of thousands of plantation workers at risk. Around 125,000 workers, irrespective of their trade union differences, took to the streets and protested against this decision, preventing the surveying of the lands amidst police intimidation. On May 11, 1977, the survey department attempted to survey the lands with the help of police in Devon estate, disregarding the workers' protests. This eventually led to an altercation between police and workers, during which Sivanu Letchuman, an estate worker of Wattagoda estate, was shot dead by the Patana police.

Despite the tragic deaths of these workers, their sacrifices resulted in significant achievements in the fight for their rights.



Years of struggle and endurance cannot break the spirit of a community and their collective strength as they continue to fight for a better tomorrow for their children



Child in the plantation awaits the return of the Mother from the fields after a long day of work



Workshop for Teachers on formation of health clubs in schools, Uva Province

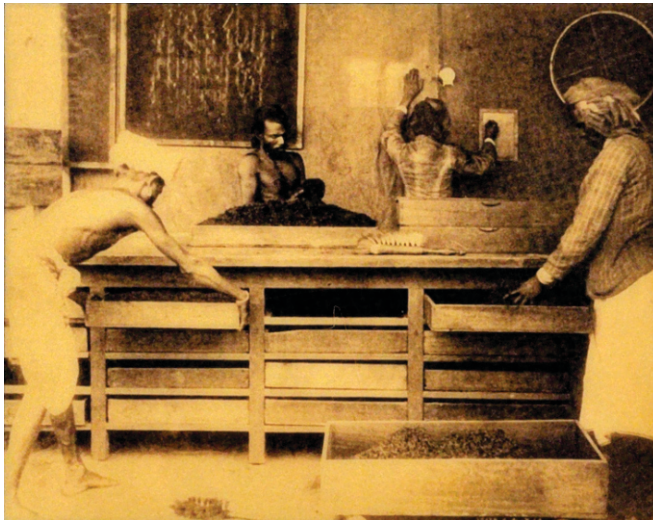
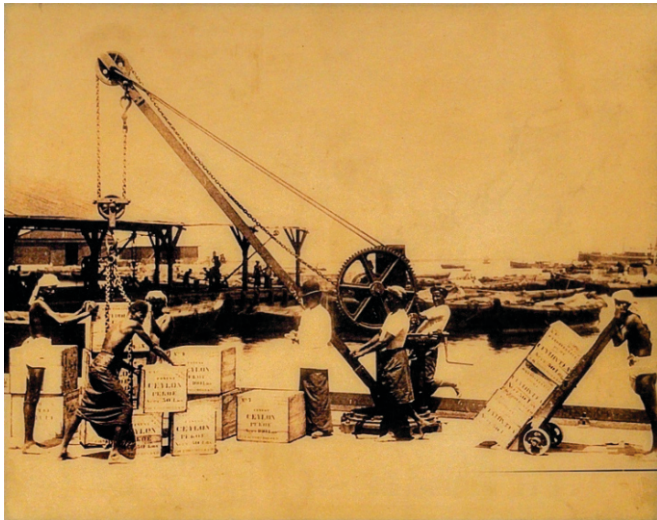
5. *Breaking the Shackles through Political Struggle*

The Indian immigrants were given universal franchise, and the first election was held in 1931 based on the Donoughmore constitution. In that election, two members were elected to the State Council, Mr. S. P. Vythilingam and Mr. Peri Sundaram. Mr. Peri Sundaram was nominated as the first Minister of commerce, Industry and labour in Ceylon. In 1936, Natesa Iyar was elected to the State Legislative Council. In 1947, under the Soulbury constitution, seven members were elected to the Parliament. In 1948, the Citizenship Act was introduced which deprived citizenship of one million Indian Tamils. Further, in 1949, the Indian and Pakistani Residents (Citizenship) Act No. 3 was introduced which further disfranchised Indian Tamils.

In 1952, the Ceylon Indian Congress initiated a Satyagraha, a nonviolent protest movement, demanding citizenship rights. The demonstration took place in front of the old parliament and lasted for about 100 days.

In 1954, a meeting was held between the Ceylon and Indian delegations to discuss the issue of Indian and Pakistani residents' citizenship. The Nehru-Kotalawala agreement was reached, where the Ceylon delegation promised to process all pending applications under the Indian and Pakistani residents' citizenship Act within two years.

In 1963, the Renaissance movement Ceylon Dravidar Kalagam launched a demonstration in Bandarawala, demanding citizenship for stateless Indian Tamils. However, the Goondas of Member of Parliament K.M.P. Rajaratna attacked the demonstration. This incident was brought up in parliament, and the parliamentarians from the left demanded that Prime Minister Ms. Sirimavo Bandaranaike solve the statelessness problem.



The combination of harsh working conditions and minimal incentives prompted the workers to take action against their masters

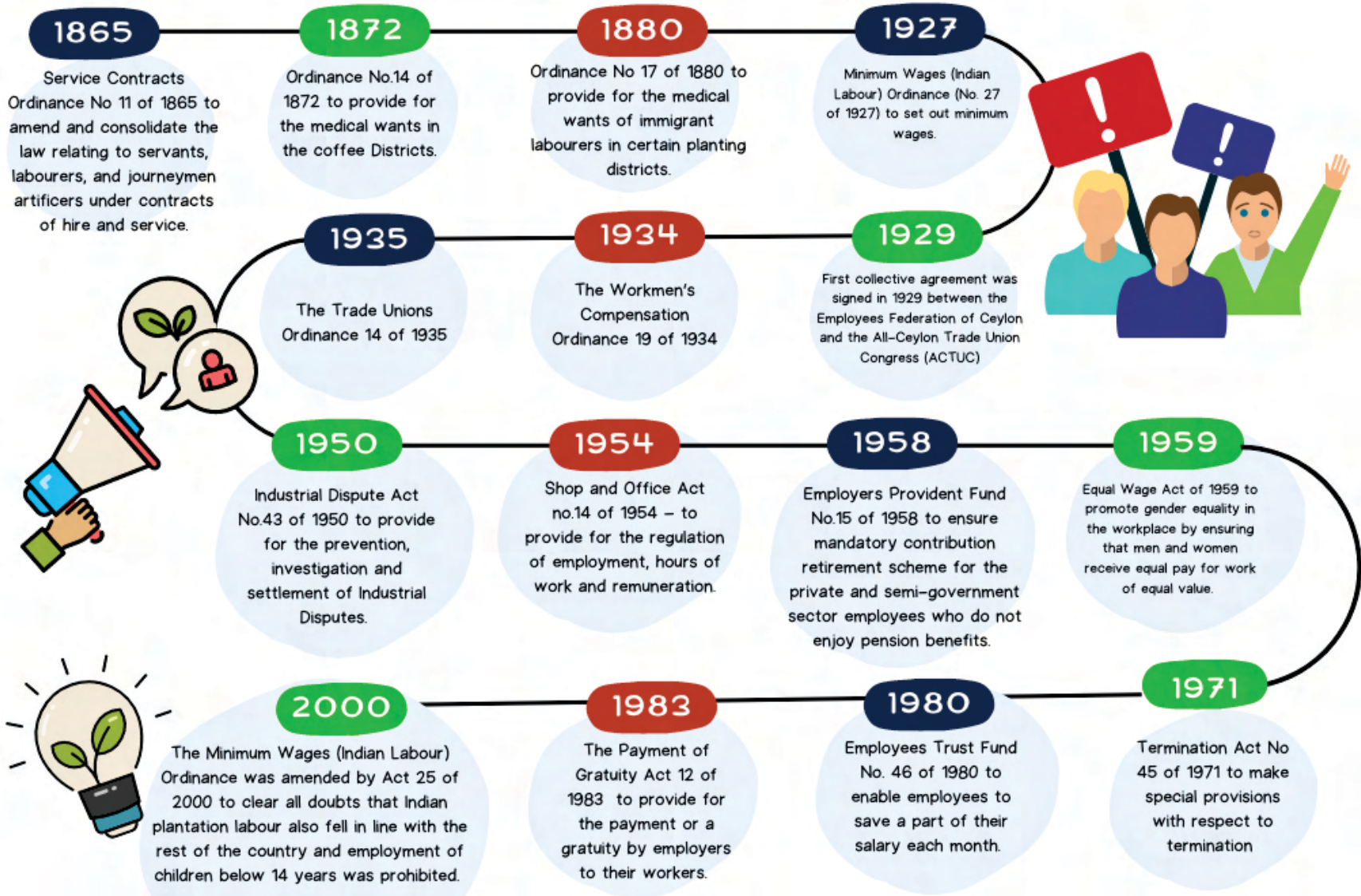
In 1964, due to continued lobbying by the Sri Lankan government and the persistent demand for citizenship by the Indian origin community, a pact was signed between the two Prime Ministers, Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Lal Bahadur Shastri. The agreement was known as the Sirima-Shastri Pact and aimed to grant citizenship to certain sections of the community without consulting the leaders of the community.

In 1985, Thimphu talks were held to find a solution to the ethnic problems in Sri Lanka. During these talks, the issue of statelessness of the Indian Tamils emerged as a key demand. In 1988, the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) launched a prayer campaign that lasted over 100 days, and this contributed to the introduction of the 1988 Citizenship Act (Act No. 39). Finally, in 2003, the Sri Lankan government addressed the long-standing issue of statelessness.



The Sirima Shastri pact was a landmark in the Malaiyaga Thamilar communities' fight for citizenship

IMPORTANT LABOUR LEGISLATIONS





Regular consultations with stakeholders, continued demand for rights and improved delivery of services to the plantations will ensure that hard won political rights can be sustained



Exploring the possibility of reforestation, Knuckles region , Matale District

6. Migration to other Cities, Regions and Countries

During the 1970s and 1980s, there was a significant migration of Up-Country Tamils from Sri Lanka to the North and East regions of the country and to South India. The initial phase of migration was triggered by the Shrima Shastri pact of 1964, which resulted in the repatriation of a large number of Indian-origin Tamils to India, including those from the Up-Country Tamil community.

Subsequently, there were several incidents of direct and structured violence targeted at ethnic Tamil minorities living in southern Sri Lanka, which led to further migration towards the North and East regions of the country. The increasing insecurity and fear of violence among the Up-Country Tamil community also played a significant role in their decision to migrate.

The migration of Up-Country Tamils had a significant impact on the demographic composition of Sri Lanka, particularly in the North and East regions where the majority of them settled. The migration also led to a loss of valuable human resources and skills for the country, as the Up-Country Tamil community was known for its contributions to various sectors of the economy, including tea plantations and other agricultural industries.



Taking the train, starting the journey back to India



Harsh working condition, low salaries, limited opportunities and increased fear for their security has resulted in migration of the Malaiyaga Thamilar community, to other cities, regions and countries



Ceremony held when a girl child reaches puberty is an important rite of passage for girls in the plantations



Cultural events are an important aspect of life in the plantations

7. Culture and Religion

"Kovil illa Ooril Kudi Irrukka Vendam," a popular Tamil saying, means "Don't live in a village where there is no temple." This saying holds significant meaning for the Malayaga Thamilar community.

During the migration of workers to Ceylon, they began to worship their Gods on the journey from their villages to the hill country of Ceylon. As they made their way across the country, they had to rest in several places, and during these rest periods, they would install the statue of Mari Amman and worship it. The Sri Muthu Mariamman Temple in Matale is one such temple that was established by the workers. The significance of this temple is not just religious but also historical, as it represents the cultural heritage of the Tamil community who have made significant contributions to the development of Sri Lanka. The temple has become an important landmark and cultural center in the Matale region.

After the installation of Marri Amman Temples in the estates they began to practice religious festivals every year and conduct traditional religious dramas such as *Kaman Koothu*, *Ponar Sangar*, and *Aruchunan Thabasu*. They also performed their traditional dances such as *Karaamg Kummi*, *Kolattem*, and *Kavadi*.



Drummers: forging their own cultural identity



Temple festival: religious activities provided a sense of protection and empowerment to the workers

As the working-class community settled into their new life in the hill country of Ceylon, they began to identify new deities. These included gods such as "Roda Muni," the Wheel God, "Kavvathu Samy," and the "Pruning Knife God." "Roda Muni" is named after the giant wheel installed in the factory, while "Muni" represents power and strength. These new gods were identified and worshiped by the plantation workers, who saw them as a means of protection and empowerment.



Shrine to the Gods at one of the factories indicates that religion is closely linked to the work environment of the community



Religious festivals continue to play an important role in the lives of the Malaiyaga Thamilar Community, piercing and other forms of sacrifice are seen as powerful expressions of faith



Text

Women from the plantations collecting feed for their cattle for their livelihood development



Despite facing numerous hardships, the Malaiyaga Thamilar community continues to smile, holding on to hope for a better tomorrow



Creating child friendly environment within schools in the estates, Monaragala

8. *Struggle for Education Equality*

Despite Sri Lanka's long-standing policy of free education for all, the benefits of this policy have not always reached the country's plantation communities. In 1907, the British introduced an ordinance to provide education for children in vernacular languages, including those in the plantation sector. According to the ordinance, the superintendent of the estate was responsible for providing primary education up to grade five for children between the ages of six to ten. Once the child reached the age of ten, they had the right to join as a child labourer in the estate.

In 1947, the Sri Lankan Parliament member Mr. C. W. W. Kannangara submitted a landmark bill to provide free education for all children in the country until graduation. However, despite the bill's progressive vision, it did not initially extend to children living in the country's plantation communities. This was despite the persistent demands of plantation political parties, who argued that the children of plantation workers deserved access to quality education just as much as their urban counterparts.

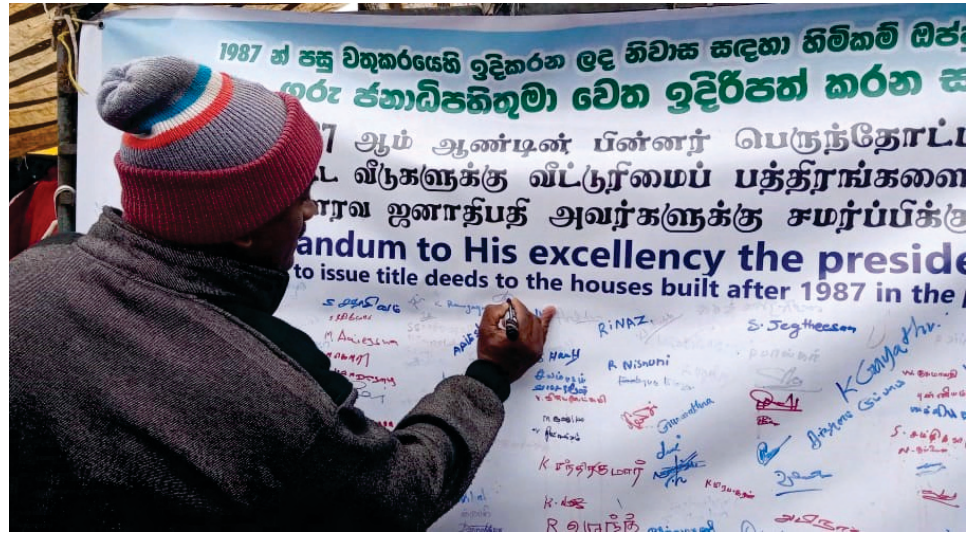
It was not until 1975 that plantation schools were brought under the national education system, marking an important step towards providing equitable educational opportunities to all Sri Lankan children. This move allowed for the establishment of better infrastructure and resources in plantation schools and enabled greater investment in teacher training and curriculum development



Children from the plantations deprived of free education that other children in the country enjoyed during the early days



From preschool to secondary school, amidst many challenges, children from the Malaiyaga Thamilar Community are striving to obtain the best education they can, so that they can look forward to a better future



Building on the struggles and experiences of their ancestors, the Malaiyaga Tamilar community is informing themselves and undertaking collective action to continue to demand for their rights



இ காவல்துறை
காலை
விசுவலிங்கம்
வெள்ளை
காலை
காலை

காலை
காலை

சீனிப்போம்
சீனி
தாழிலாளர்
கொடு
சீனிப்போம்

அஷ்யப்ப அஷ்யப்ப
தூக்கவள்ள தேயாலை
தொழிலாளர் சங்கம்
அதிகாரி சர்க்காலை
அஷ்யப்ப

Fighting for a better tomorrow

9. Trailblazers and Icons

Peri Sundram was the son of Periya Kangani, a prominent figure in the Nellimalai Tea Estate. After completing his studies at Trinity College, he went on to pursue further education in London, where he immersed himself in the city's culture and ideas. In 1931, Peri Sundram contested the election for the Legislative Council and was subsequently appointed as the first Commerce, Industry, and Labor Minister.



Peri Sundaram



Karuppiyah Mathavan, who later became known as Savumiamoorthy Thondaman was the son of the owner of the Wewendan estate and went on to become a prominent figure in the trade union movement in Sri Lanka. As a key member of the Ceylon Indian Congress, which later became the Ceylon Workers Congress, he played a pivotal role in advocating for the rights of plantation workers. Thondaman became the president of both the CWC and Ceylon Labour Union in 1945 and remained an unchallenged leader of the CWC until his death in 1999. He worked to empower workers and promote their rights in the face of opposition from powerful economic and political forces.

Savumiamoorthy Thondaman

K. Rajalingam, the son of a Periya Kangani from Sanquer Estate, received his education at St. Anthony's College, Kandy where his passion for public service was ignited. Rajalingam recognised the critical importance of education in empowering the Malaiyaga Thamilar community. To this end, he founded the Saraswathy School in Pussella wa. In 1947, he was elected as a member of parliament. Rajalingam's dedication and commitment to his community earned him the nickname "*Malaiyaga Gandhi*" by the editor of Kalki Magazine published in India.



K Rajalingam



C V Velupillai

C.V. Velupillai, was born to a Periya Kangani of Madakumbura Estate. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Velupillai chose to write in English, a language that would allow his message to reach a wider audience. Velupillai's poetry touched the hearts of many, as he captured the struggles and hardships faced by the Malaiyaga Thamilar community in a powerful and poignant way. Velupillai had the honour of meeting Ravindranath Tagore when he visited Sri Lanka and dedicated his English poem "Vismadene" to him.

A. Ilanchelian was a reformist leader who played a key role in advocating for the rights of the Malaiyaga Thamilar community in Sri Lanka. As the head of the Ceylon Dravider Kalagam, he was a fierce opponent of the caste system and traditional mythologies that had long been used to oppress marginalized communities. Ilanchelian's vision was to create a society that was truly inclusive, where all citizens were treated with dignity and respect regardless of their ethnicity or social status. He believed that the Indian-origin Tamil community in Sri Lanka deserved to be recognised and celebrated for their unique culture and contributions to society, and so he coined the term "*Malaiyaga Thamilar*" to refer to the community

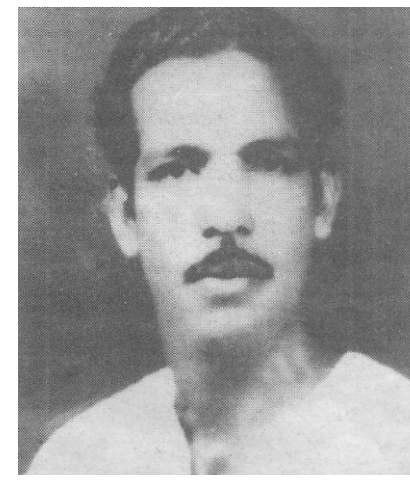


A Ilanchelian



In 1939 V K Vellayan captained Trinity Rugby, a significant achievement for the son of a Periya Kangani

V. K. Vellayan, the son of a Periya Kangani from an estate, was an accomplished athlete. After completing his education at Trinity College, Kandy where he excelled as the captain of the rugby team, Vellayan was offered a position as a planter. However, he declined the offer and instead chose to pursue a career as a trade unionist. Vellayan's passion for social justice led him to join the Ceylon Workers Congress, where he quickly rose through the ranks and became a prominent leader within the organisation. Vellayan broke away from Ceylon Workers Congress in 1964 and formed National Workers Union.



V K Vellayan

A. Aziz was a founding member of the Ceylon Indian Congress (CIC) and became one of its joint secretaries in 1939. He was elected as the president of the CIC Labour Union in 1942. Aziz was critical of the government's mistreatment of estate labour and its anti-Indian stance, which led to his arrest and trial in 1943. He was acquitted by the Supreme Court. In 1956, Aziz formed the Democratic Workers Congress (DWC) due to leadership rivalries with CIC president, Thondaman.



A Aziz



Back to school with renewed hope, Nuwara Eliya

10. *Hopes, Aspirations, and Expectations for a Brighter Tomorrow*

For many years, the Malaiyaga Thamilar community has been fighting to attain full and equal citizenship in Sri Lanka. This has been an enduring demand of the community, even as they celebrate their 200 -year history in the country in the year 2023. The community has long felt that despite their significant contributions to the country's economic prosperity, they are not treated as equal and full citizens in areas such as development, politics, governance, and economic development. The community continues to demand that Sri Lanka recognize their place in society and politics by enacting policies, laws, and institutions that are fair and inclusive. Their aim is that the Malaiyaga Thamilar contributions to the economy and social welfare of the country are acknowledged. As the Malaiyaga Thamilar community celebrate 200 years in Sri Lanka, we hope this pictorial will contribute towards the communities' attempt to gain recognition and social justice for themselves and their future generations.

A society needs to be inclusive to thrive and access to quality education, training and decent work is essential to end contemporary forms of slavery for all. The Government must listen to the people, including the most marginalized ones, and the silence on sensitive issues such as caste-based discrimination must be broken in order to trigger positive change... I witnessed first-hand that Malaiyaga Tamils are disproportionately affected by marginalization, discrimination, exploitative working conditions and appalling living conditions.

Tomoya Obokata, the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery on his visit to Sri Lanka in December 2021



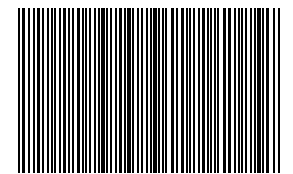
Even as traditions are passed down from generation to generation, the youth of the Malaiyaga Thamilar community are challenging the status quo and doing their part to ensure that their future is better than that of their forebearers

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