

## Longing for Equal Status: A Study on Changing Social Status among the Plantation Tamils in Sri Lanka

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Contemporary Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country as a result of a series of historical developments and mainly due to the colonial rules in the past. Therefore studying the Tamil community in general and the estate community in particular can be seen as a vital factor in this context. Tamils in tea and rubber estates are identified as Indian Tamils while the Tamil speaking inhabitants in the northern and the eastern parts of the island are identified as Sri Lankan Tamils who are also termed as traditional Tamils. Indian Tamils were brought from southern India to work in Sri Lankan plantations by the British colonial administrators through the system known as Kangany system. Today these plantation Tamils are approximately 850,000 scattered over 240,000 resident families. The social status of this population is based on their lifestyle centred on living in temporary houses known as 'line rooms' provided by the British planters. While the Sinhala villagers often labelled them using disparaging terminology such as 'demalu', 'wathu demalu', 'watte aayo', 'layime aayo' which suggested their low social status. Tamils living in other areas refer to them as 'thottakkattan', 'malaiyakkathan', 'vadakkathiyar', 'kallathony'. Estate Tamils, however, resent the use of such terminology.

According to observations made in estate areas, the intervention to replace 'line rooms', has a significant effect on the social status and the dignity of the plantation Tamils. Providing separate (independent) housing units similar to those in the Sinhala villages has been one of the demands of estate Tamils in their political agenda for generations. This study, therefore, is focused on two settlements initiated on self-help basis in 1980s and 1990s for estate working families which are known as Ganga Nagar in Nuwara Eliya and 'Jana Udana Gammanaya' in Kalutara. By present study it is envisioned to understand the effect of these programmes on the social status of the plantation Tamils. The study was carried out in 2002 and 2003 using both quantitative and qualitative research methods, involving the newly settled Tamils as well as the Sinhala communities in neighbourhoods.

Research findings reveal that the existing social status and recognition of those who moved into the settlement have improved their quality of life significantly. The majority of these people are happy and comfortable with their new social status. This newly established social status has supported social integration of estate Tamils with Sinhalese and contributed towards social acceptance of the broader Sri Lankan society. After fifty years of independence, we as a country have not paid adequate attention to transform these immigrant low status 'labourers' to community members with equal status. To achieve this, it is important that planners address social status, and dignity of the plantation Tamils.

Key Words: Sri Lankan Tamils, Estate Tamils, Line rooms, Separate living units, Social status

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