



MALAIYAHA TAMILS

2023 marked 200 years since the British colonialists brought people from South India to work on plantations in Sri Lanka. In the early 19th century, widespread famine and miserable living conditions in southern India forced the people to serve the British colonialists under slave-like conditions. By the 21st century, they have become nothing more than slaves with franchise rights. The fate of Malaiyaha Tamil plantation workers is the longest history of oppression in Sri Lanka.

The plantation was the backbone of colonial capitalism. Sri Lanka, the largest welfare state under the British Empire, was built on the labor of Malaiyaha Tamil plantation workers. The surplus wealth required to maintain the colonization projects planned and expanded by the British, large public service, free education, and free health was produced by the Malaiyaha Tamils. But the benefits of the welfare state went to all community groups except Malaiyaha Tamils.

After the British granted Sri Lanka independence in 1948, the first step of the local rulers was to abolish the citizenship of the Malaiyaha Tamils through the Citizenship Acts of 1948 and 1949. The Ceylon (Parliamentary Elections) Amendment Act enacted in 1949 disenfranchised them. As a result, in the general elections of 1952, no representatives were elected representing the Malaiyaha Tamil community.

Agreements signed between two countries like the 1954 Nehru-Kotalawala Agreement, 1974 Sirimavo-Gandhi Agreement etc. tried to resolve the issue of the citizenship of Malaiyaha Tamils. But all of them only resulted in further depriving them of their citizenship. The Sirima-Shastri Accord signed in 1964 made 150,000 Malaiyaha Tamils stateless. Due to the citizenship agreements, the families of Malaiyaha Tamils were torn apart and they were forcibly deported. Malaiyaha Tamils were finally granted Sri Lankan citizenship through the Citizenship of Persons of Indian Origin (Amendment) Act, passed in 2003, 55 years after independence.

Malaiyaha Tamils became the primary victims of state-sponsored anti-Tamil violence beginning in 1956 and went through similar violence in 1958, 1972, 1977, and 1983. 200 years of slavery of the Malaiyaha Tamils was created by the ethno-religious nature of the state. The destitution and socio-political degradation that these people have forever inherited is an issue of the state structure. Therefore, it requires active political interventions, not sympathetic positions.