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Author(s): Cole P. Dodge and Paul D. Wiebe

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# Tamil Repatriates in Madurai: Problems and Prospects

Cole P Dodge

Paul D Wiebe

*Many Tamil estate workers from Sri Lanka have been repatriated to India over the years. This study presents information relevant to an understanding of their conditions of life, as these occur among those settled in colonies in and around Madurai. Where possible, comparisons are drawn between repatriates and resident groups of people, repatriates from Sri Lanka and repatriates from Burma and repatriates employed in industries and repatriates otherwise employed.*

*While the data show that the conditions of life of the repatriates around Madurai are not nearly as bad as they have often been pictured in the press, government and other agencies could be doing far more than they are in the effective implementation of the entire repatriate process. It seems clear that the less fortunate have left the housing colonies while the more fortunate remain.*

THE rapid expansion of the British estate economy in Sri Lanka during the middle of the nineteenth century brought about the need for estate labourers. Sinhala villagers were engaged in paddy and other cultivation and in fishing and, in general, were neither available nor interested in working in the newly opened estate areas. To fill the need the British, then in colonial control both in India and Sri Lanka, allowed and brought in Tamils, known both for their hard work and docility as labourers. Their numbers were substantial over the years: 31,000 Tamils immigrated to Sri Lanka in 1843, 71,000 in 1844, 67,000 in 1845. By 1964, 975,000 estate workers of Indian origin were resident in Sri Lanka.

The integration of the Tamil workers into the predominantly Sinhala social system of highland Sri Lanka where the estates were established, was never achieved. Most estates were geographically remote and socially isolated. Religious, language, cultural, economic and other variations marked off the Tamils from the Sinhalese. The estate Tamils retained marriage, family and other linkages with their people in India. Under the colonial system as it then operated, it was more important for persons such as estate labourers to adjust themselves to the expectations of the dominant elite (in this case the British) than the expectations of others in their environment [see Kuper, 1971; Furnivall, 1948; Wiebe and Mariappen, 1978: 179-188].

Nor were these Tamil immigrants to become intergrated with the 'Jaffna Tamils' who had come to Sri Lanka very much earlier. The 'Jaffna Tamils' were involved primarily in agricultural and commercial activities in the northern and eastern parts of the island country and, like the Sinhalese, were generally

uninterested in developing estate labour possibilities.

The governments of India and Sri Lanka early recognised the statehood problems of the estate Tamils. Although the vote had been given them and all other residents of Sri Lanka in 1931, later developments altered the position of the estate labourers. These acts of parliament in 1948-49 deprived the vast majority of the estate Tamils of their vote, rendering them 'stateless' for all practical purposes.

The statehood problem of the estate labourers was 'solved' in 1964 by the Sirima-Shastri Repatriates Agreement, according to which India was to take back 525,000 of the 975,000 persons in this category then in the country, with Sri Lanka agreeing to settle permanently an additional 300,000. A 1974 Sirima-Gandhi agreement settled the fate of the 150,000 not provided for in the 1964 settlement. Accordingly, India was to take in an additional 75,000, Sri Lanka the balance, with the 'natural increases' of the various identified populations after 1964 to be taken in, respectively, by the two countries.

The actual process of repatriation has not proceeded as defined. Whereas the Indo-Ceylon Agreement (Implementation) Act of 1967 specified that repatriation should be phased out within fifteen years from that date, up to May 31, 1973 'only' some 227,000 plus the 'natural increase' of 61,000 persons had been repatriated to India, and 'only' 128,800 plus the natural increase of 33,800 were given citizenship in Sri Lanka. And the rate at which repatriation is being accomplished has clearly slowed down. Whereas about 46,000 individuals were repatriated to India during 1976, the number dropped to 29,400 in 1978 and to 22,000 in 1979. Table 1 gives the

number of repatriates to India for the years 1968 through 1979.

Many factors help explain the slow-down. The large-scale shifting of individuals and families from one to another context is difficult in the best of circumstances. It has often proven extraordinarily difficult when the roots of a group of people go into a national context as deeply as have the roots of the Tamil estate labourers into Sri Lanka. Repatriates to India have often written to friends and relatives in their places of origin, telling them of hardships upon returning to India, discouraging further departures. Repatriation hit estate production in Sri Lanka. According to Braban Weerakon, then Plantation Ministries Secretary in Sri Lanka, the large-scale repatriation of non-Sri Lankan Tamil labourers had resulted in some 29,000 vacancies in state-owned plantations (which account for nearly

TABLE 1: TAMIL REPATRIATES TO INDIA FROM SRI LANKA, 1968 THROUGH 1979

Year	Number of Individuals	Number of Families
1968	4,565	647
1969	5,876	2,638
1970	10,166	1,412
1971	26,051	6,021
1972	32,713	7,536
1973	40,979	9,532
1974	44,940	10,648
1975	26,028	7,182
1976	45,785	11,087
1977	39,800	10,060
1978	29,400	7,600
1979	22,119	5,664
Totals	328,412	80,027

Source: United Front Federation for Repatriates, Madurai, "1979 Annual Report".

TABLE 2: EMPLOYMENT BY OCCUPATION AND SEX

(Percentages)

	Coolie	Mill	Petty Business	Skilled	Unemployed
Sri Lankan Men (N=172)	15.1	53.5	14.5	14.5	2.3
Burmese Men (N=98)	14.3	9.2	23.5	53.1	—
Sri Lankan Women (N=178)	28.1	—	2.8	2.8	66.3
Burmese Women (N=96)	8.3	—	16.7	13.5	61.5

TABLE 3: EARNINGS AND DAYS EMPLOYED DURING PREVIOUS WEEK

(Percentages)

	Daily Earnings (in Rupees)					Number of Days Employed during Previous Week	
	0-4.99	5-6.99	7-9.99	10-14.99	15+	1	2
Sri Lanka Men (N=172)	10.1	19.7	11.2	56.7	2.2	—	—
Burmese Men (N=98)	9.2	29.6	19.4	30.6	11.2	—	—
	Daily Earnings (in Rupees)					Number of Days Employed during Previous Week	
	0-4.99	5-6.99	7-9.99	10-14.99	15+	1	2
Sri Lanka Men (N=172)	0.6	1.7	6.2	4.5	4.5	61.2	21.3
Burmese Men (N=98)	—	1.0	10.2	6.1	14.3	29.6	38.8

TABLE 4: LITERACY LEVELS FOR HARIJANS AND NON-HARIJANS IN TAMIL NADU, 1961 AND 1971

(Percentages)

	All Classes		Non-Harijans		Harijans	
	1961	1971	1961	1971	1961	1971
Total	31.4	39.4	35.0	43.0	14.0	26.2
Male	44.4	51.6	49.0	54.5	22.0	37.8
Female	18.0	26.8	21.0	29.4	6.0	15.3

Source: Alladi Vagiswari, 1972:14.

80 per cent of the island's tea lands), with most of the vacancies falling in the hill country and 'mid-elevation' estates where the proportion of Tamil labourers had always been the highest (reported in *The Hindu*, October 21, 1978), ranging from 90 to 95 per cent in the former to 60 per cent in the latter. Weerakon noted in 1978 that around 53 per cent of Sri Lanka's foreign exchange earnings came from tea exports.

Finally, it was clear all along that the majority of the labourers to be repatriated had long considered themselves to be 'permanently settled'. Under Citizenship Acts of 1948-49, some 237,000 applications on behalf of around 825,000 persons were made for Sri Lankan citizenship showing that a large proportion of the Tamil labourers wished to remain in Sri Lanka. While the Donoughmore Commission of 1928 estimated that 40-50 per cent of the 'Indian' estate workers at that time were 'permanently settled', the Jackson Report on Immigration in 1938 pushed the figure to 60 per cent. More recent reports have pushed the figure to 80 per cent.

#### THE STUDY

The Sri Lankan Tamil repatriates arrive in India by ferry at Rameshwaram, and are housed initially at the Mandapam and Trichy transit camps. Those without substantial savings of their own can avail themselves of Government of India assistance in one of four ways: through settlement on an estate of Tamil Nadu or India, through settlement on a land colonisation scheme, through a small business loan, through placement in an industrial establishment. Estate 'line' quarters are provided for those who are placed on estates; housing loans up to approximately Rs 5,000 are available to those who are shunted into non-estate employment. Incentives are provided by the government to estates and industries (mostly textile mills) that absorb repatriates, through the provision of up to Rs 15,000 in working capital for each repatriate placed. Approximately 77 per cent of the families so far repatriated have been assisted through small business loans while only 8.6 per cent have been employed in industry, 6 per cent on estates and 4 per cent in land colonisation schemes [for further information on this material, see

Joseph, 1979; 21-25].<sup>1</sup>

Almost all of the repatriates in the Madurai area are employed in textile mills or have taken small business loans (usually for Rs 5,000). Most of them live in colonies established by 'contractors' who know how to work their way through government regulations and administrative procedures in the securing of loans, and get the repatriates to sign the papers that enable them to work on behalf of the repatriates.

The survey materials reported here were collected for the 178 Tamil repatriate and 98 Burma repatriate households situated in 16 different housing colonies within a radius of 25 kilometres of Madurai city, between December 1978 and February 1979. The Burmese repatriates of the Madurai area returned in the early 1960s; their inclusion in the collection of data was for the purpose of enabling comparisons. Ninety-seven per cent of the Burmese repatriate families included in our study had been in the Madurai area for at least three years; only 29 per cent of the Sri Lankan families had been in the area for this length of time. The Burmese repatriates, in general, were better off in Burma than were the Sri Lankan repatriates in Sri Lanka. Whereas the latter were almost invariably estate labourers, the former include a considerable number with clerical, business and commercial occupational backgrounds.

#### FINDINGS

**Family Size:** While 38.7 per cent of the Burmese repatriate families had seven or more members per household, only 17.4 per cent of the Sri Lankan families had this number. The Burmese families had lived in the area for a much longer period of time, in general, and had been joined by other relatives along the way. The percentage of joint family households among the Burmese came to 9.2 per cent; among the Sri Lankans it came to 2.8 per cent.

**Occupation:** Table 2 presents the percentage distributions of the occupations of the head of household male and female, by country of background.<sup>2</sup>

With the Government of India provision of incentives for industrial establishments in the employment of Sri Lankan repatriates, the number of mill employees is relatively high among these repatriates in Madurai. The highest proportion by far among the Burmese repatriate males is employed as skilled labour. Relatively few Sri Lankan repatriates around Madurai have been assigned to estates or land colonisation

TABLE 5: EDUCATION BY SEX

	(Percentages)				
	Illiterate	Primary	Middle	Secondary	Other
Sri Lankan Men (N=172)	1.7	45.9	29.1	22.1	1.2
Burmese Men (N=98)	2.0	23.5	46.9	27.6	—
Sri Lankan Women (N=178)	40.4	46.1	11.8	1.7	—
Burmese Women (N=96)	42.7	33.3	10.4	12.5	1.0

TABLE 6: NUTRITIONAL STATUS OF PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN, STANDARDS OF WEIGHT FOR HEIGHT

	Standard-91%	90-81%	80-71%	70-61%
Sri Lankan Children				
N	169	58	8	1
%	71.6	24.5	3.3	0.4
Burmese Children				
N	125	28	6	5
%	76.2	17.1	3.7	3.0

Note: The values presented here are derived from the Harvard standards (see Stuart and Stevenson, 1959). The differences observed between the Sri Lankan and Burmese children are not statistically significant at the 0.05 levels, using chi square analysis.

TABLE 7: NUTRITIONAL STATUS OF MILL AND NON-MILL PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN, STANDARDS OF WEIGHT FOR HEIGHT

	Standard-91%	90-81%	80-71%	70-61%
Children of Mill Workers				
N	111	24	7	—
%	78.2	16.9	4.9	—
Children of Non-Mill Workers				
N	183	62	7	6
%	70.9	24.0	2.7	2.3

Note: The differences observed between the mill and the non-mill children are statistically significant at the 0.01 level, using chi square analysis.

schemes. Such employees, however, are not represented among the figures for our respondents.

Unemployment is not a problem for either the Sri Lankan or the Burmese respondent men. For the women of both categories, particularly for those from Sri Lanka, on the other hand, unemployment is obviously a problem. Meanwhile, the Burmese women are more likely than the Sri Lankan women to be involved in petty business and skilled activities. They are less likely than the latter to work as coolies.

**Daily Income:** The distributions of daily incomes and the number of days employed during the week previous to the interview of the respondent, for the 172 Sri Lankan repatriate men and the ninety-eight Burmese repatriate men respondents involved in our study, are given in Table 3.

The mill employment of Sri Lankan men skews their distribution of incomes

into their favour more than could otherwise have been expected by chance. Overall, both sets of income distributions show that the male respondents in our study had respectable incomes and work possibilities, at least for the week in question, considering similar distributions for other lower income categories of people in Tamil Nadu. In fact, low as the incomes undoubtedly are in terms of purchasing power, they compare favourably against the income distribution of hutment households in Madras. Here, in 1971 only 18 per cent of all households had a total income of as much as Rs 200 per month (Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board, 1975: 29).

**Education:** Tamil Nadu literacy rates for 'all classes', non-Harijans and Harijans are given for 1961 and 1971, by sex, in Table 4.

Table 5, which gives educational levels for our male and female respon-

dents, shows that while problems of illiteracy and low educational attainments are much more characteristic of the females than the males involved in our study, the accomplishments of the Sri Lankan, and particularly the Burmese respondents, compare very well with the figures for the Tamil Nadu populations as reported in Table 4, however much these will have changed since 1971.

**Nutritional Status of Pre-School Children:** Standard anthropometric (age independent) nutritional assessments on the 400 pre-school children living in the households reviewed in our study (236 and 164 were from the Sri Lankan and Burmese households, respectively) were carried out. Table 6 reports the findings of standard weight for height procedures [see Jelliffe, 1966 for information on these procedures].

All but one of the eleven Burmese repatriate children below the 80th percentile (that is, those severely malnourished) represented in Table 6 belong to five families in one colony who live under rather desperate conditions. However, their general rates of malnutrition are higher than they are for the Sri Lankan repatriate children.

What do such figures mean overall? It is difficult to say for many reasons, among them problems in making adequate comparisons for suitably selected groups at comparable points in time. The repatriate children of our survey, however, have lower proportionate rates of protein-calorie malnutrition than do children resident on the estates of Kandy in central Sri Lanka [3.7 and 6.7 per cent, respectively, for the Sri Lankan and Burmese children involved in our study fell below the 80th percentile (Table 6), as against 8.6 per cent of the Kandy children who fell below this level in one recent study (Department of Census and Statistics, Colombo, 1978: 37)]. Meanwhile, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has reported that the mean weights of the Indian children they studied in six regions of the country were 40 to 50 per cent below American standards [ICMR, 1977: 42], showing also that in Hyderabad 18 per cent of the children were in a "grade III" level of malnutrition (corresponding to below 60 per cent of expected weight for age distributions), a result significantly higher than the level discovered among the Madurai area repatriate children.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, while the differences between Sri Lankan and Burmese repatriate



children are not significant (Table 6), the probability of a distribution like that given in Table 7 (using chi square analysis) is less than 0.01, meaning that the children of mill workers are significantly better nourished than are the children of non-mill workers.

### HOUSING

In the 16 colonies surveyed, a total of 276 housing units (those in relation to which data have been reported here) were occupied by repatriate families at the time of our survey, eighteen were occupied by non-repatriate families, 231 were unoccupied or abandoned and 425 were incomplete. Some of the repatriate families of some of the 'abandoned' houses had no doubt simply left their houses for a period of time, perhaps in relation to work opportunities in other places. However, 220 of the housing units were both incomplete and evidently abandoned and there was no doubt at all that a good number of the completed houses were also permanently abandoned. Many were situated in out of the way colonies with no utility provisions and no local employment opportunities. Of the 950 housing units in the sixteen colonies examined, in short, roughly a third, by our estimation, were of little use to anyone.

House contractors in some cases serve repatriate families reasonably well. Taking necessary documents from the repatriates, they approach appropriate government departments to obtain loans for their clients, usually represented in groups. They then construct houses on the lands they have purchased, later turning these over to participating repatriate families. Some contractors even provide temporary shelter for their clients while a colony for which they are responsible is under construction.

But the manipulatively unscrupulous possibilities open to contractors and others supposedly responsible in the repatriation process are evidenced in the number of houses abandoned. Promises are not fulfilled, the repatriates find that what they had expected is by no means possible in their new housing sites, quality control in construction and the supply of construction materials is in no way guaranteed, the lands on which some of the colonies stand might flood during the rainy season, be completely without water supply during the remainder of the year, and schools and other institutional facilities might be completely inaccessible from the new colony context.

### CONCLUSION

The repatriates living in the Madurai area in general have educational, income, occupational and nutritional levels that place them reasonably well when comparisons are made with other lower class local populations.

But this is only part of what our data show. Most strikingly, they point out that no matter how well off the repatriates are, in selected comparative terms, not nearly enough is being done to enable what should be accomplished under current allocations and programme definitions. Houses that might have been reasonably situated, instead of simply built, lie dilapidated and abandoned. Many contractors have made far more in relation to the repatriates than a conscionable expectation of profits would allow, leaving the repatriates with inadequate housing. Officials entrusted with the administration of the programme have, in many cases, been far from effective in meeting their responsibilities.

In short, the positive understandings enabled in places by our data are clouded thoroughly by the data supported awareness that the less fortunate among the repatriates are most likely those who have left the colonies and that what might have been accomplished for the repatriates has not been accomplished as it might have been. Involved government agencies will have to show more responsibility than they have in the past in carrying through the practical supervision of the general repatriation programme.

### Notes

- 1 Most repatriates would prefer to work on estates or land colonisation schemes. But there are not enough employment possibilities along such lines.
- 2 Considering the Sri Lankan repatriate households, 172 had an adult

male and 178 had an adult female in residence. For the Burmese households, ninety-eight had an adult male, ninety-six an adult female in residence.

- 3 The ICMR study referred to here used an age dependent anthropometric method in the determination of levels of malnutrition. While correlations between such methods and the weight for height methods we used vary, the generalisations made for the Madurai children in comparison with the Hyderabad children hold.

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