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Source: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 10, No. 8 (Feb. 22, 1975), pp. 353-356

Published by: [Economic and Political Weekly](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4536879>

Accessed: 04-06-2015 06:43 UTC

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Immigrants in Their Homeland

Tamil Repatriates Return from Sri Lanka

RAMESWARAM, a traditional place of religious homage near the southern tip of India, is currently the scene of a new kind of pilgrimage. The "pilgrims" are the returning labourers of Indian origin recently uprooted from their jobs and residences in the tea plantations of Sri Lanka. Some time ago, by way of a combination of political expediency, economic chauvinism, and bureaucratic technicality, nearly a million of these Tamils became classified as "stateless" by the Government of Sri Lanka (a condition which the Indian Government was also willing to recognise for a time). They earned this unfortunate status in spite of the fact that many of these families had lived in Sri Lanka for generations. The story of how these people, who helped to build up the plantations which now form the backbone of Sri Lanka's economy, came to this condition, and the present means being employed to resolve their plight, forms an interesting if somewhat depressing example of the workings of a classical capitalist export economy and its inhumane by-products of human misery.

Tamil relations with Sri Lanka extend far back into history. (See E F C Ludowyk, "The Modern History of Ceylon", London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966; and S A Fakeman, "Ceylon", New York, Praeger, 1964). The Tamils were the first Indian people to attempt to colonise Sri Lanka, which they in ancient times called Izham. (See K S Ramaswamy Sastri, "The Tamils and Their Culture", Annamalai University, 1967.) But it was chiefly during the British colonial period that Tamils began to be recruited (by "kanganis" or labour brokers) in large numbers, originally to work on coffee estates. Gaining momentum coincident with the rapid expansion and consolidation of the plantation industry in Sri Lanka in the 1840s, the incoming Tamils, who faced scarce opportunities in their South Indian homeland, formed a large and inexpensive force of willing workers who were handily exploited by the enterprising European planters. (See Donald R Snodgrass, "Ceylon: An Export Economy in Transition", Homewood, Ill, R D Irwin, 1966.) Due partly to "false advertising" by the 'kanganis', who were given incentives to bring labourers, Sri Lanka was seen

as an oasis relative to South India at that time. Yet wages were only about 45 paise per day. Furthermore, disease and fatigue exacted a heavy toll on workers engaged in this enterprise, since travel and medical and residential facilities were very poor or absent.

These Tamil labourers have in the past been forced, often under intolerable conditions, to absorb the brunt of the numerous setbacks experienced in the history of Sri Lanka's export economy, and have contributed largely to the resolution of these "slump" periods and to the restabilisation of production and trade. Today, Tamils constitute a sizeable (and at present, a highly disgruntled) minority of 22 per cent of the island's population. Recently, Prime Minister Bandaranaike has made overtures to soothe the Tamils (i.e. mainly those who possess Sri Lankan citizenship) and has urged them to eschew "communalism and sectarianism". In a speech delivered in the Tamil-dominated area of Jaffna, she stated: "The basis of national progress should be national unity." Yet it is hard to conceive of unity without at least a modicum of equality, and the new Constitution of Sri Lanka has reduced the Tamils' language and religion to second-class status. Buddhism is now the "state religion" and Sinhalese the sole official language. (See editorial in *The Hindu*, October 8, 1974.)

But we must understand that the Tamils whom Bandaranaike is trying to woo are those privileged with an assured status as citizens. The repatriates we study here are destined to have little political voice, since they comprise a relatively insignificant minority, and a large proportion of them (200,000) lack official recognition at all. The facts behind their current condition and dim destiny are as follows.

From 1898 to 1949 there was free movement of labour (in one direction, chiefly) between Sri Lanka and India. Tamil workers were allowed to leave India and to enter Sri Lanka without passports or visas. Then suddenly, pressed by a failing economy, the Government of then Ceylon decided that no more citizenship would be granted without proof of identity and certain other criteria being met. At the same time, the Indian Government

could legitimately (i.e. technically) deny responsibility for these people, since they held no official papers. The total thrown into this "stateless" condition numbered some 975,000 persons of Indian origin, most of them Tamils.

Then, on October 25, 1964, Bandaranaike arrived in New Delhi to discuss the fate of these people. On October 30, the Indo-Ceylon Agreement on Stateless People was signed (by Bandaranaike and Prime Minister Shastri), according to which Sri Lanka agreed to grant citizenship to 300,000 and India to 525,000, leaving the fate of 150,000 people undecided. More recently, by the Indira-Sirimavo Agreement (1974), India and Sri Lanka both agreed to grant citizenship to an additional 75,000 people each. Thus, officially the problem of stateless Indians in Sri Lanka has been solved. But in reality, this is not so. In addition to difficulties to be faced by those who must now relocate back to India, there remain (due to natural increase since 1964) an estimated 200,000 stateless — i.e. officially unrecognised — people in Sri Lanka today.

Although, Bandaranaike announced (shortly after signing the 1964 agreement) that repatriation of "stateless Indians" would begin in 1965 and be completed in the next 15 years, in actuality the process began only in 1968. So far, about 130,000 repatriates have arrived in India. Some figures range as high as 156,807 up to September 1974 (see *The Hindu*, October 12, 1974). Statistics offered by the United Front Federation for Repatriates (UFFR) are as follows:

Year	Arrivals
1968	1,178
1969	5,751
1970	9,847
1971	25,129
1972	32,664
1973	35,304
1974 (to July)	17,267
Total	127,140

Something we must realise, in connection with these figures, is that the migration of these people to Sri Lanka was a slow and gradual process. Even so, their impact (largely positive) on the economy was significant. One can only imagine how much greater the impact of their return to India will be (to local economies in both countries), given that this movement is now taking place in a much more compressed time period. Weekly, about 1,600 repatriates are arriving at Mandapam Camp alone, and it was anticipated that by the end of 1974 about 9,410

families consisting of 42,350 persons would have arrived.

But the sheer numbers alone are not as distressing as the conditions of their voyage and the situation into which they are thrown on their arrival in India. Their "state" is appalling, and their future pathetic. Notes taken by one Father Thomas Joseph while on "A Study Tour Along the Steps of the Repatriates" provide a revealing eyewitness report:

"Tuesday, June 11, 1974: Visited two groups of plantation workers at Khawatha; all the employees were Tamil-speaking, some of them ready for their return to India, while others are awaiting their travel papers. A very small number have been naturalised as Sri Lanka citizens. All of them are very hard-working simple people, many of them illiterate. Some of the points discussed were: scarcity of work (two days a week, or three); low wages and spiralling prices; scarcity of foodgrains, rations insufficient; Lines (one-room tenements) very much dilapidated, unhygienic and lacking basic amenities. All are anxious to return to India as early as possible; in their anxiety to speed up the papers, middlemen offer help and collect bribes (sometimes as much as Rs 500). Some of them are ready to leave for India; but some of their near relatives have yet to get their passports. This delay is a great hardship, as they want to return together and settle down in the same place. Once intimation of the passport reaches them, all adults will have to travel all the way to Kandy, where they are total strangers and become easy victims of unsocial elements. They even complained about the treatment of the officials of the consulate.

"Wednesday, June 12: Visited Kandy where the Indian High Commissioner's office issues the travel papers to the repatriates. It was agreed by all that the Consul is a very sympathetic man, most willing to assist the repatriates in every possible way. But many complained about the minor officials and the clerks. Often the poor people are summarily dismissed without being given a patient hearing. Since the "Family Card" issued with each passport is an important document for their rehabilitation, entries should be made carefully: I have noticed incorrect entries on these documents.

"Kandy is a hill station; overnight stay... will be very costly. The local Church... will be willing to give night accommodation, if someone takes the initiative to organise it in church pre-

mis. Assistance and guidance is needed at Kandy for those who come in connection with the repatriation.

"Thursday, June 13: Departure from Colombo Fort Railway Station, 6-40 pm by Thalaimanar Mail. Twice a week (Mondays and Thursdays) Thalaimanar Mail is run to give through journey to those who travel by rail with connection to the Ferry Service from Thalaimanar to Rameswaram (on Tuesdays and Fridays). There was a big crowd at the platform awaiting the Mail: many had come to say "good-bye" to their kith and kin leaving for India. It was an unforgettable scene: weeping and wailing! Many more passengers (most of them repatriates) joined the train at Kurunegala and the train was overcrowded. In fact, the capacity of the train was about 700-800, yet the actual number of the passengers for that trip was well over 2000!

"Friday, June 14: The Mail reached Thalaimanar pier at 8-00 a.m. (late by one hour, as the engine was very old and could not go quickly). It was a scramble to go through the custom formalities: there was confusion everywhere. The platform could accommodate about 1,000 persons and the crowd was double that number! Further, the capacity of the ferry boat is only just over 800 and 1,200 will be left behind: hence the rush and confusion to go through the customs and embark the boat as early as possible.

"The ferry left the pier at 1-30 p.m. with a full capacity of 827 persons, leaving behind well over 1,200 repatriates with the promise that the ferry will run two extra trips (on Saturday and Sunday) to clear the traffic. Again it was a scene of more weeping and wailing!

"Landed at Rameswaram at 4-00 p.m. and we reached shore by country crafts. On reaching the shed many of the passengers discovered that their luggage had been left behind. Individual passengers have no control over their unaccompanied luggage; for, once the customs clearance is given over, the porters take charge of the luggage. The result was great disappointment

for those who could not clear their luggage... since they could proceed no further; they had to stay at Rameswaram on that day and some on the following day also as the luggage was cleared only on Sunday along with the last group of passengers arriving on that day....

"Saturday, Sunday, June 15 and 16: I took up residence at the Mandapam Camp. This is a transit camp for repatriates from Sri Lanka. This is a well-planned housing estate, supplied with running water and electricity. It is an ultimate irony that these very quarters, originally put up as a rest camp for workers proceeding to Sri Lanka, are today a rest camp for their grandchildren...! But the excitement and enthusiasm which these camps witnessed in former days have given way to anxiety, disappointment and often bitterness. For the future is gloomy and uncertain.

"I met many repatriates at Rameswaram and Mandapam Camp. Many and varied are their problems: some of them have exhausted their financial resources and are forced to sell their possessions for food; some are waiting in the camp for several months and no placement has been offered; some are not willing to proceed to destinations outside Tamil Nadu because (a) they do not feel secure to go to places where they are strangers to the language, customs, etc, (b) their fear is heightened by the recent events in Tamil Nadu, unleashing parochial sentiments, (c) their near relations are in Tamil Nadu; some are anxious about the Provident Fund, which they could not collect before their departure (their former employers offer them Rs 40 as incentive to leave); all complain about high prices of essential commodities and the uncertainties and slowness of the machinery for rehabilitation; some complain about the fact that they could not get the *ad hoc* cash grant: they have put down as near relations in India persons who are in fact distant relations from whom they cannot solicit help. They feel themselves cheated and misled; all are anxious to get to work and settle down as quickly as possible."

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Thus, many of the repatriates arrive in India penniless or nearly so, and must pin their hopes on the promise of assistance from the Indian Government. But on reaching Rameswaram, the largely illiterate labourers, who have given the best part of their lives on the plantations helping to make Sri Lanka the world's largest tea exporter (454 million pounds last year), come to understand their grim plight. They are treated callously at all levels. Since they have lived, many of them, in Sri Lanka for several generations, they have lost all ties with the Indian "homeland". They are supposed to receive a cash dole of Rs 35 to Rs 115 per mensem (depending on the size of the family). But to get this help they must wait two weeks or longer. Some of the repatriates (an estimated 35-40 per cent) must wait at Mandapam Transit Camp for more than two months. During this period no additional financial assistance is provided for their maintenance. (An individual needs a minimum of about Rs 5 to exist.) Many of the repatriates sell their few personal belongings to buy food, the prices of which have risen by an average of 43 per cent over the year ending August 24, 1974. While Mandapam merchants enjoy a brisk business from this "wind-fall" of customers, the morale and health standards at the transit camp are very low.

The place of the repatriates' resettlement in India is decided by the Indian High Commission in Kandy, Sri Lanka. The repatriates are often ignorant or misled about their eventual destinations. If the jobs promised them are unavailable when they arrive, the officials in charge (e.g., the Special Deputy Collector in charge of the repatriates) are powerless to help them. Any change of assistance sought by the repatriate must be approved by higher authorities, who are often out of reach immediately (and just as often out of touch with the repatriates' true condition).

Usually, only the largest families are selected for and deployed to the comparatively well-organised Government colony schemes (described below). Alternatively (i.e., for smaller families, or if a designated scheme is not ready), the Government says it will supply Rs 1,000 as a business loan. But obtaining such a loan involves the perennial bureaucratic delays. Further, lack of independent business experience prevents many of the repatriates (who are eligible) either of availing themselves of this service or of utilising the money, once secured, in an efficient or

economic manner. Due to this, many repatriates are becoming disgusted and disillusioned, as their hopes of obtaining land and financial assistance are dashed.

Consider the case of Shanmuganathan, age 46 years. With a wife and ten children, he is the head of a twelve-member household. When he arrived in India in October 1971, employment for a man of his particular experience (tea estate worker) could not be found. Hence, in consideration of the size of his family, the Government supplied him with a Rs 2,000 business loan. Due to his inexperience in the business world, his venture at running a "hotel" (restaurant) failed within one year. (No advice, technical or otherwise, was offered with the loan.) Because of this, no additional loan could be secured. Presently, only one of his children is employed, at Rs 185 per month. He is unable to explain how he feeds and clothes his family, beyond saying, "It is very difficult".

People in Shanmuganathan's position are, somewhat surprisingly, still very proud. They do not accept "charity" easily. One is forced to speculate that the temptation, to engage in 'extra-legal' ways and means of keeping body and soul together, is very strong.

Thus, clearly, the greatest difficulties must be faced by the repatriates only *after* they leave the comparative (yet minimal) comforts of the Mandapam Transit Camp. Even those who are 'lucky' enough to be selected for the colony schemes must anticipate many problems. (They are lucky in that they are sent in groups, and so retain some of the benefits to be derived from the retention of some semblance of "community life". This is perhaps the only good fortune they can hope to enjoy under the circumstances.) Even the wages are reportedly lower here than those 'enjoyed' in Sri Lanka. People selected for the colony schemes are eligible for the following funds, which, it must be stressed, are all in the form of loans repayable at 10 per cent per annum.

- (a) Three acres of land is given *free*.
- (b) Housing loan: Rs 2,050 if house is erected in village; Rs 4,100 if house is erected in municipality area.
- (c) Loan for digging well: Rs 2,500
- (d) Loan for purchase of cattle: Rs 550
- (e) Loan for fertiliser, seeds, tools, etc.: Rs 900.

Further, if the family arrives with less

than Rs 1,000, the Government has promised to pay upto Rs 115 (depending on the size of family) per month for a period upto the first harvest.

Disregarding the inadequacy of these 'grants' (given current costs and prices), even these minimal schemes for rehabilitation often go awry. For example, one scheme at Thiruvarangalam (Pudukkottai District) has been accepting repatriates for resettlement. But even those who were despatched three months ago from Mandapam Camp have as yet been granted neither housing nor rattle-purchasing loans, nor have they been allotted land. In fact, even temporary housing has not been supplied, and the families are currently staying in temples and "chatrás". And those persons who discover opportunities outside their designated areas are forced to wait upto six months or more while the bureaucracy deliberates whether or not to ratify their reallocation. (Confirmation for such relocation must be obtained, once again, from far-off Kandy.)

Due to such experiences, many repatriates have deserted the colonies and left to seek their fortunes elsewhere. Some have become rickshaw or taxi drivers in urban centres like Madurai. By extrapolating the implications of such a movement, it is easy to see how this constellation of basic, "mundane" problems could cause a complex chain reaction, aggravating such issues as the currently overcrowded nature of urban areas in India, and placing additional pressures on the already overtaxed and scarce urban facilities.

Yet, taking into consideration the nature of this problem and the limited resources available for its solution, one realises that some credit is due to the authorities for their attempts thus far. (For example, certain educational and employment concessions are being reserved for repatriates.) Only in the course of time have certain problems, difficult to anticipate in advance, come to the fore. For example, funds (however minimal) have been allocated to alleviate certain basic inconveniences suffered by the repatriates. Yet these same funds are now being held up in the bureaucratic machinery at the State level (i.e., the Ministry for Rehabilitation). Also, many repatriates are ignorant of the funds available, due to lack of proper information. For example, few of them are aware of the loans offered by the "Co-operatives for Repatriates" in Madras. Judging by the inefficient and inept handling of the operation so far, one may suspect that

the whole problem has been given a very low priority, due to the lack of political "value" these scattered pilgrims hold for any self-seeking politician. But again, one must appreciate certain difficulties involved in administering this problem, as viewed from the perspective of the authorities. For example, according to the Secretary of the UFFR (N K Perumal), some repatriates come to Mandapam Camp under false pretences. They may have relatives who could lend them support, yet they report otherwise to the authorities. They utilise Government monies without need. (There is no way of telling what proportion of the repatriates are in this condition.) Finally, in general, it must be stated that repatriates stationed at Mandapam Camp are in some respects quite fortunate. Due to the tireless efforts of the small unpaid staff of the UFFR, some improvements have been made in the repatriates' journey-experience: baggage is less frequently misdirected (though bribes

to porters are often required); a cup of tea and some rice is now supplied to the travellers on their arrival in Rameswaram; and the business loan has been increased from Rs 1,000 to Rs 2,000. Further, a voluntary organisation (The Citizen's Committees for the Welfare of the Repatriates) has been formed recently to aid the "refugees". Consisting of some of the wealthiest and most enterprising citizens of Mandapam, this Committee has begun to assist the repatriates in coping with bureaucracy, and is soliciting (locally) considerable financial donations for the distribution of food and general improvement of living conditions in the camp.

The initiative shown by the good citizens of Mandapam is certainly commendable, and a worthy example for other communities. Yet all the humanitarians and philanthropists in Mandapam cannot *hope* to single-handedly complete a task which must involve the whole Indian nation (and especial-

ly Tamilians).

Although much work has been done, there remains a great deal *more* to do. The Government must see that an adequate "follow-up" programme is implemented, in consultation with the various agencies involved, especially those representing the repatriates. The newly-formed Citizen's Committee has begun the job of administering essential aid and seeing to the *immediate* needs of these people. Yet, some organisation is needed to safeguard the "long-term" interests of the repatriates. Perhaps the UFFR is the group capable of representing the latter's long range interests. But the Federation lacks essential funds. It has only the verbal support of the Ceylon Workers Congress (which has, incidentally, been most helpful in dealing with the problems of the repatriates while in Sri Lanka). But the obstacles placed in the way of the repatriates in Sri Lanka should not be allowed to be perpetuated when they arrive here.



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