

## **Indian Tamils of Srilanka and Unchanging Language Identities**



**Dr. R. Kurinjivendan**

Professor, Dept. of Tamil studies in foreign countries, Tamil University, Thanjavur, Tamilnadu, India

The Indian Tamils settled down in the South Central Province of Mountains nearly 200 years ago. It is officially reckoned that the Indian Tamils are about 5% of the entire population of Sri Lanka. There is a strong background behind the settlement of the ancestors of millions of Indian Tamils who live widespread in the Uphills of Sri Lanka.

Most of the Indian Provinces were severely affected by the Famine in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; Madras Presidency was one among them. In order that death due to famine may be controlled, the British Indian Administration decided to send away the Tamils to the Colonial Nations that were under the British rule.

### **INDIAN TAMIL SETTLEMENTS IN SRI LANKA**

The Tamils were brought to Sri Lankan Uphills only in 1823 A.D. Coffee was widely cultivated in the Uphills at that time. Millions of Indian Tamils from Tamilnadu, the then Madras Presidency, were taken to work at the plantations of Sri Lanka<sup>1</sup>. These settlements took place in two stages – permanent settlements and temporary settlements.

Due to reasons like famine, poverty-stricken life style, and caste conflicts, the relocation of Indian Tamils to Srilanka continued for more than 100 years. These emigrant Tamils, who settled down there on the basis of Indenture Labour system and Kangani system, worked very hard in the coffee, tea and rubber plantations of the Central Province Highlands.

### **The Administrative System of Plantation and Language Environment**

The Indian Tamils are the only race to have settled down in a widespread manner in the mountain ranges of Srilanka.<sup>2</sup> No other race in Srilanka could have had easy access into the terrible forests of the Uphills. The British Plantation Owners made use of the Tamil labourers to destroy the forests and convert them into plantations.

The administrative system of the coffee and tea plantations was as follows:

Manager (British) (Level 1)

|

European Assistant Managers (level 2)

|

Asian Conductors (level 3)

|

Head Kanganis (Labour's Master) (level 4)

|

Labourers (Indian Tamil Labourers)<sup>3</sup>

Most of the managers who worked at the coffee/tea plantation did not know Tamil to converse with their subordinates. The labourers knew no other language than Tamil. Therefore all types of communication took place only through the Head Kangani or the Labourer's master.

All official communications in the Uphills took place only in English. Even the spoken form of Sinhalese, the language used by majority of the Srilankan's was not in use there. The reason was Sinhalese speaking settlers were not more in number. Indian Tamils were forced to learn the language of the country where they settled down.<sup>4</sup> The same situation prevailed in more than 30 countries where the Indian Tamil had settled down.

Nevertheless, the labourers who settled down in the plantations of the Srilankan Uphills had an opportunity to retain their mother tongue – Tamil. Even though they settled in villages bearing Sinhalese names, the emigrant Tamils had a conducive atmosphere that helped them to continue speaking in Tamil. For about 190 years now, the Indian Tamil Community of the Srilankan Uphills has managed to retain their language in a very subtle manner.

Though the Caribbean Islands, Reunion, Guiana and Mauritius are Indian Tamil settlements, Tamil as a spoken language is not in existence anymore in these place but the cultural aspects of Tamil are still maintained. In the case of the Indian Tamils of the Sri Lankan Uphills, Tamil is still used in the spoken form. There are basically two reasons for this:

## Indian Tamils of Srilanka and Unchanging Language Identities

1. The heirs of the Indian Tamil plantation workers across the world, shifted to different jobs in due course of time. On the contrary, most of the Indian Tamils of the Sri Lankan Uphills still work at the plantations.
2. The Indian Tamil settlements are geographically segregated from the other parts of Sri Lanka. Hence the impact of other languages is comparatively less than elsewhere, enabling Tamil to be the spoken language.

Apart from these basic reasons, there are certain other external causes that have enriched the usage of Tamil in the Uphills. Let us discuss the causes:

### Growth of Tamil in the Uphills

Though they were illiterate laymen, the responsibility of protecting their mother tongue from getting deteriorated was quite naturally found in the Indian Tamils. When they settled down at the Uphills, not many races dwelt there. On the contrary, now the Sinhalese as well as the Tamils of the North and Eastern Provinces live together in the same place. There are a few factors that help the Indian Tamils to face all difficulties and still retain their language.

#### (A) Folklore of Plantation Community

At the start, the life style of Indian Tamils was full of inexplicable sorrows. Many records are available regarding the woes faced by them like attacks by wild animals, impact of diseases, death of close relatives, tyranny of the officers, sexual harassments faced by women, low wages, excessive drinking habit found among men, and caste conflicts.<sup>5</sup> These people have recorded their sufferings in the form of folk songs. These songs stand testimony to the 200 year old life of the Indian Tamils of the Uphills. Here are a few translations of the Tamil songs in English.

My men!

They lie dust under dust

Beneath the tea

No wild weed flowers

Or memories token

Tributes raise

Over their humble mould.

The sons trample,

Over the fathers' biers!

O shame what man

Ever gave them a grave?

Only God in His grace

Covered them with His grass.

Withered roses their days

Remembered in thorns

Unchanged in each detail:

Days like other days

So have the hundred years

Gone one by one

To the tom-tom's throb.

These laymen have registered how they began their life planting coffee and how it has changed to planting of tea.

From the coffee days

To these our tea days

From the coffee picker

To the tea plucker;

Between the sigh and smile

Between the sweat and rest

The changes came and went...

Not this mutability

That's our theme.

But the pit and barrier

Within man and man

Within man and state

How the one forbids

## Indian Tamils of Srilanka and Unchanging Language Identities

And the other denies.<sup>6</sup>

The Indian Tamil labourers pass over their history as well as their language to the forthcoming generations by keeping alive the oral tradition of folklore songs. The contribution of folk songs in retaining Tamil in the Uphills is worth mentioning.

### (B) Schools and the growth of language

Literacy plays a vital role in the retention of Tamil in the Srilankan Uphills. In the beginning period of immigration, there was no necessity to educate the children of the labourers, because the children were also involved in performing petty tasks at the coffee plantations.<sup>7</sup>

Later on, say around 1865, the Kanganis who were in charge of supervising the labourers, wanted to educate their children. Hence Evening Schools came into existence to educate the children of the supervisors and the labourers. Priests who performed rites at the temple and religious preachers called Annavis became the teachers. Ethical Literature comprising Aathichoodi (Words of Wisdom) and Religious verses was taught in those schools.<sup>8</sup>

From the year 1867 onwards, many small schools were started and teaching went on at the Plantations with special emphasis on teaching Tamil. Thus, the prevailing situation enabled safeguarding of Tamil from the side of the Government itself. After the Srilankan Independence in 1948, these Plantation schools were taken over by the Government, and till date teaching and learning Tamil goes on unhindered. Thus the then British Government, Missionaries and the Srilankan Government after Independence have played significant roles ensuring the teaching of Tamil to the children of the plantation labourers

### (C) Role of Religion and Culture towards Tamil Language Development

'Do not live in a country, where there is no temple', is an age-old belief of the Tamils. These people who settled down in British as well as other European Colonies constructed places of worship for Goddess Mari Amman and Lord Murugan. Further they built temples also for Nondi Appachi, Iyyanar, Sangili Karuppu, Muniyandi, and Madasamy.<sup>9</sup>

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the priests at the Sri Lankan Uphills made use of Tamil to perform all kinds of rituals and ceremonies. Moreover, during Festivals, the labourers worshipped God by singing lullaby to Goddess Mari Amman and songs of valour to Lord Murugan. These religious rites play a vital in the usage of Tamil. Folk plays, mainly based on puranic and epic episodes and Street plays performed during festival times for the Gods and Goddesses are also reasons for the retention of Tamil language. Kaaman Koothu or the Play dance of Love God a celebrated performance of the past, still continues as a tradition.<sup>10</sup> In addition to this, Tamil cultural dances like Kolattam and Kummi were also performed during those times. Indian Tamils retained their language also with the help of drama troupes that went to the Uphills from Tamil Nadu.

### (D) Uphills Tamil Daily and Magazines

From the year 1880 onwards daily papers and magazines became available for the common public throughout Srilanka. But people of the Srilankan Uphills had access to journals only during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Magazines and journals reached them via sea from India. Desanesan (1921), Desabhakthan (1924), Thozhilaali (1929), Thottathozhilaali (1947) were available at the Uphills without any hindrance. The formation of Labour Unions and political awareness among the Indian Tamil workers created interest in reading magazines. Thus the growth of Tamil and sustenance of the language went hand in hand.

Even today there are 5 daily papers, and Tamil Dailies from various parts of Srilanka and Tamilnadu reach even the remote villages of the Uphills. Thus these magazines and dailies also play a role in the retention of language.<sup>11</sup>

**Role of Media**  
After their Independence in 1948, the Srilankan Radio Service was extended to many places throughout the country and it certainly had an impact on the Uphills. There was a widespread usage of Tamil in nooks and corners of Uphills through radio broadcasts of Tamil programmes like songs, dramas, short stories etc.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover the Srilankan television programmes in Tamil, and satellite television programmes telecast from India since 1990s are watched regularly by the people of the Uphills. Further, Facebook and internet/ web service sites also are determining factors helping the sustainability of the language.

### (E) Literary Associations

The contribution of the Literary Associations to the growth of Tamil in the Srilankan Uphills is valuable. Literary personalities like C.V. Velu Pillai, Kurinjithennavan, Thelivathai Joseph, Antony Jeeva, and Saarnaadan have put in a lot of effort for the growth of Tamil and are continuing with their service for about 75 years now through the literary associations of the Srilankan Uphills. In order to create awareness among people who are in some measure educated, these literary associations are bringing out two magazines by name Kundrin Kural (Voice of the Hill) and Kozhundhu (Tea leaf).

## Indian Tamils of Srilanka and Unchanging Language Identities

### CONCLUSION

It is almost 200 years now since the Tamils were taken across the globe by the Europeans. Indian Tamils are residing in more than 30 countries across the world including a few islands. Indian Tamils are holding high posts in few of these countries; in some cases they are the chief officials in the government service. But Tamil in its spoken form is not in existence anymore in most of these countries. The passage of time and the multi-lingual environment of modern times have made them forget Tamil.

Nevertheless, the Indian Tamils of the Sri Lankan Uphills are an exception to this fact. Even today Tamil is the exclusive communicative language of approximately 10 lakhs of Indian Tamils who live in the mountain ranges of the Central Province Highlands of Sri Lanka. Indian Tamils are prudently retaining their language despite the interference of many languages like the Sinhalese. Though they are facing many problems like poverty, unemployment, natural calamities etc., the Tamils are using their mother tongue as per the modern technology. The reason for this is, they consider their Language to be the root which helps them sustain their identity.

### REFERENCES

- 1) Ilyas Ahmed. H, Estate Tamils of Srilanka – a social economic review/International journal of Sociology and Anthropology – Academic Journals 11 march 2014 P.185
- 2) Marimuthu Mani Socio-Economic History of TamilNadu: Emigration (1840-1920) p.23
- 3) Kurinjivendan.R., The History and Life of Tamil Emigrants (Phd. Thesis – 2008) pg.108
- 4) Paramasivam Muthusami, Mauritius Tamil Race: Language – Culture – society, pg.60
- 5) Charles Sarvan, Indian Plantation ‘coolie’ experiences overseas”, Kunapipi, Australia, Vol. XII, No.2, 2000.
- 6) Velupillai. C.V. (transaltion) “In Ceylon’s Tea Garden’ from the book, “Sri Lankan Literature in English, 1948-1998 by D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke, Department of Cultural Affairs Sri Lanka 1998.
- 7) Donovan Moldrich, BITTER BERRY BONDAGE – The Nineteenth Century Coffee Workers of Srilanka p.108.
- 8) George Gnanamuttu, Education and the Plantation Workers in Sri Lanka, Wesley Press Colombo, 1979 P.1-19
- 9) Velupillai. C.V. Born to Labour, Colombo 1970
- 10) Jothimalar Ravindran, Kaaman Koothum Malayaga Paarampariyamum, pg.34.
- 11) Antony Jeeva, Malayaga Maanikangal, Thuraivi publications, Sri Lanka 1998. p.22
- 12) <http://ta.wikipedia.org/s/wyl/> Ceylon Radio



There is an Open Access article, distributed under the term of the Creative Commons Attribution – Non Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits remixing, adapting and building upon the work for non-commercial use, provided the original work is properly cited.