

Research Article

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Fear of Small Numbers and Political Behaviour of Ethnocentric Majority of Sri Lanka: Undeclared War against Upcountry Tamil Females

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Abstract: The United Nations Human Development Report (UNHDR) mentions that the rights of women and female children are inalienable, integral and indivisible. It further highlights the full and equal participation of women in every segment of the social process without any discrimination or without considering sex - gender hierarchies.¹ The legal frameworks of the international system and local political space is accepting of the normative values of gender equality and the eradication of gender-based discrimination. But most of the majoritarian societies challenge these legal frameworks to address their political, social and market-oriented interests. These actions are driven by political, social and structural frameworks which have been accepted by the majoritarian societies in the liberal democratic world.

Tamil women in upcountry tea plantations in Sri Lanka were subjected to systemic and structural violence because of Sinhala majoritarian statecrafts in post-independence Sri Lanka. The ethnocentric violence directly problematizes human security, survival and the personal rights of the upcountry Tamil female labour force. This paper discusses the survival of Tamil female plantation labour forces, focusing mainly on the security crisis of female reproductive rights under the ethnocentric Sinhala Majoritarian Society.

Keywords: Ethnocentrism, Fear, Tamils

1 Introduction

During the British colonial era (1815- 1948) in Sri Lanka, the Indian Origin People (IOP) shifted to Sri Lanka as low wage labourers to work in the tea plantations in upcountry Sri Lanka. Ethnically these people belonged to the Hindu-Tamil community and were geographically linked to the southern states of India. Under the British government rule, IOPs were eligible to visit Sri Lanka as low-skilled labourers without any passports or any other legal documents. These provisions facilitated the migration of many waves of Indian Origin Tamils into upcountry Sri Lanka. These migrant groups were identified as an Indian Origin Tamils, upcountry Tamils, Indian Tamils or plantation Tamils. In 1948, Ceylon² acquired its independence from the British empire. During that time around 900,000 Indian origin, Tamil tea plantation workers were living in Ceylon. But the post-independent Ceylon government changed the existing legal frameworks and implemented new legal frameworks over the migrant labour forces. The new legal framework cancelled the free movement of labour and refused to identify IOPs who were living in Ceylon as Ceylon citizens. In 1964, the Bandaranaike government and the Indian Prime Minister Shastri entered into an Indo- Ceylon agreement on

1 R. Ramesh, Susantha Rasnayake, Thushara Kamalathne, “Women’s Rights in Sri Lanka: An Inequality into the Rights of Planation,” *International Journal of Arts and Commerce* 2, no. 7 (2013): 14.

2 Before 1972, Sri Lanka was identified as a dominion state of British Empire. During 1947- 1972 Ceylon is the official name of the state and in 1972 as a result of new constitution Ceylon transfer it state name to the current name “Sri Lanka” of the country.

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Stateless people to resolve this humanitarian dispute. Under the agreement, the Ceylon government agreed to accept 300,000 IOPs while the Indian government accepted 525,000 IOP labourers back to India.³ The second agreement which was signed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Prime Minister Sirimawo resolved the citizenship crisis by providing a political solution. Diplomatically two governments were able to address the citizenship issue, but due to a lack of enforcement power, disputes of the bureaucracy and procedural concerns, the two governments failed to reach the expected outcomes. Around 200,000 IOP Tamil plantation workers were sent back to India under these agreements whereas the rest remained in Ceylon / Sri Lanka.

These Tamil people received Ceylon / Sri Lankan Citizen rights under several acts including: The Grant of Citizenship to Stateless Person Act, Grant of Citizenship to Stateless Person Special Provisions Act and the Grant of Citizenship to Persons of Indian Origin Act.⁴ Currently, “the intact IOPs or else upcountry Tamils population is around 1,300, 000 and that includes the calculations for natural growth. According to the 2002 Sri Lankan National Census Report, around 120,000 IOPs live in Sri Lanka without legal recognition or any citizenship right.”⁵ The IOPs are marginalised from mainstream political discourse. Majoritarian societies inevitably show a certain fear towards minority groups. The fear of majoritarian societies is based on numbers and generates substantial discrimination against minority groups. Most liberal democratic countries provide real-world explanations for this theoretical framework. Liberal democracy has been accepting of the legitimacy of ethnic majority groups over political, economic and social aspects of the nation-states. Even in Sri Lanka, the ethnocentric majoritarian government act against the will of minority groups, and these actions shaped by the fear manifested within the majoritarian government based on small numbers. Upcountry Tamils cultivate this fear in majority mindsets due to their ethnic, religious composition and historical transformation of the ethnic mobilization process. This paper discusses how the fear of small numbers was able to generate discriminative policies toward upcountry Tamils with special reference to violations of female reproduction rights.

2 Fear of Small numbers: Mass Sterilizations in Upcountry Tea Plantation

Different ethnicities and various social groups provide the foundation for the existence of the modern nation-state. Particularly, the national interests of a nation-state shaped by the identity and interests of the ethnopolitical majority of society. The dominant power of a majoritarian society is not absolute; it depends on the relationships they have with other minority groups of society. Under a liberal democracy, majoritarian groups can legitimise their power interests effortlessly at the state level. The mass mobilization of minority groups challenges the existing superstructure and power politics of the majoritarian society. In that sense, the political behaviour of the majoritarian society is shaped by the fear of minorities. It can be an extended version of structural violence sponsored by the majoritarian society.

According to Arjun Appadurai, many transformations take place within nation-states. The modern nation states in South Asia welcomed liberal democracy into mainstream political agenda settings. The mixed nature of the state is captured by the majoritarian forces while releasing large- scale ethnic violence towards minority groups.⁶ The liberal democracy has certified the functions of the open market, free flow of capital, liberal values, liberal ideas of constitutionalism and good governance. The utility of the liberal democracy has been hijacked by majoritarian society. It expanded a set of certain rights which became attached to a majoritarian political, economic, social view while releasing diverse policy implications toward minority groups. These vicissitudes manufactured the idea of national sovereignty on the solid foundation of majoritarian ethnic intellectual capabilities. Most modern nations do not tolerate different forms of multicultural systems and their political and economic demands in a larger context.

These theoretical aspects address the political behaviour of the ethnic majority of Sri Lanka and their decision-making process with reference to the upcountry Tamil community. Predominantly, the upcountry female labour force which works in plantations has been subjected to political, social and economic discrimination under the majoritarian government. The fear within the Sinhala majority government causes a strong fragmentation of majority and minority

³ A. S. Chandra Bose, “Outgoing Labour and Its Impact on the Tea Plantation Sector in Sri Lanka,” *Intersym* 5 (2015): 416.

⁴ R. Ramesh, Susantha Rasnayake, Thushara Kamalathne, “Women’s Rights in Sri Lanka: An Inequality into the Rights of Planation,” *International Journal of Arts and Commerce* 2, no. 7 (2013): 13.

⁵ Ahmed Ilyas H. “Estate Tamils of Sri Lanka- a Socio Economy Review,” *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 6, no. 6 (2014): 187.

⁶ Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers* (Landon: Duke University Press, 2006), 60-65.

groups. The identification of ‘we and they’ increases the anxiety over relations of many individuals of the minority and the majoritarian led states.⁷ The fear of the majoritarian world denies the recognition of upcountry Tamils as equal citizens and labels them as second-class citizens. The government provides resources and other facilities to upcountry Tamil people based on this pre notion; because of that, health, housing, and state sanitation facilities for minority communities are of unequal quality.

This fear is visible in a post-independence society of Sri Lanka. The reluctance of the political leadership to identify upcountry Tamils as equal citizens based on the small number of population. The liberal democratic states need to address political grievances of all the ethnic groups. But the fear of small numbers (population) been influencing government to execute ethnic clearance policies in upcountry. The national agenda of population control targets the Indian origin female Tamils and sets up different population control policies in that particular region. The number of upcountry Tamil populations and the macroeconomic aspects of the management of tea plantations provides a solid background to this agenda-setting.

The health services including national population growth control activities are conducted by the National Ministry of Health and National Family Planning Association. However, the government introduced ‘the Plantation Human Development Trust’;⁸ a quasi-governmental organization to implement the policies of population growth in the upcountry. This is an independent agency which is separate from the Ministry of Health. Apart from the trust, “the government established a few other organizations; namely the Family Planning Association, Family Planning Bureau, Family Health Bureau and Population Division to implement the policy decisions of the majority government in plantation areas.”⁹

Sri Lanka, as a signatory partner of the CEDAW¹⁰ is legally bound to follow its provisions and regulations. The CEDAW principles and other human rights conventions mention that sterilization activities / permanent sterilization activities need to have the written consent of females. The sterilization activities in other areas are based on the consent of females. But the field research and the data collections that were led by Sashikumar Balasundaram pointed out that the Plantation Human Development Trust is performing forced sterilizations in tea plantations without the written consent of the Tamil females.¹¹ This forced sterilization is questioning the universally accepted human rights norms and special provisions of female rights. The government-sponsored forced sterilization in the upcountry has been violating many female rights including the right to non-discrimination in health services, the right to choose one’s number of children, decide the time between births, the right to choose a preferred method of sterilization.¹² Similarly, the government authoritarian policy execution over upcountry Tamil females is questioning the reproductive rights of women. The female agency and their rational decision-making ability have been questioned by the state. The fear of a small number which cultivates within the majority of society has mouldered national policies to discriminate upcountry Tamils. There are particularly ethnic majority concerns about the number of IOP Tamils in the upcountry area. How many of them are living among us? the ethnic minority is the second burning question of the ethnic majority.

Arjun Appadurai stressed that “majority and minority ideas and groups link with the modern nation-state ideology. The majority is not completely independent from the minority; primarily within the political discourse of the modern nation-state.”¹³ These intertwined conditions of democracy had been providing better bargaining power to Tamil minority groups in the political and economic sector. Around 90 per cent of IOPs are living in the upcountry tea estates and 95 per cent of female labour requirements are fulfilled by the Indian Tamil female tea workers.¹⁴ These numbers and figures have cultivated fear within the ethnic majority community. The political mobilization of Tamil female workers

7 *ibid.*

8 Sasikumar Balasundaram, “Sterilization Abuses and Women’s Reproductive Health in Sri Lanka’s Tea Plantation,” *Indian Anthropologist* 41, no. 2 (2011): 61.

9 R. Ramesh, Susantha Rasnayake, Thushara Kamalathne, “Women’s Rights in Sri Lanka: An Inequality into the Rights of Planation,” *International Journal of Arts and Commerce* 2, no. 7 (2013): 14.

10 The Convention on the Elimination of all Form of Discrimination Against Women

11 Sasikumar Balasundaram, “Sterilization Abuses and Women’s Reproductive Health in Sri Lanka’s Tea Plantation,” *Indian Anthropologist* 41, no. 2 (2011): 69.

12 *ibid.*

13 Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers* (Landon: Duke University Press, 2006), 50.

14 Vidyamali Samarasinghe, “Puppets on a String: Women’s Wage Works and Empowerment among Female Tea Plantation Workers of Sri Lanka,” *The Journal of Developing Areas* 27, no. 3 (1993): 329.

directly links with the economic wealth of the country. If the ethnic Tamil community starts to control the productions of tea plantations then they are inevitably questioning the political supremacy of the ethnic majority. This fear which cultivates within the mindset of the ethnic majoritarian society introduces a systematic and gradual approach to ethnic clearances policies in upcountry tea plantation areas which target Tamil tea plantation female workers.

Since 1948, the ethnoreligious Sinhala Buddhist majoritarian groups understand that territory bound Tamil ethnic groups can hit back at the flow of majoritarian ideas.¹⁵ Historical evidence and the behaviour of the Sri Lankan Tamil Community¹⁶ provides valid evidence to escalate this fear. The Sri Lankan Tamil community has mobilised their ethnocentric identity throughout history and because of that, these groups have improved political bargaining power. However, the political, economic and social power of the upcountry Tamils do not have the appropriate techniques to mobilize their agency. This backwardness of the Indian Tamil community assists the ethnic majority in executing their cleansing policies. On the hand these cleansing policies deter the political mobilization of Indian Tamil minority vis-a-vis.

The territorialization of upcountry Tamil groups problematizes the survival of the ethnic majority groups. The central government introduced new health and population control policies in 1996. According to these policies, the Human Development Trust and estate management executed permanent sterilizations in plantation areas with reference to the Tamil female labour force. Many of the Tamil female workers were permanently sterilised by the Trust after their second delivery of the child. The special report which presented by Sasikumar Balasundaram stressed that “predominately, Sinhala speaking health workers used subtle coercion to force minority Tamil- speaking [based on the field reports of upcountry tea plantations] women to agree to the operation to foil the birth of their third child.¹⁷” Under the supervision of plantation management, many Tamil females were sterilised immediately after their first delivery by the doctors who worked for plantation based hospitals. The sociological explanation of reproduction rights explains that female reproduction health rights are preoccupied with the notion of power. This power element increases the fear of the ethnic majority because the higher rate of population growth can transform the demographical status of the minority groups. Numbers will alter the status of majority and minority; because of that, ethnic majorities have a consensus about ‘the population growth of the ethnic minorities, conditions of minorities and the gap between ethnic minority group.’¹⁸ The fear of small numbers, discriminative health policies, and permanent sterilization activities question the safety and wellbeing of the IOP Tamil females.

Health and reproductive rights have been recognised as one of the most powerful and fundamental rights which are accepted by a wide range of universal audiences. “The article second of the Vienna Declaration on Violence Against Women, the article first of CEDAW, the Act of Violence Against Women Minority Groups, Act of Gender-based Violence highlighted the conventional framework of the gender-based violence. According to these provisions, the physical sexual or psychological harassment, inclusive threats of such acts, cohesive decisions over sexuality and reproduction rights, arbitrary deprivation of liberty and whatever coercive actions which threaten to the private and public life of the females”¹⁹ has been identified as a violation of international human rights and specially recognized female rights. But the element of fear of small numbers which cultivates in the cognitions of majoritarian society liberate state sponsored threats toward the minority. These threats questions their safety and as well as the role of the state as a protector of human rights. In that sense, the state itself becomes a perpetrator of threats and fear within IOPs females.

¹⁵ Neli Devotta, “Majoritarian Politics in Sri Lanka: the Role of Pluralism Behaviour,” *Accounting for Change in Diverse Societies* 1, no. 1 (2007): 1.

¹⁶ The ethnic Tamils who lives in Jaffa, North, North East and other subordinate areas can identify as a Sri Lankan Tamils. They did not migrated to Sri Lanka as a low wage labours during the colonial period.

¹⁷ US Congressional Records qtd. in Sasikumar Balasundaram, “Sterilization Abuses and Women’s Reproductive Health in Sri Lanka’s Tea Plantation,” *Indian Anthropologist* 41, no. 2 (2011): 58.

¹⁸ Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers* (Landon: Duke University Press, 2006), 50.

¹⁹ Gunarathne qtd. in R. Ramesh, Susantha Rasnayake, Thushara Kamalrathne, “Women’s Rights in Sri Lanka: An Inequality into the Rights of Planation,” *International Journal of Arts and Commerce* 2, no. 7 (2013): 14.

3 Conclusion: Future of Upcountry Tamils in Sri Lanka

“Not only the line rooms my grandparents inherited from white men and the bushes that cherished their lives but also the wombs of our women have been privatized”²⁰

Modern liberal states carry the possibilities of encouraging the political legitimacy of majoritarian society. Argun Appadurai pointed out that “all the majoritarianism have seeds of genocide since they are inevitably connected with ideas about the singularity and completeness of the national ethos”²¹ The fear of the ethnocentric majority of Sri Lanka targeting the upcountry Tamil community because of the notion of the incompleteness of majoritarian society. The pivotal assessments of the tea plantation are carrying the upcountry Tamil females. Their political mobilization can change the political representation of Sri Lanka. The permanent sterilization and other unequal regulations were introduced to dislocate the female Tamils in the upcountry. Until these female workers are working under the majoritarian power they cannot secure their political will.

In 2006, The Population Research Initiative identified that Sri Lanka is a leading country which using forced sterilization since the 1980s in upcountry plantation areas.²² Even the UN reports and Sri Lankan Civil Right Organization Report of 2008 stressed out that “Tamil Women on the tea plantations also face forced sterilization promoted by plantation management.

Allegations of the forced sterilization of Tamil tea plantation workers need to be addressed immediately and the government authorities should take the responsibility for these actions”²³

The fear of small numbers which cultivates within the majority ethnic-nationalists government is based on the idea of incompleteness and this incompleteness escalates the fear of small numbers. Appadurai describes this incompleteness as “not only about effective control or practical sovereignty but more importantly about purity and its relationship identity.”²⁴ The idea of purity inevitably frames the motives behind forced sterilization in tea plantation areas. Not only within the Sinhala majority government, but the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE) and socialist-communist movements like JVP do not accept the equal rights of these upcountry Tamil people. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) or the LTTE have not accepted the IOPs political participation in macro-level revolutions.

The Neo Malthusian²⁵ fears about overpopulation and the profit-seeking plantation authorities motivate the government-sponsored sterilization in tea plantation areas. Female Tea workers are entitled to three months of maternity leave with all the facilities including salary for the first two children and six weeks leave with salary for subsequent births.²⁶ However, regional plantations authorise, directly and indirectly, the sterilization of female Tamil tea plantation workers, because it increases the efficiency of the labour force. Authorities relish the maximum profit. They enjoy the maximum efficiency of the female labour force. Government-sponsored NGOs are involved in sterilization campaigns in upcountry. Mainly, “they promote the government policies of sterilization in plantations, providing necessary medical treatments, providing special payments to the medical teams (for each and every permanent sterilization and birth control operations), providing special payments for volunteer teams for these activities.”²⁷

The collective identity of the minority group’s is linked with the struggles and radicalization of cultural-political rights along with the special interests of these particular groups. This special concerns of minority society cultivates the fear within the ethnocentric majoritarian political waves. The majoritarian societies respond to this fear through ethnic cleansing and political discrimination. Somehow, the Sinhala Buddhist majoritarian government politically

²⁰ Sasikumar Balasundaram, “Sterilization Abuses and Women’s Reproductive Health in Sri Lanka’s Tea Plantation,” *Indian Anthropologist* 41, no. 2 (2011): 57.

²¹ Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers* (Landon: Duke University Press, 2006), 57.

²² Sasikumar Balasundaram, “Sterilization Abuses and Women’s Reproductive Health in Sri Lanka’s Tea Plantation,” *Indian Anthropologist* 41, no. 2 (2011): 57.

²³ Jahangir et al., qtd. in Sasikumar Balasundaram, “Sterilization Abuses and Women’s Reproductive Health in Sri Lanka’s Tea Plantation,” *Indian Anthropologist* 41, no. 2 (2011): 59.

²⁴ Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of small numbers* (Landon: Duke University Press, 2006), 53.

²⁵ Danial Bass, “Paper Tigers on the Prowl: Rumors, Violence, and Agency in the Up-country of Sri Lanka,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (2008): 276.

²⁶ Vidyamali Samarasinghe, “The Feminization of Foreign Currency Earnings: Women’s Labour in Sri Lanka,” *The Journal of Developing Areas* 32, no. 3 (1998).

²⁷ R. Ramesh, Susuantha Rasnayake, Thushara Kamalrathne, “Women’s Rights in Sri Lanka: An Inequality into the Rights of Planation,” *International Journal of Arts and Commerce* 2, no. 7 (2013): 18-19.

demobilizes the female plantation workers. The main two trade unions in the plantation sector, Ceylon Workers Congress and Democratic Workers Congress, are led by political leaders that work in favour of Sinhala majoritarian political parties. Both of the unions are carrying more than sixty per cent Tamil female membership, but political leadership is controlled by the male political leaders which are prejudice against Sinhala Buddhist political parties in Sri Lanka. Through these unions, the government enforces their discriminative regulations over the Tamil female labour force and retains them under the boots of majoritarian political, economic and social power.

The territorialization of the upcountry Tamil community and their political mobilization has increased fear within the majoritarian society. The political leadership of post-independence Sri Lanka has identified Indian origin Tamils as a separate ethnopolitical identity. The clear demarcation of 'us and them' leads to the execution of discriminative policies. Particularly, Neo- Malthusian fear of over-population has influenced the government to implement permanent sterilization in upcountry plantation areas.

In 1947, upcountry Tamils represented 12 per cent of the total population and in 2012 it was 4 per cent only. The tea plantation labour force has been reduced to 500,000 from 1,500,000. ²⁸ The fear of ethnic majority groups, a government-sponsored sterilization process and other selective discriminative policies has been challenging for the survival of IOP Tamils. Particularly the state, the protector of human rights has started to perpetuate insecurity over IOP females in upcountry Sri Lanka. The fear of small numbers questions the safety of female upcountry Tamils. Finally, the government-led sterilization process can be identified as an undeclared genocide against upcountry Tamils. This is a certain human security threat toward upcountry Tamils in Sri Lanka. The majoritarian policies which are driven by the ethnocentric ideologies could generate another civil war in Sri Lanka. Therefore, the government is necessary to eradicate the elements of fear of small numbers while acknowledging equal citizenship rights of all the individuals who live within the identified state boundaries.

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²⁸ Neli Devotta, "Majoritarian Politics in Sri Lanka: the Role of Pluralism Behaviour," *Accounting for Change in Diverse Societies* 1, no. 1 (2007): 1.