

‘Enjoy Enjaami’ a welcome start, say Sri Lanka’s Malaiyaha Tamils

Monday 31 May 2021, by [SRINIVASAN Meera](#) (Date first published: 22 May 2021).

‘A spark’ that could lead to greater awareness of Tamil community’s struggles

When ‘Enjoy Enjaami’ fame Arivu from Chennai recently joined a virtual discussion with a group of activists and youth from Sri Lanka’s Malaiyaha or hill country Tamil community, there was one person binding them and their histories — Valliamma, Arivu’s grandmother.

She is named in the song that has got over 200 million views since its YouTube launch two months ago. The viral number has intrigued listeners about her story — she was among the Indian-origin Tamils who laboured in Sri Lanka’s tea estates and was later repatriated back to India, with not a patch of land to call her own after years of hard work. Thousands like her returned, and several thousands remained in Sri Lanka, plucking tea every day, building its export-reliant economy.

The song merely names Ms. Valliamma, but could be a spark that begins telling the story of the Malaiyaha Tamils, according to Saumyaa Vilashini Muthulingam, a Kandy-based activist working on plantation rights and gender issues, who took part in the discussion. And that is significant, because Tamil Nadu has had little appetite to learn about the struggles of this community, she recalls.

“I studied in Bengaluru for three years from 2008. The final war was raging [in Sri Lanka] and Tamil people in India were following it closely. At that time and even later, I noticed that whenever I raised the issue of Malaiyaha Tamils, they were not receptive. It was all about ‘Jaffna Tamils,” she says.

In her view, this was just another manifestation of the “indifference” to the community’s concerns seen within Sri Lanka as well. “Tamils of the north and east tend to look down upon our people. Even if you look at Malaiyaha Tamils who migrated to the north and east, they face discrimination when it comes to land rights and housing.”

Brought to Sri Lanka by the British to work in tea estates located in the country’s scenic hill country, the Malaiyaha Tamil community’s history is one of braving discrimination and oppression through two centuries, till date. They were disenfranchised, rendered stateless, denied basic rights and yet, the 1.5-lakh estate workers, from the million-strong community, continue to toil in estates, fighting for fair wages and decent living conditions.

Different struggles

It was not only the social hierarchy of different groups of minority Tamils within the island nation that relegated the Malaiyaha Tamils’ issues to the background, but also one of politics, Ms. Muthulingam notes. “Whether it is here or in Tamil Nadu, an economic struggle is not considered as heroic a struggle as the one for civil and political rights. I can’t see how having food on your plate can be less important than having self-respect,” she says.

Arivu, in his talk, foregrounded the politics of caste, drawing upon his work in *The Casteless*

Collective band, while also highlighting how intimately it was linked to his family's class location. "It is only from a position of privilege that one can say there is no caste today. The soil beneath our feet bears witness to our history of caste-based oppression. It is a question of whether we support hierarchy in our society, or equality," he said. Recalling his family's struggle as daily-waged labourers and *koothu* artistes, he said: "the class we come from, our caste identity — all these are shaped by a host of political factors. We can't take politics out of our lives."

Joining the discussion among others was Mylvaganam Thilakarajah, a writer and former MP representing Malaiyaha Tamils in Parliament. Compared to other places where Tamils live, such as Tamil Nadu, Malaysia or Jaffna, caste-based violence is relatively less in the hill country, he notes. All the same, he points out that those like Ms. Valliamma, who returned to India, were branded "Ceylon Repatriates", "virtually like a caste group" although they came from different caste groups. "So your identity can depend on where you are and at what point, you see."

Pop culture

Writers and poets in Tamil Nadu such as K.A. Gunasekaran, Ra. Vinoth, Tamizhmagan, and Mohammed Yousuf have written on Malaiyaha Tamils and their lives, but popular culture can have a wider reach, as Arivu and Dhee's song has shown, Mr. Thilakarajah says. "*Enjoy Enjaami* is a massive hit and with the fame it has brought, Arivu has been trying to advance his progressive politics, which is very commendable. The reference to Valliamma is significant, but for the stories of those like her, and of those who stayed back in Sri Lanka to come out in some detail, we need a full-length film on a character like that."

Telling such a story will also offer scope to zoom into how caste played out within Sri Lanka and among those who returned to India. "The return of some of our people meant that families left the estates in an ad hoc manner, at times inadvertently collapsing caste differences. Also, the fact that estate workers in Sri Lanka have historically mobilised for land rights, housing and better wages, has meant that they forged a stronger class identity than caste identity. When you tell our people's stories, you can lay bare all these aspects," he says, adding: "That is why I feel there's a good film waiting to be made."

Meera Srinivasan

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