

A PEOPLE OF AN EMERALD ISLE, WAITING WITH DOOSRAS

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'The Indian Tamils of Sri Lanka need important changes to be made by them and for them' | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

George Bernard Shaw visited Ceylon in 1948, skipping India altogether. So much for the ego of the island's massive neighbour. But that was not all. In a letter to India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, the unpredictable playwright wrote: "I was convinced that Ceylon is the cradle of the human race because everybody there looks an original. All other nations are obviously mass produced." Anthropology was as far from Shaw's brain as the razor from his beard. But in this observation he had hit upon both a human truth and a Lankan verity.

The emerald isle's people have traditionally been seen in terms of ethnic groups. The categorisation has its uses, as, for instance, in understanding the demographic weight of sections of its population such as given in this latest figure (Census of 2012): Sinhalese 74.9%; Sri Lankan Tamil 11.2%; Sri Lankan Moors 9.2%; Indian Tamil 4.2%; others 0.5% ('Moors' being a quaint Lankan way of describing, a la Shakespeare and Othello, the island's Islamic population).

But identity-clustering can be very self-depriving for a nation.

Muthiah Muralitharan is one of the 4.2% of Sri Lanka's population called Indian Tamils. '...born in Kandy...to a Hill Country Tamil (Malaiyaha Tamizhar) Hindu family of tea plantation workers, the eldest of the four sons born to Lakshmi and to Sinnasamy Muttiah who runs a successful biscuit-making business, he is a grandson of Periasamy Sinnasamy who migrated from south India in 1920 to find work on Ceylon's tea estates.' But Murali is also the fast-bowling spinner of spinners who sends the ball as only he does, with a menacing sneer to match, and 'has taken more wickets in international cricket than any other bowler'. You cannot get more original than that.

The Sinnasamy family is part of the large group of agricultural labourers that began coming into the island from the drought-ravaged and poor districts in southern Madras over a 100 year period, from about 1830 to 1930. As the plantations and the island's export earnings from the plantations, especially tea, grew, the labourers' numbers grew too. Did their incomes and educational and health scores grow proportionately?

They did not. And here, the single-minded and unrelenting work put in by another 'original' Indian Tamil leader and head of the Ceylon Workers' Congress, the late S. Thondaman, made a difference. He was a 'fast-bowler' of his own kind. His ability to inspire and mobilise his people gave them voice, gave them self-respect. More than that, it made them feel they mattered as persons, individuals.

And there was the issue of citizenship. After 10, 25, 50, 100 years, were they Ceylonese or Indian or a bit of both? Nehru told India's Parliament on April 9, 1958, 'They are or should be citizens of Ceylon.' He had the moral authority to do so, given the Congress-led Parliament's record in the matter of affirmative action to ameliorate India's debasing caste system.

Today, all that is history. The Sirimavo-Shastri Pact of 1964 and the Sirimavo-Indira Gandhi Pact of 1974 saw the translocation of a large number of Indian Tamils to India, a procedure Nehru would have surely resisted. The repatriates are now part of the fluctuating fortunes of India's under-employed, self-employed and unemployed wage-searching masses. But the stateless and futureless situation of the Indian Tamils on Sri Lanka's plantations has ended. The bulk of Indian Tamils on Sri Lanka's plantations are now citizens of that country, with voting rights.

More and more of the young among the Indian Tamils now are seeking avenues of work outside the estates, like Murali's father did, with reasonable success. On-estate issues remain, in terms of deficits in housing, medical and educational standards. And in ergonomic norms. And, there are political aspirations of the Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka that call for remedial action as well. These, as identified by participants in a 'Malaiyaham200' event organised by the Katugastota-based Institute of Social Development include retention of the proportional electoral system, power sharing at the central, provincial and local government levels, the re-vesting of human settlements in the plantations with the State (not the estates) and being recognised as villages so that government schemes and services as also land rights can flow equally to the community.

But casting a forward gaze, the Indian Tamils of Sri Lanka now need the following five important changes to be made by them and for them:

First, to start being seen as distinct and equal Lankans with huge and unique professional expertise making a major, indeed critically important, contribution to their country's economic well-being.

Second, to have their land-based climate-dependent profession protected against the now almost certain threat of adverse and erratic weather conditions. This calls for urgent, in fact, emergency mitigation strategies not just in the interest of plantation labour but also of the plantations themselves, and therefore of Lanka's economy.

Third, to have their worksites, work-cycles and work-styles readied to face the real possibility of COVID-19's variants and other pandemics, especially zoonotically triggered ones, re-visiting the plantations. It is vital to obviate the crippling disruption that shattered plantation aspirations over the virus's two waves by dips in export, in prices.

Fourth, to ensure that this sector is not left vulnerable to policy-related adversities such as those that were created by the ill-conceived ban on chemical fertilizer some months ago which hit tea estates in the gut, and to make it creatively equipped to respond to the gradual but globally discernible change in tea tastes, away from the current black tea pattern towards green and herbal teas.

Fifth, and most important now, to recognise the global opportunities, and equally the challenge that Artificial Intelligence (AI) is opening for the community. The opportunities are, among others,

helping predict weather and, using drones, help making planting, de-weeding and de-infesting near perfect if not zero-defect operations, and with algorithms, transform the future of the plantation sector. Authentication has been cited as one area where AI will confer a boon. Labels can and do misrepresent facts. Traditional methods can fail to see adulteration or to spot 'spent leaf' in bags of mixed tea. "100% X or 100 % Y", may be only 10% or 20% so. AI will tell the true from the fake. Algorithms detecting fraud, calibrating flavour through sensor technology and chemometrics are going to transform the industry. But will AI cut employment on estates? Could AI, in a short space of a few months, displace hundreds of thousands now working on the island's hill-slopes? Will AI, in some unregulated brain and in some frenzy of corporate rivalry, tamper with tea or coffee preferences and generate a spasm of craving for something that replaces tea and coffee and makes the tea bush or coffee plant objects in museums of antiquated forest produce? This is not about science fiction, but about AI's flip side. Is anyone in Sri Lanka or elsewhere, thinking of this? Are plantation labour unions? They must.

If Sri Lanka's plantation workers, in a measured but audacious move, were to be made part of the creation and development of an AI university situated in the central highlands and specialising in algorithms for the plantation sector, their originality as individuals and genius as persons could work not for their own so much as for Lanka's good. The 4.2% have been generators of wealth for Sri Lanka, themselves remaining in want. The time has come for them to be harbingers of change, themselves leading — and regulating — the change.

The author of Pygmalion was an AI drone buzzing over the island's future spotting not Eliza Doolittle like originals who could speak a zero-defect English but women and men spinning their individual destinies with doosras waiting to fly.

Gopalkrishna Gandhi is a former administrator and diplomat who served in Sri Lanka over two spells for six years

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