THE INDIA FORUM
A JOURNAL-MAGAZINE ON CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

November 3, 2022

Migrants and Minorities in Ceylon: Lessons for the Present

By: Ritesh Kumar Jaiswal

Sri Lankan politics bears the mark of a century of anti-Tamil policies. A majoritarian outlook has helped Sinhalese groups gain power, grow corrupt and weaken democracy.

Sri Lanka was just about recovering from a devastating civil war and its aftermath when it plummeted into an unprecedented economic and political crisis. Mass protests beginning in March, in response to alarming inflation and shortages of food, fuel, medicines, fertilisers, and other essential items, forced President Gotabaya Rajapaksa into brief exile. His replacement, Ranil Wickremesinghe is hardly popular.

In many ways, the current economic crisis and the consequent political chaos can be seen as a long-term consequence of colonial and post-colonial majoritarian politics and policies, the seeds of which were sown with the economic recession in the 1930s. The disruptions set off by the Great Depression of 1929 marked the peaking of xenophobia and ethnocentric politics in which Ceylon's ethnic minorities and migrants suffered heavily. Post-colonial Sri Lankan politics and bilateral relations between independent India and Sri Lanka continue to bear the mark of the developments of the 1930s.

Anti-Indian politics

When Ceylon became independent in 1948, Tamils of Indian origin - called Estate Tamils or Upcountry Tamils - formed slightly over half of Sri Lanka's Tamil population. (The rest were the Eelam or Jaffna Tamils, said to be the descendants of Tamils of the old Jaffna Kingdom and east coast chieftaincies called Vannamials.)

The Indian migrant presence was mainly due to the plantation economy. British Ceylon was one of the world's leading producers of tea and rubber in the 20th century. This led to heavy capital investment - both European and indigenous - and large-scale labour migration from India. The plantations were worked by migrant labourers from the Tamil-speaking districts of the Madras Presidency. (Adi-Dravidas - the so-called untouchable groups of castes - constituted the bulk of Indian migration.) Other immigrants, mostly Tamil and Malayali, found office or blue-collar jobs in Colombo and other cities.

Less than a tenth of the total migrant workers settled down permanently. The depression of the 1930s played a crucial role in amplifying this ephemerality. The sharp fall in global demand and prices for tea and rubber led to reduced production in Ceylon and a decline in demand and wages for plantation workers. Colonial statistics reveal a significant increase in returns of these migrants to India and a decrease in Indian emigration to Ceylon during the 1930s.

> Propaganda around migrants served as an important tool of mass mobilisation for the larger anti-colonial national politics in Ceylon.

If the plantation workers wanted to return to India because of lower wages, irregular days of work, and rising indebtedness, Indian migrants in the cities wished to return because of the growing hostility of the "natives" towards them. Ceylonese had begun to compete with Indians for urban jobs, and protests against immigrants in such jobs increased massively. The dominant Sinhalese, best represented in the Legislative Council of Ceylon, pegged rising unemployment on Indian immigrants. The Labour Party leader A. E. Goonersinghe stated that Malayalees were the reason for "men of country's unemployment, starvation and death." The left-wing leader of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, said he 'would be glad to see every Indian turned out of Ceylon.

Policies to exclude Indians from Ceylon's civil services and municipal, medical, and port administrations had been practised surreptitiously or openly since 1923. But now the Ceylon government called for the dismissal of all non-Ceylonese (those not born in Ceylon) daily-wage government employees hired after 1934 and replacing them with unemployed Ceylonese.

> Sinhalese nationalists maintained a position of convenience, desiring and despising different classes of Indian migrants at the same time.

Yet, as economic conditions began to improve from 1937 onwards, the Sinhalese-dominated State Council changed its stance to permit new recruitment from India for estate labour. The reason for the changed stance was that a quarter of the area under tea cultivation and over half of that under rubber was owned by Sinhalese. Attempts to find local labour were largely unsuccessful: few Ceylonese were willing to work as plantation labour due to the attached stigma and the poor working conditions. Without Indian labour, the plantation owners would suffer economically. Thus, Sinhalese nationalists maintained a position of convenience, desiring and despising different classes of Indian migrants simultaneously.

The concerns around migrant labour were also politicised on the other side of the Palk Straits. There was increasing pressure from Indian nationalists and capitalists to restrict further emigration to Ceylon. The mass mobilisation around the issue of migrant labour for the anti-colonial movement in India developed through two narratives. One highlighted the failure of the British government to create better avenues for the employment of workers in India; the other criticised the government for its failure to protect the interests and welfare of Indian migrants overseas. Thus, the depression political economy was instrumentalised by nationalists on both sides who sought to use anti-migration rhetoric to gather mass support for larger political agendas of self-government and decolonisation, as well as for political ambitions.

As a result of the politico-economic developments and increased tensions of the 1930s, the Indian government imposed a complete ban on the emigration of unskilled Indian labourers to the island in August 1939. The ban, and the promulgation of defence regulations during World War II, marked the end of the aggressive boycott of Indians in Ceylon.

The fate of the Tamils

However, the struggle of the mostly Tamil migrants for citizenship rights continued throughout the 20th century. The Sinhalisation of political, economic, and cultural spaces in Ceylon, which began under colonial rule and accelerated during the 1930s economic recession, was adopted more vigorously by the Ceylonese nation-state. Post-colonial politics resulted in the state-crafted ethnic cleansing of the Tamil minorities resisting Sinhala dominance and policies of exclusion.

Between independence in 1948 and the 1970s, the Tamils of Indian origin were progressively disenfranchised and marginalised through legislative acts defining Ceylonese citizenship. Diplomatic negotiations between India and Ceylon failed to resolve the fate of the migrants. Even after the Bandaranaike-Shastri Pact between the leaders of the two countries of 1964, over 500,000 Indian-origin migrants remained in Ceylon without citizenship of either country. (It was only through the Stateless Person Act of 1988 and Grant of Citizenship to Persons of Indian Origin Act 2003 that Sri Lankan citizenship was granted to people of Indian origin residing in Sri Lanka since October 1964 and their descendants.)

> Plantation Tamils experienced 'double expropriation': displaced and exploited by the colonial regime and then marginalised by post-colonial successors.

Sinhala ethnonationalism in the 1950s also jeopardised the early political successes of Tamil plantation workers. Countryside land was granted only to Sinhalese peasants, deemed to be the 'authentic group' of the state. Standards of education and public health of the plantation Tamils fell. Thus, the plantation Tamils experienced 'double expropriation': displaced and exploited by the colonial regime and then marginalised by post-colonial successors.

Even the non-migrant Jaffna Tamils were affected by the developments in independent Ceylon. The process of Sinhalisation was widely opposed by them, as they saw it as a direct attack on their culture, language, and economic position. Communal disagreements, hartals, demonstrations, and rioting ensued between Sinhala and Jaffna Tamils from 1956 onwards. The 1958 anti-Tamil riots and the assassination of Bandaranaike in 1959 marked the beginning of the long civil war in Sri Lanka. From 1983, the country faced a civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sinhala-dominated Sri Lankan government, which, by the time it ended in 2009, had killed over 100,000, displaced 500,000 Tamils, and caused mass arrests, detention, torture, rape, and disappearances of nearly 100,000 people.

The Indian Tamils were not direct participants in this ethnic conflict and generally did not subscribe to the separatist vision. This distinction notwithstanding, they were victims of state and structural violence - often implicated in the backlash violence against the LTTE. During the many anti-Tamil riots in the early 1980s, thousands of Indian Tamils were mercilessly attacked by the state forces and uprooted from their historical homes.

Majoritarian victory and weak democracy

Members of the Rajapaksa family helmed the government's victory in the civil war. (Gotabaya Rajapaksa was then the defence secretary, his brother Mahinda Rajapaksa was president, and other siblings held various government posts). The victory, and divisional tactics based on religion and ethnicity, helped them consolidate power. Mahinda Rajapaksa's political solution to the so-called 'ethnic problem' was to wage a 'war on terrorism' as he saw the ethnic insurgencies for equality and autonomy as terrorist and fascist.

> Majoritarianism […] has helped the Sinhalese groups gain power and grow corrupt without the fear of punitive action.

Displacements, disappearances, killings, abductions, and arbitrary arrests of ethnic minorities have been prominent features of post-war Sri Lanka. With rising Islamophobia, there has been a growing antagonism towards the cultural and religious practices of Muslims, including the indigenous Ceylon Moors of the northern and eastern regions. (In the 1990s, too, the Moors had been targets of ethnic violence by the government forces and the LTTE.) The parliamentary structure continues to remain rooted in Sinhalese nationalism.

Majoritarianism, exclusionary ethno-chauvinistic outlook and politics, and recurring ethnic conflicts have long obstructed the construction of a more robust pluralistic, democratic, and inclusive polity in the country. It has helped the Sinhalese groups gain power and grow corrupt without the fear of punitive action. Pursuing an inclusive policy and amending long years of social-economic distrust of minority groups would help prevent the country from collapsing again into turmoil. In its attempt to break out of this indefinite loop of crisis and chaos, Sri Lanka would do well if it learned lessons from its past.

Ritesh Kumar Jaiswal is a historian and a Swiss National Science Foundation fellow at the University of Zurich.