



# **DREAMS AND DIGNITY :**

## **Stories of Malaiyaha Tamil youth**

### **INTRODUCTION :**

The year 2023 marks 200 years since some of the first recorded arrivals of South Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka to work in the colonial plantations, in 1823. They were brought by British colonisers initially to work on coffee plantations, the failure of which gave the way to the tea plantations that continue to this day. Since the arrival of this community in Sri Lanka, up to four generations of their descendants have called the island their home.

The Malaiyaha or Up-Country Tamil community continue to live and work on the tea plantations. They have been subject to disenfranchisement from the state and exploitation by the plantation industry. At the same time, they have been creating their community identity, struggling continuously for higher wages and dignity in their living standards.

Malaiyaha Tamils have always looked outside the estate to the cities for alternative

modes of employment that they believe are more gainful. However over the last decade or so, there has been a drastic reduction in the number of workers within the plantations. The 'loss of a workforce' is also cited by employers as a reason why wages cannot be increased.

This migration reflects an important reality - plantations are not a viable site of employment and mobility. Those who participated in this research noted that their dreams and aspirations – and the dreams of many others - cannot be realised within the plantation sector. They have witnessed the generations before them doing the difficult manual labour required for a low wage, and seeing little change in their socio-economic status over decades. As a result, many are seeking work or an education that will allow them new futures.

This documentation by LST hopes to help reflect on the community's situation at this historical moment in time, and

at the critical juncture as they shape their futures.

Youth aspirations have been a key factor behind several moments that altered the course of Sri Lankan history in both terrible and powerful ways. Two centuries since the arrival of their ancestors on the island, this work centres the voices of the youth who make up the newest generation of the community. It brings together the experiences and aspirations of Malaiyaha Tamil youth across the island's tea-growing regions.

These regions do not necessarily map onto administrative boundaries of districts or provinces, but are instead used to distinguish the varieties of tea that grow best in each location. Even as the young speakers detail the challenges they've faced, they also crucially reflect on the community's need for dignity and rights, that continue to be systemically denied.

## **Dimbula region**

### **Maskeliya – Gawarawila and Upcot**

Located at the geographical centre of the map of tea-growing regions, Maskeliya features some of the tea plantations at the highest elevations in the country.

## **Kandy region**

### **Medamahanuwara**

The Deltota region on Kandy is home to the oldest commercial estate on the island; Lookandura or Loolecondara, where British planter James Taylor began planting tea in 1867.

## **Sabaragamuwa region**

### **Deraniyagala – Miyanawita**

Located in close proximity to several towns and industrial centres in the province, the youth living in these areas are able to commute to and from work outside their homes on the estates on a daily basis.

## **Ruhuna region**

### **Deniyaya**

Estates located within this region, unlike the others, are surrounded by Sinhala-majority towns. As a result, there is more connection between young Malayihaha Tamil people and Sinhala-speaking students within their classrooms.

## **Uva region**

### **Bandarawela – Poonagala**

Located within the province with highest susceptibility to landslides in the country, those living in this region also face the most risks with regard to the safety of their houses during inclement weather.

This research was made possible by community-based organisations working in these estates and regions, whom LST has engaged with over a period of time in relation to land rights and other issues faced by the community. These organisations helped the researchers connect with young people from the Malaiyaha Tamil community in their locality.

For this documentation, LST spoke to young people between the ages of 16 and 21 whose journeys differ from one another. Some were sitting for their final school exams, others were applying to or just beginning

university, while others were already working outside the estate. Through focus group discussions, researchers spoke with them about education, employment, aspirations for the future and the barriers that exist to achieving these in their context.

The conversations touched on a range of topics to explore current education and work conditions, as well as future aspirations for such. The issues that emerged from these discussions overlap and intersect in many ways. This document has categorised the key themes that emerged from the young people's responses.



## SCHOOLING

For Malaiyaha Tamil youth, education is a challenge from the very early years. The lack of state expenditure in the education sector is most visible in schools within the plantations. The range of issues raised by the speakers capture how this plays out in their daily lives, such as through the lack of facilities, curriculum and teaching staff appointed by the state to these areas. It is crucial in shaping their futures as well.

The speakers raised from transport to the facilities available at schools. The speakers noted how few people continue studies to pursue a future ambition. While they feel more students go to university than a decade ago, more are choosing to work to earn an income.

Transport issues are a heavy and persistent barrier to school access. The cost to go to school

begins with the immense distance between the line rooms on the estates that they call home and the school nearest to them. Distances can be a particular challenge during exam times.

As they grow older, some will need to attend schools in towns as estate schools very often do not offer classes up to the A Levels. This means an additional cost for the parents to cover bus or three-wheeler costs.

Trying to use the bus can be quite unreliable since bus conductors are less likely to take students from estates. Their season tickets are not as profitable to as those from other passengers.



**The closest bus stop to the estate line rooms is about a thirty-minute walk in one direction. Roads are broken and three wheelers can't be driven on them, so there is no choice but to go by foot.**

- Poonagala -

In Medamahanuwara off Kandy, students must walk 3km to the main road, and then take a bus to school. Occasionally they are able to arrange a three-wheeler from their homes to the main road, but the prices of these can increase, especially when it's raining. Due to the lack of consistent teaching in the school or the social expectation to attend 'tuition', some students travel all the way to Digana (21km away) or Kandy (38km away) for private classes. In addition, tuition and other fees cost a lot of money, and when their parents' salary is not enough, some have gone into debt by taking loans to cover these costs.

Respondents in this area also noted the lack of connectivity. The clearest signal for phones can be obtained in a pine forest at the top of the hill. Leeches can be found on the ground, and wild boar are also known to frequent the area. Therefore, students are forced to skip any classes scheduled later than 5pm.

Limited access to subjects was also highlighted by the participants, who talked about how Tamil medium schools do not offer subjects they are good at or interested in pursuing. This pushes them to study subjects they do not like or are not good at. As a result, many will find themselves having to enrol in

'bigger schools', ones closer to the towns, for their A/Ls, given the availability of subjects and teachers. The limited access to subjects further hampers their ability to join state universities and narrows their options in employment.

The absence of teachers to teach in Tamil language

schools in the area is also a growing issue within schools surrounding plantations. It indirectly pushes students to leave schooling, as the expense borne by their parents to send them to school is seen as a waste when teachers are not present in many classes.



**Tamil schools in the area are lacking in terms of facilities such as school grounds and extra activities compared to the Sinhala ones. Sometimes it is even in basic things like classroom space.**

- Medamahanuwara -

For example, in the Medamahanuwara school that the students from this estate attend, classes from grades 1 to 11 are located within the same building. When their school faced damage due to adverse weather, they were temporarily located in the building of a local Sinhala school. When they returned

to their own school within one month, they found that it was yet to be repaired.

In Bandarawela, some students had just obtained their A/L results and spoke of how difficult it was for them to even reach this stage. The closest schools to them offer A/Ls only in the Commerce and



Arts mediums, which severely constrains students choice of higher studies. Those who wish to study Science or Maths would need to journey 17kms to Bandarawela town in order to do so.

These students noted that while in the O/L class there were up to 85 students in the local school, the A/L class consisted of only 21 students. This drop in numbers is due to a combination of students going to town to continue other subjects, and also school dropouts.

Limited access to sports and extracurricular activities was also a persistently expressed issue for Malaiyaha Tamil students. Students who wish to pursue and play sports seriously do not have the opportunity to do so as schools have limited to no facilities. Very few of the small schools have formal teams and the opportunity for students to enter meets and tournaments.



**I wish to play sports to a higher level, for a team, and to go on to become a coach myself. But to do that I would have to go to bigger schools or join clubs further away from my home. There is no simple way for me to follow this path, though I am determined to try as hard as I can.**

- Deniyaya -

They must also cover expenses, such as for uniforms and equipment, by themselves. All of this must be done with individual initiative as schools are and cannot be involved. Most students find it difficult to pursue extracurricular interests alongside their responsibilities at home.

In Bandarawela, respondents said that though there are students who'd love to play cricket, there is no chance for

them. They feel that the denial of facilities they experience is because they are from the Malaiyaha Tamil community.

In Kandy, respondents said that youth groups in the local Pradeshiya Sabha don't engage with kids from the estates in a very genuine or sustainable manner. They might get them involved in some activities occasionally but there is little to no focus on the community.

## UNIVERSITY

Several speakers had chosen to pursue higher education, gaining acceptance into universities to study a range of subjects from fine arts to business. They noted that their parents want them to study as a means of getting jobs that will allow them to earn more than their generation does.

The earnings of their parents and other workers on the tea estates is often just enough

wondered about the additional expenses for them to gain an education that would span over four years and questioned if this was the right choice to have made.

University education in the Tamil language medium was a significant issue for Malaiyaha youth pursuing university study.

In Deraniyagala, those who were exploring the possibility of attending university or those who had already gained admission said they had selected certain universities located in the Eastern Province or in Jaffna because other campuses don't offer courses of their choice in the Tamil medium.

Speakers in Maskeliya compared the situation in their district and other estates against the situation in Tamil-majority areas in the North and East.



for the family to survive on a daily basis but does not allow for them to have savings. The youth going to university

A significant number of students enter university from those regions compared to from Malaiyaha Tamil students.

One key issue was a lack of guidance for students as they passed through school and sat for final exams; there were no teachers or advisors present

who could give them options on what paths to follow and let them know of the choices available to them. For example, there are several free courses available to students from local awarding and qualifications authorities but there is not enough awareness among students about them.



**Our parents are also scared to send us away to university sometimes due to the distance from the home. Having government universities with full facilities within the central hill country – close to the estates - would be helpful.**

- Maskeliya -

A variety of motivations for university study were expressed by Malaiyaha Tamil youth for attending university and persisting with it.

In Deraniyagala, those who have chosen the path of a university degree or higher

education qualification say they need to pass their courses, in order to be able to secure a good job. If not, they say, people in their village will wonder why they ‘studied so much’ – by extension meaning that they spent so much to study – and didn’t do well.



**My relatives constantly question why I am sitting for exams – I now feel I need to do better and pass, otherwise they will say I have wasted time and my family’s money on education.**

- Galaha -

Youth from Maskeliya are conscious of the influence they can have in pursuing this path. They feel that if they choose education, people will take it as encouragement to follow and thereby lead more to learning.

Some of the young women interviewed in Deraniyagala said they had been told “girls don't need to study” when they decided to pursue education. For them, the choice to go to university was an opportunity for resistance, and to prove the stereotypes wrong.

In Maskeliya, many had plans to go onwards to university to study to become doctors, a profession that they had shown interest in from a small age.

Parents’ attitudes towards education informed many youths’ decisions to pursue education.



Many of their parents who worked on estates had told them that they should not 'suffer like them' but must find good and respectable work. Students who had entertained the idea of leaving school to begin work said that their parents had discouraged them from doing so.

Speakers noted that parents who had received some education wanted their kids to learn, having had some exposure to it themselves. Others with parents who had little to no education were

equally enthusiastic that their children receive a good education. Both groups had worked their whole lives in the estates – in some cases, the last generation to do so - and saw education as their children's way of moving outside of an exploitative system.

One speaker in Bandarawela said his father was doing two jobs to educate three children. He had told his son that he must continue his studies so he can find a way to get work abroad and take care of the whole family.



**Our parents tell us how estate management treats them 'like slaves', and they therefore want something better for us. Learning would help us get a 'good name' in society, offering us some dignity as well. They feel that no one takes note of members of this community who've worked as labourers on estates for generations.**

- Maskeliya -



## EMPLOYMENT

Across the regions, we noted that many young people were already engaged in or preparing to engage in work outside the estate, sometimes at the expense of their own education. None of those who participated in our focus group discussions had any desire or plan to continue working within the boundaries of the estate. This is largely informed by the experiences of their parents, whom they have witnessed engaging in difficult labour without much improvement in their quality of life due to low income and mobility.

Young people who are currently employed work in

or seek to work in short term jobs that help support their families. In the long term, they hope to get work that they can hold down for a while that also provides EPF, ETF and other protections.

Work in apparel factories was a significant source of employment for Malaiyaha Tamil youth. Apparel factories actively come to estates and small villages in the area looking to recruit workers. For the young people who are hoping to find well-paying work outside the estates, this opportunity is among the few where they are on equal footing with other workers. But working conditions in apparel factories are difficult.

In Deraniyagala, several had previously worked in the apparel factories, located in Avissawella and specifically in the Seethawaka Export Processing Zone. During the COVID outbreak in the last two years, they had to leave those jobs due to the high risk of transmission in the factories.

In Kandy, several youth from the particular estate in Medamahanuwara go on to work in garment factories after finishing school. Posters from these factories and their recruiters can be seen placed on telephone poles around the area.

Many find work in the Kandy Industrial Zone (25km away, in Pallekele) and several other factories in Teldeniya (13km away). They offer Rs. 18,000 as a basic wage or a maximum of Rs. 35,000 per month with overtime. The factories are

staffed by young people who dropped out of school, but also those who pursued education and have now chosen this work.

Work begins at 7.30am and goes on till 6.30pm, for the minimum basic wage. Missing even a day of work would mean losing the monthly



attendance benefit. Workers need to inform management if they're sick or urgently unable to attend work that day. A young worker said that she received only one day off after nearly 4 months of work.



**Jobs on these production lines offers a better salary than estate wages, but they still offer less respect – we have heard that workers are shouted at for the smallest of mistakes.**

- Maskeliya -

Daily wage work is also a widespread source of employment. This includes manpower work which is paid on a daily basis. However, the basic salary paid to a worker is still low, and they would be required to work overtime hours (OT) to be able to collect an adequate amount.

In Deraniyagala the group were currently engaged in daily wage work either in the main towns of Deraniyagala and Avissawella, approximately 8 and 28 kilometres from the estate respectively. They undertook construction, carpentry and painting work on a project basis with contractors in the area.

Work in Colombo was pursued by many Malayaha Tamil youth. Youth who drop out of school early or do not pass their O/Ls with satisfactory

results often go to Colombo to work in various shops, most often in the Pettah industrial and commercial area. Economic survival remains the first priority for most families and choosing education can be tough in these circumstances.

In Kandy, some students knew peers as young as 13 and 14 who had gone to Colombo looking for work.

The reasons for working that those taking up employment in their teen years have are varied. Family issues centred around economic struggles are the main reason why students choose to leave school early. In most cases, especially with the prevailing economic crisis, it costs parents more to send children to school. Therefore, many of them begin work young.

Some did not perform well in school and therefore had to drop out and find work at a young age. Some of the speakers had chosen to work delaying or forgoing their own education, so that with their wages they could fund the education of their own younger siblings. Their parents were daily-wage labourers or had travelled overseas looking for employment. In some cases, children as young as 17 or in their early 20s were supporting their entire

family on the wages they were earning from work.

Speakers in Bandarawela related the experiences of their siblings and other young adults from the village who have migrated to urban centres looking for work. This included young women mostly recruited into garment factory jobs as well as working in supermarkets and textile shops, and young men working in the construction industry.



**We would have liked to continue our education or even undergo a technical vocational course, but we choose to work due to economic issues in the home.**

- Kandy -

The speakers said they don't communicate much with these folks once they have gone to the city, however, when they come home for a vacation, they tell the younger students to continue their studies and to

not 'be like them'. About one third of the speakers said that they themselves had thought about leaving the estates and their district in search of work, without continuing their studies.



**When we were younger, we thought we would like to become doctors, lawyers or police officers. However, we do not have the support to make these a reality. The financial situations in our homes are very difficult, and we need to consider the needs of the rest of the family or our sick relatives over our own education.**



## **JOB ASPIRATIONS**

Malaiyaha Tamil youth expressed a wide range of possible ‘futures’ in employment. These ranged from the ubiquitous government jobs to foreign employment to the private sector. For many, the aim was for a job was one that would

pay well and also help support their families.

Government jobs were a major aspiration for Malaiyaha Tamil youth, and one that is heavily socially conditioned. Growing up, their parents had told them that they should

get government jobs because of the security and benefits. A 'government job' assured them long-term security and a pension upon retirement. Whether this is their own choice or something they take on as a responsibility to the family is not always clear.

Speakers in Maskeliya noted that when the government was giving away 1 lakh jobs, some of these were given to people from their estate. That had built up a mindset in others that they don't need to study. Those who had sat for public exams wondered why they had done so if employment was going to be offered to them so easily.

A recurring theme is the number of students who referred to wanting employment either with the Army, STF or Police, an extension of the 'government job' ambition. They have seen videos or TV broadcasts of the armed forces and what was portrayed inspired them to consider working in those roles. However, many spoke about the hurdles specific to



the community in attempting to join this sector. Speakers in Kandy noted particular difficulties such as getting a Police clearance report.



**I would like to become a teacher. The wage and the pension would allow me to securely take care of my parents and also, if I get posted in the estates, I can give something back to society and my community.**

One speaker from Kandy noted that from her young days, she had wanted to be a teacher, a dream she had told her parents. She was now hoping to follow that path through university and was determined to do well in exams and gain entrance to university. Her parents were also encouraging her to pursue this. In Bandarawela, those aspiring to be teachers wanted to teach arts subjects in particular.

Speakers in Maskeliya who were interested in becoming teachers but were not able to attend university were looking at alternatives like certifications from teaching colleges like the Sri Pada College of Education.



Foreign employment was looked at seriously by some Malaiyaha Tamil youth. They hoped to stay a few years in a country in the Middle East, earn well and then return to support their families. Foreign employment as an option for Malaiyaha Tamil youth is often conditioned by their parents' experiences with it. Many are aware that it can be a significant source of income.

In Kandy, those whose parents are working in the Middle East said they were not entirely aware of what their parents'

work looked like there but they did know that it provided enough money for the family. As such, one speaker said he wanted to join his father who was working in the Gulf, to contribute to the family.

In Bandarawela, speakers said many of their parents had previously worked on the estate, but many had since looked for work overseas. Several of their mothers had taken up jobs as domestic workers and carers for families in Gulf countries and the Middle East.



One young person said that their mother had returned from one such period of work and was planning to go again but had become paralysed by an injection given in the medical check that was carried out by the authorities before she left. In order to ensure a steady income for the family, her brother took up work.



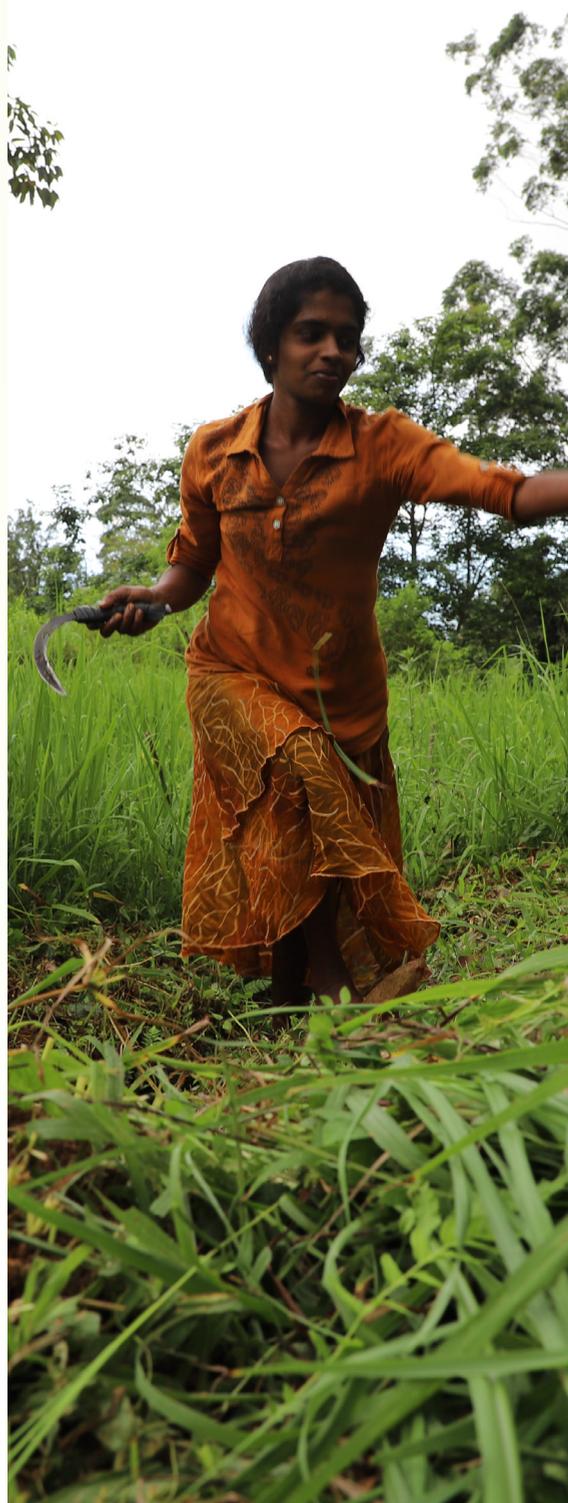
Obtaining foreign employment can, however, come with risks. It can impose eventual burdens on families. Children of parents who go overseas, often explicitly to help them continue their schooling, can sometimes end up attending school less and even dropping out.

In Deraniyagala, one individual recounted falling victim to a scam by a 'foreign employment agency' that he contacted to help with the process. He paid LKR 75,000 as a fee for processing, and when he went to the office on the day of the supposed flight, found it to be non-existent.

Some Malaiyaha Tamil youth expressed interest in working for other jobs in the private sector. Speakers from Bandarawela said they hoped to reach employment at a management level, and another student said they wanted to start their own travel company, providing services such as visa applications and tickets to clients.

In Maskeliya, several were also in the process of studying accounting in the hopes of eventually going to work in banks. In Kandy, one young speaker noted that she wanted to go to campus to be able to realise a dream she had of working in the media. She had seen news videos on YouTube and wanted to also raise the problems in her village with a media platform. Highlighting them, she hoped, would make change for future generations.

For many youth, their parents' work situations directly inform their own aspirations. Interviewees reflected on the history and patterns of work that their parents experience on the estate. In many cases, their parents no longer work on the estate and in a few instances, their grandparents were the last generation in their family to work within its boundaries. These are some indicators of the slow but steady attrition of labour from the tea industry. The interviewees for this documentation are part of



a generation whose exit from the industry will show a more drastic drop in the pattern.

The parents of young speakers from Deraniyagala still work in various roles in the estates. In the years that the estate has switched to cultivating rubber and cinnamon, there is less work required from one individual and by extension, less wages. For this reason, parents too are engaged in daily wage labour, with several of them having gone overseas for

work. They are the last generation to have a connection to labour in the estate, as everyone in newer generations have been looking for opportunities outside the estate.

Where parents have taken up work outside the home – such as in urban centres or in foreign employment – there are direct consequences for youth. Older siblings often must take on the caring responsibilities of their younger siblings, sometimes with the help of their ageing grandparents.



## COMMUNITY ISSUES

Youth had several perceptions of the discrimination they face – from the state, from employers

or from individuals – based on their identity as Malaiyaha Tamils.



**We were perceived in a certain way by employers and people outside the estate, because they were Malaiyaha Tamil. There is an assumption that we are not capable or able to do the work.**

- Deraniyagala -

Speakers from Deraniyagala note that among the people who work with them in daily-wage jobs are those who have earned a full education. It is the lack of opportunity and people's unwillingness to provide them with one, that keeps many in this position.

Youth engaged in activism had particular views of their community. Some of the speakers who were engaged in social activities noted that within their community, people don't speak out against

injustice or for their rights. For example, all understood that the line house they lived in was their residence but that they did not own it – however, none were willing to ask management or local government what could be done about it. Where other communities might ask for their rights, they felt the Malaiyaha Tamils did not do so on such a frequency, but did not elaborate as to their reasons why.





## CONCLUSION

Much writing and reporting on the Malaiyaha Tamil community has focused on the historical and current struggles that they face. It is necessary to place on record these systemic failures that continue to marginalise them, however the story does not end there. There is also immense resistance, in terms of political action but also importantly, in everyday life and the choices made for the future.

The key learning this report brings is that Malaiyaha Tamils are, within themselves, a community with diverse stories and realities. The young people interviewed, though faced with the same

set of systemic injustices and obstacles, are choosing their paths to the future in different ways.

Among the young people interviewed, some had not been able to pursue the subjects of their choice due to shortfalls in the education system illustrated earlier. Despite this, they said they were going to 'try any means possible' to follow a path informed by their interests and passions.

For others, they claim that their success has already begun, having gained seats at a state university to follow higher studies.

For most others, it includes choosing jobs that sometimes take them far away from their homes on the estates, because it offers higher wages and mobility that they might not necessarily find on the plantation.

An point noted by the young speakers across all the locations is they were seeking lives with dignity, that they said their parents and generations before them had struggled to find on the plantations.

Responses to the stories and struggles of the Malaiyaha Tamils should not solely be those of sympathy. Questions around why, 200 years since the community's arrival on the island, they are still facing such marginalisation must be raised. Systemic injustice – across economic, social and political spheres – must be addressed in order for them to access opportunities and protections.

It is also essential to hold accountable those in various forms of power who have allowed the community's marginalisation to continue for this long. This has been perpetuated by political and economic interests, at the expense of the rights and wellbeing of the people. The governments of both Sri Lanka and India that disenfranchised them, destabilising their citizenship; the local Pradeshiya Sabha administration, that relinquishes responsibility for the unequal facilities provided to them; the commercial tea giants who exploit their labour for profit.

The journeys of the youth show how they – and the entire Malaiyaha Tamil community – are defining their futures in the face of centuries of this injustice. As we mark their choices and achievements, so must we also advocate for a systemic change that would acknowledge and uphold their rights.

**Photographs :** Selvaraja Rajasekar