



**A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF
THE CHANGING SOCIAL IDENTITY
OF ESTATE TAMIL WORKERS**

by

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ABSTRACT

The point of departure on this study is the concept of social identity, which is one of the major sociological concepts. Today, our country is encountering an identity crisis and serious damage has been done to the different aspects of the country. The damage and destruction has been both human and socio-economic. Study focuses on the 'Estate Tamil' community in Sri Lanka. They are often recognised as 'Indian Tamils', in contrast 'Sri Lankan Tamils', the people who live in the north and east of the island. The majority of them live in upcountry tea estates while a small percentage of them live in low country tea and rubber estates. They were brought to Sri Lanka, as estate labourers by the British planters, under 'kangany' system since the Sinhallas did not like to work in the estates. They had been given so called 'line room based', residential facilities by the plantation companies at that time, and they were confined only to the estates. This 'dwelling' (living space) and 'settlement' (environment) patterns enforced very low status social identity which naturally they come to resent. They have been cornered by the non-estate Tamils, and the majority Sinhallas because of these reasons. Estate Tamils who well understand the situation, have taken some actions voluntarily to change their mode of living in search of a new identity, which gives them better acceptance among non-estate based Tamils and the majority Sinhallas.

The government operated self-help housing schemes similar to what is found in Sinhala villages, as an alternative to the existing line rooms for the estate Tamils considering the requests made by the trade unions, estate based political parties and members of the civil

society for generations. The study has been done in two newly established settlements named Ganga Nagar in Nuwara Eliya and Jana Udana Gammanaya in Kalutara. Ganga Nagar was started in the 1980s, and the Jana Udana Gammanaya was established in the 1990s. Both quantitative and the qualitative approaches have been employed in the study. The concept of social identity has been addressed from three angles, namely line room dwellers, settlers and the traditional Sinhala villagers' points of views. The study shows that transforming 'dwelling' and 'settlement' have changed the social identity of estate Tamils who have moved to the settlements. The study incorporates concepts such as lifestyles, aspirations, integration and social status. The newly established social identity facilitates in bridging the gap between 'estate Tamils' and 'outside' community.