

Bridging the social space between the Sinhala man and Tamil man: The role of social identity

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Sri Lanka has been experiencing the brutality of the war, identified as "ethnic conflict" or "terrorism" by various concerned parties, for more than twenty-five years. This conflict is reflected even in the relationship of Sinhalese with the Tamils in the plantations. Why do people resort to terrorism or develop suspicions of each other? Among the many possible causes for this situation, are the existing identity differences between the ethnic groups which play a vital role. One group is trying to exercise power over the other claiming more rights based on heritage. Plantation workers make up a significant proportion of the country's population as a whole as well as of the Tamil community as a segment of the broader Sri Lankan society. There is a residential population of approximately 850,000, comprising over 240,000 resident families in the estates (Malwatte 2000: 404).

Colonial administrators got down the poor south Indian families here, for their cultivations as locals did not consent to work in their plantations as wage labourers, and settled them down in old barrack type "line houses", in the centre of the hill estates isolating them from the major Sinhala communities. Since then they have been working in the estates without much interaction with the Sinhalese. Through 150 years of life and labour on the plantations, the identity of the estate Tamil community has come to be defined by and large as "outsiders" (Philips 2001: 217). But this separation has been addressed by the post-independence governments to some extent through various development projects such as housing.

Against this backdrop a study was conducted from September 2002 to December 2003, in two housing schemes given to Tamils in Nuwara Eliya (Ganga Nagar) and Kaluataru (Jana Udana Gammanaya) with a view to understanding how changing dwelling pattern would affect the social identity and its influence on bridging the gap between Sinhala world and Tamil world. The study shows that the people who moved to separate houses; "*Gammane men*", "*Colony men*", do not belong to the similar low status identity groups similar to "*line room dwellers*". This has facilitated them to integrate with outside world in general and with Sinhalese in particular. It is not just the change in structure of the house but it is a change of entire lifestyle. The findings of the study shows that the social space between the Sinhalese and Tamils have been reduced by the housing interventions. And this has happened through the changes that took place in their aspirations, lifestyles, and integrations. The Sinhalese has shown their acceptance and readiness to recognize settlement Tamils as equals.

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