

Bridging the Gap.

Reconciliation for Malaiyaha Tamils in the Wake of Sri Lanka's Polycrisis





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Executive Summary

Despite Sri Lanka's post-war reconciliation agenda, the Malaiyaha Tamil community—a plantation-based ethnic group with a 200-year history on the island—remains structurally excluded from national narratives of justice, peacebuilding, and inclusive development. The convergence of at least political, economic, and social crises (polycrisis) since 2022 has deepened their historical marginalization.

Their marginalization continued post-war, and reconciliation processes have largely ignored their unique histories and grievances.

1.2 Polycrisis and its Disproportionate Impact

The polycrisis that came about since 2022 —driven by economic collapse, political instability, the COVID-19 pandemic, and global shocks—has had an enormous impact on Malaiyaha Tamils (Theiventhran, Alikhan, Wedagedara and Rabel 2025). With limited assets, recurrent dispossession, precarious housing, and suppressed wages, the community is especially vulnerable to cost-of-living pressures, environmental disasters, and lack of access to basic services (Jegathesan 2022; Jayawardena and Kurian 2015). Despite their disproportionate struggles, Malaiyaha Tamils remain peripheral to national reconciliation discourses. These have historically centred on Sinhala-Tamil binaries, excluding numerically smaller minorities (Ismail and Jeganathan 1995).

2. Consideration of key policy issues

Why have Malaiyaha Tamils remained absent from the reconciliation agenda?

1. **Ethno-political neglect:** Political leadership from all ethnic groups have deprioritized Malaiyaha Tamil issues.
2. **Institutional exclusion:** National mechanisms for reconciliation (e.g., LLRC, OMP) have not meaningfully engaged with plantation communities.
3. **Socio-economic invisibility:** State policies have failed to address overlapping vulnerabilities—housing, landlessness, health, education.
4. **Narrative erasure:** Reconciliation discourse conflates “Tamils” with Northern Sri Lankan Tamils, obscuring histories and grievances unique to Malaiyaha Tamils.

3. Key Findings from the Field

3.1 Reconciliation Is Distant and Abstract

For many Malaiyaha Tamils, reconciliation is an alien concept. Their lived experiences of daily survival, economic precarity, and marginalization take precedence. Participants saw little connection between elite-driven reconciliation narratives and their material realities.

"We are small people. Even if we know our rights, we can't question. Who will listen?" – Female participant, Ratnapura.

The responses suggested not apathy but resignation where communities were aware of their rights but saw little institutional space to make themselves heard.

3.2 Identity and Belonging Are Evolving

There is a clear generational shift toward adopting the label "Sri Lankan Tamil" over "Indian Tamil" or "Plantation Tamil." Despite ongoing social exclusion, this reidentification reflects aspirations for equal citizenship and social dignity, but also a coping strategy to avoid discrimination.

"We have nothing in India. We live and die here. We are Sri Lankan Tamils now." – Male participant, Kalutara.

By adopting the label of Sri Lankan Tamil and distancing themselves from India, given generational presence and life in Sri Lanka, our respondents were emphatic about how belonging was to the place of birth and life. Sri Lankan citizenship as a due.

3.3 Structural Discrimination Persists

Malaiyaha Tamils face entrenched discrimination in:

- **Housing:** Line rooms with no legal deeds.
- **Education:** Under-resourced Tamil schools; underperforming examination outcomes.
- **Public services:** Disparities in access to healthcare, water, sanitation, and social security.
- **Language:** Barriers in accessing services in Sinhala-majority regions.

3.4 Crises Compound Vulnerability

Economic inflation, climate shocks (e.g., landslides), and state austerity measures (IMF-led reforms) disproportionately harm plantation workers. The loss of daily income, rising food prices, and loss of subsidies threaten basic survival.

3.5 Social Tensions Simmer Beneath Coexistence

While some relationships with Sinhalese neighbours are cordial, deep-seated mistrust and economic rivalry persist, especially in shared markets and public services. Youth increasingly resist passive accommodation and demand dignity and equity; as Sri Lankans wanting an equal footing and stake in their life course.

4. Reframing Reconciliation: A Policy Framework

The need to move from exclusion to inclusion. The reconciliation process must be reframed through an intersectional, polycrisis-informed, and rights-based lens. All citizens – irrespective of class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality have the right to make claims to resources and reconciliation.

4.1 Redefine Reconciliation as Justice and Recognition

Reconciliation must go beyond memorialization and apologies. For Malaiyaha Tamils, it must mean:

- Land and housing rights
- Equal access to services
- Recognition of their unique history and contributions
- Political representation and participation

4.2 Recognize the Impact of Polycrisis on Social Cohesion

- Climate-induced displacement, wage stagnation, and health inequities erode trust in the state and deepen ethnic fault lines.
- Crisis response must integrate reconciliation objectives to avoid reproducing structural violence.

5. Policy Recommendations

5.1 Institutional Reforms

A. Establish a Malaiyaha Tamil Reconciliation and Justice Commission

- Mandated to document historical grievances, consult widely, and propose specific policy measures.
- Chaired by members from the community and supported by independent experts.

B. Integrate Malaiyaha Tamil Concerns into National Reconciliation Mechanisms

- LLRC follow-up, Office of Missing Persons (OMP), and truth commissions must disaggregate data and testimonies by ethnic sub-groups.

5.2 Socio-Economic Inclusion

A. Land and Housing Security

- Grant land deeds to plantation workers.
- Establish public housing cooperatives in urban and plantation-fringe areas.

B. Educational Equity

- Upgrade Tamil-medium schools in plantation areas.
- Offer language bridge programs and scholarships for tertiary education.

C. Health and Infrastructure Access

- Expand mobile health units and maternal care in underserved estate sectors.
- Extend rural electrification and piped water schemes to plantation communities.

5.3 Political Representation

A. Reform Local Government Structures

- Guarantee minimum representation for Malaiyaha Tamils in local councils.
- Provide budgetary autonomy for estate-based localities.

B. Support Youth Political Mobilization

- Fund civic education and leadership training for Malaiyaha youth.
- Create national forums for inter-ethnic youth dialogue.

5.4 Crisis-Responsive Measures

A. Social Protection During Economic Shocks

- Expand cash transfer programs tailored to estate workers.
- Protect wage floors and enforce minimum wage compliance.

B. Disaster Risk Reduction

- Prioritize disaster preparedness in hill country landslide-prone areas.
- Include Malaiyaha Tamils in national climate adaptation planning.

6. Conclusion

The 200th anniversary of Malaiyaha Tamils in Sri Lanka (2023) was a moment for reflection and reparation. While we have just passed that milestone, the new Sri Lankan government, the state institutions, international partners, and civil society must act decisively to move beyond symbolic recognition to structural transformation.

For reconciliation to be meaningful, it must be inclusive of all communities. The Malaiyaha Tamil experience—of displacement, exploitation, and resilience—offers a critical lens through which the limits and possibilities of Sri Lanka's reconciliation project can be reimagined.

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