In Sri Lanka, a bitter brew

Often described as the backbone of the economy, close to 1.5 lakh tea estate workers have been agitating for fair wages for the last three years. Ahead of Sri Lanka's presidential election in November, which the labourers see as another season of empty promises, **Meera Srinivasan** reports on how they view their struggle

"Half the blood in our bodies is sucked by these leeches. Can't someone find some medicine to keep them away?" At first it is hard to locate the voice that is emerging from the bushes. A few feet off the road margin, at a slightly higher elevation is a worker, with her head alone visible over the lush green leaves. "They get all over us even if we smear a packet of salt," the worker says, as she continues to pick leaves at an estate near Hatton in Nuwara Eliya district of the Central Province in Sri Lanka.

"What she says is very true. I was hospitalised because of this," says B. Devika, another worker, pointing to the many scars on her feet ravaged by hungry parasites. "It is so painful even now," says the 36-year-old mother of two.

Leeches are only part of the problem for hundreds of women like them who work in the tea estates located in the hill country. The women's hands move rapidly, as if in circles, picking tender tea leaves from the top of bushes. In a matter of seconds, as their palms brim with leaves, they reach out to the bags hanging from their shoulders and empty the leaves into them - a recurring action whose rhythm they have mastered, knowing well that their labour and speed is money, even though the money is far from fair. After a prolonged struggle for fair wages, the workers who sustain Sri Lanka's economy are tired.

An elusive fair wage

For three years now, Sri Lanka's tea estate workers have been agitating for a daily basic wage of LKR 1,000, which they think is reasonable compensation for their backbreaking work of picking 16-18 kgs of tea leaves a day over eight hours. While their labour remains largely invisible, its outcome, the famous, flavourful Ceylon tea, has, for decades, brought Sri Lanka global recognition and valuable foreign exchange - over \$1.4 billion according to official data for 2018. About 1.5 lakh people from the million-strong community are engaged in direct labour in the estates.

Frustrated with their stagnant wages and spiralling living costs, tens of thousands of workers joined the '1,000-rupee wage' struggle, one of Sri Lanka's biggest worker mobilisations in recent history, both in its show of strength and geographic spread, in plantations across the island's Central, Uva and Southern Provinces

On October 24, 2018, their protests which began nearly two years earlier culminated in a massive demonstration at Galle Face Green, Colombo's iconic sea-front promenade. Thousands of Malayaha (hill country) Tamils now living in Colombo, and others in solidarity, mobilised largely through a social media campaign, wearing black they raised slogans against the ongoing exploitation of their community.

This exploitation began two centuries ago, when the British brought down labourers from south India, mainly Tamil Nadu, to work in the plantations. Post-colonial Sri Lanka proved it was not too different in its treatment of the Malayaha Tamils - disenfranchising them and even rendering them stateless. The community has had to constantly fight back to be visible and counted – for citizenship until 2003, for land and housing rights, and for a decent wage in the last few years. While their labour gave the tea workers their identity, it is their resistance that has won them even basic rights incrementally, though not adequately.

In January this year, trade unions and employers signed a new collective agreement, approving a 40% raise, to LKR 700 (roughly ₹275), still LKR 300 short of the amount the workers had emphatically demanded. The government later promised an additional LKR 50 to the basic wage, which workers are

The many rounds of unsatisfactory negotiations and numerous promises that politicians have made have left workers with one conclusion on their struggle – it was "a failure". "What else do you call something that didn't lead to our desired outcome?" asks Devika, "It made us realise that there was no point in trusting any trade union leader or political party any longer. Ultimately,

they side with the employers." The agitations have stopped in the plantations, though small groups of sympathisers in Colombo continue to hold sporadic demonstrations, still demanding LKR 1,000.

'They made us pawns' Their history and past experience have taught workers to expect little from political leaders - those of their own community and others who hold power in Colombo – but the October struggle revealed something even starker. Two days after their big Colombo protest, Sri Lanka witnessed unprecedented political turmoil that paralysed its administrative system. On October 26, President Maithripala Sirisena sacked Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, and controversially installed former President Mahinda Rajapaksa in his place. In



"For three years now, Sri Lanka's tea estate workers have been agitating for a daily basic wage of LKR 1,000." A tea estate worker in the Dambatenne tea plantation in Haputale, Uva Province. • GETTY IMAGES

the following 52 days of the country's infamous constitutional crisis, the questionably dislodged Prime Minister and Cabinet, and their purported successors desperately clamoured for support from different quarters. At that time, the hill country political leadership on both sides – the Ceylon Workers' Congress aligned to the Rajapaksas, and the Tamil Progressive Alliance that is part of Mr. Wickremesinghe's government hurriedly put out messages promising a 1,000-rupee basic wage.

"We knew they were all using us as pawns. We knew nothing would come of it. And we weren't wrong," says P. Sivakumar, an estate worker. "The promise of a fair wage of LKR 1,000 is Sri Lanka's best-known story of deceit," he says, emptying his sack of tea leaves by the roadside, where workers wait in line to have their bags weighed. The men are also part of the predominantly female workforce, often engaged in part-time labour in the plantations.

With the marginal increase in wage earlier this year, most plantation companies cut a performance-linked incentive of LKR 3,000 a month for 18 days of work that was earlier paid, according to the workers. "As they increased the wage a little on the one hand, they quietly cut the incentive on the other. They forget that the wage we get is for our children's education, our family's medical needs, expenses for weddings, or travels for a funeral. What is LKR 750 today," Sivakumar asks.

The revised wage is hardly enough, according to a 2018 study by academics at the University of Peradeniya. "Taking current living costs into consideration, we found that a worker needs a living wage of at least LKR 1,108 to live with basic dignity. In the one year since the study was prepared, the cost of living has gone up further," says Professor S. Vijesandiran, head of the Economics and Statistics Department at the University of Peradeniya. "The 1,000-rupee basic wage demanded by workers was already less than a fair living wage, and now the companies have got away with paying just 750," he says. The wage would at best add up to LKR 855, workers say, if employers' social security contributions and performance-based incentives are added.

Production paradox

The Regional Plantation Companies (RPCs), which manage and control the estates and people living on them after government divestment in the 1990s, maintain that the tea production industry would collapse if employers are forced to pay a 1,000-rupee basic wage. In December, the RPCs claimed that the strike action had cost them a collective loss of LKR 6 billion per month.

They voice concern over low tea production, attributed to a host of factors including adverse weather and a threeyear ban on weedicide glyphosate. The ban was subsequently lifted last year, for the tea and rubber sectors, after planters appealed to the government saying the fields were overgrown with weeds, severely affecting production and costing the country up to LKR 20 billion in annual losses. The move

seems to have helped increase yield. According to Sri Lanka's Tea Exporters Association, 184 million kgs of tea was produced from January to July 2019, showing a gain of 1.9 million kgs compared to the same period last year.

In addition to the challenge in increasing production, plantation companies point to a declining workforce and a fall in global prices, effectively conveying a message that a wage hike beyond LKR 750 is non-negotiable and virtually impossible. Further, the producers and exporters are mulling "out of the box solutions" to their crisis - seen in experiments with the "out-grower model" of production, where workers are leased small plots of land for tea production; or are engaged for "quick cash" - a slightly higher daily wage rate without statutory social security benefits mal contract of employment.

The government on its part is throwing its weight behind the industry. The Sri Lanka Tea Board recently announced launching a \$50-million global campaign to promote Ceylon Tea in Moscow, and plans to take it to at least 11 other key markets. It has termed the campaign the biggest in the 150-yearhistory of Ceylon Tea.

Protest fatigue

While efforts of the state and private sector continue to boost the tea industry, neither sector has given a convincing explanation to workers about why their wages alone can't be increased suitably. According to Vijesandiran, ever since the once state-owned plantations were privatised, there has been a wage revision once every two years. "This year's raise must be one of the smallest increments in their history," he says, "that too in the wake of a widespread protests by the workers".

When public sector employees go on strike, there is seldom any impact on their monthly salary. They may take to the streets day after day, but at the beginning of the following month they still receive their salary, unlike estate workers who must forego their daily wage for each day of protest. Their dissent heightens their precariousness, he explains. "I'm still repaying the LKR 15,000 loan I borrowed at that time [of the protests]. We went for weeks without wages. We felt it was important to be part of the struggle. Anyway, it is all a

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waste now," says S. Parameswari, a worker, voicing protest-fatigue that is frequently heard in the estates.

Workers say the "failure" was mostly because their leaders prioritised their political interests over workers' interests, and the trade unions – there are at least half a dozen of them - had lost sight of their primary purpose of advancing the rights of working people. Moreover, the government is ever-ready to sympathise with the companies, workers say with anger. "Even now, the fact that the estate labourers have returned to work doesn't mean they are satisfied with the current hike. It is desperation that comes with poverty that is a product of prolonged exploitation," says Vijesandiran, whose parents were estate workers in nearby Badulla.

Patrons, not leaders

Selliah Siyasundaram, 74, Vice President of the Ceylon Plantation Workers' Red Flag Union, concurs with that view. "Trade Unions have become mere political vehicles for leaders and parties seeking to build their future. The focus is not workers' rights anymore," he says, recalling a time when unions, irrespective of their party affiliations, stood together and spoke in one voice. "It's all fragmented now. Interests have become very narrow."

Part of the reason for this, he says, is that parties which unionised workers are now focussed on mainstream, parliamentary politics. "Then you're busy playing other games. To retain political influence, you begin using your unions to build patronage networks. You throw crumbs and get votes in return."

Vijesandiran too notes that trade unions have hardly any bargaining power today, especially since the Malayaha community outside of the estates has a bigger vote share compared to the workers. "Unions have become the local office for these parties' political outreach. Membership fees go into developing the party. The workers have stopped mattering to their own leaders," he says.

Even the patronage networks covered by the unions don't reach the most vulnerable sections, according to Velu Lakshmanan, a leader in the Naional Union of Workers, led by Palany Thigambaram, a Cabinet Minister of Hill Country New Villages, Infrastructure and Community Development, a new Ministry created by the current government. The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration, which received a decisive mandate from hill country Tamils in 2015, drafted a revised National Plan of Action for the social development of the plantation community. But it remains unclear how the government plans to fund the ambitious targets on paper.

Beginning in 2016, the plan spans five years, covering many development initiatives including housing, which has been a key demand of workers who have been living in colonial-era, crammed line rooms for generations. About 40,000 of the planned 1,60,000 houses are already coming up, enabling workers to own a house and some land for the first time. The Indian government, too, is helping build 14,000 in the estates in a belated but significant development outreach initiative for the much-neglected community whose ancestors shared intimate links and histo-

"But then again, whether you qualify for a new house depends on how influential you are as a union leader, how many members you control, and how many votes you can bring back," says Lakshmanan. The Minister's initiatives, he says, are certainly useful for the community but that doesn't mean that the most marginalised sections are the ones benefiting. For many families like his, the reality continues to be a tin-sheetroofed dwelling about a century old and a grossly inadequate wage. "Our struggle was a failure," he says. "Tholvi", or failure, is a word almost every worker utters, while referring to the struggle.

"It's time for the presidential election now and contenders will again promise us a 1,000-rupee wage. None of us takes that promise seriously any more. Hopefully, my children will not have to do this work," Lakshmanan says. While he and his wife work in the estates, they dream of a different future for their schoolgoing children. His eldest daughter Diana, now doing her A-levels (plus two), wants to become a music teacher. "I want to go to campus and study further," she says. Going to "campus" or university is a relatively recent but increasingly appealing option that many children in the estates are considering,

even if there is no assurance of jobs.

"We frequently hear about vacancies in the estate factory offices, but those positions are never opened up for our children even if they're educated. The plantation companies resist any upward mobility from our community. It's like, 'you people must work only as tea pluckers'," Lakshmanan says.

A restless workforce

The paths winding into an estate in Maskeliya town are parlous, a stark contrast to the carpeted main roads. "Imagine how difficult it is for those living here to get out in case of a medical emergency," says N. Palavindan, accelerating his autorickshaw whose front wheel is stuck in a pothole. In his early thirties, Palavindan works in the estates during the day and drives the three-wheeler ioi hire to supplement his income.

Like many in their generation, his parents too sent Palavindan to school hoping he would find a less exploitative job. "I studied till O-levels and really enjoyed mathematics. But I couldn't continue; I had to start earning. Even if I had studied further, it is not as if there are jobs waiting for me here," he says, echoing Lakshman's sentiment about how the plantation companies control employment opportunities in the area.

"Why are you talking to them?" a young man, who identifies himself as a supervisor of a plantation company, asks me, as I speak to a group of women workers. "Do you have permission from the company? They belong to us. Even the police take our permission before doing anything here," he says, reflecting a power dynamic peculiar to the estates. It seems that companies have the final word on matters.

The companies' dominance is more pronounced after the failed wage struggle, according to the trade unionist Sivasundaram.

And even in the rare instance of new jobs being created, they come with caveats. For instance, workers at a garment factory run by a plantation company in the Central Province are actively discouraged from unionising. "So, they create a precarious situation where even the younger people, no matter how educated they are, return to the tea estates because there are so few options here," Palavindan says.

Many go to Colombo in search of jobs as domestic workers or in the construction sector, but neither guarantees a secure income. "Some women go to West Asian countries as domestic help and are treated harshly. We also hear of broken homes because one parent is away and there is undue pressure on the other," Sivasundaram says. "This may well be the last generation of tea pluckers. But the future of their children is a big question mark."

A history of exploitation, a futile struggle for better wages, few alternatives and an increasingly indifferent political leadership have demoralised Sri Lanka's estate workers. "They often say we form the backbone of the economy," worker M. Ganasekaran says. "But they have broken our spines so badly that we have to bend like this all the time," he says, arching his spine forward.

