

EXISTENTIAL REFUGEES: AN INSIDER ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE BEING OF REFUGEEHOOD AMONG MALAYAGA TAMILS IN INDIA

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This article addresses the urgent need to reconceptualise refugeehood in contexts where existing legal categories fail to account for lived realities of displacement. It examines the Malayaga Tamils in India — descendants of indentured plantation labourers displaced during the colonial period — who continue to live in refugee camps despite their historical and ancestral ties to India. Their case highlights the inadequacy of conventional definitions of ‘refugee’ and ‘stateless person’, particularly in protracted situations of displacement and contested citizenship. Using an insider ethnographic approach, this study introduces the concept of the ‘existential refugee’ to describe the condition of communities caught in legal ambiguity, historical displacement and ontological insecurity. Fieldwork was conducted with 26 respondents (19 women and seven men), whose narratives reveal how everyday experiences of abandonment, estrangement and unbelonging shape their understanding of identity and belonging. By foregrounding the concept of the existential refugee, this article contributes both conceptually and empirically to debates on refugeehood, statelessness and citizenship. It invites policymakers, scholars and practitioners to rethink refugee protection frameworks by paying attention not only to legal recognition but also to the existential dimensions of belonging that define displaced lives.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I	Introduction	24
II	Methodology and Positionality	25
III	The Making of Existential Refugees	28
IV	Unsettled Identities	32
V	Abandonment.....	34
VI	Estrangement	40
VII	Conclusion	41

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I INTRODUCTION

People who live with refugee status for extended periods inevitably face profound challenges of belonging. Prolonged existential crisis blurs the boundaries between temporary refugee status and the reclamation of Indian-Origin identity, citizenship rights and a sense of belonging within India, transforming refuge into a broader struggle for recognition and inclusion. It leaves individuals uncertain — neither fully integrated into the host society nor securely connected to their homeland. This enduring condition exacerbates identity crises, prompting individuals to question their citizenship, nationality and where they truly belong, thereby deepening their struggles with belonging and recognition. These existential conditions underscore the urgent need to rethink refugeehood beyond its conventional, short-term framing. In the case of the Malayaga Tamil refugees in India, these challenges of belonging take on a particularly existential dimension. After returning from Sri Lanka to India, which they regard as their ancestral homeland, they continue to face issues in proving their identity and asserting that they truly belong in India. This life struggle reflects their identity crisis of national belonging, nationality exclusion and the deeper existential uncertainty of living in a space where they feel they do not belong. These living conditions mean their status is constantly questioned, as they are considered as Sri Lankan refugees rather than Indian nationals.

The term *Malayaga Tamil* embodies a layered identity rooted in their history and displacement. It signifies their association and representation of plantation labour work in Sri Lanka.¹ It mainly reflects the exploitative conditions under which they lived and worked.² At the same time, it denotes their Indian origin, tracing their migration route from India to Sri Lanka during the colonial period.³ The word *Malayagam* refers to the uphill plantation settlements in Sri Lanka, while *Tamil* highlights their ethnic and cultural lineage from South India.⁴ Importantly, this designation was not self-ascribed but rather attributed to them by the local Sinhalese population, marking both their geographical placement and their migrant identity.⁵ The Malayaga Tamils, or Indian-Origin Tamils, embody a complex history of *being* and *belongingness* that emerged from their forced labour migration from India to Sri Lanka during the British colonial period. Transported as indentured workers for plantation labour, they settled in the southern and central highland regions of Sri Lanka, including Hatton, Kandy, Badulla and Nuwara Eliya.⁶ These areas were predominantly inhabited by Sinhala-speaking populations. In contrast to Malayaga Tamils, the Sri Lankan Tamils are the

¹ Kumari Jayawardena and Rachel Kurian, *Class, Patriarchy and Ethnicity on Sri Lankan Plantations: Two Centuries of Power and Protest* (Orient BlackSwan 2015) 44 ('Jayawardena and Kurian, *Class, Patriarchy and Ethnicity on Sri Lankan Plantations*').

² Rachel Kurian and Kumari Jayawardena, *Persistent Patriarchy: Women Workers on Sri Lankan Plantations* (Social Scientists' Association Pamphlet Series No 3, 2014) 8–13.

³ Valli Kanapathipillai, *Citizenship and Statelessness in Sri Lanka: The Case of the Tamil Estate Workers* (Anthem Press 2009) 19.

⁴ Daniel Mark Bass, 'A Place on the Plantations: Up-Country Tamil Ethnicity in Sri Lanka' (PhD Thesis, University of Michigan, 2004) 3–4; Ravindran Sriramachandran, 'Life is Where We Are Not: Making and Managing the Plantation Tamil' (PhD Thesis, Columbia University, 2010) 6.

⁵ Jayawardena and Kurian, *Class, Patriarchy and Ethnicity on Sri Lankan Plantations* (n 1) 27.

⁶ See generally, Chandra Richard De Silva, *Sri Lanka: A History* (Sangam Books 1987) 80–7.

island's native Tamil population. They were concentrated in the northern part of island, creating a clear cultural and spatial divide.⁷

As a result, the Malayaga Tamils remained outsiders in Sri Lanka. They were distinguished both socially and administratively. Even under British rule, they were classified as a separate community in colonial censuses, which mainly explicitly recorded their ethnicity apart from other groups.⁸ Following Sri Lanka's independence in 1948, the Malayaga Tamils' marginality deepened. It extended to the conditions of nearly 975,000 Malayaga Tamils who were rendered stateless.⁹ Between 1956 and 1974, the governments of India and Sri Lanka attempted to resolve this crisis through bilateral agreements: India agreed to grant citizenship to 600,000 persons, while Sri Lanka committed to absorb 375,000 into its citizenry.¹⁰ However, the outbreak of the Sri Lankan Civil War ('Civil War') between the Sinhalese and Sri Lankan Tamils disrupted the repatriation process within the two countries.¹¹ Many Malayaga Tamils who had been awaiting repatriation to India were forced to endure the combination of uncertainty, persecution and fear of violence, which forced them to flee to India as refugees. Today, thousands remain in refugee camps in Tamil Nadu, still living with refugee status.¹²

These multiple displacement conditions lead to a prolonged *existential identity crisis* for the Malayaga Tamils. Despite their ancestral belongingness to India, they continue to struggle to prove their belonging as Indian-Origin people while being misrecognised as Sri Lankan refugees. In reality, they are not refugees in the conventional sense but stateless individuals who have been denied the restoration of their citizenship rights. The core objective of this study is to address these conceptual complexities by examining the Malayaga Tamils and their struggle for national belongingness. It places their predicament under the framework of *existential refugees*, highlighting the dilemmas of proving their 'being of belongingness' as Indian-Origin stateless persons rather than Sri Lankan refugees. This conceptual framing seeks to capture the depth of their displacement, estrangement, abandonment and unresolved quest for recognition.

II METHODOLOGY AND POSITIONALITY

This study utilised an autoethnographic approach to examine these intricate issues of refugee and stateless dilemmas. Employing in-depth interviews, the first author embraced an autoethnographic methodology, operating within a hybrid reality as proposed.¹³ Several ethnography researchers emphasise the importance

⁷ Patrick Peebles, *The History of Sri Lanka* (Greenwood Press 2006) 71–89.

⁸ Kalinga Tudor Silva, 'Politics of Ethnicity and Population Censuses in Sri Lanka' (Draft Paper, International Conference on Social Statistics and Ethnic Diversity: Should We Count, How Should We Count and Why?, 6–8 December 2007) 5–6.

⁹ Kanapathipillai (n 3) 91; Rani S Pillai, 'Indo–Sri Lankan Pact of 1964 and the Problem of Statelessness: A Critique' (2012) 3(1) *Afro Asian Journal of Social Sciences* 1–14, 3.

¹⁰ Chandraprakash Yoganathan, 'Destitution and Displacement: Unveiling the Precariousness of Homelessness and Statelessness among Uphill Country Tamil Repatriates in India' (2024) 33(2) *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness* 532, 534; Abhijit Dasgupta, 'Repatriation of Sri Lankan Refugees: Unfinished Tasks' (2003) 38(24) *Economic and Political Weekly* 2365, 2366.

¹¹ Dasgupta (n 10) 2366.

¹² Yoganathan (n 10) 540–1.

¹³ Norman K Denzin, *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century* (Sage Publications 1997) xiv.

of looking into the reality or conditions of people who are living on the ground.¹⁴ This autoethnographic dynamic brings new dimensions to the existing concepts of refugees and statelessness, challenging their conventional boundaries and revealing the inadequacy of current frameworks to capture such complex case-based realities.¹⁵ Although the first author has not personally experienced displacement as a refugee, his parents directly lived through this crisis at the ages of 22 and 23. They arrived in India with refugee status and subsequently underwent the repatriation process, during which they received official documentation such as Indian passports, residential or repatriate certificates, ration cards under the Public Distribution System and voter identity cards — documents that symbolised their incorporation as citizens. However, despite this formal recognition, the first author grew up experiencing the lingering consequences of repatriation, often being labelled as a *Sri Lankan plantation settler* in India. Through his parents' lived histories and his own post-repatriation experiences, the first author came to understand the grounded realities of exclusion, un-belongingness and the complexities of national identity. These insider connections provided him with unique access to the nuances of what the first author conceptualises as the condition of *existential refugees*. Such perspectives would remain invisible to an outside researcher without these embodied, intergenerational links to the refugee experience. For this reason, the first author employed an autoethnographic approach in this study. This insider position — shaped by both inherited experiences of displacement and his own encounters with marginality — enables the first author to critically analyse how the *Being of un-belongingness* is lived, negotiated and reproduced among Malayaga Tamils in India. Autoethnography thus allows the first author to merge personal and collective histories, bridging intimate narratives with broader theoretical insights into statelessness, refugeehood and citizenship.

Notably, the ethnographic researcher contends that understanding everyday experiences is inherently intertwined with an ethnographic approach.¹⁶ The day-to-day emphasis of existential inquiry used in this article stemmed from the lived experiences of Malayaga Tamils in the two refugee camps of Tamil Nadu. It is mainly rooted in the grassroots complexities of refugee and statelessness dilemmas, which become big barriers to their right to citizenship. This article brings out field data collected during the extensive fieldwork for the first author's PhD research. As part of this work, the first author contacted key leaders within his community to facilitate access to two Indian Tamil refugee camps for qualitative data collection. In the process, the first author spoke with an active female community member who expressed immense pride and happiness that individuals from their community were pursuing higher education and engaging in research on community-specific issues. She fully supported the first author's research and encouraged the first author to visit the Tiruchirappalli and Vellore refugee camps in Tamil Nadu, India. With the support of community members both within and outside the camps, the first author of this study successfully conducted fieldwork in these locations.

¹⁴ Mary Lynn Hamilton, Laura Smith and Kristen Worthington, 'Fitting the Methodology with the Research: An Exploration of Narrative, Self-Study and Auto-Ethnography' (2008) 4(1) *Studying Teacher Education* 17, 24.

¹⁵ Megan Bradley, 'Rethinking Refugeehood: Statelessness, Repatriation, and Refugee Agency' (2014) 40(1) *Review of International Studies* 101, 102–4.

¹⁶ John D Brewer, *Ethnography* (Open University Press 2000) 314.

The first author's fieldwork started in December 2021 and was completed in June 2023, and the authors revisited the refugee camps in January and March 2025. A total of 26 respondents participated in this study, including 19 women and seven men. The study data contains more female participants for this study because women face more challenges in their everyday lives than men. Specifically, all the aspects of living space — social, economic and legal — reflects the higher risks of problems that women face while living in the refugee camps. Throughout the extensive interview collection of field data, this part of the study observed that Malayaga Tamils encounter the everyday experience of estrangement and abandonment from the Indian State. They grapple with the sentiment that their motherland fails to comprehend the struggles of its citizens. Their daily lived experiences within the refugee camps engender existential questions of abandonment and estrangement, fostering a sense of 'Un-belongingness'. The ethnographic approach employed in this study defines and brings out the existential ontological questions of 'Who am I?' and 'Where do I belong?'.¹⁷ The study, fieldwork and data collection was carried out with strict adherence to ethical considerations, considering the perspectives of community leaders and members residing in the camps. A pseudonymous approach was employed to ensure confidentiality and to safeguard the respondents' identities.

The first author of this study is a child of stateless Malayaga Tamil Sri Lankans who were repatriated to India in 1981 under one of the Indo-Sri Lankan bilateral agreements.¹⁸ Although their family was legally granted Indian citizenship, their post-repatriation life in Kerala's forest plantations was characterised by persistent marginalisation, administrative exclusion and restricted access to welfare — conditions that reflect a state of legal liminality. The first author's insider experiences brought the nuances of the refugee status they experienced in the refugee camp. These insider experiences are crucial in this study. These first-hand lived experiences of the first author profoundly help the study's analysis through the conceptual lens of the study. The second author contributed through empirical analysis and interpretive methods. As the PhD supervisor of the first author, the second author played a key role in guiding the data interpretation and providing the article's conceptual structure. All research protocols were approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. Interviews were conducted voluntarily, with informed consent and all personal identifiers were pseudonymised. Before the interviews, formal and verbal consent was obtained from the respondents. They were informed that they could withdraw from the interview at any time. Participants described experiences of bureaucratic neglect, denial of citizenship, constant monitoring and identity struggles in proving their nationality belonging — all of which underscore the disjuncture between legal status and the struggle to avail themselves of citizenship.

¹⁷ See, eg, Anahí Viladrich, "'You Just Belong to Us': Tales of Identity and Difference with Populations to Which the Ethnographer Belongs' (2005) 5(3) *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 383; Isabella Ng, 'To Whom Does My Voice Belong? (Re)Negotiating Multiple Identities as a Female Ethnographer in Two Hong Kong Rural Villages' (2011) 15(3) *Gender, Technology and Development* 437; Amanda Coffey, *The Ethnographic Self: Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity* (Sage Publications 1999).

¹⁸ Pillai (n 9) 4; Urmila Phadnis and Lalit Kumar, 'The Sirimavo-Shastri Pact of 1964: Problems and Prospects of Implementation' (1975) 31(3) *India Quarterly* 249, 256.

III THE MAKING OF EXISTENTIAL REFUGEES

The multiple displacements of the Malayaga Tamils — from the colonial period of forced labour migration to the plantations of Sri Lanka, to postcolonial statelessness, to repatriation and ultimately to their entrapment in refugeehood in India — have produced unstable living conditions that transcend the legal categories of ‘stateless’ or ‘refugee’. Each phase of displacement altered their sense of belonging and cast them into a perpetual state of unbelonging. From an existentialist perspective, the trajectory of Malayaga Tamils’ repeated displacement deeply connects to or resonates with Martin Heidegger’s concept of ‘*thrownness*’¹⁹ (*Geworfenheit*).²⁰ Specifically, this explains the experience of being cast into historical migration, political struggles and social structures beyond one’s comprehension or control. Jean-Paul Sartre’s primary notion of *nothingness* further illuminates their condition as a liminal state of non-recognition in which identity is negated and deferred by successive states.²¹ Thus, the Malayaga Tamils emerge into a condition as *existential refugees* and are not only geographically displaced between the countries but also ontologically displaced. Their lived reality reflects a cycle in which national identity, rights to citizenship, national belonging and recognition are perpetually suspended, rendering them visible within legal frameworks yet unacknowledged in existential terms.

Heidegger emphasises that *Being* is the most universal and, at the same time, the most indeterminate of concepts. Precisely because it is so fundamental, it resists formal definition, yet it is constantly invoked and implicitly understood in everyday life.²² This study adopts Heidegger’s notion of *Being* as a key framework to conceptualise the *Being of belongingness* as an *existential refugee* in the case of the Malayaga Tamils. Their lived experiences express or reveal the shifting phases of unbelonging tied to their national identity: first, during their migration to the plantations of Sri Lanka under colonial rule; second, in their profound experience of *thrownness* when the post-independence Sri Lankan State rendered them stateless; then finally, in a renewed sense of *thrownness* when, upon arriving in India, they were excluded from full national belonging and relegated to life as refugees. This trajectory emphasises how their existential condition went beyond legal categories of citizenship or refugeehood, underscoring the persistent uncertainty of their *Being-in-the-world* as a community caught in cycles of unbelonging.

This vicious cycle of *Being of un-belongingness* can be traced back to their historical migration that happened during the colonial era, when the Malayaga Tamils were first transported as indentured labourers from India to Sri Lanka. During the 1830s, Sri Lanka experienced a severe labour shortage following the rapid expansion of coffee plantations.²³ This extreme labour recruitment was also

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Blackwell Publishers 1962) 174 [trans of: *Sein und Zeit* (1927)]: ‘This characteristic of Dasein’s Being — this “that it is” — is veiled in its “whence” and “whither”, yet disclosed in itself all the more unveiledly; we call it the “*thrownness*” of this entity into its “there”; indeed, it is thrown in such a way that, as Being-in-the-world, it is the “there”.’ (emphasis in original).

²⁰ *ibid* 174 n 1.

²¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, tr Hazel E Barnes (Washington Square Press 1992) 43–9 [trans of: *L’Être et le Néant* (1943)]. See William R Schroeder, ‘Jean-Paul Sartre: *Being and Nothingness*’ in John Shand (ed), *Central Works of Philosophy* (McGill-Queen’s University Press 2005) vol 4 155.

²² Heidegger (n 19) 21–35.

²³ Patrick Peebles, *The Plantation Tamils of Ceylon* (A&C Black 2001) viii.

witnessed in the 1840s with the large-scale expansion of tea plantations in the island. To meet the demand, the British colonial administration recruited *Kanganies* (labour agents) from India to bring in workers who were primarily from Tamil Nadu, owing to the region's proximity and the sea routes between southern India and Sri Lanka.²⁴ Upon their arrival, these workers came to be identified as a distinct social category — Malayaga Tamils, 'Plantation Tamils', or 'Up-Country Tamils'.²⁵ Such colonial construction of identity categorised them as a separate ethnic group in their separation from both the Sinhala-speaking majority and the native Sri Lankan Tamils in Sri Lanka.²⁶ This led to enduring forms of alienation. Many of the plantation labourers initially migrated seasonally with the intention to return after six months of work, but they were forced to permanently settle by colonial authorities.²⁷ This blurs the boundaries of their migration. As scholars note, even colonial statistics made it difficult to disaggregate these populations, further reifying their identity as a separate ethnic group.²⁸

Existentially, their experience resonates with Heidegger's idea of *thrownness* — as they were cast into historical and political conditions not of their own choosing and trapped in the situation or conditions of forced and permanent settlement in Sri Lanka.²⁹ Many Malayaga Tamil labourers in the plantations began to imagine Sri Lanka as their national home, but the persistent discrimination and hostility they faced from the native people, such as from the Sinhala majority, relegated them to a position of unbelonging. In Sartrean terms, their existence was marked by *nothingness* — a negation of their potential belonging — as successive social and political structures denied recognition of their identity.³⁰ This colonial history of displacement and alienation of Malayaga Tamil's ancestors laid the foundation for their postcolonial statelessness. Later, this became the major factor that trapped them in an existential condition where belonging was always deferred. The un-belongingness was experienced as alienation of Malayaga Tamils, marked by their casting out from Sri Lankan nationality. This action of the government became starkly visible when they were rendered stateless in the aftermath of independence. Following the end of the British colonial era in 1948, the newly independent Sri Lankan state scrutinised and redefined its national community through exclusionary citizenship laws. The Indian Tamil or Malayaga Tamil population, despite having lived and laboured for generations in Sri Lanka's plantations, was declared to be 'Indian' and thus were outsiders who ought to return to India. This culminated in the *Ceylon Citizenship*

²⁴ *ibid*; Bass, 'A Place on the Plantations: Up-Country Tamil Ethnicity in Sri Lanka' (n 4) 2.

²⁵ Peebles, *The Plantation Tamils of Ceylon* (n 23) 7–43.

²⁶ DW Ananda Wickramasinghe and DC Cameron, *British Capital, Ceylonese Land, Indian Labour: The Imperialism and Colonialism of Evolution of Tea Plantations in Sri Lanka* (Conference Paper, Proceedings of the 4th International Critical Management Studies Conference (Management and Organisational History), 4–6 July 2005) 2.

²⁷ Peebles, *The Plantation Tamils of Ceylon* (n 23) 81–3.

²⁸ Jayawardena and Kurian, *Class, Patriarchy and Ethnicity on Sri Lankan Plantations* (n 1) 44–9; Peebles, *The Plantation Tamils of Ceylon* (n 23) 20–30.

²⁹ Heidegger (n 19) 174–80.

³⁰ Sartre (n 21) 47–56; Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1973) 296–302.

Act,³¹ which rendered nearly 975,000 Malayaga Tamils stateless.³² Such legal enforcement of the citizenship law denied recognition to a community that had sustained the plantation economy and helped position Sri Lanka as one of the world's leading tea producers.³³

This act that excluded them from national belongingness exemplifies what Heidegger describes as *thrownness* — a condition of being cast into a world not of one's choosing,³⁴ specifically where existence is marked by estrangement, abandonment and displacement. In the case of Malayaga Tamils' statelessness which created an existential rupture, they were at the same time physically present within the national territory and yet denied belonging to Sri Lankan national citizenship. Their condition aligns in a deep sense with Sartre's argument that human existence is often defined in situations of negation, where recognition by the Other is withheld.³⁵ Similarly, Fanon's reflections on colonial alienation illustrates how the colonised subject is reduced to an existence *outside history*, trapped in a liminal state of un-belongingness.³⁶ The stripping of citizenship thus transformed their collective *Being* into one of existential exile — legally invisible, socially marginalised and suspended between two states that both disowned them.

During this existentially uncertain situation of the Malayaga Tamils' nationality and belongingness, both India and Sri Lanka sought to end the protracted statelessness of the plantation community. A decade after independence, they signed repatriation pacts ('Pacts') — most notably the Sirimavo–Shastri Pact of 30 October 1964 ('Sirimavo–Shastri Pact'),³⁷ and the Sirimavo–Gandhi Pact of 28 June 1974 ('Sirimavo–Gandhi Pact').³⁸ Under these bilateral pacts, India agreed to grant citizenship or repatriate 600,000 individuals, while Sri Lanka agreed to permanently resettle 375,000.³⁹ Yet, these official promises did not mean the repatriation processes were completed and they still remain as an unfinished task.⁴⁰ By 1983, the Commissionerate of Rehabilitation of Tamil Nadu, the nodal agency responsible for records of repatriates, documented a total of 461,442 returnees.⁴¹ However, the fate of many others remained unrecorded.

³¹ Law No 18 of 1948 'Ceylon Citizenship Act 1948' (Sri Lanka).

³² Alfred Jeyaratnam Wilson, *The Break-Up of Sri Lanka: The Sinhalese–Tamil Conflict* (C Hurst & Co 1977) 118, 186; Chandraprakash Yoganathan, 'Rooted in Displacement: The Lived Experiences of Tamil Dalit Plantation Labourers' Disparities and Inequality in South Asia' in Gunika Rishi and Tulika Bourai (eds), *Unpacking Intersectional Perspectives on Migrant Marginalities: Tracing Agency, Solidarity and Resistance* (IMISCOE 2025) 28, 28.

³³ E Valentine Daniel, *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence* (Princeton University Press 1996) 163.

³⁴ Heidegger (n 19) 174–9.

³⁵ Sartre (n 21) 340–76; Arendt (n 30) 296–302.

³⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, tr Charles Lam Markmann (Pluto Press 1986) 109–40 [trans of: *Peau Noire Masques Blancs* (1952)].

³⁷ *Agreement on Persons of Indian Origin in Ceylon*, India–Sri Lanka (signed and entered into force 30 October 1964) ('Sirimavo–Shastri Pact'). See also Phadnis and Kumar (n 18).

³⁸ *Sirimavo–Gandhi Pact*, India–Sri Lanka (signed and entered into force 28 June 1974). See also Pillai (n 9) 2.

³⁹ Dasgupta (n 10) 2366.

⁴⁰ *ibid* 2367.

⁴¹ Department of Rehabilitation, Government of Tamil Nadu, *Information Handbook under Right to Information Act 2005* (Handbook, 2010) 11 ('Government of Tamil Nadu, *Information Handbook under Right to Information Act 2005*'); Bernard D'Sami, Chandraprakash Yoganathan and Ahilan Joe Woutres, *Empowering Malaiyaha Tamil Repatriates: A Comprehensive Socio-Economic Assessment in Tamil Nadu*, India (Loyola Institute of Social Training and Research Report).

The outbreak of the Civil War in 1983 further disrupted repatriation, forcing thousands of Malayaga Tamils into India, this time as refugees. Ironically, those who entered India after 1983 — despite their generational links to India — were no longer classified as ‘repatriates’ but as ‘Sri Lankan Tamil refugees’.⁴² This recursive cycle of displacement and incomplete belonging generated what can be termed an existential un-belongingness. The Malayaga Tamils became trapped between two countries and became people abandoned between them. This Malayaga Tamil community experienced a broken feeling of *Being* marked by abandonment and estrangement. Philosophically, their condition highly connected with Sartre’s notion of abandonment,⁴³ where individuals confront the ‘nothingness’ of not being recognised by overarching structures of meaning — in this case, citizenship regimes. Similarly, Heidegger’s concept of *thrownness* resonates with the Malayaga Tamils’ experience: they are thrown into historical circumstances of displacement, colonial labour exploitation and postcolonial exclusion without agency over their nationality.⁴⁴ Agamben’s ‘bare life’ framework also clarifies how the community is reduced to survival without the political recognition of citizenship.⁴⁵

Empirical studies underscore this existential dimension. The studies include Wilson and Hollup which extensively describe the plantation Tamils’ structural marginalisation,⁴⁶ while Daniel shows how their narratives of displacement embody a profound sense of *Being of un-belongingness*.⁴⁷ More recent analyses — such as Ravi Vaitheespara⁴⁸ on Tamil political subjectivities, and Sethuraman and Rudhramoorthy⁴⁹ on repatriated Indian-Origin Tamils — demonstrate how displacement and identity are not merely abstract or philosophical concerns but are concretely embedded in state policies, citizenship regimes and rehabilitation practices. As Malkki argues in her anthropological work on refugees, exile disrupts the very categories of personhood, leaving groups like the Malayaga Tamils suspended between ‘home’ and ‘host’.⁵⁰ Thus, the Malayaga Tamil plantation community does not fit neatly into the traditional way to define who are refugee or who are stateless. They are *existential refugees* — a community whose

⁴² Chandraprakash Yoganathan and Ioana Vrabiescu, ‘Panopticon Citizenship: An Insider Ethnography of Surveillance and Exclusion among Tamil Returnees in India’ (2026) *Citizenship Studies* 1–19 (forthcoming).

⁴³ Sartre (n 21) 340–76; Arendt (n 30) 296–302.

⁴⁴ For the discussion of the interconnected themes of *thrownness* and the exclusion of labourers, see Heidegger (n 19) 174–9; Peebles, *The Plantation Tamils of Ceylon* (n 23) 80–105, 129–34.

⁴⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, tr Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford University Press 1998) 7–12, 181–8; Arendt (n 30) 296–302.

⁴⁶ A Jeyaratnam Wilson, *Politics in Sri Lanka 1947–1973* (Macmillan 1974) 37–8; Oddvar Hollup, *Bonded Labour: Caste and Cultural Identity among Tamil Plantation Workers in Sri Lanka* (Sterling Publishers 1994) 11–12.

⁴⁷ Wilson, Hollup and Daniel discuss the historical exclusion and marginalisation of the plantation community, and provide the empirical and historical context that supports the article’s theoretical analysis of identity formation and exclusion. These studies are interpreted through the analytical framework of *Being*, particularly the concepts of un-belongingness and *thrownness*. See Daniel (n 33) 163.

⁴⁸ See the scholarship of Ravi Vaitheespara on the topic of ‘Crisis of Tamil Politics and Citizenship in Sri Lanka’.

⁴⁹ Venkatanarayanan Sethuraman and Cheran Rudhramoorthy, ‘Status of Repatriated Indian-Origin Upcountry Tamils from Sri Lanka in India’ [2022] *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Social Problems* 1–13 (forthcoming).

⁵⁰ Liisa H Malkki, ‘Refugees and Exile: From “Refugee Studies” to the National Order of Things’ (1995) 24 *Annual Review of Anthropology* 495, 514.

Being is defined not only by legal exclusion but also by deep-rooted estrangement, abandonment and a perpetual search for belongingness across shifting national borders. Addressing their situation requires moving beyond conventional refugee-stateless binaries toward a case-specific existential analysis of belongingness, which foregrounds both their legal exclusion and their lived condition of unbelonging.

IV UNSETTLED IDENTITIES

The status of the Malayaga Tamil refugees in India is deeply complex, particularly in relation to proving their identity as people of Indian origin. Their situation is further complicated by their refugee settlement alongside Sri Lankan native Tamil refugees, which blurs the distinctions between the two groups and creates existential challenges in asserting Malayaga Tamils' Indian ancestry. According to art 8 of the *Constitution of India*, persons of Indian-Origin residing outside of India may claim Indian citizenship if they, their parents or their grandparents, were born in India — as defined under the *Government of India Act 1935* —⁵¹ and if they are duly registered by an Indian diplomatic or consular representative in their country of residence.⁵² Despite this provision, many Malayaga Tamils remain excluded from accessing citizenship, largely due to the ambiguities and mixed categorisation of refugee settlements. *The Citizenship Act* of 1955 ('1955 *Citizenship Act*') further complicates the issue by creating selective pathways to citizenship.⁵³ For instance, its provisions — amended to facilitate naturalisation for Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan — explicitly exclude Sri Lanka.⁵⁴ However, the majority of the Malayaga Hindu Tamils, even when they can trace their origins to India, remain in precarious legal circumstances due to their perceived Sri Lankan origin. Without recognition as Indian-Origin persons, they face prolonged exclusion from citizenship rights and remain trapped in refugee status. This legal ambiguity underscores their existential predicament: despite historical and ancestral ties to India, their inability to prove origin within rigid state frameworks perpetuates their condition of un-belongingness. Their case highlights the inadequacy of existing citizenship laws to address communities displaced through colonial histories and postcolonial agreements, leaving them in a liminal state between refugeehood and statelessness.

A critical gap emerges in the context of India's citizenship framework, originating from the *Government of India Act 1935*.⁵⁵ While the 1955 *Citizenship Act* stated that persons of Indian-Origin could claim citizenship if duly registered by an Indian diplomatic or consular representative in their country of residence,⁵⁶

⁵¹ *Government of India Act 1935* (Imp) 25 & 26 Geo 5, c 42.

⁵² *Constitution of India*, art 8; Ashna Ashesh and Arun Thiruvengadam, *Report on Citizenship Law: India* (GLOBALCIT Country Report No 2017/12, July 2017) 8.

⁵³ *The Citizenship Act, 1955*, s 6(1) (India) ('1955 *Citizenship Act*'); Amit Ranjan and Devika Mittal, 'The Citizenship (Amendment) Act and the Changing Idea of Indian Citizenship' (2023) 24(3) *Asian Ethnicity* 463, 469–70.

⁵⁴ Vanamala Srinivas, Hasitha Kurupath and Rudhi Vojjala, 'The Emergence of Citizenship Act, 1955 and Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019: The Introspective Analysis' (2023) 9(2) *International Journal of Law* 50, 53.

⁵⁵ Shiblee Noman and Taskia Haq Lyric, 'Representative Government by Phases as Colonial Legacy: A Case Study of British India (1861–1935)' (2019) 15(July) *Perspectives in Social Science* 53, 70.

⁵⁶ 1955 *Citizenship Act* (n 53) s 5.

this provision was inaccessible to the Malayaga Tamils. Transported to Sri Lanka as indentured labourers since the 19th century (and in some cases earlier), the majority of Malayaga Tamils were illiterate and had no awareness of such bureaucratic processes.⁵⁷ Although they were recorded as ‘Indian Origin’ in Sri Lankan colonial and postcolonial censuses, this recognition did not translate into legal documentation of Indian nationality.⁵⁸ When they were rendered stateless after Sri Lanka’s independence and subsequently awaited Indian passports under the bilateral repatriation agreements, many fell through the cracks due to long delays and the eventual suspension of repatriation during the Civil War.⁵⁹ As a result, the majority of Malayaga Tamils today lack the documentation required to prove their Indian origin. The situation is further complicated by the 1955 *Citizenship Act*, which requires valid passports or travel documents for eligibility.⁶⁰ Without such documents, they are automatically excluded from accessing citizenship. Compounding this exclusion, the 1955 *Citizenship Act*’s provisions — particularly its amendments — facilitate citizenship for communities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, but not for those from Sri Lanka.⁶¹ This dual complexity — first, the absence of documentary proof of origin and second, the exclusion of Sri Lanka from India’s contemporary citizenship pathways — has led to the Malayaga Tamils being misclassified as ‘Sri Lankan Tamil refugees’ rather than recognised as Indian-Origin Tamils. Such mislabelling perpetuates their precarious status and prolongs their exclusion from citizenship rights. This article therefore emphasises the urgent need for relabelling and recognition based on Malayaga Tamils’ existential condition: their history of forced displacement, abandonment and estrangement positions them not within conventional refugee or stateless categories but as *existential refugees*. Without a case-specific approach to their recognition, the citizenship crisis of the Malayaga Tamils will remain unresolved.

The Malayaga Tamils do not fall neatly within the conventional definition of refugees. According to the United Nations, a refugee is defined as an individual who, ‘owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality and is unable or, owing to such a fear, unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country’.⁶² This definition presupposes that a refugee possesses a nationality or legal membership in the origin state from which they are displaced. In the case of the Malayaga Tamils, however, this criterion does not apply. They were rendered stateless in post-independence Sri Lanka and thus do not possess the nationality of any state.

⁵⁷ Dharmapriya Wesumperuma, ‘The Migration and Conditions of Immigrant Labour in Ceylon 1880–1910’ (PhD Thesis, University of London, 1974) 35.

⁵⁸ Peebles, *The Plantation Tamils of Ceylon* (n 23) 129–34; Jayawardena and Kurian, *Class, Patriarchy and Ethnicity on Sri Lankan Plantations* (n 1) 44–9; See generally, KM de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka* (University of California Press 1981) 472–5.

⁵⁹ Kanapathipillai (n 3) 91–6.

⁶⁰ 1955 *Citizenship Act* (n 53) ss 2, 6(1); See generally, Kalathmika Natarajan, ‘Entangled Citizens: The Afterlives of Empire in the Indian Citizenship Act, 1947–1955’ in Christian D Pedersen and Stuart Ward (eds), *The Break-Up of Greater Britain* (Manchester University Press 2021) 63, 70.

⁶¹ 1955 *Citizenship Act* (n 53) s 6(1).

⁶² *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, opened for signature 28 July 1951, 189 UNTS 150 (entered into force 22 April 1954) art 1 (‘1954 Convention’); Andrew E Shacknove, ‘Who Is a Refugee?’ in Hélène Lambert (ed), *International Refugee Law* (Routledge, 1st edn, 2010) 163, 275.

Yet, in India, they continue to live under the legal and social classification of ‘refugees’. This misalignment reveals a conceptual gap between refugeehood and statelessness. Statelessness, as defined under art 1 of the 1954 *Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons*, refers to individuals ‘who are not considered as a national by any state under the operation of its law’.⁶³ The Malayaga Tamils clearly meet this definition of statelessness. Their categorisation as refugees in India despite lacking any prior nationality highlights both the inadequacy of conventional international definitions, as well as the urgent need to develop more nuanced categories that reflect their lived realities. In reality, the Malayaga Tamil refugees live under conditions of abandonment and estrangement. These two lived realities shape their ontological experience of un-belongingness, as they remain suspended between their exclusion from nationality and their denial of citizenship. This condition of un-belongingness — rooted in their fractured relationship with both the state and the broader idea of national belonging — defines their status most accurately as *existential refugees*. Their predicament cannot be fully understood within the conventional legal categories of ‘refugee’ or ‘stateless’, but rather through the existential lens of displacement, negation and deferred recognition.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger begins by stressing the importance of asking the question of *Being*, emphasising that philosophy (and indeed everyday thought) has largely ceased to interrogate what *Being* itself means.⁶⁴ He notes that *Being* is ‘the most universal and the emptiest of concepts’, one that resists precise definition.⁶⁵ Universality here signifies that everything that exists is understood in terms of *Being*; yet it reveals nothing specific about the particularities of existence precisely because it applies to everything.⁶⁶ This philosophical insight is crucial for understanding the unsettled identity crisis of the Malayaga Tamils in Indian refugee camps. Their condition illustrates the necessity of defining *Being* in relation to identity — how their historical routes of migration, displacement and labour shape their status as either refugees or stateless persons. Their lived realities — marked by unsettled identity, abandonment and estrangement, compounded by the absence of recognition by the state — reveal a profound *Being of un-belongingness*. It is within this ontological framework that their condition must be understood not simply as refugees or stateless in the conventional sense, but as *existential refugees* whose existence is defined by dislocation, deferred recognition and the impossibility of stable belonging.

V ABANDONMENT

One of the most important questions that must be asked in the case of Malayaga Tamil refugees concerns how they experience life within refugee camps. These lived conditions not only shape their everyday struggles but also confront them with the deeper existential question of un-belongingness. Heidegger observed that *Being* cannot be derived from higher, abstract concepts by way of definition, nor

⁶³ 1954 *Convention* (n 62) art 1(1); Victoria Redclift, *Statelessness and Citizenship: Camps and the Creation of Political Space* (Routledge, 1st edn, 2013) 141.

⁶⁴ Heidegger (n 19) 21–3.

⁶⁵ *ibid* 21.

⁶⁶ Mary E Johnson, ‘Heidegger and Meaning: Implications for Phenomenological Research’ (2001) 1(2) *Nursing Philosophy* 134, 140–6.

can it be fully explained through lower, derivative categories.⁶⁷ In the context of refugeehood, this insight is particularly instructive. The concept of abandonment emerges not as an abstract philosophical claim, but from the *grounded realities* of lived experience — conditions of displacement, exclusion and estrangement that shape the everyday lives of refugees. Thus, there is a profound necessity to ask the question of *Being* within the domains of refugeehood, statelessness and citizenship. By doing so, we can begin to illuminate how belonging, or the lack thereof, is not merely a legal or political condition but an ontological one — constituting what the first author terms the condition of the *existential refugee*. Within Malayaga Tamils' current host country, India, their position as refugees produces a profound sense of abandonment — a state of being present yet unrecognised, sheltered yet excluded and alive yet denied full belonging. The concept of abandonment is generally defined as a profound sense of being unrecognised in individual identity and left to the individual life in isolation. This condition has been broadly conceptualised by scholars such as Chen,⁶⁸ Cappelen,⁶⁹ Carnap,⁷⁰ Appiah,⁷¹ and Zack,⁷² who emphasise the emotional, social and political dimensions of being abandoned or excluded by the very structures meant to provide recognition and support. In refugee studies, the concept of abandonment is often defined through the aspects of camp life. For instance, Pinelli describes the refugee camp as a 'spatial, social and political dispositif',⁷³ which, while structuring the lives of refugees, also represents a 'zone of social and institutional abandonment'⁷⁴ even when situated within the boundaries of the state. In this context, abandonment is conceptualised or defined as the lived experiences of refugees' life in refugee camps — marked by social and institutional abandonment.

I grew up in a densely forested plantation settlement in the southern Indian state of Kerala, inhabited predominantly by stateless returnees or repatriates from Sri Lanka. My forefathers were taken as indentured labourers from India to Sri Lanka during the British colonial period to work in the Hill Country plantation sectors — locally known as *Malayagam* — in regions such as Kandy, Nuwara Eliya and Badulla. Following Sri Lanka's independence in 1948, my parents, then still children, were rendered stateless by newly enacted citizenship laws. Later, some like my father, were repatriated to India under the Indo-Ceylon Agreements —

⁶⁷ Heidegger (n 19) 23.

⁶⁸ Mengmeng Chen et al, 'Valuing the Effect of Capital Goes to Countryside on Cropland Abandonment: Evidence from Rural China' (2025) 156(February) *Habitat International* 103299:1–10.

⁶⁹ Herman Cappelen, *The Concept of Democracy: An Essay on Conceptual Amelioration and Abandonment* (Oxford University Press 2023) 244.

⁷⁰ See generally, Howard Stein, 'Was Carnap Entirely Wrong, after All?' (1992) 93 *Synthese* 275, 275–8.

⁷¹ Mark Appiah et al, 'Dependence on Forest Resources and Tropical Deforestation in Ghana' (2009) 11(3) *Environment, Development and Sustainability* 471, 482.

⁷² See generally, Lizabeth Zack, 'Who Fought the Algerian War? Political Identity and Conflict in French-Ruled Algeria' (2002) 16(1) *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 55, 97.

⁷³ Barbara Pinelli, 'Control and Abandonment: The Power of Surveillance on Refugees in Italy, During and After the Mare Nostrum Operation' (2018) 50(3) *Antipode* 725, 726, citing Michel Agier, 'Le Camp Comme Limite et Comme Espace Politique' in Carolina Kobelinsky and Chowra Makaremi (eds), *Enformés Dehors: Enquêtes sur le Confinement des Étrangers* (Éditions du Croquant 2009) 28.

⁷⁴ *ibid*, citing João Biehl, Byron Good and Arthur Kleinman (eds), *Subjectivity: Ethnographic Investigations* (University of California Press 2007) 10–14; Jocelyn Marrow and Tanya Marie Luhmann, 'The Zone of Social Abandonment in Cultural Geography: On the Street in the United States, Inside the Family in India' (2012) 36(3) *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 493.

the Sirimavo–Shastri Pact of 1964 and the Sirimavo–Gandhi Pact of 1974 —⁷⁵ others were left behind. These agreements between India and Sri Lanka were made to address the crisis of statelessness. India agreed to repatriate or grant citizenship to 525,000 individuals.⁷⁶ At the same time, Sri Lanka committed to settling 300,000 stateless Tamils.⁷⁷ Under the bilateral stateless repatriation Indo-Ceylon agreements, only approximately 475,000 Indian Tamils were successfully repatriated from their Sri Lankan stateless conditions to India.⁷⁸ My parents were among those who returned under this arrangement, arriving in a plantation settlement in Kerala in 1979. From Grade 1 to Grade 10, I attended a school established specifically for repatriated or stateless returnee children in Kerala. Although I grew up listening to stories of migration from my elders, I did not fully understand the broader historical and political context of my community's displacement until I began my doctoral research. Through my PhD journey, I came to know and discovered that many Indian-Origin Tamils who migrated to Sri Lanka remained in vulnerable conditions. Moreover, while doing my doctoral research, I became increasingly aware of the ongoing struggles faced by the Malayaga Tamil community residing in refugee camps across Tamil Nadu. I contacted a respected community leader from our plantation settlement, who has maintained long-standing relationships with these displaced individuals and frequently visits them to offer moral and material support. Through his network, I contacted residents of the Tiruchirappalli refugee camp. My first interaction with a female Malayaga Tamil refugee made me understand that she is actively fighting for her Indian citizenship — a reflection of the broader crisis of identity, recognition and belonging experienced by this community. As our conversation unfolded, I discovered she was originally from Badulla, Sri Lanka — my father's birthplace. Moved by our shared roots, she welcomed me into her home as if I were her son. The refugee camp was directly opposite the central prison, and the entire compound was enclosed by high boundary walls, giving it an atmosphere of confinement. She came to receive and invite me at the gate and guided me to her modest home, which consisted of just two small rooms — one serving as a living space and the other as a combined kitchen and bathing area. Toilet facilities were shared among residents in the camp. Specifically, a significant number of the remaining population was unable to complete the repatriation processes due to the Civil War in Sri Lanka.

⁷⁵ *Sirimavo–Shastri Pact* (n 37); *Sirimavo–Gandhi Pact* (n 38).

⁷⁶ Dasgupta (n 10) 2365–6.

⁷⁷ See Kanapathipillai (n 3) 30.

⁷⁸ The Commissioner of Rehabilitation of Tamil Nadu governance body is responsible for repatriation and rehabilitation between India and Sri Lanka. It was reported that the Indian Tamil plantation labour community from Sri Lanka was rehabilitated across various parts of India, including Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands: Government of Tamil Nadu, *Information Handbook under Right to Information Act 2005* (n 41). Most Indian Tamil repatriates, or stateless returnees from Sri Lanka, were rehabilitated into several parts of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, primarily within the forested plantation sectors of these regions: *ibid* cl 2.16.6. As per their records, the total population of repatriates stood at 461,442 until 1983, with this figure officially documented by the Rehabilitation Board in 1985: Chandraprakash and Bernard D'Sami, 'Stateless Tamils Stare at Another Displacement', *Deccan Herald* (online, 19 April 2025) <<https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/stateless-tamils-stare-at-another-displacement-3500375>>, archived at <perma.cc/MQH8-AHAF>. The repatriation process was formally stopped in 1983 due to the outbreak of Civil War in Sri Lanka. Notably, within the total repatriate population of 461,442, a natural increase of 126,007 individuals was included in the total by 1995: *ibid*. This population could have reached approximately 800,000 to 1 million by 2024: Personal Perspective View of the First Author. See generally, Dasgupta (n 10) 2365; Yoganathan (n 10) 534. However, no current census data is available to verify the repatriated population in India.

Although they waited for years in anticipation of repatriation, the process was eventually halted by both governments, leaving them uncertain.⁷⁹

When the conflict intensified, many of the Indian-Origin Tamils crossed the Sri Lankan border through Thalaimannar and sought refuge in Tamil Nadu, India, where they continue to live in refugee camps without formal citizenship rights.⁸⁰ There remains considerable confusion among scholars in distinguishing between Malayaga Tamils, the Indian business migrant community and Sri Lankan Tamils. The Malayaga Tamils were indentured Tamil labourers transported by the British to work in the plantations of Sri Lanka.⁸¹ Recruitment occurred primarily during the 19th century, though early forms of South Indian labour migration to Sri Lanka can be traced as far back as the 15th century.⁸² In contrast, other Indian migrants — such as traders, artisans and members of the business community — settled in Sri Lankan cities like Colombo, with whom the Malayaga Tamils had little to no social or cultural connection. The very term *Malayagam* signifies this plantation identity: it refers to the highland or hill-country estates where these communities were settled as plantation workers. This distinction has been clearly noted in historical works such as *The History of Sri Lanka*⁸³ as well as in studies by de Silva and Jayawardena,⁸⁴ which underline the unique trajectory of the plantation community. Importantly, it was the Malayaga Tamils, not the non-plantation Indian migrants, who bore the brunt of colonial exploitation, plantation slavery and, in the postcolonial period, statelessness, displacement and refugeehood. Today, a significant number of Indian-Origin Tamils who were unable to prove their Indian ancestry or complete the repatriation process remain confined to refugee camps in India. Excluded from the citizenship frameworks of both Sri Lanka and India, they continue to live under conditions of abandonment and un-belongingness. This *Being of abandonment* embodies the unresolved legacy of colonial labour migration and postcolonial exclusion, situating the Malayaga Tamils in a perpetual liminal space — present within the territory of the state, yet denied full recognition, rights and belonging.

The colonial plantation settlements in Ceylon produced a deep and enduring sense of un-belongingness among the Malayaga Tamils from the moment they arrived to work in the plantations. Unlike other Indian migrants to Sri Lanka, they were systematically distinguished and segregated, labelled as ‘Malayaga Tamils’, ‘Up-Country Tamils’, ‘Estate Tamils’, or ‘Indian-Origin Tamils’. These labels functioned as markers of exclusion, reinforcing their identity as indentured plantation labourers rather than integrated members of society. Such

⁷⁹ Personal Perspective View of the First Author, recorded in an embodied ethnographic account on 12 March 2025.

⁸⁰ Johanna Deeksha, “‘Life is Here Now’: Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees Pin Hope on Indian Citizenship”, *Scroll.in* (online, 26 March 2026) <<https://scroll.in/article/1091576/life-is-here-now-sri-lankan-tamil-refugees-pin-hope-on-indian-citizenship>>, archived at <perma.cc/VJB8-GDNR>.

⁸¹ See generally, Christophe Z Guilmoto, ‘The Tamil Migration Cycle, 1830–1950’ (1993) 28(3–4) *Economic and Political Weekly* 111, 112–14; Mythri Jegathesan, ‘Deficient Realities: Expertise and Uncertainty among Tea Plantation Workers in Sri Lanka’ (2015) 39(3). *Dialectical Anthropology* 255.

⁸² Peebles, *The Plantation Tamils of Ceylon* (n 23) 5–7, 24–53.

⁸³ See generally, *ibid* 28–9.

⁸⁴ See generally, de Silva (n 58); Jayawardena and Kurian, *Class, Patriarchy and Ethnicity on Sri Lankan Plantations* (n 1) 70–5; Peebles, *The Plantation Tamils of Ceylon* (n 23) 202–25; Daniel Bass, *Everyday Ethnicity in Sri Lanka: Up-Country Tamil Identity Politics* (Routledge 2013) 16–40.

categorisation entrenched multiple forms of discrimination. The plantation community was treated as outsiders and socially degraded by the British colonial authorities, the Sinhalese majority and other migrant groups. Their lives were marked by structural deprivation: poor housing (with more than 10 people crammed into three-room ‘line houses’), communal sanitation facilities with little privacy, open bathing, minimal wages and widespread denial of dignity.⁸⁵ For generations, these conditions institutionalised inequality and reinforced their status as an ‘untouchable’ labouring class within Sri Lanka’s social fabric. As part of this study, the first author conducted interviews with Malayaga Tamil refugees who were born and raised in Sri Lanka until the ages of 17 or 18, and who now reside in India. Their oral histories vividly recount experiences of systemic discrimination and neglect, particularly in relation to basic amenities and everyday dignity. This oral historical method is crucial for capturing not only the material hardships but also the affective dimensions of abandonment and estrangement that continue to shape the Malayaga Tamils’ collective memory and existential condition.

For example, as part of this study, the first author interviewed a 91-year-old Malayaga Tamil refugee currently residing in the Trichy refugee camps. Despite his advanced age, he retains a vivid memory of his life in Sri Lanka and his journey to India as a refugee. When asked about his life in Sri Lanka, he showed a greater inclination to recount his plantation experiences there than speak about his current conditions. He described in detail the structural exclusion faced by the Malayaga Tamils: their marginalisation from the mainstream community, exploitative wages, congested ‘line housing’, inadequate sanitation and the pervasive insecurity of plantation life.

As he explained:

We lived as if we did not belong anywhere. Our houses were crowded, more than 10 of us in just a few small rooms. There was no dignity in how we lived — shared toilets, no privacy and low wages that never improved. Even though we worked hard on the plantations for generations, we were always treated as outsiders.⁸⁶

Tamilselvi, a 60-year-old Malayaga Tamil refugee from the Trichy refugee camp, shared her long-time struggle to prove her Indian-Origin identity after returning to the Indian refugee camp. She told her lived experiences of how her identity as a Malayaga Tamil was shaped through generations of labour work in Sri Lanka’s plantations and was firmly rooted in the historical trajectories of Indian migration. However, upon arriving in India, she faced immense challenges asserting this original identity. Despite her Indian ancestry, Tamilselvi found herself misidentified and excluded, caught between the historical realities of repatriation and the bureaucratic failure to recognise her rightful place as a citizen. She shared that:

When we lived in Sri Lanka, people called us different names like Malayaga Tamils, Estate Tamils, *Malayaga Makkal* and Indian-Origin. These names were given by the Ceylonese. They called by these names because we came from India and worked on plantations in the mountains. But when we got to Mandapam Camp in India, I told the officers we were Malayaga Tamils, but they didn’t understand what

⁸⁵ Yoganathan (n 10) 534.

⁸⁶ Interview with Kandhayya (Chandraprakash Yoganathan, In-person Field Interview, 7 December 2023).

that meant. They thought we were Sri Lankan Tamils. Because of this confusion, we're not getting our Indian citizenship and the freedom we deserve in India.⁸⁷

The testimony of the elder refugee in the Trichy camp vividly illustrates how Malayaga Tamils were systematically excluded and treated as outsiders in Sri Lanka. Their recollections highlight forms of exclusion that penetrated every aspect of daily life: the denial of self-respect, the indignity of overcrowded and inadequate housing, the absence of privacy in basic routines such as bathing and sanitation and the persistent stigma of being identified merely as 'Indian plantation workers'. These lived experiences not only reflect material deprivation but also reveal the deeper existential condition of un-belongingness. This condition of un-belongingness deeply shaped the Malayaga Tamils' lived experiences, revealing how colonialism created plantation spaces marked by ignorance and non-recognition. Despite having spent most of their lives contributing to the growth of Sri Lanka's plantation economy, they were never fully acknowledged as Sri Lankans in their adopted homeland. This persistent treatment as non-Sri Lankans reinforced their marginalisation and produced enduring feelings of abandonment — a sense of being present yet unrecognised, productive yet excluded and rooted yet denied belonging.

The Malayaga Tamils experienced multiple phases of abandonment. The first emerged under colonial rule, when they endured exclusion and unequal treatment as plantation labourers. The second occurred immediately after Sri Lanka's independence in 1948, when nearly 975,000 Malayaga Tamils were denied citizenship under the Pacts between India and Sri Lanka. This exclusion left them suspended between two States, belonging fully to neither. The crisis deepened when many attempted to return to India, their ancestral homeland. Upon arrival, they were registered not as Indian-Origin repatriates but as Sri Lankan Tamil refugees. This misclassification occurred despite their clear assertions of Indian ancestry and their claims under bilateral repatriation agreements. Several factors compounded the problem: many lacked Indian passports due to the disruption of repatriation during the Civil War, and officials often confused them with Sri Lanka's native northern Tamils because both groups shared the Tamil language and arrived during the same period. This linguistic and historical overlap led to a profound misidentification, leaving Malayaga Tamils trapped in refugee status rather than recognised as Indian citizens. Dhanalakshmi, a 68-year-old Malayaga Tamil refugee, recounted her decades-long struggle to prove her Indian-Origin and her prolonged wait for repatriation. She says that:

The Indian government stopped the ferry between Ceylon and India because of the [Civil] War. We didn't have Indian passports, and through repatriation, only we were able to receive Indian passports and citizenship. So, we came to India. Some Sri Lankan Tamils were on the ferry, too, because of the [Civil] War. The officers thought we were Sri Lankan native Tamils because we looked similar and spoke the same language. But we spoke different dialects. So, they thought we were refugees from Sri Lanka.⁸⁸

Her testimony reflects the community's broader existential crisis of unbelonging, caught between abandonment by Sri Lankan citizenship and

⁸⁷ Interview with Tamilselvi (Chandraprakash Yoganathan, Oral History Interview, 12 June 2023).

⁸⁸ Interview with Tamilselvi (Chandraprakash Yoganathan, In-person Field Interview, 5 March 2023).

non-recognition within Indian citizenship frameworks. This condition of citizenship and nationality abandonment underscores the necessity of asking the fundamental question of *Being* within the context of refugees and stateless persons. Heidegger reminds us in *Being and Time* that *Being* is ‘the most universal and the emptiest of concepts’, one that resists precise definition precisely because it applies to everything.⁸⁹ In the case of the Malayaga Tamils, their lived experiences of unbelonging and abandonment compel us to rethink *Being* not as an abstract category but as an existential condition shaped by displacement, exclusion and the denial of recognition.⁹⁰ When viewed through the lens of *Being* as abandonment, the conventional categories of ‘refugee’ and ‘stateless person’ appear as the emptiest of concepts, inadequate to capture the depth of lived realities. What is required instead is a focus on the abandonment of citizenship and nationality as an existential condition. In this sense, the Malayaga Tamils represent a case of *existential refugees*, whose experiences of exclusion in both Sri Lanka and India reveal how abandonment, rather than legal definition alone, shapes the meaning of refugeehood and statelessness.

VI ESTRANGEMENT

The question of *Being* cannot be limited to the dimension of abandonment alone. There is also a necessity to consider the question of estrangement in order to fully grasp the ontological condition of refugees and stateless persons. While abandonment highlights exclusion from citizenship and nationality, estrangement captures the deeper alienation of living as outsiders — disconnected from the state, society and even the recognition of selfhood. Together, abandonment and estrangement expose the limitations of the conventional definitions of ‘refugee’ and ‘stateless person’, and call for a re-conceptualisation of these categories through the lens of *existential refugeehood*. Kierkegaard emphasised that human beings can only be truly understood from within through their lived experiences.⁹¹ Existential feelings of estrangement among Malayaga Tamils arise from their lived experiences of day-to-day struggle and the uncertainty they face in refugee camps. The conditions of refugee camp life, marked by the absence of formal citizenship, reinforce a profound sense of detachment. For Malayaga Tamils residing in these camps, there is a persistent sense of un-belongingness. Their daily hardships, coupled with the prolonged wait for Indian citizenship, contribute to a sustained feeling of estrangement — from both the state and the spaces in which they live. Rani, a Malayaga Tamil refugee from the Vellore camp, shared her feelings of estrangement resulting from her lack of access to citizenship and the temporary conditions of receiving aid from the government, which do not give her feelings of belongingness in India. She says that:

Even though I receive monthly rations and some money from the government, these supports don’t give me the full freedom and opportunities to live like everyone else in the country. In my home country, I’m considered a refugee. I’ll only truly feel connected to this country when I receive my citizenship. Otherwise, I feel like I’m not just separated from my homeland but from the whole world.⁹²

⁸⁹ Heidegger (n 19) 21.

⁹⁰ *ibid* 32–5.

⁹¹ *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources*, ed Jon Stewart (Ashgate Publishing, 1st edn, 2011) vol 9 ix.

⁹² Interview with Rani (Chandraprakash Yoganathan, In-person Field Interview, 3 March 2023).

Furthermore, Dhanalakshmi, a Malayaga Tamil refugee woman, recounted her experiences and highlighted how the camp structure reinforces the feeling of being treated as outsiders in their own country. She shared that:

I've been staying in this camp for almost 30 years. It feels a lot like living in a prison. Our camp was right across from the main jail and there was just one road between us. Big walls surround both the jail and the camp. The rules for the jail and our camp are similar.⁹³

Kamachi, a participant in the study, shared what she views as the most crucial issue contributing to the sense of estrangement in refugee life:

We don't want lots of things in these camps, and it won't make us feel like citizens. Life keeps being hard without getting our Indian citizenship back. We have an *Aadhar* card and a refugee card. But these are not enough to show we are citizens. The government people still think of us as '*Satta Virodhama kudiyeriyavarkkal*' (illegal migrants). Our only wish is to get citizenship.⁹⁴

The classification of the Malayaga Tamils as 'refugees' fails to capture the ontology of belonging tied to their citizenship and nationality. Their lived experiences in refugee camps not only embody the *Being of abandonment*, but are also rooted in a longer history of forced migration which generates a profound *Being of estrangement*. Yet even the categories of abandonment and estrangement remain insufficient to explain their full existential condition. This calls for a redefinition of refugeehood itself through the concept of the *existential refugee*. Heidegger reminds us that *Being* is always rooted in historical ontology and cannot be adequately interpreted until the question of *Being* is clarified in relation to its origins.⁹⁵ In this sense, the Malayaga Tamils' existential condition must be understood through both their historical trajectory of displacement and their present estrangement within India. Their everyday lives in refugee camps exemplify this: dependence on state-provided rations, restricted employment and educational opportunities and temporary housing reflect a condition of being present yet unrecognised. Until proper repatriation is achieved — through recognition of Indian citizenship, access to employment and equitable opportunities in education and public life — the Malayaga Tamils will remain caught in a cycle of un-belongingness. Their *Being* is tied inseparably to the legal and political recognition of nationality. Without this, their daily lives continue to exemplify the condition of *existential refugees*, estranged from both the state and the promise of belonging.

VII CONCLUSION

There is a pressing necessity to ask the question of *Being* in the context of refugees and stateless persons. What do these categories truly mean when examined through the framework of *Being of belongingness* and the broader issue of citizenship or nationality as recognised by the state? This study has sought to interrogate the ontological dimensions of refugeehood and statelessness, moving beyond their technical definitions to explore how they are lived and experienced.

⁹³ Interview with Dhanalakshmi (Chandraprakash Yoganathan, In-person Field Interview, 5 March 2023).

⁹⁴ Interview with Kamachi (Chandraprakash Yoganathan, In-person Field Interview, 8 April 2023).

⁹⁵ Heidegger (n 19) 44.

The case of the Malayaga Tamils illustrates these dynamics vividly. Their history of colonial forced migration to Sri Lanka as indentured plantation workers embedded a condition of unbelonging from the outset. This was deepened when they were excluded from Sri Lankan citizenship after independence in 1948, extending their ontological experience of un-belongingness. Their eventual displacement to India further reinforced this condition, as many were registered not as repatriates but as Sri Lankan Tamil refugees despite their Indian origins. Across these historical phases, the Malayaga Tamils experienced refugeehood not only as a legal status but also as a lived reality of abandonment and estrangement. This trajectory raises a fundamental ontological dilemma: *What is the meaning of Being in the context of citizenship and nationality?* The Malayaga Tamils' situation demonstrates that conventional categories of 'refugee' and 'stateless' fail to capture or express the reality of their being. Through this investigation, their experiences are more accurately conceptualised as those of *existential refugees* — a category that foregrounds the lived realities of unbelonging, abandonment and estrangement. Recognising the Malayaga Tamils as *existential refugees* highlights the need for case-specific and context-sensitive analyses of forced migration, refugeehood and statelessness. Such an approach can help policymakers, researchers and scholars to move beyond rigid legal definitions, and instead design responses that acknowledge the complex historical, social and existential dimensions of displacement. Importantly, this conceptual lens can also be applied to other global contexts where displaced communities confront similar dilemmas of nationality and belonging, offering a pathway toward more humane and grounded solutions to the crises of refugeehood and statelessness.