

# THE CITIZEN

Ground level discourse 2



Initiative of presenting a memorandum to the Prime Minister (photo: Parliament of Sri Lanka)

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## Problems have not been resolved

We visited the parliament and undertook the initiative of presenting a memorandum to the Prime Minister and the Speaker earlier this year, outlining the longstanding challenges faced by the Adivasi Communities. Regrettably, we have not received any response or resolution to our concerns. The memorandum comprehensively highlights our issues such as land disputes, wild elephant issues, confrontational encounters

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## Prime Minister, implement the solutions urgently

On January 18, 2023, Minister for Cultural Affairs Vidura Wickramanayaka stated in Parliament that the government is actively engaged in safeguarding the rights of the indigenous community and striving for providing a lasting solution to their challenges.

A month following the Minister's statement, we revisited the issue to measure the progress of the initiatives outlined. The minister stated that various measures have

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## 01 *Continue...* **Prime Minister,**

been undertaken to address the issues faced by the Adivasi people, by the Development Heritage Office of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs that has played a pivotal role.

What is the progress of the work? In response to our inquiry, Nishanthi Jayasinghe, Additional Secretary of Development Heritage, elucidated on the ongoing initiatives and outlined the multifaceted steps being taken. (A detailed article elaborating on these efforts is given as a separate article in this publication).

Despite a comprehensive document prepared on Adivasi issues, collating responses from relevant ministries, challenges persist. The key challenge is orchestrating a unified approach to comprehensively address these issues.

Nishanthi Jayasinghe, Additional Secretary of Development Heritage, has conveyed that the document prepared by their ministry seeking to resolve the challenges faced by the indigenous people has been presented to the Prime Minister. She emphasised that while the Adivasis fall within the purview of her ministry, collaboration of various ministries is indispensable in resolving the problems faced by the indigenous people and stated that they are expecting the support of the Prime Minister to ensure the success of these activities.

Highlighting the interconnectivity of the issue, the involvement of ministries such as the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing, Ministry of Water Supply, Department of Census and Statistics, Ministry of Transport and Highways, Road Development Authority, Sri Lanka Transport Board, Wildlife Conservation Department, Forest Conservation Department, National Physical Planning Department, Mahaweli Development Authority,

Child Protection Authority, Department of Ayurveda, and Department of Archeology are all deemed essential. Ms. Jayasinghe stressed that without the collective support of this diverse range of ministries, addressing the challenges faced by the Adivasi community has proven to be a difficult task.

So therefore, the effort of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs is to seek a directive through the Prime Minister as they strive to work collaboratively with the various ministries in seeking a resolution to these issues. Pursuant to this objective, the hope for solutions to the challenges faced by the Adivasi communities are presently in the hands of the Prime Minister.

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***A policy brief and a series of demands, compiled by the Centre for Policy Alternatives subsequent to extensive field studies conducted in all provinces where the indigenous communities reside, has been formally presented to the Speaker, the Prime Minister, and the Leader of the Opposition. In light of this background, it is imperative to note that addressing and resolving the longstanding issues of the indigenous community, which has already been debated in parliament, is a matter of national interest.***

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Undoubtedly, the plight of the indigenous people in the country is a grave and unresolved concern. The intricacy of the problem is evident in the myriad of rights lost by these

communities and the difficulty of untangling these entwined issues. The Center for Alternative Policy (CPA) has elevated the discourse surrounding indigenous issues, which had received scant attention. Following comprehensive field studies conducted in Uva East, North Central, and all provinces inhabited by indigenous communities, CPA formulated a series of policies and demands. These were subsequently presented to the Speaker, the Prime Minister, and the Leader of the Opposition. Given this contextual background, it is imperative to address the indigenous issues promptly, which were also debated in parliament, since this is a matter of national interests.

Uruwarige Wannila Aththo the Chief of the 'Vedda' Community in Sri Lanka, emphasised the need of the hour is to draft a new act with laws recognising their existence and guaranteeing their rights and freedoms as indigenous people, that will protect their well-being. The discourse in Parliament must continue to facilitate such a process. It is time to fulfil the commitments made by the Minister for Cultural Affairs Vidura Wickramanayake in January, in response to the questions posed by Opposition Leader Sajith Premadasa under Standing Orders 27/12.

When inquired, Uruwarige Wannila Aththo expressed his gratitude to the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) for duly understanding their issues and providing a decisive contribution to their cause. He called on the government, particularly the President, to resolve these issues providing tangible solutions. The hope resonates that the government will shoulder the responsibility of realising these solutions.

- **Citizen**



## Fundamental Rights of the Adivasi Community in Sri Lanka

At this juncture, as the citizens of Sri Lanka commemorate 75 years of sovereignty over an independent state, it is an opportune moment to direct our attention towards the status of indigenous communities and their rights. The United Nations Charter on the Rights of Indigenous Communities, adopted on September 13, 2007, serves as a pivotal framework in this regard. Despite the passage of 15 years since its adoption, Sri Lanka has yet to enact legislation recognising the existence and freedom of indigenous community within the nation. It is incumbent upon citizen representatives, policymakers, political leaders, and decision-makers, alongside civil society activists, to urgently address this imperative responsibility.

The question of whether the indigenous communities in Sri Lanka will find themselves within a conducive socio-economic and political environment to fully exercise their fundamental rights remains uncertain, even during this commemoration of 75 years of independence. Presently, there exists a void in legal or policy acknowledgment that demonstrates sensitivity to the identity, socio-economic conditions, and cultural practices of these Adivasi groups.

In recent times, the perilous situation of indigenous communities

has exacerbated, marked by continual suppression, neglect, and discrimination. Regrettably, this predicament unfolds in a country with a historical standing as one of the oldest Asian states to embrace democratic governance.

Compounding these challenges, there is a dearth of formal and updated data concerning the socio-economic conditions of various Adivasi community groups residing

in the country. This gap is rooted in the removal of the 'Vedda' category from ethnic group classifications in population censuses post-1963, a decision that inherently biases against them. Furthermore, the issues and obstacles faced by these communities—ranging from language use, livelihood opportunities, travel freedoms, to the assertion of their self-esteem as indigenous people—are insurmountable and have not been adequately addressed.

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*Sri Lanka has yet to enact legislation recognising the existence and freedom of indigenous community within the nation.*

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The recurring executive and administrative decisions, coupled with the attitude and actions of law enforcement agencies, serve as recurrent evidence of our society's insensitivity to the existence and freedom of Adivasi communities in the country. This repeated insensitivity is a matter of concern and reaffirms and underscores the pressing need for comprehensive reform and a genuine

commitment to upholding the rights and dignity of indigenous populations in Sri Lanka. These unfolding circumstances represent the continued socialisation of a longstanding error within the fabric of our society, persisting over many decades.

Therefore, as we approach the momentous occasion of the celebration of 75 years of independence, we perceive this moment as an unprecedented and historic opportunity to rectify this societal misstep. The indigenous community within our nation stands as an eminently suitable cohort to assume the role of custodians over natural resources, encompassing land, water, wildlife, and ecosystems intricately linked to their habitats. This juncture offers a unique chance to reacquaint ourselves with their intrinsic values and, more importantly, to undertake the essential measures required to fortify these values within the broader framework of the fundamental right to life.

A pivotal step in this direction involves the formal acknowledgment of the state's commitment to uphold the principles outlined in the United Nations Charter on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Additionally, we advocate for the necessary measures to ratify the 1989 International Labor Organization Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Communities (ILO Convention 169). Such actions not only signify a commitment to international standards but also serve as a manifestation of the political will and dedication requisite for this transformative endeavour. This belief is deeply rooted in our conviction that this approach will foster an environment conducive to the flourishing of Adivasi communities and their invaluable contributions.

**Lionel Guruge**  
Senior Researcher  
Centre for Policy Alternatives

The Vedda community, once nestled in the forests surrounding Wellassa and Bimthane, diligently preserving their culture, found themselves compelled to abandon their ancestral homelands due to the advent of the blooming scattered development accompanying the country's open economy. The rapid progress acted

longstanding connection to the Dimbulagala forest, their ancestral cave, once a site of worship, was relinquished, and they descended from the mountain—ignored and overlooked, leading a profoundly unstable and unsuitable existence for survival.

Against this backdrop of neglect and vulnerability, with the state has

collecting honey and unearthing wild yams. Tragically, many women in the Ampara - Galvalaya Vedda village, grappling with the absence of cultivable land, have succumbed to the entrapment of microfinance companies, further deepening their economic plight.

Certain companies impose group loans, initiating at Rs 30,000 with weekly instalments, while others adopt a monthly premium structure. Unfortunately, the pervasive shadow of poverty enveloping the lives of these illiterate individuals renders them susceptible to exploitation. Microfinance companies, particularly those targeting women, often commence operations by forming small groups. Despite the purported norm of not providing loans within the same family, observations reveal that the Vedda people, like their counterparts in other villages, find themselves ensnared in a web of debt due to loans extended to the same family.

*In many instances, borrowers, often illiterate, merely affix their signatures, with limited understanding of the contents of the forms filled out by the lenders.*

A crucial point of contention emerges in the evaluation process conducted by lending institutions. If a thorough assessment and

## Adivasi women trapped in a quagmire of unscrupulous microfinance schemes

as a destructive force, consuming the cultural fabric, traditional ways of life, and the very homeland of the Vedda people and was never a beacon of development. Regrettably, these transformative changes failed to bring illumination to their lives; instead, their existence remained cast in the looming shadow of the ensuing development.

The forests, once havens of tranquillity, have been transformed into sanctuaries and wildlife parks, forcing the Vedda people into involuntary forced exile during the 1980s. This displacement barred them from hunting and honey gathering, while cultural practices intricately linked to these activities gradually eroded due to government laws and ordinances restricting access to the very forests where these rituals once thrived.

Consequently, the Vedda people were compelled to adopt alternative livelihoods for survival. The young Adivasi leader of Dalukana in Dimbulagala, has moved from traditional practices to contemporary pursuits such as concrete-making for his sustenance. The younger generation, similarly affected by the upheaval, now engages in daily wage manual labour as a means of eking out a living. Despite their

abdicating their responsibility to the people, microfinance companies, which proliferated in the country a decade ago, have appeared as opportunistic exploiters. These companies, rapidly surfacing like mushrooms, appear to target impoverished communities left destitute by governmental neglect. The Vedda people, in particular those residing in Heninagala, Ampara - Pollebedda, Galvalaya Yaya, and Dimbulagala-Dalukana, have become ensnared in the web of debt spun by these microfinance entities, recognising them as easy prey.

The prohibition on entering reserved forests, coupled with the lack of arable land for cultivation, has compounded the economic woes of these communities. In their desperation, they express that a semblance of relief could be found if they had the freedom to enter the jungles for the simple acts of



Uuruwarige Anulawathie



Uuruwarige Wimalawathie



Thalawarige Kusumawathie

evaluation were undertaken, it would preclude the signing of loan agreements for individuals in such difficult and vulnerable financial conditions. In many instances, borrowers, often illiterate, merely affix their signatures, with limited understanding of the contents of the forms filled out by the lenders. She knows only to sign, so does her group members. Many of the borrowers in the Vedda community said that they merely signed the forms filled in by the officers of the lending institutions.

Uruvarige Anulawathi, a resident of Henanigala Vedda village, exemplifies the challenges faced, having borrowed for fishing nets for her husband but subsequently diverting the funds towards family consumption, making loan repayment impossible. Henanigala, like many Vedda villages, grapples with the complexities of the microfinance trap, with the Vedda leader also unable to mediate to resolve the issues. This is due to economic hardships stemming from the surrounding poverty which force individuals, including leaders, to resort to loans. Consequently, a significant portion of Henanigala's populace falls victim to the perils of the debt trap.

Similarly, the Vedda community of Dalukana in Dimbulgala, ensnared in a debt trap, also succumbed to the ramifications of microfinance loans, as conveyed by Thalawarige Priyantha, their vedda leader. He attributes this vulnerability to the obstruction of their access to traditional forest areas by wildlife officers and officials from



Uruvarige Anulawathi

the forest conservation department. This restriction exacerbates economic woes and propels the Vedda people into the intricate and challenging landscape of microfinance indebtedness.

Suranga Rupasinghe, the President of the National Cooperative Development Foundation, has asserted that the Adivasi people of this nation find themselves ensnared in the quagmire of microfinance. He goes on to highlight that the pervasive epidemic of microfinance loans has not only impacted common agricultural workers but has also pushed the broader population of the country to the brink of extreme poverty.

In response to this dire situation faced by the Vedda people, Lionel Guruge, a Senior Researcher at the Centre for Policy Alternatives, collaborated with various government officials to offer some relief to the Eastern Coast Marine Adivasi community. Lionel Guruge emphasises the tragic nature of the government's policy towards the Adivasis in the country. He points out that it is evident when you consider the respect, status and treatment accorded by the Australian government to its aboriginal population compared to the Adivasi people of our nation. This discrepancy underscores the pressing need for a more considerate and equitable approach in addressing the challenges faced by the Adivasi community in Sri Lanka.

- Lakmal Baduge

## 01 Continue...

### Problems have not been resolved

with wildlife officials, and restrictions preventing our access to the forest. The unjust imposition of fines on our people for fishing in the forest further exacerbates our predicament.

Annually, we contribute bee honey to the Dalada Mailgawa (Buddhist Temple of the Tooth), a practice integral to our cultural traditions. We need access to the forest to collect honey. However, the Wildlife Department impedes our ability to access the forest, making it challenging for our people to fulfil these rituals. We have to enter the forests as thieves in order to collect the honey. Due to our attempts to procure honey for Dalada Poojawa discreetly, those caught are subjected to legal proceedings and fines. Unfortunately, our questions remain unanswered, no one is able or willing to respond to them.

We acknowledge Minister for Culture Vidura Wickramanayake as a man with a highly compassionate stance, yet we recognise that addressing these challenges requires a collective effort from the entire government, including the President. Despite the Leader of the Opposition raising the issue in Parliament, he is unable to provide solutions. He is in the opposition and he does not have the power. The complexities of our situation persist. Without a concerted effort, if things continue as it is, there will be a time when there are no Adivasis left in Sri Lanka, the community will fade away into extinction. The Adivasis face the risk of fading away from the face of the earth. The Centre for Policy Alternatives is actively engaging in discussions surrounding our concerns, seeking to propel them forward. However, there has been no solution forthcoming from the government and policy makers.

- Citizen

This article contains the queries raised by Opposition Leader Sajith Premadasa under Standing Order 27(02) highlighting the challenges faced by the Adivasi community in various parts of the country and the response of the Minister of Cultural Affairs Vidura Wickramanayake. It has been over nine months since this debate took place during the parliamentary session on January 18, 2023. However, have these issues been resolved or addressed?

collective shortcoming that merits our shared concern. I am not attributing blame to any one person here; instead, I earnestly request the Honourable Prime Minister to issue an immediate directive to the Department of Census and Statistics regarding this matter. The objective is to initiate accurate data collection and analysis regarding the number of Adivasi families, their overall population figures, and their specific locations in various areas and villages.

for constitutional recognition of the Adivasi people? There is a need for provincial governments and local bodies to prepare decrees and by-laws for the protection of indigenous rights. Will the government work towards these solutions? Can the government provide a specific timeframe for these initiatives, and if not, why?

- **Does the government recognize that there is an urgent need to ratify and legally enforce the Indigenous and Tribal people Convention and implement it through a formal procedure?**

If so, will the government take steps to ratify the Indigenous and Tribal People Convention in this country, and are there specific dates for its implementation?

## PM, Opposition leader and the Minister – debate in parliament



Honourable Deputy Speaker, the internationally recognised rights of Adivasi peoples, as articulated in the United Nations Declaration - underscore a global commitment to their well-being. However, the Adivasi community residing in various parts of our nation confronts numerous challenges today.

Honourable Deputy Speaker, Even the statistics department does not have proper data about the population and family size of the Adivasi community in Sri Lanka, and we as a nation should be collectively ashamed of this situation. The Statistics Department lacks comprehensive data regarding the population and family size within districts, divisional secretariat jurisdictions, Grama Niladhari Divisions, and small villages where the Adivasi community resides. As a nation, this data gap is a

Regrettably, many rights of our Adivasi community are curtailed due to existing laws and regulations in force across the country. It is imperative for the government to give dedicated attention to amending these restrictive laws and ordinances, which intrude upon the traditional way of life of Adivasi people. Moreover, the introduction of new laws aimed at safeguarding the rights of the Adivasi community is crucial.

In light of the gravity of this matter, consider this as a national issue, and I anticipate specific responses and elucidations from the government regarding the following questions.

- **Does the government acknowledge the necessity of formulating specific laws to safeguard the economic, social, cultural, civil, and political rights of the Adivasi community in Sri Lanka?**

If affirmative, will the government undertake the drafting of a new bill to be presented to Parliament, ensuring the preservation of traditions and culture of the Adivasi people? Alternatively, is there consideration

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Honourable Prime Minister,

There are international conventions, there are international protocols, which protect and safeguard the indigenous community. Especially the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples - UNDRIP - adopted in 2007. It has been accepted in 2007 that many states should fully implement this convention through Article 42 of UNDRIP.

Therefore, will the government take the necessary steps to ratify the Indigenous and Tribal People's Convention in this country? We, in the opposition, express our full support and commitment to this endeavour. Could the government provide specific dates for the implementation of this ratification?

- **Is the government aware that Acts such as the Animal and Flora Protection Ordinance, Forest Conservation Ordinance, and Coastal Conservation Acts define activities related to the Adivasi traditional habitats and livelihoods as criminal activities?**



**Vidura Wickramanayake**  
(Minister of Buddha Sasana,  
Religious and Cultural Affairs)

In response to all the sub-questions of the main queries raised by the Leader of the Opposition under Standing Order 27(2), the answer is unequivocally "Yes." However, if a more comprehensive response is sought, we are prepared

If so, does the government plan to amend these ordinances to ensure fairness to the Adivasi community instead of the injustice suffered by them? Additionally, what measures are being taken to address the rights issues concerning their ancestral lands?

- **The Adivasi community has made a request to form an 'independent committee' consisting of Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission, Adivasi representatives, and government officials and to also form a 'parliamentary subcommittee' to investigate in to the challenges faced by the Adivasi people in Sri Lanka and to protect and guarantee their rights.**

Honourable Prime Minister,

The Adivasi community is requesting the establishment of a parliamentary sub-committee and an independent committee to examine the challenges and the violation of their rights. I seek clarification on whether the government intends to establish an independent body dedicated to the rights of the Adivasi

to provide such detail.

Accordingly, these are the specific answers to the questions posed:

- **Yes. Further studies are underway to comprehensively address the economic, social, cultural, civil, and political aspects of the Adivasi community, with a specific focus on securing their rights. Initiatives have been undertaken to draft new laws or make amendments to existing laws as deemed necessary.**

We aim to complete this full process within a specific timeframe

community and a committee under a sectoral oversight committee. If so, could you provide information on when these initiatives are anticipated to be implemented?

- **In light of the criminalisation of activities associated with the traditional livelihoods of the Adivasi community and the loss of traditional habitats, many have resorted to microfinance loans for building new habitats.**

Multiple social problems have arisen as a consequence of preying upon the Adivasi people, featuring loans that consist of terms and conditions that have not been clearly articulated, exorbitant interest rates, and illegal collection activities. Given the intricate and inseparable connections between land, livelihood, identity, and culture, it is imperative to address these multifaceted issues in seeking solutions to the microfinance credit problem faced by the Adivasi people. Will the government assign special attention to providing solutions to this microfinance credit crisis faced by the Adivasi people?

of 6 months. The intention is to conclude these efforts within the stipulated period, presenting the outcomes to Parliament, and subsequently passing the bill or implementing amendments to the existing legislation.

- **Yes. The government has established the 'Heritage Conservation Unit of the Community with Distinctive Identity'.**

This unit is not exclusive to a single group but caters to various distinct groups in the country. Its purpose is to safeguard the heritage of all groups with unique identities and cultures, ensuring that future

generations enjoy the privileges and rights enjoyed by other communities in our country.

- a. Accordingly, the "Heritage Conservation Unit of the Community with Distinctive Identity" unit has been established within the Ministry. This unit is dedicated to addressing the demands and needs of the Adivasi people, taking necessary actions, and coordinating with relevant departments to fulfil these demands. (Relevant reports provided in Annexure No. 01).
- b. There are plans to engage directly with the Adivasi community at the village level to discuss their problems and collaboratively find solutions. (Relevant reports provided in Annexure No. 02)
- c. To foster a comprehensive approach, a Steering Committee will be established in collaboration with all pertinent institutions to facilitate discussions on related

issues. (Reports are available in Annexure No. 03)

- **Yes. Ongoing discussions, coordinated with the relevant ministries and departments, are in progress for the amendment of Acts.**

The Adivasi community is requesting to return ownership of their traditional lands owned by them, and at present consultations required with entities such as the Ministry of Lands, the Ministry of Wildlife and Forest Resources Conservation, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Ministry of Irrigation to facilitate the restoration of their traditional lands have commenced. I would like to apprise this Honourable House that these essential steps have already been initiated.

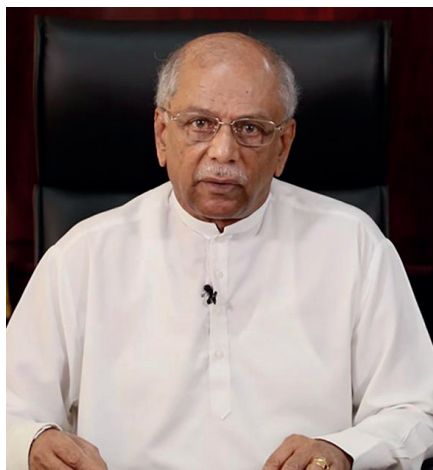
- **Yes. The intention is to establish a sub-committee**

**under the Parliamentary Advisory Committee, and this sub-committee is slated to be established during the upcoming Advisory Committee meeting.**

- **Yes. I hope to engage in negotiations with the Ministry of Finance to develop a concessional system for this purpose.**

It is evident that the longstanding issues have been overlooked by successive governments for decades. These questions and issues require resolutions through a systematic and meticulous approach. Failure to do so would result in a waste of public funds on a futile process, as has been done in the past. In order to avoid such a situation, we expect the unity and collaborative engagement of all esteemed Members of Parliament.

***As a government, we are requested to execute these directives as a national policy. It is imperative to highlight that the government is actively formulating policies expeditiously to safeguard the rights of the indigenous community in Sri Lanka.***



**Prime Minister  
Dinesh Gunawardena**

As a government, we are requested to execute these directives as a national policy. It is imperative to highlight that the government is actively formulating policies expeditiously to safeguard the rights of the indigenous community in Sri Lanka.

Notably, I extended an invitation to the Adivasi leader's delegation to partake as a special delegation in the independence ceremony, a gesture they embraced willingly.

The Honourable Minister has pledged to initiate legal provisions as Parliament and as part of the Government's commitment. It is reiterated at this juncture that concerted efforts are underway to implement these measures. We anticipate further detailed discussions on this matter within the parliament.

**- Tiran Bangamaarachchi**





## Preserving the heritage of the land

The indigenous people in this country, who have become a minority, are confronted with numerous pressing challenges. Their ethnicity, culture, and language often subject them to discrimination, resulting in social exclusion, economic disadvantage, and political disempowerment. Notably, indigenous individuals are disproportionately represented among the impoverished in this nation. This disparity arises from various factors, encompassing the consequence of systemic discrimination, limited access to education and employment, and the deprivation of their ancestral lands.

The traditional lands of the Adivasi community have been acquired or denied over centuries and this has exacted a profound toll on the indigenous peoples, impacting their culture, economy,

and livelihood. Their traditional lands, often rich in natural resources, are frequently exploited by both governmental and private

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*Their traditional lands, often rich in natural resources, are frequently exploited by both governmental and private entities, resulting in environmental degradation and the displacement of entire indigenous communities.*

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entities, resulting in environmental degradation and the displacement of entire indigenous communities. Predictably, this exploitation gives rise to violence perpetrated by government and security forces, exacerbating human rights violations against the indigenous peoples.

The absence of legal rights to their ancestral lands is a critical issue faced by the indigenous people. Despite having traditionally inhabited communal lands, they find themselves devoid of any rightful claim to these territories. Consequently, these lands fall prey to the interests of both government entities and private entrepreneurs. Large-scale government acquisitions for development projects, such as irrigation schemes and national parks in the dry zone, have led to the forced displacement of indigenous communities. Furthermore, private enterprises, enticed by the tourism potential of these areas, exacerbate the struggle of the indigenous people.

The perpetual challenges of drought aggravate the indigenous people's predicament. Livestock farming, their primary occupation for generations, becomes increasingly arduous due to water scarcity. Forced migration in search of suitable arable land disrupts their social and cultural fabric, compelling them into low-wage jobs that fail to provide adequate sustenance.

The cycle of adversity faced by the indigenous community underscores the urgent need for comprehensive reforms, ensuring their rights, preserving their cultural heritage, and addressing the systemic inequalities that have perpetuated their suffering for far too long.

- Citizen

## All the issues of the Adivasi community has been informed to the Prime Minister

**Nishanthi Jayasinghe**

Additional Secretary (Development)  
Ministry of Buddhasasana, Religious & Cultural Affairs, National Heritage Division



**Adivasis are currently grappling with a myriad of challenges, and among them, the issue of permanent housing stands out prominently. Similar to Rathugala, the Vakarai Adivasis have already expressed the need for permanent housing projects. What steps have been taken so far?**

While the Adivasis fall under our ministry, addressing the majority of their issues necessitates collaboration with other ministries. Specifically, the solutions to the housing problem lie within the domain of the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing. We communicated this concern through a letter dated 2022-09-12 (NH/P&D/06/28) requesting a solution to these issues. In response, on 10-10-2022, by a letter MSUP/P&M/P 2022 they have promised to provide a timely response.

**The lack of drinking water facilities, akin to the housing problem, poses a significant challenge for the Ratugala and Vakarai Adivasis.**

Addressing this issue falls under the purview of the Ministry of Water Supply. A written request was submitted on 16-09-2022 to resolve the drinking water problems faced by the Adivasi people. In response, the Ministry of Water Supply has assured in writing that immediate action will be taken to address this matter (On 07-10-2022).

**What is your opinion on counting the Vedda people as a separate ethnic group in the population and statistics census of 2022?**

The Department of Census and Statistics has been notified in writing on 16-09-2022 to intervene in the issue of counting the Vedda people as a separate ethnic group, which is among the many problems and development needs faced by the Adivasi community. In response to that, they have informed us that they have prepared the questionnaire for the population and housing census in 2024, and if sufficient data is available, they will take steps to provide relevant information.

**There are a number of problems in the Adivasi village of Dambana. Your ministry has been informed about this. What measures have been taken?**

Yes, there are several indigenous issues in Dambana. There have been even requests for intervention in the construction and renovation of roads and bridges. These need solutions through the Ministry of Transport and Highways, the Road Development Authority, and the Sri Lanka Transport Board, therefore, we have forwarded these matters to them seeking solutions. These institutions have responded, indicating that they are actively investigating and addressing the issues.

**Have the clauses outlined in the Memorandum of Understanding of July 2011 between the Director General of Wildlife and Vedda leader Uruwarige Wanniyala Atto been legislatively endorsed by Parliament and made into law?**

In the letter NH/P&D/06/28

dated 2022-09-16, the Wildlife Conservation Department and the Forest Conservation Department were notified to intervene regarding the many problems and development needs faced by the Adivasi community, including the enactment of the MoU between the Director of Wildlife and the Adivasi leader into a law, fishing using nets, addressing the threat of wild elephants, allocating the adjacent forest for daily activities, establishing a model Vedda village, and setting up a training centre.

Responses received in relation to this communication indicated that fishing opportunities had been facilitated at Maduru Oya Reservoir, although no Adivasi person had applied for permits. Maintenance activities are underway for the construction of electric fences aimed at preventing damage from wild elephants. Employment opportunities have been generated for a selected group of Adivasi people in Maduru Oya Park. However, they have also indicated that permission for establishing a training centre on Henanigala Island, as per the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance cannot be granted. The Department of Wildlife Conservation, in written correspondence dated 25.04.2023, confirmed the suitability of the Cultural Centre built by the Ministry of National Heritage for that purpose.

**Isn't the request to construct the boundary fence, the dormitory and meditation centre of the Adivasi heritage temple a longstanding appeal?**

The responsibility for preparing the dormitory, meditation centre, and boundary fence of the Adivasi heritage temple is with the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing. A written request was submitted to them on 16-09-2022, and subsequently, we received estimates from the National Physical Planning Department. The estimated

cost for the dormitory for the monks was Rs. 133,590,000.00, and Rs. 44,286,000.00 for the meditation center, and Rs. 950/- per foot for the construction of the fence for the boundary. These estimates were formally submitted through letters NPPD/LPP/JANAUPUMA/01 dated 2023-11-10/2023-12-23.

This ministry routinely allocates annual funding to preserve the unique cultural elements of the indigenous people. These funds support various initiatives, including the organisation of the annual Adivasi Day celebration, the bee honey donation in Dalada Maligawa, and the events in Dambana and Senanigala, all these are done by the Ministry of Buddha Sasana, Religious and Cultural Affairs. As the Ministry of Buddha Sasana, Religious and Cultural Affairs, we also oversee the development of the Dambana Adivasi Museum, salary payments to its staff, and overall maintenance through our allocations. We have obtained an estimate of Rs. 486,663.17 for the restoration of the Iluk roof of the museum through Mahiyanganaya Divisional Secretariat.

**Disharmony within the Adivasi community, early marriages, instances of multiple marriages, and insufficient access to proper education for school children are prevalent issues commonly observed in the Dalukana Adivasi village**

Yes! We initiated a social animation program specifically for the Dalukana Adivasi village. During this program, we supplied school equipment to 85 children from economically disadvantaged families. Our plan is to extend similar social animation programs to every Adivasi village in the future, aiming to address and resolve the remaining issues through this programme.

**The Dalukana Adivasi village requests permission to enter the forest around Dimbulagala**

**mountain for the harvesting of bee honey, and fruit, which is a main part of the Vedda people, isn't it?**

The issue requires resolution by the Forest Conservation Department, and we are currently in discussions with them. They are making efforts to issue a special identification card for a designated group of people to access the protected forest.

**Some Adivasi children do not even have a birth Certificate. This is a serious situation isn't it?**

There are children who do not have birth certificates. A program to provide birth certificates by obtaining updated information and birth records of those children has already been initiated.

**Pollebedda does not have a specific place separated for Adivasi settlements. Is it possible to turn the declining cultural centre into an income-generating place?**

It could be possible. Aiming at a tourism promotion program, the indigenous culture centre near the Rambakan Oya Reservoir is working towards investigating the possibility of establishing a model indigenous village based on caves in the adjacent forest and to investigate the possibility of attracting tourists to the area through travel agents. The support of the Department of Forest Conservation is also available for that.

**In the Ratugala Adivasi village, a variety of medicinal plants such as Aralu, Bulu, and Nelli abound. Is it not possible to devise a way to directly sell them?**

We have already distributed containers to facilitate the collection of these medicinal plants, with plans underway to establish a dedicated collection centre in the near future. This centre will enable the direct purchase of medicinal plants. Additionally, we are collaborating with the Ayurveda Department to provide the necessary plants and technical expertise for medicinal

cultivation.

**Has the ministry formulated a program to preserve the endangered Vedda language?**

This issue is prevalent in several Adivasi villages, including Rathugala. Therefore, we are conducting language classes aimed at educating Adivasi children in their native language. We have incurred an expenditure of Rs.335,120.00.

**Ratugala Adivasi village is situated along a major road and holds the potential to attract tourists, therefore you could implement a program to increase tourist attraction, isn't it? This will facilitate an opportunity for the people to generate an income as well.**

Plans are underway to capitalise on this opportunity, with the Central Cultural Fund spearheading initiatives such as maintaining a museum, library, sales centre, and a meeting hall focused on the Rathugala Adivasi village. The Central Culture Fund has initiated a project to enhance the quality of life for the Adivasis, foster cultural engagement, and develop the village as an attractive location for tourists. Additionally, a honey production project involving indigenous people is currently in progress.

**Despite the numerous measures taken by your ministry, there appears to be a delay in their implementation, is this not the case?**

Addressing the challenges faced by the Adivasis is a monumental task. Even though the Adivasi community falls under the purview of our ministry, we cannot resolve all of their issues at once. This cannot be tackled by our ministry alone. Cooperation with the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing is crucial to resolving land-related issues. Similarly, collaboration with the Ministry of Water Supply, the Department of Wildlife

Conservation, and the Department of Forest Conservation is necessary to address water problems and major forest-related issues.

Even if you take the issue of roads, it is connected to some place. The intricate web of interconnected problems, highlights the complexity of the situation. Recognising this, we have briefed the Prime Minister on these challenges. We propose a unified effort under his leadership, involving various ministries to develop and implement comprehensive solutions. We believe that we will receive a favourable reply.

We also acknowledge that obtaining the support of the Adivasis is essential, even if there is resistance to certain actions. We remain hopeful that the Prime Minister's involvement and the collective efforts of ministries will lead to positive outcomes. (We extend our gratitude to Minister of Cultural Affairs Vidura Wickramanayake for responding positively to discussions about the issues faced by indigenous people. His support has paved the way for formal discussions with Nishanthi

Jayasinghe, contributing to a better understanding of the challenges within society.

This is a monumental task. Handling the challenges faced by the Adivasis is a substantial undertaking, and while they fall under the purview of our ministry, addressing their issues requires a collaborative effort. We recognize the need to collaborate with the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing to address land-related concerns among the Adivasis. Similarly, resolving water-related issues involves the coordination of efforts with the Ministry of Water Supply, the Department of Wildlife Conservation, and the Department of Forest Conservation, especially concerning problems within the forest.

The interconnected nature of road- and other issues underscores the complexity of addressing Adivasi problems comprehensively. Recognizing the multifaceted nature of these challenges, we have communicated the situation to the Prime Minister. Our proposal

advocates for the collective involvement of various ministries under his leadership to formulate and implement holistic solutions.

We understand that the Adivasis' support is essential in resolving some of these issues, even though there might be opposition to certain actions. We remain optimistic that the Prime Minister's intervention and the collaboration of ministries will yield positive results. In this endeavour, we express our gratitude to the Minister of Cultural Affairs, Vidura Wickramanayaka, who responded positively to the discussion about indigenous people's problems. The subsequent engagement with Nishanthi Jayasinghe for a formal discussion signifies a step forward in fostering a proper understanding of the challenges at hand. We are very grateful for the minister's support in taking the scope of the work to the society to have a proper understanding of the challenges.)

- **Tiran Bangagamaarachi**

## No forest- no land – they are suffocating us

As Adivasis, we feel that the government has not adequately addressed the issue of the fundamental rights of our people. The challenges related to land are not solely economic; they extend to social and cultural aspects, significantly impacting our way of life. The external societal issues further exacerbate our struggles.

The drug problem in our community is highly intricate, with even children as young as ten or

twelve becoming swiftly ensnared by alcohol addiction. This has resulted in a disoriented group that struggles to find its place. The uncertainty surrounding the future of the Adivasi community looms large if this trajectory persists.

Some members who were once in Dambane acquired land from Danigala through the Mahaweli Development. However, they find themselves confined to meagre half-acre plots. The psychological state of

those who once enjoyed freedom but are now constrained is a matter of concern.

Access to the forest is restricted, and the income from farming is insufficient. Additionally, the ongoing issue of human-elephant conflict adds another layer of complexity to our challenges. These problems are deeply rooted and extensive, reflecting the picture of complexity of the myriad difficulties we face.

**C P A**

CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES

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