

CASE STUDY

THE ANTI-DEVELOPMENT MACHINE

Tamil Dairy Farmers' Protest in Mayilaththamadu-Madhavanai,
Batticaloa

January 2026





People for Equality and Relief in Lanka (PEARL) is a Tamil advocacy group, based in Washington D.C. and registered as a 501(c)3 non-profit organization in the United States. PEARL advocates for human rights, justice and self-determination for Tamils in the North-East of Sri Lanka.

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Introduction

After 2009 and the end of the armed conflict, Sinhala settlers seized 3,025 hectares of pastureland that was being used by Tamil dairy farmers in Mayilaththamadu-Madhavanai, in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka.¹ This case study chronicles the Tamil dairy farmers' ongoing protest for the return of this land. It is an ongoing example of Sinhalization, which is the use of state power to facilitate Sinhala-Buddhist control and domination of the North-East of Sri Lanka in order to erase the Tamil-speaking character of the North-East.² The encroachment of pastureland utilized by generations of Tamil dairy farmers by Sinhala settlers is particularly important in the current context of Sri Lanka's economic crisis, highlighting how Tamil livelihoods are being undermined by Sinhalization. While the country is focused on addressing its economic challenges, this case study shows how the Sri Lankan state continues to prioritize certain communities over others. Tamil dairy farmers are losing their land and economic stability to Sinhala settlers, exemplifying how discriminatory policies persist despite the broader need for inclusive development. This unequal treatment not only undermines Tamil livelihoods but also reinforces long-standing political and social fractures rooted in Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarianism, obstructing island-wide economic recovery.

This Sinhalization effort is part of a deliberate programme of colonization that has been growing since Sri Lanka's independence in 1948.³ For decades, successive Sri Lankan governments have used state-sponsored settlement schemes to alter the demographics of the North-East of Sri Lanka, systematically settling Sinhala populations in historically Tamil areas under the guise of development or conservation projects.⁴ The ongoing crisis in Mayilaththamadu-Madhavanai is a clear example of this long-standing policy. Here, state institutions, including the Forest Department, the Mahaweli Authority, and security forces have actively enabled or ignored the illegal encroachment of Sinhala settlers on pasturelands used by Tamil dairy farmers, despite court orders affirming the Tamil dairy farmers' rights.⁵ The construction of a Buddhist statue and

¹ *Two years on, Mayilaththamadu Tamil farmers still denied grazing lands*, Tamil Guardian (Sept. 17, 2025), <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/mayilaththamadu-farmers-mark-730-days-peaceful-struggle-grazing-lands>.

² PEARL, *State-sponsored Sinhalization of the North-East - The Anti-Development Machine*, at 6 (Jan. 2026), https://pearlaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/PEARL_Sinhalization-as-an-anti-development-machine.pdf

³ PEARL, *State-sponsored Sinhalization of the North-East*, at 15 (Mar. 2022), <http://pearlaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/State-Sponsored-Sinhalization-of-the-North-East-March-2022.pdf>.

⁴ See PEARL, *State-sponsored Sinhalization of the North-East*, (Mar. 2022), <http://pearlaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/State-Sponsored-Sinhalization-of-the-North-East-March-2022.pdf>

⁵ The Mahaweli Authority was created by the Sri Lankan government to plan and implement the Mahaweli Ganga Development Scheme and also invested it with extensive powers over the development and administration of lands designated as "special areas" under the Act's exceptionally broad terms. Because the Act does not define the criteria for selecting lands as "special areas," the Authority has nearly unchecked discretion in choosing the lands over which it will exercise authority. The Mahaweli Authority exercises extraordinarily wide-ranging powers over them. See PEARL, *State-sponsored Sinhalization of the North-East*, at 18 (Mar. 2022),

vihara combined with the protection afforded to the Sinhala settlers by influential figures mirror patterns seen across the North-East.

Sinhala settler encroachment in Mayilaththamadu-Madhavanai displaces productive Tamil dairy farmers and destroys valuable assets like livestock, harming an already debt-burdened economy. This process, which is carried out with impunity and supported by government inaction, undermines land rights, fuels instability, and adds economic costs through conflict and disruption rather than development.

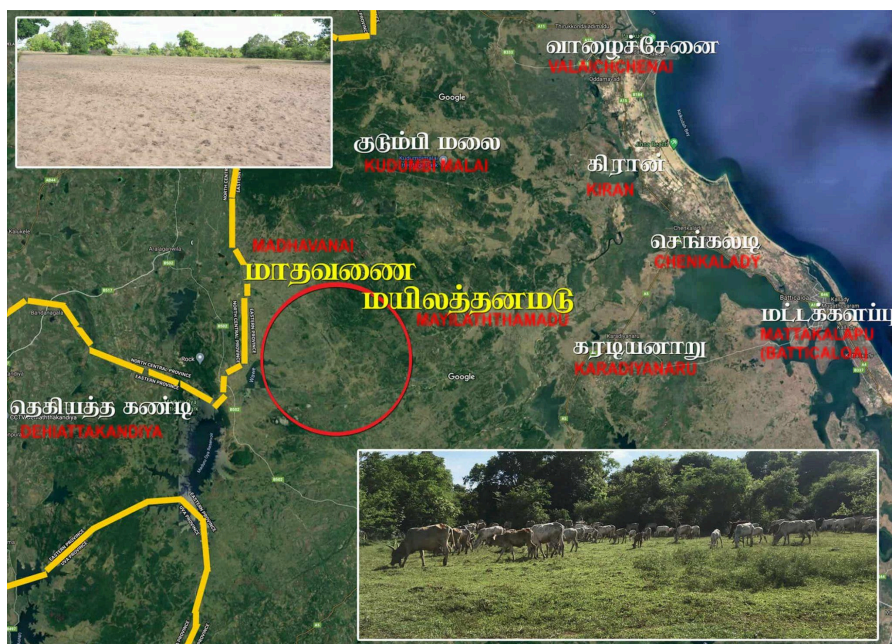
The contents of this report is based on both primary and secondary research. PEARL conducted a series of interviews from May 2024 to December 2025, spanning two different government administrations. The interviews were conducted with a diverse range of individuals, from young to elderly Tamil dairy farmers, as well as locals, policymakers, journalists, and human rights activists. The discussions focused on their ongoing struggle to seek justice and highlighted the profound impact of land seizures on Tamil livelihoods. Special attention has been given to understanding how the displacement and loss of land are affecting Tamil dairy farmers and their ability to sustain themselves economically.

Due to the intense surveillance, intimidation, and harassment faced by Tamil human rights activists and local communities from the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) and Counter Terrorism Investigation Division (CTID) in Sri Lanka, the interviews conducted for this report have been anonymized to protect the participants.

<http://pearlaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/State-Sponsored-Sinhalization-of-the-North-East-March-2022.pdf>. PEARL's 'Sinhalization of the North-East' series is available at <https://pearlaction.org/sinhalization-of-the-North-East/>.

The Sinhalization of Mayilaththamadu-Madhavanai

Mayilaththamadu-Madhavanai is a fertile pastureland situated in the East of Sri Lanka, on the border of the Batticaloa and Ampara Districts and under the Eravur Pattu Chenkalady and Koralai Pattu South Divisional Secretariat.⁶ The lands are used for agricultural activities by around 1,072 farming families from surrounding villages such as Sittandi, Vantharmolai, Illupaiyadichenai, and Murakkaddan Chollai.⁷ It is a vital area, hosting over 200,000 cattle and supporting the livelihoods of around 3,000 farmers.⁸ The area consists of a rich ecosystem, with forests and coconut trees, and has historically sustained the farmers since 1972.⁹



Map and Photographs of Mayilaththamadu-Madhavanai, in Sinhala colonization steps up in Batticaloa as farmers encroach land in Mylanthanaimadu. Source: Tamil Guardian¹⁰

⁶ Centre for Policy Alternatives, *The Intersectional Trends of Land Conflicts in Sri Lanka*, at 18 (Aug. 2024), <https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/The-Intersectional-Trends-of-Land-Conflicts-in-Sri-Lanka.pdf> [hereinafter *Intersectional Trends of Land Conflicts*].

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Sarmila Vinodini, *An Unlawful Occupation Crisis: Need for sustainable solution in Mayilathamadu Madhavanai*, Daily Mirror (Nov. 15, 2023), <https://www.dailymirror.lk/opinion/An-Unlawful-Occupation-Crisis-Need-for-sustainable-solution-in-Mayilathamadu-Madhavanai/172-271310>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Map and Photographs of Mayilaththamadu-Madhavanai, in Sinhala colonisation steps up in Batticaloa as farmers encroach land in Mylanthanaimadu, Tamil Guardian (Dec. 4, 2020), <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sinhala-colonisation-steps-batticaloa-farmers-encroach-land-mylanthanaimadu> [edited by PEARL for translations].

Tamil dairy farmers and their families have been farming in Mayilaththamadu-Madhavanai and the surrounding areas for three generations.¹¹ They recount how Tamil dairy farmers were directed to leave the pasturelands in Mayilaththamadu-Madhavanai by the Sri Lankan state in the early 80s due to Sinhala mob-based violence in the region.¹² Around the same time, in 1979, the state took over 12,000 acres of pasture land in Madhavanai and Mayilaththampatti as part of the Mahaweli Authority's System B project, which attempted to acquire and convert Tamil-owned pasturelands for agricultural uses using state funds.¹³ During the armed conflict, the Mayilaththamadu-Madhavanai area could not be accessed by the Sri Lankan government, as it was then controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.¹⁴ The Tamil dairy farmers returned to the pasturelands after the armed conflict ended in 2009. One farmer highlighted the extent of the militarization of the pasturelands by emphasizing that upon his return, he needed to obtain a license from the military to keep cattle on pastureland that he had used before displacement.¹⁵ From 2010 onwards, Tamil dairy farmers in Mayilaththamadu-Madhavanai began to face repeated attempts by government-supported Sinhala settlers to expropriate their pasture lands.¹⁶

There was reportedly an attempt by Sinhala settlers to encroach on over 12,000 acres of pastureland in 2016 to create a colony named 'Malamandi', and despite violence directed at Tamil dairy farmers that killed hundreds of their cattle, the farmers resisted and dismantled these efforts.¹⁷ A Tamil dairy farmer confirmed that 'Malamandi' had been located in Mayilaththamadu.¹⁸ While further attempts of full encroachment of the lands have been unsuccessful, legal challenges over the past decade have also highlighted the consistent failure of state institutions to uphold the rights of Tamil dairy farmers.¹⁹ Although some court rulings have affirmed Tamil dairy farmers' access to the pasturelands, these decisions have frequently been ignored by relevant authorities, including the Forest Department and the Mahaweli Authority.²⁰

¹¹ Interview by PEARL with local community members (Batticaloa District, May 2024) [Translated by PEARL].

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ The Oakland Institute, *Endless War: The Destroyed Land, Life and Identity of the Tamil People in Sri Lanka* at 13, (2021), <https://www.oaklandinstitute.org/sites/default/files/files-archive/endless-war-web.pdf> [hereinafter *Endless War*]; PEARL, *State-sponsored Sinhalization of the North-East* (Mar. 2022), <https://pearlaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/State-Sponsored-Sinhalization-of-the-North-East-March-2022.pdf>.

¹⁴ See *Endless War*, supra note 13, at 13.

¹⁵ Interview by PEARL with local community members (Batticaloa District, May 2024). [Translated by PEARL]

¹⁶ See *Endless War*, supra note 13, at 13.

¹⁷ *Impunity continues amidst stiff resistance against illegal encroachment of pasturelands in Batticaloa*, TamilNet (June 11, 2020), <https://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=79&artid=39854>.

¹⁸ Interview by PEARL with Tamil dairy farmers, in Batticaloa District, Sri Lanka (Dec. 2025) [Translated by PEARL].

¹⁹ *Sirisen's Mahaweli ministry twists old records to Sinhalicize Paduvaankarai*, TamilNet (Sept. 14, 2017), <https://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?artid=38807&catid=13>. See also *Endless War*, supra note 13; People's Alliance for Right to Land, *The Peaceful Protest of the Tamil Dairy Farmers of the East*, (Mar. 5, 2024), <https://www.parlsl.com/publications/the-peaceful-protest-of-the-tamil-dairy-farmers-of-the-east>.

²⁰ *Ibid.* See also *Court order to be sought to evict Sinhala farmers from B'caloa grasslands*, The Leader (Oct. 17, 2023), <https://lankaleader.lk/news/6236-court-order-to-be-sought-to-evict-sinhala-farmers-from-b-caloe-grasslands>.



A hut belonging to occupying Sinhala colonizers, who have renamed the area as ‘Malamandi’.²¹

A period of relative stability ended in 2020 with the start of Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s presidency, when Sinhala settlers intensified their violence and harassment.²² The Eastern Province Governor at the time, Anuradha Yahampath, supported the relocation of 150 Sinhala families into Mayilaththamadu-Mathavanai and encouraged the farming of maize and peanuts on the pasturelands.²³ The settlers – who hailed from Polonnaruwa and included home guards, retired military families, and defense sector employees – were strongly backed by Yahampath, the government and the military.²⁴ Tamil dairy farmers in the Batticaloa border villages of and around Mayilaththamadu-Madhavanai saw their pasturelands seized by settlers again, who had resumed violence towards them and their cattle.²⁵

Brutal attacks on Tamil dairy farmers’ cattle by the Sinhala settlers continued and intensely escalated in 2023.²⁶ The Sinhala settlers routinely intimidated the Tamil dairy farmers, often flashing army identification to assert dominance, while the Valachchenai police repeatedly sided

²¹ “A hut belonging to occupying Sinhala colonisers, who have renamed the area as ‘Malamandi’” in *Protest by dairy farmers brings EPC Minister, GA to inspect Sinhala occupation in Batticaloa*, Tamilnet (May. 6, 2016), <https://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=38248>.

²² Ibid.

²³ Intersectional Trends of Land Conflicts, supra note 6. See also *Devastation of livelihood: Tamil cattle farmers’ protest continues past 300 days*, Ceylon News (Jul. 13, 2024), <https://english.ceylonnews.lk/devastation-of-livelihood-tamil-cattle-farmers-protest-continues-past-300-days/>.

²⁴ Interview by PEARL with Tamil dairy farmers (Batticaloa District, May 2024) [Translated by PEARL]; Endless War, supra note 13, at 13.

²⁵ Endless War, supra note 13, at 13; *Sinhala settlers issue death threats to Tamil farmers and kill cows over land dispute*, Tamil Guardian (Nov. 19, 2020), <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sinhala-settlers-issue-death-threats-tamil-farmers-and-kill-cows-over-land-dispute>.

²⁶ *Sinhalese settlers feed explosives to Tamil farmer’s cattle*, Tamil Guardian (Oct. 31, 2023), <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sinhalese-settlers-feed-explosives-tamil-farmers-cattle>

with the settlers by detaining the Tamil dairy farmers and accusing them of trespassing on so-called “Sinhala lands.”²⁷ Settler cultivation of corn, paddy, cowpea, and green gram has reduced pastureland for the Tamil farmers, and electric fences, poison, and explosives have been used to harm cattle, alongside repeated reports of livestock theft by settlers.²⁸ In 2023, a police checkpoint was installed in Mayilaththamadu.²⁹ Tamil dairy farmers believed that this was to protect settlers’ interests: it forced the farmers to register simply to access their own pasturelands, while keeping out the public, including journalists.³⁰

The escalation of violence in 2023 pushed the Tamil dairy farmers to begin their biggest public protest yet in September of that year at Sittandi Milk Junction in Batticaloa, a government-owned milk collection center where they deposit their milk daily, and they have been peacefully protesting for the return of their pasturelands since.³¹ In January 2024, Tamil dairy farmers, joined by Tamil MPs and local residents, held a large and widely covered protest march to draw attention to land encroachment and violent attacks on their cattle, demanding the removal of Sinhala settlers.³² Between these protests, following pressure from Batticaloa Members of Parliament (MPs), the then-President Ranil Wickremesinghe instructed the police to obtain a court order to remove the Sinhala settlers in October 2023 and reportedly again in June 2024, but both requests were ignored.³³

²⁷ Interview by PEARL with Tamil dairy farmers (Batticaloa District, May 2024) [Translated by PEARL].

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Interview by PEARL with Tamil dairy farmers (Batticaloa District, May 2024) [Translated by PEARL]. See also Kamanthi Wickramasinghe, *Batticaloa cattle farmers crisis Journalists obstructed at Mayilathamadu checkpoint*, Daily Mirror (Nov. 10, 2023), <https://www.dailymirror.lk/front-page/Batticaloa-cattle-farmers-crisis-Journalists-obstructed-at-Mayilathamadu-checkpoint/238-271001>.

³⁰ Interview by PEARL with Tamil dairy farmers (Batticaloa District, May 2024) [Translated by PEARL].

³¹ *Tamil livestock farmers mark 200 days of protest against Sinhalese settler violence in Batticaloa*, Tamil Guardian (Apr. 1, 2024), <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/tamil-livestock-farmers-mark-200-days-protest-against-sinhalese-settler-violence-batticaloa>; *Two years on, Mayilaththamadu Tamil farmers still denied grazing lands*, Tamil Guardian (Sept. 17, 2025), <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/mayilaththamadu-farmers-mark-730-days-peaceful-struggle-grazing-land>

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³² ‘Patti Pongal is a black day for Tamil farmers’ – Tamils protest land encroachment by illegal Sinhala settlers, Tamil Guardian (Jan. 16, 2024), <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/patti-pongala-black-day-tamil-farmers-tamils-protest-land-encroachment-illegal-sinhala>.

³³ *Sri Lankan police allow Sinhalese settlers on Tamil farmers’ land in Batticaloa despite President’s order*, Tamil Guardian (Oct. 22, 2023), <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sri-lankan-police-allow-sinhalese-settlers-tamil-farmers-land-batticaloa-despite-presidents>. See also R. Ram, மயிலத்தமடு பண்ணையாளர்களின் மேய்ச்சல்தரையை ஒப்படைக்க ஜனாதிபதி ரணில் மீண்டும் உத்தரவு; ஜூலை 2ஆம் வாரத்தில் பண்ணையாளர்களுடன் சந்திப்பு [President Ranil has again ordered handing over grazing lands to the Mayilathamadu farmers; meeting with farmers scheduled for second week of July], Virakesari (June 27, 2024), <https://www.virakesari.lk/article/187064>.



The Tamil dairy farmers' protest stand at Sittandi Milk Junction, Batticaloa.

The protest efforts led to a few meetings with diplomats but resulted in little progress.³⁴ Cattle were continuing to be mutilated and killed by Sinhala settlers, who were emboldened by government inaction and acted with impunity, with reports of cattle being stabbed or legs being slit overnight.³⁵ A Tamil dairy farmer tried to file a complaint with the police after his cow had allegedly been shot by Sinhala settlers in Madhavanai, but the police refused to even register his complaint.³⁶

The Tamil dairy farmers' protests have been supported by Tamil MPs, students, and civil society organizations, with many of the protestors being met with brutal force and arrests.³⁷ In 2023, six Tamil students were arrested for participating in a protest against the encroachment of

³⁴ Interview by PEARL with Tamil dairy farmers (Batticaloa District, May 2024) [Translated by PEARL].

³⁵ *Growing tensions in Mayilathamadu Madhavanai as Tamil cattle farmers face threats from Sinhalese occupiers*, Tamil Guardian (Dec. 2, 2023), <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/growing-tensions-mayilathamadu-madhavanai-tamil-cattle-farmers-face-threats-sinhalese>.

³⁶ *Sri Lankan police refuse to register complaint after Tamil farmer's cow is shot by Sinhala settlers*, Tamil Guardian (Dec. 11, 2023), <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sri-lankan-police-refuse-register-complaint-after-tamil-farmers-cow-shot-sinhala-settlers>.

³⁷ *Sri Lankan police crack down on Tamil farmers protesting against land grabs in Batticaloa*, Tamil Guardian (Oct. 8, 2023), <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sri-lankan-police-crack-down-tamil-farmers-protesting-against-land-grab-s-batticaloa>. See also *Six Tamils students arrested in Mayilathamadu for 'unlawful assembly' released on bail*, Tamil Guardian (Nov 5, 2023), <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/six-tamils-students-arrested-mayilathamadu-unlawful-assembly-released-bail>; *Eravur Circuit Magistrate Court issues arrest warrant for exiled Tamil journalist*, Tamil Guardian (Jan. 24, 2025), <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/eravur-circuit-magistrate-court-issues-arrest-warrant-exiled-tamil-journalist>.

Mayilaththamadu, before being released on bail the same day by the Eravur Magistrate's Court.³⁸ Following a court case that lasted over half a year, the students were finally acquitted, with Eravur Court determining that the Sri Lankan Defence Department failed to provide sufficient evidence of any crime, that there were inconsistencies in their charge sheets and that there were no grounds for further charges.³⁹ Journalists attempting to cover the incident and human rights activists have also been interrogated by Sri Lankan security forces, describing the constant surveillance as a form of mental torture intended to deter them from raising awareness of the issue.⁴⁰ For example, the Eravur Circuit Magistrate Court issued an arrest warrant for Tamil journalist Sasikaran Punniyamoorthy, who went into exile after facing harassment by Sri Lanka's security forces for his coverage of protests against the Sinhala settler encroachment in Mayilaththamadu-Madhavanai.⁴¹

The Sinhala settlers have benefited from considerable support from an infamous extremist Buddhist monk. During a field visit to the Mayilaththamadu-Madhavanai border in 2016, Eastern Provincial Council officials raised concerns about a “well-planned strategy” to settle Sinhala farmers on state lands with the support of Batticaloa-based Buddhist monk Ampitiye Sumanaratne Thero.⁴² At the time, in the Chenkalady and Kiran Divisional Secretariat areas, at least 300 Sinhala families were living in unauthorized settlements, where a Buddhist vihara was also being constructed.⁴³ Though these efforts fell flat, the monk has continued to be at the forefront of encroachment efforts. In August 2023, an interfaith delegation travelled to Mayilaththamadu-Madhavanai, hoping to engage with the monk and settlers, who instead, aggressively surrounded their vehicle and held them hostage for over five hours.⁴⁴ During the incident, the group assaulted a Hindu priest, threatened to burn the activists alive in their vehicles, and seized journalists' equipment, deleting their files.⁴⁵ Moreover, 32 days into the Tamil

³⁸ *Six Tamils students arrested in Mayilathamadu for 'unlawful assembly' released on bail*, Tamil Guardian (Nov. 5, 2023), <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/six-tamils-students-arrested-mayilathamadu-unlawful-assembly-released-bail>

³⁹ மயிலத்தமடு - மாதவனை போராட்டத்தில் கைதான பல்கலைக்கழக மாணவர்கள் விடுதலை! [University students arrested during the Mayilaththamadu–Mathavanai protest have been released!], Virakesari (Jun. 3, 2024), <https://www.virakesari.lk/article/185217>

⁴⁰ Interview by PEARL with Tamil journalist (Batticaloa District, May 2024) [Translated by PEARL]. See also Human Rights Watch, “If We Raise Our Voice They Arrest Us” (Sept. 18, 2023), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/09/18/if-we-raise-our-voice-they-arrest-us/sri-lankas-proposed-truth-and-reconciliation>.

⁴¹ *Eravur Circuit Magistrate Court issues arrest warrant for exiled Tamil journalist*, Tamil Guardian (Jan. 24, 2025), <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/eravur-circuit-magistrate-court-issues-arrest-warrant-exiled-tamil-journalist>.

⁴² *Sinhala farmers settled on state land in Batticaloa*, Tamil Guardian (May 28, 2016), <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sinhala-farmers-settled-state-land-batticaloa>.

⁴³ *Protest by dairy farmers brings EPC Minister, GA to inspect Sinhala occupation in Batticaloa*, TamilNet (May 6, 2016), <https://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=38248>.

⁴⁴ “Reprisals against peaceful protesters protesting against ongoing pastureland encroachment in Madhavanai and Mayilathamadu, Batticaloa,” Front Line Defenders (Oct. 13, 2023), <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/statement-report/reprisals-against-peaceful-protesters-protesting-against-ongoing-pastureland>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

dairy farmers' protest, in October 2023, a new Buddha statue was installed in Mayilaththamadu-Madhavanai under the monk's leadership, with former Eastern Province Governor Anuradha Yahampath also in attendance.⁴⁶

Tamil MPs in Sri Lanka condemned the culture of impunity for Buddhist monks, highlighting stark double standards in policing: Tamil protesters supporting the farmers were being met with excessive force and violence, while openly threatening and inflammatory conduct by Buddhist monks was routinely ignored by the police.⁴⁷ In October 2023, a video of Ampitiye Sumanaratne Thero was shared widely, garnering widespread attention, as he threatened to massacre Tamils in the South, inciting violence in a racist outburst, exclaiming: "Every single Tamil person will be cut into pieces![...]They will all be killed! All the Tamils in the south will be cut into pieces and butchered! The Sinhalese will massacre them."⁴⁸ Despite being charged under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act for inciting racial hatred, he was later granted bail by the Batticaloa High Court in December 2025.⁴⁹ The handling of such egregious hate speech against Tamils, as well as the monk's subsequent release on bail, continues to reinforce the culture of impunity that emboldens racist actors and leaves Tamil communities feeling unprotected by the state.

Following the 2024 presidential election, the Tamil dairy farmers in Mayilaththamadu-Madhavanai hoped for progress on the return of their pastureland. To date, no concrete solution has materialized. The administration has failed to engage substantively with affected Tamil dairy farmers or to address the violence that has been perpetrated by Sinhala settlers.⁵⁰ A Tamil dairy farmer expressed that NPP representatives had told the farmers that land would be allocated to them but there have been no developments on this line of action. Tamil dairy farmers have also facilitated site visits by NPP MPs; however, following these visits, the officials reportedly accused the farmers of acting against the government, despite the fact that the government had failed to resolve the continued occupation of the Tamil farmers' pasturelands since coming into power. Furthermore, a farmer confirmed that as of December 2025, the Human Rights Commission in Sri Lanka had also still not taken any substantial steps in helping to resolve the issue.

By mid-October each year, cattle are traditionally moved from the mainland to the pasturelands as the paddy cultivation season begins, while the onset of the monsoon season also draws illegal

⁴⁶ *Buddha statue installed in Batticaloa village as Tamil farmers protest*, Tamil Guardian (Oct. 17, 2023), <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/buddha-statue-installed-batticaloa-village-tamil-farmers-protest>.

⁴⁷ *TNPF leader slams double standards of Sri Lankan police*, Tamil Guardian (Nov. 15, 2023), <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/tnpf-leader-slams-double-standards-sri-lankan-police>.

⁴⁸ *Every single Tamil will be cut into pieces! Sinhala Buddhist monk threatens a massacre*, Tamil Guardian (Oct. 26, 2023), <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/every-single-tamil-will-be-cut-pieces-sinhala-buddhist-monk-threatens-massacre>.

⁴⁹ *Court grants bail to Ampitiye Sumana Thera*, Newswire (Dec. 18, 2025), <https://www.newswire.lk/2025/12/18/court-grants-bail-to-ampitiye-sumana-thera/>.

⁵⁰ Interview by PEARL with Tamil dairy farmers, in Batticaloa District, Sri Lanka (Dec. 2025) [Translated by PEARL].

settlers to the same areas to commence cultivation using rainwater.⁵¹ This overlap has often heightened tensions between the settlers and the Tamil dairy farmers whilst the dispute remains unresolved.⁵² In September 2025, after being alerted by Tamil dairy farmers, the government reportedly prevented a group of illegal Sinhala settlers from entering the disputed lands ahead of the monsoon season.⁵³ While this is a welcome action, Tamil dairy farmers have stressed that their protest has now entered its third year, yet no durable solution has been delivered. The farmers have written directly to President Anura Kumara Disسانayake and the Eastern Province Governor, receiving only generic responses indicating that the matter would be “investigated.”⁵⁴ At present, Tamil dairy farmers are permitted limited access to their lands through the checkpoint at Mayilaththamadu but are prohibited from bringing new individuals into the area.⁵⁵ A Tamil dairy farmer claimed that the police still provide no meaningful assistance, even when the farmers are harassed by Sinhala settlers, and as a result, the farmers no longer seek police support when incidents occur, reflecting a deep erosion of trust in state institutions.⁵⁶

The Sinhalization of Mayilaththamadu-Madhavanai is described as state-sponsored ‘ethnic cleansing’ which has disrupted the lives and economy of the local Tamil population.⁵⁷ In interviews across 2024 and 2025, the Tamil dairy farmers spoke of government attempts to relocate them to different areas.⁵⁸ “We rejected their offers because no matter where they send us, it doesn't address the real issues”, one farmer said, explaining that relocation will not bring justice for the cattle that have been killed, nor will it solve the violence or settler encroachment they face.⁵⁹

K. Kurunathan, the former Eastern Province Land Commissioner, has stated that the distribution of land to Sinhala settlers for maize cultivation is actually in violation of the Gazette of 1979 No. 41 and Schedule 9, Rule 1, Appendix 2, article 2.5 of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, mandating that the allotment of Mahaweli land should be given in proportion to the national ethnic ratio, which was not upheld in this case.⁶⁰ The Tamil dairy farmers have called for Mayilaththamadu-Madhavanai to be officially gazetted as pastureland and for the removal of

⁵¹ *Injunction order against dairy farmers in Batticaloa*, Times Online (Oct. 7, 2023), <https://sundaytimes.lk/online/news-online/Injunction-order-against-dairy-farmers-in-Batticaloa/2-1143467>. See also Shanakiyan Rajaputhiran Rasamanickam (@ShanakiyanR), X (Sep. 15, 2025), <https://x.com/ShanakiyanR/status/1967490295723143585/video/1>.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Interview by PEARL with Tamil dairy farmers, in Batticaloa District, Sri Lanka (Dec. 2025) [Translated by PEARL].

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Growing tensions in Mayilaththamadu Madhavanai as Tamil cattle farmers face threats from Sinhalese occupiers*, Tamil Guardian (Dec. 2, 2023), <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/growing-tensions-mayilaththamadu-madhavanai-tamil-cattle-farmers-face-threats-sinhalese>.

⁵⁸ Interview by PEARL with Tamil dairy farmers (Batticaloa District, May 2024); Interview by PEARL with Tamil dairy farmers, in Batticaloa District, Sri Lanka (Dec. 2025) (translated by PEARL).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Endless War, *supra* note 13 at 13.

Sinhala settlers, alongside basic development measures including reliable water access for livestock, improved local roads, and a nearby veterinary office to ensure timely care for their cattle.⁶¹ Having been used by Tamil dairy farmers in Batticaloa for decades, the community is demanding that the pastureland be officially designated for long-term public use under Sections 8 to 18 of the Land Development Act.⁶² Formally gazetting the land as pastureland would provide official recognition of its intended use for cattle grazing, removing ambiguity that has enabled ongoing encroachment and competing land claims. It would strengthen the ability of authorities to prevent illegal settlement and cultivation, reducing recurring tensions between settlers and local cattle-farming communities.⁶³ Gazetting the land would also help safeguard traditional livelihood practices and serve as a long-term preventative measure against future disputes.

⁶¹ Interview by PEARL with Tamil dairy farmers (Batticaloa District, May 2024)

⁶² Kamanthi Wickramasinghe, *Migrants, communal tensions leave Batti's original cattle farmers ruffled*, Daily Mirror (Nov. 17, 2023), <https://www.dailymirror.lk/news-features/Migrants--communal-tensions-leave-Batti%E2%80%99s-original-cattle-farmers-ruffled/131-271457>.

⁶³ See State Lands Ordinance, No. 8 of 1947 (Sri Lanka), <https://www.lawnet.gov.lk/state-lands-ordinance/>.



A view of the pasturelands taken from Kudumbi Malai.

The Economic Impact of the Sinhalization of Mayilaththamadu-Madhavanai on the Livelihood of Tamil Farmers

Sri Lanka's dairy sector, dominated by small-scale farmers in the climate-exposed dry zones, accounts for 1% of the national GDP but faces growing risks.⁶⁴ The Tamil dairy farmers have also been driven to protest due to the severe financial losses stemming from the attacks on their cattle through brutal violence and the poisoning of the grass, and the subsequently reduced milk yields due to the starvation of their cattle.⁶⁵ Between 2013 and 2024, over 7,000 cows had perished due to the violent actions of the encroachers.⁶⁶ A single cow is valued at over 100,000 Sri Lankan Rupees, thereby creating a significant financial loss for Tamil dairy farmers over time.⁶⁷ Many of the Tamil dairy farmers are burdened with heavy debts, with some families lacking milk even for their own families.⁶⁸ The psychological toll on the Tamil dairy farmers has been profound, with anxiety and fear triggered by constant interactions with the police and the CID, who perpetuate a climate of intimidation.⁶⁹

In 2024, PEARL spoke to a farmer with over 30 years of cattle-rearing experience, who detailed the severe hardships he now faces. Traditionally, he moved his cattle between fields during the summer and to Mayilaththamadu–Madhavanai during the monsoon season to avoid flooding. However, escalating conflict with Sinhalese settlers has made these areas unsafe, forcing him to keep his cattle in flood-prone regions.⁷⁰ Where his cows once produced up to 20 liters of milk each, insufficient grazing land reduced output to just 5 liters.⁷¹ As a solution, the farmer spoke of his decision to keep his cattle near paddy fields, which are cultivated in January—coinciding with calving season—resulting in a critical shortage of fodder.⁷² As a consequence, milk production collapsed, calves struggled to survive, and his cows began dying of starvation, with no government assistance provided to him at that time.⁷³

Before renewed settler encroachment in 2023, Tamil dairy farmers in the area produced between 2,000 and 6,000 litres of milk per day, selling it for 75–97 Sri Lankan Rupees per litre in 2021, but post-2023 following Sinhala settler violence and scarce resources, milk production dropped sharply to around 500–1,000 litres due to malnourished cows and a high number of calves dying

⁶⁴ Ama Koralage, *Batticaloa Dairy Farmers Face Violence and Threats over Grazing Land*, Groundviews (Oct. 9, 2023), <https://groundviews.org/2023/10/09/batticaloa-dairy-farmers-face-violence-and-threats-over-grazing-land/>.

⁶⁵ Interview by PEARL with Tamil dairy farmers (Batticaloa District, May 2024)

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

at birth.⁷⁴ In 2025, while there has been a decrease in settler violence, around 30 cows have died, including several killed through settler violence, while others died from illness made worse by the lack of pastureland and delayed access to veterinary care.⁷⁵ Although the land dispute remains unresolved, this temporary reduction in settler interference has led to an increase in production, with one farmer stating production to be around 3,000 litres per month.⁷⁶ This limited improvement shows how productive the Tamil farmers could be if settler interference is completely stopped, while also highlighting that ongoing land dispossession and restricted access continue to leave livelihoods fragile and economically insecure.

The Tamil dairy farmers raised concerns over government policies that systematically favor the Sinhalese settlers, at their expense, such as land allocations by the Mahaweli Ministry for foreign hybrid cattle under World Bank-funded dairy projects, which they say benefit Sinhala farmers while excluding long-established Tamil dairy communities.⁷⁷ Farmers stressed that cattle cannot be relocated arbitrarily, explaining that their indigenous breeds are low-maintenance, well adapted to the local pasturelands, and able to graze freely.⁷⁸ “The Mahaweli Authority would force us to raise hybrid cows,” one farmer said. “Our traditional cows suit this land, but hybrid cows need special feed, intensive care, and are more vulnerable to disease.” Studies published in *Tropical Agricultural Research* and by the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) show that indigenous cattle breeds in Sri Lanka are well adapted to local climatic conditions, requiring minimal inputs, tolerating heat stress, and resisting common diseases, though they produce lower milk yields.⁷⁹ In contrast, hybrid or crossbred cattle, which are often introduced through state-led or donor-funded dairy development programs, have higher milk production potential but do in fact require intensive management, specialized feed, reliable water access, veterinary care, and climate-controlled conditions. Further research indicates that without these inputs, hybrid cattle perform poorly and are more vulnerable to disease and heat stress.⁸⁰ These findings emphasize why Tamil dairy farmers’ favor the indigenous breeds that they have used across generations, particularly in extensive grazing systems dependent on common pastureland, while hybrid cattle

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ 175 cows were lost due to damage caused by Hurricane Ditwah. In total 205 cows were lost in 2025. Interview by PEARL with Tamil dairy farmers, in Batticaloa District, Sri Lanka (Dec. 2025) [Translated by PEARL].

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Interview by PEARL with Tamil dairy farmers (Batticaloa District, May 2024) [Translated by PEARL].

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ W. V. V. R. Weerasingha, C. S. Ranadheera, P. H. P. Prasanna, G. L. L. P. Silva, and J. K. Vidanarachchi, *Probiotic Viability and Physicochemical Properties of Set-Yoghurt Made of Indigenous and Exotic Cow Milk*, *Tropical Agricultural Research* 32, no. 1 (2021) at 39–48, <https://tar.sljol.info/articles/8440/files/submission/proof/8440-1-29362-1-10-20201230.pdf>; E. Galukande, H. Mulindwa, M. Wurzinger, R. Roschinsky, A. M. Okeyo, and J. Sölkner, *Cross-Breeding Cattle for Milk Production in the Tropics: Achievements, Challenges and Opportunities*, *Animal Genetic Resources* 52 (2013): 111–125, <https://www.ilri.org/knowledge/publications/cross-breeding-cattle-milk-production-tropics-achievements-challenges-and>

⁸⁰ V. Buvanendran and P. Mahadevan, *Crossbreeding for Milk Production in Sri Lanka*, *World Animal Review* (FAO), <https://www.fao.org/4/x6500e/X6500E08.htm>; W.M.P.B. Weerasinghe, H.M.G.P. Herath, and M.B.P.K. Mahipala, *Effects of Two Levels of Dietary Energy Content on Milk Production and Serum Metabolites in Early Lactation Temperate Crossbred Dairy Cows Fed Guinea Grass (Megathyrsus maximus) Based Diets*, *Tropical Agricultural Research* 34, no. 3 (2023): 200–211.

are better suited to commercial, high-input dairy operations. As a result, the farmers see no economic benefit in participating in these schemes.

Furthermore, the relocation of the Tamil dairy farmers represents a further misallocation of public resources, funnelling additional state funding into managing the consequences of a problem that is itself state-created and state-funded. Rather than restoring productive land use and safeguarding existing livelihoods, such measures risk compounding inefficiency by investing in displacement, temporary mitigation, and parallel infrastructure, while leaving the underlying drivers of conflict and economic loss unresolved. According to the farmers, the region is highly suitable for dairy farming, and if Sinhala settler encroachment were addressed, Tamil dairy farmers could thrive; they emphasized that equitable access to land and resources could support sustainable livelihoods for all communities, including Sinhalese farmers.⁸¹

⁸¹ Interview by PEARL with Tamil dairy farmers (Batticaloa District, May 2024) [Translated by PEARL].



A Tamil dairy farmer transporting milk.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The case study of Mayilaththamadu-Madhavanai reveals that in the government's narrative of economic progress, certain groups, like Tamil dairy farmers, are systematically deprioritized. The government's focus on Sinhalization has overshadowed the livelihoods and wellbeing of these Tamil dairy farmers, as seen in the preferential treatment given to Sinhala settlers. Despite clear violations, the encroachers and a supporting monk continue to enjoy impunity, backed by police protection. Meanwhile, little attention has been paid to the severe losses faced by Tamil dairy farmers, including the cattle and disrupted milk supply, which are crucial assets for their survival. In this larger pursuit of Sinhalization, the suffering of Tamil dairy farmers is being ignored, reflecting a disregard for their rights and economic well-being.

The violent seizure and settlement of Tamil land by Sinhala settlers not only disrupts productive agricultural activities but also leads to economically unproductive outcomes. Tamil dairy farmers who were contributing to the economy have been displaced, resulting in a loss of economic value, while Sinhala settlers often take time to reach comparable levels of productivity. This entire process has been carried out with full impunity, with the government not making any effort to address or prevent these actions to date. Additionally, this upheaval undermines land rights and fosters political uncertainty, creating a polarized environment that hinders stability. Furthermore, mistreating livestock, such as cows which are essential assets in a resource- and capital-scarce country, is economically irrational. In a country already struggling with debt, destroying agriculturally valuable assets is counterproductive and only deepens the economic challenges.

PEARL provides the following recommendations to the Government of Sri Lanka, in line with the demands of the Tamil dairy farmers:

- Restore the pastureland of local Tamil dairy-farming families following a time-bound plan, in line with historical land use, existing administrative decisions, and Sri Lanka's obligations under domestic and international law.
 - Implement existing court rulings and enforce prior government decisions allocating these lands for grazing, without delay or selective application.
- Evict illegal settlers who have currently forcibly occupied designated pasturelands and prevent further encroachment, including halting cultivation activities that undermine the livelihoods of local Tamil communities.
- End violence, intimidation, and harassment against Tamil dairy farmers, by settlers and state actors and conduct independent and impartial investigations into reported attacks on livestock and property, with perpetrators held fully accountable.
- Officially designate the areas as protected pasturelands, ensuring long-term legal recognition and protection.



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