

Following your most recent meeting with President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, what tangible outcomes can you point to—beyond assurances and symbolism?

A: The engagement to date with President Anura Kumara Dissanayake has so far remained largely at the level of assurance and symbolic acknowledgement. The initial meeting itself was not easily secured, despite repeated requests since December 2025, the President's Office did not facilitate a formal appointment. It was only after raising the issue publicly that communication channels were activated, leading to a direct phone discussion and the eventual arrangement of the meeting. During that engagement, I conveyed a clear position: while parliamentary advocacy allows for strong rhetorical articulation of our community's concerns, the nature of my responsibility as leader of the largest representative party of the most marginalised requires a parallel, constructive interface with the executive.

Accordingly, I proposed an institutional mechanism—designation of a senior focal point within the President's Secretariat to engage directly with subject-level teams nominated by us. The objective is to develop mutually agreed policy proposals in a structured manner, which can then be formally submitted to the President for directive implementation through the relevant ministries. The President agreed to this framework and appointed Prabhath Chandrakertthy, his Chief of Staff, as the coordinating point for this process. He also emphasised that this is the appropriate pathway for delivering tangible solutions.

You and other hill-country MPs have engaged with successive Presidents over the years. How do you compare or evaluate President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's approach in comparison to theirs?

A: My political engagement spans multiple administrations, including President Maithripala Sirisena's Government within the Good Governance framework, where our primary interface was then Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. Colleagues such as MPs Palani Thigambaram and V. Radhakrishnan also worked closely with President Mahinda Rajapaksa's administration prior to the formation of the TPA. We have also engaged with President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga's tenure.

The most substantive policy gains for our community began during the period of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, when progress was achieved through Cabinet decisions, Parliamentary processes, legislative amendments, and Gazette notifications. These included advancements in land rights, housing access, and local governance and administrative structures. While the transformations are ongoing and far from complete, that period marked the beginning of a long-overdue shift away from a two-century structural disadvantage.

In contrast, during the current administration under President Dissanayake, now in office for nearly 16 months, expectations articulated at the outset have not yet translated into comparable policy delivery. This gap between commitments and implementation is the reason for renewed engagement and direct reminders at the highest level. Let's wait for him to be compared.

The current Government includes several representatives from plantation regions. Yet, on the ground, workers continue to face low wages, heavy workloads, inadequate housing, and limited healthcare access. In your assessment, has there been any meaningful improvement, or is this representation largely symbolic?

A: The Malayahya Indian Origin Tamil (IOT) representation elected under the NPP wave carries a clear mandate derived from that political motion. This is a matter of political fact and responsibility. With due respect to the Ministers and MPs concerned, the focus now must shift towards delivery. The expectation is that attention is directed squarely at the substantive issues affecting the Malayahya IOT community, particularly within the plantation sector, where long-standing structural constraints persist.

The public commitment to 'system change' must now be translated into measurable outcomes in this sector. The benchmark is no longer rhetoric or historical reference, but implementation, reform, and tangible improvement in living and working conditions. The moment calls for execution

Plantation workers have long raised concerns about the monthly 'Union Subscription' deductions. Are these still being collected? If so, how are trade unions accountable to workers, and what tangible benefits do workers receive in return?

A: It is the Trade union subscription. Workers are not raising any such concerns, but it is the vested interest groups, including sections of the contended media and civil society. Trade union subscription is a usual practice in the trade union movement all over the world. Aren't there trade unions in the health, apparel, State official, and teacher sectors in this country? Aren't they collecting subscriptions from their members? Such funds are used for maintaining union offices, to pay rents, to pay staff and meet expenses related to labour court cases, etc. When some prominent trade union leaders in this country are accused of collecting Kappams, that is, 'Ransoms', this talk on the plantation trade union movement is just nonsense!

During Cyclone Ditwah, plantation communities—particularly women and children—were among the hardest hit. What specific relief, rehabilitation, and long-term policy interventions has the Government implemented for these communities? Do you believe their response has been adequate and equitable compared to other regions?

A: Very inadequate is the word. The worst affected districts are Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, and Badulla, with plantation communities bearing the brunt of the impact. Our people were not even yet translocated during the initial relief efforts, including payments for house cleaning and assistance for schoolchildren. At present, we are still waiting for the promised relief of Rs 5 million per family for housing reconstruction and land purchases.

There were attempts by certain Government Ministers and officials to introduce a racially discriminatory approach by subsampling plantation housing reconstruction—intended for Tamil victims—under the standard Indian Housing Scheme. However, Indian-funded housing units are valued at around LKR 2.7 million, whereas the government's pledged rebuilding support stands at LKR 5 million.

As leader of the TPA, I took up this issue directly and campaigned both within and outside Parliament against this disparity. We are Sri Lankans, not Indians. While India's assistance is appreciated and rooted in historical ties, all victims—whether in plantations or elsewhere—must receive equal treatment.

Also raised this issue with the diplomatic community in Colombo, describing the practice as discriminatory. I speak firmly, but with responsibility. Even after four months, not a single house in the plantation areas has been rebuilt in line with the government's stated criteria and promises.

MALAYAHYA TAMILS DEMAND DELIVERY, NOT PROMISES

—TPA LEADER MANO GANESAN

Mano Ganesan, Leader of the Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA), is known for his vocal engagement in Parliament, consistently advocating for minority rights for over a decade. Speaking to Ceylon Today, he discusses the current Government and reflects on the role minority parties have played in successive governments over the years.



BY SULOCHANA RAMIAH MOHAN

We must work with India

Minority parties often argue that their influence is limited under strong governments. However, leaders like Soumyamoorthy Thondaman once held decisive 'kingmaker' power. Why has today's leadership—including yourself—struggled to command similar political leverage?

A: You can't compare. I respect late Soumyamoorthy Thondaman—he played an important role in his time. But times have changed. As leader of the TPA, I am not focused on making kings, queens, or governments; my priority is to secure fair and inclusive treatment for our people. I advocate for affirmative policy measures for communities that remain underdeveloped across key human indicators such as poverty, health, education, and access to housing and land, largely due to historical marginalisation.

These conditions did not emerge overnight—they span across different political eras, including that of Thondaman himself. So the question remains: why were these long-standing issues not resolved earlier? Today, we are dealing with the consequences of a 200-year legacy—125 years under colonial 'White Raj' and 75 years under local 'Brown Raj'.

It is not easy to navigate an ethnically sensitive country like ours, yet it is often convenient to place all blame on Malayahya Tamil politicians. The reality, however, is that we continue to face systemic ethnic discrimination due to our Tamil identity. It is also worth noting that the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a key component of the current NPP Government, historically conducted political classes that framed our community within the concept of 'Indian Expansionism' since 1965. This contributed to deep-seated biases among sections of the Sinhala population. As a result, our people have had to struggle for basic citizenship rights, which has, in turn, contributed to the underdevelopment we see today.

You recently warned that while the President claims to dismantle monopolistic cartels in sectors like fuel, gas, and pharmaceuticals, new cartels are emerging within the system. Who are these actors?

A: In the Coal Scam, new cartel players also raised this issue with the diplomatic community in Colombo, describing the practice as discriminatory. I speak firmly, but with responsibility. Even after four months, not a single house in the plantation areas has been rebuilt in line with the government's stated criteria and promises.

companies under different names, sometimes manufacturing entities, sometimes trading entities, at times inside and at other times outside the shores.

More broadly, how do you assess the Government's handling of the energy crisis, which played a major role in the collapse of the previous administration? Are current policies related to energy and RE sustainable?

A: The crisis is international. Today, the new changing world order is behind the energy crisis. It is not natural but man-made. The current crisis is not anything new, but a continuation of events. Sri Lanka, being a small nation by population and territory, has certain advantages. You should know how to play the cards. This Government has failed to look towards the emerging axis between India, Russia and China. It is not too late. India has supported us during this crisis, too, and China has assured support. We can't send our ships to Hormuz and bring fuel here. Instead, work more with India. We are geographically located at the tip of the southern part of India. We are needed by India. Hence, India needs to keep us in their friendly fold. Energy is fuel and electricity. And now, this NPP coal scam has added to the local energy crisis.

You have also publicly encouraged the President to move beyond opposition politics and deliver results. How do you currently evaluate this Government's service delivery and governance approach?

A: The President is more popular than the parliamentary part of his government. You need expertise and a team to govern. That is missing in the Government. Therefore, they are very small in planning and thinking. They keep on talking about an elusive conspiracy of the Opposition to topple the Government. As the Opposition, we will take the Government only through democratic and lawful means. It is democracy and not conspiracy. This practice is not going to take them anywhere. Soon, people will be tired of the old rhetoric. It is already happening. Therefore, the way out for the President is to reach out to the uncaptured expertise of the Opposition to move forward.

Having previously been part of Government, can you honestly say that you delivered structural, lasting change for plantation workers? Or were there missed

opportunities that continue to affect the community today?

A: The TPA's participation in government lasted only four years, compared to other parties and leaders who were part of successive administrations over a much longer period. Despite this limited timeframe, the TPA states that it initiated structural changes within the Malayahya Tamil community that had not been achieved previously and now calls on the current Government to continue and build on these reforms. Among its key achievements from 2015 to 2019, the TPA highlights the approval of the Cabinet Paper granting seven perches of land each to plantation families, marking a significant step towards land ownership. It also facilitated the long-delayed Indian Government-assisted housing programme, leading to the construction of individual housing units with freehold ownership. These housing schemes were formally recognised as new 'villages', often named after renowned leaders from Sri Lanka and India.

There was progress in political empowerment, including the establishment of six new Pradeshiya Sabhas in Nuwara Eliya District, enabling greater local governance for the upcountry Tamil community. In addition, a longstanding legal restriction from 1987—which prevented local councils from allocating funds to plantation areas—was amended through Cabinet and parliamentary approval, bringing these areas under the jurisdiction of local authorities.

What specific demands have you placed before President Dissanayake regarding: Wage increases, Land ownership rights, Housing and Education: Have you set any clear timelines or benchmarks for delivery?

A: The TPA Memorandum outlines a broad set of socio-economic and governance reforms focused on improving conditions for the Malayahya Tamil community. On housing, the TPA calls for a dedicated disaster-rebuilding programme with standalone houses valued at around LKR 5 million each in Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, and Badulla, rejecting apartment-style solutions and emphasising land ownership and infrastructure. It also urges the expedited completion of Indian-assisted housing projects, including 10,000 previously pledged units and an additional 4,000 units for disaster-affected families.

Regarding land rights, the TPA advocates a dual framework that ensures both residential land ownership and land for livelihoods,

aiming to transition approximately 157,000 plantation families from line-room accommodations to individual housing with secure tenure. On wages, the alliance highlights inconsistencies across plantation sectors and calls for standardised and fair wage implementation for workers across regional plantation companies, State-owned estates, private estates, and smallholders.

In education, the TPA proposes a quota of around 3,000 teaching positions for plantation schools within the national recruitment programme, alongside increased Tamil representation in administrative roles such as zonal Directors and Principals. It also raises concerns about discrimination against Tamil students in leading Colombo schools, calling for equitable class allocation and fair student intake.

Additional demands include expanding administrative divisions in plantation areas, strengthening Tamil language use in public services, increasing Tamil representation in Police recruitment, and ensuring greater inclusion in governance structures. While the Memorandum sets out clear policy directions and targets, it does not specify strict timelines but emphasises the urgency of implementation.

If the Government fails to respond to your demands, are you prepared to withdraw support or adopt a more confrontational stance, or will you continue engagement despite limited results?

A: We are neither supporting the Government nor part of it. If the Government fails to respond to our fair demands, we will go to the people. We will expose them. We can't keep engaging when there is no delivery. That is the engagement of the democratic opposition.

India has been the only country that has backed the upcountry Tamils in terms of building houses, etc. There can be a lot more requested from India by the TPA. Anything lined up?

A: Although we are categorised as people of recent Indian origin, support from the Government of India remains limited to select aspects of our community's development. We are actively engaging this issue at the highest levels—both with the Prime Minister's Office and the External Affairs Ministry. The operating environment is gradually shifting, and the trajectory is increasingly moving in our favour.

The Tamil Nadu Government is aware of its historical and cultural links to Sri Lanka, yet tangible benefits for Malayahya Tamils have remained limited. What initiatives have been extended so far, and how can the TPA engage with leaders—including Chief Minister M K Stalin—to strengthen support in areas such as education and healthcare? With Elections approaching in Tamil Nadu and figures like Vijay influencing the political landscape, can these opportunities be better leveraged for sustainable development in Sri Lanka's upcountry?

A: With elections in Tamil Nadu imminent, it is prudent to allow the democratic process to conclude. The TPA has its own roadmap and established channels of engagement with the Tamil Nadu leadership. We intend to work constructively with both the Government of Tamil Nadu and the Government of India, within India's federal framework, to advance shared priorities, particularly in Education and Healthcare.

Finally, what is your message to the Malayahya Tamil community

This Government has failed to look towards the emerging axis between India, Russia and China. It is not too late. India has supported us during this crisis, too, and China has assured support. We can't send our ships to Hormuz and bring fuel here. Instead, work more with India

regarding what they should remain vigilant about under the current Government, and how do you assess the future of their socio-political and economic standing in the upcountry?

A: The Indian-origin Malayahya Tamil community can no longer be defined solely as a plantation workforce. With a population of around 1.5 million, only about 100,000 remain in plantation employment, and nearly 75% of those residing in estate areas are no longer plantation workers. This reflects a significant demographic and social transformation that must be properly recognised. Today, the community stands as a distinct ethnic minority in Sri Lanka, alongside Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims. However, there are continued attempts by certain vested interests, including within the Government, to portray them narrowly as 'plantation labour'—an approach that risks limiting their social mobility and future prospects.

The Malayahya Tamil community is moving beyond these constraints, with growing political, social, cultural, and economic aspirations. The focus must now be on broader national integration, equitable recognition, and ensuring access to opportunities that reflect the community's evolving identity and full potential.



MUNCHEE'S TICKET TO TOGETHERNESS

Free rail travel initiative helps nearly 25,000 passengers celebrate Avurudu with loved ones.



In a heartwarming gesture that captured the spirit of Avurudu, Munchee stepped forward to help thousands of Sri Lankans reunite with their loved ones for the festive season.

Widely recognised as Sri Lanka's leading biscuit brand, Munchee fully sponsored train travel for nearly 25,000 passengers heading to their hometowns, easing the financial burden for families making the traditional New Year journey.

The large-scale initiative, carried out on April 12, covered all train departures from Fort Railway Station, ensuring commuters could travel home free of charge during one of the busiest travel periods of the year.

As the flagship brand of CBL Group, Munchee's campaign was widely praised as a meaningful act of corporate social responsibility that went beyond branding to make a genuine difference in people's lives.

For many passengers, the support meant one less expense during a costly festive season. For others, it meant the priceless opportunity to celebrate Avurudu with family members they may otherwise have struggled to visit.

The initiative drew widespread applause, with many commending Munchee for using its reach and resources to bring people together when it mattered most.

At a time when travel costs continue to weigh heavily on households, Munchee's thoughtful gesture served as a reminder that brands can play a powerful role in supporting communities and preserving cherished traditions.

This Avurudu Munchee did more than sponsor tickets; it helped deliver the joy of homecoming.



Danuska Tamali Silva, General Manager-Marketing (Munchee) Ceylon Biscuits Limited

