

Politics After a Ceasefire:  
Suffering, Protest, and Belonging in Sri Lanka's Tamil Diaspora

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## ABSTRACT

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This dissertation is a multi-sited ethnographic study of the cultural formations of moral and political community among Tamils displaced and dispersed by three decades of war and political violence in Sri Lanka. Drawing on twenty months of field research among Tamils living in Toronto, Canada and Tamil Nadu, India, I inquire into the histories, discourses, and practices of diasporic activism at the end of war between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Tamils abroad were mobilized to protest the war, culminating in months of spectacular mass demonstrations in metropolitan cities around the world. Participant-observation among activists and their families in diaspora neighborhoods and refugee camps, and their public events and actions, as well as semi-structured interviews, media analysis and archival work, reveal how “diaspora” has become a capacious site of political becoming for the identification and mobilization of Tamils within, across, and beyond-nation states and their borders.

Part One of this study considers how migration and militancy have historically transformed Tamil society, giving rise to a diasporic politics with competing ethical obligations for Tamils living outside Sri Lanka. Chapters One and Two describe and analyze how distinct trajectories of migration and settlement led to diverse forms of social and political action among diaspora Tamils during Sri Lanka's 2002 ceasefire and peace process. Chapter Three turns to the history and historiography of Sri Lanka to contrast narratives about the emergence of Tamil politics, nationalism and militancy with

diaspora narratives developed through life history interviews with activists. Taken together, these chapters provide a layered social and historical context for the ethnography of Tamil diaspora life and activism.

Part Two of the dissertation ethnographically explores how and why Tamils in Canada and India protested the recent war, soliciting their states, national and transnational publics, and each other to “take immediate action” on behalf of suffering civilians. Chapter Four examines diaspora community formation and activism in Toronto, a city with the largest population of Sri Lankan Tamils outside Asia, in the wake of Canada’s ban on the LTTE. Chapter Five turns to refugee camps in Tamil Nadu, India, to discuss how camp life shaped refugee politics and activism, while Chapter Six follows the narratives of two migrants waiting and preparing to migrate from India to the West. Chapter Seven examines how Tamil activists in Toronto and Tamil Nadu publicly invoked, represented, and performed suffering to mobilize action against the war. The dissertation concludes with a discussion of the modes of Tamil migration, asylum-seeking, and diaspora activism that emerged in response to the war’s end and its aftermaths.

In their actions of protest and dissent, I argue that Tamils from Sri Lanka create new modes of belonging and citizenship out of transnational lives forged from wartime migration and resettlement in multicultural and pluralist states. A political subject of “Tamil diaspora” has thus emerged, and continues to shape Sri Lanka’s post-war futures. This ethnography contributes to scholarly debates on violence, subjectivity and agency; the nation-state and citizenship; and the politics of human rights and humanitarianism at the intersections of diaspora, refugee and South Asian studies.

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*For Appamma (1918-2009)*

&

*for my family, far and wide*





Figure 2: Map of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka (Source: K.M. de Silva 1995b)

## *Introduction*

### ***The Politics and Ethics of Tamil Displacement and Diaspora***

In January 2009, four months into my fieldwork with Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India's southern state of Tamil Nadu, I was invited to visit a small refugee camp called "Maattupatti." Tamil refugees who worked with a relief and advocacy organization in Chennai created "by and for refugees" returned to their respective camps during the holidays to spend time with their families. One of the workers invited me, and a foreign volunteer, to stay with his family and participate in what he described as the "proper" festivities of the season, away from the dust and density of the city. The holiday was the Tamil harvest festival of *Pongal*, which was celebrated with the sharing of food and cultural activities over a period of four days in mid-January. This marked the state of the Tamil calendar, and the month of *Thai*.

As dusk fell on the eve of Thai Pongal, people gathered in the space between their line houses to tell me how they felt about the upcoming holiday. "We cannot celebrate properly," they told me, "because of the war." They referred to the war in northern Sri Lanka, and mass displacement from Mannar, the region from which they all hailed. As we talked, they decided that as someone who had come from Canada, I should meet their former camp leader who was now the children's English teacher.

The teacher, Muthusamy, was one of thousands of Hill-Country Tamils (*malaiyaka thamar*) displaced by the 1977 anti-Tamil riots in Sri Lanka, which took him from Nawalapitiya (in the centre of the island) to Vavuniya and Mannar (in the north),



where he was later displaced by war. Of nine brothers and sisters, he was the only one living outside the country. Some of his siblings decided to return to the tea plantations where they had worked and lived; others remained displaced in the north. Muthusamy's own children are scattered in south India, in Trichy, Pollachi and Kerala. None could meet the burden of proof required to claim citizenship in India. Nor did they hold citizenship in Sri Lanka, as the descendants of Indian-origin Tamils who were disenfranchised in postcolonial Ceylon.

As Muthusamy and I talked, we eventually returned to the topic that preoccupied every Sri Lankan Tamil I met during my fieldwork: Sri Lanka's war. Muthusamy speculated about the motivations of the parties to the war—the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)—and global powers like the United States and India. He was definite about one thing: “This is not terrorism. This is a freedom struggle,” he told me, even as he criticized the LTTE's tactics. Like many Tamil refugees and immigrants abroad, Muthusamy was very concerned about the latest war's high number of civilian casualties. When I asked him what he thought people should do to bring about the war's end, he said, “The diaspora (*pulam peyaranthor*) must put pressure on the international community.”

When Muthusamy told me this, I was taken aback. Did he consider himself to be a part of this diaspora? As we discussed what would “pressure” the international community to end the war, I wondered: How did a man who is stateless come to believe that Tamils living abroad must act to end the war and decide his family's future? What is the power of moving, living and organizing across nation-states and their borders?

### **The Subject of Tamil Diaspora**

My dissertation project explores how Sri Lankan Tamils, displaced and dispersed by over thirty years of political violence and war, form moral and political communities as they remake their lives across the globe. My research examines, in particular, how these communities are formed as Tamil activists mobilized and protested war in Sri Lanka. As a 2002 ceasefire between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) disintegrated into total war in 2008-09, Tamil activists mobilized thousands of diasporic Tamils to non-stop public protest in metropolitan cities around the world. Through an ethnographic study of diasporic activisms, I discuss how and why Tamils in Canada and India protested the war, soliciting their states, fellow citizens and each other to “take immediate action” on behalf of a suffering people. I also consider what forms of community and contestation were entailed by practices of Tamil activism.

My argument proceeds as follows:

- I argue that the historical transformation of Tamil society through militancy and migration, in response to decades of discrimination and violence, created a diasporic politics that obliged Tamils living outside Sri Lanka to take action to end the war in their homeland.
- This action was publicly organized during the ceasefire into two competing tendencies: Those who supported the LTTE and its nationalist goals of a separate Tamil state through a politics of protest, and those who opposed the LTTE, its political goals, and/or militant actions through a politics of dissent.
- The politics and ethics of Tamil protest and dissent reveal internal social differences among Tamils from Sri Lanka, along the lines of gender, caste, class, region, time of

migration, and legal status—differences that also complicate the “pro-LTTE” versus “anti-LTTE” binary, which delineates Tamil activism in the diaspora. Activists’ attempts to negotiate these internal boundaries or repress differences in the name of unity were central to the production of Tamil identity in diaspora.

- Notwithstanding the above differences, Tamils were socially and affectively oriented to respond to the war, and the suffering it created among Tamils on the island. This public engagement with wartime suffering has come to define what it means to be a Tamil living outside Sri Lanka, even among those who generally stay away from the domains of “politics” and the “political.”
- Ultimately, the contested practices of Tamil migration and activism I document here have generated new forms of cultural citizenship and transnational belonging for displaced and dispersed Tamils on the margins of liberal democratic polities. In other words, transnational migration and activism are critical processes through which Tamils have fashioned diaspora communities across the geopolitical borders of the international system of nation-states.

### **Ceasefire and the End/s of War**

Migration and displacement have been unavoidable facts of life for many Sri Lankans.<sup>1</sup> During thirty years of violent conflict, over two million people—one-tenth of Sri Lanka’s population—have been displaced and dispersed several times from their homes.<sup>2</sup> Though preceded by growing tensions between the state and aggrieved Tamil

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to Tamil migration and asylum-seeking, hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankan women and men of all communities have migrated to Gulf countries—primarily Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and U.A.E.—in the last two decades of war, working in construction, service industries and domestic labor.

<sup>2</sup> The majority of the displaced have been Tamils in the Northern and Eastern Provinces, including Hill-Country Tamils from the central highlands who were re-settled among them. Sinhalese and

politicians, activists and militant youth, Sri Lanka's war began after state-organized anti-Tamil violence in 1983 drove thousands of Tamil youth to join burgeoning militant organizations. These groups received support and training from India's intelligence agencies in South India (and the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh) to fight a war against the Sri Lankan state, with the ultimate goal of a separate homeland for ethnic Tamils. However, in the struggle for national liberation, many of these groups and political parties were decimated through internecine fighting and targeted assassinations, giving rise to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's claim to "sole representation" of Sri Lanka's Tamils. During these years (1983-90), hundreds of thousands of Tamils who were internally displaced by war fled on small boats for neighboring India (from which many traveled to Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America) or traveled by circuitous air and land routes to seek asylum in Western countries. After the failure of an Indian-negotiated peace accord (1987-90) and return to war, a new wave of migration emerged throughout the 1990s.

The historical transformation of Tamil society through militancy and migration created a diasporic politics with competing ethical obligations for Tamils outside Sri Lanka. Tamils who left Sri Lanka and the militant struggle during the early years of war were once derided by the Tigers as "traitors," or a "lost generation," even as the organization developed a sophisticated overseas network to finance its war against the state.<sup>3</sup> Eventually, the growing diaspora's financial and political clout could not be

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(predominantly) Tamil-speaking Muslims living in these provinces and 'border regions' have also been subject to violence and forced eviction throughout the conflict. In 2015, six years after the war, tens of thousands of Tamils and Muslims were yet to be resettled in their former homes.

<sup>3</sup> On the notion of the "traitor" in LTTE and Tamil nationalism, see Thiranagama (2010, 2011); the social and political use of this term is also elaborated in Chapter 3 of this dissertation. The LTTE leader referred

ignored. By the late 1990s, an estimated *one in three* Sri Lankan Tamils lived outside the island.<sup>4</sup> Tamils dispersed by violence were mobilized to demonstrate support for militants fighting the war “back home” and their project of national liberation through a separate state. A 2002 ceasefire redoubled these efforts, as diaspora activists who traveled back to the island viewed the war’s devastation and cultivated a diasporic duty upon their return. In contrast, activists involved in a wide range of different movements—including former members of other Tamil militant groups and parties (for example, members of TELO, EROS, PLOTE, EPRLF, and EPDP), leftist parties and trade unionism, grassroots women’s circles and feminist movements, and human rights groups—critiqued nationalist ends, the social relations (of caste, class and gender) they concealed, and the violent actions taken to pursue these ends in war and peace. Whether publicly supportive or critical of the Tigers’ dominance and public hegemony, Tamil diaspora activists shared at least one thing: an imperative of action, wrought from the fragmentation and dispersal of Tamil struggles for self-determination.

In journalistic and policy-oriented academic accounts, Sri Lanka’s Tamil diaspora is often presented as a monolithic entity that provides relentless financial and political support to the LTTE (see for example, Gunaratne 1999; Chalk 2000; Byman et al. 2001; Fair 2007). Moreover, a Tamil diaspora is perceived by many in Sri Lanka to be responsible for the decades of war. My study points to the diversity of Tamil socio-economic origins, political identities, displacements and settlement experiences that

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to the diaspora as a “lost generation” (*tholaintha santhathi*) at a 1990 conference according to Jeyaraj (2009).

<sup>4</sup> See Fuglerud (1999) and Cheran (2001). This narrative about Tamil political mobilization post-1983 is only one (though significant) part of a longer genealogy of Tamil diasporic activism that I explore in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

comprise diaspora communities and activism. Furthermore, this project examines how those activists who have been blamed for the suffering of war understand their work, in their own words. Whether in protest of state violence, or in dissent from LTTE nationalism, diasporic Tamils take action because they seek to alleviate suffering and bring about the war's end. I argue that diaspora subjects imagine themselves as a community in suffering and struggle, making those who share prior experiences of violence—and often kinship and intimate relationships with Tamils in Sri Lanka—obliged to act to end Tamil suffering in that country.

This study thus argues for a more complex analysis and understanding of Sri Lanka's Tamil diaspora—one that attends to the social differences through which diasporic subjects and their political communities are formed. In doing so, this project examines and recognizes the various ways in which Tamils have been affected by the war, and how these affects shape their public and personal actions. To be “affected” by the cycles of violence in Sri Lanka is not only to suffer privately or send money to fight; Tamils are affectively mobilized to many forms of action, including migration, social disengagement and an avoidance of politics, social work, grassroots organizing among workers, as well as political protest and dissent.

### **Theorizing Diaspora Citizenship and Belonging**

#### *Sri Lanka and Tamil Studies*

This project examines how the political subject of a Tamil diaspora emerges out of transnational migration and activist engagements with Sri Lanka's war. The project therefore builds upon the concerns of a vast literature on the politics of war and nationalism in Sri Lanka, and its Tamil diaspora.

Sri Lanka's war has been referred to as a "civil war" and "ethnic conflict" by many scholars (Tambiah 1986; de Silva 1998; Devotta 2004, among others). The latter term has had particular traction among social scientists, as the trend of studying "ethnic conflict" in the 1990s coincided with the intensification of war in Sri Lanka. The intellectual stakes of this project are inspired by the engaged scholarship of Sri Lankan scholars in the humanities and social sciences, whose critical studies of ethnicity and nationalism (in the politics of civil society and the state) began in the late 1970s with analyses of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism as a political ideology, a socio-historical development, and cultural practice (Abeysekera and Gunasinghe 1987; Jayawardena 1985; Obeyesekere 1984; Social Scientists' Association 1984; Tennekoon 1988, 1990). These studies were undertaken in the context of a rising tide of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, political authoritarianism, and local civil rights movements; they continued during the early years of war.<sup>5</sup>

Critical scholarship on Sinhala nationalism was paralleled and followed by work that interrogated its counterpart in Tamil nationalism. Studies of Tamil nationalism began in the late 1970s, and were concerned with finding the 'origins' of nationalism in the Tamil/Saivite cultural-religious reform and revival movement led by Arumuga Navalar in mid-nineteenth century Jaffna (Sivathamby [1979]1984; Kailasapathy [1979]1984).<sup>6</sup> They understood this early nationalism as a "defensive" response to British colonial and missionary activities. However, these scholars also revealed how Tamil revival

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<sup>5</sup> The Civil Rights Movement, the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality, and the formation of the Social Scientists' Association are of particular note here. The Civil Rights Movement was initially a response to the state repression following the JVP insurrection of 1971.

<sup>6</sup> For a historical study of Arumuga Navalar's role in the Tamil Saivite revival, see Ambalavanar (2006), and Bate (2005) on the influence of Navalar's sermon (*piracangam*) on the practice of Tamil oratory (*medaithamizh*), a practice that came to define modern Tamil political communication (Bate 2009).

movements were shaped and formed by the traditions and practices they sought to critique, in order to buttress their own dominant Vellala caste and upper-middle class positions (Bastin [1979]1998; Sivathamby 1995, 1984; Kailasapathy 1984; Arasaratnam 1981).

Later discussions of Tamil nationalism applied this notion of a “reactive” or “defensive” nationalism in relation to the rise of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in late colonial and post-independence Sri Lanka (Gunasingam 1999; Manogaran and Pfaffenberger 1994; Wilson 2000). Such studies presume a unity of Tamil identity and belonging, and in doing so, efface social differences within Tamil communities and within the project of Tamil nationalism itself. Consequently, the notion of a “defensive” nationalism has been challenged by other scholars (Cheran 1992; Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1990a).<sup>7</sup>

Scholars have also questioned the gender politics of Tamil nationalism in the LTTE and, to a lesser extent, Tamil militancy in general (Coomaraswamy and Perera-Rajasingham 2004; de Mel 2001; Maunaguru 1995; Sivamohan 2001), largely in response to claims of women’s participation in the LTTE as evidence of a feminist politics and transformation of Tamil society. These scholars have shown that Tamil women’s participation in militancy has created limited forms of social agency, or what Rajasingham-Senanayake (2001b) has written of as an “ambivalent empowerment.” Moreover, they show how this transformation was undermined by the militants’ patriarchal regulation of women’s sexuality and enforcement of gender norms in Tamil society during the war (Maunaguru 1995; Sivamohan 2001). These studies of gender (and

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<sup>7</sup> I discuss nationalist histories and these critical arguments in more detail in Chapter 3.



its intersections with caste, class and region) point to internal differences that limited full belonging to the national community of the LTTE.

### *Studies of the Tamil Diaspora*

The scholarly literature on Sri Lanka's Tamil diaspora extends the concerns of the critical studies above. Much of this scholarship documents and analyzes the migration of Tamils due to war in Sri Lanka, and diaspora social formations in relation to Tamil nationalism (Cheran 2000, 2003, 2007, 2010; Daniel 1996; Daniel and Thangaraj 1995; Fuglerud 1999; McDowell 1996; Ranganathan 2010; Steen 1993). Other works have considered the political economy of the migration-development nexus and the impact of remittance networks (Hyndman 2003; Sriskandarajah 2002) on the political economy of the 'homeland' on the one hand, and the relationship between 'homeland ties' and 'civic participation' in 'host societies,' on the other (Wayland 2002, 2004).

The first book-length publication about a Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora appeared when Fr. Santhiapillai Guy de Fontgalland, an activist working with refugees in India, published *Tamil Diaspora: Sri Lankans in Exile*, through Ceylon Refugees and Repatriates Organization (CERRO) in 1986. Santhiapillai's book provided a historical account of the conflict and resulting migration, and catalogs the social and political conditions of Tamils living in 15 countries throughout North America, Europe and Asia.<sup>8</sup> A number of brief, policy-oriented articles followed along these lines (Chandrasahana 1989; Aruliah 1994).

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<sup>8</sup> The countries included in the book are (in order of presentation): India, Germany, France, Belgium, Netherlands, Switzerland, Italy, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, and Australia.

Scholarship on the Tamil diaspora began ten years later, with studies of Tamil society and politics in exile. In 1996, British sociologist Christopher McDowell published his study of Sri Lankan Tamils in Switzerland, whom he dubbed an “asylum diaspora.” McDowell wrote that Tamils were engaged in a “politics in exile,” wherein ““the conflict which contributed to the creation of the diaspora is now fueled continuously by the diaspora itself” (31). Øivind Fuglerud’s 1999 book, *Life on the Outside: The Tamil Diaspora and Long-Distance Nationalism*, makes a more complex argument about the form and meaning of exile politics. Fuglerud draws parallels between social exclusions in Sri Lanka and in Norway to argue that Tamil nationalism provides Tamils in Norway with “a name for individual nostalgia and shared exclusion from host society” reshaping individual consciousness through migration and its social transformations (1999: 186). He examines how this “revolutionary nationalism-in-exile” became circumscribed by LTTE politics, which provides Tamils with a reshaped historical consciousness of a lost authentic self, and in so doing, replaces the moral authority of “traditional structures” of ‘honor’ with ‘dignity’ in a “politics of equality.” The LTTE thereby becomes a source of regeneration for Tamil identity in exile (136).

These two early studies reveal the centrality of belonging and exclusion to the transnational practice of Tamil politics, whether implicitly, as is the case with McDowell, or more explicitly, in Fuglerud’s book. My project builds on these studies of Tamil diaspora nationalism, and others that document the “resistant” and “liberationist” projects that emerged in the diaspora in contrast to LTTE politics (Cheran 2000). However, I argue against their use of Benedict Anderson’s notion of “long-distance nationalism” to describe Tamil diaspora politics. This concept, as articulated by Anderson (1998, 1994),

assumes that a modular “nation” exists prior to its replication in exile. “Long-distance nationalism” does not sufficiently account for the heterogeneity of diasporic social life in the local contexts that form transnational Tamil politics. Daniel’s (1996, 1994) research among Tamil refugees and immigrants in Britain and the United States provides me with another approach. Daniel examines the social cleavages within a suffering “nation-in-alienation” that enables a “disaggregation of identity” (1996: 186) for Tamils living in diaspora. I build on his insights to argue that the transnational politics of Sri Lanka’s Tamil diaspora emerges from these social differences and conflicts, and their negotiation, in attempts to produce a national unity.

Tamil diaspora studies have focused exclusively on communities living in North America and Europe. Studies of Tamil refugees in India focus almost exclusively on camp refugees (Balasundaram 2012; Hans 1997; Suryanarayan and Sudarsen 2000; Tesfay 2007; Xavier 2007). My project brings these two sets of literature together, to better understand how immigrant and refugee populations understand and practice citizenship and belonging in diaspora. I have found only one other text that studies Tamil refugees in India in the context of transnational migration—a dissertation focused on Tamil refugees self-settled near the city of Madurai (Paus 2005). This points to the widespread exclusion of refugees in the global South from conceptualizations of diaspora. My project addresses this exclusion, and considers how two different sets of refugees in India—camp refugees, and urban refugees waiting to migrate to the West—inhabit the margins of diasporic belonging.

*Rethinking Diaspora*

In the humanities and social sciences of the 1990s and early 2000s, diaspora seemed to be everywhere. This led Khachig Tölölyan, the founder and editor of the journal, *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* and an Armenian diaspora scholar, to proclaim, “Where once were dispersions, there now is diaspora” (1996: 3), a term he and other scholars (cf. Brubaker 2005) felt was in danger of becoming “a promiscuously capacious category” (1996: 8). Tölölyan’s reflections on the new field of diaspora studies led him to consider “why and how... a term once saturated with the meanings of exile, loss, dislocation, powerlessness and plain pain became a useful, even desirable way to describe a range of dispersions” (1996: 9).

For the early scholars of diaspora such communities were primarily shaped by “the maintenance of group consciousness defined by a continued relationship with an original homeland” (Safran 1991), rather than their integration or assimilation into so-called ‘host societies.’ This model of twentieth-century diaspora studies thus took for granted the notion of a homeland as a singular “place of origin,” (Safran 1991) and diaspora, as the spatially dispersed community formed out of “a people’s” migration to two or more peripheral places, could become a site for studies of cultural survivals and processes of acculturation and assimilation among racialized and minoritized group.<sup>9</sup> In addition to the notion of “home” and “host” countries, these studies defined diasporas as communities that viewed the ancestral homeland as a place of eventual return or one to maintain or restore (Safran 1991; Sheffer 2003).

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<sup>9</sup> Scott (1991) provides a good summary and critique of such studies in his analysis of Herskovits’s scholarship as a Caribbeanist.

Subsequent work incorporated the powerful insights of black British cultural studies (Brown 1998; Gilroy 1993; Hall 1990, 1994) to examine and redefine diaspora as a transnational space of traversal (Clifford 1994), exchange, and cultural production. Such work wrote against the essentialism of what anthropologist Brian Axel (1998, 2004) has termed the ‘place of origin’ thesis—the notion described above of a diaspora constituted by its relationship to an original homeland. By emphasizing the plurality of antagonisms that constitute diasporic identity and the diaspora’s retrospectively produced origins (Axel 2001; Edwards 2001) this next generation of scholars also questioned displacement as the privileged explanatory trope of diaspora, and its spatializing effects (Brown 1998; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994). These scholars critiqued earlier studies that pathologized diaspora as a failure to obtain or inhabit the normative ideal of national sovereignty (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994).

However, as valuable and important as this work is, it has not fully de-authorized the spatial assumptions of the “place of origin” model, which has only gained increasing traction in popular discourse. This presents scholarship with a contradiction. On the one hand, the first strand of diaspora studies, with its model of an original community scattered from a homeland, provides the form in which many people, including Sri Lankan Tamils, imagine and narrate their lives as “diasporic.” On the other hand, the second strand, led some scholars to uncritically celebrate diasporas as plural and hybrid social formations (Gilroy 1993; Bhabha 1994) that inaugurate a “stateless power of the transnational moment” (Tölölyan 1996).

Similarly, I am neither arguing to recenter the nation-state, nor to preemptively celebrate its total dissolution. Rather, I suggest that the heuristic of “diaspora” allows me

to re-examine tightly-conscripted notions of ethnicity, territoriality and sovereignty in Sri Lanka and the fight for Tamil Eelam. In doing so, however, I suggest that this critical project is undermined by scholarship that takes the claim of “stateless power” at face value. Diaspora, as a modern social imaginary and a translocal form of political community, emerges in relation to the nation-state under globalization. My approach here parallels that of recent historical and anthropological scholarship on diaspora in the contexts of historical empires (Ho 2004), colonial indenture and ethnolinguistic pluralism (Eisenlohr 2006; Trnka 2008), and social movements (Sökefeld 2006). As we shall see (particularly in the ethnographic chapters of this dissertation), the political community of Sri Lanka’s Tamil diaspora encompasses national and ‘post-national’ senses of belonging. And yet this belonging is defined in relation to the politics of the Sri Lankan state and Tamil separatist movements, as well as the laws and policies of the states in which Tamils currently reside, particularly with respect to asylum-seeking, immigration and citizenship. For this reason—and in contrast to most cultural studies of diaspora—this ethnography examines the policies and laws that have deeply shaped Tamil diaspora formation and political activism.

### *The Anthropology of Violence and Suffering*

Contemporary anthropology has generated an abundant and theoretically rich literature on violence and suffering.<sup>10</sup> The discipline turned to violence and suffering in the context of massive political and economic shifts during the late 1980s and 1990s: the end of the Cold War, the growth of late capitalism and, most visibly, new ethnic and civil

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<sup>10</sup> For a summary of this literature, see Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004). In a recent analysis, Robbins (2013) suggests that anthropology’s turn to violence has produced a new “suffering slot” that replaces the problematic “savage slot” (Trouillot 1991) of colonial anthropology, while revealing new problems of its own.

wars. The Global War on Terror that followed September 11, and the spread and implementation of neoliberal economic policies has only made the topic of “violence” more relevant to scholars. Consequently, the anthropology of violence and suffering has centered on the following phenomena: political violence, communal violence, and ethnic wars (Das 2007, 1995; Daniel 1996; Feldman 1991; Malkki 1995a; Nordstrom 1997; Sluka 2000); experiences of displacement and the bureaucratic management of refugees (Daniel and Thangaraj 1995; Malkki 1995, 1996); forms of suffering that result from structural violence (Farmer 2005; Das, Kleinman et al, 1997; Scheper-Hughes 1992); human rights discourses on culture and violence (Abu Lughod 2001; Merry 2006; Riles 2006; Allen 2013, 2009); and the biopolitical violence of humanitarianism (Fassin 2007; Ticktin 2011, 2006). I draw several insights from this literature.

First, anthropologists have examined the history of colonialism in constructing, categorizing and reifying social differences that, amid unequal distributions of power within a racial hierarchy, lay the ground for postcolonial conflicts (Daniel 1996; Mamdani 2001; Taussig 1987). In Sri Lanka (which was known as Ceylon before 1972), this is apparent in the very notion of a “Tamil” people, amid multiple historical and social formations of Tamilness. Political technologies such as the census and “communal representation” were crucial to British governance of the colony, and created distinct ethnic groups that were later mobilized under the sign of the nation (Nissan and Stirrat 1990; Rajasingham-Senanayake 2002). During the late colonial period of the 1920s-1940s, changes to the form of political representation assigned to local elites and the granting of so-called universal franchise under colonial tutelage led to the rise of “ethnic politics” (Wickramasinghe 1995) and a series of political maneuvers from Sinhalese

political elites during the writing of a new constitution on the eve of independence. In short, colonial statecraft produced “majority” and “minority” communities, setting in motion a chain of events that led to the political conflicts and forms of violence discussed throughout this dissertation.

Second, anthropologists’ studies of representations of violence contributed to theoretical approaches to the nature of language and signs, with particular attention to the problem of how violence is and is not communicated among sufferers of pain and survivors after violence (Daniel 1996; Das, Kleinman and Lock 1997). This work focuses on the activity of signs and their interpretation in the making and remaking of social life after violence (Daniel 1996; Das 2007). I suggest that attention to the study of signs in life after violence is important to the study of Tamil diaspora formation, and political activism especially. Whereas social scientific studies of diaspora politics tend to study transnationally dispersed ethnic groups as “actors” (whether collective, or as individual representatives), a semiotic approach to the study of violence and diaspora activism allows for a fine-grained analysis of multiple forms of action.

Third, in their attention to structural violence (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004; Farmer 2005), this scholarship on violence urges me to attend not only to the spectacular forms of violence such as torture and assassination that pervaded the war, but also to the less visible and ‘slow’ violence of poverty and deprivation that constituted everyday life in wartime, and among socially marginalized refugees and immigrants in diaspora. Finally, on a related point, anthropologists of violence and suffering have turned increasingly to the study of human rights and humanitarianism as regimes that discipline and govern subjects in the context of growing global inequality (Feldman



2008; Allen 2009, 2013; Redfield and Bornstein 2010; Clarke 2010; Fassin 2011; Feldman and Ticktin 2010; Ticktin 2006, 2011; Gabiam 2012); they illuminate the contradiction between humanitarianism's ideal that all lives are sacred and the inequality of human lives in conditions of structural violence (Fassin 2007; Redfield 2005).

Anthropologists have also critiqued human rights as a discourse of power in which those who enjoy such rights in the global north assume "moral ownership" of third world suffering to authorize their own interventions (de Waal 1997; Jackson 2005) in what has been termed "the new humanitarianism" (Chandler 2001). Humanitarian action organized by international non-governmental organizations has thus become a fundamental part of the state's military and economic interventions (Fassin and Pandolfi 2009). While humanitarianism has typically operated through non-governmental organizations (Ticktin 2014: 274), scholars have also shown how "humanitarian government" (Pandolfi 2008; Agier 2010) as a "politics of life" (Fassin 2007) is being incorporated into the policies of the governmental state (Ticktin 2006) to manage life and death across a variety of domains, including biotechnology, the environment, and immigration.

More specifically for my project, the anthropology of humanitarianism has contributed critical insights to refugee and migration studies by examining what Miriam Ticktin (2011) has called "the biopolitics of immigration" and what Didier Fassin (2011) terms "the governmentality of immigration in dark times." These writers study the effects of humanitarian regimes on the recognition and mobility of asylum-seekers, refugees and immigrants from the global south. They find that as immigration laws and policies became increasingly restrictive in the West, the refugee's "suffering body" has become a

site for the verification of “truth” and legitimacy in determining claims for asylum or refugee status (Fassin and D’Haillun 2005); these studies also show that not all human suffering is equal: Only certain forms of suffering entail political recognition from the state, while other kinds of suffering are obscured and easily ignored (Ticktin 2011; see also Daniel 1996, Daniel and Knudsen 1995). The turn to human rights and humanitarianism in the last decade thus allows us to critically examine how political claims are made in the name of humanity (Feldman and Ticktin 2010), as a discourse and a practice of power, and how attempts to alleviate suffering through transnational humanitarian action can often produce violence and harm, particularly when organized on behalf of state policies and institutions (Ticktin 2006).

Instead, transnational humanitarianism becomes a way to define “our” humanity and capacity in relation to “their” helplessness. This literature encourages us to think against the grain of contemporary appeals to compassion that seek to mobilize us to action by drawing attention to the structures and discourses of power that, on the one hand, ascribe the humanity of “bare life” to some people (Agamben 1998), while investing other human subjects with agency. My dissertation considers this problem from the vantage point of Tamil diaspora activists that appropriated human rights and humanitarian discourses as a new way of “doing politics” in the twenty-first century. In their desire to alleviate and bring an end to Tamil suffering, activists were confronted by and made use of human rights reporting on Sri Lanka and their diaspora communities; their frequent use of such reports, from a variety of Sri Lankan and international groups, discursively shaped the ethics and politics of their work. This became especially apparent when the Government of Sri Lanka banished international humanitarian workers from the

active war zone in the north in September 2008. During the final months of the war in January to April 2009, activists organized large crowds of diaspora Tamils to protest and call for Sri Lanka to declare a “humanitarian ceasefire.” I suggest that Tamil protests served as a way for diaspora Tamils to intervene in the war in lieu of humanitarian access.

### *Violence in Diaspora Formation*

Violence is often mentioned in studies of diaspora populations, but analyzed rarely. Diaspora studies, as an interdisciplinary field that emerged during the 1990s, has largely remained the province of two sets of disciplines: literary and cultural studies, on the one hand, and sociology, political science and international relations, on the other. In each of these fields, violence has been taken to be a basic condition of possibility for diasporic immigrant populations. Indeed, for some scholars, what differentiates a diaspora from other transnational migrants is the notion of a forced migration away from physical violence and harm (Cheran 2003). As a result, the concept of violence itself and its relationship to diaspora formation has not been sufficiently explored within the humanities and social sciences.

This project brings the insights of the anthropology of violence and suffering to bear on theories of diaspora and the study of Tamil activism. In doing so, my efforts are informed by two anthropologists whose work examines representations and discourses of violence in the making of diasporas. Brian Axel (2001, 2004) theorized the relationship between violence and diaspora in his study of Sikhs and the transnational fight for Khalistan. Axel argues that representations of the “tortured body,” a political artifact of state violence, have become central to the social imaginary and formation of a Sikh

diaspora (2001: 122). In an article titled, “The Violence of Diaspora,” Deborah Thomas (2009) examines the discursive construction of Jamaica and its diasporas in the United States and elsewhere as mired in a “culture of violence.” Thomas argues that academic diaspora studies has been complicit in the perpetuation of multiple forms of violence, through scholarship that privileges culturalist analysis, and in doing so, obscures socioeconomic inequality and systemic racism. My study of Tamil diaspora finds resonances in Thomas’s and Axel’s scholarship, as Tamils in Sri Lanka and the diaspora have had to contend with discourses that assume a cultural basis for separatist violence and question their multiple loyalties. In the case of Sri Lanka’s Tamils, an additional point should be made: The notion of a “culture of violence” in the form of the LTTE blamed Tamils for their suffering—even as the government claimed its ‘humanitarian operation’ rescued civilians from the Tigers—and thus allowed for thousands of people to be killed at the war’s end without consequence.

This dissertation extends the above scholarly concerns with violence in diaspora formation to the study of political activism. However, I assert that the political subject of a Tamil diaspora has not *only* been formed out of activists’ circulation of texts and images of wartime violence and suffering. Tamil diaspora activists and protesters also publicly remembered their own embodied experiences with violence in the context of anti-Tamil riots and pogroms and the ongoing war, and commemorated the suffering of their relatives. I argue that violence was, in this way, a fundamental part of the “background practices” (Daniel 1996: 155) of Tamil diaspora political life and action.

*Signs and Subjects in Action*

This dissertation also brings Peirce’s theory of signs to the study of diaspora politics and social life. Many social theorists who study language and culture have followed a dyadic theory that relates signs and objects.<sup>11</sup> A Saussurean theory of the sign (*semeion*), for example, considers the relationship between the “signifier” (sign) and “signified” (object). Peirce’s *semeiotic* introduces a third element into sign-object relations: the interpretant. For Peirce, a sign (also called a *representamen*) is anything that stands *for* something—its object—in *relation to* something, i.e. its interpretant. This interpretant could then serve as the representamen in another triadic relationship.

Peirce divided signs by breaking down into various categories their structure, depending on their “ground.” He termed a sign based on a quality a “qualisign,” an existent thing or actuality as a “sinsign,” and a sign of law or habit as a “legisign.” Further, by considering the sign’s relation to its dynamic object (“the really efficient but not immediately present object”), Peirce (1894, “What is a Sign?”) differentiated between a sign that resembles its object (icon), a sign that has an actual connection to its object through causation or contiguity (index), and a sign that is related to its object by convention or habit (a symbol).<sup>12</sup> The effectiveness of each of these types of signs depends on people’s understandings of how they signify (Keane 1997: 19).

For purposes of clarity, I do not draw on all of Peirce’s myriad terms, which include further divisions of the above trichotomy of signs into a ten-fold classification.

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<sup>11</sup> For example, the Prague School of linguistics (with the exception of Jakobsen, who later became interested in Peirce), Roland Barthes’s *semiology*, Levi-Strauss’s structural anthropology, Derridean deconstruction, the postcolonial and Subaltern Studies of Spivak and Guha.

<sup>12</sup> Peirce uniquely recognized differences among types of signs. Only the third type, the symbol, relies entirely on social convention in a way that parallels what Saussurean linguists have characterized as the “arbitrary” relationship between the signifier and signified.

The latter three—icon, index, and symbol—are ones I use regularly throughout the dissertation to differentiate particular kinds of signs in political action.

In addition to the above terms, Peirce’s theory of signs provides us with a unique vantage point from which to theorize the place of signs in the making of human subjectivity and action. As Vincent Colapietro (1989) notes, much of Peirce’s approach to the self was implicit to his theory, and it has been up to sympathetic scholars to wade through the density of his prose in order to take up this direction in his work. Peircean semiotics illuminates subjectivity not only by understanding human subjects “as users of signs, but also as themselves processes and products of semiosis” (Colapietro 1989: 47).

In contrast to psychological and sociological studies of individual thoughts and behavior, a semiotic/pragmaticist approach to the study of human subjectivity and culture focuses on processes and habits of action. At a basic level, this approach understands signs to be constitutive of actions, and the meanings that we create from actions. When this insight is applied to the ethnographic study of the political, we arrive at another important finding: Signs also create the power and authority they appear to reflect through human practices of interpretation and exchange (Keane 1997; see also Daniel 1996).

Peirce’s notion of semiotics as a theory of reasoning, and his interest in the ethics of self-governance (as being rooted in habits of self-observation and self-criticism, Colapietro 1989: xix) resonate with Foucault’s theories of power and subjectivity, in spite of their different intellectual genealogies. His general theory of signs, “insofar as it is a normative account of reasoning, entails a commonsensical understanding of human agency,” in which “agents are beings who possess the power to exercise real, although

limited, control over the course of their conduct.” The study of signs as a pragmatic analysis of agency and habit-formation can contribute to the study of power relations of discipline and government, as forms of power that act upon subjects and “act upon their actions” to achieve its desired ends (Foucault 1991).

*Citizenship, Belonging and the Liberal State*

This project aims to bring into focus the problem of citizenship in liberal democratic states. Citizenship has been typically understood as a legal category of the nation-state that confers rights and obligations (Marshall 1950). However, citizenship as a juridical form of state recognition does not wholly define belonging and its exclusions, especially in the context of globalization and transnational migration. In contrast to such formalistic definitions of citizenship, anthropologists have focused on the everyday processes by which people are made into subjects of the nation-state. This project also discusses citizenship in an expanded sense as a social practice (Lister 2003) and cultural form of membership and belonging.

Among anthropologists, the notion of “cultural citizenship” refers to citizenship in this wider sense. The concept was developed in the mid-1990s out of ethnographic studies of the exclusion and inclusion of Latino immigrants (Rosaldo 1994; Flores and Benmayor 1997) and Southeast Asian refugees (Ong 2003, 1996) in the United States, and in relation to the “flexible citizenship” of transnational Chinese elites (Ong 1999, 1996).<sup>13</sup> Subsequent scholarship has extended and expanded this concept in studying

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<sup>13</sup> While “cultural citizenship” and “flexible citizenship” are both practiced in relation to the governmental state, Ong uses the latter to refer to practices of highly mobile “capital-bearing subjects,” and more specifically, “the strategies and effects of mobile managers, technocrats, and professionals seeking to both circumvent and benefit from different nation-state regimes by selecting different sites for investments,

racialized and marginalized minorities in the United States, Asia, and other transnational and diasporic locations (Clarke 2012; Maira 2009; Siu 2001; Rosaldo 2003).

“Cultural citizenship” has been defined in multiple ways. Renato Rosaldo, in his discussion of educational democracy, refers to it as “the right to be different and to belong in a participatory democratic sense” (Rosaldo 1994:402). The anthropologist Aihwa Ong’s work has, as Kamari Clarke writes, “popularized ways of thinking about agency and belonging beyond the state” (2013: 465). Ong defines cultural citizenship, broadly, as “a process of self-making and being-made in relation to nation-states and transnational processes” (737). Whereas Rosaldo focuses on assertions made by immigrants, who appear to be already constituted political subjects, Ong considers cultural citizenship to be a process of subjectification in relation to the biopolitical state (Foucault 2003, 1991). Ong argues accordingly of the need to attend to the regulatory regimes of the state and civil society institutions (1996:738) to understand the making of immigrant and refugee subjects in intersecting hierarchies of racial and cultural difference.<sup>14</sup>

Like the anthropologist Sunaina Maira (2009) in her study of Muslim immigrant youth and citizenship in the U.S. after 9/11, I aim to bridge these approaches in order to better analyze the contradictions of “multicultural citizenship” (Kymlicka 1995) and its exclusions in liberal democratic nation-states. When the political agency of migrants and technologies of state regulation are studied together, the practice of cultural citizenship

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work, and family relocation” (1999: 112). The concept has since been used by other scholars in ways that diverge from her use; see, for example, Maira (2009).

<sup>14</sup> Although the 1996 article also notes intersections of class and gender (the latter of which could use deeper elaboration), Ong’s primary concern is to intervene in the “race-versus-culture” debate at that time. She rightly refers to this debate as “a red herring” (739). See the Comments and Reply to the article for further discussion.



may critique the state while remaining within its framework (2009: 85; Grewal 2005). This problem becomes quite apparent in multicultural discourses of “inclusion” which often assert liberal values of “tolerance” and “diversity” (Brown 2006) while sidestepping problems of political and economic inequity that are especially acute for racialized immigrants and minorities.

This project examines multiple forms of citizenship in the migration and political activism of Tamils from Sri Lanka. The notion of citizenship I use draws on the above literature to denote a practice of social membership and subjective belonging across multiple scales of human action. I consider many forms of “action” in studying Tamil practices of citizenship and belonging in Canada and India. First, I study the actions taken by Tamils to become mobile citizen-subjects in processes of international migration and settlement, on the one hand, and in preparing for future return to Sri Lanka, on the other. Second, I examine highly visible forms of community mobilization and public action such as rallies and demonstrations, postering, digital videos, debates, and commemorative ceremonies, as well as less apparent practices of political activism such as fundraising. Third, I consider how activists seek to address inequities and create social change within diaspora communities.

Legal citizenship for immigrants does not guarantee belonging to a national community or rights, as the sociologist Monisha Das Gupta has argued in her study of South Asian immigrant organizing among service workers, feminists and queer activists in the United States (2006: 14). Instead, Das Gupta contends that non-citizen immigrants’ activisms construct a “transnational complex of rights” that do not rely on citizenship to make claims of the state (Das Gupta 2006). I find this concept useful in thinking about

how Tamil refugees—especially in India’s camps—participate in diasporic activism. I suggest, following Das Gupta, that immigrants and refugees embody and transform the relationship between states, national citizenship and rights in their border-crossing actions, even as they confront the limits of laws that exclude and deprive them.

A resurgence of interest in political anthropology at the end of the twentieth century has led to new fields of study, from state institutions to non-governmental organizations, and new social movements to transnational humanitarianism. We have seen the importance of Foucault’s theories of “governmentality” and “biopower” in this new anthropology of “the political” for an analysis of the making and management of people as populations. This has led to an “anthropology of the state,” which ethnographically examines “the state effect” (Mitchell 2006)—the social abstraction of a unitary state produced out of multiple institutional apparatuses, and their application of techniques of power in the everyday lives of the governed (Chatterjee 2004). The government of populations generates contemporary categories of identity, making an anthropology of the state critical to the study of popular mobilizations of identity. Indeed, I suggest that Tamil diaspora political activism as a practice of citizenship and belonging offers a unique vantage point from which to analyze the effects of the Sri Lankan state. I examine these effects through the state’s transnational extension in the lives of expelled and excluded citizens abroad, and as this intersects with internationally circulating human rights and humanitarian discourses.

Building on anthropological concerns with the state and citizenship, this study also engages with political theories of democracy. I focus especially on contemporary philosophical debates on the public sphere (Habermas 1992), on the one hand, and

multiculturalism, pluralism, and the politics of recognition (Fraser and Honneth 2003; Kymlicka 1995; Markell 2003; Taylor 1995), on the other, to interrogate the political rationality of liberal democracy and analyze the relationship between affect and agency in the social practice of citizenship. Liberal theorists have argued that rational consensus is the foundation of democratic politics (Rawls 1971; Habermas 1989). On the basis of his work on discourse ethics and communicative action, the philosopher, Jurgen Habermas, has been one of the strongest proponents of a “deliberative democracy,” in which participants reach a consensual agreement through public communication. In response, poststructural feminist theorists (Butler; Fraser 1992; Young 1990) have drawn attention to the inequities that undergird Habermas’s ideal-rational public sphere, showing how the social differences that delineate the public sphere make some “voices” more powerful than others. In contrast to liberal deliberation and consensus, radical theorists value conflict as inherent to the practice of democracy, which becomes an arena for an agonistic pluralism (Honig 1993) and a collective struggle for hegemony (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Mouffe 2000).

The debate between consensus and conflict in the practice of democracy is important in the case of Sri Lanka and the ‘Tamil national question,’ as well as the internal politics of community among Tamils in and outside the country. Sri Lanka, India and Canada are all liberal democratic states formed out of British imperialism and colonial rule, making these debates especially relevant to my project. In spite of their different historical formation, all three states have shared since their inception an ongoing concern with managing and governing a heterogeneous polity, in which subjects have

made claims for resources and political power on the basis of language, indigeneity, race, ethnicity, religion, caste, class, and gender.

In the Sri Lankan case, architects of the 2002-2006 peace process emphasized liberal norms designed to effect a “consensus” between the two warring parties. Local intellectuals also argued that a more “liberal” system of governance was the need of the hour. This could, of course, take many forms. However, the peace process was designed so that differences and conflicts *within* social formations were smoothed over in favor of a top-down process of “representation” at talks to find consensus *between* two defined groups. Consequently many social groups were left out of the formal peace process: Muslims, non-LTTE Tamil militant groups, IDPs and refugees, and (for the most part) women. The failure of Sri Lanka’s peace process shows that attempts to build a top-down consensus between dominant “representatives” did not resolve “the conflict,” let alone address the social and economic inequities that contributed to the war. The dissertation understands these dynamics of conflict as integral to struggles for a pluralistic democracy in Sri Lanka and within Tamil diaspora communities.

### **Fieldwork in a Time of War and Counterinsurgency**

From January 2008 to August 2009, I carried out ethnographic and archival research in Toronto, Canada and Tamil Nadu, India. My fieldwork spanned the official return to war, the announcement of the war’s end, and the first few months of the post-war period. I also conducted a brief visit to London in early 2010 to follow-up with diaspora activists I had met in my primary field sites who were active in the wider diaspora. This multi-sited ethnography is further supplemented by the insights I have gained from visits to Sri Lanka in the summers of 2004 through 2006 and May 2012.

## *Methods*

In each site, I employed multiple qualitative methods, including the following: (1) Participant-observation among activists and their families in diaspora neighborhoods and refugee camps, and their public events and actions, to investigate how they create and inhabit the social spaces of ‘community,’ ‘diaspora’ and ‘homeland’; (2) Informal interviews at events, semi-structured interviews, and life histories of key interlocutors, to examine how personal and political narratives of ‘critical events’ such as war, migration, death, and protest constitute diasporic subjects as ethical selves and political agents; (3) Mapping social networks and kinship across time and geographic distance, to study overlapping activist networks and their interactions; (4) Constructing an archive of diasporic activism by collecting documents from libraries, organizations, community media and activists’ personal collections, to trace the public formation of a Tamil diaspora.

My long-term research proceeded in three phases, coinciding with the final phases of the Sri Lankan war. Fieldwork began in Toronto in January 2008, following the Government of Sri Lanka’s official abrogation of the 2002 ceasefire. In Toronto, I spent the first three months of my fieldwork reinitiating contacts I had made during previous stints of pre-dissertation research, attending a wide range of public events, making new contacts and generally introducing myself to ‘the community.’ I spoke with community-based activists, writers, journalists, educators and social workers, with a focus on those who were affiliated with the following organizations: the Canadian Tamil Congress (CTC), the World Tamil Movement (WTM), Canadian Tamil Youth Development (CanTYD), Tamil Youth Organization (TYO-Canada), etc. I also met 'alternative' groups

such as the Tamil Resource Centre, Karumaiyam, Canadian-Sri Lankan Women's Action Network, Canadians for Peace (C4P), and dissenting activists, who were often members of groups including the Sri Lanka Democracy Forum (SLDF), Canadian Democratic Tamil Cultural Association (CDTCA), EPDP-Canada, etc. I conducted participant-observation at demonstrations and rallies, 'awareness events,' activist workshops, organizing and planning meetings, community debates, literary and political discussions, commemorative ceremonies (e.g. a vigil remembering victims of the 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom known as "Black July," and Heroes Day, an LTTE commemoration of martyrs), rehabilitation fundraisers, exhibits, theatre performances and "cultural shows." Through such events and the connections I had made, I became increasingly involved in the social and political life of Tamil Toronto.

Throughout this period, I interacted with hundreds of Tamils, and conducted eighty-eight individual and group interviews with activists. These semi-structured interviews allowed me to gather basic details about personal backgrounds (for example, places of birth and residence, education, occupation), migration trajectories, and settlement processes, and were accompanied by several open-ended questions designed to open the interview up into a broader conversation about diasporic social life and political activism. Some interviewees were key interlocutors who spoke with me on multiple occasions; as a consequence, their stories and words appear more frequently throughout the dissertation.

Next, in October 2008, I went to Tamil Nadu, where protests initiated by local Indian political parties, civil society groups and, later, student activists were matched by unprecedented protests among Sri Lankan Tamil refugees. I partnered with a local NGO,

the Organization for Eelam Refugees' Rehabilitation (OfERR) to work with refugees and the social activists among them in camps throughout the state. In Tamil Nadu, my interviews were primarily with residents of refugee camps and refugee workers and activists, but I also conducted interviews with Indian activists, academics and government officials to better situate my research among refugees. In Tamil Nadu, I also asked interlocutors to complete a brief questionnaire aimed at gathering basic data about household composition and family migration at the conclusion of our interview.

Additionally, in Chennai, I collected documents on the history of Tamil politics and separatist activism at the Periyar Thidal, Anna Arivalayam, the International Institute of Tamil Studies, and OfERR's library. During the second-half of this phase of research, some of my interlocutors in Canada, while watching and communicating with Indian activists, organized mass demonstrations and street actions of their own.

Finally, at the end of war in May 2009, and again in July and August, I returned to Toronto to conduct follow-up research among Tamil protesters, community leaders, and dissenting activists, to examine their ongoing actions, feelings and aspirations at the end of war.

### *Some considerations*

Given the contentious politics and migration practices researched in this dissertation, I have taken great care to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of my interlocutors during fieldwork and writing. I did not respond to requests to share names of those I had already interviewed when asked during research. Only two activists explicitly requested that I use their personal names. I have also used the names of official and public figures. All other names in this dissertation are pseudonyms. I have also

changed the names of the smaller refugee camps I discuss. In addition, all data, including my fieldnotes, were coded and encrypted on password-secured hard drives.

*On my presentation of the material*

This dissertation presents and interprets an ethnographic record constituted out of multiple, interconnected fragments gathered during fieldwork. This is in part due to the nature of diaspora research, which involves fieldwork among people whose lives are physically and socially dispersed across multiple places and networks.

My presentation of the material also emerges from intellectual and political concerns that arise from this research project. The history of anthropology has shown a disciplinary preference for unified narratives of social continuity that often explains away conflict. This has certainly changed with the influence of poststructuralist theories (notably, Foucault's work on discourse and power), postcolonial studies (for example, the Subaltern Studies collective) and anthropology's turn to violence and suffering under conditions of globalization and neoliberalism. Yet, contemporary ethnographies still rely on academic traditions of argumentation that, even in their complexity, may force connections to produce a unity of subject and theoretical import. Similarly, in the war between the state and the LTTE, nationalists in Sri Lanka and diaspora activists frequently asserted the need for unity—whether as “Tamils,” “Sinhalese,” or “Sri Lankans.” In contrast, contemporary research on postcolonial Sri Lanka has tended to focus on the social and political crises that have led to insurgency, violence and war. Yet, in doing so, many of these studies have also presumed the unity of the groups they



present as being in an inevitable conflict—“the Tamils” and “the Sinhalese.”<sup>15</sup> My effort here has been to explore the mutually constitutive relationship between social unity and conflict among Tamils, through a narrative that presents the contradictions and ambivalences inherent to Tamil diaspora life and politics.

### *Situated research*

I was born in Canada to Tamil parents from Jaffna, Sri Lanka. My father and mother were the first of their siblings to leave the island, and planned to return in a few years, only to find they could not—after the anti-Tamil pogrom of July 1983 (known to many as ‘Black July’), the country slid inexorably into war. Tamils migrated to Canada in large numbers during the 1980s and 1990s, and my parents’ siblings and cousins, and their families, were among the new immigrants. My parents moved frequently within Canada and the United States during this time. Although a formative part of my later childhood and adolescence was spent in Toronto, my peripatetic upbringing allowed me to observe a growing community with which I was affiliated, but from which I lived apart more often than not.

I later attended the University of Toronto, where I completed undergraduate degrees in history and anthropology, and turned my attention to studying the country (Sri Lanka) and region (South Asia) that my parents had not-so-willingly left behind, alongside my study of Canadian history, society and politics. Toronto is ‘home’ in these ways and more—more accurately, it is one of my many homes—and this understanding

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example de Silva (1981), Devotta (2005), Wilson (1988, 2000). I analyze this problem further in Chapter 3.

has led not only to the intensive study that produced this dissertation, but also to critical reflection on the purpose and social relevance of this enterprise.

The research for this dissertation was undertaken due to my desire to critically investigate the social dynamics of violence and conflict that led to Sri Lankan Tamil migration and the creation of far-flung yet interconnected diaspora communities. In time, I became increasingly interested in how activists mobilized diasporic communities out of Tamil migrant and refugee populations.

As a diasporic ethnographer, I write here with the assumption that my work can (and likely will) be read by members of the diasporic communities and transnational networks discussed, of which I am and have been a part. My early awareness of this fact led, at first, to difficulties in writing up my fieldwork. Eventually, this gave way to an understanding of the necessity of telling this story as only I know how to tell it. I write with an awareness of fieldwork-based ethnography as a product of partial and situated knowledge (Haraway 1988), as is the work of every researcher.

*A note on “Tamil”*

This dissertation’s inquiry into Tamil diaspora activism warrants a brief explanation of my use of the ethnolinguistic category, “Tamil.” Scholarly accounts of modern Ceylon and Sri Lanka have observed a distinction between “Ceylon Tamils” and “Indian Tamils” on the island. In the twentieth century, Ceylon Tamils also distinguished themselves from the Indian Tamils by calling themselves “Indigenous Tamils,” thus making a claim to centuries of historical habitation on the island, in contrast to Tamils who traveled from India to Ceylon between 1870 and 1930 to labor on British-owned tea plantations, and the laborers’ descendants. In fact, as I discuss in the first two chapters of

the dissertation, this differentiation among Tamils—and the relationship between territory and belonging it implies—shaped and was shaped by the island’s early postcolonial politics. Today, those who once described themselves as Ceylon or Indigenous Tamils may use “Sri Lankan Tamils” or “Eelam Tamils,” depending on their politics. In contrast, I occasionally use “Sri Lankan Tamil” diaspora to refer to all Tamils from the island, including Tamils from the Hill-Country (*malaiyaka*) region, who form communities living outside the island.

In addition to country of origin, Tamil identity is often qualified by regional distinctions in Sri Lanka and the diaspora. In Toronto and throughout much of Sri Lanka’s Tamil diaspora, “Jaffna Tamils”—Tamils from the Jaffna peninsula of northern Sri Lanka—predominate, and this group tends to assume a synecdochal relationship to the rest of Sri Lanka’s north and east. In Tamil Nadu, however, Tamils from the Jaffna peninsula were few among camp refugees, who were mostly from other districts and regions: Mannar, Mullaitivu, Kilinochchi (taken together as the Vanni), Trincomalee, Nuwara Eliya (or *malaiyaka*, the Hill-Country), and so on. Finally, in addition to regions and countries of origin, diaspora Tamils also use their country of residence and/or citizenship to distinguish groups within the wider diaspora: e.g. Canadian Tamils, British Tamils, Swiss Tamils, etc.

These distinctions among Tamils often gave way to a general identity as Tamils affected by systemic discrimination, violence and war. My use of the “Tamil” category varies contextually, as it does among those who are identified as Tamils. When I refer to “Tamils” or a “Tamil diaspora” in general, I do so in the context of a diasporic politics that generalizes across the abovementioned differences: an activism predicated upon a

shared group identity as potential targets of violence in Sri Lanka.<sup>16</sup> However, I do not take these differences for granted, and at times draw attention to the ways in which Tamil, as a political identity, obscures important social differences among the people described.

### **Overview of Dissertation Chapters**

This dissertation is organized around three interlocking concerns: (1) I examine the social transformations of Tamil migration and militancy that led to the formation of a new ethical and political self among those previously expelled from the state and the Tamil national project: The creation and naming of a diasporic political subject who bears a moral obligation to act to prevent and stop war from the relative safety of distance from its physical exigencies. (2) I consider how and why diasporic activists represented, reenacted, and mediated suffering to protest war and express dissent. (3) More broadly, my research seeks to understand how and why “diaspora” has become a concept and location with moral, cultural and political salience not only for Tamils dispersed by violence and war, or social scientists, but those who claim belonging to today’s “global diasporas.” These concerns unfold in the following chapters:

Part I of this dissertation delves into the historical and social transformations that gave rise to a diasporic politics with competing ethical obligations for Tamils living outside Sri Lanka.

Chapter One introduces the reader to my ethnographic field, “the Tamil diaspora,” and begins to map out the conditions of possibility that produced Tamil protest against

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<sup>16</sup> For example, this general category appear in a statement I often heard during my fieldwork in Canada and India: “The government [of Sri Lanka] is killing Tamils.”

war. The first half of the chapter maps the global dispersion of Tamils from Sri Lanka and provides the reader with an ethnographic introduction to the social life of Tamils in my two primary fieldsites: Toronto, Canada and Tamil Nadu, India. Chapter Two examines how these two different trajectories of migration and settlement resulted in political movements with contrasting ends; First, I describe the political situation in Sri Lanka during the 2002-2008 ceasefire and the failure of the peace process. Then I turn to Sri Lankan Tamil activism in Canada and India during this period. In Toronto, I examine the *Pongu Tamil* (Tamil Uprising) movement, tracking the event from Jaffna, Sri Lanka to its diasporic iterations in Toronto in 2004 and 2008. In Tamil Nadu, I examine movements of refugee return to Sri Lanka and how a local NGO “of, by and for refugees” mobilized and prepared refugees for their eventual return to the island.

In Chapter Three, I explore diaspora histories of Tamil politics, and how a new political subject emerges in activists’ practices of historical narration. The first half of the chapter presents dominant narratives of Tamil politics and the events that have typically defined this domain in colonial and postcolonial Ceylon/Sri Lanka. In addition to a synthesis of prevailing accounts, I undertake a reading of Tamil political histories written by scholars and activist writers during the war (1983-2009). The second half of the chapter supplements this historiography with ethnographic insights drawn from life history interviews and oral histories recorded during fieldwork among diaspora activists. I juxtapose these diasporic narrations of Tamil political histories and the ‘critical events’ (Das 1995) they invoke to construct a genealogy of the political conditions and contestations at the core of an emerging Tamil diaspora politics. In contrast to academic and activist histories that claim the “end” of Tamil politics with the start of war, I argue

that a specifically “Tamil” politics and Tamil political identities in Sri Lanka were instead displaced—figuratively and literally—and transformed in the parallel developments of Tamil militancy and diaspora activism.

Part II of the dissertation explores Tamil forms and formations of diasporic community in actions of protest and dissent at the end of Sri Lanka’s war. Chapter Four focuses on Tamil diaspora activism in Toronto, a city with the largest population of Sri Lankan Tamils outside Asia. First, I outline the social, cultural and political lives of Tamils in Toronto, and describe the hegemony of the LTTE in diaspora politics. Then, I investigate the notions of “community” and “citizenship” that give form to Tamil belonging in diaspora. Specifically, I examine the politics of community and citizenship in the context of Canada’s state policies of multiculturalism and anti-terrorism laws that led to proscriptions on the LTTE in 2006, and the World Tamil Movement in 2008. Through participant-observation, interviews and everyday conversations with activists, and a discursive analysis of Canadian laws and media coverage, I consider the social meaning and political effects of the ban on Tamil diaspora community formations and activism. I argue that, after the ceasefire, Canada’s ban on the LTTE catalyzed Tamil protest as an assertion of a diasporic identity and community.

Chapter Five and Chapter Six each provide a thick description of the social and political lives of Tamils from Sri Lanka living in the refugee camps and cities of Tamil Nadu, India. Taken together, these chapters demonstrate that two forms of refugee life—the camp and the city—are relational and constitutive of one another in Tamil Nadu and in the larger formation of a Tamil diaspora. In contrast to philosophies that idealize “the refugee” as an exemplary political subject of our times (Agamben 1994; 1998), by virtue

of her exclusion from the polis, these chapters reveal the ambivalent and multiple values of the polysemic figure of “the refugee” for Sri Lankan Tamils now settled in India.

Despite their lack of legal status, Tamils who live in the camps are socially recognized as refugees, and inhabit this identity to make strategic claims upon the state as they organize to improve their lives and protest Sri Lanka’s war. Camp Tamils expect they will return to Sri Lanka one day, and organize community and collective actions in their displacement as part of their prospective return. In Chennai, however, Tamils who were self-settled at the city’s limits became refugees in order to migrate from India to the West, where they hoped to settle in a diasporic community of citizens. Whether through collective action or international migration, I suggest that it is precisely in contested attempts to reinhabit a world that, to quote Hannah Arendt (1968[1951]) “makes opinions significant and actions effective,” and to invoke and appropriate its loss, that Tamil refugees enact a new political subjectivity at the limits of modern citizenship.

The final chapter of this dissertation, Chapter Seven, brings my fieldsites together to examine Tamil actions in response to suffering. I discuss how Tamil diaspora communities mobilized against the war, and more specifically, in response to Tamil suffering during the final months of battle. In the first part of the chapter, I discuss two exhibits that were organized by activists in Canada to raise awareness about historical suffering. The first exhibit, “Remembering Silenced Voices,” was organized by the Canadian Tamil Congress to commemorate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Black July. In the exhibit, Tamils who feel they constitute a ‘suffering community’ in Sri Lanka became ‘survivors’ in their lives after migration, producing knowledge about violence for Canadian audiences. The second exhibit was titled “Call of the Conscience,” and was

organized by a dissenting Tamil activist who wished to present a history of the war. I argue that diaspora Tamil activists share a desire to alleviate and end Tamil suffering in Sri Lanka. In my synthesis and engagement with theories of spectatorship and humanitarian action in response to suffering, I suggest that Tamil activists were neither distant spectators, nor immediate sufferers, but diasporic intermediaries whose past experiences of violence in Sri Lanka and recent distresses shaped their actions to end the war. The second part of the chapter describes and analyzes the ways in which activists in Canada and India publicly invoked and performed suffering to mobilize public action against the war, and explores some limits to these mobilizations.

The war ended on May 18, 2009 with the Sri Lankan government's announcement of the military defeat of the LTTE. This dissertation concludes with reflections on the end of the war, and its aftermath in protests that continued in Toronto and other diasporic locations. I highlight the possibilities and limits of "the Tamil diaspora" as a subject of political action in Sri Lanka. An epilogue follows, in which I briefly describe the situation of post-war Sri Lanka, new trends in Tamil migration, and the reappearance of "the Tamil refugee" across international waters and borders.



*Chapter 1*

***Tamil Migrations and Diasporic Locations***

Everywhere  
losing life and claiming comfort,  
we are human debris;  
Is our land  
In perennial autumn,  
a lifeless tree?

My son in Jaffna,  
my wife in Colombo,  
my father in Vanni  
my mother in Tamil Nadu,  
relatives in Frankfurt,  
my sister in France,

me,  
a lost camel in Alaska,  
in Oslo,  
our families,  
a pillow's feathers,  
flung in the air  
by a primate fate?

(in Kanaganayakam, ed. 2009: 83-84).

The above poem, "Autumn Thoughts" by V. I. S. Jayapalan, renders the pain of displacement and dispersion experienced by so many of Sri Lanka's Tamil people over the last three decades. Jayapalan—himself a displaced Sri Lankan Tamil living in Chennai at the time—writes of a land that has become "a lifeless tree," shed of its leaves in a "perennial autumn," its people now "human debris" whose families are divided and randomly "flung" around the world.

Jayapalan's poetry provides a fitting epigraph for the contents of this chapter, which examines the historical and socio-cultural experience of migration and displacement for Sri Lanka's Tamils. This chapter sketches out the contours of my ethnographic field, "the Tamil diaspora," and my primary objects of analysis through the lens of migration. I hone in on two different trajectories of Tamil migration involving multiple scales of mobility and habitation. The first section of the chapter maps the global dispersion of Tamils from Sri Lanka before and after the anti-Tamil violence of 1983; in the latter sections, I ethnographically describe historical and social processes of migration to Toronto, Canada and Tamil Nadu, India. Throughout, I elucidate the cultural and political significance of these migrations and mobilities, setting the stage for the chapters that follow.

### **A Century of Tamil Migration**

Tamil migration to and from Sri Lanka has a long history, and can be characterized by multiple phases in the modern period. Each of these phases contributes to the many layers of today's Tamil diaspora.

Twentieth-century migration to Sri Lanka was primarily from the subcontinent. For several decades of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Tamils from South India (primarily from the Madurai, Tirunelveli, and Ramanathapuram districts) were taken to labor on colonial plantations in the central, hilly regions of the island—an area known to Sri Lankans as "the Upcountry" or "Hill Country," and in the Tamil language as *malaiyakam*.<sup>17</sup> They traveled first, by boat, via Rameswaram to Talaimannar,

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<sup>17</sup> See Bastiampillai (1996a), Daniel (1996), and Peebles (2001). Whatever their ethnic identity today, most of Sri Lanka's people are the descendents of centuries of migrants to the island, most of whom were from Southern India. In the island's modern history, two distinct groups of Tamils were identified as the Ceylon

and then were transported to Kurunegala to camps in the town of Matale.<sup>18</sup> Ceylon also attracted the notice of merchants who settled primarily in the low-country region of the south, in Colombo. In this period, dozens of Ceylon Tamils traveled to India for higher education in Madras, and several scholars made trips back and forth across the Palk Straits.<sup>19</sup>

British India was not the only territory of the Empire in which Ceylonese lived and traveled. In the first decades of the twentieth century, many of Ceylon's urban political elites were educated in Britain. The Ceylon Tamil League and former CNC founder-president, Ponnambalam Arunachalam, and the country's future prime ministers, D.S. Senanayake, Sir John Kotelawala, and S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, had lived in Britain for several years before returning to the island to head their families' estates and political dynasties.<sup>20</sup>

In the 1930s and 1940s, English-educated upper-caste Ceylonese worked for the British civil service, largely as clerks and low-level administrators, in the colonies of Malaya (present-day Malaysia and Singapore) and Burma. These civil servants were often young men of Tamil origin who, after marrying, settled and supported their families in Jaffna while working abroad. Their remittances also aided local *infrastructure* projects

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Tamils and Tamils of Indian Origin. The latter were also deemed "Plantation Tamils" or "Estate Tamils," but today increasingly identify by their region as *malaiyaka thamar*, or Hill-Country Tamils (sometimes noted as "Up-Country Tamils.") As Bass (2013) notes, the distinction in ethnic nomenclature implicitly contributes to the social and political marginalization of these Tamils. For a recent discussion of community and identity among Hill-Country Tamils, see Jegathesan (2013).

<sup>18</sup> I discuss the importance of this route in Chapter 5 on Sri Lankan Tamils in India.

<sup>19</sup> The list of scholars includes C.W. Thamocharampillai and Arumuga Navalar. See Kailasapathy (1984[1979]) and Sivathamby (1995) for a discussion of scholarly exchanges. Scholars of Tamil literature during this period in India became known as "the Jaffna school."

<sup>20</sup> See Jayawardena (2000) for a historical study of these wealthy families and their political ambitions. See especially Chapter 11, pp. 202-219, on the making of Colombo's Tamil bourgeoisie and migration from Jaffna to the city.

and temples—leading one political writer, Pieter Keuneman, to dub Jaffna “a money-order economy” (Philips 2007). At independence, some of these men stayed and their families migrated to Malaya, while others returned to work in Colombo and other areas of the island, returning to Jaffna on weekends or holidays.<sup>21</sup>

Tamil migration abroad accelerated in response to political and legal changes in Ceylon. After independence in 1948, a wave of migration began in the mid-1950s and continued throughout the 1960s with the advent of legislation that made Sinhala the country’s only official language.<sup>22</sup> Ceylonese professionals of all ethnicities who were not proficient in the Sinhala language migrated to Britain primarily, as well as Australia and Canada.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, Ceylon Tamils, accustomed to seeking and finding advancement in and through the civil services and professions, continued to enter the two universities in Ceylon (Colombo and Peradeniya) in numbers that appeared disproportionate to their ratio in the island’s population as a whole. In the 1970s, middle-class Tamil youth went abroad to study in countries such as India, Russia, and the United Kingdom when university “standardization” policies created quotas for Tamils. In addition, thousands of young professionals left the island due to the continued implementation of Sinhala Only, new laws and constitutions that further marginalized minority groups, and ethnic tensions that increasingly led to violence. Some took short-term, one to three year leaves from

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<sup>21</sup> Although a fictional account, Ambalavanar Sivanandan’s novel, *When Memory Dies* depicts the manner in which some Jaffna Tamil men traveled to Colombo for work, returning to rest and spend time with their families in Jaffna on weekends. Others lived with their families in Colombo, the Hill-Country, Batticaloa, and Trincomalee, while working in the civil service, as accountants and teachers, or in private enterprise.

<sup>22</sup> I discuss The Official Language Act of 1956 and the “Sinhala Only” movement, as well as the other political events and laws described throughout this chapter in greater detail in Chapter 3.

<sup>23</sup> Tamil immigrants to Britain during the 1950s and 1960s are a part of the first phase of migration in E. Valentine Daniel’s 1996 study of Tamil migrants in the UK during the mid-1990s. Perera (2008) writes of how Sri Lankans (including Tamils) had to pass as “white” in order to gain entry to Australia during this time.

government service, in order to do contract work in Asia or southern and eastern Africa; others left permanently for the United Kingdom and North America. This period of Tamil migration had important consequences for the migrants who followed.<sup>24</sup>

### *Tamil Migration after 1983*

While Tamils emigrated from Sri Lanka throughout the twentieth century, mass migration from the island began largely after the anti-Tamil violence of 1983 and the beginning of war between Tamil militant groups and Sri Lankan forces. The war with the state intensified through the mid-1980s and 1990s, prompting thousands of Tamils to depart every year.<sup>25</sup> Most Sri Lankan Tamils went to India first—hundreds of thousands sought asylum during the decades of war—and for many, India was where they would remain. For others, India provided a brief respite where they could plan their route abroad, either on their own or through a broker, to Europe and North America. The broker was usually another Sri Lankan Tamil in Chennai, Trichy, Trivandrum or Kochi. Tamil migrants with some means headed to Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States, which offered the possibility of citizenship.<sup>26</sup> However, throughout the 1990s, these Anglo-American countries enabled global flows of capital through free trade agreements and further entrenched neoliberal economic reforms, while passing more restrictive immigration policies, making it difficult for Tamils to enter as immigrants or

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<sup>24</sup> In addition to the links drawn in this chapter between migrants of the 1972-1983 period and post-1983 migrants, Chapter 3 discusses the importance of this period of Tamil migration for the internationalization of 'the Tamil national question' and development of Tamil militancy.

<sup>25</sup> See Santhiapillai (1986) and Chandrahasan (1989) for figures on Tamil migration in the mid-to late 1980s.

<sup>26</sup> See Sarah Wayland (2002, 2003) and Cheran (2003; 2007) on the Tamil diaspora in Canada; E. Valentine Daniel (1994, 1996) on immigrants and refugees to the UK.

refugees.<sup>27</sup> Such policies generally favored so-called “economic immigrants.” Tamil migrants also made claims for asylum in Northern and Western Europe. West Germany was a prime destination for Tamils during the 1970s and the first few years of the war, as a gateway to the rest of Europe.<sup>28</sup> Many of these Tamil migrants continue to live as undocumented immigrants or refugees in France, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.<sup>29</sup> Each of these countries has varying practices of asylum determination; for instance, in France, the majority of applicants were granted asylum, whereas after 1985, Germany only granted asylum to 1% of those who applied (Naidoo 1987).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Two policies were designed to restrict and deny asylum claims in the UK: The 1993 Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act, and the 1996 Immigration and Asylum Act. In the late 1990s, UK policy shifted with the Labour government in favor of “economic migration.” As of 2002, asylum-seekers are not permitted to work in the UK; moreover, their state benefits have been cut multiple times in legislation since 1993. See Somerville, Sriskandarajah and Latorre (2009).

In 1992, Paul Keating’s government changed Australia’s policy to require the detention of all people arriving without a valid visa. In the United States, the Immigration Act of 1990 increased total, overall immigration, but these changes privileged specific occupational categories, and included employer-sponsored immigrants and immigrant investors.

<sup>28</sup> Migrants entered East Germany, and crossed the wall into West Germany, where they either lived undocumented or claimed asylum. Tamil asylum applications to Germany peaked at 17,340 applications in 1985—the most applicants from Sri Lankan citizens to any country that year (UNHCR 2004). The same year, the Federal Administrative Court decided that Sri Lankan Tamils were not experiencing targeted persecution; applications decreased dramatically, as did acceptances. Tamils continued to migrate to Germany over the next two decades under difficult legal and labor restrictions, and thousands left to resettle in Canada, where permanent residence and citizenship could be acquired.

<sup>29</sup> For two monographs about Tamil asylum-seekers in Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, see McDowell (1996) on Switzerland, and Fuglerud (1999) on Norway; see also Steen (1992) for a study of refugees in Denmark and Britain; Guha (2003) for an article on Tamils in Switzerland.

<sup>30</sup> See also Rodgers, who reports that in 1988—one year after the signing of the Indo-Lanka peace accord, and during the LTTE-IPKF war—over 40 percent of Tamils seeking asylum in France were given refugee status (1989: 32).

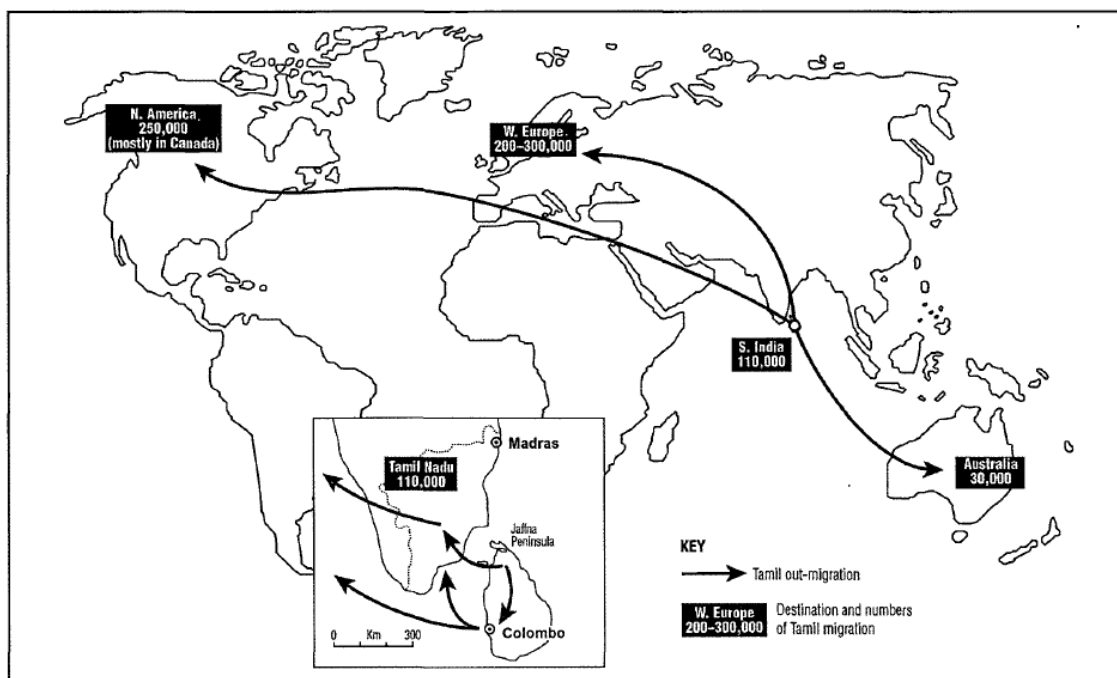


Figure 1.1: Map of Sri Lanka's Tamil diaspora, 1983-2002 (Source: Van Hear and Rajasingham-Senanayake 2006)

Table 1: Tamils from Sri Lanka, by the numbers (estimated)<sup>31</sup>

Canada	200,000 – 300,000
United States	20,000 – 30,000
United Kingdom	100,000 – 150,000
France	100,000
Germany	60,000
Switzerland	50,000 - 60,000
Norway	6,000 – 10,000
India	200,000
Malaysia & Singapore	25,000 – 50,000
Australia	40,000-60,000

<sup>31</sup> This estimate includes all Tamils who have migrated from Sri Lanka, and draws on numbers from a range of sources. These sources include Van Hear and Rajasingham-Senanayake (2006), UNHCR (2004), the Government of Tamil Nadu's Special Commissioner on Rehabilitation (2008, 2009), Sri Lanka's 2012 census, as well as interlocutors during my fieldwork.

## Sri Lankan Tamils in India

### *Tamil Migration to India After 1983*

They arrived in several phases after 1983<sup>32</sup> and throughout the war. Tamils fleeing violence in Sri Lanka often turned to India first, for obvious reasons: (1) The geographical proximity of India's southern peninsula, via a series of islets named Adam's Bridge in the Palk Straits, to their homeland and (2) the historical connections between Sri Lanka's north and east with India's southeastern state of Tamil Nadu, along with the shared language and cultural affinities of their peoples. Sri Lankan Tamils who arrived in India after 1983 may be divided into three categories:

- (1) Tamils who are registered to live in a camp set up by the state government of Tamil Nadu, often referred to as "camp refugees" by state officials and NGOs
- (2) Tamils from Sri Lanka who live among the local population in towns throughout the state are known as "non-camp refugees"
- (3) A more restricted population living in "special camps" created by the state to detain Sri Lankan Tamils who were identified as militants; officials refer to them as "inmates."

In this section of the chapter, I describe the journey and arrival of Tamils from Sri Lanka to India. My primary focus here and throughout the dissertation—when discussing refugees in India—is on Tamils living in government-administered camps. While Sri Lankan Tamils who fled to India after 1983 were referred to as "refugees" in state documents and the everyday talk of its officials—from police officers at the camps to senior bureaucrats in Chennai—Sri Lankan Tamils in India are not officially recognized as refugees under international law, as India is not a signatory to several agreements,

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<sup>32</sup> "1983" has become shorthand for the events otherwise described as "July 1983" or "Black July" (in Tamil, *karuppu joolai*).



including the UN's 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.<sup>33</sup> Thus, this section also describes and examines the processes by which Tamils were temporarily settled and transformed into “refugees” in government-administered camps. After I describe the refugees' journey, arrival and settlement, I chart four distinct periods of post-1983 Tamil migration from Sri Lanka to India, and two periods of organized return to the island.

### *A Passage to India*

The majority of Tamil refugees in the camps arrived in India with their families and few belongings—whatever cash, jewelry, clothing, and other personal effects they could carry in overcrowded boats. When I asked why they had left the island, these families told me that they had to leave the country due to the ongoing war.

Everyday there was bombing and shelling. We could not stay there anymore.

The army came and rounded up all of the men in our village. We had to leave. It was too difficult to stay in Colombo, everything costs a lot of money. We could not afford it. There was nowhere for us to stay.

The war imperiled Tamil life in the war zones of the north and east. Everyone had a story about the war's violence, and all spoke of their fear for the physical safety of their loved ones and themselves. Colombo was considered to be an internal flight alternative—by refugees and international organizations alike—but most of the internally displaced were poor villagers and fisher families who could not afford to resettle in the capital city where they had no social or economic connections.

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<sup>33</sup> Chapter 5 discusses in greater detail the implications of the term, “refugee,” as a form of state-centered subjectivity versus a legal nomenclature and status for Sri Lankan Tamils living in India.

Leaving Sri Lanka for India was a difficult and stressful experience for all of the refugees with whom I spoke. Nearly all refugees living in the camps had traveled by boat. In conversation, they spoke less of their lives in Sri Lanka, and focused instead on the journey to India:

It was cold, and we were scared. We did not know if we would live to see land.

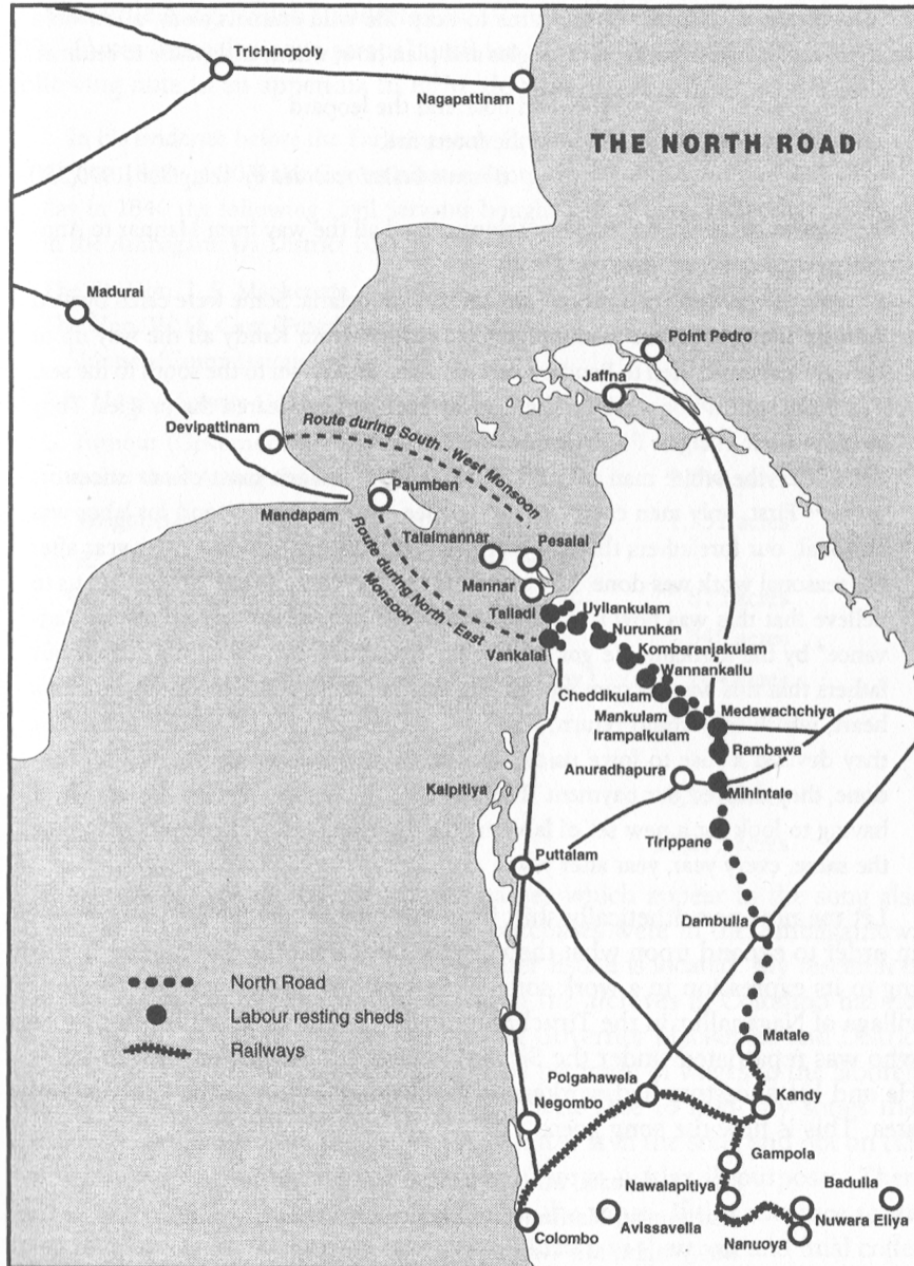
I got into a boat with my mother, my sister, and our *mama* (mother's brother). There were many boats at that time, and we paid Rs. 1000. It is not like today, where people pay lakhs.<sup>34</sup> The boat went very slowly and was moving back and forth, up and down, I was worried we would fall into the water.

In telling me about their journey, refugees focused not on what had been left behind, but the discomfort, the dangers, and the cost of the boat ride that took them away from the island. Most camp refugees had left Sri Lanka directly from the war-torn regions of the Northern and Eastern provinces by traveling to Talaimannar, as well as other departure points like Nachagudi, and to a much lesser extent, Trincomalee. From these points, they arranged and paid in full, in advance, for a boat ride from local fishermen across the Palk Straits to Dhanuskodi, near the temple town of Rameswaram. The distance across the strait at its narrowest point is less than 30 kilometers. The refugees' route reverses the journey taken by over one million Indian Tamil men and women who were recruited between 1835 and 1950 to work as "coolies" on Ceylon's railway, and its coffee, rubber and tea plantations. Their labor made the country's tea plantations the

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<sup>34</sup> If "lakhs" is an overestimation, it still speaks to the great difference between the price of the trip in the late 1980s/1990 and the time of fieldwork in 2008-9. The use of hyperbole indicates the near-impossibility of the figure and the magnitude of the cost for the average Tamil refugee.

largest sector of the island's economy. Almost one third of the Sri Lankan camp refugees are descendants of these mainland Tamil laborers.<sup>35</sup>



<sup>35</sup> Chapter 3 discusses the policies that led to the disenfranchisement of the Tamils of Indian Origin in Ceylon, and the repatriation of hundreds of thousands of these Tamils to India. The descendants of the people who stayed in Ceylon are today known as Hill-Country Tamils. As I discuss in Chapter 5, Hill-Country Tamils who were displaced by anti-Tamil violence in the 1970s and 1980s were resettled in northern Sri Lanka before they fled the island's war. These Tamils cannot apply for Indian citizenship.

Figure 1.2: Map showing labor route from Tamil Nadu to central Sri Lanka  
(Source: Daniel 1996: 33, original adapted from D. Wesumperuma)

Though a relatively short distance, the boats were small and overloaded when busy—when the war flared up—and the ride a physically arduous one. The journey began at night. The boats were simple fishing boats and catamarans owned by fishermen who turned to ferrying refugees and smuggling goods during the war; they moved slowly across the strait’s choppy waters. Up and down, up and down, the passengers bobbed, fearing all the while for their lives—often, without sufficient supplies of food and fresh water. Hundreds died each year when the boats capsized or ran out of supplies. In addition to being physically challenging, the journey by boat posed other dangers too. The fishermen took alternate routes to duck Sri Lankan and Indian Coast Guard and Navy patrols that aimed to find and stop the fishermen, and return their passengers. The Sri Lankan coast guard frequently patrolled the sea to intercept LTTE weapons smugglers. In some cases, Tamil refugees were brought back to the island after being picked up by the Sri Lankan Navy and charged before courts for leaving the country illegally. When the Indian government established a Naval Block in 2000, refugees who were dropped off on the sand dollars leading up to mainland were often stranded, as Indian fishermen were ordered to leave them, or risk being detained. With Sri Lanka’s return to war in 2006, however, the coast guard was usually responsible for bringing the refugees to shore.

In contrast, Sri Lankan Tamils who traveled by plane to India’s towns and cities said little about their actual journey.<sup>36</sup> The details of such trips accumulated slowly, across conversations with several different people. The journey was apparently simpler:

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<sup>36</sup> International flights were usually from Colombo to Chennai or Tiruchirapalli in Tamilnadu, or less frequently, to Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala.

They left Sri Lanka for India, via Colombo and the international airport at Katunayake. Air travel was initially more expensive than travel by boat, and an option only available to the comfortably middle-class or upper-middle class Tamil.

There were times when this distinction was not as straightforward as it would appear. As the war continued and would-be refugees found themselves in a desperate situation, the price of the boat journey skyrocketed. Refugees reported being charged 750-1000 LKR in 1990; nine years later, in 1999, the price had increased to 15,000 and as much as 30,000 LKR (Suryanarayan and Sudarsen 2000; Paus 2005: 46). During my fieldwork, Tamil refugees reported selling every last item they owned in order to purchase passage for themselves and their kin, and as the woman quoted above notes, some paid as much as a lakh, or 100,000 LKR, during the war's end.<sup>37</sup> Many Tamils viewed the boat ride as a more feasible option, even though it could become just as expensive as a plane ticket, which typically cost 20,000 to 30,000 LKR. In the 1990s, Tamils in LTTE-controlled territory had to obtain permission from the Tigers to leave, and purchase an "exit pass."<sup>38</sup> Then, to reach the international airport, they had to travel a few hundred miles through war zones to the capital, where they had few connections, did not speak Sinhala, and could appear suspicious to security personnel. While staying in Colombo, they had to pay to stay in a "lodge"—temporary low-budget accommodations in the city—while they applied for a passport and visa.<sup>39</sup> They also had to pay "fees" to

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<sup>37</sup> In 2008, the equivalent of approximately \$900 USD.

<sup>38</sup> For obvious reasons, purchasing an exit pass from the LTTE would not be an option for Tamils who were trying to escape the organization or avoid forced recruitment.

<sup>39</sup> "Lodges" housed Tamil migrants, as well as people who were hiding from the Tigers, workers en route to or returning from the Middle East, and those who were in Colombo to receive medical treatment or pursue educational and employment opportunities. Lodging also came with risks: Army and police officers regularly conducted security checks at these lodges, and arrested Tamils on suspicion of links to terrorism.

Colombo-based officials or brokers to ‘expedite’ and obtain their travel documents, and local police to avoid harassment or arbitrary arrest. Only after a few months of this costly and uncertain process, could they board a plane. Altogether, traveling to India via Colombo was always more expensive for Tamils.

### *Arrival and Quarantine*

When Sri Lankan Tamil refugees reached India after a long boat journey, they were taken through several steps of a standardized intake procedure. First, each person was interrogated at Dhanuskodi by the police and a Q-Branch officer to ascertain whether she or he had any links to the LTTE. The officers asked new arrivals to tell their stories multiple times, to see whether they could find any discrepancies, leading to further questioning. Anyone assumed to be a militant during this or subsequent questionings was taken to be detained at the “Special Camps” at Tipu Mahal in Vellore, Chengalpattu, or Melur in Madurai district.<sup>40</sup>

Next, refugees were taken to the Mandapam transit camp where they were asked similar questions as before. Once again, their journey mirrored that of Tamils recruited from India to Ceylon’s plantations: They were held in a separate section of the camp for recent arrivals dubbed “Quarantine.” Here, the refugees also underwent medical examinations and were photographed. Once their arrival was “processed,” they received refugee identity cards from the state government, and were able to live in the transit camp until they were transferred to another camp elsewhere in the state. The state government

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On a single day, June 7, 2007, Sri Lankan police evicted 376 Tamils who were staying in Colombo lodges, who were sent on buses to Vavuniya and Batticaloa. For one report of this event, see Reddy (2007).

<sup>40</sup> See below for a brief discussion of the creation of these special camps.

had reorganized the camps according to place of origin in 1993, and subsequently, efforts were made to reunite families in determining camp assignments (Rao 1993; Das 2005).

When I visited the Mandapam camp in April 2009, a refugee working for an NGO in the camp suggested that I visit quarantine to interview refugees who were still being processed.<sup>41</sup> These Tamils had just recently left Sri Lanka's war zone and were thus suspected of having connections to the LTTE. The quarantine area of the camp had lines of one-room (concrete) structures with low-ceilings and one small barred window. A female police officer stood outside the door of one. She stepped aside and I entered this door, where I met a young woman seated and waiting impassively. Our interaction was awkward. I asked questions, and she complied, with short answers followed by long silences. I asked the questions I usually asked of long-time residents of the camps, wanting to know which part of Sri Lanka they had come from, why they had come to India, and so on. Worried that the officer could hear us, I avoided questions that would directly implicate anyone in militancy or political activity. After the first young woman, I spoke to a second. In each of these interactions, I realized that my questions still bore an unfortunate resemblance to an interrogation. My access to this section of the camp required some proximity to local authorities via a non-governmental organization (OfERR), and so, even though I explained that I was doing academic research, my interview *felt* like an interrogation. Although I was uncomfortable with continuing to interview people in this context, my NGO host insisted, saying that it was important to get the details directly from (*neradiyaha*) from the newly arrived. The "directness" that

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<sup>41</sup> I visited Mandapam during daylight hours with two women from OfERR. We took a room in nearby Rameswaram, as visitors were not allowed to stay in the Mandapam camp after curfew.

my host valued was, however, belied by the bureaucratic context of my encounter with the young woman I was questioning.

Outside the quarantine, I heard more complicated and compelling stories. These were stories that could not be told during an interrogation. At the other end of the camp at Mandapam, I spoke with a woman who had arrived within the last two months. She worked at a small tea shop within the camp. Her husband was a former LTTE cadre who left his post and escaped to India with her. The war was not going well, and he had lost confidence in the organization. He was among many hundreds—perhaps thousands—of low-level cadre who were living among civilians in the middle of the war. However, he could not tell his interrogators of his past connections to the LTTE—if he had done so, he would have been separated from his family and detained in a special camp.

### *“Waves” of Migration*

#### *The First Wave: July 1983-July 1987*

Sri Lankan Tamils began to flee to India in large numbers shortly after the anti-Tamil violence of July 1983. In fact, the government of Tamil Nadu recorded refugee arrivals from the second day of the riots/pogrom, on July 24, 1983. According to their data, 134,053 Sri Lankan Tamils had sought refuge in Tamil Nadu by August 1987.<sup>42</sup> Those who arrived by boat were deemed “destitute” and given accommodations in “transit centers” at the Mandapam and Kottapattu transit camps, in the districts of Ramanathapuram and Trichy (Tiruchirappalli). By the end of this period, Sri Lankan

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<sup>42</sup> This number was from G. Bhujanga Rao’s (1993) report, *Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees in Tamil Nadu, India*, written for the Directorate of Rehabilitation, September 9. All subsequent population numbers in this section that are not otherwise attributed are from this report.



Tamil refugees in the camps numbered 39,918 people from 11,601 families.<sup>43</sup> District Collectors were instructed to set up temporary camps to accommodate these refugees.<sup>44</sup> They created 172 temporary camps throughout the state, excluding the city of Madras (Chennai) and the Nilgiris district. Refugees were housed in various kinds of publicly and privately-owned buildings, including regulated market committee buildings, cyclone shelters, old mills, theatres, wedding halls and schools.<sup>45</sup> Refugees were then taken from the transit center to these camps by buses, where they were given inoculations, and issued a Refugee Identity Card with a photograph of each family member and their biographical details attached.<sup>46</sup> Once identified, the state would provide them with an annual allotment of clothing, cooking vessels, mats and bedsheets.<sup>47</sup>

*The First Return: December 1987-March 1989*

In July 1987, India brokered and entered into a peace agreement with the Government of Sri Lanka and Tamil militants, also known as the Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord. An Indian Peace-Keeping Force was sent to the island to enforce the agreement, and bring “normalcy” to the war-zones of northern and eastern Sri Lanka. In India, Tamil Nadu District Collectors issued notifications to refugees living outside the camps, asking

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<sup>43</sup> “Family” was used to refer to a refugee “household,” and did not refer to all of an individual’s kin who may be living in the same camp or elsewhere. I discuss individual and household life in further detail in Chapter 5.

<sup>44</sup> In India, each state is divided into smaller administrative units called districts. A District Collector is in charge of district administration and revenue collection. Each Sri Lankan refugee camp was assigned to an officer working under the Collector for the camp’s district. See Chapter 5 for an extended discussion of refugee camp administration in Tamil Nadu.

<sup>45</sup> A significant number of these camps were created in the following districts: Trichy, Madurai, Pudukottai, South Arcot, Chengalpattu-MGR, Thanjavur, Coimbatore, North Arcot-Ambedkar, Periyar. See Rao (1993: 63); for statistics and brief descriptions of each of these camps as they existed in 1985, see Santhiapillai (1986: 108-187).

<sup>46</sup> The order of these actions differed from the process that occurred during my fieldwork, as described earlier in the chapter.

<sup>47</sup> Chapter 5 details the annual allotment received by refugees every two years.

them to register with the collector if they wished to return to Sri Lanka. They were then asked to report to the Special District Collector (of the Dept. of Rehabilitation) at Mandapam camp for their repatriation. 25,585 Tamil refugees returned to Sri Lanka by chartered ships during this period, and all of the state's temporary camps were shut down. 50 sailings were made over a period of 15 months between December 1987 and March 1989, with an average of over 500 people taken to Sri Lanka on each trip.<sup>48</sup> Almost 4 out of 5 of the refugees on these ships were from the camps. Other camp refugees either stayed in India by finding their own accommodations with the help of relatives and friends, or they returned later to Sri Lanka on their own, without government assistance.

#### *The second wave and Eelam War II*

Five months after the last ship of “reverse flow” refugees sailed from India to Sri Lanka, a second phase of migration began due to fighting between the IPKF and LTTE. The first group reached Indian shores on August 25, 1989.<sup>49</sup> However, the mass “wave” did not begin until July 1990, when the Government and the LTTE resumed fighting each other following the IPKF's withdrawal. This period marked the beginning of widespread and protracted displacements in northern and eastern Sri Lanka. In August 1990, the LTTE ordered the eviction of Muslims from the northern districts of Jaffna and Mannar. Most of these internally displaced people did not leave the country, however, and were sheltered in camps in the Puttalam district of northwestern Sri Lanka.<sup>50</sup> By the end of April 1991, 122,078 refugees from Sri Lanka had arrived in Tamil Nadu. Temporary

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<sup>48</sup> This number is drawn from a detailed list of sailings in Annexure VII of Rao (1993: 68-70).

<sup>49</sup> Rao (1993: 15) notes that by the end of June 1990, only 4,575 refugees had arrived.

<sup>50</sup> They had yet to be resettled during the ceasefire, and many continue to live in camps. See especially the third and fourth chapters of Thiranagama (2011), and Brun (2008).

camps were set up once again, in all districts except Madras and the Nilgiris. This time, camp refugees outnumbered by far those who lived outside the camps; in addition, many of the urban “non-camp” refugees of the first phase left India for Canada and Europe. 115,680 people were admitted and found accommodations in the new camps, which peaked at 337 in number. In addition to the types of public and private buildings used to house refugees during the first wave of migration, state agencies constructed thatched huts in Thanjavur district, followed by 20,000 temporary brick and mud-walled huts across the other districts. When this construction was completed in 1992, refugees were shifted from some privately-owned buildings to these huts, and the number of camps were reduced to 132 by January 1993.

The majority of my interlocutors arrived in India during this period. They believed at the time that their stay in India would be temporary. They were glad to be reunited with family members at the camps. Some recalled very tight and crowded living conditions, as hundreds of new “camps” were set up to accommodate them.

The “special camps” were also created during this time. At the end of 1990, the government learned that militants and their sympathizers resided in the camps.<sup>51</sup> Five special camps were set up at Puzhal (Chengai-MGR), Thammampatti (Salem), Borstal School (Pudukottai), Police Recruit School at Vellore (North Arcot-Ambedkar), and Saligramam in Virugambakkam (Madras).

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<sup>51</sup> India’s relationship with Tamil militant groups has changed over the course of the conflict. I discuss this in more detail in Chapter 3. The special camps are out of bounds to most visitors. See People’s Union of Civil Liberties—Tamil Nadu & Pondicherry (2000) for a report on the conditions of one such camp at Vellore.

*The Assassination and a Second Return, 1991-1993*

1991 was a pivotal year that changed irrevocably the lives of Tamil refugees in India. That year, Rajiv Gandhi, the former Prime Minister of India, was assassinated by a female suicide bomber while meeting the public at Sriperumbudur, 46 kilometers outside Chennai. The LTTE was blamed for the assassination.<sup>52</sup> Gandhi was responsible for the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, and despite signing the agreement, Prabhakaran, the LTTE leader, was unhappy with the terms of the agreement. The LTTE had already fought the IPKF, using weapons supplied by their erstwhile enemy, the Sri Lankan government then led by Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa. Both forces had found common cause in ousting the Indian army.

After the assassination, Indian public opinion turned against Sri Lanka's Tamils, including refugees caught up in the fighting. The people of Tamil Nadu, where the militants had found training and political support for more than a decade, were also upset, and their goodwill toward refugees soured.<sup>53</sup> India dissolved the Tamil Nadu state government, elections were held, and under a new Chief Minister Jayalalithaa<sup>54</sup>, who won on a platform of punishment for "anti-nationals," the state decided that all Sri Lankan Tamil refugees should be returned to the island. The Government of India chartered two

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<sup>52</sup> The LTTE never officially responded to these allegations. When they held an international press conference in Kilinochchi after the signing of the CFA in 2002, Anton Balasingham expressed "regret" about the assassination, but did not confirm the allegations against the LTTE.

<sup>53</sup> Although the 21 accused included several Indian citizens, six of the accused were Sri Lankan Tamils living in Tamil Nadu as refugees. In Chapter 5, I discuss in more detail the effects of the assassination on refugee life, as it was enmeshed with discourses of security and protection under surveillance.

<sup>54</sup> Jayalalithaa was of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), which ousted "Kalaignar" Mu. Karunanidhi of the DMK, who was a known supporter of the militant struggle for Tamil Eelam. In particular, Karunanidhi had supported TELO, and formed the Tamil Eelam Supporters Organization in an attempt to create unity among the Tamil militant groups in 1985. See Karunanidhi (n.d.) for an appeal he wrote around this time titled, *Eelath thamilarkale onrupattu poraadunka!* (Eelam Tamils: Unite and Fight!)

Indian vessels, M.V. Akbar and M.V. Ramanujam, to transport refugees from Madras Fort to Trincomalee, in the case of the former, and from Rameswaram to Talaimannar, in the case of the latter. Refugees were also transported by plane from Madras to Trincomalee.

To encourage these returns, the Department of Rehabilitation gave refugees a pamphlet listing the facilities that would be provided to returnee refugees by the Sri Lankan government; these included a “settling-in” allowance of LKR 2,000 per family, three months of dry rations, a modest housing grant of LKR 15,000 to low-income families with damaged or destroyed housing, housing loans, and compensation for death or injury due to “terrorist violence.”<sup>55</sup> Returnees were asked to sign a form indicating their willingness to return to Sri Lanka. This form was provided to them in English only at first, but after protest, the Government of India asked the state government to obtain refugees’ assent in Tamil and English. District collectors also screened videos provided by the Sri Lankan government, depicting the conditions to which refugees had previously returned. By October 1992, 29,102 Tamil refugees had returned to Sri Lanka.

The large number of involuntary returns during 1992-1993 resulted in the establishment of a small UNHCR office in Chennai to oversee the paperwork for “voluntary” returns. The government did not allow the UNHCR any oversight of the Sri Lankan refugee camps in Tamil Nadu, or the conditions of life therein.

Refugees living outside the camps were required to register with the closest police station. Registration was announced in daily newspapers. Within three weeks, 26,363

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<sup>55</sup> See Government of Sri Lanka (1992), for details on the reception of Sri Lankan returnee refugees and the limited assistance provided to them by the Ministry of Reconstruction, Rehabilitation, and Social Welfare. Also see Annexure XIV in Rao (1993).

people had registered themselves (Rao 1993: 26). The vast majority, however, did not. The police searched houses in neighborhoods where Sri Lankan Tamils were known to live, and picked up almost 1800 unregistered Tamils under the Foreigners Act of 1946. They were joined by Tamils who had subsequently arrived by plane on forged travel documents. New special camps were created to detain these refugees and restrict their movement.<sup>56</sup> They were permitted to leave once investigated and found to be “bonafide refugees” by the police, while inmates with no cases pending were allowed to leave for Sri Lanka, at their own cost or with government support. The state claimed that the detainees were willing to be repatriated.

### *The Third Wave and Eelam War III*

Refugee repatriation to Sri Lanka continued on a smaller scale until May 1995, when military operations between the SLA and LTTE in “The Battle for Jaffna” grew heated. On October 30, 1995, this resulted in an event known to Sri Lankan Tamils as “the Exodus”: the mass displacement of more than half a million people—more than two-thirds of the Jaffna peninsula’s population—on account of LTTE orders, leading to the Sri Lankan government’s control of Jaffna.<sup>57</sup> Hundreds of thousands traveled eastward on foot, with many following the LTTE south of the peninsula. The LTTE set up new headquarters in Kilinochchi, and recruited primarily among internally-displaced and

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<sup>56</sup> The refugees who were arrested did not necessarily have militant links, but were among the tens of thousands who had not registered with the police. The political rationality of the state’s decision to restrict these refugees’ mobility is unclear, but reveals the exercise of state power over bare life.

<sup>57</sup> For a human rights report of the Exodus from Jaffna, see University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) 1995. UTHR(J) describes this period as a new “war without borders” in which the Tigers relied on civilians, rather than sentries, for information about enemy movements, thus placing civilians in greater danger. The Exodus in this way prefigured the use of civilians as shields at the end of war in 2009. In the days that followed October 30, the LTTE denied that it had issued the order.

A personal account of this event from a Tamil nationalist perspective appears in Chandrakanthan (2000), the afterword to Wilson (2000).

resettled Tamils in the Vanni region (UTHR(J) 1995) and the Eastern Province (Trawick 2007). Intense fighting between the state's forces and the Tigers continued in northern and eastern Sri Lanka, leading to significant hardships for the local population. Everyday hardships included harassment at army checkpoints, food scarcity, and an embargo on common items such as batteries and fuel; in lieu of electricity and gas, residents made do with kerosene oil to light their homes and drive the few working vehicles. Tamils of the north and east also lived in terror of armed robberies by pro-government paramilitaries, extrajudicial killings, disappearances, forced child recruitment into the LTTE's ranks, and torture—a frequent tool of the army also used in the LTTE's prison camps (UTHR(J) 1992, 1994).

The third wave of refugee migration to India began in August 1996, when Tamil civilians—most of them internally displaced persons—fled from Mannar and other areas of northern and eastern Sri Lanka (Das 2005: 50). Many of these refugees were crossing the straits to find refuge in India for the second and third time. Heavy patrolling by the Indian and Sri Lankan Navy and Coast Guards stymied the mobility of refugees by making it difficult for other vessels to traverse “their” waters.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, 21,816 people arrived and sought refuge in Tamil Nadu camps between August 1996 and December

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<sup>58</sup> Das (2005: 50-51) claims that the LTTE encouraged the movement of refugees to India at this time to attract the international community's attention to the situation in Sri Lanka, but she provides no source. This assertion contradicts the organization's recruitment goals, as well as reports that it was very difficult for civilians to move out of LTTE controlled-territory during this time. It is true that the LTTE increasingly turned to diaspora fundraising during the 1990s. What this suggests is that the LTTE encouraged the migration of some of its members, sympathizers, and their families, while restricting the mobility of most Tamils. Poor families, and particularly those of oppressed castes, were especially vulnerable to forcible recruitment.

Das also claims that the LTTE seized local fishermen's boats, limiting the number of vessels available to ferry refugees. This may explain, in part, why the rate per person increased dramatically, to LKR 10,000-15,000 and up to LKR 30,000 in the years leading up to 2000.

2000.<sup>59</sup> The next month, the Tigers announced a ceasefire, but the war continued until the CFA was signed in February 2002.

### **Sri Lankan Tamils in Canada**

Sri Lankan Tamil migration to Canada largely occurred at the same time as the phases of migration to India, as described above. Tamils who migrated from Sri Lanka to Canada—in some cases, via third countries—could become permanent residents and citizens in their new country, in contrast to Tamils in India, who could only obtain provisional status as refugees, or as undocumented migrants. The following sections of the chapter draw on available reports, statistics, and ethnographic interviews, to examine how Tamil migration to Canada was fashioned out of political conflict and war in Sri Lanka, social and political differences among Tamils, and Canadian immigration policies.

#### *Tamil Migration to Canada After 1983*

While some Tamils had migrated to Canada from Jaffna and Colombo after the Sinhala Only legislation of 1956, and in the late 1960s and 1970s to study and work, they numbered fewer than 2,000 by 1983 (Vaitheespara 1999; Wayland 2004: 418).<sup>60</sup> They were mainly ‘independent’ and ‘family-class’ immigrants. Black July set in motion events that would transform this small community into the largest Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora outside Asia. Tamil immigrants who had arrived before 1983 lobbied the federal government, which had only recently changed its immigration policy and law to offer

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<sup>59</sup> Department of Rehabilitation (2000) in Das (2005: 50).

<sup>60</sup> Aruliah (1994) and Rodgers (1989) report different figures. The latter refers to Canada’s IRB figures as approximately 8,000 Sri Lankan Tamils in the early 1980s. It is unclear whether this includes any post-1983 migration.

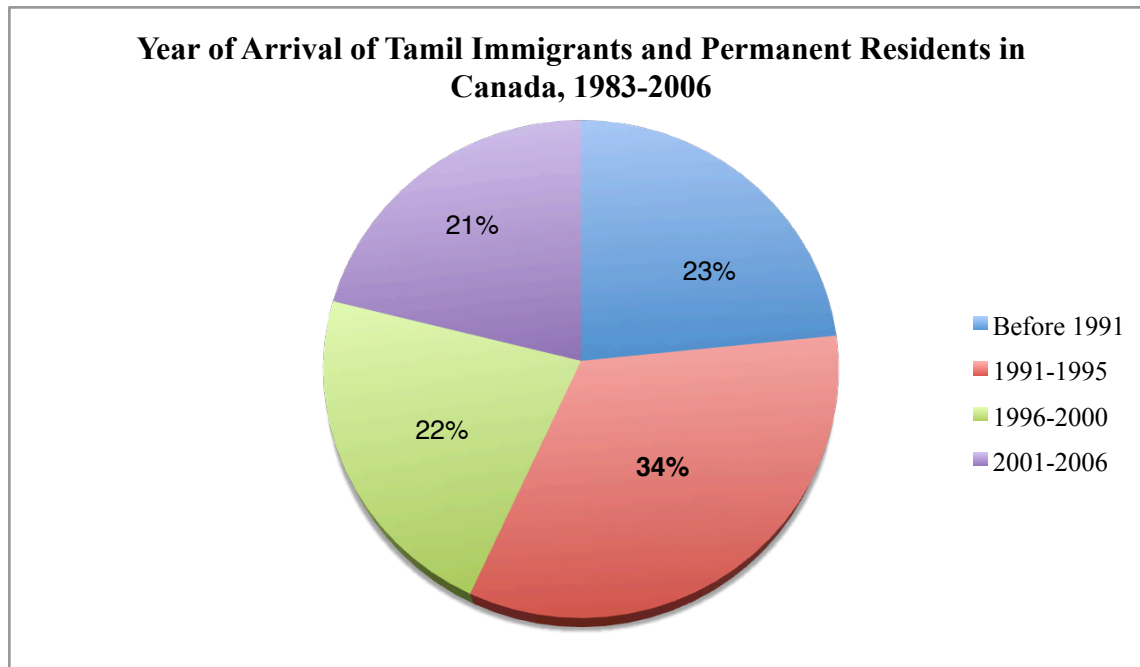


asylum to those with “a legitimate fear of persecution.”<sup>61</sup> They sought to open up and expedite the immigration process for Tamil refugee claimants from Sri Lanka, and those who could be sponsored by close relatives.<sup>62</sup> The Government of Canada created a special refugee resettlement program, selecting people who were taken by boat from southern Sri Lanka to temporary camps in Jaffna, or who went across the Palk Strait to Tamil Nadu. That year, Canada’s resettlement program admitted nearly 1,800 Tamils to the country. In the years to come, tens of thousands of people would travel to Canada by air, land and sea routes to claim refugee status. As a result, nearly half of Canada’s estimated 200,000-plus Tamils arrived as refugees. However, a significant number of refugee arrivals were not immediately after 1983, but in the years between 1991 and 2000; a large percentage of the remaining people were admitted through family reunification.

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<sup>61</sup> Canada began to admit refugees during the 1970s, beginning with Ugandans of South Asian origin who were banished during Idi Amin’s reign. Chilean and Vietnamese refugees followed. During the early 1980s, people fleeing political persecution and conflict would turn up at a port of Canadian entry and ask for asylum. Tamils from Sri Lanka were among those who did so, along with Somalis, Ethiopians and Eritreans, Iranians, Afghans, and Salvadoreans.

<sup>62</sup> Family reunification was a priority of the Canadian immigration system, and mostly took place through sponsorship, a form of immigration in which the applicant is financially underwritten by a permanent resident or citizen of Canada. At present, Section 130 of the Regulations to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act of 2001 defines a sponsor as a Canadian citizen or permanent resident who has filed a sponsorship application of behalf of a member of the Family Class of Canadian immigration policy, or a spouse or common-law partner.



**Figure 1.3:** Tamil immigration to Canada: Before 1991, 1991-2000, 2000-2006  
(Source: Statistics Canada 2006)

**Table 2:** Tamil arrivals according to 2006 Statistics Canada census

Before 1991 <sup>63</sup>	24,695
1991-1995	35,385
1996-2000	23,280
2001-2006	22,310
Total number of immigrants and permanent residents	105,670
Non-permanent residents <sup>64</sup>	3,365

Over the next two decades, Sri Lanka became a significant source of new immigrants to Canada. Between 1991 and 2001, Sri Lanka was the fifth largest source country of immigrants to Canada, sending 3.4% of Canada’s total immigrant population

<sup>63</sup> This was primarily between 1983 and 1991, as discussed in this chapter.

<sup>64</sup> This figure refers to Tamils undergoing refugee claims processing and still without “landed” (permanent resident) status in 2006, the year the census was taken.

during that period (Hyndman 2003: 264).<sup>65</sup> Sri Lanka was also the second largest source of refugees to Canada during the latter part of this period, 1998-2000, when fighting peaked during the third Eelam war. In the year 1999, Sri Lanka was responsible for the largest group of refugee claimants in Canada (Hyndman 2003: 264). The vast majority of refugees and immigrants from Sri Lanka to Canada during this time were of Tamil ethnicity.<sup>66</sup>

### *Populations and Politics*

The current number of Tamils from Sri Lanka living in Canada—and Toronto more specifically—is often subject to dispute. Estimates range anywhere from approximately 105,000, according to Canada’s 2011 census figures on Tamil-speakers (Statistics Canada 2011), to estimates of 300,000 provided by community-based organizations. The figure is likely somewhere in-between, and 200,000 has been a widely-cited figure (Cheran 2003, Wayland 2002).<sup>67</sup>

In its 2006 Census, the Canadian government agency, Statistics Canada (StatsCan), found that there were 114,896 immigrants from Sri Lanka to Canada between 1983 to 2007, and 98,265 people in the Toronto area who claimed Tamil as their mother tongue. That not all Tamils would speak Tamil, are of Sri Lankan origin, or self-identify

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<sup>65</sup> To put this into perspective: Sri Lanka was ranked after China, India, The Philippines and Hong Kong—the first two countries have populations numbering approximately 55 times that of Sri Lanka’s, but only 2.5-3 times the number of immigrants. Put another way, Sri Lanka was responsible for approximately *18 to 22 times* as many refugee claims per capita than the two largest sources. Sri Lanka was only *one-third of one percent* of the world’s population at this time.

<sup>66</sup> Tamil is not a category of ethnicity on the census, but a category of language only. Below, I discuss the conflicts between state practices of enumeration, community activism, and personal identities.

<sup>67</sup> The 105,000 number is according to the strictest measure—those who reported Tamil to be their mother-tongue in the 2011 Census. This measure is inadequate, as it only refers to those who report Tamil as their mother tongue. Not all persons who claim Tamil ethnicity will speak Tamil. Moreover, as discussed above, community organizations and scholars expressed concerns about lack of reporting. Their concerns warrant a reconsideration of Canadian census figures.

as Tamil when responding to a census question, complicates any interpretation of their assessment. StatsCan numbers were contested by community organizations and scholars who told me that new immigrants, particularly in Toronto, did not self-report to the Census because they often live in single-family homes (illegally) converted to multiple household dwellings. This issue of enumeration became a subject of public debate in reporting on the 2009 Tamil diaspora protests.<sup>68</sup>

As a governmental technology for enumerating and classifying populations (Foucault 1991), the Census is one means by which state power simultaneously *constitutes* and *recognizes* a community of Tamils.<sup>69</sup> Canadian Tamil organizations and associations have benefitted, organizationally and politically, from a wider—and in their understanding, more accurate—assessment of the population. Moreover, the communities these organizations claimed to represent would benefit if they could stake a greater claim upon the state’s resources for immigrant settlement, English-language classes, job training programs, for-credit Tamil classes in public schools, etc. Chapter 3 considers the historical importance of censuses in the making of a Tamil community and Tamil politics in Sri Lanka. For now, I point out here that diaspora politics in Canada is shaped by a longer history of political action to secure recognition and state power in Sri Lanka.

At the time of my fieldwork, much was made of the declaration that more Sri Lankan Tamils lived in Toronto than in Jaffna, the largest city in the Tamil-majority areas of northern and eastern Sri Lanka. While Tamils are a numerical and political

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<sup>68</sup> See, Toronto Star, “The Truth about Tamil Statistics” 4 April 2009. The newspaper also suggested that the Canadian government’s 2006 designation of the LTTE as a terrorist group is another reason why some Tamils may have hesitated to identify themselves as Tamil-speakers—or at all—to Census officials. I discuss the 2006 proscription and the politics of “the ban” in Chapter 4.

<sup>69</sup> For a discussion of such processes in India and South Asia, see Pandey (1990), Chatterjee (2004), Appadurai (2007). In Sri Lanka, see Rajasingham-Senanayake (2001a).

minority in Sri Lanka, where the Sinhalese constitute the majority community, in Canada, Tamils outnumber the Sinhala community—by as much as ten to one, according to some estimates. Even as Tamils remain a minority in Canada, many activists feel themselves to be part of a *significant* minority—a rhetorical move that parallels the claims by which Ceylon Tamil politicians of the last century argued that their community was one of the island’s two “major” communities.<sup>70</sup> The ability to claim a numerical majority and dominance has clear political implications for diaspora Tamils, and especially the nationalist activists who seek to mobilize them. The claim of *numerical significance* has bolstered Tamil participation in Canadian politics at the municipal and federal levels, with Toronto voters electing the first Tamil Member of Parliament in Canada in 2010.<sup>71</sup>

During my fieldwork, Tamils in Canada felt strongly about participating in the institutions of representative democracy from which they were excluded in Sri Lanka; they felt that Canada afforded them the opportunity to “exercise [their] rights and freedoms” and thus confirmed their ‘belief’ in the power of liberal democracy—in spite of many occasions for doubt.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> I discuss the history of Tamil politics and the making of majorities and minorities in Chapter 3.

<sup>71</sup> MP Rathika Sitsabaiesan of Canada’s New Democratic Party is representative for the riding of Scarborough-Rouge River. She emigrated with her family from Jaffna to Toronto at five years of age, and said of her election, “It’s very significant for me, but also the Diaspora” (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 2011). Prior to her election, Markham city councilor Logan Kanapathipillai was the only Tamil elected to any level of government in Canada.

<sup>72</sup> We might note that this liberal democratic affect (as the capacity to act and be acted upon) occurred in the context of (1) the Canadian state’s racism and policies of mosaic multiculturalism that simultaneously minoritizes immigrants and people of color and celebrates their contributions to ‘diversity’ and (2) the Sri Lankan state racism that birthed (3) the LTTE’s armed struggle for national liberation and authoritarian *de facto* state. Canadian Tamils live out the contradictions of life between these three different national and state formations, with many supporting the LTTE and/or its goal of a separate state while valuing the political processes of liberal democracy in Canada. I discuss this in greater depth in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

Given the power of numbers, the Canadian Tamil Congress was one of several organizations encouraging Tamils of multiple generations to name their ethnic origin as simply “Tamil.” Names matter. Naming is a performative act that creates the very community that activists wanted to enumerate—what they wished to count and *make count*, or make *significant*.<sup>73</sup> The number can also be thought of as a *figure*: a rhetorical device that is not reducible to what it appears to transparently communicate (i.e. “how many Tamils live in Canada.”) The figure is not only a discursive-textual signifier, but a visual one enrobed with affective intensities (Pinney 2004) as well. As we shall see in Chapters 2 and 4, this form of enumeration-as-community activism in relation to the multicultural state was important to the figuration of nationalist protests. It was a way of “making the community count” in Canada.

#### *Phases of Tamil Migration to Canada*

This section of the chapter draws on life histories and interviews with Tamil activists to describe phases of Tamil migration from Sri Lanka to Canada. In his research on Tamil refugees in Britain, Valentine Daniel (1994, 1996) writes of three phases of migration from Sri Lanka. Like Daniel, I found that my interlocutors’ personal histories revealed routes of migration that could be categorized into different phases. This was especially the case when seen against the backdrop of the official data cited above. This data, when combined with my ethnographic research, shows that Tamils immigrated to Canada in five phases differentiated by several factors: *a person’s time of migration, immediate reason for departure, type of arrival, and other social differences*, such as gender, caste, and class (particularly as these related to financial means and connections

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<sup>73</sup> See Butler (1997) on performativity and the politics of naming.

abroad). The first phase (Phase 1) of Sri Lankan Tamil migration to Canada occurred pre-war, and was followed by four phases (Phases 2-5) of migration during and after the war. This section of the chapter details the first four phases of migration (Phases 1-4).<sup>74</sup>

### *Phase 1: Students and Young Professionals*

Tamil immigrants of the 1970s and early 1980s were mostly English-proficient undergraduate and post-graduate male students, professionals and their families.<sup>75</sup> They were middle-class and of the dominant Vellala caste. Most had spent one to four years studying or working in Britain. In 1967, Canada switched to what was deemed a “non-racial” immigrant selection process (Aruliah 1994). After 1976, these immigrants were admitted under the exacting social and economic criteria of Canada’s “points” system.<sup>76</sup> Tamils of Phase 1 felt that they could pursue educational and work opportunities abroad for a few years and wait until Sri Lanka’s “problems” (*piraccinai*) were settled, before returning to the country. They were mostly men and women in their late twenties and early thirties; at this time, the women were recently married to men who had migrated during the late 1960s and 1970s, and once landed, sponsored their spouses. One Jaffna Vellala woman explained to me that, at this time, it was difficult for a professional woman to find a suitable spouse, and that all the “good matches” were abroad.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> The fifth phase began after the war ended in 2009 and continues as of this writing. I discuss post-war emigration and asylum-seeking in the epilogue to this dissertation.

<sup>75</sup> Tamil professionals were often engineers, medical doctors and barristers.

<sup>76</sup> Canada’s “points system” admitted individual applicants to the “economic immigrant” category, allotting points according to their education, history of professional/skilled work, proficiency in English and French, connections to Canada, etc. The points system was created under the Immigration Act of 1976, and replaced by Bill C-11, or the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) of 2001.

<sup>77</sup> The woman who used this phrase was a Hindu and Vellala from Jaffna. The phrase “good match” is at times synonymous with the notion of coming from a “good family,” and implies not only a match of status in terms of profession, but also of caste according to the hierarchies of caste system in her region. Jaffna Tamil Vellalas who ascribe to this system would (unsurprisingly) claim their subcaste is “highest.” The

Consequently, marriage to a man abroad created a path for the transnational migration of Tamil women, many of whom had no prior plans to emigrate.<sup>78</sup> Every one of my interlocutors of this phase told me that they had planned to return to Sri Lanka, but that the anti-Tamil violence of July 1983 created profound doubts among them. Though they still hoped to return one day, the door to their old home had begun to close.

\* Siva went to Toronto, Canada as a young man in 1966, where he completed his Masters in Architecture, after studying and working as a draughtsperson in the UK. He returned to Jaffna to get married to a cross-cousin, his mother's brother's daughter.<sup>79</sup> He went back to Canada shortly after the engagement and wedding ceremonies, and sponsored his wife, who arrived in 1973. They had two daughters, and made regular trips to visit their family in a village near Tellippalai, Jaffna. He was known to many as the "father" of the Tamil community in Toronto, and was a founder of the Tamil Eelam Society of Canada, an organization that actively supported the Tamil nationalist struggle in Sri Lanka while providing settlement services to Tamil migrants to Canada.

\* Ganesan moved to Canada in 1981 at the age of 35, intending to pursue graduate studies, after working as a sociology lecturer in Jaffna. However, it was difficult to find

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perniciousness of this claim can be observed in Tamil matrimonial ads in Sri Lanka and the diaspora. In addition to considerations of caste, kinship, region, profession, many Tamils consult astrologers and/or numerologists to assess whether two people are a "good match."

<sup>78</sup> With the start of war, transnational marriages became the primary means for the migration of Tamil women in their twenties and thirties. For a study of this phenomenon during the late 1990s and 2000s, see Maunaguru 2009. These matches were—and continued to be—arranged through family networks and other "known people," as well as local and Colombo-based brokers. Marriages between Tamil women living in Sri Lanka and men in the diaspora have also transformed the local practice of giving dowry.

<sup>79</sup> Bilateral cross-cousin marriage, or marrying within one's *sontham*, is privileged among Sri Lankan Tamils. The marriage of a mother's brother's daughter and father's sister's son has historically been a desirable one in Tamil culture, but waned during the war. See Trautmann 1981 and Trawick 1990 on Dravidian (i.e. Tamil) kinship in south India, and Maunaguru and Van Hear 2012 on the transnationalization of Sri Lankan Tamil marriage practices.



work as a new immigrant and the economic realities of supporting a family in a new country led him further afield from his original plans. Ganesan worked as a security guard in Vancouver, where he lived for ten years, before he moved to Toronto in 1991. He is married to a Sinhala woman, and together, they have one daughter. Though he once worked with “alternative” Tamil organizations such as Thedakam (a Tamil resource library), he has increasingly moved towards organizing a multi-ethnic Sri Lankan community.

\* Vaitheki was raised in the politics of the Tamil left—her father was a well-known communist politician in Sri Lanka. She studied engineering, and after marriage, moved to Vancouver, Canada in 1982 to join her husband. Two years later, they moved to Toronto. As was the case for most Tamil professionals who migrated to Canada, it took time to continue her career in a new country-- she had to take exams and obtain new certifications to work in her field. When Tamils began to arrive on their own in large numbers from 1985 onward, she tried to help with the settlement of the new refugees. However, as she and others reported to me, this became difficult as independent efforts were co-opted or thwarted by members of the World Tamil Movement or TESOC. Vaitheki stepped back from community activism and focused on her personal life; her marriage was a difficult one, but she continued to live with her husband, even after their divorce in 1997. When he passed away in 2002, she again became more involved in Sri Lankan issues—this time, diaspora engagement in development in Sri Lanka, and peace activism in Toronto.

Some parallels can be drawn between Phase 1 migrants to Toronto and “the Students” in Phase 2 of Daniel’s schema of Tamil immigrants to the UK. Both groups were highly

educated, students and young professionals, emigrating at roughly the same time. However, in Canada, Phase 1 Tamils were primarily middle-class, Vellala and from Jaffna. They had some financial resources to be able to migrate and were mostly young professionals; even the students were post-graduate professionals who had some work experience abroad and continued to work to complete their studies. They were the first in their families to move to Canada, and they saved enough to send some money back home. As noted above, Phase 1 Tamils' migration arose from political and economic instability in Sri Lanka; they reported personal experiences of discrimination and a general sense of insecurity that motivated them to leave Sri Lanka temporarily. They also pursued opportunities that would allow them to return to Sri Lanka with economic and/or social capital. However, as Ganesan's story shows, education and work experience in Sri Lanka did not always translate to professional opportunities in Canada, as employers required "Canadian experience." Caught in a cycle of underemployment and financial instability, some immigrants of this phase experienced downward social mobility. Tamils in this phase generally did not have a history of political activism while living in Sri Lanka, but they became involved with community-based social work and/or political activism after 1983.

*Phase 2: Refugees, Resettled and Families At the Border, 1983-1990*

The events of July 1983 accelerated a deepening crisis of the state, and led to a full-blown war between the Sri Lankan army and Tamil militant groups. As discussed above, during the first four years of war, many Tamil civilians sought refuge in neighboring India; as the war continued, greater numbers turned to Canada, which had begun to earn a reputation for its open immigration policies and path to citizenship. Tamil migration to

Canada during this phase was fueled by three events in the Sri Lankan war. First, civilians were targeted during the war: the Sri Lankan army rounded up entire villages in Jaffna, and held thousands of Tamil men in detention; beginning in 1984 and 1985, the Tigers planned and executed a number of bus bombings and civilian massacres in Anuradhapura and other “border areas.” Each attack on civilians led to an escalation of “revenge” attacks by the army. Secondly, in 1985 and 1986, Tamil militancy was plagued by internecine killings, which became a specialty of the LTTE. Tamils from the other militant groups went into exile abroad in order to survive. Third, civilians experienced a great deal of terror, violence and displacement when fighting broke out between the LTTE and the Indian Peacekeeping Forces (IPKF) brought into Sri Lanka during the 1987 Indo-Lanka peace accord. Few IPKF soldiers could speak Tamil, and the suspicions they harbored of the local population led to beatings, murders and sexual violence.<sup>80</sup> When the IPKF left the island in 1990, fighting the war between the government and LTTE resumed.

Nearly all of my interlocutors who migrated to Canada during this period arrived between 1987 and 1990. More than 80% of them were Tamils from Jaffna. Most of these Tamils can be divided into the following subgroups:

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<sup>80</sup> See UTHR(J) reports no. 1, 2 & 3 (1989a, 1989b, 1989c) for accounts of this period that refer to violence from other Tamil militant groups with the IPKF’s complicity, as well IPKF beatings and shootings of civilians, who were often suspected of helping the LTTE. Tamil youth were also forcibly conscripted into the Additional Citizens Volunteer Force (known colloquially as the Tamil National Army), per the directive of India’s RAW. For an insider’s discussion, see Loganathan 1996: 119-165, and on conscription, especially 154-155.

The IPKF period has largely been omitted from popular and academic narratives about the Sri Lankan war. IPKF soldiers were never held accountable for the aforementioned crimes. Instead, in a turn of events indicative of the deliberate nature of this forgetting, Mahinda Rajapakse’s government unveiled a statue in 2011 to memorialize IPKF soldiers’ contributions to Sri Lanka.

- (1) Tamils who were directly affected by the violence of 1983 and/or political refugees, and admitted to Canada through a resettlement program or sponsored by an organization or institution (e.g. Amnesty International, the Methodist Church.)<sup>81</sup>
- (2) Those who were directly affected by the violence of July 1983 while living in the south and were taken by boat to resettle in Jaffna, after which point, they lived through the first few years of the war before leaving.
- (3) Tamils who arrived in Canada via a third country, where they were living either (a) before 1983, and with the outbreak of war, felt they could not return to Sri Lanka, or (b) who had fled to another country after 1983, but were not granted the protections of legal residence or citizenship. For example, a few of the activists I worked with had been students at a college or university in Tamil Nadu. In addition, several Tamils had been living and working in African countries such as Nigeria, Sudan, Zambia, and Lesotho, or were the children of these migrants.<sup>82</sup>
- (4) Tamils who were displaced from Jaffna during the war, and moved to Colombo before emigrating via a flight.<sup>83</sup> Some in this group applied for and received a tourist visa to the United States, and then traveled by bus to the U.S.-Canada border where they made inland refugee claims.

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<sup>81</sup> I discuss one such story of an activist below, and another in Chapter 3.

<sup>82</sup> In two cases during this period, the person and/or family went back to Sri Lanka temporarily and stayed in a Colombo lodge for a few months before beginning their journey to Canada. In this way, they could claim to have arrived directly from Sri Lanka. I note this to indicate how Tamils had to navigate laws and bureaucratic rules that required departure from their country of origin and a valid passport. This is not to diminish their claim for refuge in any way.

<sup>83</sup> Tamils displaced from the north and east lived in Colombo for several years—even decades—where they waited for a resolution to the war and/or prepared to migrate abroad. Tens of thousands still live in the city, where they constitute an internal diaspora, and typically have relatives living in the diaspora.

(5) Young men who left the other militant groups (TELO, PLOTE, EPRLF, and to a lesser extent, EROS) and/or their political affiliates (e.g. ENDLF) during internal fighting and political assassinations.

Though some Tamils who arrived during this period were sponsored by relatives already in Canada, a large number of my interlocutors were refugees who either came on their own, with their family, or in the case of a few people, were resettled after being sponsored by a church.

Tamils who had arrived during Phase 2 when they were seven to fifteen years old were sometimes dubbed the “1.5 generation”; they saw their lives and selves as being divided between two countries, and so were deemed as being between the group of adult immigrants to Canada identified as “first-generation Canadians,” and that generation’s children, who were “second-generation Canadians.” The 1.5 generation were adults by the time of my fieldwork, and as twentysomething activists, they were an important link between older activists, and the generation of youth born and raised in Canada, who were entering colleges and universities (and who would become active during Tamil protests against the war.)

\*Fr. Antony arrived in Canada at the end of 1983. During the Black July pogrom, he was tipped off about a threat against his life by a Sinhala policeman he had once counseled. Fr. Antony was ordained as a Catholic priest in 1956, and had worked in Jaffna and Mannar. In 1968, he heard another calling—that of family life—and decided to become an Anglican in order to marry. In 1970, he married a Sinhala woman, with whom he has three children, and at the same time, became increasingly involved in

progressive movements in the South. He quickly gained a reputation as a “revolutionary” priest.

Fr. Antony was no stranger to state violence, as a witness to the 1971 JVP insurrection and the state’s response, and as a survivor of the 1977 riots during his work with the Gandhiyam movement among Tamil plantation workers who had resettled near Vavuniya in the North.<sup>84</sup> During the 1971 insurrection, he protected some JVP youth; shortly after, he learned that he was being watched by the police. In 1977, he was arrested by the army. Nevertheless, he continued his work, and lectured about counseling throughout the island.

When the violence began in July 1983, Fr. Antony’s wife’s brother took the kids to a safe place during the riots. Fr. Antony was then arrested, questioned, and eventually, after several interventions on his behalf, released on house arrest. He told me, “I wanted to stay and help my people,” but the church had already told him to continue with his plans to attend an international conference on counseling. This was when he received the tip from the policeman about a hit. The World Council of Churches helped him find safety by ensuring his passage out of Sri Lanka to attend the conference. He flew to San Francisco, and then went to New Jersey. He then crossed the border into Ottawa, and met his wife and children in Montréal, the largest Tamil community at that time. Fr. Antony counseled Tamil refugees, and became the President of the Québec branch of the Tamil

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<sup>84</sup> Gandhiyam was an organization that worked with Hill-Country Tamils affected by anti-Tamil violence in 1977, turning their refugee camp into a farm. It was founded by S.A. David and Dr. S. Rajasundaram that same year. In 1983, the founders were falsely accused of training militants and arrested; they were imprisoned at Welikada, where Rajasundaram was killed during the 1983 riots. David escaped, lived in exile in Chennai, and recently returned to Kilinochchi where he passed away in October 2015. For a recent interview with S.A. David, see Kolappan (2012).

Eelam Society of Canada. His family lived in Montréal for 13 years, before moving to Toronto in 1996.

\*Theepan was ten years old when he moved to Canada in 1989 with his family. They left Anaithivu (one of several islets east of Jaffna) for India in 1984. They lived in a rented house for a few years, then returned to Sri Lanka at the beginning of the Indo-Lanka peace accord. When war returned—this time, between the IPKF and Tigers—they moved to Canada as refugees. After his family moved, Theepan’s relatives followed in the early 1990s, including some uncles who were living temporarily in Europe. Theepan says that he did not learn much about the history or politics of “the struggle” until he became involved with the Tamil Students’ Association at his university. Growing up in Toronto during violence between Tamil gangs in the 1990s, he volunteered with Canadian Tamil Youth Development (CanTYD), an organization that was created to address this violence, and based in Scarborough. He continued to work for them. Many of Theepan’s peers were of the “1.5 Generation” that migrated to Canada and settled in Toronto at this time—his wife, a youth counselor, moved to Canada in 1987 at the age of six, and several of his coworkers and activist colleagues, and friends had arrived in Canada with their families as children and teenagers during the latter half of this phase.

### *Phase 3: Refugee Claims and Family Reunification, 1991-2001*

The largest number of Tamils migrated to Canada during the years between 1991 and 2001. As noted above, Sri Lanka was the fifth largest source of immigrants to Canada during this period. While many more Tamils arrived in the years 1998 to 2000, most of my activist interlocutors arrived in the years 1994 to 1996. Phase 3 Tamils were often from the Jaffna districts of Vadamarachchi and Valigamam where war between the

state and Tigers led to mass displacement as the army took over large tracts of land and turned them into High Security Zones. The government built new army bases in these militarized zones, which were made off-limits to local Tamils. Soldiers looted and camped out in Tamil homes during their operations.

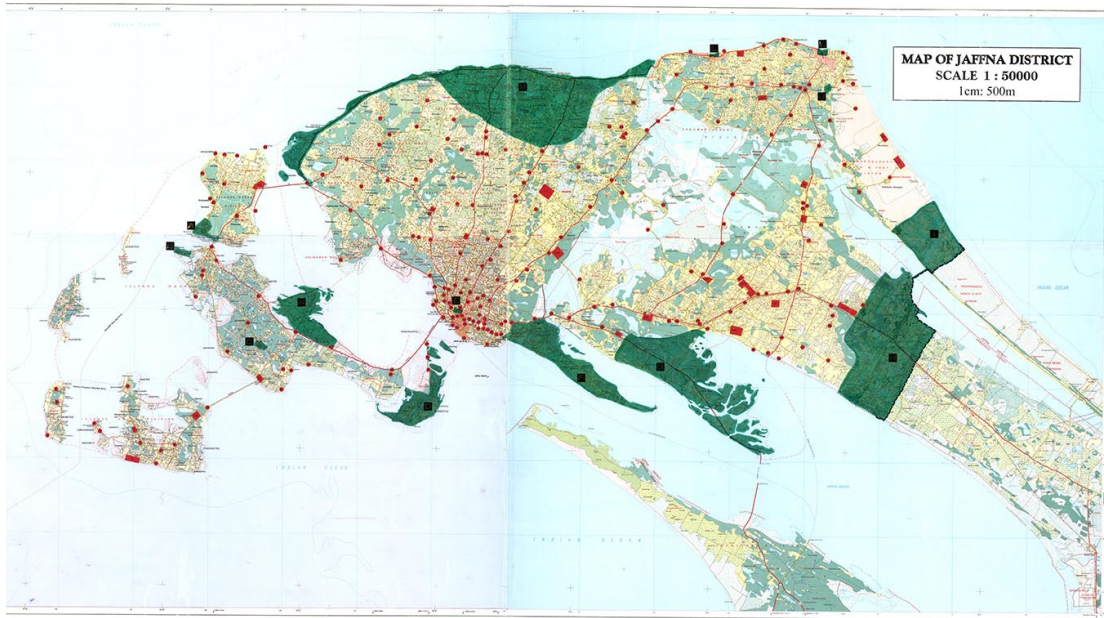


Figure 1.4: Map of Jaffna High Security Zones and Military Camps  
(Source: *Tamil Guardian*)

Under such conditions of insecurity and displacement, Phase 3 Tamils increasingly decided it was time to leave the country. They had lived through 10 to 15 years of war or more, and were encouraged by relatives and friends already abroad to migrate. They were told that Canada was a good choice for immigration: It was easier to get in and become “landed,” a Canadian term for permanent residents. Canada offered a path to citizenship, which afforded them a much sought-after feeling of security and rights that were denied to them in Sri Lanka. As one woman—a Canadian Tamil social



activist who migrated during this phase—told me, “We felt that by moving [to Canada], we wouldn’t have to move and move anymore.”

Phase 3 shared some of the forms of migration found in Phase 2: Many of the Tamils who arrived during this time were refugee claimants or family sponsorship applicants. A greater number of Tamils arrived via family sponsorship, as compared to the previous phase.<sup>85</sup> A few activists among my interlocutors applied as refugees seeking political asylum, after being physically assaulted or threatened by the LTTE in Sri Lanka and in Europe. Most were, however, seeking refuge after facing government atrocities and did not mention the militants as a reason for their migration. In particular, those who had been activists in Sri Lanka or India believed that they would be detained and tortured again if returned to Sri Lanka.

Also, as in Phase 2—though to a lesser extent during my research—a significant number of activists who arrived at this time were of the “1.5 generation.”

\*Nalini arrived in Toronto in 1994. She was sponsored by her husband, Satheesh, an activist and a former member of PLOTE, the militant group that was created by Uma Maheswaran following after he left the LTTE in 1979. The couple had met in Jaffna—Satheesh was Nalini’s brother’s friend—and married before Satheesh left for Canada through an agent on a circuitous route that took him through Eastern Europe, South America, Mexico, and the United States. After reaching Toronto, Satheesh lived in a downtown rooming house with other young Tamil ex-militants who were critical of the LTTE. He became good friends with some of these men, and together, they formed the

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<sup>85</sup> This was also true, to some extent, for Tamil diaspora activists. Of the activists interviewed during my fieldwork in Toronto, 9 of 21 who arrived in Phase 2 were sponsored by a relative, while 10 of 18 in Phase 3 were admitted through family sponsorship.

Tamil Resource Centre—a library and space for dissent—and alternative Tamil theatre groups. When Nalini arrived, she joined the theatre group, and grew interested in feminist activism. The couple moved to Scarborough, where most of their middle-aged circle now lives. Satheesh and Nalini have middle-class office jobs, but during my fieldwork, Satheesh had recently been laid off, and this was a source of stress for him.

\* Leena, like Nalini, moved to Toronto in 1994 after being sponsored by her husband. She arrived, however, via a third country: Germany. Leena left Sri Lanka after the women’s centre where she had lived and worked was overrun by the LTTE in 1990.<sup>86</sup> She lived in a small German city as a refugee, and participated in Tamil groups that were critical of the LTTE. In 1993, she was physically beaten by LTTE activists. She decided it was time to start another life for herself in Canada, and focused instead on organizing Tamil workers in restaurants, laundries, and other service industries.

\*Nantha was raised on an island west of Jaffna, and moved to Canada in 1995 with his older sister when they were 16 and 19 years old. Like many Tamils during these years, Nantha’s parents worried that, at their age, the army would view their children as potential Tigers. The family was sponsored: Three of his mother’s siblings had already moved to Toronto between 1990 and 1992. His mother and 2 other siblings joined them in 1996, and his father moved in 1998. His parents’ other siblings lived in Holland, Switzerland and Germany. When they left Sri Lanka, after moving several times in Jaffna due to the war, the family decided to go to a country where they could have a “base”—to enter a good education system, work, and live “a stable life” with citizenship. By 1999 he became a citizen. He went to university, became involved in the TSA, the students’

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<sup>86</sup> See below and Chapter 4 for further discussion of the women’s centre.

branch of the WTM, and volunteered for CanTYD. Through his community involvement, he entered non-profit work and ran for public office. He continues to serve as a community spokesperson. He tells me, “The Tamils are a nation, even though we are a diaspora” and as such, “We are a community without a country.”

\*Rathan had lived in India and Switzerland before leaving for Canada. His wife and teenaged daughters entered the country as refugees several months before he did in 1998. He was detained for allegedly entering the country on a false name: his passport used his grandfather’s name. Rathan’s political work as a WTM activist was known to immigration authorities, and his status hung in the balance.<sup>87</sup> Eventually, he was allowed to reside in Canada, but on the condition that he abstain from “political activities.” He obtained “landed” status toward the end of my fieldwork; his wife and children were awaiting citizenship.

#### *Phase 4: National Security and Tamil Migration during a Ceasefire, 2002-2008*

During Phase 4, Tamil migrants had to increasingly “prove” their need for refuge, as their claims were made upon a changing legal and discursive field. Those changes were: (1) After a boat of people from Fujian, China arrived off the coast of B.C. in 1999, state and public discourses on immigration made a distinction between “real refugees” and “economic refugees” (or “bogus refugees”)—a variation of the “deserving” and “undeserving” immigrant dichotomy that had characterized the previous decade (Mountz 2010).<sup>88</sup> According to political geographer Alison Mountz (2010), Canadian immigration

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<sup>87</sup> The WTM was said to be a front organization for the LTTE. I discuss this relationship and how it shaped community activism in Toronto in Chapter 4. The leader of the WTM in Canada was arrested on criminal charges in 1995, and was subject to ongoing deportation proceedings when Rathan entered Canada.

<sup>88</sup> The boat was the *Yuan Yee*, which brought 123 Fujianese migrants to the coast of British Columbia. Mountz’s research among civil servants in Canada’s immigration bureaucracy reveals how the country

officials termed the policy changes that followed from this event “the long tunnel thesis” of Canadian bureaucracy. In this strategy of interception and containment, unwanted migrants who struggled to enter Canada became cases to be processed offshore, in interstitial spaces such as ports of entry, that were deemed “not Canada” but remained under the state’s jurisdiction (xiv). (2) The events of September 11, 2001 in the United States had global repercussions, which led to changes to Canada’s anti-terrorism and immigration laws (Bill C-11, which became Canada’s *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act of 2001*). Canadian intelligence agencies brought greater scrutiny to bear on the LTTE, which was identified as a terrorist organization. (3) The following year, the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement in Sri Lanka led Canada’s immigration regime to presume that the situation in Sri Lanka was “safe” for Tamils.<sup>89</sup>

Far fewer Tamils were admitted to Canada between 2002 and 2008, and even fewer arrived to make refugee claims.<sup>90</sup> Not surprisingly, only four of my interlocutors migrated to Canada during this time, and their reasons for migration and means were quite different when compared to activists of the previous phases. One was an immigrant who had attended college in the United States, where he had lived for over a decade and

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became a pioneer of “interdiction” by creating a network of immigration control officers overseas, particularly throughout Asia and Africa (2010: 136-137). The offshore containment of asylum-seekers constitutes what her informants termed a “long tunnel” to Canada. Her work illustrates how the securitization of migration makes vulnerable people in search of asylum and protection via the state’s diffusion of its borders and creation of zones of exception (Agamben 2005).

<sup>89</sup> An IRB judge noted the following in a 2006 decision on a sponsorship application, “However, there has been a ceasefire between the Tigers and the Sri Lanka government for about three years and the conditions that fuel suspicion of young Tamils by Sri Lankan authorities have abated.” See *Shanmugathasan v. Canada (Citizenship and Immigration)*, 2006 CanLII 63909 (CA IRB), <<http://canlii.ca/t/23w26>>. Refugee claimants during this time were often denied on the basis that Colombo constituted a reasonable “internal flight alternative.” See, for example, *X (Re)*, 2006 CanLII 62245 (CA IRB), <<http://canlii.ca/t/1z8s3>> and *X (Re)*, 2006 CanLII 61422 (CA IRB), <<http://canlii.ca/t/1w9w8>> retrieved on 2015-08-21.

<sup>90</sup> The number of immigrants from Sri Lanka to Canada increased again in 2008, placing the country at the bottom of the list of top ten source countries. Of 4,744 immigrants admitted, only 28.4% were refugees, as compared to 43.9% in 2001. See Milan (2011) for Statistics Canada.

worked for pro-nationalist groups before marrying a Tamil woman in Toronto. The other three were Tamils who were admitted as refugees in need of protection from the LTTE. Aathi had worked with dissenting Tamils to research human rights violations in the north. Mano was an activist and journalist who was publicly critical of the LTTE. And Jeevani was a part of their network of activists critical of the parties to war, and a feminist activist whose personal experiences with violence had deeply affected her. All three of these activists had to leave northern Sri Lanka due to the LTTE in the 1990s. They lived in Colombo and Batticaloa, but during the ceasefire, they were threatened with violence and lived in safe houses until they could leave the country.

\*Jeevani was also a friend of Leena's, the woman described in Phase 3. She was raised in a small village on the western end of the Jaffna peninsula with four brothers and two sisters. One brother and sister each died in the war. Her father could not afford her school fees, and she had to stay at home to help her mother. When she was 16, she was attacked by an LTTE cadre. With no support from her family, she decided to leave home. She lived in Jaffna, making frequent trips to the town hospital when she fell ill. During this time, a Catholic nun told her about a new centre for women. She moved to the centre, where she met Leena and was introduced to feminist activism. When the women's centre was taken over by the LTTE, Jeevani left the north in 1991 and never returned. A friend gave her Rs 500 to travel, and she moved to Colombo, where she worked with internally displaced Tamil and Muslim women. When some of these women were forcibly "returned" to an open field in Batticaloa, Jeevani and other members of her organization moved to work among them, and to combat growing incidences of violence. Jeevani had learned how to navigate conflicts with the SLA, the LTTE, the TVMP faction, and other

paramilitary groups that sought to control feminist anti-violence work. However, one day, she was abducted by a local LTTE leader. Although she was eventually released, Jeevani's colleagues felt that her life was in danger. Friends in Sri Lanka and Toronto helped her apply to be admitted to Canada as a refugee; her application was approved, on grounds of persecution. She left the island reluctantly in 2006. Within a year, she received "landed" or permanent resident status. She missed her work in Sri Lanka, and after two years of living in Toronto, she did not know whether she would apply for Canadian citizenship.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has described two different trajectories of Sri Lankan Tamil migration and settlement that have resulted in large diaspora communities in Toronto, Canada and throughout Tamil Nadu, India. I began by describing the layered histories of Tamil movement and mobility across Asia that preceded wartime migrations, with a focus on the late colonial and post-independence periods. From this followed a mapping of the dispersal of Sri Lankan Tamils globally, since the anti-Tamil violence of 1983.

I showed how Sri Lankan Tamil migration to India was punctuated by two periods of primarily forced return, and proceeded in phases that corresponded to periods of intense fighting as well as political events connected to the war, such as the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. Tamil migrants to India fled the country out of fear for their physical safety and survival, but this temporary situation became a protracted one as the war continued. Their liminal status as unofficial refugees and undocumented migrants made Sri Lankan Tamils perpetually unsettled and available for "return" to Sri Lanka.

As in India, Tamil migration to Canada, and Toronto in particular, proceeded in several phases. This chapter illustrated the ways in which Tamil migration was differentiated by several factors: a person's time of migration, immediate reasons for departure, type of arrival, and other social differences, such as gender, caste, and class. Overall, I showed that pre-war immigrants were middle-class Jaffna Tamils seeking education and economic opportunity abroad, in the context of discrimination in Sri Lanka, who still hoped to return to the island. In contrast, refugees and immigrants during the periods between 1983 and 2000, moved largely in response to contingencies of political violence and war: the fear of physical violence threatened or experienced, imprisonment, and social and economic insecurity. These Tamils benefitted from resettlement programs (as in Phase 2), policies and refugee determination processes, and increasingly, family reunification (especially important in Phase 3). In the twenty-first century, however, fewer Tamils left Sri Lanka, and those who tried to migrate to Canada found it much more difficult after the ceasefire. The Canadian government viewed refugee claims based on Sri Lankan government or army persecution with increasing suspicion. Some Tamils continued to leave Sri Lanka after 2002, particularly dissidents and dissenting activists targeted by the LTTE.

This chapter has argued for an understanding of Tamil migration as a social and political process that produces distinct forms of community in specific locations. While each diasporic location has its own distinctive formations of community, the later chapters of this dissertation point to a networked diaspora. Sri Lankan Tamil communities in Toronto and Tamil Nadu serve as nodal points in this diaspora and its circulation of Tamil political activisms and cultural productions. The next chapter turns

from Tamil migrations and diaspora formation to these practices, and the politics of Sri Lanka's 2002 ceasefire and peace process, with a focus on two contrasting political movements in Canada and India.



## Chapter 2

### ***Rise Up or Return? Tamil Activisms during the Ceasefire***

This chapter picks up at the point where the previous one ended. I explore how two different trajectories of migration—to India and Canada respectively—resulted in different forms of Tamil activism in each site, and distinct political movements with contrasting ends. Specifically, I examine two moments of Sri Lankan Tamil activism during Sri Lanka’s Ceasefire Agreement and peace process (2002-2008), and analyze the social and cultural meanings of these events for Tamils living in diaspora. First, I describe the political situation in Sri Lanka that led to the disintegration of the peace process and ceasefire before and during my fieldwork. Then, I turn to Sri Lankan Tamil political movements and activism in Tamil Nadu, India and Toronto, Canada.

In Tamil Nadu, refugees mobilized in the context of return, or “reverse migration” to Sri Lanka, when over six thousand refugees attempted to re-inhabit and resettle in their villages in the aftermath of violence. I consider the meaning of these movements of refugee return to Sri Lanka among those who decided to remain in India, whether for the time being or permanently. The chapter reveals how Tamil refugees imagined and negotiated the idea of “return” in the context of governmental practices of refugee management, rehabilitation, and international laws. In Toronto, I examine, *Pongu Thamil* (Tamil Uprising), an event that was part of a political-cultural movement of the same name, and I discuss the forms of activism the circulation of these events created. I track

this event from its performance in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, and subsequent diasporic iterations, to its performance in Toronto in 2004. Pongu Tamil was an unprecedented event in mobilizing the Tamil diaspora, in Canada and several countries around the world, nearly five years before diaspora protests at the end of the war.

### **Ceasefire and Peace Process, 2002-2008**

A new kind of diasporic mobility emerged after the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement and peace process between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. During the peace process, Tamils who had migrated out of Sri Lanka as refugees/asylum-seekers and immigrants were able to return to the island. Their stays were motivated by different reasons, contingent on their migration trajectories and political statuses. In the sections below, I outline the political developments and discourses in Sri Lanka that enabled and constrained multiple forms of diasporic movement and mobility before turning to two different forms of “return” and the political movements that emerged from these returns—what one might call the unanticipated “dividends” of the peace process and its failures.

#### *Before the Ceasefire*

The LTTE was in a position of military strength when it unilaterally declared a ceasefire on December 24, 2000. The Government, on the other hand, was in disarray: The years of 1995 to 2000 were a time of political upheaval, economic instability, and violence in Sri Lanka. Eighteen years of UNP rule ended when President Chandrika Kumaratunga and her SLFP-led People’s Alliance was elected in November 1994 on a platform of peace. Peace, however, quickly gave way to a “war for peace,” and Kumaratunga’s ongoing attempts at a political solution through constitutional reforms

consistently met opposition from the UNP, on the one hand, and studied indifference from the LTTE, on the other.<sup>91</sup> Parliament was dissolved not once, but twice, in 2000 and 2001—making for three parliamentary elections in less than three years. The economy had taken a nosedive, as investors and tourists stayed away after the LTTE bombed Sri Lanka’s Central Bank in 1996, its World Trade buildings, and the Bandaranaike International Airport in July 2001. On the war front, the army had also lost important, strategic battles to the LTTE, including the April 2000 battle of Elephant Pass.<sup>92</sup> The LTTE was now in control of the entire Vanni region, and had entered the Peninsula as far as Chavakachcheri.

Kumaratunga’s stalled devolution package—the foundation of the permanent peace her government sought to deliver—was eventually discarded, and the constitutional reforms bill incorporating its proposals was not brought to Parliament before the latter was dissolved in August 2000 and October 2001. The LTTE announced that it would join negotiations if the UNP was voted in. The United National Front, led by the UNP’s Ranil Wickremasinghe, came to power at the December 2001 parliamentary election, also on a platform of peace; the party promised to suspend hostilities with the LTTE and return to the negotiating table to find a ‘permanent solution,’ with the aid of Norway, which had spent the last year and a half visiting the country to broker peace.<sup>93</sup> The election also saw

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<sup>91</sup> For the LTTE’s take on this period, see Balasingham (2004). Balasingham served as a political advisor to the LTTE delegation at these talks.

<sup>92</sup> Elephant Pass is an isthmus that connects the Jaffna Peninsula (then government-controlled) to the Vanni (under LTTE control at the time); it was the site of three pitched battles between the state and the LTTE. This second battle was codenamed Operation Unceasing Waves III by the LTTE, and the subject of a popular video the Tigers sold to diaspora Tamils. The recapture of Elephant Pass, as the “gateway to Jaffna,” was emotionally significant to the LTTE and its diasporic supporters.

<sup>93</sup> Norway’s involvement was reportedly with the support of the US Government, with the requirement that it keep the Government of India in the know. The US, EU, and Japan joined Norway as co-chairs of the donors circle of the process.

the formation of the Tamil National Alliance between some senior leaders of the TULF joining pro-LTTE factions of TELO, EPRLF, and the ACTC.

The September 11 attacks on the United States and the start of a ‘Global War on Terror’ drove the LTTE to a new international political strategy. Prabhakaran and the LTTE asserted the political nature of the struggle at this time, drawing a distinction between “freedom struggles based on the right to self-determination and blind terrorist acts based on fanaticism” (Tamilnet.com 2001). At a press conference in Kilinochchi in April 2002, Anton Balasingham argued that a ban on the LTTE—at this time imposed by the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada, in addition to India<sup>94</sup>—would impede a negotiated settlement by encouraging the Sri Lankan government to pursue military means. The ban, they argued, would have to be lifted as a precondition for talks with the Sri Lankan government. As we shall see in Chapters 4 and 7, diaspora activists took up this argument and mobilized around it during the peace process and the war’s end.

#### *Talking peace, 2002-2004*

In 2002, the Government and the LTTE signed a formal Ceasefire Agreement. Shortly after the elections, Prime Minister Wickremasinghe relaxed an economic embargo, allowing the flow of essential goods and medical supplies into LTTE-controlled areas. Discussions and exchanges were organized between Tamil and Sinhala communities from the North and South by religious and civil society organizations.<sup>95</sup> The

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<sup>94</sup> India was the first country to ban the LTTE in 1991, followed by the United States in 1996, 1999, and again in the State Department’s listing of October 5, 2001.

<sup>95</sup> Inter-ethnic activities were favored by international donors. In 2006, a friend and I attended a talk at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies in Colombo, at which an American INGO development professional argued for organizing exchanges between Tamil and Sinhala farmers, so that “they can see what they have in common.” My friend, a young Sri Lankan academic and activist, criticized the INGO professional for her naïvete about Sri Lankan politics and ignorance of recent interventions during the peace process.

Agreement and subsequent peace talks were facilitated by the Norwegian government as planned. Six rounds of talks were held between September 2002 and April 2003, in Thailand, Germany, Norway. In addition, the UNF gathered donors in Tokyo and Washington D.C. to pledge their financial assistance to the Sri Lankan peace process and rehabilitation projects in the war-affected areas. Crucially, the agreement also allowed the LTTE to open political offices in the island, leading to activities to mobilize Tamils behind the organization, and thus create and demonstrate “unity” among Tamils in the North and East. The new space for LTTE politics, however, also opened up a space for violence against the LTTE’s political opponents in Jaffna, Trincomalee and Batticaloa.<sup>96</sup>

Sri Lankans of all ethnicities were tired of war and had high hopes for the new, internationally-mediated peace process. However, the euphoria of the first few months of the peace process quickly faded, as problems emerged. For one, the LTTE was unhappy with the government’s internationalization of the peace process through the donors conferences—they had been prevented from participating at the D.C. conference (being a banned organization in the U.S.), but would be responsible to its concerns about human rights and democracy.<sup>97</sup> The six rounds of peace talks were mostly procedural discussions that did not lead to substantive agreements about the contours of a political solution. The LTTE submitted a proposal in October 2003 for their own interim administration in the north-east—the Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA)—which they argued was necessary for meeting local needs and a return to ‘normalcy’ before a political settlement

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<sup>96</sup> Between February 2002 and December 2005, the LTTE, the Karuna group and other armed groups had committed 300 killings. The LTTE was directly implicated in at least 200 such killings, primarily of their opponents (Human Rights Watch 2006: 39-40).

<sup>97</sup> Critical observers of the peace process noted the shortcomings of liberal peacemaking based on elite negotiations and donor-funded neoliberal development without local political context. See Stokke and Uyangoda 2011 for further discussion.

could be reached.<sup>98</sup> The LTTE pulled out of the sixth round talks. Political conflicts in the south led to a lack of government commitment to the peace process. Mistrust between the two sides grew. By the end of 2003, with neither the government nor the LTTE observing the Ceasefire's provisions, Norwegian facilitators suspended their role. The Norwegian-led Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission remained on the ground to document a growing number of violations.<sup>99</sup>

*The diaspora travels "back home"*

Thousands of Tamils living in diaspora returned to Sri Lanka as visitors, following the signing of the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement between the Government and the LTTE. Their visits lasted anywhere from a few weeks to months, and tended to occur during the summer and winter holidays in North America, the UK, Australia and Europe—the countries in which they currently resided, and held either citizenship (by naturalization or birth), or permanent residence. Most of these visitors were families who returned to visit kin they had not seen for years. In the case of some Jaffna Tamils who had gone abroad before the war or in its earliest years, the years had grown into decades. They visited their *ur*, if they could, and if they were lucky, stayed in a family home. Then, they might be visited by other distant relatives, or former neighbors. Once, they would have known

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<sup>98</sup> The ISGA would have granted the LTTE executive and judiciary powers along the lines of the Palestinian Authority, without facing an election, for up to five years while negotiating the terms of a final settlement with the GoSL.

<sup>99</sup> The SLMM terminated its monitoring and left Sri Lanka on January 16, 2008, after the Sri Lankan government officially abrogated the ceasefire. An archive of the SLMM website and reports from 2007 may be found at <https://web.archive.org/web/20071225071016/http://www.slmm.lk/> On the fifth anniversary of the CFA's signing, the Mission noted that nearly 4000 people were killed in fighting related to the conflict between November 2005 and February 2007, as compared to 130 deaths recorded during the first three years of the CFA.

everyone in this village. Now, they searched for familiar faces as they moved about the land, and the few they found had grown old.

More often than not, they returned to Jaffna villages that were empty, and homes that were no longer inhabitable—riddled with bullet holes, crumbling, overgrown with grasses and other vegetation. Or they might find a family living amid the ruins, having been displaced years before. Instead, diaspora visitors could take a room at small hotels that had cropped up for this purpose, and take their meals at local mess halls. Some alumni found accommodations at the “colleges” where their secondary schooling was completed. During these visits, diaspora Tamils found out what, if anything, remained of the Jaffna and/or Sri Lanka they once knew.

Tamil diaspora activists were also among the thousands of Tamils who visited Sri Lanka during this time. In addition to visiting their *ur* and kin, activists were involved in a range of activities to help people in their homeland, or to help those fighting for a separate homeland. Some gathered information about the war and peace process: For example, some Tamils from Toronto were part of a fact-finding team that conducted research for a Berghof Foundation report.<sup>100</sup> Groups of Canadian Tamil students returned to volunteer their skills and time in areas that were devastated by the war. The Tamil Students’ Volunteer Project (TSVP) was one such effort, in which university students taught youth in Kilinochchi various subjects, including English as a Second Language, and computing and programming courses at VanniTech. The latter was also a diaspora effort, founded by three Tamils in the U.S. Early in the peace process, the TSVP’s

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<sup>100</sup> See, for example, Cheran (2003) for a report written from this research.

student-organizers had formed good relationships with the Government and the LTTE's political wing, which allowed them to move and work with relative ease.

Some diaspora activists contributed to the LTTE's political efforts during the peace process. They were among the "experts" who helped the LTTE formulate its ISGA proposal. The World Tamil Movement coordinated trips that brought students and other diaspora activists to Kilinochchi, the headquarters of the Tigers' de facto state. The students traveled throughout the district, and were shown the hallmarks of the LTTE's would-be state: The discipline of its fighters, the LTTE's police and courts, its modern administrative buildings and guesthouses. In conversations during my fieldwork, they noted how "safe" they felt in the LTTE-controlled areas, and that young women could travel alone without fear of harassment or sexual violence. They also met with the leadership, including the movement's *thalaivar*, Prabhakaran, who had generally kept away from visitors before the peace process. He advised these students, asked questions of them, and listened to their replies. Out of Prabhakaran's meetings with student leaders, the idea for a Tamil Youth Organization (TYO)<sup>101</sup> was born. Later, they would recall these meetings while organizing and protesting in Toronto.

*Things fall apart, 2004-2006*

I visited Sri Lanka in May 2004, and began preliminary research among Toronto Tamils in early 2005. The glimmering hope of a peaceful end to over two decades of armed struggle and violence—for many, in the form of a negotiated end to war and

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<sup>101</sup> The TYO recalls other student and youth organizations that were formed in the early years of Tamil militancy, such as GUYS, GUES, and SOLT. I discuss some of these organizations in Chapter 3. TYO has multiple chapters in Canada and Europe, and was an important part of community organizing in Toronto, which I discuss in Chapter 4.



international recognition of Tamil autonomy—was quickly receding from the collective horizon. Several events contributed to this situation. The Tigers and the GoSL had not been in talks for nearly a year. In April 2004, Colonel Karuna Amman, the Eastern Commander of the LTTE for Batticaloa-Amparai, split from the organization, claiming that the Vanni-based leadership discriminated against Eastern Tamils and disregarded their lives. The Karuna faction drew more than 6,000 cadres away from the LTTE’s rank-and-file. The LTTE in Vanni countered that the grievances were false, and a deflection from the “truth” about Karuna’s departure: to avoid punishment for the scandal of misappropriation of funds, and to further his own politico-military career. Efforts to persuade Tamils in the east to remain with the LTTE were unsuccessful (e.g. Sivaram’s negotiations in Whitaker 2007). The Sri Lankan state was rumored to have engineered the split, and later reports showed evidence of collusion between the faction, now dubbed the TMVP (*Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal*, or Tamil People’s Liberation Tigers) and the armed forces.<sup>102</sup> The LTTE dubbed Karuna and the Eastern Tamil leaders who followed him *thurogi*, or “traitors” to the Tamil cause. The two groups battled each other in the East, despite the ceasefire.<sup>103</sup> Once again, Tamils militants who had been fighting together in a war of “national liberation” to carve out a separate state of their own, were now fighting each other.

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<sup>102</sup> This was not an uncommon pattern in the history of Tamil militancy, as political dissenters and armed groups have, at times, sought state protection from the LTTE to ensure their survival. Human Rights Watch (2007b) documents state collusion with the Karuna Group in abductions and child recruitment in the East.

<sup>103</sup> For reporting on the LTTE-TMVP split and violent clashes, see Jeyaraj (2004). He writes that “several people in Sri Lanka and abroad” worked to negotiate a deal to avoid protracted war between the two groups. This allowed for the disbanding and dispersal of nearly 4000 Eastern cadres.

On December 26, 2004, the Asian tsunami devastated two-thirds of the Sri Lankan coastline, from the Western Province to the South, and all the way around to the LTTE-controlled villages near Mullaithivu in the North-East. The tsunami's destruction led many to hope that the two parties could come together to aid those who had survived a disaster that did not discriminate along ethnic lines. A joint administrative body, the Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS) was set up, but provoked vehement opposition from Sinhala nationalists and threatened to bring down the government. Moreover, the government and the LTTE could not agree to the mechanisms for the distribution of aid. The LTTE had come up with their own proposal, in keeping with their efforts to establish a parallel state, while the Colombo government wanted to administer all aid.

When the LTTE assassinated Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar in 2005, the EU imposed a travel ban on the organization, ruling out subsequent negotiations in Europe. The LTTE banned Northern voters from the polls, leading the SLFP's Mahinda Rajapaksa to a narrow victory against the UNF's Ranil Wickramasinghe. Rajapaksa was a hardliner who had campaigned on a platform critical of the peace process. Finally, two and a half years after the last round of talks, the two sides met in Geneva in April 2006. Little came of these talks, which revealed the great mistrust between the two parties, which had already unofficially returned to war.

#### *The shadow war, 2006-2008*

The year 2006 marked the start of an "undeclared war" between the Government and the LTTE. The resumption of hostilities was evident in the LTTE's use of Claymore mines against government forces and suicide attacks on the Navy, as well as a spate of

civilian massacres by both parties, in the “border zones” of the north and east.<sup>104</sup> Tamil activists were particularly disturbed by army massacres of civilians in Mannar in April and May 2006, and the SLA bombing of students at Sencholai, an orphanage for young women and girls, in August 2006. The LTTE and the government continued to engage in killing their political opponents, which included several Sri Lankan Ministers and Members of Parliament, and hundreds of political activists.<sup>105</sup>

Both parties returned to the battlefield in a dispute over water in the Eastern Province’s Trincomalee district in July-August 2006 after the LTTE closed the gate to the Maavil Aaru (meaning “great bow river”) reservoir in an area under their control.<sup>106</sup> SLA air strikes to capture the sluice-gates and water led to LTTE attacks on targets in government-controlled Muttur, and battles there led to the displacement of thousands of Tamil and Muslim civilians. In the first week of August, the LTTE announced a ceasefire and consulted with Norway. Nevertheless, the “war for water” led to the escalation of

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<sup>104</sup> See Human Rights Watch (2006, 2007).

<sup>105</sup> Many of the politicians killed between 2004 and 2008 were Tamils, including Lakshman Kadirgamar of the SLFP government (allegedly by the LTTE), T. Maheswaran of the UNP (allegedly by the Karuna group for the government) and three TNA MPs who were believed to be killed by the EPDP or TMVP/Karuna group on behalf of the government: Joseph Pararajasingham, Nadarajah Raviraj, and K. Sivanesan. Among the activists killed were several high-profile Tamils, including Kethesh Loganathan, Deputy Leader of the government’s Peace Secretariat (SCOPP) and ex-EPRLF, whose death was attributed to the LTTE, and Dharmaratnam Sivaram, the ex-PLOTE fighter and Tamil political journalist who co-created the popular website, Tamilnet.com, whose body was found in a government security zone. Neither the LTTE nor the government claimed any responsibility for their deaths.

<sup>106</sup> Maavil Aaru provided drinking and irrigation water to approximately 15,000 people living south of the reservoir. When the LTTE refused to open the sluice gates after several days of blockade and protests, the Army promised to open the gates through “Operation Watershed” a “limited military action” to obtain water for the farmers, and prevent 15,000 people from “becoming refugees,” according to government and military officials.

hostilities between the LTTE and government.<sup>107</sup> The next day, the LTTE turned their sights to recapturing Jaffna.<sup>108</sup>

Within days, the country had returned to war. The A9 highway, the main road connecting the North to the rest of the island—and as such, an important symbol of the peace process—was closed again, cutting off essential supplies and inhibiting the movement of people between the two regions. Even in Colombo, signs of war abounded, as army checkpoints returned to the city. Two months later, in late October 2006, a final round of peace talks were held again in Geneva. On the same day, an army offensive began against rebel territory. The LTTE's attempt to enter Jaffna was ultimately unsuccessful, and resulted in hundreds of casualties.<sup>109</sup> Both parties remained committed to the Ceasefire Agreement on paper, even as they battled in the North and East. By late 2007, the war began to move toward the North, after the SLA gained control of all eastern territory.<sup>110</sup> In January 2008, the government officially withdrew from the ceasefire, announcing an official return to war.

### **Return of the Refugee**

In the previous chapter, I outlined three waves of migration from Sri Lanka to Tamil Nadu, India, and discussed two intervals of state-organized refugee return. The first phase of return followed the signing of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord and involved

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<sup>107</sup> By the 10<sup>th</sup> of August, the gates were open again after 21 days of closure, but with opposing claims made as to who opened the gates. See *Dinamina* 9 Aug 2006, which reports the SLA opened the gates vs Tamilnet.com, which reports the LTTE's claim to do so voluntarily.

<sup>108</sup> The battle began on August 11, near the SLA forward defence lines at Muhamalai and Kilali in Thenmaradchchi, was suspended after five days of fighting and heavy casualties, and started again on October 28.

<sup>109</sup> The number of civilians killed was not recorded.

<sup>110</sup> The government claimed victory on July 11, 2007.

four-fifths of the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees living in the camps. The second return may be split into two phases – the first, in 1992, was organized by the Tamil Nadu state government and constituted *refoulement*, or the forced return of refugees to their country of origin. The second phase of refugee return, in 1993-95, was done with some involvement from the UNHCR. In each of these periods, some refugees decided to return to Sri Lanka on their own, without government or international assistance.

The goodwill expressed at the beginning of the 2002 ceasefire and peace process led many refugees to question whether they could return to re-establish their lives in Sri Lanka. They did not know whether their homes would be there when they returned, or whether the lands would be accessible, but the talk of peace fostered hopes for a political settlement that would result in conditions of safety and “normalcy.” Refugees who did not have relatives remaining in or near their lands (*ur*) would have to travel to find out for themselves. The question of return led to new forms of activism among refugees. The Organization for Eelam Refugees’ Rehabilitation (OfERR), in addition to its grassroots relief and rehabilitation efforts, decided to help refugees prepare for return—whether as a tangible outcome, or at the least, a future possibility.

In what follows, I explore how this came to be, in an attempt to answer the following questions: Why did Tamils who fled Sri Lanka to survive the war then determine that their future lives and livelihoods depended on their return to the island? What institutional structures and socio-political discourses shaped decisions to organize refugee return en masse? What political affects and forms of moral community were created in Tamil refugees’ decisions to return—someday—to the homeland? Finally, how does the very notion of ‘return’ make possible new forms of social action in the country

of refuge? Before delving into the activism that emerged from the prospect of a return to Sri Lanka, it is important to consider how OfERR's position on refugee return changed.

### *Shifting Positions on Return*

In his report on Sri Lankan Tamil refugees, then-Director of Rehabilitation G. Bhujanga Rao claims that the assistance provided by NGOs, or “voluntary organizations” like OfERR was “negligible” when compared to the amount spent by the government (At its peak in 1991-2, Rs. 2.28 million according to Annexure XVI, p. 114). Rao's report aims to make a case for refugee return, and his claims about OfERR must be read in this context. He alleges that representatives from OfERR and ProTEG (a related organization formed by several key figures in OfERR) used “adverse propaganda” to tell refugees that they should not return to Sri Lanka, and sent petitions against the Special Deputy Collector at Mandapam, who was responsible for refugee relief and return arrangements (1993: 44). Consequently, all voluntary organizations were banned from Sri Lankan refugee camps. Moreover, the Indian government blocked local agencies and organizations receiving foreign funding from working in the camps (Rao 1993: 45).<sup>111</sup> This prohibition was announced multiple times through instructions to government servants in 1991 through 1993. In spite of the ban, however, Rao writes that OfERR's informal network among refugees allowed the organization to continue to dissuade refugee returns.

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<sup>111</sup> These local organizations were spread throughout the state. Some of those noted include: CROP (The Community Rehabilitation Organization for Progress, Perambalur; READ (Rural Education and Action for Development); PERD (People's Education for Rural Development, Madurai); KEDS (Kodaikanal Educational Development Society, Kodai), RUC (Rural Uplift Center, Tirunelveli).

When the time came for a fourth round of refugee returns in 2002-4, however, OfERR's position had changed. During the ceasefire, the organization encouraged camp refugees to envision their future return to Sri Lanka. OfERR also prepared for this return in the long-run. Moreover, those who wished to return immediately were prepared to do so in a number of ways. First, the organization assisted refugees who expressed a desire to return with the formalities of arranging such a return. As in the previous round of returns, UNHCR was involved. Second, OfERR obtained important documents for camp refugees. Many people lacked the correct documentation of their birth (in Sri Lanka, or in India to Sri Lankan-born parents), marriages, and/or death of kin. For some families, their only document was one valid only in Tamil Nadu—their “refugee identity card.” While assisting refugees who wished to return after the ceasefire, OfERR looked ahead to the possibility of a future phase of return, and the decision was made to regularize the documents of all Sri Lankan refugees. Third, not all Sri Lankan-born refugees held Sri Lankan citizenship, due to the disenfranchisement of Tamils and other people of Indian and Pakistani origin in 1948-49. OfERR worked with Sri Lanka's Deputy High Commissioner and politicians from the *Janata Vimukti Peramuna*<sup>112</sup> (JVP, or People's Liberation Front) to obtain citizenship for all who had been excluded from previous agreements. The organization's active involvement on this issue ensured that those who had fled to India for refuge would also receive citizenship, so that they could return to the

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<sup>112</sup> The JVP was a rural, almost entirely Sinhalese youth-based movement whose political ideology combined populist radicalism and Sinhala nationalism, leading to two insurrections against the state in 1971 and 1988-1989. See Obeyesekere 1974 on the social background of the 1971 insurgents, and Moore 1993 on the second insurrection; also see Alles 1990 for a historical narrative written by the head of 1971's Criminal Justice Commission. Both uprisings were violently crushed by the government; during the latter, an estimated 100,000 youth were killed and/or “disappeared.” The movement entered formal politics during the 1994 parliamentary elections, and became part of the government as key coalition member of the UPFA in 2004.

island with dignity. The Deputy High Commissioner and JVP politicians met with OfERR staff and other refugees, and listened to their concerns, the problems they faced without citizenship, and their desire to return to the island one day.

*New visions and declarations*

At the start of the peace process, OfERR began what they called a “revisioning” process, with the help of a professional consultant who helped NGOs with this kind of process. Refugee staff and leaders were brought together in Chennai to review the history of the organization, learn more about the Sri Lankan peace process, and to discuss what they understood peace to mean. Brainstorming in smaller groups, they then presented their ideas to the larger group, which then held wider discussions about what refugees could expect from and contribute to the peace process. Out of these sessions, they came up with their own statements (Chennai and Trichy declarations).

In February 2003, on the first anniversary of the signing of the MOU between the government and the LTTE, 70 members of OfERR’s regional staff—themselves refugees—met at the Nallayan Research Centre for Sustainable Development in Kancheepuram district for a workshop on the problems and prospects of returning to Sri Lanka. In this workshop, they identified risks of return, bureaucratic requirements, and entitlements they held in the process. In two dialogues, they shared their thoughts and concerns about the ongoing peace process. They also learned about the experiences of refugees returning to two other countries devastated by war and counterinsurgency—Afghanistan and Guatemala. Out of these discussions, OfERR staff drafted a Memorandum of Concern linking the return of Ceylon Tamil refugees living in India to the peace process. The preamble of the document, also known as the “Nallayan



Declaration,” centered on refugees’ concerns about the peace process. It noted the following:

Associated discussions have taken place between the two parties and concerned refugee agencies such as the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on the resettlement and return of refugees, most recently in Kilinochchi in January 2003. These consultations followed an International Donors Conference in Oslo in December 2002, where considerable funds were pledged for the immediate reconstruction of North-East Ceylon.

The return of refugees is generally seen by the international community as a signal of returning normalcy and stability.

The last line of the excerpt above is particularly notable. At OfERR, refugee staff recognized that their return to Sri Lanka would be recognized by “the international community” of UN agencies, donors and other parties as “a signal”—a *sign*—“of returning normalcy and stability.” This, in turn, would lead to new signs and significant effects—namely, large-scale post-war reconstruction. However, Tamil refugees in India were unwilling to be fixed as a static sign for international interpreters seeking to fund their new projects. Whether working and living at OfERR, or living in the camps, Tamil refugees were dynamic interpreters of signs as well. They were avid readers and listeners of the news from Sri Lanka and diaspora outlets, and learned about the ground situation in the north and east from their relatives and friends. What they learned concerned them, and so they decided to proceed with caution. And from their previous experiences with return, they understood that “return” on their own terms was a complex process that involved more than a boat ride or a plane ticket to Sri Lanka. Talks about refugee return by international agencies thus provided camp refugees and OfERR with an opening to voice their own concerns and stake a claim to participation in the peace process.

In addition to opening up political space for refugees by staking a claim in the peace process, the Nallayan Declaration also lists several *principles* of return. The declaration collectively states the need for “a lasting peace” for refugees to be able to return to the island, and the need to democratize the peace process, creating an opportunity not only for refugees to participate, but many other Tamil political actors. Several other principles were also concerned with the logistics of refugee return, and demanded specific provisions be included in written accords to guarantee the rights, safety and security of returnees (#8) by involving refugees in the negotiation of accords (#9), attending to risks to physical safety such as uncleared land mines (#13) and bureaucratic obstacles to return, such as the recognition of identity, status, qualifications, and relationships afforded by documents (#14). In short, the Nallayan Declaration makes apparent what it proclaims: That “Refugees must play an active and informed part in the return process itself.”

One year later, Tamil refugees in India gathered again in February 2004—this time, the second anniversary of the MOU—to review the past year of the peace process and their work. These discussions were held in camps across Tamil Nadu, before representatives—camp *thalaivars*—met in the state’s capital with OfERR. They noted that little progress had been made towards peace in Sri Lanka—in part due to a lack of consensus among southern political parties, and the division of the LTTE into factions—and that conditions in “North East Ceylon” remained “deeply uncertain.”<sup>113</sup> Yet they also re-affirmed “their resolve and their right to return to their country” as part of a

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<sup>113</sup> OfERR, as an organization, was opposed to the 1972 name change of Ceylon to Sri Lanka, as the change was made without the consultation of Tamil political parties. The leadership always referred to the island as Ceylon in writing, and often in speech as well.

democratic peace process, and made a call for restorative justice by articulating the right of refugees to “the restoration of their social and material well-being” and the need for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to heal Sri Lankan society. OfERR made this stance known in a document titled, “The Chennai Call to Action: Challenging the obstacles to return of Ceylon Tamil refugees.” In addition, the document made general recommendations about the peace process—such as a National Convention on constitutional changes and oversight of the peace process—and supported the recommendations of other international actors that called for a link between progress in the peace talks and rehabilitation funding.<sup>114</sup>

Finally, in 2007, OfERR issued a third statement titled, “Trichy Declaration: The Quest for Peace in Sri Lanka.” When this statement was made, 220,000 people were already displaced by fighting in the north and east, and 12,000 people—three-fifths of those who would be able to flee over the next three years—had left the country in 2006. As the declaration notes, “The CFA exists now in name only and the prospects for peace seem further away than ever” (1). In 2004, in response to the return of some refugees, OfERR opened new offices in Sri Lanka, in Colombo, Trincomalee, Vavuniya, and Jaffna. The offices also served over 50,000 internally displaced people.

The Trichy Declaration correctly anticipates that Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa’s government will turn to a war in northern Sri Lanka as a military solution to the conflict. The declaration reminds the government of the human and financial costs of war, and refers to the government’s own APRC proposals as a means for delivering a

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<sup>114</sup> This was a demand at the 2003 Tokyo Donor Conference.

“durable” and “credible” political solution to end the conflict once and for all.<sup>115</sup> It also argues that mechanisms should be created to consult local populations, and that Tamil refugees concerns should be included in the APRC’s report as well. These statements are clearly addressed to the Sri Lankan government, and in so doing, recognizes the sovereignty of the state over the lives on whose behalf the declaration speaks: Tamil refugees. Moreover, the document reuses the political language of counterinsurgency in its attempt to be “heard” by the government. Speaking of “Tamil hearts and minds,” the declaration concludes, “The struggle is not only for the soil of a territorial state but for the souls of its inhabitants” (4). This shift from statements that address a wider range of local, national and international actors to a declaration almost singularly addressed to the Sri Lankan government reveals how OfERR adjusted to a changed political terrain. This was a landscape in which the international community had come to a tacit consensus that allowed the Sri Lankan government to deal with an “internal threat” to state sovereignty by whatever means it deemed necessary.

### **Pongu Thamil and the Performative Politics of Diaspora**

The political mobilization of Sri Lanka’s Tamil diaspora was at its height during the 2002 to 2008 ceasefire and peace process, and the socio-political movement known as *Pongu Thamil* (Tamil Uprising)<sup>116</sup> was at the epicenter of this activism. Pongu Thamil was created as “a movement of self-discovery, self-expression, cultural celebration, and political awareness and activism” (Palihapitiya 2011: 90) that emerged from the work of

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<sup>115</sup> The APRC was appointed by President Rajapaksa in July 2006 to devise a “homegrown solution” to the conflict. Its chairman, Tissa Vitharana (LSSP), submitted a report based on the committee’s deliberations to the government in 2010, but the proposals were not discussed or implemented. Many Tamils viewed the APRC as an insincere effort on the part of the SLFP government.

<sup>116</sup> Or, when read as an imperative, “Rise up, Tamil!”

the Jaffna-based Theatre Action Group (TAG) and its founder, the artist K. Sithamparanathan (also known as Sitham). The group was formed in 1990 in response to conditions of war that resumed between the govt and LTTE after the Indian peace accord. TAG's company of artists and students led performance-based workshops and rituals that allowed people to express "suppressed feelings" and "build on their human resources" (87). In the late 1990s, Sitham organized "cultural caravans" of rural Tamils walking in groups through Trincomalee, Batticaloa, and Colombo—all bi- and multi-ethnic cities with sizeable Tamil populations—to bridge information gaps between the Tamils and Sinhalese, and the Tamils and the international community (89). When his efforts were met with a lackluster response, Sitham decided to organize Tamils in the north and east more deliberately. He started with an assignment for his students at the University of Jaffna, challenging them to use performance to express "the burning in their hearts" (90); their efforts led to a performance called "Mission into the Soul." Afterwards, the show generated discussions between the actors and their audience.

The first Pongu Tamil demonstration was organized in January 2001 by the Jaffna Students Union to urge the Government of Sri Lanka to reciprocate the LTTE's declaration of a ceasefire (Tamilnet.com 2001). Thousands of university students and staff joined the rally at the University of Jaffna, while many people were turned away by Sri Lankan security forces through checkpoints and road blocks leading up to the campus (Tamil Times 2001).<sup>117</sup> Subsequent iterations of the event enfolded Pongu Tamil into the political machines of the Tamil National Alliance—a parliamentary alliance of several

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<sup>117</sup> Palihapitiya (2011) estimates between four and six thousand attendees, and notes that police threatened to shoot anyone entering the campus without the required identity card.

Tamil political parties—and the LTTE political wing.<sup>118</sup> Six events were held in Jaffna between 2001 and 2005, along with multiple events in other areas of northern and eastern Sri Lanka.

Pongu Thamil also spread around the globe as diasporic, Tamil nationalist activists organized events in North America, Europe and Australia. Each diasporic Pongu Thamil event incited participants to “rise up” to demonstrate and advocate for the livelihoods and self-determination of their kin “back home,” and featured a mix of cultural performances and speeches from prominent community activists, local politicians, and Tamil politicians and activists in Sri Lanka.

However, the event was also more than a declaration of support for people back home. As one informant named “Muthulingam” confided to me, “We don’t usually tell people this, but it’s a show of power.” He paused, adding: “It’s a show of unity.” When Muthulingam said me this, I wondered: Why characterize this event – or, series of events – as a representation of “unity?” And what does unity have to do with showing power?

The first Pongu Thamil took place three days after Thai Pongal<sup>119</sup>, on January 17, 2001 in Jaffna—a region that steadfast nationalists consider the cultural heartland of Tamils in Eelam. As a harvest festival in Tamil Nadu, India and Sri Lanka, Thai Pongal is known as a celebration of abundance and neighborliness exemplified by the habitual preparation of *pongal*. Pongal is a dish of rice and milk sweetened with jaggery. Water and milk are boiled together in a *paanai*, or clay pot. Only once the liquid mixture has

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<sup>118</sup> The TNA acceded to the LTTE’s claim of “sole” representation of the Tamil people at this time and lacked independence.

<sup>119</sup> Thai is a month on the Tamil calendar that usually falls between January and February. Thai Pongal marks the beginning of this month and the celebration of Pongal.

reached its boiling point, and “spilled over” in excess, can the uncooked rice and other ingredients be added. The cultural significance of this holiday has led some diasporic Tamils refer to it as the “real” Tamil New Year, rather than that of the first day of the month of Cittirai.<sup>120</sup> This dense, poetic structure – of spilling over, fertility, newness -- semiotically formed Pongu Thamil and its diasporic enactments, which indexically tether themselves to the annual event of Pongal as origin-point. This allowed the event, with several degrees of spatiotemporal proximity and distance in its circulation, to be variously glossed as a “Tamil Upsurge” by its organizers, and an Uprising, Revival, Renaissance, Resurgence Movement, Cultural Reawakening, or Pride by a range of Tamil and international media commentators. Between February 2002 and September 2004, Pongu Thamil’s affective surge flowed through Sri Lanka and its diasporic channels, extending, accumulating and sedimenting Tamil national sentiments in the cities and towns of Batticaloa, Trincomalee, Mannar, Kilinochchi, and Vavuniya in Sri Lanka, and Australia, Paris, London, Geneva, and Oslo, along with smaller, allied events performed in other locations.

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<sup>120</sup> The Tamil month of Cittirai usually begins in mid-April on the Christian calendar. It is important to note that this new year’s day is celebrated by Tamil and Sinhala communities in Sri Lanka, and is the *only* national holiday they share. In Sinhala, the holiday is known as Avurudu. The dawn of the new year is celebrated with an initial meal of *kiribath*, or “milk rice,” a dish of boiled rice cooked with coconut milk which is usually prepared for an auspicious occasion.

In Tamil Nadu, celebration of the Tamil New Year has become highly politicized and divided according to party lines, with the DMK celebrating it on Pongal, and the AIADMK celebrating it on Cittirai. In 2008, then Chief Minister Mu. Karunanidhi officially changed the date to that of Thai Pongal. The date was changed back to Cittirai when Jayalalithaa returned to power in 2011. Some have suggested that Karunanidhi wished to “secularize” the holiday. The DMK continues to celebrate the new year on Pongal, and DMK MP, MK Kanimozhi (also Karunanidhi’s daughter) defended the celebrations by saying that “Tamil people have been fighting and asking for this.” She referred not only to people in Tamil Nadu, but “Tamils around the world.” The DMK often claims to represent the World’s Tamils, but Kanimozhi’s statement may also reveal diasporic influences on the importance of Pongal in contemporary Tamil Nadu politics. See Stalin (2014). Karunanidhi’s decision was defended by a Toronto-based writer-activist, V. Thangavelu, and N. Satyendra in an editorial on his website, [Tamilnation.com](http://Tamilnation.com).



Figure 2.1: *Paanai* overflowing with *pongal* and LTTE flags at Pongu Tamil in Geneva, Switzerland (Source: Tamilnet.com 2005)

### *Pongu Tamil, 2002*

Canadian Tamils held the first Pongu Tamil event outside Sri Lanka on July 13, 2002 in downtown Ottawa, Canada, at an outdoor theatre near Canada's Parliament Hill.<sup>121</sup> The Hill was a politically important location, as the home to Canada's federal government—something that was noted and remarked upon by one organizer during the

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<sup>121</sup> The Astrolabe Theatre is on Nepean Point, just past the Pont Alexandra/Alexandra Bridge which crosses the Ottawa River to Quebec. The event took place three months after the second Pongu Tamil in Jaffna (held 4.17.2002), and only five months after the ceasefire began.



event.<sup>122</sup> Participants were thus arranged to imagine and feel that they were facing their government while asking for its active involvement in Sri Lanka's newly-begun peace process. They listened to speeches about the Tamil national struggle, and watched Indian musicians and dancers perform to Tamil "freedom songs" (*suthanthirap paadalkal*). The event's keynote speaker was Arul Mozhi, an Indian lawyer from Tamil Nadu, who spoke about the Government of India's use of its Prevention of Terrorism Act against supporters of the LTTE and their fight for Tamil Eelam.

The organizers of Ottawa's Pongu Thamil also made several resolutions, which were read out to the crowd. The last three resolutions reveal the logic of representation in this event and its transnational politics.

Resolution #5: Tamils in Sri Lanka have accepted the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam as their sole representatives. Through this event, the Tamils of Ottawa are also proclaiming the LTTE as our sole representatives.

Resolution #6: Since it is now a well established fact that the LTTE is the sole representatives of the Sri Lankan Tamils, to help the peace process, the ban on the LTTE should first be lifted in Sri Lanka and then in the rest of the world.

Resolution #7: Canadian government has included the LTTE in the list of banned organizations due to misunderstandings [sic]. This event urges the Canadian government, on behalf of the 250,000 Tamil Canadians, that the ban on the LTTE should be lifted in order for the LTTE to fairly participate in the peace process as the legitimate representatives of the Tamils in Sri Lanka (Kanagasabapathy 2006: 50; World Tamil Movement 2002).

While urging an end to bans on the LTTE in Sri Lanka and Canada, each of these resolutions state that the LTTE are the "sole representatives" (Resolution 5 and 6) or "legitimate representatives" (Resolution 7) of "the Sri Lankan Tamils." The Tigers' claim

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<sup>122</sup> Mr. Kannan of the Ottawa Tamil Coordinating Committee, quoted in a Tamilcanadian.com article about the event.

of sole representation is also extended to “Tamils of Ottawa” (Resolution 5). Such statements presuppose a homogenous Tamil community—for many activists, a nation—available for representation by the LTTE. In doing so, the Ottawa Pongu Thamil openly declared a representational logic that underlies the political cultures of pro-LTTE diasporic activism.<sup>123</sup> In this logic, the LTTE’s claim of “sole representation” of the Tamils of Sri Lanka and activists’ assertion of the same LTTE claim over the diaspora triangulates the relationship between diaspora Tamils and the island’s Tamils (Fig. 2.2).

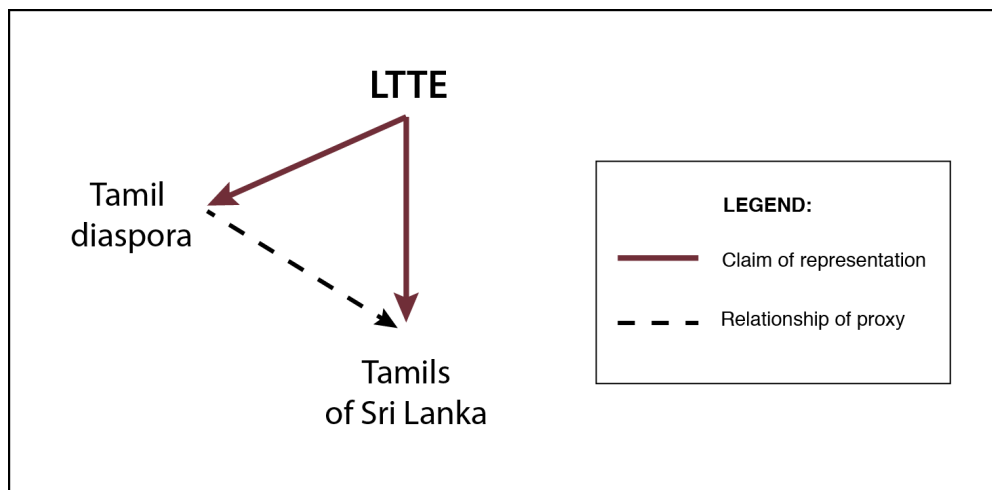


Figure 2.2: The triangular semiotic of the LTTE’s claim of “sole representation”

<sup>123</sup> Other events reveal a similar logic. Manivillie Kanagasabapathy (2006: 49-54), writing on the significance of homeland politics on diasporic Tamil identity, discusses Ottawa’s Pongu Thamil and a protest organized by the LTTE the same year, in 2002, to oppose the prospect of a ban. Opposition to a ban extended beyond LTTE support, but did not refuse the group’s claim to representation of all Tamils. As she writes of a Tamil Students Association meeting, ‘The main message presented at this meeting was “don’t do it [protest against the banning] for the LTTE, but for the oppression of the Tamil people by the SLA and the GoSL. Show them the strength of the Tamil population, and that we (the Tamil diaspora) will not stand by while groups discredit the Tamil people.” The ban was seen as a way of disempowering *all* Tamil people.’ Such was the strength of identification between some Tamil youth activists and the LTTE.

Kanagasabapathy notes that the protest’s organizers approached all Ontario universities and their Tamil associations. Students from this TSA decided to attend the protest, which did not materialize—the Bill that listed the group was passed on an earlier date.

Yet, while claiming to be represented by the LTTE, Pongu Tamil's organizers addressed their demands to the Canadian government. They stated that the ban should be lifted "in Sri Lanka and then the rest of the world" (Resolution #6), while urging the Canadian government to lift a ban on the LTTE "on behalf of the 250,000 Tamil Canadians" (Resolution #7).<sup>124</sup> The ordering of these resolutions mimicked the flow of Tamil migration; from Sri Lanka to the rest of the world, they end in Canada, where activists' demands called upon their Canadian citizenship to gain international recognition for the LTTE.

**பொங்குகமீழ்**  
ஈழத்தமிழரின் உணர்வை உலகுக்கு வெளிப்படுத்துவோம்!!!

தலைநகரில் ஓர் சரித்திரம் படைப்போம் அணிதிரண்டு வாரீர்! வாரீர்!!! வாரீர்!!!

**அருள் மொழி சிறப்பு பேச்சாளர்**

- தமிழீழ மக்களின் உரிமைக் குரலான தேசியம் — தாயகம் — சுயநிர்வாயத்தை வலியுறுத்துவோம்.
- தமிழினத்தின் தேசியத்தலைமையை வலுப்படுத்துவோம்.
- விடுதலைப் புலிகள் மீதான தடையை நீக்கி இலங்கைத்தீவில் சமாதான வழிமுறையான தீர்வு முயற்சியை கனடியப் பங்களிப்புடன் விரைவுபடுத்துவோம்.

**பொங்குகமீழ்**  
பவம் கொண்புடயநகரமொடி

**நேரம்:** யூலை 13, 2002 @ பி.ப. 3:30 மணி **இடம்:** Astrolabe Theatre, **Ottawa**

Figure 2.3: The poster reads: We will bring out the feelings of the Eelam Tamils to the world! (*Eelattamizharin unarvai ulagukku velipaduttuvom!*)

(Source: Tamilcanadian.com)

<sup>124</sup> Chapter 4 of this dissertation explores in greater detail the political implications and social semiotics of bans on the LTTE and other organizations in Tamil Toronto and the wider diaspora.

*Pongu Thamil, 2004*

The frenzy of Pongu Thamil events in 2001-2003 in Sri Lanka slowed to a lull by 2004, as the peace process quickly unraveled. One event was organized in Batticaloa in January 2004, a mere few months before the Karuna split would lead to internal fighting. In April, Tamils living in Europe converged on Geneva, and led a procession to the United Nations. Seeing these events and the lack of progress in talks, Toronto students were mobilized to organize their own event.

Toronto's Pongu Thamil was planned and spearheaded by students from the Canadian Tamil Students Association (CTSA), a group formed in the wake of a provisional, hoped-for peace in Sri Lanka. As discussed above, many Canadian Tamil students traveled on their own or with their friends or families to Sri Lanka between 2002 and 2004 to visit their homeland and *ur* (home-village), see their relatives, and volunteer for organizations in Sri Lanka. Socially and politically active students connected with the movement via their Canadian leaders. The World Tamil Movement organized a "student orientation," drawing participants from Tamil Students Associations at several Canadian universities.<sup>125</sup> Upon their return to Canada, a few of these students maintained contact with the University of Jaffna's Students Union; when they decided to organize their own Pongu Thamil in Toronto, they consulted their Jaffna peers. Why did they organize? As one student activist told me, Pongu Thamil was organized in less than two months as a response to the Government's refusal to recognize the LTTE's Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA) proposal. Neither party budged, and the stalemate revived prospects of a return to war. Toronto Tamil activists urged the Canadian government to get involved

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<sup>125</sup> See, for example, Carleton University Tamil Students Association (n.d.) *CUTSA—A Legacy*.

in the peace process. The demand shaped the timing of their event. Whereas the inaugural Pongu Tamil in Jaffna was figured by its temporal proximity to Pongal, subsequent rallies, conventions and marches (with the exception of a one year anniversary) could be detached from this context, and were instead held in response to political events. The organizers of the Toronto event selected a date close to the United Nations' International Day of Peace on September 21st.

Toronto's Pongu Tamil was held on Saturday, September 25, 2004, and made headlines and front-page news in Canada and beyond by attracting what was deemed a "record crowd" of 75,000 Canadian Tamils "of all ages," including entire families of three or four generations. Participants rallied in front of a stage upon which students and various Canadian politicians gave political speeches in English and Tamil, and Tamil orations, songs, dance, and drama were performed—mostly by Tamils living in Canada. The event was hosted and emceed by a group of active students from the CTSA.

The Toronto event was not for Toronto participants alone —media technologies were built into the planning of the event, which used interconnected forms of mass communication to construct a virtual transnational community. The festival was broadcast live by Canadian Tamil Radio, and was simulcast to viewers around the world through a video feed embedded on the event's website, [ponguthamil.ca](http://ponguthamil.ca). These networked technologies of communication also linked Tamil political leaders in Sri Lanka and other parts of the diaspora to Toronto Tamils. On two video screens propped up on either side of the stage, the students projected videotaped messages for the audience from Tamil parliamentarians, LTTE leaders, and members of the Canadian public-at-large. Members of the audience faced these speakers as listeners, and were not invited to speak on stage.

Serving as a backdrop to the staged event were the parliamentary buildings of Queen's Park, home to Ontario's provincial government—and a common site for public events and protests.<sup>126</sup>

One speaker, Prof. V. Elagupillai, discussed the significance of the event's location by asking the audience a rhetorical question: "Why is Pongu Tamil *in Canada?*" His answer, which was echoed by many of my interlocutors: "The population of the Tamil Canadians in this country is nearly 300,000. This is the single largest Sri Lankan Tamil population outside Sri Lanka."<sup>127</sup> In fact, in 2004, there were more Tamils living in Toronto than in Jaffna town, due to the displacement of Tamils from the peninsula and migration abroad. Prof. Elagupillai noted that he, like many Canadians, has friends and relatives still living in Sri Lanka. He described his worries about them, and when he worried, he said, he was unable to contribute fully to Canadian life. "Therefore," he argued, "when lack of peace in Sri Lanka adversely affects more than 300,000 Canadians, then it is a Canadian issue." In the example above, knowledge of and empathy for Tamil suffering in Sri Lanka becomes diasporic suffering, which must then be addressed. For Elagupillai and some of my interlocutors, the presence of a large diaspora community and its suffering-by-proxy thus legitimized Canada's involvement in Sri Lanka's peace process.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> During fieldwork, I observed university student protests against tuition hikes, and a protest held by supporters of Palestinians against Israeli apartheid, at a corner of the park near the Royal Ontario Museum, which was publicizing an exhibit of Dead Sea scrolls.

<sup>127</sup> There may in fact be more Tamils from Sri Lanka in India, but most are not registered in the camps or with the police.

<sup>128</sup> To buttress his claim, Elagupillai provided statistics, comparing the population of Canadian Tamils to the populations of Ottawa (Canada's capital), Prince Edward Island (a province with a population that numbers "only 50% of the Canadian Tamil population"), and Canada's three northern territories (Yukon,

The above example also highlights the indexical significance of numbers in diaspora nationalists' activisms, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Activists showed a frequent concern to demonstrate numerical superiority. Just as Tamil nationalists and the LTTE asserted a Tamil majority in the north and east of Sri Lanka in their quest for self-rule, diaspora activists turned to numbers to indicate the political power of a Tamil community in Canada. The LTTE and community-based diaspora activists thus operated within the political rationality of the majoritarian state they opposed. Meaningful political power meant having large numbers of people supporting you. The larger the number, the greater the claim to "represent" a community. If the LTTE could not always demonstrate mass support in Jaffna, particularly after losing territory in 1995, it could claim cultural hegemony among Jaffna Tamils living abroad.<sup>129</sup>

Toronto's event was staged like other Pongu Tamil festivals in an open, public space. However, Queen's Park is situated in the middle of a busy roundabout, visible yet contained within downtown Toronto and Canada's largest university campus, the University of Toronto. In another poetic parallel to Pongal, participants in the event often noted the 'overflowing' crowd, too large to be contained by the park. Once the Toronto crowd "spilled over" the park, they had to disperse. Any attempt to commune outside the park was effectively foreclosed by its spatial limits: several lanes of hurtling automobiles and a campus with closed doors on weekends produced an enclosed oasis for public sociability. Pongu Tamil at Queen's Park thus served as a dedicated space for the habituation of participants (cf. Bourdieu 1977).

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Northwest Territory, and Nunavut, in order to argue that peace in Sri Lanka should be a "primary concern" to Canada because it affects a "sizeable proportion" of Canadians—more than one of Canada's provinces.

<sup>129</sup> Chapter 4 discusses in greater detail the LTTE's hegemony in Tamil community activism and cultural productions.

Pongu Thamil's organizers announced three objectives for holding the event in Canada:

1. To urge the Canadian government to play a more active role in taking forward the peace talks between the LTTE and the GOSL which is now stalled.
2. To bring pressure on the GOSL to hold peace talks on the basis of the Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA) drawn with the help of the international community.
3. To hold peace talks between the LTTE and the GOSL in Canada (Ponguthamil.ca 2004)

Moreover, they asserted a broader role for Pongu Thamil, which, in its circulatory movement, became “a declaration of unity and solidarity with relations in Sri Lanka”:

The Tamil Diaspora has held Pongu Tamil demonstrations *as a method of telling their relatives in Sri Lanka that they are not alone*. The Tamil Diaspora has made a commitment *to educate their own governments about the suffering of Tamil people* in their homeland. Through Pongu Tamil events held by international communities, the Tamil Diaspora has acknowledged that they have not forgotten about their brethren in Sri Lanka. (Ponguthamil.ca 2004, my emphasis)

In the above statement, “the Tamil diaspora” turns to the Canadian government—and other governments in the countries in which Tamils reside—to “tell” their relatives in Sri Lanka that they are not alone. In addition to drawing on a generalized notion of kinship to imagine the nation-as-family, this declaration of solidarity positions the diaspora Tamil as a proxy speaker to communicate Tamil suffering in Sri Lanka to the Canadian government. As Mikhail Bakhtin writes, addressivity, “the quality of turning to someone, is a constitutive feature of the utterance; without it the utterance does not and cannot exist” (1971: 99). In this case, Pongu Thamil’s “declaration of unity and solidarity” existed—or, came into being—when the event’s speakers and participants addressed their grievances and demands to the state.



I argue, however, that the event was not only about unity and solidarity with relatives in Sri Lanka.<sup>130</sup> The diasporic performance of Pongu Tamil also aspired to another ideological unity: a singular and united Tamil community in Canada. Declarations of unity *between* Tamils “here” and “there” presupposed that Tamils “here,” in Toronto, were united. These declarations served to remind audience members about the need for unity *among* Tamils in Toronto.



Figure 2.4: Pongu Tamil 2004 at Queen’s Park (Tamilnet.com)

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<sup>130</sup> Within Sri Lanka, the event revealed some political differences. Some members of the TNA, like R. Sampanthan, focused on the peace process and the need to address Tamil grievances. Others directly mentioned or were supportive of the LTTE; they declared the organization to be the “sole representatives” of the Tamil people, and demanded the Sri Lankan government revoke the ban on the organization before peace talks. These differences in Tamil politics were elided in the Toronto event, as speakers consistently presented a pro-LTTE message that often equated Tamil national identity and the right to self-determination with a separate state.



Figure 2.5: Prabhakaran and the crowd at Pongu Tamil 2004 (Tamilnet.com)

One striking manifestation of Pongu Tamil’s image of diasporic “unity and solidarity” could be found in the ubiquitous presence of images of LTTE leader and self-proclaimed national figurehead, Velupillai Prabhakaran. Photographs and video of the event framed the crowd against the backdrop of the parliamentary buildings at Queen’s Park (Figure 2.4).<sup>131</sup> At the event, Canadian flags rippled distantly, miniaturized icons subdued to larger and bolder Tiger flags waved by members of the crowd. A large sign proclaiming Prabhakaran to be “Our Glorious Leader” was centered with the locus of provincial governmental power, while a statue of Sir John A. Macdonald, the “founding

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<sup>131</sup> Queen’s Park has been a site of disciplinary power (Foucault 1977) since the inauguration of the Canadian nation with Confederation in 1867. The building’s grounds were the original location of the (surrounding) University of Toronto, and an asylum for women prior to its current incarnation as the seat of parliamentary provincial government.

father” of the Canadian settler-nation, stands off to the side—in photographs of the event, relegated to the margins of the foreground. Still, Canada’s first prime minister remained within the frame as an indexical symbol to actualize and authorize the nationalist aspirations of “the Tamil people,” and Pirabhakaran as their head of state.

Pirabhakaran’s photo did not only preside over the stage, or the text of the speakers, but appeared throughout the audience, in the form of mass-produced posters (Figure 2.5). These posters were not, in fact, unique to the Toronto Pongu Thamil, but featured a different aesthetic for each event. In Toronto, the presence of the Leader’s image against a backdrop of Tiger yellow and red blazed like wildfire throughout the crowd. At times, these signs obscured the faces of their carriers, the image of Pirabhakaran supplementing and supplanting the body of the would-be Tamil national in a curious mirroring constitutive of the autotelic public (Warner 2002: 68). Pirabhakaran’s visage is an indexical icon, regimenting multiple groupings of identification and difference into a social whole. Icons and indices assert nothing, but rather, are potentialities and declaratives (Peirce 1955); in this case, the potentiality of the Tamil nation was enacted by the repeated visibility of Pirabhakaran’s smiling, mustachioed face. Notably, in this instance of diasporic performativity, Pirabhakaran-as-idol had a much larger network of circulation, beyond the interiority of the event, as a few of my informants presented me with a few tokens of his type—including a 3-D image of their “glorious leader” in full military garb. The repetition of these posters—so surprising to non-Tamils—became familiar, as it gradually sedimented into a *dispositif*.<sup>132</sup> Pirabhakaran’s image was thus naturalized, becoming a self-evident *doxa* that secured

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<sup>132</sup> I draw this concept from Bourdieu (1977).

recognition from Pongu Tamil's participants and viewers of the event without explicit argument. Instead, the event and its dissemination interpellated and inculcated a Tamil-Canadian political subjectivity, avoiding argument to simply enact through indexical iconicity.

This doxa, or what Arjun Appadurai (1996) terms the “culturalist” presuppositions of national movements mobilized in relation to the modern state, was also evident in the participants' clothing and bodily comportment. While some young male activists described the scene as a “casual” affair in which participants could enter whenever and wear “whatever they wanted to be dressed in,” it was also noted that “a lot of [women] showed up in sarees” (Figure 5). Unlike previous Pongu Tamil events in Sri Lanka, however, male participants did not wear the *verti*, but pants with t-shirts and button-down shirts; forms of dress common, but not recognized as “national” dress in Sri Lanka.<sup>133</sup> As Sitralega Maunaguru (1995) notes in her discussion of the gendering of Tamil nationalism, the iconic figure of the saree-clad woman has become an important means of signifying gender order within the LTTE during a war fought by both female and male cadres. As a form of dress authorized by the LTTE, the saree performs – and declares – a nationalized identity. This icon was replicated on stage in the form of dance and oration. In *bharatanatyam*, identically-dressed young women wearing half-sarees performed highly-regimented movements and postures to the Pongu Tamil audience.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> In Sri Lankan English, “national” dress for men refers to clothing worn on formal occasions: a long *kurta*-like shirt and the *verti*. The latter is approximately 4.5 meters of unstitched white cloth wrapped around the waist.

<sup>134</sup> See David (2012, 2007) and O’Shea (2001) on the politics of performance of *bharata natyam* in Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora communities in the United Kingdom and Canada respectively.

Their poetic expressions embodied and mirrored the unity to which the event, its organizers, and its audience aspired.

Repetitive chanting and songs, interspersed between and throughout speeches on stage, also served to habituate the potential nation. One chorus sung by the performers on stage issued an imperative to the crowd as an already constituted community at the beginning: *Pongu Thamilay, ne pongiyathay!* (Rise up, Tamil! You have risen!) During this emphatic command and declaration, numerous audience members on the periphery sat and listened, waving flags while others stood closer to the stage. Students wearing red-and-black faced the crowd and led them in the following refrain, in Tamil: *Emathu theysam enna? Tamil Ilam! Emathu thalaivan jaar? Pirabhakaran!* (What is our nation? Tamil Eelam! Who is our leader? Pirabhakaran!) *Ore kuralil collunga!* (Tell in a one voice!) What appears here in text as a call-and-response was articulated by both ‘speakers’ and ‘hearers’; the response an apparently simple declarative with an performative effects. Segments of a lengthy speech made by Theepan, Director of Communications of the Canadian Tamil Students Association responsible for organizing Pongu Thamil, also illustrate the performativity of the event:

In our short history, we have made our community proud, our country proud, and our parents proud! Regardless of when or how we came here, one thing is certain: Canada is our home! And as Tamil-Canadians, we are also aware, that the Tamil homeland is the wellspring from which our values contribute to the diversity of Canada.

... We, as Canadians, can help the Tamil people of Sri Lanka.

... We will send our strong voice to the Tamils back home, to tell them that there is hope, that peace will be there!

The metonymic substitution of this particular performative speech act produces one “strong voice” that can declare, with certainty, “We, as *Canadians*, can help the Tamil

people of Sri Lanka” (my emphasis). Deixis implies, instantiates, and identifies subjects in language. According to the linguist, Emile Benveniste, the singular usurps the plural, the verbal person in the plural expresses a diffused and amplified person as “We” annexes an indistinct mass of other persons to “I” (1971: 203). “We” — in this case, always the inclusive *naam*, rather than an exclusive *naangal* when spoken in Tamil<sup>135</sup> — indexically presupposes and creatively entails a Tamil-Canadian public.<sup>136</sup>

## Conclusion

As I have noted above, Sri Lanka’s internationally mediated peace process relied on a liberal consensus that assumed the promise of “economic dividends” from donor-funded neoliberal economic development would seal a compromise between two central parties to the war. In this view, a negotiated peace would bring with it the means to develop Sri Lanka and properly integrate the island into the global economy. Six rounds of talks were held between the government and the LTTE. With each successive round, the parties grew further apart, even as donor countries tried to use the carrot of a billion dollars of aid (and the stick of withholding that aid) to pull the parties together for negotiations.

This vision of a liberal peace was not to be. In less than two years, the process had come undone; the parties no longer held talks, and violations of the ceasefire abounded. International efforts at liberal peacebuilding, in linking aid to conflict resolution, failed to

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<sup>135</sup> In Jaffna Tamil, *naangal* (possessive *engal*) refers to the speaker and others to whom her/his words are addressed, in contrast to most Tamil dialects in India, which use the inclusive *naam*, possessive *namma*). Suseendirajah (1999) notes that in Jaffna Tamil, “*naam* indicates very high respect for the addressed,” and was used in rural areas to address someone of a higher caste (224-225). He writes that, “With the progress of education and social reforms, the usage of *naam* is fast disappearing” (225).

<sup>136</sup> The notions of indexical presupposition and entailment are discussed in Silverstein (1976).

take into consideration local political context (Uyangoda and Stokke 2011; Holt 2011). Differences within the Southern polity and the internal politics of the LTTE, when combined, resulted in a new configuration of forces during this period; the factional splitting of the LTTE and a resurgent Sinhala nationalism converged to bring the country back to war.

Instead of peace, the peace process produced dividends of an entirely different kind. As if to supplement the high-level negotiations of the LTTE and the government, Sri Lankan Tamils living outside the country mobilized to intervene in the peace process. This chapter has shown how those efforts diverged from one another, depending on the diasporic locations of the activists and participants involved. I have shown how Tamil refugees in India mobilized around a politics of return—whether actual or potential—to imagine their political futures on the island. Tamil refugees’ actions and declarations thus attempted to intervene in the making of that future. I have also discussed how Tamils in Toronto mobilized to “rise up” as citizens demanding Canada’s involvement in the internationalized peace process, and to secure recognition for the LTTE and its goals. They used distinctive cultural and political forms of action—from language and oratory, to dress and comportment—that signified their (diasporic) Tamilness, rather than demonstrating as unmarked Canadian citizens. In so doing, I argue that participants were engaged in a performative politics that enacted an emergent form of diasporic community for the first time in public space: a Tamil-Canadian public.

### Chapter 3

#### ***‘Our Historic Struggle’: Tamil Politics and Diaspora Histories***

This chapter argues for the ethnographic utility of historical narrative and historiography in this dissertation’s analysis of diaspora politics and community formation. History is a frequent subject of contention in modern Sri Lanka. The writing of history has been a critical part of the making of Sinhala and Tamil communities, and the conflict itself. As Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam writes about the fusion of myth and history in the politics of the Tamil past,

The past has been reinterpreted in a way that enables its acceptance as truth or otherwise vital for *the survival of the community*. That is why history will not let go, and why it seems to have led to a spiral of death and destruction. [...] Preexisting differences were reinterpreted in a new fashion that emphasized antagonism and hostility, instead of tolerance and exchange. (1990a: 118-119, emphasis added)

This chapter, following the insights of Hellmann-Rajanayagam and others<sup>137</sup>, argues that an analysis of history is critical to understanding the central place of the concepts of “community” and “struggle” in Tamil political and everyday life. The chapter also considers the power of history and its diverse interpretations in Tamil claims to land, power, and recognition.

The first part of this chapter outlines the political events that have typically defined Tamil politics in colonial Ceylon and postcolonial Sri Lanka. I begin with a

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<sup>137</sup> On the politics of the Tamil past, also see Cheran (1992, 2000) and Daniel (1990, 1996). See Whitaker (1990) for a discussion of the plurality of pasts in an east coast Tamil village.



synthesis of key historical and social scientific accounts of Tamil and Sri Lankan politics. As we shall see, this synthesis presents a broad consensus among scholars of Sri Lanka around the origins of a distinctly ‘Tamil’ politics and militancy; however, throughout these sections, I also discuss some differences in their interpretations of historical events. This narrative is followed in the second part of this chapter by a reading of political histories of Tamil nationalism written by scholars and activists during the war, with a focus on the widely disseminated work of the Sri Lankan Tamil political scientist, A. Jeyaratnam Wilson. In my analysis of these writings, I discuss four themes of nationalist discourse integral to the politics of Tamil militancy and diaspora activism.

In the third and final part of the chapter, I supplement this historiography with the ethnographic insights of my fieldwork among diaspora Tamil activists from Sri Lanka. This portion of the dissertation examines the ways in which diaspora activists narrate their own histories of Tamil politics. In contrast with the linear and continuous historical narrative presented by individual nationalist writers and other activists, I juxtapose four activists’ narratives and the “critical events” (Das 1995) they invoke to construct a genealogy of the political conditions and contestations at the core of an emerging Tamil diaspora politics. In doing so, this section of the chapter reveals how the emergence of a specifically “Tamil” politics and the production of Tamil political identities in postcolonial Sri Lanka was displaced—figuratively and literally—in the parallel developments of Tamil separatist militancy and diaspora activism. I also briefly consider how these varied and intersecting trajectories of Tamil politics contribute to the concepts of “community” and “struggle” used by diaspora activists.

## Tamil Politics in Ceylon & Sri Lanka

In the early 1970s, Sri Lanka entered a period of great social and political instability, leading to the crisis of an ethnic conflict and a quarter-century long civil war. Consequently, and perhaps unsurprisingly, most recent scholarship of the island's modern history grapples with the conflict.<sup>138</sup> As the Sri Lankan historian Nira Wickramasinghe (2006) argues, liberal and Marxist scholars of the last few decades have tended to focus on the state's failure to accommodate the needs and demands of the country's minorities.<sup>139</sup> Their scholarship is time and again a history of the nation-state, tracing the political administration and constitutional reforms of the colonial state to the electoral politics of a newly independent and postcolonial Ceylon governed by a Sinhala majority, and finally, a deepening crisis as tensions between majority and minority communities give way to conflict and war.

Indeed, as the first part of this chapter shows, the history of state formation and reform in late colonial and post-independence Ceylon and Sri Lanka demonstrates a long and vexed engagement with the question of power-sharing among the island's diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious communities. In particular, this history begins with the problem of defining community and the role of 'minority representation' in the political life of the state. In what follows, I provide a synthesis of the prevailing scholarship, as

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<sup>138</sup> See especially, the works of K.M. de Silva (1981, 1986, 1998), and A.J. Wilson (1979, 1988, 1994a, 2000), as cited and discussed in this chapter, as well as C.R. de Silva (1987), James Jupp (1978), Robert Kearney (1973), James Manor (1984), and Howard Wriggins (1960), among others.

<sup>139</sup> While Wickramasinghe aims to write a general political history of twentieth-century Sri Lanka, her book, *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History of Contested Identities* departs from conventional positivist histories in a few critical respects: 1) the author draws on a wide range of sources, including ethnographic and literary writing, as well as critical analyses of women and gender; 2) the author uses a thematic, rather than chronological approach to Sri Lankan history, and historicizes her categories of analysis, and 3) in doing the above, she aims to write a history that evokes "a reality that is differentially refracted through varying experiences and positionalities" (2006: xi), rather than a history of the nation-state.

referred to by Wickramasinghe and outlined above, and supplement this material with the observations and interpretations of social historians and anthropologists on the historical making of communities in Sri Lanka. The “official” or standard authoritative account of the origins of Tamil politics in Sri Lankan history provides context for my critical analysis of Tamil political histories that follows.

### *Ethnicity and Community under Colonialism*

When the British East India Company claimed control of Ceylon in 1796 and declared the island a Crown Colony in 1802, the territory was not entirely within its power (de Silva 1981). Ceylon was finally brought under unified rule with the defeat of the Kandyan resistance and the fall of the kingdom in 1815. The administrative and political unification of the island, however, took place through reforms well into the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>140</sup>

Critical scholars have argued that British recognition of particular forms of social difference was built into the unification of the colonial state (Rogers 1994; Scott 1999). Communal representation was introduced into Ceylon’s Legislative Council with the liberal Colebrooke-Cameron reforms of 1833, which allowed elites from designated communities to represent their respective groups to the colonial government (Samaraweera 1973). In order to determine which groups required representation, the colonial government attempted to systematically classify the castes and ‘races’ of Ceylon, an endeavor begun with the first full Census of 1871. The first census recorded 78

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<sup>140</sup> Mendis (1956) discusses many of these reforms in his introduction to an edited volume on the documents of British colonial policy during this time. Also see Samaraweera (1973) on the Colebrooke Cameron reforms of 1833, and Scott (1999: 23-52), for a discussion of these liberal reforms in Sri Lanka and an analysis of the political rationality of “colonial governmentality.”

‘nationalities’ and 24 ‘races’ resident in Ceylon: (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2001: 15; Cheran 2000: 58).<sup>141</sup> Subsequently, with each decennial census the categories changed and narrowed, and as a result, the communities recognized by the British as being in need of representation also changed. The 1921 Census recognized ten principal “races” in Ceylon.<sup>142</sup> By 1981, more than one hundred years after the first modern census, the communities of Ceylon were as follows: Sinhala, Tamil, Muslims and Others (Cheran 2000: 59).<sup>143</sup> These colonial constructions of identity rigidly defined the structure of state politics in Ceylon for more than a century (Nissan and Stirrat 1990; Rajasingham-Senanayake 2001a). Moreover, the categories of the colonial state would shape the country’s politics for decades after it gained independence.

Sri Lankan anthropologist Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake sums it up the following: During the early years of colonial rule, “regional differences between groups speaking the same language... were more salient than those between the coastal Tamil and Sinhala groups” who were not perceived as distinct ethnic groups, but as members of a wide range of caste groups (2001a: 16). However, by the end of British rule, language had become the primary marker of difference used to consolidate modern ethno-racial identities.

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<sup>141</sup> Rajasingham-Senanayake (2001a) notes the incoherence in the census categories: “‘Sinhalese’ and ‘Tamil’ were races as well as nationalities while the Kandyans were another nationality” (15). Sinhalese residents of the coastal Low-Country and the Kandyan highlands were each categorized as separate communities during most of colonial rule and were granted separate representation (Wickramasinghe 1995).

<sup>142</sup> According to Wickramasinghe (2006: 48), these were as follows: Low Country Sinhalese, Kandyan Sinhalese, Ceylon Tamils, Indian Tamils, Ceylon Moors, Indian Moors, Burghers, Eurasians, Malays, Veddas.

<sup>143</sup> The contemporary category of “Muslim” includes those who were categorized in the colonial census as “Moor.” This community has, over the decades, assimilated diverse smaller ethnic groups, including Malays, Borahs, Sidis, etc, but some among these groups claim distinct identities today.

*Constitutional reform and the movement for independence, 1919-1947.* As with the island's colonization, the official independence of Ceylon was a slow and gradual process. In 1919, the Ceylon National Congress (CNC) was a multi-ethnic compact formed by Ceylonese elites who were active in efforts to reform the constitution. They sought to: 1) Create a broad coalition of elites to secure the 'Ceylonization' of public services, 2) Increase the powers of the appointed Executive and Legislative Councils<sup>144</sup> (which included appointed Ceylonese representatives) and 3) Develop an ethnically-balanced legislature. The latter goal became a point of contention, as the CNC became increasingly dominated by Sinhala leaders over the next two years. In conflict with the majoritarian interests of the Sinhala leaders, the CNC's first President, Ponnambalam Arunachalam, a representative of the Tamil community, withdrew from the leadership.<sup>145</sup>

Historians broadly agree that Ceylon's independence movement was characterized less by mass mobilization and protest than reform schemes and backroom deals, as elite leaders worked within the political structures of the colonial administration (K.M. de Silva 1981; Wilson 1988; Wickramasinghe 1995; Wriggins 1960). However, an informal compact among Sinhala, Tamil, Moor, Malay, Burgher and European leaders dissolved as the question of 'communal representation' versus 'territorial representation'<sup>146</sup> instigated discord, and led to political divisions in the 1920s and 1930s (Russell 1982; Wickramasinghe 1995). The switch from communal representation to a purportedly more egalitarian territorial representation was ushered in with the

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<sup>144</sup> Established in 1833 as a result of the Colebrooke-Cameron reforms.

<sup>145</sup> Arunachalam left the CNC amid disagreements with Sinhalese political leaders over the share of Ceylon Tamil representation in the legislature (Wilson 1994a: 11). Also see K.M. de Silva (1972).

<sup>146</sup> In Ceylon, "communal representation" referred to the assignment of political seats according to one's membership within a particular ethnic or ethno-religious community, while "territorial representation" referred to a legislature organized according to administrative boundaries.

Donoughmore Constitution of 1931. With it came the introduction of universal franchise in Ceylon.<sup>147</sup> In 1944, Arunachalam founded the All-Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC), marking the first time a party was formed around a Tamil ethnolinguistic identity in Ceylon.

*The Minority Question and Political Representation at Independence*

The terms “minority” and “majority” were introduced to Ceylon during British colonial rule, and they have been subject to change and contestation since. As Ceylon’s independence loomed on the horizon, Ceylon Tamil political leaders were particularly conscious of the effects of constitutional reform on their standing as a ‘major’ community vis a vis the Sinhalese.<sup>148</sup> Together, with the leaders of numerically smaller minority groups, they sought to be represented on an equal footing with the Sinhala political leadership. In 1944, the ACTC presented their case for a radically different conception of post-independence politics. Under the leadership of G.G. Ponnambalam, the case for ‘50/50,’ or ‘balanced representation,’ was presented to the British Soulbury Commission tasked with the latest round of constitutional reforms—this time, in anticipation of a Ceylonese government. Under Ponnambalam’s scheme, 50% of the seats in the Legislature and the Executive ministries would go to Sinhala politicians, with the remaining 50% to be distributed among the various minoritized communities (Russell

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<sup>147</sup> Prior to 1931, only 4% of the population had the ability to vote. Ceylon was the first British colony—excluding the white settler colonies/Dominions—to be granted universal franchise, two years after Britain’s first general election under universal suffrage (de Silva 1998: 7). Arunachalam called for “manhood suffrage” in making the case for “responsible government” for Ceylon in 1919, as did A.E. Goonasinha in 1923 (de Silva 1981: 400-401).

<sup>148</sup> By ‘major’ community, I refer to the way in which Ceylon Tamil leaders understood their community to be a distinct group deserving of political recognition on par with the ‘majority’ community—the latter being a numerical and political term. For one use and a discussion of the terms, ‘major’ and ‘minor,’ see Ismail (2005).

1982; Wilson 1994a). The ACTC proposal reflected a general consensus among the leaders of the larger minorities—the Ceylon Tamils (as Tamils who had lived for centuries on the island were then called), Tamils of Indian Origin, and Moors (later known as Muslims)—about the need for minority safeguards in the new constitution.<sup>149</sup>

Despite a minority consensus, the British commissioners deemed the ACTC's proposal unacceptable. Their disapproval hinged on the liberal notion of a 'representative government' that was now realized as territorial representation. This form of representation had favored Sinhala leaders who dominated the Councils, and they sought to preserve it. Ponnambalam was deemed a 'communalist' among the Sinhala leadership and sections of the colonial government. In other words, after 1931, there was no turning back from 'One man, one vote.' Britain's Soulbury Constitution instead included a Section 29, which prohibited discrimination in legislation against any specific community:

No ... law shall ... make persons of any community or religion liable to disabilities or restrictions to which any persons of other communities or religions are not made liable; or ... confer on persons or any community or religion any privilege or advantage which is not conferred on persons of other communities or religions. [Section 29(2)]

As with the earlier Donoughmore Constitution, the Soulbury Constitution of 1947 was a turning point in the island's modern governance. The constitution was written by a British commission established to provide recommendations on the Ministers' Draft Scheme, a draft constitution presented by the predominantly Sinhalese ministers in anticipation of self-government in Ceylon. For the first time, Ceylon's (Sinhalese) elites

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<sup>149</sup> See Wilson (1988) on this point. Liberal historians (for example, Russell 1982) have typically viewed Ponnambalam's proposals as an "extreme" demand; for an alternative reading, see Scott (1999) and Ismail (2005).

had the opportunity to conceptualize and inscribe the legal ground for the independent polity they would govern. On the other hand, British commissioners struggled with, in their words, “the most difficult of the many problems involved” in writing the new constitution: the relationship between the minorities and the majority community (Great Britain Colonial Office 1945: 38).<sup>150</sup>

In this period of constitutional reforms immediately before and after independence, two major political parties were formed: the United National Party (UNP), which won the 1947 elections, and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in 1951.<sup>151</sup> Both parties became predominantly Sinhala. This political elite soon proved that, in spite of Section 29, the state could—and would—discriminate against minorities in defining the postcolonial nation. Their minority counterparts pursued multiple strategies to oppose state discrimination and secure a greater share of state power.

### *Tamil Politics After Independence*

Scholars of Tamil politics and those interested in the rapid growth of Tamil nationalism generally point to the emergence of political parties as a key development. These parties were formed in dynamic response to the mid-twentieth century creation of Sinhala-dominated national parties, as well as internal debates among Tamil political elites. Shortly before and after independence, Ceylon Tamil<sup>152</sup> politicians and activists

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<sup>150</sup> Lord Soulbury also states this in his preface to Farmer (1963).

<sup>151</sup> See Wilson 1979: 125 on the political significance of the SLFP’s launch. While the LSSP was the first mass party formed in 1935, the SLFP formed a centre-left populist coalition of rural peasants, teachers, monks, and other non-elites that presented to the UNP’s electoral dominance. The Sri Lankan executive has since alternated between these two parties, with the exception of the years during which J.R. Jayawardene and R. Premadasa were elected into power (1977-1994).

<sup>152</sup> What I refer to as “Tamil politics” here primarily refers to Ceylon Tamil politics in the post-independence period. As seen above, this at times involved policies around Tamils of Indian Origin. Throughout this dissertation, I use multiple terms—Ceylon Tamils/Jaffna Tamils, Tamils of Indian



banded together around several key concerns they had about the Sinhala-dominated state: citizenship and voting rights for Tamils of Indian Origin, language policies, state-aided ‘colonization’ in the North and East of the island, and educational policies of ‘standardization.’ Symbols such as the national flag and anthem were also debated. Language—central to education and employment opportunities—and territory, became key planks in the political struggle for Tamil rights. Scholars have questioned, however, the extent to which the 1950s and 1960s struggle for ‘Tamil’ rights was inclusive of all Tamil-speaking people, particularly with respect to caste and region (Pfaffenberger 1990; Sivathamby 1995).

*The Citizenship and Elections Acts.* Ceylon gained official independence on February 4, 1948. Shortly afterward, the UNP government of D.S. Senanayake passed three laws that would result in the statelessness and disenfranchisement of an entire community: The *Ceylon Citizenship Act, No. 18 of 1948*; the *Immigrants and Emigrants Act, No. 20 of 1948*, the *Indian and Pakistani Residents (Citizenship) Act, No. 3 of 1949*; which were later followed by the *Parliamentary Elections (Amendment) Act, No. 48 of 1949*. With these acts, nearly all Tamils of Indian Origin were taken off the electoral registers and denied citizenship.<sup>153</sup> Tamils of Indian Origin living and working on the estates in central Sri Lanka were a significant voting bloc, and held great influence over 14 seats that had

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Origin/Hill-Country Tamils, etc—that illustrate the heterogeneity of Tamil identities and political formations in Ceylon/Sri Lanka, and their socio-historical change over time. I also note the dominance of Jaffna Tamils (often referred to as Ceylon Tamils) in these formations.

<sup>153</sup> See Peebles (2001) and Jegathesan (2013) on the political framing of Indian Tamils’ as ‘transient’ and ‘disinterested’ that underscored these acts. See also Kanapathipillai (2009: 44-45) on the gendered implications of these acts, which required either birth by registration or proof of descent from a father or paternal grandfather born in Ceylon.

returned Left parties in the 1947 general election.<sup>154</sup> When the state disenfranchised Tamils of Indian Origin, the community lost seven weighted seats, delivering Sinhala-dominated political parties an unassailable majority of 80 percent of seats in Ceylon's Parliament.<sup>155</sup> The Citizenship Acts set the stage for all subsequent elections, where the UNP and SLFP could engage in what the Sri Lankan political scientist Neil Devotta (2005) has called "ethnic outbidding." In other words, the two parties could ignore minority voters and gain an absolute majority in the Parliament.

In protest over the collusion of Ponnambalam's ACTC with Senanayake's government over the citizenship acts that disenfranchised Tamils of Indian Origin, S.J.V. Chelvanayakam left the Congress in 1949 to form the Federal Party (known in Tamil as the *Ilangai Tamil Arasu Katchi*). At its first party convention held in 1951, the Federal Party announced, "The Tamil-speaking people of Ceylon constitute a nation distinct from that of the Sinhalese by every fundamental test of nationhood" (K.M. de Silva 1981: 513).<sup>156</sup>

Furthermore, successive postcolonial governments would have to contend with the questions raised by a population now made 'stateless' and without citizenship. Over the next two-and-a-half decades, various negotiations and pacts between the Indian and Ceylonese governments attempted to 'resolve' this question, often without the

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<sup>154</sup> At their peak, the population of Tamils of Indian Origin, prior to the "return" of many to India, was approximately 12% of the country's total population—equal to the number of Ceylon Tamils. In addition to obtaining seven of 95 seats in Parliament during the 1947 general election, Tamils of Indian Origin influenced twenty other constituencies by voting for the Left. Their disenfranchisement increased the Sinhala voting population to four-fifths of the total voter population.

<sup>155</sup> Parliament required a two-thirds majority, now easily won with no need for compromise with minority politicians amid conflicts over political rights and social and economic opportunity.

<sup>156</sup> The declarations of the Federal Party make repeated reference to the "Tamil-speaking people" of Ceylon. The party made a conscious effort to do so, believing it would unite minorities around their common language, Tamil, regardless of region and/or national origin (i.e. Hill-Country Tamils, or Tamils of recent Indian origin), or religious and ethnic identity (i.e. Muslims).

consultation of the Tamils of Indian Origin, who would subsequently come to call themselves *malaiyaha thamarar*, or Hill-Country Tamils.<sup>157</sup>

*Language: The 'Sinhala Only' Act and Tamil Political Responses.* In 1951, the year of the Federal Party's first convention, the newly-appointed National Languages Commission began to probe the question of a transition from governance in English, the language of colonial administration, to the vernacular languages of Sinhala and Tamil. It first appeared that both languages would be used in government and education. Over the next few years, however, Sinhala nationalists mobilized to support a transition to only one language: Sinhala. S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, supported by politically active Buddhist monks (*bhikkus*), formed a radical Sinhala nationalist coalition with a few smaller parties under the banner, Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP, or People's United Front). This pushed the UNP government of Sir John Kotelawala to respond. Earlier proposals that would grant 'parity of status' to Tamil were sidelined in favor of what came to be known as a "Sinhala Only" policy for the SLFP. Parliament was dissolved and a new election fought with both parties on a "one language" platform. The language question thus quickly became the basis of the 1955 elections (K.M. de Silva 1981). The MEP won, confirming the popularity of their Sinhala nationalist and (in the aftermath of the Left's *hartal* (strike) of 1953 organized by the Left) populist platform.

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<sup>157</sup> In 1964, protracted negotiations between the Indian and Ceylonese governments lead to the first attempt to resolve the problem of citizenship for the Tamils of Indian Origin, now known as *malaiyaha*, or Hill-Country Tamils. In the Sirimavo Bandaranaike-Lal Bahadur Shastri pact—named after the then Prime Ministers of Ceylon and India respectively—it was agreed that a substantial number of the 975,000 persons who had been rendered 'stateless' by the citizenship acts would be given citizenship rights within the island. A greater number, however, were repatriated to India in the years to come, leading to future negotiations between the two countries and two more agreements in 1967 and 1974. The problem of statelessness among this group of Tamils continued into the twenty-first century, as I discuss in Chapter 5 on Tamil refugees living in India. For further reading, see Kanapathipillai (2009).

Bandaranaike's new Parliament passed the *Official Language Act, No. 33 of 1956*, in which Sinhala would be made the one and only official language of Ceylon. While the draft bill included provisions for the use of Tamil and English, the provisions were removed due to protests from hardline Sinhala nationalists who supported Bandaranaike's rise. Thus, with no reference to the use of Tamil in administration, Tamil government servants would be required to pass examinations in Sinhala to continue to work.<sup>158</sup>

Tamil leaders and their constituents were shocked and frustrated by discriminatory legislation passed without their input. The act quickly became known as the "Sinhala Only Act." The Federal Party turned to extra-parliamentary methods in response. Party activists organized a Gandhian non-violent protest, or *satyagraha*, urging the Bandaranaike government to include Tamil in the act. The protesters were attacked by organized Sinhala mobs, which had planned simultaneous attacks on Tamils in Colombo and at the Gal Oya irrigation project, a state-organized settlement, or 'colonization scheme' in the Eastern Province (Peebles 2006: 110; Wilson 2000: 84). Later, a *pāda yātra* ("pilgrimage on foot") to Trincomalee rallied thousands at the site of the declared capital of a future Tamil homeland. There, the Federal Party announced four demands: (1) a Federal constitution, (2) parity of status for Tamil and Sinhala, (3) citizenship for Tamils of Indian Origin; and (4) the end of colonization, or Sinhala settlements in Tamil-majority areas (Wilson 2000: 82-84). The first demand of federalism entailed "...one or

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<sup>158</sup> The passing of the 1956 Act held other implications: Government forms could not be obtained in the Tamil language; in most areas of the country, government services were provided in Sinhala only; students could not sit for exams in Tamil.

more Tamil linguistic state or states incorporating all geographically contiguous areas in which Tamil speaking people were numerically in a majority” (Wilson 2000: 85).<sup>159</sup>

Growing ethnic tensions led Sinhalese and Tamil political leaders to enter negotiations to bring harmony to the communities. Bandaranaike delayed enforcement of the ‘Sinhala Only’ act as he attempted to quell ethnic tensions by gaining Tamil politicians’ support. Negotiations between the ruling coalition and the Federal Party led to compromise in the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam Pact of 1957. By this pact, Chelvanayakam stepped down from federalism and total parity of status for Tamil, while Bandaranaike agreed to make provisions for Tamil and some power sharing within the unitary state.<sup>160</sup> Tamil would be recognized as the language of administration in the predominantly Tamil-speaking North and East, with “no prejudice” to Sinhala as the official language, and subordinate law-making authority would be devolved to regional councils (Wilson 1988). These regional councils would handle agriculture, education, and the selection of colonists to reside in the state’s ‘colonization’ schemes. However, the Pact did not survive. Under pressure from the *sangha* and his Sinhala nationalist supporters, Bandaranaike scrapped the 1957 pact.

Tensions between the communities came to a head once more in March 1958 when Federal Party activists blackened the Sinhala letter, “Sri,” that appeared on the new license plates of buses sent to the North and east, which they replaced with the equivalent letter in the Tamil script to register their protest against the continuing “Sinhala Only” policy. In Colombo, chauvinistic elements among the Sinhalese parties retaliated by

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<sup>159</sup> Also cited in Wickramasinghe (2006: 271).

<sup>160</sup> The distinction between a “unitary state” with highly centralized powers and a “united” one comprising several political units has been important in modern Ceylonese and Sri Lankan politics.

painting the Sinhala ‘Sri’ on Tamil homes and deleted all signs in Tamil found on commercial and public buildings by brushing them over with black paint; when the FP responded by launching a non-violent direct action campaign, Sinhala nationalists beat the *satyagrahis* and organized island-wide riots (Wilson 2000: 88-89; for accounts, see Ponniah 1963; Vaithilingham 1962; Vittachi 1958). Thousands of Ceylon Tamils affected by the riots were taken to Jaffna by government ships. Amidst press censorship and curfews, Bandaranaike presented a much-delayed bill to provide for the “reasonable use of Tamil.” Under pressure once again, he eliminated the Regional Councils Bill and The Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Act of 1958. However, Bandaranaike's criticism of the rioters and enactment of the provisions for limited use of Tamil earned the wrath of his own passionate supporters. He was assassinated by a bhikku (and former supporter) in September 1959 (Tambiah 1986).

His wife, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, succeeded her husband as Prime Minister<sup>161</sup> and pushed through the implementation of the Official Language Act on January 1, 1961, ignoring the special provisions act proposed by her late husband. The Language of the Courts Act of 1961 further enabled the replacement of English with Sinhala in all courts of law. Public officers appointed after 1956 were required to pass a proficiency examination in Sinhala to retain their jobs. This limited opportunities for Tamil-speakers in the public service. The Federal Party mounted civil disobedience campaigns and agitations; in response, the government declared a state of emergency to suppress their opposition (Ponniah 1963). As the satyagraha of 1961 continued, the government also stationed the army throughout Jaffna and the Northern Province. The Tamil language was

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<sup>161</sup> With her election defeat of the country's interim Prime Minister, Sirimavo Bandaranaike became known as the world's first elected female head of state.

not recognized in legislation until a new UNP government under Dudley Senanayake passed the Tamil Language Regulations of 1966, a piece of “subordinate legislation” that was not implemented over the decades to come.<sup>162</sup>

*Territory: State-sponsored ‘colonization’ schemes.* Ceylonese debates about national language(s) and policy changes were made in tandem with new economic policies and practices around the distribution of land. Tamil political leaders became especially concerned about state-organized land ‘colonization’ schemes, which were perceived by them as a form of Sinhala conquest (Wickramasinghe 2006: 268). Colonization in Sri Lanka referred to the creation of agricultural settlements in less-populated, interior regions of the island: namely, in sections of the Eastern Province, and the North-Central and Southern dry zones. These settlements required irrigation—Sri Lanka, facing a rice shortage, encouraged new settlers to grow paddy, which meant that vast tracts of land had to be flooded with water. The state engaged in public works projects, seeing this work as a revival of Lanka’s ancient “hydraulic civilization” (Peebles 1990; Tennekoon 1988).<sup>163</sup> Economic development projects thus benefitted peasant farmers recruited exclusively from the majority community. Moreover, the influx of Sinhala settlers was transforming the demographics of the Eastern Province.<sup>164</sup> State-sponsored settlements begun in the mid-1950s continued to be a source of conflict.

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<sup>162</sup> The Thirteenth Amendment to the 1978 Constitution, passed in 1987 under the terms of the Indo-Lanka Accord, notes in Chapter IV, Article 18, paragraph 2 that “Tamil shall also be an official language.” This was the first time that Tamil was “also” legally recognized as an “official language” of the state. However, no government has fully implemented the amendment in state administration.

<sup>163</sup> On the related “hydraulic society,” see also Leach (1959) and Gunawardena (1971).

<sup>164</sup> Tamil activists and some scholars have argued that the purpose of these schemes was to ‘Sinhelize’ areas that Tamils considered to be their “traditional homelands.” For a version of this argument, which connects the changing demography of the Eastern Province to electoral politics, see Manogaran 1994. Peebles 1990 contests this argument. For a historical study of the “traditional homelands” concept, see

In addition, the period between 1956 and 1977 was distinguished by the nationalization of the public sector, as well as the colonial plantations. When Sirimavo Bandaranaike was returned to power in 1968 on a platform of socialism and economic independence for Ceylon, land continued to be a central issue. One of the first acts of the new government introduced radical land reforms, which nationalized the once British-owned plantations and estates, allowing excess lands to be distributed to the Sinhala population. Tamils of Indian Origin, Ceylon Tamils, and Muslims were discriminated against in land distribution, particularly in the Central and Eastern Provinces. The government continued to recruit villagers from crowded and impoverished villages in the southern ‘low-country’ to colonization schemes in the interior dry zones; patronage politics meant that, even in heterogenous villages, the settlers were Sinhala.<sup>165</sup>

Scholars have argued that the politics of the state’s language policies and colonization schemes, and more importantly, the social and economic consequences of those policies, provided the material basis for Tamil separatism (Peebles 1990; Shastri 1990; Wickramasinghe 2006: 267-74).

*Education: National schools and ‘Standardization’ policies*

In 1970, the government introduced two systems of ‘standardization’ of marks for university admission. ‘Standardization’ meant that, according to the language of examination, Tamil students were required to achieve higher marks for admission to the same faculty (school) as Sinhala students. Moreover, K.M. de Silva writes that even

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Hellmann-Rajanayagam (1990b). See Peiris (1991) and K.M. de Silva (1995) for an appraisal and critiques of the concept.

<sup>165</sup> Predominantly Sinhalese settlers were often chosen through their connections to party supporters and local members of Parliament.



when Sinhala and Tamil students sat for an examination in English, Tamil students were still required to have higher qualifying marks than Sinhala students (1984 in Wilson 2000, 103). The new policy was thus aimed at Tamil students, who were greatly affected by its implementation. The policy was later revised to include a ‘district quota system,’ which effectively reduced the number of admitted students from Jaffna and Colombo (Bastian 1984; C.R. de Silva 1974).<sup>166</sup> The SLFP’s education reforms, on the basis of territorial quotas, drastically reduced the number of Tamils, particularly from the Northern Province, receiving admission to tertiary studies and coveted placements in the professional faculties such as medicine, engineering, and law. Many scholars have noted that Tamil grievances peaked as the effects of university ‘standardization’ throughout the 1970s became apparent (Bastian 1984; C.R. de Silva 1998[1979]; K.M. de Silva 1984; Wilson 1988, 2000).

*State reform and devolution of power.* Sri Lanka’s first constitution as an independent nation was written and passed in 1972, during the second prime ministership of Sirimavo Bandaranaike. The new constitution superseded The Ceylon Constitution Order in Council of 1946-7, otherwise known as the Soulbury Constitution, which was drafted by a Ceylonese lawyer, and finalized by appointed British commissioners; it also excised Ceylon’s remaining constitutional links to Britain. In so doing, architects of the 1972 constitution eliminated the position of Governor General, who was the country’s ceremonial Head of State as the Queen’s representative in Ceylon, and more importantly,

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<sup>166</sup> Colombo (and its environs) and the Jaffna peninsula had a high number of government and private schools. The former, though multi-ethnic, had a large population of Tamils, while the latter was predominantly Tamil. Middle-class Tamils, particularly those from Jaffna, had looked to education as a means to a secure livelihood, as farming was and continues to be a difficult occupation on the arid peninsula. The shift to district quotas impacted the educational trajectories of these Tamils most. Some have argued that the switch to district quotas may have benefitted minorities in the eastern regions, but little empirical research has been done to support this claim.

replaced the Privy Council as the ultimate source of appeal with the legal apparatus of the Supreme Court (Ponnambalam 1983).

Ceylon was renamed the (Free, Sovereign and Independent) Republic of Sri Lanka, and was re-formed into a highly centralized unitary state. The 1972 republican constitution abolished the Senate, and accorded official recognition and ‘the foremost place’ to Buddhism which, as the republic’s major religion, became the state’s duty to foster and protect (Section 6).<sup>167</sup> Moreover, Sinhala was again established as the official language, with Tamil mentioned as a “second language,” while provisions for the “reasonable use of Tamil” created to redress the problems of “Sinhala Only” were ignored once again. The entrenchment of Buddhism as the new republic’s religion, and Sinhala as its official language, upset Tamil political leaders and their communities. They felt that the first constitution of an independent Sri Lanka was written without minority consultation. The FP’s leader, Chelvanayakam, resigned his parliamentary seat in protest and announced he would run in a by-election against the government candidate to prove that the Ceylon Tamils did not support Mrs. Bandaranaike’s constitution.

Six years later, Prime Minister J.R. Jayawardene and the UNP passed another republican constitution. The 1978 Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka went beyond the republicanism of Sirimavo’s 1972 effort. Jayawardene scrapped the country’s Westminster-style parliamentarism for a Gaullist-type republic (Wilson 1980), creating an Executive Presidency, to which the Prime Minister became subordinate. He named himself Executive President, extended his term to six years, and

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<sup>167</sup> For a study of this particular section of the 1972 Constitution, see Schonthal (2012). For a general discussion of the political symbolism of Buddhism in Sri Lanka at this time, see Phadnis (1976).

made the UNP's Ranasinghe Premadasa his Prime Minister, thus giving himself unprecedented powers in the history of independent Sri Lanka. These reforms further consolidated the highly centralized nature of Sri Lanka's unitary state structure.<sup>168</sup>

*Tamil Politics: From Federalism to Militant Separatism*

By 1973, the tide was turning from Tamil federalism to militancy. Ceylon Tamil politicians had spent twenty-five years engaged in parliamentary politics and non-violent protests of majoritarian policies with few results. They were under pressure from a militant younger generation inspired by student movements and youth revolts around the world and in Sri Lanka.

In 1970, the Tamil Students' Federation (*mānavar pēravai*) was formed by Sathiyaseelan and Sabalingam.<sup>169</sup> The following year, in 1971, southern (predominantly Sinhala) youth of the People's Liberation Front (*Janata Vimukti Peramuna*, or JVP) launched an insurrection.<sup>170</sup> The JVP revolt was quashed by the state's army and led the government to declare a national State of Emergency, which would remain in place over the next four decades. Tamil students and youth frustrated by the UF's policies of standardization and state nationalization privileging the majority community backed the formation of a Tamil United Front (TUF) formed by several Tamil political parties in

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<sup>168</sup> Which, as discussed above, was a political and administrative structure bequeathed by British colonial rule, but has also been claimed by Sinhala Buddhist nationalists as indigenous in the form of pre-colonial kingdoms. This has made the concept of the "unitary state" a point of contention between Tamil and Sinhala political leaders in contemporary Sri Lanka. Those who support federalism among the former prefer a structure that devolves power to the provinces in a "united" state.

<sup>169</sup> Several activists discussed the *mānavar pēravai* as formative in their politicization, as seen in the final part of this chapter. See UTHR(J) 2005 for a reference to the founding of the group, in the context of the LTTE's later killing of Sabalingam.

<sup>170</sup> This period of violent unrest is relatively understudied in Sri Lankan history and anthropology. See Hewage (2013) for a discussion of the 1971 insurrection and its political implications. Also see Jani de Silva (2005) for an ethnographic study of violence and masculinity in the aftermath of the second JVP insurrection of 1988-89.

1972, including the ACTC and the Ceylon Workers' Congress of the Hill-Country Tamils.<sup>171</sup> In 1973, the FP issued the Mallakam Resolution at its annual convention, in which it announced the Tamils to be “a separate Nation... with the right of self-determination.”

Over the next few years, militant youth planned targeted attacks on the state in the north, through bank heists and political murders, beginning with the assassination of Jaffna's UNP mayor Alfred Durayappah in 1973.

If Sri Lanka's political reforms of the 1970s relegated minorities to second-class citizenship, Ceylon Tamils were also appalled by what they felt to be attacks on their linguistic and cultural heritage. Two highly charged events contributed to the mobilization of Tamil youth and their turn to militancy. In January 1974, police attacked crowds celebrating at the International Tamil Conference in Jaffna, leading to nine deaths by electrocution when a policeman's bullet hit electric cables. Later, in December 1981, two state ministers instructed police to burn down the Jaffna Public Library. The library held ancient Tamil palm-leaf manuscripts (*ōla*), many of which were not duplicated and thus irreplaceable.<sup>172</sup>

The TUF was renamed the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) in 1975, emphasizing its turn toward national liberation, as fought for by other movements around

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<sup>171</sup> The Ceylon Indian Congress was founded in 1939 and was renamed the Ceylon Workers Congress in 1950, becoming the country's largest trade union. Today, the CWC is a political party that represents the Hill-Country Tamils working on Ceylon's tea estates. The CWC joined the TUF shortly after the plantation sector was nationalized. Its leader, S. Thondaman, recognizing that the Hill-Country Tamils inhabited a region that was not contiguous with the North and East, made it known that he was not bound to the TULF's later demand for a separate state (Wilson 2000: 108).

<sup>172</sup> Some of these ancient manuscripts may also be found in Tamil Nadu, but there has been no comprehensive effort to track them down. Jaffna's Public Library remained a burned-out shell until it was rebuilt during the ceasefire. It has slowly acquired a new collection through donations of contemporary materials from throughout Sri Lanka, India, and the diaspora.

the world. The TULF announced its intention to pursue a separate state for the Tamils of Eelam at its inaugural 1976 convention in northern Jaffna. The Vaddukoddai Resolution, as a call to the “Tamil Nation,” addressed “Tamil youth” in particular and proclaimed,

This convention resolves that restoration and reconstitution of the Free, Sovereign, Secular, Socialist State of TAMIL EELAM, based on the right of self-determination inherent to every nation, has become inevitable in order to safeguard the very existence of the Tamil Nation in this Country (DeVotta 2004: 141, full text in Appendix G).

In 1977, the TULF headed to the polls, campaigning on the basis of their new resolution. Chelvanayakam, “the Father of the Tamils,” passed away the same year. The TULF’s new leader, Appadurai Amirthalingam, became the Leader of the Opposition—the first and only time a Tamil politician had become so in the country’s postcolonial history. Militant youth of the TULF’s Youth Front (*ilaignar peravai*) became a “military wing” which Amirthalingam used as political leverage in (unsuccessful) negotiations with President Jayawardene.

#### *The “Open Economy” and Anti-Tamil Violence, 1977-1983*

Shortly after Jayawardene’s election, mobs attacked Hill-Country Tamils in violence that spread quickly throughout central Sri Lanka. Estate workers’ line rooms were set on fire, and businesses destroyed. The violence displaced an estimated 100,000 people, of whom half sought refuge in the Northern province (esp Mannar, Vavuniya and Kilinochchi districts). The Matale and Kandy regions were badly affected. Activists formed organizations like Gandhiyam to assist the displaced, creating farms up north to provide the newly resettled with sustenance and employment.

Meanwhile, news of the violence added fuel to the fire of militancy, as stories circulated about the brutality of the mobs, and youth observed the Colombo government's indifference and inaction. Tamil militants ramped up their guerilla activities targeting the police and military outposts. Their actions were met with the state's repressive apparatuses. On May 22, 1978, the Jayawardene government introduced a law to proscribe Tamil militancy for one year.<sup>173</sup> Two months after the law was extended (for another two years), the government decided to replace it on July 11 with a new one: *The Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act No. 48 of 1979*.<sup>174</sup> That same day, the Cabinet announced a state of emergency in the Jaffna district, and the President invoked the Public Security Act, allowing the police and army to dispose of dead bodies without an inquest. Taken together, the state's laws produced in Jaffna an exceptional zone for the torture, disappearance, and extrajudicial killing of Tamils suspected of militancy. Anti-Tamil violence targeted Tamils in the country's east and south in July 1981, and Hill-Country Tamil estate workers again in August 1981.

Reflecting upon these events in subsequent years, Sri Lankan scholars have argued that Jayawardene's policies of economic liberalization exacerbated the potential for conflict between ethnic groups. Newton Gunasinghe (1984) has described the move from a state-regulated economy reliant on import substitution to an "open economy" designed for export-led growth, and analyzed how the new policy created contradictions among ethnic groups. While abolishing import controls on the market, the new policy eliminated special concessions obtained by mostly Sinhalese mid-level entrepreneurs in a

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<sup>173</sup> The full name of the law passed was the *Proscribing of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and Other Similar Organizations Law, No. 16 of 1978*.

<sup>174</sup> This act was later followed by the *Prevention of Terrorism (Special Provisions) No. 10 of 1982*.

formerly protected domestic market. Tamil and Muslim businesses had not received such concessions, and were not affected to such an extent. In this context, a Sinhala chauvinist ideology emerged among mid-level traders were able to mobilize wide sections of the disenfranchised urban poor. Sinhala chauvinists blamed minorities, and “the Tamils” especially, for increasing economic disparities between different strata of their classes.

If 1977 marked “the point of no return” for Tamil militancy (Wilson 2000: 109), the anti-Tamil pogrom of July 1983 made armed struggle and war seemingly inevitable. Tamils lost their remaining faith in the Sri Lankan state: The police and army had done little to stop the violence, and President Jayawardene all but blamed the Tamils for the violence visited upon them.<sup>175</sup> Displaced Tamils resettled in the north and east, and thousands fled the country, leading to greater ethnic separation. The government’s collusion in the violence also led hundreds of youth to join extant militant organizations and travel abroad for training under India’s Research & Analysis Wing (RAW). In August 1983, the Sixth Amendment to the 1978 Constitution was used to expel from the government Tamil parliamentarians who refused to take an oath. Tamil political leaders then left the country for exile in India. This vacuum of political leadership created an opening for the leaders of militant youth who came to be known colloquially in Jaffna as “the boys” (*podiyal*).

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<sup>175</sup> Jayawardene did not address the violence for several days, and then issued a “non-apology” during a television appearance on July 26. See Wilson (2000: 113-114, 1988: 137) on Jayawardene’s public response. Wilson volunteered to be an intermediary between the President and the TULF, and was with President Jayawardene during the early days of the riots, which he discusses in (1988: 140-174).

## **Histories of Tamil Nationalism**

Toronto, August 2008. I had just finished an interview with the then-president of the Canadian branch of the Tamils' Rehabilitation Organization (TRO-Canada), who sat in front of a large Canadian flag as he spoke about the difficulties he faced with fundraising for the Tamil people in Eelam, in the aftermath of a 2006 ban on the Tigers. TRO was known to be close to the LTTE. The World Tamil Movement headquarters had recently been ransacked and their computers and files confiscated by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) to be turned over to the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS).<sup>176</sup> The leader was worried about the same fate for his organization. He told me that the funds were “solely for rehabilitation of Tamils affected by the war,” multiple times throughout the interview. However CSIS, following Colombo's lead, suspected that TRO-Canada was “providing material support for terrorism,” as part of the LTTE's support network. The organization's Sri Lankan counterpart had already had its state bank-held assets frozen, and Mr. G was very frustrated. As we finished up our interview, his colleagues told me they could help me with any information I needed, emphasizing the importance of getting “the true story” out. One man pointed to a glass case, the kind used to display trophies and memorabilia. This one held photographs and a book. He picked up a paperback copy, and placed it in my hands as a gift, telling me, “This will tell you the story.”

The book was *The Untold Story of Ancient Tamils in Sri Lanka*, by the Tamil climatologist and political geographer, Chelvadurai Manogaran. Published in 2000, *The*

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<sup>176</sup> The RCMP is Canada's federal police force and also enforces the law in Canada's provinces and territories (with the major exceptions of Ontario and Québec), smaller municipalities, and aboriginal communities. CSIS is Canada's national intelligence agency, and is responsible to the federal government's Minister of Public Safety.



*Untold Story* begins with a brief introduction to the political history of post-independence Sri Lanka, before getting down to its primary purpose: making a historical justification for a traditional Tamil homeland on the island. Manogaran does this by looking to archaeological scholarship on the pre- and proto-historic peoples of South India and Sri Lanka, as well as historical studies of rock inscriptions using the *vattezhuttu* script.<sup>177</sup> Manogaran draws a line from “pre-Dravidian tribes” of the pre-historic past to “the Dravidians” and their migration to Lanka (*Ilankai*, or *Eelam*), to the creation of a Tamil kingdom in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and finally, “the Tamil people” of present-day Sri Lanka. He argues that these sources and more “...demonstrate that Sri Lanka’s Tamils have inhabited the island from early historic times, throughout the island, long before the Sinhalese language, its script and the concept of Sinhalese-Buddhist came into existence” (2000: 22), and that Tamils were the continuous, historical inhabitants of the northern and eastern regions of Lanka in particular. In short, Manogaran claims that the Tamils were the first people of Sri Lanka, and must be guaranteed a separate territory in the face of Sinhalese-Buddhist hegemony and suppression.

Receiving Manogaran’s book<sup>178</sup> as a gift revealed to me the extent to which academic writers of history—whether historians by discipline, or scholars of other disciplines—were important to Tamil activists. History is a powerful discipline that could authorize and legitimate their claims. Why was it important for these Tamil activists to

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<sup>177</sup> *Vattezhuttu* (literally, “rounded letters”) was derived from the Grantha form of the Brahmi script—an alphasyllabary writing system that produced some of the earliest historical inscriptions in southern and central Asia—and is considered by Tamil scholars to be one of three alphabets developed to write a proto-Tamil language. Sinhala and Tamil are two of the many languages that developed from Southern Brahmi.

<sup>178</sup> It may be noted that this short monograph was not printed by an American academic press (as his earlier book, *Ethnic Conflict and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka* was in 1987), but a small publisher in Chennai instead. However, *The Untold Story...* bears the mark of the writer’s scholarly reputation, as a Tamil geographer cited in many other academic works on identity in Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict. The book may be seen as a hybrid of scholarship and activist political writing.

present me with “the story”—this story—of the Tamils in ancient times? How does their (hi)story relate to other contemporary efforts to claim and inscribe a history for the Tamil people of Sri Lanka—a history that is often contrasted with a history of Sri Lanka taken to be a history of a Sinhalese nation? And who, in this process of making and writing a national history, are “the Tamils”?

This section of the chapter analyzes the arguments of prominent and widely-circulating English-language diasporic texts of and about Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka. These texts authorize Tamil separatist claims to a distinct national identity and have shaped how a diaspora of Tamil nationalist activists narrate their own histories of the nation and its struggle. I place these texts in the context of the writers’ other writing and political work and discuss how these histories interpenetrate and animate diaspora narratives of the nation.

### *Writing the Nation*

The writing of Sri Lankan histories, and the genre of political history in particular, has largely been a national affair. It is a grand narrative of high politics among elites. In this narrative, Ceylon was a “model colony” and independence was gained through efficient and effective collaboration with colonial rulers, rather than a mass struggle for national independence (Wickramasinghe 1995). An ostensibly smooth transfer of power led many scholars and political observers to believe that Ceylon was a promising beacon of democracy in Asia (Wriggins 1960; K.M. de Silva 1981). However, subsequent events brought to the fore contestations and mobilizations on the basis of language, religion, class and caste, as the language of ‘communalism’ was revived, displacing the triumphalist narrative of a “model democracy” (Kearney 1967; Russell 1982). The

“problem” of communalism eventually gave way to scholarship on “the national question”: Was there one Sri Lankan nation, or two nations, Sinhalese and Tamil?

Early studies of nationalism in Sri Lanka primarily centered on Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, seeking to explain its emergence and significant trends (K.M. de Silva 1981; Roberts 1998[1979])<sup>179</sup> or challenge its primordialist assumptions and exclusionary claims (Abeysekera and Gunasinghe 1987; Jayawardena 1985; Obeyesekere 1984; SSA 1984.) Several of these texts deconstructed the discursive formation of a Sinhalese-Buddhist history as a resource for making claims about the present (Daniel 1996; Gunawardhana 1990, 1995; Tennekoon 1988, 1990).

Histories of Tamil nationalism generally fall into one of two categories. The first type of history can be broadly construed as nationalist: it is the history of those who are writing the future nation-state they wish to see. It is a teleological history that begins and ends with “the Tamil nation”; this history’s chronology inevitably results in armed struggle to (1) “defend” the Tamil nation and (2) win a separate state to safeguard Tamil rights and secure their lives and livelihoods. The second type of history is less a history of Tamil nationalism as a total phenomenon than a critical analysis of ethnicity and nationalism. This scholarship on Tamil nationalism draws on the modes of criticism employed by scholarly analyses of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism cited above and, inspired by this literature, initially sought to address a lacuna in studies of its Tamil counterpart. Eventually, the rapid growth of militancy and the turn to war after July 1983

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<sup>179</sup> See also K.M. de Silva’s articles on the Ceylon National Congress (1967, 1972, 1973) and the impact of nationalism in Ceylon (1974) in the *Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies*, which he references in de Silva (1981). Roberts’s article focuses on the economic interests of the nationalist reformers who came to dominate Ceylon politics, rather than the socialists and radicals.

led to much greater academic interest in studying Tamil nationalism, its origins, and its political development and forms of cultural expression.

The first type of history—Tamil nationalist history—is the focus of this chapter section, though I draw at times on the second type of history in my analysis.

Before I turn to a reading of Tamil nationalist histories, this chapter warrants a brief discussion of the scholarship that studies and critically analyzes Tamil nationalism. This literature focuses less on the historical development of Tamil nationalism—which eventually became the primary mode of Tamil politics under the LTTE—than on deconstructing nationalist discourses and ideologies. One major contribution of this scholarship has been the critique of mythic origins, or namely, Tamil claims to being the island’s original population. These mytho-histories refer to a ‘noble’ Dravidian civilizational antiquity, and claim a ‘purity’ of language and racial origins, which serve as the historical antecedents of a Tamil nation, demonstrating the necessity of a separate state to preserve a unique indigenous language, ‘race’ or culture (Coomaraswamy 1987). Following from this, scholars have also pointed out the ways in which nationalism entails social exclusion and violent expulsions of difference to produce a ‘pure’ Tamil nation (Daniel 1996; Jeganathan and Ismail 1995; Manikkalingam 1995; Roberts 2005).

A related concern has been attention to the treatment of social differences such as gender (Coomaraswamy and Perera-Rajasingham 2004; de Mel 1998; Maunaguru 1995; Sivamohan 2001) within Tamil nationalism. Such works have typically focused on women’s involvement in Tamil militancy (beginning with the EPRLF in 1985), and the ‘ambivalent empowerment’ (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2001b) this radical change created within Jaffna’s gender order, or the anti-feminist politics of the LTTE (Sivamohan

2001).<sup>180</sup> A few scholars have also written about class and caste (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1994a; Kailasapathy [1979]1984; Sivathamby [1979]1984) but have paid less attention to specific formations of these differences over the last four decades. The historian Ravi Vaitheespara (2006) argues that much of the writing and scholarship critical of LTTE-led Tamil nationalism fails to account for the structural, political-economic factors of caste and class that led to the rise of militancy and nationalism. Vaitheespara argues that the dominant trend in historical writing about contemporary Tamil nationalism has instead produced an ‘othering’ of Tamil militancy.<sup>181</sup>

Finally, after growing numbers of Tamils fled Sri Lanka, scholars began to write about Tamil nationalism among expatriates in the mid-1980s (Coomaraswamy 1987) and diaspora populations of immigrants and refugees (Cheran 2000; Fuglerud 1999).

In what follows, I highlight key themes and discursive features that dominate the history and historiography of Tamil nationalism. I focus on the political histories (and a political biography) written by the Sri Lankan Tamil political scientist, A. Jeyaratnam Wilson (1988, 1994a, 1994b, 2000), but draw parallels to other writings on “Sri Lankan” or “Eelam” Tamil nationalism—namely, monographs by S.J. Emmanuel (2004), Murugesar Gunasingam (1999, 2008), and V. Navaratnam (1991), among others.<sup>182</sup> As

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<sup>180</sup> Adele Balasingham (1983) and Schalk (1992) present accounts that claim the liberation of Tamil women through their participation in the LTTE’s “Birds of Freedom” women’s unit. For a more general feminist discussion of gender in the social formation of Jaffna, see Thiruchandran (1997). Little work has analyzed the construction of masculinity in the LTTE or Tamil militancy, but for one brief attempt, see Ismail (1992).

<sup>181</sup> Vaitheespara’s point about insufficient attention paid to caste and class in writing about the political development of Tamil nationalism is well-taken. His focus on the UTHR(J), a human rights group, as exemplary of a tendency to “other” Tamil militancy in historical writing appears somewhat misplaced.

<sup>182</sup> Other nationalist histories written by exiled and diaspora authors but not addressed here include Rajasuriar (1993), Arudpragasam (1995), Gunasingam (2012) and the hybrid historical memoir of Sivanayagam (2004). For an interesting compilation of articles and memoir, about which I intend to write more, see Vaikuntavasan (1992). Finally, Cheran’s (2000) account makes a critical distinction between

the most prominent and authoritative academic example of (Sri Lankan) Tamil modern history, however, Wilson's work on nationalism warrants a closer look and provides the frame for my analysis.

*A reactive and defensive nationalism.* In his book, *Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism*, Wilson (2000) is concerned with tracing the origins and development of this nationalism throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Wilson, like many scholars, argues that Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka arose as a defensive reaction to political events on the island: namely, discrimination caused by the forces of Sinhalese majoritarianism and exclusivism (2000: 11, 82-112). Tamil nationalism does not, however, emerge from nowhere. The broad outlines of his argument are as follows:

Wilson argues that the Ceylon Tamils held a “national awareness” of shared language, culture and territory and were “a community apart.” The separateness of this identity was, according to him, recognized in the Portuguese and Dutch colonial administrations of predominantly Tamil areas as a separate entity, and communal representation under the British. This “national awareness,” traced through linguistic, cultural and religious revivalist movements led by figures such as Arumuga Navalar and C.W. Thamotheeram Pillai, was then transformed into a “national consciousness” in the years leading up to and following Ceylon's independence in 1948, a result of the failure of successive attempts by Tamil political leaders—from G.G. Ponnambalam, to S.J.V. Chelvanayakam—to negotiate more political power for Ceylon Tamils. Disaffected with older Tamil leaders who had made few gains through electoral politics, Tamil youth

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“nationalist” and “liberationist” movements, to suggest the potential of the latter for opening up Tamil nationalism.

became increasingly militant, transforming the fight for political equality for “a community apart” in Sri Lanka to an armed struggle for a separate Tamil state.

Wilson’s narrative is a popular one in two senses. First, other scholars have frequently cited his analysis of Tamil nationalism—perhaps as a result of the political scientist’s thorough research and adherence to scholarly protocols, as well as the general paucity of scholarship on Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism. Second, Wilson’s book has been read, referenced, and commented upon by Tamil political activists (in English), and his argument shares much with the predominant interpretations of Tamil political history among activists and protesters. This may be seen in Wilson’s description of Tamil nationalism as a “defensive reaction.” Similarly, the Catholic priest and activist, S.J. Emmanuel writes of a “self-defensive Tamil nationalism” (2004: 39-49). In Emmanuel’s view—a view shared by other nationalist writers<sup>183</sup>—Tamils are united by the shared experience of being targets of violence and the need to defend their lives, livelihoods and lands.

Many scholars have taken issue with the interpretation of this period as one of ‘reactive’ or ‘defensive’ nationalism in response to state exclusion. Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam (1990a) argues that Tamil nationalism was not simply ‘reactive,’ but also influenced by Tamil nationalism in South India, and that the particular contribution of Sinhala nationalism was to heighten the sense of being a “Jaffna Tamil,” instead of being part of a wider “Tamil” context. Cheran (1992, 2000) also critiques the notion of a ‘defensive’ nationalism, but does so in the context of political developments within Tamil

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<sup>183</sup> For example, the lawyer, activist and creator of Tamilnation.org, N. Satyendra, describes the Tamil nation as one “united in struggle and suffering.”

separatism. He argues that it became no longer possible to use the “defensive” label after the LTTE’s attacks on civilians and internecine fighting among Tamil militants.

Nira Wickramasinghe draws on Wilson’s account of the life and times of FP leader, S.J.V. Chelvanayakam, to argue that two key events in Tamil mobilization point instead to what she calls a “strategic nationalism.” First, she writes that, on November 26, 1947, Chelvanayakam asked Parliament, “...why the Tamils should not have the right to secede from the rest of the country if they desired to do so” (in Wilson 1994a: 25). Secondly, in 1953, the FP adopted a resolution to demand the establishment of a Tamil university in Trincomalee. Noting Wilson’s claim that the FP “was seeking in advance to safeguard Tamil interests by asking for a Tamil university” (1994a: 46), Wickramasinghe argues, “Thus, the Tamil nationalism propounded by the Federal Party was pre-emptive and strategic, and motivated by fears that later events proved to be well founded” (2006: 268).

*Tamil or Ceylon Tamil?* The exclusive rhetoric of—Ceylon or Sri Lanka—Tamil nationalism is also reflected in the complex politics of naming the people on whose behalf a separate state is claimed and fought. There are many Tamil community formations on the island of Sri Lanka. Who are the ‘Tamils’ of Tamil nationalism? Tamil, as a term referring to an ethno-linguistic formation, contains greater and lesser degrees of specificity, depending on the referent. On occasion, “Tamil” has been used to refer to all Tamil-speaking people on the island, including those who identify as Muslim and speak Tamil.<sup>184</sup> Typically, however, the term is used in a more restricted sense; this use of

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<sup>184</sup> Tamil-speaking Muslims identify as a separate community of Muslims, and wish to be recognized as such rather than subsumed under a general “Tamil” identity, as Ceylon Tamils outnumber and metonymically displace other minorities within this category. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Tamil politicians found it



“Tamil” refers to a specific group or groups of Tamils. “Tamils of Ceylon” or the “Ceylon Tamils,” and more specifically, “Jaffna Tamils,” would increasingly come to be referred to as simply “Tamils,” while groups with less social and political power, such as the “Plantation” or “Hill-Country Tamils” would be known by their region as much as their ethno-linguistic community. Likewise, during the 1930s-1970s, oppressed castes had to qualify their use of the word Tamil to describe their political formations—referring to themselves as “Minority Tamils” and “Depressed Tamils”—to distinguish themselves from Vellala political elites who claimed to represent “the Tamils” (Pfaffenberger 1990).<sup>185</sup>

Scholars did not always take for granted a unified category of “Tamils.” For example, Wilson, in an earlier article on the rise of the Federal Party, refers to a Tamil understanding of three types of Tamils: “the Jaffna man, the Batticaloa man, and the Colombo man” (Wilson 1994b, 2000: 14-16). These archetypes present regional differences as the basis for potential social and political schisms among Tamils. However, this presentation of regional difference also obscures other regions such as the Hill-Country, as well as internal social differentiations of caste, class and gender. The scholar recognizes and describes these differences—minus gender—when he presents an “ethnographic” account of the Tamil people (2000: 16-25). He argues, however, that

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expedient to include Muslims within the category of “Tamil.” For example, the politician, P. Ramanathan (1915), turned to ethnology to argue that the “Moors” (as the Muslims were then known) were also Tamils. Sri Lankan Muslims have their own political associations and parties, and their own internal political struggles. On the Muslim revivalist movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century up to the 1915 Sinhala-Muslim riots, see Samaraweera (1998[1979]); for an ethnography of Muslims and Tamils on the east coast of Sri Lanka, see McGilvray (2008); finally, on Muslim politics in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, in the context of the ethnic conflict, see Haniffa (2009); Ismail (1995); McGilvray and Raheem (2007).

<sup>185</sup> Pfaffenberger (1990) examines the temple-entry movement of the 1960s, and builds on the insights of his 1982 book on caste and Vellala domination in Jaffna. See also the Depressed Tamils’ memorial of 1928 and petition of 1930, cited in Gunasingam (2005).

Sinhala-majority government discrimination unified a diverse population into a people when he concludes that, “Thus *a people*, highly splintered for reasons of caste, region, religion (Hindus versus Christians), politics and class, closed ranks when faced with the threat of the Sinhala Only movement” (2000, 23, my emphasis). In an earlier work, Wilson (1988) also argued that regional differences, in particular, were neutralized by the violence experienced by many in 1983 and the war that followed. He remained doubtful of the LTTE’s claims to have dissolved caste ties and endogamy, arguing that the war had “eroded” the caste system but that social transformations would only modify an “in-built hierarchy” of Sri Lankan Tamil society, rather than eliminate it completely (2000: 24-25).

*Ancient kingdoms and traditional homelands.* In nationalist histories, invocations of the ancient Tamil kingdom of Jaffna often lead to a discussion of what several writers have termed “the traditional homelands of the Tamils.” One such text is Rev. S.J. Emmanuel’s 2004 essay collection, *Agonies & Aspirations of the Tamil Struggle*. In Emmanuel’s reading of the recent past, the post-colonial policies of successive Colombo-based governments lead Tamils to realize that their future safety and growth depend on “reclaiming their pre-colonial and traditional habitation again as their homeland” (2004: 41) Emmanuel looks to the past for the Tamils’ political future by “reclaiming” a medieval polity as their modern homeland. He also links the “pre-colonial” kingdom to the Tamil’s “traditional habitation.” However, the Kingdom of Jaffna ruled over northern Sri Lanka, and was not connected to the eastern regions that would be claimed for the modern separate state of Tamil Eelam.

Moreover, the notion of areas of “traditional habitation” excludes Tamils who live in the Hill-Country and Southern regions from belonging to the future separate state. This

physical exclusion was viewed as historically inevitable and necessary by most proponents of Tamil Eelam<sup>186</sup>, whose claim to a national territory relied on a political rationality of “indigeneity.” Hill-Country Tamils could not make this claim, given their relatively recent migration from India to Sri Lanka. Whereas some Tamil nationalists were willing to “write off” the Southern Tamil (Ismail 2000), Wilson (1988) reconciled this exclusion differently. He suggested that Tamils living outside the North and East would have to move to Tamil Eelam to avoid retaliatory violence in a Sinhala state. In Tamil Eelam, it was claimed, they would receive full citizenship and the protection of a Tamil state.

*The necessity of a separate state.* Having claimed to establish a historical basis for a traditional Tamil homeland, separate and apart from the island’s Sinhalese majority, these texts all end with a call for separation. For example, in his book, *The Fall and Rise of the Tamil Nation*, V. Navaratnam, the former Federal Party Member of Parliament for Kayts, writes of his own realization of this trajectory,

I came to the conclusion that there would be no lasting solution for the ills of the Tamils unless they separate from the Sinhalese and establish their own government in the homeland territory of the ancient Tamil kingdom which roughly covers in modern times the Tamil Northern and Eastern provinces. There is no other solution (1991: 18).

For Navaratnam, an ancient Tamil kingdom’s realm of power can be mapped onto the contemporary boundaries of predominantly Tamil provinces – lines drawn and reified by Ceylon’s successive colonial administrations. The claim to a traditional homeland territory provides justification for the postcolonial necessity of a separate state.

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<sup>186</sup> The militant group EROS was a notable exception, as their maps of Tamil Eelam included districts in the Hill-Country region. For a document that draws the cartographic boundaries of the would-be state, see ex-surveyor Sinnatamby’s (1983) *thamizh eezham naattu ellaikal* (The Boundaries of Tamil Eelam).

Navaratnam's monograph builds a case for separation by documenting his experiences in Sri Lankan politics. In this narrative, every time the Tamils protested, the protesters—and, at times, non-protesters—were met with violence, organized by successive Sinhala-dominated governments through unjust policies and pogroms. For Navaratnam, this violence had become inevitable, and made living together as fellow-citizens impossible. Sinhala violence had to be met with Tamil violence, in a “war of independence” (rather than a civil war), to secure a future state and the “resumption” of an earlier sovereignty for the Tamils of Eelam.

Wilson's writings, alongside Manogaran and Gunasingam's texts, can thus be understood as the academic version of what Qadri Ismail calls, “the autobiography of Tamil nationalism”: the story of how an always-already existent Tamil nationalism came to be, as narrated and written by Tamil activists and scholars (2000, 2005: 105).<sup>187</sup> These scholars' academic writings buttress the work of their activist contemporaries like Navaratnam and Emmanuel. Tamil nationalist activists have, consequently, found in Wilson's account authoritative support for their claims to a separate state. Reading Wilson, Ismail deems the political scientist's later writings, beginning with *The Break-Up of Sri Lanka* in 1987, “his petition for a separate Tamil-majority state” (2005: 105).

For Wilson, electoral politics is the primary field for an emerging Tamil national consciousness in the twentieth century. He finds this to be the case in the formation of new Tamil political parties (1944 and 1949-51), and later, in the coalitional politics of the “united fronts.”<sup>188</sup> Wilson writes that two communities—the Tamils and Sinhalese—

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<sup>188</sup> Although the TUF and TULF were performatively named “united fronts” there remained differences among the front's constituents.

trusted one another enough in the first two decades of the twentieth century for two Ceylon Tamils (P. Arunachalam and P. Ramanathan) to be leaders of the Ceylon National Congress. The Tamils viewed themselves “equal partners” of the Sinhalese, and both as “the founding races” of the island, only for the latter mantle to be usurped by a Sinhalese-majoritarian leadership:

“However, problems began to surface with the extension of the franchise...” and as a result, “...from the early 1920s onwards the Ceylon Tamils found themselves on the periphery” of the island’s national politics (179).

Wilson goes on to argue that leaders such as Arunachalam and Ramanathan then shifted from their stance of “all-island unity” to the “preservation of Ceylon Tamil interests.” Where Wilson finds “national consciousness” emerging in this period of the early 1920s, Gunasingam locates the conception and “the birth of Tamil nationalism” at this time. He finds this in the Manning reforms of 1921, the formation of the Tamil Mahajana Sabhai in Jaffna on August 15 of that year by ex-CNC leader, P. Arunachalam and colleagues, as well as Arunachalam’s founding of the Ceylon Tamil League in 1923 (2008: 425-427). Wilson writes that with the sidelining of Ceylon Tamils in all-island politics, “Democracy had now come to be tantamount to rule by the ethnic majority...” (179-80).<sup>189</sup> Ultimately, however, Wilson argues that the discriminatory policies of Sinhalese-dominated governments in general, and the Sirimavo Bandaranaike governments of 1960-65 and 1970-77 particular, led to the emergence of Tamil

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<sup>189</sup> Interestingly, Wilson does not examine whether the political rationality of liberal democracy itself might have contributed to majority rule. He instead implies that Sri Lankan democracy has deviated from a liberal democratic ideal in its handling of minorities’ concerns and rights.

nationalism in Sri Lanka as “a serious force” in the 1970s—and not before then (2000: 83).<sup>190</sup>

I contend that this seemingly straightforward history of Tamil and Sri Lankan politics elides the ways in which Tamil and Sinhala identities, as well as the distinct social and political identities of Muslims and the *Malaiyaha* or Hill-Country Tamils, have emerged within a changing and contested polity. Moreover, this form of writing history posits a unified and seamless identity among ethnic groups, such that the designation of a “Tamil” political identity makes sense across historical periods, whether in 1833, 1921 or 1972. Such a history has focused on moments of ideological unity, rather than the differences and points of contention within those groups, such as caste and region.

In spite of the above authors’ implicit claims to ‘objectively’ present ‘the facts,’ these are politically engaged histories that recognize the value of the past as a political resource for claims about the present and future. They hope that their understanding of how and why Tamil nationalism emerged will contribute to establishing Tamil political sovereignty on the island by demonstrating the historical evidence for a Tamil homeland (especially in the case of Manogaran), its political necessity (Wilson), or both (Gunasingam). Although they historicize “the rise of Tamil nationalism,” these authors also take this nation to be self-evident today (see, e.g. Gunasingam 2008: xiii-ix). Their historical explanations and justifications call forth the nation-state to-be.

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<sup>190</sup> This is to say that although Wilson finds historical roots for the emergence of Tamil nationalism in the nineteenth century revival movements and the politics of late independence, he locates its political force in recent times. His argument stands in contrast to other nationalist writers like Gunasingam who locate a fully-formed nationalism in the early twentieth century, or Manogaran and activists like S.J. Emmanuel and V.N. Navaratnam who assert ancient origins for a Tamil national identity.

Histories of the state focus on moments critical to state formation—the events that consolidate or threaten the unity of state power.<sup>191</sup> Although these events are important markers in some Tamil activists' histories, they are invoked with reference to a struggle within and/or against the state, and as such, can be invested with very different social meanings. On the other hand, many nationalist activists narrate histories that culminate in the formation of their own state: Tamil Eelam. In doing so, their counter-histories partake of the same rhetoric as the official histories they aim to contest or expand.

Indeed, the LTTE also wrote histories of the Tamil nation they sought to liberate.<sup>192</sup> As the historian Steven Kemper notes (in a monograph otherwise dedicated to the presence of the past in Sinhala history), the LTTE increasingly used Tamil historical records to justify the existence of Tamil Eelam (1991: 108, 144). They prevented the teaching of Sri Lankan history in areas under their control, which included schools dependent on government funding.<sup>193</sup> These histories were written to inculcate a sense of 'national feeling' (*thesiya pattru*) among Tamil schoolchildren. LTTE cadre visited schools and delivered lectures on the nation and its history—a singular one, in their narrative. LTTE history in schools was patterned on the histories imparted to LTTE recruits during their political (re)education, from the beginnings of the organization. They also distributed to local teachers and principals exams on the history of the LTTE, and returned to collect them (Human Rights Watch 2004: 22-23). In this way, the LTTE

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<sup>191</sup> See Mayaram (2004) for further discussion of the politics of history and myth in South Asia. In the Sri Lankan context, see Hellmann-Rajanayagam (1990a), Kemper (1991) and Daniel (1996, 1990).

<sup>192</sup> For one English-language example of this history, see *Towards Liberation*.

<sup>193</sup> This was perhaps unsurprising, as the Sri Lankan government supplied schools with social studies textbooks that narrate a Sinhala nationalist history of Sri Lanka even in Tamil-language textbooks. In Sinhala-medium schools, textbooks celebrate Sinhala kings who vanquished Tamil enemies, and other negative images of minorities.

enlisted Tamil children to believe in the righteousness of their struggle. More broadly, Tamils of the North and East—and as I discuss in the next chapter, many diaspora Tamils—were interpellated as the citizens of a Tamil nation and its future state (described by many as a *de facto* one).

History had become such a powerful narrative that, in addition to managing its writing and dissemination within the territories they held, the LTTE also sought to control writers abroad. In May 1994, A. Sabalingam, a Paris-based writer and activist who had co-founded the *mānavar peravai*, was shot dead. He was known as a witness to the early years of Tamil militancy in the 1970s, and was said to be writing a history of this period. His killing was attributed to the LTTE. When the Toronto-based Tamil Resource Centre (TRC) mourned Sabalingam’s death with a public event in 1994, their offices and library (Thedakam) were burned down.<sup>194</sup> This was the power of history in Tamil politics: A “spiral of death and destruction” as noted by Hellmann-Rajanayagam at the beginning of this chapter. As the Tamil writer, Taraki (Dharmaratnam Sivaram), wrote in a tribute to Sabalingam, in an article published in the Canadian Tamil journal, *Thayagam* (Motherland), “For the Tigers to assert a monopoly right over Tamil politics, they must logically affirm a monopoly over its history too” (cited in UTHR(J) 2005; see also Sivaram 1994).

In contrast to this “monopoly” over history and politics, the next section of this chapter uses life histories to examine the ways in which Tamil activists—whether nationalist or dissenting—narrate their community’s political history through their personal experiences of militancy and activism.

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<sup>194</sup> This was the second time the TRC was targeted with arson. The first occurred in 1989. The TRC was formed by former militants (primarily from PLOTE and TELO) who were vocal critics of the LTTE.



## Genealogies of Tamil Militancy and Diaspora Activism

In writing about Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict and war, social scientists and journalists writing for a wider audience tend to focus on the period after 1983. While this may be preceded by a few notes on the political events that led to violence, neither the constitutional reforms and electoral politics of the post-independence period, nor the grassroots mobilization of the 1960s and 1970s figures in the emergence of militancy and war. Such accounts are less interested in the social, economic and political transformations that led to war than with apprehending *violence* (Jeganathan 2003) as an object apart from context.<sup>195</sup> When violence has a context, culturalist explanations or descriptions of a charismatic leadership have prevailed.<sup>196</sup> On the other hand, when scholars such as Wilson and Gunasingam write about Tamil politics, seeking to give historical context and understanding for the emergence of war, they do not historicize their categories, taking for granted notions of a unified "Tamil community" or "identity."

Tamil activists' narratives supplement and, at times, challenge these authoritative historical accounts. Even as Tamil nationalist activists tell histories and personal stories that converge with scholarly nationalist histories, they at times present contradictory information, offering events and new insights left out by Tamil political histories. Moreover, dissenting activists offer a critical reading of such histories—whether the nationalist narratives of other Tamil activists, or scholarship—that confronts and questions some of the central assumptions of dominant Tamil political histories. Taken

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<sup>195</sup> Accounts of Sinhala violence are not immune to this approach. See, for example, Bruce Kapferer (1988) on a cultural ontology of violence among the Sinhalese. For critiques of this work, see especially Scott (1994), Daniel (1996) (as well as his 1989 *American Anthropologist* review) and Spencer (1990b).

<sup>196</sup> See, for example, Roberts (2005), and Roberts (1996) on 'filial cults' in Tamil martyrdom.

together, I argue that activist narratives create an alternate genealogy of the Tamil political post-1970 (the decade in which Tamil nationalism is said to emerge as a “serious force”), and one that allows us to historicize the very notions of a Tamil community and identity.

The standard nationalist narrative of the rise of the LTTE focuses on the group’s military prowess, with the LTTE exemplifying commitment to the armed struggle and its goals, and thus maintaining leadership of the people, as compared to other militant organizations (Wilson 2000). The latter are deemed ‘quislings’ and ‘traitors’ to the nation (Thiranagama 2010).<sup>197</sup> Tamil nationalist activists’ accounts follow this line of historical analysis—indeed, their ideological apparatus also shapes nationalist scholarly histories.

This chapter is in general agreement with the approach of Sri Lankan historian, Nira Wickramasinghe who writes about the historiography of Tamil politics, nationalism, and armed struggle in her general history of the island, *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History of Contested Identities* (2006). In “The Search for Sovereignty: Tamil Separatism/Nationalism,” Wickramasinghe writes that a reading of some of the main work on Tamil nationalism—Tamil scholars such as Wilson, Gunasingam, and Cheran, and many others—reveals two conventional treatments of the subject.<sup>198</sup> The first, as discussed above, seeks to identify phases in a continuum of Tamil nationalism; Wickramasinghe suggests that this line of analysis looks for substance in the early twentieth century. Within this strand of national historiography, some scholars demarcate

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<sup>197</sup> For one example of militant literature that addresses this accusation by the LTTE, see Premachandran (1993: 6). In this address, the EPRLF leader also describes “the real traitors to our cause” as those who ridiculed his organization’s perspective on India’s role in the conflict. The EPRLF split in 1999, and Premachandran’s faction, EPRLF-Suresh, left with most of the group’s funds and joined forces politically with the LTTE.

<sup>198</sup> Wickramasinghe also draws on Kearney (1967) and Tambiah (1986).

two successive phases of Tamil mobilization: political and military. The second line is concerned with the origins of militant separatism, finding it to be either 1) a crisis within Tamil society or 2) a reaction to state oppression (253). Neither of these arguments proves satisfactory on their own. Rather than take an either/or approach to the question of the origins of Tamil separatism, Wickramasinghe attempts a reading that includes dissent and multiple strands within Tamil nationalism, recognizing that contradictions within Tamil society compounded the state's unfair treatment of minorities. In addition, I argue that paying attention to the distinctions of caste, class, gender, region and religion in Tamil society leads us to a fuller and more nuanced understanding of Sri Lankan and diaspora Tamil formations of political community and activism.

*Kanthan: The diaspora's role*

I met Kanthan in Chennai while conducting fieldwork in Tamil Nadu, India, among refugees from Sri Lanka. Kanthan was good friends with Chandrahasan, the leader of OfERR, the organization discussed in Chapter 2. They knew each other from their activist work in the 1970s and 1980s; Chandrahasan was the son of S.J.V. Chelvanayagam, the leader of the Tamil Federal Party, and had once been a supporter of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO). Kanthan, on the other hand, was with the more left-oriented Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students (EROS). He was visiting Chennai to participate in a conference on the Tamil national question. I had already met his daughter, a volunteer at OfERR, and had met a few of his relatives in Toronto.

In February 2010, I traveled to the United Kingdom to follow up with some activists. I visited Kanthan at his home, in a suburb outside London. He had lived there

since 1965. In 1968, he became involved with the British Labour Party. His activism continued with Sri Lankan politics, as he became one of the early members of EROS.

Kanthan remembers being one of the first Sri Lankans in this small city. “There were no families here,” he says. By 1977, however, he describes a “massive” number of young professionals moving to the area. Anti-Tamil riots had spurred the migration of some Tamils, while others were students unable to attend Sri Lankan universities due to ‘standardization’ and were now studying in the UK, continental Europe, and the Soviet Union. At this time, some young men contacted Kanthan:

One of those guys who was here had made some contact with organizations abroad to train Tamil youngsters [i.e. youth]. They needed a public face—someone who can go and talk to other people, to generate funds, and things like that, to set up that organization. And people said, “You’re the best guy, because you’re in politics, you know the politics. Second, you have got a face... within the Tamil community, I had integrity, as it were. People would trust me. Because all these things are going to work on trust.

This, Kanthan tells me, is how he became involved with the setting up of EROS.<sup>199</sup> Established in 1975 by Eliyathamby Ratnasabapathy in London and V. Balakumar in Madras, EROS had a leftist orientation to the Tamil question, and was less concerned with separatism than mobilizing a people’s revolution against the Sri Lankan state.<sup>200</sup> Before the Tigers had established a presence abroad—a presence that would grow into a global network—EROS was the first group to mobilize Tamil students, exiles and expatriates in the UK. In 1977, the group set up GUES, the General Union of Eelam Students, which provided a forum for students to engage with the Tamil national question

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<sup>199</sup> The group was also sometimes known as the Eelam Revolutionary Organizers.

<sup>200</sup> Wilson (1988) notes that the organization “specializes in economic warfare.” Other scholarly accounts make reference to group’s efforts in political education.

in their universities, hold debates, and participate in an annual conference. Student activists in GUES also recruited enthusiastic youth to train abroad and return to Sri Lanka to fight for the cause of Eelam. Kanthan describes the symbiotic and formative relationship between diaspora politics and Tamil militancy on the island at this time:

Everyone had enough trust, enough commitment. I mean, in Sri Lanka these guys who were going to England were coming back here to carry on the resistance movement, so that motivated the guys on the ground, and at the same time encouraged them to go into these areas [?]. Same thing, the guys here, they wanted to do something back home, and they went back. These two gelled together.

The youth who came to EROS were more involved with nationalism than the leftist politics of the 1950s and 1960s that had formed Kanthan's political life.

We tried to open their eyes and say, "Look, this is not a war against the Sinhalese. The state is the problem we have, not the Sinhala people."

EROS made contact with Khalil al-Wazir<sup>201</sup> of the Palestine Liberation Organization, and through such connections, they were able to send some young Tamil men to PLO camps in Lebanon for firearms training. These militants went on to train other recruits in Sri Lanka (and eventually, India).<sup>202</sup> At the same time, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, hereafter used interchangeably with Tigers) were emerging in Jaffna as a formidable foe of the state. Whereas the Tigers focused on guerrilla operations against the Sri Lankan army, police, and banks, EROS felt it was

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<sup>201</sup> al-Wazir was also known as Abu Jihad, or "Father of the Struggle," and was a co-founder of the secular nationalist Palestinian political movement and guerrilla organization. Two parallels can be drawn to EROS: Fatah was also formed by students and professionals in the diaspora, and both groups set up parallel students' unions. Yasser Arafat was a one-time head of the General Union of Palestinian Students at Cairo University, a union that EROS emulated in setting up GUES.

<sup>202</sup> EROS militants eventually trained the early LTTE and PLOTE members as well.

more important for their members to “move within the community” and in doing so, “mobilize the people to liberate themselves.”

The TULF continued to do parliamentary politics—becoming the first and only Tamil political party in Opposition—while young Tamils became impatient with a politics that, in their view, had failed to ensure their rights and safety.<sup>203</sup> EROS eventually determined that the TULF could not carry forward the Tamil struggle; this conclusion was shared by many Tamil youth at the time. They decided to work separately from the TULF. With the unofficial sanction of the TULF, the LTTE was operating throughout the North.<sup>204</sup> EROS then decided to work in the East. The organization needed someone to represent the youth internationally, and this became Kanthan’s role.

EROS set up another organization in parallel with GUES. Kanthan notes that after the 1977 riots, expatriate Tamils felt that they needed a strong organization to help the Tamils ‘back home.’ That year, EROS also established the Standing Committee of Tamils (SCOT), an umbrella group for over twenty Tamil organizations in the UK.<sup>205</sup> Unlike the students of GUES and their peers, few UK residents intended to return to Sri Lanka. Instead, they focused their efforts on providing aid to displaced Tamils throughout the island. SCOT attracted professionals who primarily raised funds for Tamil refugees’

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<sup>203</sup> At this time, the state was becoming increasingly authoritarian under J.R. Jayawardene, who had become the country’s first Executive President after his government’s 1978 Constitution made him so

<sup>204</sup> Amirthalingam’s connection to “the boys” was not admitted publicly, but allowed him to deal with Colombo as a “moderate” by comparison (Narayan Swamy 1994: 62).

<sup>205</sup> The committee was led by three medical doctors in the UK, including Dr. K Arumugam of EROS, and Dr. C. J. Thamotheram.

rehabilitation in Sri Lanka after the 1977 riots, as well as those affected by the violence that followed in 1981 and 1983.<sup>206</sup>

Kanthan argues that the diaspora—“the expats,” as he alternately refers to Tamils living outside Sri Lanka at this time—were at the helm of the next phase of the struggle. Once the TULF declared their aims for a sovereign state of Tamil Eelam at Vaddukoddai<sup>207</sup>, politicized youth made connections to Tamils abroad, seeking their help to mobilize funds and political support to help the cause. Their migration as students and young professionals created the beginning of a network that would continue to internationalize the Tamil struggle; with the LTTE’s domination of the struggle by 1990, a networked diaspora would also provide the financial means to keep the war going in the decades to come.

Kanthan’s story about how he got involved in Sri Lankan politics and ‘the Tamil national question’ reveals several important things. First, as someone who was part of the first group of post-independence migrants to the Britain, Kanthan complicates Daniel’s tripartite schema of phases of Tamil immigration to Britain (1996: 154-193), being of neither the group of Phase 1 elite professionals, nor of the students of Phase 2. The first phase of multiethnic elites arrived during the 1950s and 1960s, and coped with “the unavailability of the nation” by remaining distant from politics and recent Tamil

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<sup>206</sup> SCOT, now the Standing Committee of Tamil-Speaking People, is still active today as a registered UK charity. They provide financial scholarships to Tamil children and youth, and conduct medical camps in various regions of the island, with a recent focus on the post-war Northern Province. They write, “We feel that the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora continues to be a powerful force for good, that has both a great opportunity and responsibility to help those Tamils in need of assistance in Sri Lanka. There is enormous compassion and willingness amongst our community to make a positive contribution to the reconstruction the civil society of a post-war Sri Lanka” (SCOT, 2012, *About*).

<sup>207</sup> As discussed above, the TULF demand for a separate state was influenced by the increasingly militant politics of its Youth Front.

migrants; instead, they nationalized their past by ‘recovering’ a Tamil and Hindu cultural heritage (156-7, 173-5). Unlike this group, Kanthan, though from a comfortable family, became actively involved in the British left *and* Sri Lankan Tamil politics; he was at ease among the Phase 2 immigrants and students with whom he organized in the late 1970s.

Second, Kanthan’s story presents a counternarrative to scholarly histories of the Sri Lankan war. According to these writers, Tamil militancy emerged entirely within Sri Lanka, and was later ‘exported’ to Tamil immigrants and refugees living in large diaspora communities established after the anti-Tamil violence of July 1983. They cite July 1983—in which the Sri Lankan government demonstrated a callous disregard for Tamil lives, and which was later revealed to be state-organized<sup>208</sup>—as the beginning of the war. Thousands of youth flocked to already-existing militant organizations to fight the state, and new organizations were created. As discussed in the previous chapter, while some Tamils left the country shortly after 1983, the vast majority of Tamil migrants left Sri Lanka during the late 1980s and 1990s. This, it is said, is the period during which diaspora nationalism became increasingly crucial to funding and politically supporting the war.

Instead, Kanthan suggests that an early group of expatriates—many of whom now see themselves as part of a diaspora—were involved with militancy from the beginnings of the Tamil nationalist struggle against the Sri Lankan state. “Militancy” here refers to both political militancy and armed actions against the state, much of which was located in

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<sup>208</sup> Wilson (1988) raises the question of whether the violence was “pre-planned.” He cites a letter from George Immerwahr of the UN, who wrote of a friend who, as a Sri Lankan civil servant, helped plan the riots on the orders of his superiors. For another contemporary account, see Committee on Rational Development 1984. Also see Siriwardene and Perera-Rajasingham (2003) for essays reflecting on the violence of Black July.



Jaffna in the 1970s. The expatriates/diaspora to whom he refers belonged to organizations that were sidelined as the LTTE took over the Tamil struggle by eliminating their rivals.

Kanthan asserts that the LTTE had little support from Tamil expatriates at the beginning of the struggle. He finds there were several reasons for this. First, the LTTE was more concerned with a military struggle against the state than a political one, and focused its efforts on Jaffna. Second, at this early stage of militancy, the LTTE's focus on military strength at the expense of politics was not compelling to an earlier generation of Tamil immigrants who had come to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s. These immigrants had left Ceylon during the non-violent *satyagraha* of the Federal Party, and were less disposed toward the Tigers' brand of militaristic Tamil nationalism. A third related point is that these immigrants were of upper-middle and middle-class, upper caste *vellala* backgrounds, while the LTTE leadership was primarily petty-bourgeois and of the *karaiyar*, a seafaring caste (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1994a).<sup>209</sup>

Thus, it was not until the 1990s, when the LTTE had taken over the struggle in Sri Lanka, that the organization turned *primarily* to the diaspora for fundraising, and increasingly, political support to internationalize their fight for a separate state of Tamil Eelam. By this time, Jaffna Tamils who had lived through the war and the army's occupation of their lands had migrated abroad.

*David: former political prisoner and Canadian Tamil activist*

When I began fieldwork in Toronto, I met with Aravind, a member of the CTSA who was one of the first people I had met while doing research on the Pongu Thamil

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<sup>209</sup> There are variations in the castes and forms of hierarchy among Tamils in Sri Lanka. On caste in Jaffna, see Banks (1960), David (1977), Pfaffenberger (1982) and Sivathamby (1995). In Batticaloa, see Whitaker (1999) on *caati*, and McGilvray 2007.

(Tamil Uprising) event in 2004. He asked if I was interested in meeting “different kinds of people,” and suggested I meet with David, the spokesperson of the Canadian Tamil Congress (CTC), a national organization that claims to represent the “unified voice of Canadian Tamils.” Aravind told me that David was willing to talk to anyone; when a national security reporter wrote about the Tamil struggle and the CTC in a negative light, David invited him to lunch “to explain and persuade him to understand our side of the story.” He was very committed to his role as a national spokesperson. Aravind described David as “different” from other community activists he knew for two reasons: David was from Sri Lanka’s Eastern Province, while most Toronto Tamils hailed from Jaffna, and his activism was strongly influenced by his personal experiences with state violence.

When we first met, I asked David a question that many Tamils ask of one another: “Where are you from [in Sri Lanka]?”<sup>210</sup> David explained that he was born and raised in Periyakallai, a small village on the outskirts of Batticaloa in the Eastern Province, where he was born in 1956 to a Tamil Methodist family. He calls Canada his adopted land. Next, I asked him what I thought would be a simple question: “Have you lived anywhere else in Sri Lanka?” “Where?” I quickly learned that this question, though intended to ease us into a discussion of politics, was already a political one: David explained that he had worked for two years in Colombo. Then he paused, and revised his answer: When he was taken into detention, he stayed in several different parts of the country.

I asked David if he knew why he had been detained:

I don’t know why I was detained. For three years of my life, I was put behind bars. So in the course of my life, *they* traveled *me*, this was not my choice. They took me around all of Sri Lanka.

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<sup>210</sup> *Ningal entha ur?* A more literal translation could be, “Which home-village are you?”

David's use of the word "travel" in a transitive form indicates his lack of control over the situation – he was held and moved against his will from location to location. His narrative of "traveling" around Sri Lanka stands in marked contrast to the "all-island tours" university students enjoyed before embarking on their adult lives and professional careers. Unlike those tours, organized by/for an earlier generation of multi-ethnic Ceylonese students, David's "tour" was of state jails filled with young Tamil men.

Again, I asked if he was given any kind of "reason" for his arrest and detention:

They didn't give any reason. In 1979.... (*aside*) You know in Sri Lanka, they change the constitution like we change a car's tires here! (*laughs*) It's very sad to see that—they could have changed the constitution to address the Tamil grievances, but they didn't do that, they do that for other things.

David briefly outlined Sri Lanka's constitutional changes in 1972 and 1978, which were made without consulting Tamil political leaders. He then described the events that led to his arrest:

So, in September 1979, they [the government] wanted to celebrate [the second Republic's first anniversary] as an important day, so Tamils in North and East, youth leaders of the TULF came, addressed the gathering, told [us] how it's bad for us, and [on the] second day, they issued pamphlets, condemning the celebrations. Police came and arrested them, just for issuing pamphlets. Can you imagine, whether that could happen anywhere here?

I was a youth at this time, I was witnessing this incident with other youth, I thought it was an injustice, just for issuing pamphlets, police were taking someone into custody. So, I went around town and asked shopkeepers to close their shops to protest this. And they did, they did listen to me, to our argument, so they did it. For doing this, I was taken in! The next one year, that was it, I mean, I was [unclear] they filed a case, they—they say that it's a conspiracy. I was committing an anti-government conspiracy. What kind of conspiracy is that, asking people to protest in a democratic way? Then they charged us, and filed a case, after one year, I was able to come out, finally it was thrown out, the judge ridiculed it.

In 1979, Jayawardene's government passed the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). The PTA allowed the government to hold prisoners indefinitely without trial, and was deemed necessary for national security.

After David was released in 1980, he completed his studies and started a job, only to learn in 1981 that the police were looking for him again. This second arrest led to his imprisonment in several jails around the country. David learned about the events of 1983, and the start of the war, while he was in prison. In 1985, he was almost beaten to death by the guards.

David's release from jail was just as arbitrary as his detention. Thousands of political prisoners and detainees were released under the terms of the Indo-Lanka Accord in 1987. David was one of them. His wife had moved to Jaffna, and he tried to find work. When the war started again, he decided he had finally had enough, and that his life could be in danger once again. David and his family left Sri Lanka for Canada in 1990.

He spent the next several years reestablishing his life in Canada. Finding work was difficult at first. "Canada humbles you," he tells me, when relating his career path. His first job as a security guard eventually led to a managerial role. Once he felt "settled," David got involved with community activism and politics once more. He joined the Canadian Tamil Congress, an organization founded in 2000 to be a "community voice" that advocates for Tamils in Canada. He took on a leading role within the organization, and became its National Spokesperson. The CTC dealt with many issues specific to the lives of Tamils in Canada (issues which I discuss in Chapter 4), but connected to these was its approach to "the situation back home." In his work as a CTC spokesperson, David worked with other activists to get Canada more involved in the Sri Lankan peace process

of 2002-2004, and to take a stronger stand against the Sri Lankan government; he and the CTC felt that Canada's federal government blamed the LTTE for the violence, and that a subsequent ban on the organization would embolden the Sri Lankan government to fight the LTTE to the finish. The CTC as an organization did not publicly express support for either party to the conflict, but in personal conversations among Tamils, David was not afraid to make his views known: To him, the LTTE were leading the Tamils in a struggle for national liberation.

*Rathan: The political thalaivar*

Rathan was born in the port town of Kankesanthurai (KKS), at the northernmost tip of the Jaffna peninsula, in 1960. At the age of nine or ten, he says, he started to become interested in politics. He was an avid reader of the Tamil newspapers, and had learned that the SLFP government was discriminating against Tamils by implementing a "standardization" policy throughout the universities. Tamil politics was everywhere in KKS. Rathan recalls listening to Federal Party speeches in his hometown, and the demands made in the party's campaigns for Tamil rights. He also remembers seeing the crowds of people who had come from all over the island to campaign for Chelvanayakam in the by-election of 1972, after the FP leader had resigned his seat to protest the lack of Tamil consultation on the republican constitution of that year. As he became older, Rathan joined the TULF's *Ilaignar Peravai* (Youth Front). However he, like many radical youth at the time, became impatient with the Tamil MPs, who were often described as "Tamil moderates."<sup>211</sup> "They aren't getting our rights, just our votes," He

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<sup>211</sup> The phrase, Tamil moderates, was used to describe those who disavowed militancy. The TULF under the leadership of Amirthalingam made a strategic (though flawed) use of this discourse of moderation: The Youth Front and Tamil militants shared overlapping leaderships, but in Parliament, Amirthalingam and his

recalled. The force of the state loomed large in Rathan's youth in KKS— the Palaly military camp was nearby, and “they had the police, the army, the navy... and we had nothing. But at the same time, we had... we were very influenced by our language and ‘national feelings’ from a very young age.”

In 1975, when he was fifteen, Rathan met Velupillai Prabhakaran, the now-infamous leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Prabhakaran had come to live with his family for three months while in hiding. During this time, Rathan had several opportunities to talk with Prabhakaran. Even though Rathan was a *chinna podiyan* (“little boy,” or just a boy), Prabhakaran could see that he was interested in politics. They discussed the use of *ahimsa* (non-violence) in Indian anti-colonial nationalist struggle for independence from British rule, and Prabhakaran encouraged Rathan to read about Bhagat Singh's role in that freedom struggle (*suthantira porāttam*).<sup>212</sup> They also discussed the other ‘struggle’ that was taking place in their time: the Cold War conflict between democracy and communism. Rathan introduced other people to Prabhakaran, while maintaining the secrecy needed to associate with a fugitive wanted by the state. He notes that at this time, Prabhakaran was very much a Tamil nationalist, while he and others were left-oriented and tried to influence his thinking on those lines.

After the events of 1983, Rathan became “fully involved” in propaganda for the national struggle (*thēciya porāttam*), holding meetings, issuing posters, pamphlets and

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MPs denied any links between the TULF and militancy. See Wilson (2000) and Narayan Swamy (1994). The binary distinction between “Tamil militants” and “Tamil moderates” continued throughout the war, and holds sway even today.

<sup>212</sup> Bhagat Singh was an Indian socialist revolutionary whose use of violence in the Indian independence movement contrasted starkly with Gandhi's non-violent methods. He was involved in the murder of a British police officer—an act of revenge for the death of another revolutionary, Lala Lajpat Rai. His hanging, at the age of 23, drew many youth to the fight for independence.

books. Rathan was arrested for over six months. He recalled being handcuffed to other Tamil prisoners and tortured during interrogations, until he was released.

Rathan's next arrest took place when he was twenty-four years old, just as he was preparing to go to university to study math, physics and chemistry. He remembered the exact date: May 25, 1984. Instead, he was arrested by the Sri Lankan army. He had been married for two years, and his wife was seven months pregnant. He was held for thirty-one months without charge. When he was finally charged, for "failing to provide information about terrorism," he received a token three-week sentence. Rathan's arrest was a defining moment for him, and many Tamil activists of his age. Young men were especially susceptible to arrest, but as I discuss in later stories and interactions, women of this generation were also arrested.

Upon his release at the end of 1986, Rathan decided to join the political wing of the movement. The Sri Lankan Army had just started "Operation Liberation." One week after Rathan returned to Jaffna with his family, Prabhakaran returned from Madras. When the two met, Rathan said he wanted to work for the struggle. Prabhakaran told him to "Go outside and work." Rathan took a boat to Madras, where he met Anton and Adele Balasingam. In August of that year, the Indo-Lanka Accord was signed, and Rathan was anxious to know the situation in Jaffna. His return, like the accord's ceasefire, was short-lived. Prabhakaran asked him to return to Madras in October. Rathan worked with the LTTE's Kittu to publish exposés of the IPKF's atrocities, network with local activists, and organize public discussions and campaigns to demand that India's government withdraw its forces and support "the people's real aspirations." Eventually, the Tamil Nadu government held him under house arrest. In 1989, Rathan left India via a flight

from Kathmandu, Nepal, to France and Germany, crossed the border into Switzerland, and sought asylum. In 1990, he became the head coordinator (*poruppālar*) of the Swiss Tamil Coordinating Committee. He lived there for eight years, until he was forced to step down from his position, and decided to move to Canada (as discussed in Chapter 1).<sup>213</sup>

Taken together, the stories of David and Rathan illustrate several commonalities I found among Tamil activists who came of age in the early years of militancy. Both men were introduced to political action through the *Ilaignar Pēravai*. Like David, Rathan was one of the thousands of young Tamil men arrested under the draconian PTA, for which no clear charge was required, let alone a trial. He was also moved around the island, from jail to jail, for the duration of thirty-one months in prison. Both activists experienced significant delays to their life plans—for education, employment, and creating a family—as a result of discrimination and their arrests.

There are also some crucial differences between their stories. David was arrested for protesting a local injustice—the arrests of other youth who were exercising their democratic rights. Unlike David, Rathan had a personal connection to the LTTE’s leader, and entered politics by assisting them with small tasks. After 1983, he became more directly involved with the organization by making and distributing their political propaganda. David left for Canada after two attempts to start over in Sri Lanka after his arrests, and spent the next few years re-establishing a life for himself and his family before getting involved with politics again. Rathan, on the other hand, left Sri Lanka at Prabhakaran’s request to work for the LTTE-led struggle—first to India, then

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<sup>213</sup> Rathan claimed that he volunteered to step down after rumors spread that he had an affair with a woman in the organization. He denied the rumor, but understood that the organization was conservative and differences emerged over his leadership. The story also circulated among activists in Toronto.



Switzerland, and finally to Canada, where he had to renounce his past connections with the organization in order to claim asylum (and thus avoid detention and deportation).

Their stories present two types of migration found among male Tamil activists who came of age during the early years of Tamil militancy and war: First, in men who left Sri Lanka hoping to create a better life for themselves and their families, and in their resettlement, became more involved with Tamil activism, and second, a smaller number of men who left Sri Lanka as activists to work for the Movement.

*Ragavan: the early LTTE and political dissent*

Ragavan presents us with another story: He left Sri Lanka to escape the Movement. Ragavan is still known by his *nom de guerre*, acquired during his youth as a founding member of the LTTE. He left the movement in 1984 over the organization's authoritarian structure and internal political killings, and currently lives in exile in London, with his partner, Nirmala, (an ex-supporter of the LTTE whom he met in India) who had also been politically involved with the movement (*iyakkam*) and shared many of his objections.<sup>214</sup> Ragavan came from a middle-class Vellala family in the village of Punnalaikkadduvan, in northern Jaffna. He left home and school in his teens to join the movement, which became "a kind of second home" to him.

Ragavan was born in 1956, the year of the Sinhala Only Act. He recalled becoming interested in Tamil nationalism as a young man. He regularly read newspapers such as *Suthanthiran* ("Freedom," the newspaper of the Federal Party) and *Viduthalai* ("Liberation"), and remembered seeing posters and pamphlets around Jaffna that reinforced an emerging nationalist ideology.

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<sup>214</sup> Nirmala was the first woman arrested under the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

In 1970, the Students Front (*mānavar pēravai*), led by Sathiyaseelan, organized a march in Jaffna to protest university standardization. Most of the protesters were doing their GCEs and A-levels, and therefore would be most immediately affected by the government's standardization policy. Ragavan was in his Ninth Standard, but joined them when asked. While he was not personally affected, Ragavan felt that the injustice of the policy was one of the reasons why he became involved with nationalist politics. He recognized the value of an education to Jaffna Tamils, which was still seen as a pathway to stable employment and a secure life. The importance of the latter was clear in his father's fondness for a particular Tamil proverb: *kozhi meinthallum governmentil meikavendum* (Even if you raise chickens, you should do it in the government.) A university education was a ticket to government employment in the professions, whether as a clerk, teacher, doctor, lawyer or engineer. Ragavan's parents hoped he would become an engineer. He had other plans.

Ragavan turned to political activism and militancy instead. He joined the *mānavar pēravai*, through which he made contacts with militants and other activists. The front was "not very tight or properly organized," which made it easy for the Sri Lankan police and their spies to gather information about its members. The front collapsed in 1972 when the police arrested many of its members. However, the members of *mānavar pēravai* went on to form their own militant groups. Ragavan described them as "the pioneer organization for armed violence."

In addition to his early exposure to Tamil protests over standardization, a second event influenced and inspired Ragavan's activism. In 1974, the International Tamil Conference was held in Jaffna. The state had tried to block the conference from being

held on the island at all, and then insisted it be held in Colombo. Jaffna was held by its residents to be the cultural heartland of Tamil Sri Lanka and, to them, the conference's location choice recognized their community's contributions to Tamil literature and scholarship. Ultimately, the conference was allowed to proceed in Jaffna, but it remained a highly charged, symbolic event. The state's attempt to block the festival galvanized the TULF and its Youth Front, who mobilized to support the conference and denounced the state. Ragavan was one of many youth who organized a celebration of the conference in their villages; it was an atmosphere he likened to a temple festival. However, at an outdoor town hall on Tamil literature on the final day of the conference, Sri Lankan police shot into the crowd, and severed an electrical cable, which electrocuted and killed nine people.<sup>215</sup> The violence angered many Tamils in Jaffna, who felt it was not only a physical attack on individuals, or a collective, but the culmination of a state assault on Tamil cultural heritage and pride. It also upset Ragavan: "It made me think twice... and [think] to do something against the state."<sup>216</sup>

When Chetti, an early leader of the Tamil New Tigers (TNT)—a militant organization formed in 1972<sup>217</sup>—hid in his village, Ragavan started to help the militants

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<sup>215</sup> Some accounts describe this as an accident, while others claim that the police intended to use violence against the protesters. The LTTE's future leader was not at the conference, as he was in Tamil Nadu, to which he would return several times while on the run over the next decade.

<sup>216</sup> Ragavan also noted that he learned of Ponnuthurai Sivakumaran's plan to assassinate Mayor Duraiappah and was inspired by that—"I also wanted to do something. They were looking for people to get together." Sivakumaran was part of the volunteer group that organized the Tamil conference, and sought vengeance for the mayor's role in calling the police. After one of these attempts, Sivakumaran was caught and tortured. Worried that he would become an informer if tortured again, he carried a cyanide capsule with him, which he used to end his life when captured by the Sri Lankan police on June 5, 1974. He is widely recognized as being the first Tamil martyr, and his cyanide capsule was incorporated into the LTTE movement.

<sup>217</sup> Several different dates are attributed to the founding of the Tigers. The earliest date is 1970, the year *maanavar peravai* was formed, while others date the Tamil New Tigers' origins to as late as 1974. The most commonly cited year is 1972.

by taking them to safe houses on his bicycle. The early Tigers were a small group of seven to ten members, all men. In 1974, when Ragavan was 18 years old, Chetti visited with a young man named Prabhakaran, who spoke of the need for a separate state for Tamils. The young man became the TNT's leader after the Sri Lankan police caught and detained Chetti that year.<sup>218</sup> Shortly thereafter, Ragavan met the new leader again when the latter was on the run and looking for a safe house. Prabhakaran wanted to stay at Ragavan's grandmother's house. Ragavan decided to help Prabhakaran hide, despite knowing he was wanted (and fearing his own rule-abiding father's displeasure). Prabhakaran invited Ragavan to join the organization. The next year, 1975, the TNT made news with the assassination of Jaffna's SLFP mayor, Alfred Duraiappah, whom they blamed for the Tamil conference deaths.<sup>219</sup> Duraiappah was also portrayed as a traitor for siding with the Sri Lankan government during this period of unrest. At the time, Ragavan felt glad that a 'traitor' had been eliminated.<sup>220</sup> He later learned that Prabhakaran was responsible for the assassination.

Ragavan's covert activities for the Tigers led to a more spectacular operation. The militant groups, unlike the TULF, did not have funds to pursue their goals, and were robbing state cooperatives and banks to fund their operations. Ragavan participated in the Puttur bank robbery of 1976, and became a wanted man. He fled to India, via the Tigers' smuggling contacts in Valvettithurai, to hide in one of the militants' safe houses until he could return. During this time, the TNT changed its name and became the Liberation

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<sup>218</sup> Chetti was detained and tortured until he gave the names of key leaders in the TNT. Prabhakaran was relatively unknown, and so was made leader. See Hellmann-Rajanayagam (1994a).

<sup>219</sup> Duraiappa banned outdoor assembly at the conference, but a large crowd gathered in front of the town hall anyway. The police were called in to disperse the crowd (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1994a: 11).

<sup>220</sup> Ragavan also wrote about this in a 2009 memoir-like article published one week after the end of the war.

Tigers of Tamil Eelam on May 5, 1976. That same month, on May 14, the Federal Party leader, Chelvanayakam, would announce the struggle for a separate state of Tamil Eelam at the TULF convention in Vaddukoddai.<sup>221</sup>

The armed groups that were descendents of *maanavar peravai* shared the goal of eliminating those whom they saw as traitors—any Tamil who was working with or for the Sri Lankan state.

According to Ragavan, in these first few years of militancy, Tamil students were less concerned with organizing a movement to fight the state than creating “Tamil unity”—a unified front that would be able to fight for their political goal of a separate state. One means by which they did this was to identify and target “traitors” to the cause:

What the important thing was to eliminate the traitors. So whoever was the traitor, you should eliminate them then only people have a unity. That was, in a certain sense, the TULF propaganda... also the youth talked [like] that... So the traitor first, and then whoever, the police officers, the spies who try to inform.

However, the distinction between “traitors” and state “informers” was blurred:

Traitors and informers, there's no clear line. You know, the informer is-- the traitor is seen as an informer against Tamils, because he's working with the state. For instance, if you are an SLFPer or a UNPer, you will be a traitor, because you are not with us, you are with the state, or the Sinhala government. You are supporting the southern authority. Therefore you are an informer as a traitor. As far as the police... they were specially targeted. Not necessarily the police officers, but within the police, there is a CID. The whole investigation bureau... its members. They were particularly looking at those culprits who are involved with this. So... so, the first one was the [Tamil] informer/traitor, and then once you started targeting these traitor/informers, then obviously the police will try to catch you... so it's kind of linked.

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<sup>221</sup> This was the Vaddukoddai Resolution, as discussed in the previous sections.

Ragavan eventually saw where this was heading, and decided that he had to leave the LTTE once and for all. Though he had left the organization before, only to be persuaded to re-join, this would be the last time.

In spite of several attempts to unify their respective organizations and ideologies into a single political front, Tamil militants remained divided throughout the war. The last public assertion of Tamil political unity took place in July 1985 during peace talks with the Sri Lankan government in Bhutan.<sup>222</sup> Representatives of the TELO, LTTE, PLOTE, EROS, EPRLF, and TULF participated in the Tamil delegation.<sup>223</sup> Together, they rejected the Sri Lankan government's proposal issued the Thimpu Declaration of 1985. The declaration stated the following:

It is our considered view that any meaningful solution to the Tamil national question must be based on the following four cardinal principles:

- recognition of the Tamils of Ceylon as a nation
- recognition of the existence of an identified homeland for the Tamils of Ceylon
- recognition of the right of self determination of the Tamil nation
- recognition of the right to citizenship and the fundamental rights of all Tamils of Ceylon<sup>224</sup>

The Sri Lankan government rejected the first three principles, on the grounds that they violated Sri Lankan sovereignty.

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<sup>222</sup> The Indian government initiated the Thimpu talks, which took place over two rounds from July 8-July 13, 1985 and August 12-August 17, 1985.

<sup>223</sup> Four of the five militant groups present—the LTTE, EPRLF, EROS, and TELO—were constituents of the Eelam National Liberation Front (ENLF), which was formed by the three latter groups in 1984. The LTTE joined the front in April 1985. See Loganathan 1996 for further discussion of the political dynamics of these talks. Loganathan (known as Kethesh) was a participant with the EPRLF, and later left the organization. During the 2002 ceasefire, he joined the Government of Sri Lanka's Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process (SCOPP). For his efforts, he was killed by the LTTE in 2006.

<sup>224</sup> For the full text of the declaration and one insider's account, see Sivanayagam, n.d. (1985?)

In spite of the above declaration of shared principles, the following year, “the boys” turned on one another like never before. Dissension grew within the ranks of militant organizations, and differences emerged between them.<sup>225</sup> The LTTE was particularly adept at these killings, starting with the murder of over four hundred TELO cadres and the group’s leader in late April and May 1986.<sup>226</sup>

The accusation of being a ‘traitor’ continued to have deadly consequences for Tamils within and outside these militant groups in the decades to come.

### *Community, nation, struggle*

Taken together, an analysis of these four activist narratives provides insight into the historical emergence of Tamil militancy, both as a new form of Tamil political practice, and as an armed movement. All four activists’ accounts referred to anti-Tamil violence, and especially the riots/pogrom of July 1983. The latter event appeared as a defining moment, whether personally (David), as a historical turning point in the armed movement (Kanthan), or a time for action that called upon them to redouble their efforts (Rathan, Ragavan). However, as much as 1983 signaled a turning point, these activists narrated the event as part of a historical continuum, rather than a clear “break” with the past. The violence of 1983 and the growth of Tamil militancy was not an “end” to politics, nor was it the clear beginning of an “ethnic conflict” or “civil war.” Instead, the events of 1983 marked a new phase of an *ongoing* struggle. (In Tamil, *pōrāttam*, a word with an etymological root meaning “war.”) July 1983, in this narration, was part of a

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<sup>225</sup> TELO was led by Sri Sabaratnam at this time, and split into multiple factions. The group was supported by India, and received significant expatriate support.

<sup>226</sup> The LTTE justified its actions, as it believed that TELO was being used by India to infiltrate the Eelam struggle. Prabhakaran also believed that India would have him killed.

chain of events that constitute a contemporary history of Tamil politics. This becomes clear in the recurrence of violence throughout activists' personal histories.

In addition to the events of July 1983, Tamil activists remembered other events that, if mentioned at all, do not feature as prominently in the scholarship on Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict or work on Tamil nationalism. Ragavan recalled the significance of 1974 for his political life, while the 1977 riots led to intense political organizing by Kanthan and his group, EROS. David, on the other hand, remembered 1979, and how protests on the first anniversary of the second Republic, along with the events that followed from those protests, led to his first arrest shortly after Sri Lanka passed its Prevention of Terrorism Act. Each of the above narratives makes visible moments of profound crisis in the history of post-colonial Sri Lanka. Anti-Tamil violence was an especially important feature of the narratives of nationalist activists. In our conversations, I was reminded on several occasions of the riots and massacres that took place after independence, when an activist would list each event, indexed by the year of its occurrence: 1956, 1958, 1961, 1974, 1977, 1981, 1983. The list stopped with 1983<sup>227</sup>, which was understood to be the end of large-scale riots because, as more than one nationalist activist explained to me, "After 1983, we went to war, and the Tigers were there to defend the Tamil people." In this reading, a military formation acted as a strong deterrent to one form of anti-Tamil violence. However, as the narratives of dissidents like Raghavan and events post-Thimpu show, this violence was transformed. Internal dissension among the groups at war with the state resulted in conflict and violence *among* the Tamils. The tensions marked

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<sup>227</sup> However, an activist would occasionally mentioned 2000, when Tamil political prisoners were massacred at the Bindunuwewa detention centre in central Sri Lanka.



throughout these narratives—between Tamil unity and dissent, militancy and non-violence, and reform and struggle—would continue throughout the next two decades.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have provided a critical synthesis of historical and social scientific scholarship on Sri Lankan politics and nationalism, in order to trace the emergence of a specifically “Tamil” identity and politics. Conventional political histories characterize Tamil militancy as a radical break from politics, which is discussed with respect to elections, parliamentary debates, legislation and constitutional reforms. Histories of Tamil nationalism often share this conceit about the “end” of Tamil politics, when they describe how an older generation of parliamentarians were forced to vacate their seats and thus made ‘irrelevant.’ In contrast, I have endeavored to show that the growth of Tamil militancy creates a new form of oppositional political activity among youth in the 1970s. In addition, these narratives reveal the parallel emergence of militancy and diaspora activism in a field<sup>228</sup> of transnational Tamil political engagement.

In the next chapter, I discuss the diasporic politics of Tamil protest and dissent in Toronto, home to the largest population of Sri Lankan Tamils outside Asia, and a city in which many activists and former militants have settled.

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<sup>228</sup> I use the term “field” here in the sense of Bourdieu (1993), as a system of relational social positions structured by power relations, within which cultural life and production are situated.

***Mobilizing Diaspora in Tamil Toronto: Activism and the Politics of Community under Multiculturalism***

**Community formations and organizations**

When I began fieldwork in Tamil Toronto in 2008, activists and organizers often questioned the purpose of my research, wondering whether it would harm or benefit their work and whether it had any use to “the community.” Indeed, a broad spectrum of diasporic Tamil activists referred to Toronto Tamils as “the community.” This was a group to which many claimed and asserted their belonging, but one which they also spoke of apart from their own selves, as an entity to be mobilized. They often took for granted the bounded nature of this community, directing me to organizations that were felt to be “representative” of “the community” and its needs. These organizations then provide a starting point for my inquiry into Tamil diasporic activism, and the moral and political practices of those who mobilize against Sri Lanka’s war. In this section, I briefly outline the organizations and associations that form a local and transnational community of Tamils in Toronto. This outline of community formation is preceded by a discussion of the multiple valences of the term, “community,” as it was used by Toronto Tamil activists.

“Community” was frequently the subject of social activism in Tamil Toronto. One of my first interviews was held with a small group of Tamil-Canadian women who worked in non-profits and schools to provide social services to Tamil youth. The women, in their twenties and early thirties, all migrated from Jaffna and Colombo during the late 1980s, and were part of the “1.5 generation” of Toronto Tamils. Toward the end of our

interview about their work among Toronto Tamils, they told me they rarely heard the English word “diaspora” among Tamils to describe their collective. Instead, they spoke of the “Tamil community.” For these activists, “diaspora” was an academic term, while “community” was a common way to refer to their collective life as Tamils.

“Community outreach” had become a common line of work for Tamil activists who were employed as social workers and service providers to other Tamils. These activists, like the young women above, spoke of their satisfaction at assisting people in the Tamil language to find employment or housing, or of providing culturally-competent counseling to newcomers. Moreover, they had experienced similar difficulties when settling in Canada, and wanted to share their knowledge with their clients. Such people were described as being “community-oriented,” in contrast to those who were “selfish” and had “turned their backs on the community.” Such a distinction was sometimes made by youth of the 1.5 generation between themselves and the 2nd generation that had been born and raised in Canada. In other instances, however, those who were “selfish” were those who disagreed politically with LTTE supporters in Toronto, and thus found themselves at odds with “the community” as these activists had defined it.

Some activists spoke of feeling “outside the community”—even those who participated in the work of organizations that mobilized this community. One young man, in describing the generational dynamics above, told me he felt apart from other Tamils in Toronto because of the way he dressed, spoke, and carried himself. The young man had grown up in the United States, to parents of Indian descent. Those who dissented from the Tigers, the WTM and mainstream Tamil organizations like the CTC described

themselves as “being outside” or “living apart” from the community, even as they formed small groups of their own.

“The community” was also the subject of political action, as activists who spoke supportively of, critically about, or in opposition to the LTTE made generalizing statements about the political stance of Toronto Tamils. Activists frequently asserted that the community was supportive of “the struggle,” in the words of supporters, or “the LTTE,” as identified by some of its critics and detractors. In general, those who supported the LTTE and/or did not criticize the organization were less likely to name the organization than those who publicly criticized or opposed it. In other words, Tamil activists who were excluded from the community in public by their political dissent brought the notion of a “Tamil community” into stark relief in their speech. Some of these activists wanted to ensure that I spoke to activists in organizations like the CTC and WTM. They felt this would give me a firsthand look at the social dynamics they described. Activists from Tamil community organizations, on the other hand, did not encourage me to speak with dissenting activists.

### **Mapping Toronto’s Tamil community**

#### *Political organizations*

Two organizations figured most prominently in the Tamil community during my research: The World Tamil Movement and the Canadian Tamil Congress. These two organizations had different primary aims: The former centered on homeland politics, as well as cultural and social activities that supported that politics, while the latter was primarily concerned with the social and political issues of Tamils living in Canada—a mandate that also allowed activists to organize around Sri Lanka’s ongoing war.

Unsurprisingly, many Tamil activists of different generations suggested that I begin my research by talking to the Canadian Tamil Congress (CTC), an organization that called itself “the unified voice of Canadian Tamils.”<sup>229</sup> Some of my first interlocutors were students who had participated in the Pongu Thamil movement in 2004, and had since become more involved with the CTC.

The Canadian Tamil Congress is a non-profit organization headquartered in Toronto, with chapters in major cities throughout Canada and an elected board of directors.<sup>230</sup> It describes itself as “the community’s spokesperson on the municipal, provincial, federal and international levels.” The CTC was founded in 2000, and served as an umbrella for smaller groups, activists, professionals, artists and students who moved across many different projects and initiatives in Tamil Toronto. Secondly, and importantly, the CTC’s efforts to foster Tamil civic engagement and develop connections with politicians at all levels of government made the organization function as a “caucus” representing Tamil interests in Canada. As such, they also worked with and consulted similarly organized ethnocultural groups, like the Canadian Jewish Congress. Finally, through such intra- and inter-community efforts, the CTC positioned itself as an international advocate for Tamils in Sri Lanka, and organized its diasporic membership to raise awareness of Tamil suffering in their homeland to bring an end to the civil war.

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<sup>229</sup> This was changed to “Voice of Tamil Canadians” on their latest website. I discuss the debates and implications around these namings for Toronto Tamil activists in a later section of this chapter.

Throughout my fieldwork, Tamil activists debated the merits of different identifications – some preferred Canadian Tamil, others Tamil Canadians, with or without a hyphen. Still others referred to themselves as simply Tamil, and very few preferred to identify as Canadian only. This was dramatized in an exercise at the In Search of Roots conference for Tamil youth in July 2008.

<sup>230</sup> The CTC has had up to 11 chapters throughout Canada, with the most active in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver.

These three areas of focus – connecting Tamils in Canada by serving as an umbrella for many different organizations, fostering local and national engagement, and international advocacy about the Sri Lankan war – often overlapped in the CTC’s work, which ranged from collecting information about barriers to work for immigrant professionals, to blood drives and walk-a-thons raising funds for local hospitals, to educating its membership about candidates in upcoming elections, to organizing rallies and exhibits commemorating the anniversary of anti-Tamil violence in Sri Lanka and writing press releases condemning the Government of Sri Lanka’s conduct of the war.

While the CTC focused on civic engagement, the *Ulaga Thamilar Iyakkam*, or World Tamil Movement, functioned as a community group that offered settlement services, vocational training and organized "cultural shows" and sports leagues for Tamils from Sri Lanka. The organization was founded as a non-profit organization in 1986, and was said to be staffed and funded entirely by volunteers. The WTM’s Canadian headquarters were located in a squat, brick building tucked away in an industrial section of southeast Scarborough. There, the WTM also housed a small library with over 16,000 publications in English and Tamil. Most importantly, among Tamils, the WTM (or “the Movement”) served as a hub for diaspora political organizing in support of the LTTE’s armed struggle for a separate state.

In addition to political community-based organizations like the CTC and WTM, Toronto Tamils participated in several other kinds of social and cultural associations that were supportive of these organizations’ political goals.

### *Home village and alumni associations*

Home village associations (HVAs) and alumni associations (AAs) have been at the heart of community organizing in Tamil Toronto. There are approximately 300 HVAs and AAs in Canada (Cheran 2007: 135), of which the majority are in the Greater Toronto Area. As Cheran (2007) writes, these organizations are transnational in their social organization and operation, and diasporic. For Cheran, the latter refers to the fact that “most of their members left their places of origin as refugees.” As true as this may be, I suggest that home village and alumni associations are also diasporic because, through these associations, members create imaginative and social links with the places they remember as “home” and the space of a “homeland.” Home village and alumni associations have both allowed diaspora Tamils to fund and provide skills toward the reconstruction and development of villages and schools in northern Sri Lanka.

The home village association (in Tamil, *ur sangam*) was initially formed as a kind of “social club” for people of the same village (*ur aatkal*) in Sri Lanka. HVAs anchored new immigrants and provided a way for long-time residents, now dispersed throughout a large metropolitan region, to stay connected to each other. In addition, these associations were voluntary organizations that maintained communication with their villages back home. During the war, HVAs collected funds from members for the relief and rehabilitation of displaced residents in their villages in Sri Lanka, and limited reconstruction. They consulted with local leaders and operated independently from the state and local and international NGOs, allowing them to bypass bureaucratic hurdles and overhead costs of development work. After the signing of the 2002 ceasefire, HVAs became active in post-conflict reconstruction and small-scale development projects; the

average cost of these projects ranged from \$8,000 to \$20,000 CDN (Cheran 2007: 137). Most HVAs have focused on the reconstruction and expansion of educational institutions, hospital facilities, and village infrastructure such as wells. Some activists also told me members' efforts to reconstruct and renovate Jaffna temples and churches, and the building of new ones, but these were often separate efforts.<sup>231</sup>

Home village social networks were also central to political mobilizing in Toronto. Activists within these associations contacted each of their members to encourage them to attend protests, and as a result, some associations were a visible presence at these events. For example, when the 2008 Pongu Tamil event was organized in a matter of days in response to the Canadian government's ban on the WTM, home village associations mobilized hundreds of Tamils. They displayed their affiliations proudly on totem-like poles covered in banners of the sponsoring HVAs.

Alumni associations were also colloquially known as old students' associations.<sup>232</sup> Like HVAs, they provided members with a venue for Tamil sociality, where dispersed Tamils could reconnect with old schoolmates and form new relationships. They were primarily focused on the reconstruction of their schools, and funded nutritional programs for school children, scholarships and bursaries, English-language training, and computer technologies and training. Several alumni associations produced annual publications to update their members on the school and its alumni's achievements; they also organized sports meets, math contests, and annual entertainment programs in which alumni and

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<sup>231</sup> Tamils abroad honored their deceased relatives by making a donation to their local temple or church to build an addition named after their relative. However, solicitations for temple-building in Jaffna were a source of incessant irritation among some diaspora Tamils, who explained that the funds could be better used to assist the displaced in Jaffna or develop other kinds of local institutions.

<sup>232</sup> The associations for sex-segregated schools are referred to as "old boys" and "old girls" associations—e.g. the St. John's Old Boys and Chundukuli Old Girls Associations.



their children participated by acting in plays, singing, dancing, holding quiz shows, and handing out awards. Entire families attended these shows, with ticket sales benefitting their alma mater in Jaffna. Schools in northern Sri Lanka often relied on these funds to maintain and expand their facilities. Cheran (2010, 2003) notes that the Canada and UK alumni associations of Mahajana College in Tellipalai pledged nearly USD \$4 million (LKR 43 million) at an international conference organized in Colombo in April 2003.<sup>233</sup>

### *Student and youth organizations*

Tamil youth formed their own organizations. Unlike their parents, home village associations were not central to their social networks; they attended *ur sangam* picnics but also believed these associations would fade over the next generation. The Tamil Students' Association (TSA) was one important form of youth organization separate from their parents' forms of sociality. Young men began to form these associations at colleges and universities in southern Ontario in the 1990s. They were joined by students of the "1.5 generation"—Tamil youth who migrated to Canada at a young age, but were old enough to remember life in Sri Lanka, and were typically six to fifteen years old when they entered the Canadian school system. These students were active participants in Tamil community life. When I spoke to activists in their twenties and thirties, they discussed how important the TSA had been to their politicization. Their time in the TSA marked a period when they began to learn (some for the first time) about the Tamil struggle in Sri Lanka.

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<sup>233</sup> A May 2012 meeting with the principal of Mahajana College in Tellipalai confirmed the significance of diaspora alumni networks and fundraising for Jaffna schools. Mahajana's principal had just returned to take leadership of the school after several years of living and working in Australia, and was meeting with diaspora alumni throughout the day. When we met, he first showed me a table of donations from alumni associations and individuals for the previous year. Nearly all of the donations were from Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States, and Colombo.

TSAAs began to coordinate with each other after the 2002 Ceasefire. They formed the Canadian Tamil Students' Association, a national umbrella group whose members were the primary organizers of the 2004 Pongu Thamil in Toronto.

Most of the students who were involved in the TSAAs at the time of my long-term fieldwork were, however, second-generation students. Unlike the earlier generation of first and 1.5 generation TSA students, however, they were considered to be more “social” than “political.” A few were already politically active and members of other organizations, such as the Tamil Youth Organization, and these students began to introduce pro-LTTE political education into their associations. They have been subject to controversy at times for the nature of this politics.<sup>234</sup>

During my fieldwork, I began to notice that TSA leaders often went on to join other pro-LTTE community organizations. Two youth activists eventually explained to me—on two separate occasions—that the TSAAs of that time were subject to the political mandate of other community organizations, and more specifically, the WTM in Canada. This influence did not, however, determine the politics or subsequent political engagements of their members. For example, of the aforementioned activists, the first was a young man who had migrated to Canada when he was seventeen, held a leadership role in his university TSA in the 1990s, and went on to join an alternative Tamil network. The other activist was a second-generation diaspora Tamil who had been a member of his high school and university TSAAs in the mid-to-late 2000s. In the case of another student activist who had been actively involved in the TSA in the late 1990s, his unwavering

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<sup>234</sup> In 2009, for example, when the York University TSA held the Tamil Eelam national flag created by the LTTE. The flag bears the Liberation Tigers' emblem. I discuss the social semiotics and politics of the “Tiger flag” later in this chapter, and in Chapter 7.

support of the LTTE was interrupted a few years later by questions about the group's local operations in Toronto, when diasporic LTTE activists wanted to control (and when he refused, tried to sabotage) his fundraising for Tamil rehabilitation in Sri Lanka.<sup>235</sup>

The Tamil Youth Organization (TYO) was another important network of organizations for Tamil youth in Canada. The Canadian branch, TYO-Canada, provided a venue for socialization of Tamil youth and mobilized them politically. TYO and TYO-Canada were formed in 2003, during the Ceasefire, after a group of Tamil diaspora youth from several countries traveled to visit northern Sri Lanka. Their stay was organized by diaspora Tamil activists, who connected them to the LTTE. These diaspora youth were housed in the LTTE's headquarters in Kilinochchi, and taken around to see its de facto state. In interviews, several activists remarked to me about the "modern buildings" and the "efficient" policing and courts; young women (and some men) also spoke of their ability to walk outside at night without fear, as compared to their time in Colombo, or their childhood memories of wartime Jaffna.<sup>236</sup> They also met with the LTTE leadership, including the *thalaivar*, Prabhakaran, with whom they had a group discussion. Prabhakaran suggested they create a youth organization in their countries of residence. The young activists were impressed by their visit to Kilinochchi; on their return to Canada, they established a TYO chapter with the help of their activist elders.

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<sup>235</sup> This activist was one of several Tamil diaspora activists who had met the LTTE leader, Prabhakaran. He noted that during his meeting, he raised questions and felt that his ideas were respected, in contrast to his subsequent interactions with local activists in Toronto. This encounter and Prabhakaran's willingness to hear out a diasporic Tamil activist perhaps also speaks to the social power of the Tamil diaspora, whose funds were critical to the LTTE's operations (as I discuss below).

<sup>236</sup> See also Kanagasabapathy (2006) for a more detailed discussion of diasporic youth views on the LTTE's de facto state.

If the memberships of the TYO-Canada and high school and university TSAs overlapped, TYO-Canada was more explicitly connected to the WTM. TYO members provided support to the WTM at Tamil events such as *Maaveerar Naal* or protests, where they handed out flags and signs, or acted as basic security. TYO-Canada also produced a monthly magazine that has published the writings of Tamil youth on a variety of issues, ranging from the nature of Tamil-Canadian identity, to sports and popular culture, to creative and political writing about the war in Eelam.

The Tamil Students Volunteer Project (TSVP) was another type of organization that emerged during the Ceasefire. The founder of the TSVP was a student of the University of Toronto who had been an active leader within his campus's TSA. When the Ceasefire was signed, he traveled to Sri Lanka to find out what he could do. When he returned, he recruited other TSA members and activists to organize groups of Tamil university students to travel to Sri Lanka for several weeks each summer, where they could contribute skills to their homeland. TSVP volunteers did so in a variety of ways, including teaching English as a second language classes and computing classes at VanniTech (a technology institute founded by diaspora Tamils living in the US), providing medical services, and building local infrastructure.<sup>237</sup> When non-Tamils showed interest and joined these groups, the organizers decided to rename TSVP by replacing "Tamil" with "The"—i.e. The Students Volunteer Project. The change upset other community activists, and led to tensions between members.

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<sup>237</sup> Kanagasabapathy (2006) documents these activities and relations between diaspora youth volunteers and locals during the ceasefire.

### *Relief and rehabilitation organizations*

Toronto Tamil activists regularly mobilized around relief, rehabilitation, reconstruction and development work in Sri Lanka. This work was widely carried out by the home village and alumni associations, as well as the independent diaspora networks and organizations like TSVP and Tamil Diaspora Network for Development. The largest organization, however, was the Tamil Rehabilitation Organization of Canada (TRO-Canada), which was part of a larger transnational network of organizations under the auspices of the LTTE. TRO-Canada held fundraisers and made appeals on Tamil radio for funds to rehabilitate Tamils displaced, injured and impoverished by the war. The organization was also alleged to be a front for the LTTE. Given the ban on outright fundraising for the LTTE, some Tamils questioned whether donations were being redirected to the Tigers' war effort (or local fundraisers' pockets) instead. For this reason, they preferred to work through their home village network when they could, on localized projects with "known people" whom they felt were trustworthy and accountable.

Another notable effort during my fieldwork was the creation of a "Canada village" in northern Sri Lanka, through a project called *Nivaaranam* (meaning, "relief"), which constructed homes for internally displaced Tamils. These houses were funded by over one hundred individual and community group donors.

### *Social services and community development*

Several organizations provide services to Tamils who are new immigrants to Canada, as well as those who are part of populations with specific needs.

The Tamil Eelam Society of Canada (TESOC) was founded in 1976 as a cultural organization that provided a sense of community to a small group of pre-1983 immigrants. The society's founder was discussed in Chapter 1 as part of the first phase of Tamil migration to Canada. He and his wife explained that their home had served as a hub where young men who were new immigrants could meet other Tamils and have a home-cooked, Jaffna-style meal. There were no Tamil grocery stores in Toronto at this time, so the family brought back tightly-packed spices from their annual trips back home.

In the mid-1980s, TESOC became more formally involved in the settlement and integration of new immigrants and refugees.<sup>238</sup> The Society became a non-profit organization based in southwest Scarborough, and delivered a wide range of social services to Tamils, including English-language classes, social assistance and immigration application help, job search assistance, citizenship classes, family counseling, and a women's group. During my fieldwork, the organization was funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada and the City of Toronto. In 2006, TESOC's mandate expanded beyond Tamils to serve immigrants in 12 different languages.<sup>239</sup> The organization also later changed its name to TESOC Multicultural Settlement Services.<sup>240</sup>

Vasantham is a non-profit wellness centre for Tamil seniors in downtown Toronto. Vasantham offers its residents—mostly elderly women—a place to socialize, participate in group activities, and learn new skills, as well as education and referrals for physical and mental health services. As a generation of older immigrants ages, Tamils

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<sup>238</sup> Most programs are available to permanent residents and convention refugees only.

<sup>239</sup> TESOC provides settlement services in the following languages: Arabic, Azerbaijani, Dari, English, Farsi, French, Pashto, Russian, Sinhala, Tamil, Turkish and Urdu (<http://www.tesoc.org/Settlement/>)

<sup>240</sup> This was likely due to the political import of the earlier name in the context of Canada's 2006 listing of the LTTE, and the organization's expanded audience.

have increasingly realized the need for elder-care facilities. The Canadian anthropologist, Glynis George (2011), has written of a similar place called Harmony Hall.

Middle-class Tamil activists often spoke of “two communities” to me during my fieldwork. The “first” community was made up of Tamils who, in spite of their struggles in settling down in Canada, were able to secure jobs with middle-class salaries, and eventually bought their own homes; their children went to universities and were earning comfortable salaries of their own. The “second” Tamil community worked in factories, and as food servers and cleaners; they were working-class, sometimes working second and third jobs, and their children were not going to university, or dropping out of high school. These youth were perceived as being “in danger” or “at-risk.”

Before this tale of two Tamil communities, Toronto Tamils had faced another crisis of “at-risk” youth during a spate of gang violence in the 1990s. Young men of rival gangs, such as “AK-Kannan” and the “VVT gang” were shooting and killing each other. Moreover, Toronto’s media connected the violence to the LTTE’s armed struggle, via drug-running for the LTTE, and a “culture” that glorified gun violence.

Tamil activists—among them, leaders at the WTM and local TSAs—decided it was important to rein in the violence. A group of young Tamil researchers produced a report, *Toronto Tamil Youth: Some Realities* (Balasingham et al 2000), and on the basis of such research, activists decide to create a new organization. Canadian Tamil Youth Development (CanTYD) was formed to provide Tamil youth with an alternative to violent gangs. Activists felt that Tamil youth needed community spaces to socialize, to talk about their problems, and to learn life and leadership skills. Volunteers provided mentorship to youth—many of whom were said to be young men living in Canada on

their own, or with struggling parents. As the community grew, CanTYD's mandate expanded to providing mentorship to young Tamil women through Selvy's Circle, and helping immigrant youth navigate secondary schools.

Finally, in addition to the above Tamil-run organizations, several Toronto social service providers hired Tamil community-based social workers, lawyers, and translators, and recruited volunteers to provide outreach to various segments within Toronto's Tamil community. Such organizations included: the South Asian Women's Centre, Legal Aid Ontario, Youth Link, Malvern Youth Development. At this time, the Executive Director of the Council of Agencies Serving South Asians (CASSA) was also a Canadian Tamil whose activism spanned several of the organizations discussed in the pages above.

*Media, arts and culture, business*

The Tamil Academy for Arts, Culture and Technology (TACT, also known as Tamil Academy) was founded in 1992, and provides Tamil language classes for children and teens, as well as classes in Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam dance and, since 1999, a bachelors degree in Tamil Studies through the Manonmaniam Sunaranar University of Tamil Nadu (Canadian Tamil Academy 2012).

The WTM's arts and culture group (*maththi toronto thamilar kalai panpaadu kazhagam*) and the women's wing (*thamil mahalir*) organized "cultural shows" that showcased plays (*naadagam*) and dances (*natyam*) that presented the LTTE in a heroic light, and glorified the Tamil struggle, which was typically depicted as being against the "Sinhala oppressors" of the Sri Lankan army, politicians, and aggressive Buddhist monks.



Toronto Tamils also had a thriving theatre and film scene that featured the works of several independent groups, including annual performances from Arangadal, the Karumaiyam theatre group, and the Canadian Tamil film festival.

It was a rare occasion to enter a Tamil home in Toronto without seeing or hearing at least one form of Tamil mass media: newspapers, radio, and television channels.

Toronto boasted approximately two dozen Tamil newspapers, including: *Ulaga Thamilar* (published by the WTM), *Muzhakkam*, *Eelamurasu*, and (the English-language) *Tamil Mirror*. Most were free, through advertisements from Tamil businesses.<sup>241</sup> Radio stations included the Canadian Tamil Broadcasting Corporation (CTBC), Canadian Tamil Radio (CTR), and Geethavaani. To listen to these channels, one had to purchase a specially-configured shortwave radio, sold at many Tamil stores; eventually, these stations were streamed online as well. Canadian Multicultural Radio (CMR 101.3 FM), a Tamil-owned station, also aired a large amount of Tamil programming.<sup>242</sup> Television channels like TamilOne and TVI were ubiquitous in Toronto Tamil homes. TVI, in particular, featured a significant amount of local diaspora-produced programming. Several activists hosted shows on TVI, and the network regularly covered local Tamil events and protests. One could also purchase Tamil-language cable packages to watch entertainment-driven Indian networks like Sun, Jaya, Makkal and Vijay TV.

The Canadian Tamil Chamber of Commerce (CTCC) gathered together a large community of small businesses. TVI also organized *Kondaattam*, an annual business

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<sup>241</sup> This was not the case for the WTM newspaper, which in 2008 cost \$1 at local Tamil shops.

<sup>242</sup> Tamil-language radio stations were especially popular with older Tamils, who listened to their radios from morning until night. Some programs featured local call-in shows. See Bernard 2008 for a discussion of two shows produced by Toronto's Tamil radio stations.

trade show that combined entertainment with the consumption of products created by local and international Tamil businesses. The festival-like atmosphere drew thousands of Tamil attendees over two days at a convention center.

### *Alternative and dissenting groups*

In addition to the organizations and associations outlined above, there were several other groups formed by Tamils as alternatives to the major community organizations, and often, by dissenting activists who were critical of the LTTE. Alternative Tamil groups and dissenting activists were fewer in number, in terms of the membership they could claim, but did not make claims to represent the Tamil community. These activists and groups frequently had experience with other forms of politics in Sri Lanka, including trade unionism, the Sri Lankan and Tamil left, civil rights movements, human rights and feminist activisms. Some activists were ex-militants from organizations other than the LTTE, or ex-supporters, and remained sympathetic to some forms of Tamil nationalism, while others were avowedly critical of all forms of Tamil nationalism, and in diaspora, engaged with questions of caste, class, regionalism, and to a lesser extent, gender.

Thedakam was one such group, formed mostly by Tamil ex-militants in the late 1980s. Also known as the Tamil Resource Centre, Thedakam constructed a library in Toronto, and remained independent from LTTE politics. In 1990, the library was firebombed. The group stayed dormant for several years, but re-emerged during my fieldwork to organize some events. Other organizations included: the Canadian-Sri Lankan Women's Action Network (CSLWAN), Canadians for Peace (CfP), the Karumaiyam theatre group (which was affiliated with CfP, and had branched off from the

Manaveli theatre group), the Sri Lanka Democracy Forum (SLDF, a network of diaspora activists mainly in North America, the UK and Europe, which was founded in Toronto in 2004), and the Canadian Democratic Tamil Cultural Association (CDTCA), among others. Many of these groups were multi-ethnic or aimed at forging such connections, even when they were predominantly Tamil. They were comprised of activists with heterogeneous backgrounds who often disagreed with one another's political stances and tactics. They shared one thing in common: Their work was aimed at challenging Toronto's Tamil diaspora to address oppressive dynamics within their community.

To this end, Tamil journalists were often at the forefront of such questioning. Unable to publish their critical reporting and opinion pieces in LTTE-controlled publications, they founded their own newspapers, such as D.B.S. Jeyaraj's *Muncharie*, George Ckrhushchev's *Thayagam*, and in 2007-2008, the short-lived *Vaikarai*. During the 1990s and early 2000s, many of these Tamil writers were subject to a great deal of intimidation by LTTE activists. For example, in 1993, when Jeyaraj, a veteran journalist in Sri Lanka and Canada, refused to stop publishing articles that were critical of the Tigers, he was beaten up in a Scarborough parking lot after leaving a Tamil film with his wife (Nallainathan 2007).

Many alternative and dissenting activists also participated in literary circles and wrote for alternative publications. They wrote poetry, short fiction and opinionated prose that challenged diaspora Tamils around issues of caste and sexuality for magazines such as *Kalam* (Time) and *Matrathu* (Another Thing), which were published in Toronto. Poets such as Cheliyan published books of poetry through Chennai presses such as Kalaichchuvad, They held literary and political discussions at an annual *Ilakkiya*

*Santhippu* (Literary Meeting), as well as the *Penngal Santhippu* (Women's Meeting).

These events were held in a different diasporic location each year. The women's meeting was held for the first time in Toronto in 2008, and brought together a diverse group of (mostly Sri Lankan) Tamil women writers and activists from Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Sri Lanka, India and Canada.

### **The LTTE and Tamil diaspora politics**

As noted in a previous chapter of this dissertation, Sri Lanka's growing Tamil diaspora became an important source of financing and political support for Tamil militancy, and eventually, the LTTE's continuing war with the state. Any study of the political activism of Tamils from Sri Lanka must thus examine the central, though intensely contested place of the LTTE in the making of diasporic life and politics. When the LTTE rose to dominance in the north and east of Sri Lanka through internecine warfare with rival militant groups, the organization also consolidated its political power in the diaspora. The LTTE became the dominant force among Toronto Tamils during the late 1980s and 1990s in the following ways: (1) by violently intimidating and eliminating its rivals and dissenters, (2) by appropriating successful community projects, and (3) through the creation of an overseas network responsible for coordinating its fundraising activities and commercial enterprises, arms procurement, political propaganda, and community-based organizing. These activities – particularly fundraising, political propaganda, and community-based organizing – overlapped at many crucial points, but appeared to maintain separate operations to ensure the integrity of the network.

However, the LTTE's domination and hegemony among diasporic Tamils was by no means assured. For now, I bracket a discussion of practices of dissent among Tamils

in Toronto as, in the next sections/chapter, I write more closely of the ways in which dissenting activists and diasporic Tamils experienced intimidation and its effects on diasporic political subjectivities. In what follows, I provide a brief sketch of the dense nodes and mobile networks through which LTTE activities were organized and made significant in diaspora communities. This context provides the basis for understanding how and why Tamil community activists mobilized against the 2006 ban on the LTTE with the return to war in northern Sri Lanka in 2008.

### *Fundraising overseas*

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the LTTE created a sophisticated network linking their overseas offices to commercial enterprises, small businesses, informal banking, global shipping, aid and human rights organizations, arms dealers and foreign mercenaries.<sup>243</sup> Fundraising was an important activity of this overseas network, allowing the Tigers to acquire material resources – from weapons to satellite phones to food -- necessary to continue their war with the Sri Lankan government. Much of these funds were collected from Tamil diasporic communities.

Indeed, the LTTE's overseas network functioned primarily within countries of diaspora settlement. By the mid-1990s, the LTTE's international funding had become more important than ever. The Tigers increasingly turned to the growing Tamil diaspora after heavy fighting with the Sri Lankan Army in Jaffna in 1990-1995 led to the decline of its taxation base due to Tamil civilian deaths, internal displacement and out-migration. One Canadian intelligence analyst claimed that overseas sources—both diaspora

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<sup>243</sup> For a discussion of the LTTE's global network with a focus on these activities in South and Southeast Asia, see Davis (1996). Also see Sakhuja (2006) for a report produced for the Delhi-based Observer Research Foundation on the organization's shipping activities and their centrality to its global operations.

contributions, and income from international businesses and investments-- accounted for 80-90 percent of the LTTE's military budget (Chalk 2000). However, it remains unclear how much of this can be attributed to individually-solicited contributions. By May 1998, the Tigers were said to have an organized presence in 54 countries, though the largest and wealthiest of these were Western states with large Tamil communities, such as Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Switzerland, the United States and the United Kingdom.<sup>244</sup> Estimates of the Tigers' annual earnings have ranged from USD \$100-200 million to \$1.5 billion.<sup>245</sup>

The Tigers' overseas network raised funds through multiple activities. This involved various forms of licit activity, such as donations and investments (prior to laws that would criminalize *all* funding), and illicit activity, including narcotics, credit card fraud, piracy and arms dealing, as well as passport forgery and human smuggling.<sup>246</sup> Some of these funds were re-invested by the Tigers, who provided start-up funds for diaspora small businesses. These included gold jewelry stores, cinema theatres, restaurants, groceries, real estate agencies, money transfer businesses, and even—according to rumors circulated among several of my interlocutors—franchises of popular coffee and fast-food chains in Canada. In turn, business owners had to contribute percentages of their profits. Some Tamil businesses were happy—even eager—to donate

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<sup>244</sup> Southeast Asian countries, including Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore were important for the organization's arms dealing and exchange in gold; indeed, at the very end of war, the group's main arms-dealer was appointed by LTTE leader Prabhakaran as Head of International Relations. This region also became a transit point for migration through LTTE-organized channels.

<sup>245</sup> The lower end of this range is attributed to the U.S. Treasury Department as cited in International Crisis Group (2010: 6). This same report notes that Tamils close to the organization estimate their earnings to be as high as \$1.5 billion. Davis (1996) provides a more modest estimate of \$2 million per month in 1996, prior to the LTTE's peak fundraising. At the time of my research, one military report estimated the LTTE's revenue at USD 200-300 million per annum (Karmi 2007).

<sup>246</sup> For a discussion and documentation of these activities, see Becker (2006a) and Davis (1996).

to the Tigers; financial contributions were one way to support the movement and demonstrate concern for Tamils “back home” in Sri Lanka. Additionally, showing support to the Tigers/the struggle was viewed as being “good for business.” Others complained quietly, when when low profits and high “taxes” made it difficult. However, few dared to refuse. The LTTE also reportedly made significant inroads into the overseas distribution and DVD rights of Indian-produced Tamil films.<sup>247</sup>

Organized crime and business investments were not the only means by which the Tigers raised funds in diasporic communities. They held collections at temples and churches frequented by Toronto Tamils, organized fundraisers, and performed cultural programmes to commemorate fallen martyrs and dramatically re-enact a militant history of Tamil struggle for audiences. At such events, and in Tamil stores, they displayed photos of the LTTE leader, Prabhakaran, and sold publications, song compilations, flags and videos of the battlefield (at first, on VHS, and later, on VCD and DVD). They solicited funds to rehabilitate civilians affected by the war, though it is often claimed that a significant amount of these funds – raised for the Tamil Rehabilitation Organization -- were redirected to the military wing of the organization (cf. HRW). In the Toronto area, where over forty Hindu temples were founded and attended by diaspora Tamils, temples, as places of worship, serve as important sites of sociality and community organizing. Although dismissed by some community activists as “a big business,” places of worship were another means by which the LTTE exerted its influence in Tamil community life –

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<sup>247</sup> In August 2009, Sri Lanka's Resettlement and Disaster Relief Services Minister Abdul Rishad Bathiudeen alleged that Tamil film superstar Rajnikanth's films were funded by the LTTE, channeled via a Tamil based in London. A senior police official in Tamil Nadu stated that they had not come across evidence to corroborate the allegation, but noted that "The overseas Tamil diaspora is a too huge a market for any film producer to ignore" (Times of India 2009).

not only by exacting “taxes,” holding collections and selling LTTE media, but by taking over temples outright by threat of force.<sup>248</sup> The most controversial of the Tigers’ fundraising practices, however, and a practice that garnered international attention, was the means by which it solicited funds from individuals and independent Tamil-owned businesses.

#### *Door-to-door solicitation*

As many diaspora activists told me – whether claiming membership in the community, or dissenting from it – many Tamils have willingly contributed money to the LTTE throughout the years of war. However, as the diaspora grew, so did the needs of the LTTE’s war chest. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, many Tamils were still recent immigrants to Canada, and had significant expenses associated with their settlement. This included new expenses that came to be typical, such as: utility bills, winter clothing and heating, cars or public transportation, rent (or if they had saved enough, new mortgages), as well as delayed expenses such as dowry and wedding costs (especially in the case of young men who had migrated and waited to get married) and costs generated by migration itself, such as remittances to support family in Sri Lanka, immigration fees to sponsor relatives, or agents fees to bring them to Canada as undocumented migrants. As several of my interlocutors reminded me (echoing a sentiment I would hear in India too), “Here, *everything* is cash” (*inge ellame kasu*).

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<sup>248</sup> For example, the director and secretary of a Hindu temple in London were detained by the LTTE for several weeks while visiting northern Sri Lanka, until they agreed to hand over control of the temple to a group aligned with the LTTE. For a discussion of this and other examples, see the Human Rights Watch report by Becker (2006a: 21-24).



The above economic pressures on newly-settled Tamils were at odds with the LTTE's increasing reliance on the diaspora to finance the war. Families and households were asked to contribute regularly, in larger and larger amounts, with the largest diasporic communities expected to yield the highest sums. In 1996, Canada—mostly Toronto, where more than 90% of the Tamil population lived—was estimated to contribute approximately CDN \$730,000 monthly, or \$8.76 million annually—to the Tigers (Davis 1996). These funds – which included money from individual families and businesses, and returns on investments -- provided the LTTE with almost 37% of its estimated income, the largest of any Tamil diasporic community in the world.

Over the next five years, Canada's Tamil population grew by 38 percent, making Tamils the fastest growing ethnic group in Canada (Hyndman 2003; Zunzer 2004); now they were expected to contribute even greater sums to the struggle. The movement kept records of the names, phone numbers, and addresses of Tamils living in Toronto, noting who had pledged and paid, and how much. It kept close tabs on entrepreneurs, and new arrivals, through public records and information from its supporters. Eventually, by the early 2000s, the movement encouraged individual contributors to authorize monthly bank deductions for amounts ranging from \$25 to \$80 per month– saving them from the hassle of being repeatedly asked, and making the process more efficient for the organization.

After the 2002 ceasefire agreement, fundraising dipped as Tamils in Toronto and elsewhere as the diaspora became less inclined to send money to the Tigers during the peace process. After the 2004 Asian tsunami, which devastated coastal regions in government and LTTE-held areas, the Tamils Rehabilitation Organization (TRO) – a non-profit formed to assist civilians affected by war, and with connections to the LTTE –

collected donations in the diaspora and received funding from international and UN agencies for tsunami relief and reconstruction. Some of the money was allegedly used by the LTTE to rebuild its arsenal for the coming “final” war. It may be noted that the TRO’s work in these regions was conducted with agreement from the Government of Sri Lanka; however, in September 2006, with a new president and an unofficial return to war the government froze the organization’s bank accounts, amounting to nearly \$750,000 USD. In a press release to appeal the government’s actions, the TRO noted that 40% of its funds came from diasporic contributions, with the remaining majority from international agencies (TRO 2006).

By late 2005 and early 2006, the LTTE ramped up its diaspora fundraising efforts as it prepared for a return to war. In Toronto, individual families were now reportedly asked to pay a lump sum between CDN \$2,500 and \$5,000, while business owners were asked for sums ranging from CDN \$25,000 to \$100,000, and one Hindu temple reported being asked for CDN \$1 million (Becker 2006a: 25).<sup>249</sup> These large sums were difficult for most people. Those who said they were unable to pay were told to borrow the money, use a credit card, or in a few instances, re-mortgage their homes (Becker 2006a: 32). LTTE representatives would ask for these contributions outright, variously identifying themselves as with the movement (*iyakkam*) – which could mean the LTTE or the WTM – or would explicitly identify themselves with one of the two aforementioned organizations.

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<sup>249</sup> This information was collected by Human Rights Watch in interviews with Tamils in London and Toronto. Becker’s report for HRW was the subject of great controversy among diaspora activists. Community activists adamantly denied the report’s claims at a “community launch” event held in Scarborough, and in the local and national media. Dissenting activists largely affirmed the report’s contents as being accurate.

When visiting homes, LTTE representatives returned repeatedly, or stayed for an hour or two during their visit, until they received a pledge or a check. Many Tamils—those who did not want to donate, and/or could not afford to do so—did their best to avoid answering the door. Tamils who refused to donate were subject to repeated visits, subtle harassment, and sometimes explicitly threatened – usually with unnamed consequences to their family in Toronto, or parents and siblings in Sri Lanka.<sup>250</sup>

### *Political support*

*Political structure for fundraising.* Fundraising was a critical part of the LTTE's political structure in the diaspora, as the migration of Tamils and their greater foreign exchange became a crucial revenue source for the growing militant organization in Sri Lanka. The organizational forms and leadership positions created by the LTTE's increasing reliance on and leveraging of fundraising abroad crucially shaped the political dynamics of diaspora engagement. It led to diaspora-based positions in the LTTE's political hierarchy, with the establishment of a new "wing" of Overseas Affairs. The organization created a list of Top-Level Contributing Countries, and selected country co-ordinators (*poruppālar*) in each designated country of the Tamil diaspora to coordinate the activities of their collectors, oversee their fundraising objectives and ensure they were met. These activities were coordinated globally through the World Tamil Coordinating Committee, and in Canada, through the World Tamil Movement (*ulaka thamilar iyakkam*). These *poruppaalar* were selected by the LTTE leadership. Similarly, the goals set were reportedly directives from the organization's highest leadership. In a letter signed by the

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<sup>250</sup> Becker (2006a) provides examples of such threats. During my fieldwork, I heard several stories regarding fundraising, but lack the space to delve into them here.

iconic LTTE leader, Prabhakaran, Canada alone was made responsible for \$3 million dollars (National Post 2008).

*Propaganda.* Further, the sites in which LTTE fundraising operations were the most extensive and labored also became critical to its international propaganda. Throughout the late 1990s, its “sophisticated publicity machine” and transnational network was widely acknowledged, and just as often, described as a problem for the Sri Lankan government.<sup>251</sup> What I suggest here is that representations of this network—and not just the financial transactions through which it was manifest—posed a threat. The migration of Tamils from Sri Lanka itself was treated as the source of this threat.

*Media.* A number of country-wide umbrella organizations coordinated the activities of sympathetic groups and media outlets to create a Tamil public sphere and ‘manufacture consent’ among its diasporas. The WTM sold its own newspaper, *Ulaga Thamilar* (Tamils of the World) in local Tamil shops and businesses, while Toronto Tamil newspapers such as *Eelamurasu* and *Muzhakkam*, and the English-language *Tamil Mirror*, were known to write with an LTTE nationalist slant. In addition to print media, however, broadcast television, radio and digital media were important venues for the Tigers and their supporters. As discussed above, community television stations such as TVI and Tamil One aired programs ranging from dramatic Tamil serials produced in Madras to Toronto-based call-in shows. In addition, local channels showed or covered WTM-organized events, and nationalist activists had multiple venues to share and discuss their views. Moreover, *iyakkam* videos and documentaries were sometimes played during the late night hours. Throughout my fieldwork, TVI and less commonly, Tamil One, were

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<sup>251</sup> See, for example, The Island, “To Catch a Tiger.”

frequently on in people's homes. Several activists hosted their own shows, whether on TVI or on one of the Tamil radio stations.

### *Cultural and social life*

Fundraising for the LTTE was accompanied by everyday social practices and cultural activities (dance, drama, video and film screenings, etc) that secured the LTTE's hegemony in diasporic communities. When the LTTE was powerful in the north and east of Sri Lanka, and held control of Jaffna between 1990 and 1995, they consolidated their social domination and hegemony throughout the diaspora.

The organization took control of temples to support its fundraising goals and influence community life by holding nationalist events. Several dissenting activists spoke to me of how they took over local temples.<sup>252</sup> The most prominent of these temples was the Canada Kandasamy Kovil in the middle of Scarborough. Other temples built and frequented by Sri Lankan Tamils included: Sri Durka Hindu Temple, Sri Varasiththi Vinayagar, Periya Sivan Kovil, and even an Ayyapan temple in Markham.<sup>253</sup>

The WTM was the heart of the LTTE's cultural activities; at the same time, it was an important community organization to many Tamils. The WTM created Tamil-language curricula for classes they implemented through Tamil schools. Their arts & culture groups produced "cultural shows" and dramas (*nādagam*) for Tamil-speaking audiences. Through their cultural shows, Tamil youth had opportunities to perform music and dance *bharata natyam*, the latter being a South Indian classical dance that many

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<sup>252</sup> Becker (2006a) also documents this phenomenon in Toronto and London.

<sup>253</sup> My fieldwork documented 18 temples built by and for Tamils from Sri Lanka in the Greater Toronto Area. The inclusion of a list of frequented temples here does not necessarily mean that these specific temples were owned by the LTTE or its supporters.

parents were encouraging their daughters to learn, to hold onto their Tamil “cultural roots.”<sup>254</sup> These art forms were newly claimed in a diasporic setting, as few of these Tamil parents—especially Jaffna Tamils—would have studied Carnatic music or danced *bharata natyam* in Sri Lanka.

One such event was *Nādaga Kōpuram*, a cultural show organized by the WTM’s Central Toronto Arts and Culture Group. Since Tamil community groups did not have a large theatre of their own, the show was performed at a local Armenian community center.<sup>255</sup> WTM activists and their children wrote and staged plays that would resonate with a diasporic audience. In one play, set in Jaffna, a mother and her brother (the girl’s *māmā*) try to arrange a marriage for their daughter to a man in Canada. She does not wish to, telling her mother and uncle that it is not the time to get married to someone outside. She wants to live an independent life. “This is wartime (*pōrkālam*), this is a new age (*puthukālam*).” When she meets her intended groom, she asks him,

It has been fifteen years since you went to Canada. Do you know what happens in this country?

She continues,

This is not the old society... There will be an end to this war. Then your people abroad will come back. But there will be a war between your outside culture, and our culture.”

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<sup>254</sup> I discuss the use of these cultural forms in greater detail in the sections below.

For a discussion of *bharata natyam* in LTTE performances, see David (2012). The cultural revival of *bharata natyam* is not limited to the post-’83 diaspora, and middle-to-upper class Jaffna Tamils or “Ceylonese” in Malaysia turned to these forms too. For a history and ethnography of *bharata natyam* as a gendered practice of ethnic identity in Colombo, Sri Lanka, see Satkunaratnam (2009).

<sup>255</sup> Tamil community activists hoped to establish a center like this for Tamils. Activists spoke of a community center as a resource as well as a benchmark of their community’s success in multicultural Canada.

This drama presented irreconcilable differences between a diaspora long-settled outside Jaffna and the culture of those who remain and fight for a future Eelam. It implies that the diaspora must stay connected to a homeland in order to maintain a cultural connection and be able to return one day.

Other plays and dances reinforced the diaspora's desire to connect and identify with Tamil Eelam by dramatizing past and present battles and wartime atrocities. One play depicted battles during the early years of war, showing Sinhala-speaking soldiers (played by diaspora Tamils) beating and throwing around Tamil civilians. In the next scene, old and young people together proclaim that "India will bring our freedom!" The Sinhala soldiers are replaced by two turban-wearing soldiers, who dance bhangra across the stage. "People, we have come to give you your freedom!" The celebratory scene gives way to violence, as the soldiers slash and kill civilians. The survivors cry and throw their hands up to the sky. This theme is repeated in a subsequent scene, when one actor enters as Prime Minister Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, accompanied by a soldier, and once again, promises the people their freedom. As the scene gives way to more violence, the message to the audience is clear: These promises have failed the Tamil people. "We will all fight!" one man proclaims, and together, they break their chains, led in their struggle by a woman in an energetic bharatanatyam dance. Dramatic plays such as this one are heavily critical of the role India played in the Sri Lankan war, and often depict a history of failed agreements and brutal violence in representing the Sinhala state—a history that culminates in the Tamil people being led by the LTTE in struggle. The audience witnesses a transformation, as the passive civilian-victims become active, warrior-heroes.

In addition to plays such as the ones described above, the Arts and Culture Group screened documentary-style videos. One such screening of a film called *The Road to Liberation* narrated a history of the Tamil diaspora to the audience. Beginning with definitions of the words “diaspora” and “genocide,” the film showed the audience images of maimed bodies and video footage of the 1995 Exodus from Jaffna, before narrating a history that spanned Indus civilization—claimed by the filmmakers as the ancestors of the Tamil people—and a map of Lemuria, the long-lost continent claimed by Dravidian nationalists<sup>256</sup>, to nineteenth century labor diasporas in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, through to the present-day. The film concludes with the following words and a montage:

Today, more than fifty million Tamils live in many different lands across the distant seas.

There is no state without a Tamil, but there is no state for the Tamils.

*(montage of images of Prabhakaran and protests)* They are the people who are willing to do anything for their people. Eelam is getting ready for liberation.

This pro-LTTE documentary narrates a series of heterogenous migrations, dispersions and settlements, and presents them as part of the history of a unified “Tamil” diaspora. With the above title cards, and images of protests at the end of the Sri Lankan war, and the LTTE leader, the film presents a familiar refrain among Tamil nationalists—that Tamils who live in many states around the world do not have a state of their own—to justify the LTTE’s war for national liberation and a separate state. Taken together, the film, along with the plays, songs, dances and other videos presented at the WTM’s cultural shows make an affective appeal to its diasporic audience to support the LTTE

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<sup>256</sup> For a scholarly study of Tamil nationalists’ claims to this lost continent, also known as *kumari kandam*, see Ramaswamy (2006).



cause *as a diasporic nation in need of a state*. In so doing they inculcate the notion that supporting the Tigers provides an effective defense to counter state violence against the long-suffering Tamils, and encourage diaspora Tamils to identify the Tamils' political struggle with the LTTE.

When LTTE leaders were killed, whether in battle or during government air strikes, the WTM organized memorials to them, often in the same venues as their cultural shows. In May 2008, when the LTTE's frontline commander, senior strategist and second in command, Brigadier Balraj, died of a heart attack at Puthukudiyiruppu in the Mullaithivu district, the LTTE declared a three day period of national mourning on May 21-23. In Canada, the WTM followed suit, and organized memorials for Balraj at a church in downtown Toronto and at one school and two Tamil-owned banquet halls throughout the city. The event began with an introduction, and the raising of the Canadian flag to Canada's national anthem, followed by the Tamil Eelam flag and anthem, and one minute of silence. A larger-than-life garlanded portrait of Balraj, in three-quarter profile, faced a long line of solemn mourners. A song for Balraj played while families streamed by to pay their respects by pausing and bowing their heads, raising their hands to their heads in prayer, and leaving a carnation or lighting a tealight at the shrine. Thousands of Tamils attended these events, which were also broadcast on Tamil Vision.

Every year, the WTM also organized the largest event in Toronto's Tamil community: *Maaveerar Naal*, or Great Heroes Day, to commemorate all of the LTTE fighters who were killed in the national liberation struggle. The LTTE declared November 27, the day Lt. Shankar became the first Tiger who died in combat. In the late

1990s and early 2000s, Maaveerar Naal drew upwards of 7,000 to 10,000 Toronto-area Tamils to a memorial service held in large event spaces like the Coliseum of the Canadian National Exhibition.<sup>257</sup> In this space, organizers displayed the pictures of nearly 2,000 fighters who were killed in battle. Many of the attendees were relatives of one or more dead fighters. One elderly woman who was active in the community, spoke to me of her daughter, who ran away to join the LTTE while her family was preparing to move to Toronto in the mid-1990s. She did not hear from her daughter again; she died in battle for Elephant Pass. An ardent supporter of the LTTE struggle, this woman writer attended the Heroes Day memorial every year, in spite of her ailing health. For *maaveerar* families like hers, the memorial provided a space for her to mourn and remember her daughter's life and sacrifice. Tamil activists and other supporters of the cause also attended and paused to remember others who were killed during the war.

Smaller events were organized throughout the week to commemorate the LTTE's dead in venues throughout the city. Tamil Students' Associations, in particular, held their own Maaveerar Naal ceremonies, as did TYO-Canada.

As CSIS and the Toronto police brought greater scrutiny to bear on LTTE events in Toronto, however, Maaveerar Naal moved from the city centre to venues in the suburbs, and at times, did not attract as large a crowd. By the mid-2000s, Tamil participants worried about the Canadian state's surveillance of the event, and feared they would be accused of supporting terrorism. As the war returned to northern Sri Lanka, however, Tamils attended the event in larger numbers. The nature of the event changed. No LTTE flags were visible at these events. Instead of portraits of each fighter, the

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<sup>257</sup> For one report of this event, see McAndrew (1998).

memorial focused on one symbol. There was no time to linger before the photo of a deceased loved one, or leave something behind. After quickly visiting the display, attendees were directed into a hall to watch pro-LTTE performances of dance, music and drama, and listen to speeches. In 2009, one activist told me of how the police watched and photographed the line of attendees that snaked around the building. The LTTE videotaped the event for its own records, and that year, the young activist's friend even offered to share the videotape, to get the police to stop filming and photographic the attendees as they waited. The tactic apparently worked.<sup>258</sup>

Social service provision was another important way in which the LTTE established hegemony among Toronto Tamils. Early efforts to provide basic services—like shelter and food—to Tamil newcomers during the mid-1980s were increasingly appropriated and then controlled by LTTE supporters abroad.<sup>259</sup> One activist described this as being especially prominent during efforts to assist Tamil refugees who had arrived on a boat off the coast of Newfoundland in August 1986.<sup>260</sup> Eventually, only those who supported—or, at least assented to—the Tigers were able to access municipal, provincial and federal funds to provide much-needed social services to new Tamil refugees and immigrants. The Tamil Eelam Society of Canada became foremost among organizations that provided settlement assistance to these “newcomers” to Canada. These important services were usually provided in Tamil, and included job training and employment searches, credential assessment, computer literacy and information technology training,

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<sup>258</sup> I do not know whether the videotape was later shared with the Toronto police, RCMP or CSIS.

<sup>259</sup> This took place at a time when the LTTE fought rival militant groups for control over northern Sri Lanka, as discussed in Chapter 1.

<sup>260</sup> Those seeking asylum were mostly men who had claimed to travel directly from Sri Lanka. It was later learned that the boat had left Germany, but in contrast to recent discourses around refugee arrivals, they were welcomed.

and English-language classes. Eventually, they were able to add youth and women's groups, to address specific needs among Tamil newcomers.

Political support for the Tigers was thus intertwined with cultural and social life, as supporters participated in the everyday lives of Tamil refugees and immigrants, and cultivated friendships and a sense of community among them, while alienating and excluding dissenters. In this way, Tamil migrants from Sri Lanka were reintroduced to the politics of the LTTE by its supporters in a diasporic context, through practices of social service provision and cultural heritage management in the multicultural governmental state. The Tigers, as known through diasporic supporters, were not only distant figures fighting a war that Toronto's Tamils had left behind. They actively participated in the creation of that community in Canada, helping Tamils settle into their new country and reminding them of their duty to help their relatives back home.<sup>261</sup>

### **The ban on the LTTE**

On April 8, 2006, the Government of Canada proscribed the LTTE, under the *Criminal Code of Canada*, as amended by *The Anti-Terrorism Act, S.C.2001, c. 41*.<sup>262</sup> Also known as Bill C-36, Canada's anti-terrorism act was ushered in the wake of the September 11 al-Qaeda attacks in the United States, and contained measures similar to

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<sup>261</sup> This does not mean that all Tamil community formations in Toronto were the direct result of Tiger politics.

<sup>262</sup> In addition to the Criminal Code of Canada, the Anti-Terrorism Act amended several other acts, including Official Secrets Act, the Canada Evidence Act, the Proceeds of Crime (Money Laundering) Act, and enacted the Registration of Charities (Security Information) Act. The listing of the LTTE occurred on April 8, 2006; it was subsequently reviewed and extended on December 22, 2010, eighteen months after the end of war, and again on November 20, 2012. A federal website listing proscribed organizations includes the following lines at the end of a revised paragraph about the LTTE: "The LTTE has also had an extensive network of fundraisers, political and propaganda officers, and arms procurers operating in Sri Lanka and within the Tamil diaspora. Although the LTTE was militarily defeated in May 2009, subversion, destabilization, and fundraising continue, particularly in the diaspora" (Public Safety Canada 2011).

the latter government's Patriot Act. Canada's Act expanded the federal government's powers of surveillance and security to act against perceived terrorist threats, including provisions for preemptive detentions, non-disclosure of evidence, and secret trials. With this, the federal government created a list of entities deemed to be a threat to Canadian security. The proscription of the LTTE allowed the government to prosecute individuals who mobilized financial support to the organization. Anyone who knowingly provided financial support to the LTTE could be jailed for up to 10 years, while those who fundraised or "facilitated" the work of the LTTE faced up to 14 years in prison. At the press conference, the Minister urged Tamils in Canada to call a newly-established, dedicated "hotline" to report LTTE activists to the state (Toronto Star 2008).

Though presented as legislation that "protects the safety, security and fundamental rights of Canadians," critics pointed to the bill's incompatibility with the civil and political rights enshrined in the country's Charter of Rights and Freedoms (particularly, with respect to positive freedoms of assembly, association and expression).

Canada decided to proscribe the LTTE following a long international campaign by the Sri Lankan government. Sri Lanka had first banned the organization in 1978. That ban was removed during the peace process to allow negotiations to move forward; even so, Sri Lanka's then Foreign Minister, Lakshman Kadirgamar, continued to argue for a ban against the organization in several countries, until his assassination, allegedly by the LTTE, in 2005. Kadirgamar focused on Western countries with large diasporic populations.

Outside Sri Lanka, the organization was first proscribed in India, in 1992, after the assassination of the country's Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi the previous year. The United States listed the LTTE as a terrorist organization in 1997, followed by the UK and Australia, among others. While Canada's security agencies considered the group to be a terrorist organization, the federal government was reluctant to impose a total ban. Instead, in November 2001, Canada's Liberals added the LTTE to a list of 83 groups and individuals whose property could be frozen and reported to Canadian authorities. This was the "ban" against which Tamils protested at Pongu Thamil in Ottawa in 2002. This time, the 2006 proscription entailed a complete ban on the LTTE, and was among the first actions taken when Stephen Harper's Conservatives formed a minority government in the next election on a neoliberal, pro-business and anti-terrorism national security platform.<sup>263</sup> Shortly after Canada proscribed the Tigers—and, unlike in 2001, promised judicial action against those who provided them with financial support—the EU followed suit.

*Responses to the ban: Community activists*

The proscription of the LTTE upset Tamil community activists. Many had been wary of the Anti-Terrorism Act, but few mobilized against its enactment until the 2006 election of the Conservative government. The latter had publicized its plans to proscribe the LTTE at a time when the Sri Lankan government and the Tigers were returning to war. In response, pro-LTTE activists threatened court action to fight the designation. They argued that the LTTE's activities were limited to a war with the Sri Lankan state,

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<sup>263</sup> The Conservative party campaigned on the issue in the federal elections, which were forced through by a parliamentary crisis in the wake of a corruption scandal. The Conservatives accused incumbent Liberals of being soft on terrorism, and promised stringent action, including a ban on the LTTE.

and posed no threat to Canadian security, as implied by the listing. Further, they argued that the ban infringed upon the rights of Tamils as Canadian citizens to political expression. Supporters of the LTTE argued that many Tamils in Canada voluntarily donated to demonstrate their political support for the LTTE; only “criminal” elements who misused the organization’s name could be responsible for alleged cases of extortion, (if such cases did exist) and could be punished under existing Canadian criminal law. These activists argued that it was within their democratic right to demonstrate support for the LTTE, whether by holding a sign at a rally, or donating money to the Tigers.

One prominent community activist who was often invited to speak at Tamil events made this argument at a public meeting about Sri Lankan politics since July 1983. The event was organized by a Tamil leftist who was trying to make links to community activists. The audience was predominantly Tamil, but included a smattering of people who were not of Sri Lankan origin. Everyone spoke in English. Nantha had no problem declaring his support for the LTTE, but carefully stated that his support for the organization did not make him a Tiger. In making this statement, Nantha not only declared his support, he actively demonstrated it—he exercised the liberal democratic right to free expression about which he spoke. Declaring one’s support was a disarmingly simple performative act that required less interpretive work than other signs of political support within the community. A public declaration of support did not require “inside” knowledge or context to determine whether one was in support (*aatharavu*), or opposition (*ethirppu*). Nantha’s statement of support was a verbal challenge to the Canadian government’s proscription of the LTTE, which had now become the condition

of possibility for new forms of political speech. On the other hand, N's statement that he was not a Tiger did not automatically make it so.

Accordingly, given the political climate in which the ban was enacted, very few Tamil activists took such a stand in front of a wider Canadian public. Those who supported the LTTE's struggle for Tamil Eelam in fact avoided mentioning the Tigers in statements that voiced their concerns about their "rights and freedoms" as Canadians. Instead, they focused on the ban's effects on "the community." With the announcement of the ban, they perceived and presented themselves as a Tamil community under attack. Activists from the Canadian Tamil Congress and other organizations argued that the Canadian media contributed to the problem by focusing on the LTTE to the exclusion of all other stories about the community, resulting in an unfairly negative portrayal of Tamil life in Canada.<sup>264</sup> The CTC's media relations responded to newspaper editorials, and organized media advocacy workshops for youth. At one such workshop in 2008, I joined a small group of young Tamil women in their late teens and early twenties in a training on how to identify and strategically respond to bias in media coverage of the Tamil Canadian community. We were encouraged to become resources to journalists, and develop a lasting relationship with them to encourage them to write more "balanced" stories. CTC activists also countered negative media images by constructing their own positive representations to construct a narrative of Canadian Tamils as immigrants who survived violence and oppression in Sri Lanka to create new lives as a successful

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<sup>264</sup> This was a frequent complaint among community activists, particularly during the late 1990s, and was itself the subject of at least one story in *The Toronto Star*, "Tamils frustrated by image of violence." For a discussion of media representations of gang violence in report on Toronto Tamil youth produced for CanTYD, see Balasingham et al, (2000).



community that makes significant social, cultural and economic contributions to Canadian society.<sup>265</sup>

*Responses to the ban: Dissenting activists*

From the perspective of some dissenting activists, however, the 2006 ban on the LTTE was a response to violence organized and inflicted by those who claimed to represent Tamils as a community in Canada. As described above, local agents were tasked with gathering contributions from Tamil families in Canada. While activists who supported the Tigers asserted that these contributions were “voluntary” or “freely given,” dissenters characterized these economic relationships as “extractive,” “coercive,” and “extortionist.”<sup>266</sup> Collectors were said to carry lists of Tamil households, drawn from public events, community organizations, home village associations, phone book listings, and even—as some claimed—electoral lists drawn from the offices of local officials (Becker 2006; La 2004; Toronto Star 2008). These lists, compiled and maintained by overseas activists, were shared with the leadership back home. During the ceasefire, the Tigers, like the Sri Lankan army, established “checkpoints” in the areas under their control; for example, outside Vavuniya town, on the road toward Omanthai in northern Sri Lanka, visiting diaspora Tamils were stopped, scrutinized and asked to register their passports (Becker 2004). The Tigers were aware of the transnational social ties maintained by Tamils living abroad. Those who did not wish to give could be threatened with harm to their relatives in Sri Lanka. Just as often, however, the threat did not have to

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<sup>265</sup> In Chapter 5, I discuss a CTC-produced exhibit on Tamils who migrated to Canada after Black July. The exhibit aimed, in part, to familiarize other Canadians with the Tamil community in Canada by presenting narratives of Tamil migration as a result of Sri Lankan state violence.

<sup>266</sup> To be sure, most Tamils understood that fundraising involved both sets of relationships, and was oftentimes more complex than “freely given” donations or “extortion.”

be made explicitly—it was enough for a collector in Toronto to inquire about a family member.<sup>267</sup> Tamils, after decades of political violence, internecine fighting, and war, had become deft interpreters of the unsaid.

However, alternative and dissenting activists were divided over the ban. On the one hand, these activists hoped the new law would cut the LTTE off from resources used to fight the war. Some also felt the ban would open up more political space for dissent by placing limits on intimidation within the community. Activists like Jeevani’s friend, NP, made public their criticisms of the LTTE in Canadian national media outlets and published in Tamil. On the other hand, some said they felt no safer in voicing dissent and shied away from public confrontations; they felt the police cared less about ensuring their personal safety than appearing to put an end to LTTE fundraising. In general, dissenting activists tended to articulate advantages to the ban, while alternative Tamil groups had more reservations.

A few dissenters shared with community activists concerns about racial profiling in the name of Canada’s national security. Middle-aged and older male activists cited their own experiences in Sri Lanka, under the country’s 1979 Prevention of Terrorism Act, which gave rise to detentions, arrests, and torture. They left Sri Lanka because they were misrecognized as being militants—i.e. Tigers—and were consequently deemed “terrorists” who could be arrested and tortured; if not, they anticipated this misrecognition and were encouraged to migrate to safety.<sup>268</sup> The ban, they argued, would

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<sup>267</sup> For example, one woman described being asked about her sister, followed by the statement, “We hope no misfortune will come her way.”

<sup>268</sup> While I spoke with more than one activist who had been or was involved with the LTTE politically, these activists drew a distinction between those who engaged in politics, and those who carried arms and engaged in military actions.

not reduce violent intimidation within the Tamil community; it would, in fact, create new possibilities for violation under the guise of law and order by giving Toronto police officers a reason to stop and search Tamils on grounds of “suspicion” for links to terrorism.<sup>269</sup> Several of these stories involved street policing, wherein officers tried to discern signs of “political support” for the LTTE among young Tamil men.

Community activists shared stories about their own and others’ experiences with local police to illustrate this point. They told me of a young man who was searched for having a stuffed Tiger visible in the rear window his car, and others who were perceived to be gang members, recalling the moral panic around Tamil gangs rumored to be run by the LTTE in 1990s Toronto. The irony was that even activists who publicly criticized the LTTE and faced community censure for it could be (mis)recognized and identified as potential Tigers by the police during these stop and searches. Two sisters who were part of a group of mostly Tamil, Sri Lankan-origin feminists told me about the ban’s effect on their family and their political organizing during a longer conversation at their home about Sri Lanka and diaspora politics.

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These activists and others were not sure how to interpret the ATA’s use of the word “facilitated” with reference to a listed terrorist organization. What it meant to “support” a group or to “facilitate” its work was an open question, not only in Canada and the United States, but Sri Lanka as well, and had a serious bearing on refugee determination cases.

<sup>269</sup> Toronto’s police force is predominantly White, but has recruited heavily in immigrant communities over the last decade to facilitate such operations. This kind of recruitment by police and security agencies contributed to mistrust among Tamil activists and Tamils in general, as I discuss later in this chapter. During protests in 2009, I encountered one Tamil police officer who also acted as a translator and interpreter in community-police interactions.

*Tamil women's activism: Between community and dissent*

Subasini and Tanuja are young feminist activists, writers and performers who were involved with local and transnational Tamil literary-political circles<sup>270</sup> that were critical of the LTTE; their father had been involved in EROS's political party, the Eelavar Democratic Front, before leaving Sri Lanka after being tortured by the SLA. While their grandparents were from Jaffna, their parents were raised in the Vanni, where they were born and raised before being displaced to Colombo. They felt distanced from Jaffna-centric community events and organizations. Still, the sisters were interested in understanding what other diaspora Tamils felt toward the Tigers, and felt that dissenting activists' public criticisms of the LTTE—namely, the group's human rights violations, militarism, and lack of democracy—were alienated from Toronto's Tamil community. They shared many of the dissenters' concerns, but wanted to do grassroots work to support civilians in the war zones.

As we discussed their work with a network of women activists, and their take on Sri Lankan Tamil and diaspora politics, the issue of the ban came up. They explained to me how the ban affected their everyday lives and experiences with racism in Toronto. The sisters told me of how their mother feared for their two brothers, who couldn't stay out in public with friends without attracting attention—and suspicion. One night, their 15-year-old brother was with some friends, sitting and talking in their car, parked in front of one of their homes. The police came and questioned the boys, and took them to a local

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<sup>270</sup> Thiruchandran (2006) includes translations of Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora women writers involved in these circles, including the annual *Penngal Santhippu* literary meeting, and discusses the social politics of their writing.

station, claiming the boys were part of a Tamil gang. It would cost the family almost one thousand dollars to get their son home.

The subject of community-based activism also drew out differences among Tamils, which led the sisters to draw a parallel between the way that all Canadian Tamils were stereotyped after the ban and how Jaffna-origin Tamils stereotyped other Tamils in Toronto. Subasini and Tanuja identified strongly with the Vanni, a region of northern Sri Lanka controlled by the Tigers and the site of its headquarters since “the fall of Jaffna” in 1995. Earlier, Tanuja had told me about how many in the diaspora attribute the LTTE’s mistakes to “Vanni *pulikal*” who were described disparagingly by some Jaffna Tamils as “uneducated” and “illiterates.” Some of these Tamils also used the phrase “Vanni people” to refer to Tiger cadres. For Tanuja, this equated Tamils who lived in the region with the those who were Tigers. Tanuja was understandably angry about these statements, her voice rising as we talked. Such remarks implicitly assumed that only those who could read, or were intellectuals, were capable of being political or politically effective. “I don’t see it that way,” she told me. “It is not because they are from the Vanni. *All* the (Tamil) people are making these mistakes.” In addition, she said of those who could not read, “They may not read. They’re not academics. But Vanni people are *people*! They know what they need.”

It’s like when the LTTE was banned in Canada. The majority—the rest of the communities [thought] that Tamil people are terrorists. You know, that brown people, Sri Lankans, are terrorists. You fight against it, you say, “How can you call us terrorists when you only call the LTTE terrorists? We’re not LTTE.” When they attack you [Jaffna Tamils], when they name you, you fight back. But you don’t take a second to name others [Vanni Tamils].

In the above, Subasini describes how other ethnic and racial groups in Canada exclude Tamils from a Canadian national community by labeling them as “terrorists.” She points out the dissonance in activism that object to this exclusion through the labeling of “Tamils” in general, only to reinscribe stereotypes and establish social hierarchies among Tamils (i.e. Jaffna vs Vanni). In so doing, she switches from her earlier use of “we” (indicating her belonging to the women’s network), to “you” when referring to a Tamil community of mostly Jaffna Tamils. Nevertheless, Subasini and Tanuja continued to be active among other Tamils. As Tanuja put it, “Even though I’m not part of them [Jaffna Tamils], even though I feel isolated from them, I want to be a part of them, because I want to talk about *my* history.” By telling their stories as “Tamils,” the sisters joined others in creating new formations of Tamil community in Toronto.

Three months after the ban, violence escalated between the government and the LTTE in August 2006 (as discussed in Chapter 2), leading to the closure of the A9 Highway, a vital link between the Jaffna Peninsula and the rest of the island. Subasini and Tanuja joined other women, including Jeevani and Leena (introduced in Chapter 1), and formed a group, the Canadian Sri Lankan Women’s Action Network, to protest the closure and violence. The women’s network organized a protest in front of the Sri Lankan embassy, asking the Government of Sri Lanka to reopen the A9. Subasini explained the group’s reasoning behind this action:

You know, you [the Government of Sri Lanka] say the Tigers are terrorists. We can’t ask them, so we’re here to ask you. We want the A9 to be open. We want the ceasefire of 2002 to be followed.

Similarly, the women’s group demanded Canada’s active involvement in the peace process, as had been promised. As Subasini put it,

And we can't even go and ask the Tigers, or LTTE, because you [the Government of Canada] have already banned them, saying they're terrorists. Why would we go ask the terrorists? We have to ask you, because you're the government. You're responsible.

Subasini's narrative uses a collective voice—a “we”—to describe how the women's group formed around protesting the A9 closure, but she also illustrates the politics of the ban in Tamil activism, including those that resist LTTE hegemony. Whether addressing the Sri Lankan government, which had initially banned the LTTE under its Prevention of Terrorism Act, or the Canadian government, which had recently banned the organization, Subasini is making a demand of them both by referencing the other party to the war, the LTTE, which they have placed outside the law. In naming the ban, the women's group's recognition of each state's sovereign power allowed them to address their claims to government officials as subjects of that power, on behalf of Tamils in Sri Lanka.

The women's group thus strategically used the ban and their gendered national and ethnic identities as “Sri Lankan women” and “Sinhala, Burgher, Muslim and Tamil women” to address the Canadian and Sri Lankan governments, and to demonstrate their concern for Tamil civilians in the North—of whom, as their literature noted, more than three-quarters were women and children. For their efforts, Jeevani explained that they were called LTTE supporters online by activists she described as “old Leftists.” These men were now connected to the EPDP, and—in the case of at least one of WAN's known detractors—hoped to influence Rajapaksa's SLFP government to provide a political solution for the Tamils alongside a military defeat of the LTTE. In contrast to the reasons Subasini gave for addressing the Sri Lankan government, these activists were upset by WAN's criticisms of the government's actions and wanted to see more criticisms of the LTTE's wrongdoing during the ceasefire.

Between the two public stances of support for the LTTE and opposition to it — *ātharavu* and *ethirppu*, or in other words, being ‘pro-LTTE’ and ‘anti-LTTE’—the ban as a legal utterance and a form of action was often murkier and less clearcut than a position for or against the Tigers. While hard-line sympathizers and their opponents held staunch positions to repeal and celebrate the ban, respectively, many Tamils and some activists did not wish to take either position. Their membership in the Tamil community was shaped by deep ambivalences. A story from Tharini, a community-based social service provider and feminist, illustrates the gendered politics of community-organizing amid rumblings of dissent during the ban.

Tharini belonged to a group of Tamil women service providers who were organizing a community event to celebrate “the strength of Tamil women” on International Women’s Day. As service providers and social activists, the group shared a common interest in issues facing Tamil women in Toronto, ranging from intimate partner violence to elderly neglect. However, a few of the group’s core members had links to other political organizations in the community. These connections led to a new sponsor for the event in 2008: The Canadian Tamil Congress.

Driving back home from a meeting with the group, Tharini was upset about the CTC’s involvement: They had put out a press release to the mainstream media, making the event appear to be theirs; in an email chain to others, they did not mention the work of the women providers group. Tharini felt that the work of women like her was being appropriated: “They like to take credit! They’re all men, but the women are doing all the work!” She explained further, noting that “the men” (i.e. the CTC) just put their name on the event, by sending PR, without consulting the women organizers. “That’s how it is in



all of these organizations—they are all connected to the Tigers, through the WTM, and this is how they work!”

Tharini suddenly stopped talking. For one quiet minute, her eyes narrowed, focusing on the road ahead. “I don’t have a problem with them (CTC) working with those organizations,” she told me. She has explained to me before that she remains independent, to be able to “work with everybody,” and indeed, she was one of the few activists I knew who continued to work this way—but sometimes the people she worked with maintained a distance from her. As we talked, she reminded me of where we first met—a CTC annual gala dinner to celebrate Thai Pongal. For the first time, they awarded funds to three community-based service organizations. Tharini believed that the CTC was doing this “because of the ban on the LTTE,” and its fallout for the WTM. “It is good that they are getting involved with community needs, but not this way.” She asserted that the CTC, the WTM, and the old students’ and home village associations, as well as the alternative and dissenting groups were all typically run by men and, in their focus on public and political life, these groups were not in touch with the “real needs” of the community.

Indeed, as Subasini and Tanuja, and Tharini’s narratives show, even some Tamils who wanted to reduce the social dominance of the Tigers in diaspora life also worried that the ban would stigmatize their communities, as the (non-Tamil) Canadian public, steeped in governmental and media discourses, learned to identify the Tamils with the Tigers. At the heart of this indistinction between the Tiger and the Tamil was, paradoxically, the Tigers’ claim to sole representation of the Tamil people in the homeland and the diaspora. Thus, even as Tamil nationalist and community activists

claimed that many Tamils supported the Tigers as their political representatives, so this claim to total representation bound them to a stigmatized identity in public.

Youth who were sometimes privately critical of such dynamics among community activists also recounted being (mis)recognized as Tigers for their community work.<sup>271</sup> Young professionals were denied jobs, while others were shut out from interviewing for financial jobs, which they speculated was due to the Tamil gangs and Tigers' links to credit card fraud. Tamils who perceived themselves as hard-working<sup>272</sup> were now viewed by such employers as untrustworthy and disloyal.

### *Thivya's calendar*

Four months into my fieldwork in Toronto, in April 2008, I had started to become friends with Jeevani, the feminist activist and recent refugee whose story I had introduced in Chapter 1. She wanted me to meet her friend Thivya. Jeevani and Thivya were friends who had lived together at Poorani Women's Centre, a shelter in Jaffna for women and girls during the war.<sup>273</sup> The centre was founded by members of the Women's Study Circle of the University of Jaffna, and run independently of the parties to war—the government,

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<sup>271</sup> See Jo Becker 2006b for a paper presented to a policy symposium which summarizes follow-up research after the Human Rights Watch report on diaspora fundraising, Canada's proscription of the LTTE, and a return to war between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE. In October 2006, Tamils reported employment-based discrimination and harassment, including instances in which employees were called "terrorists," faced demotion and dismissal. Many felt that the government had not made sufficient distinctions between the LTTE and Tamils in Canada, and should have spoken out explicitly against anti-Tamil bias.

<sup>272</sup> I note here that the self-perception of "Tamils" as hard workers also draws on common colonial stereotypes that distinguished between "industrious" and "docile" Tamil workers (not only on the plantations, but in civil service), and "lazy" but "hospitable" Sinhalese. See Daniel 1996 for a discussion of these stereotypes.

<sup>273</sup> For a short history of Poorani as a space of women's resistance to militarism, see Rajasingham-Perera (2007); see also Sornarajah (2004) for an article in *Lines* written by the activist Nirmala Rajasingham under a *nom de plume*, and Coomaraswamy and Rajasingham-Perera (2009).

the LTTE, other armed Tamil groups, and at that time, the IPKF.<sup>274</sup> At Poorani, activists highlighted and addressed women's suffering by attending to the intersections between political violence and domestic and sexual violence against women. Moreover, as a feminist space, Poorani encouraged and allowed Tamil women to question and challenge the gender order of Jaffna society and the gendered, culturalist norms and militarized politics of the LTTE and Sri Lankan Army.<sup>275</sup> As the war continued, however, Poorani women were harassed by these armies, and eventually driven out by the LTTE, which had taken over what was left of the Centre in 1991.<sup>276</sup>

Thivya lived in a public housing project in Regent Park, a low-income immigrant neighborhood in downtown Toronto. As dark descended on Toronto, Jeevani and I tried to navigate the alleys of the housing project to find the right entrance, only to find ourselves a little lost. We were warned the apartment would be difficult to find. We called Thivya, and her son bounded out of one exit; inside, he led us through fluorescent-lit hallways to their home.

Thivya has lived in this apartment for fourteen years—since 1994, when she migrated to Canada to join her husband after their marriage. She was in her mid-twenties then. He works in a Tamil-owned factory, and earns some extra income through piecework sewing, while taking care of their home and three children. Pink paint peels

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<sup>274</sup> The Women's Study Circle was a group of feminist activists and lecturers who met regularly to discuss women's issues.

<sup>275</sup> See Maunaguru (1995), Thiruchandran (1997), de Mel (2001), and Sivamohan (2001).

<sup>276</sup> The centre continued for a few years as a shelter for wounded LTTE combatants, under the LTTE-run development organization, TRO, and was later abandoned. According to one person, during this time, some of the women who had been sheltered at Poorani after surviving rape by the SLA or IPKF later joined the Black Tigers, an elite group of cadre recruited for suicide-bombing missions. See Neloufer de Mel (1998, 2001) and Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake (2001b) for discussion of the ideological framing of rape survivors that underpinned this recruitment.

from the walls, on which the youngest child has scribbled with pencil and crayon. Thivya and her husband hope to buy their own home soon—like many working-class Tamils, they aspire to join the ranks of the sixty percent of Canada’s Tamil community who are homeowners. We sat and chatted amiably for a while before getting down to the main reason for our visit: Thivya had arranged for us to speak with two fundraisers for the *iyakkam*—a married couple who live in the same complex, and are also Tamil-language teachers.

Thivya had told the teachers that I wanted to interview them for research; she called them to confirm that we could visit. A woman in her early 40s with a soft, rounded face answered, smiling as she showed us in. The apartment was similar to Thivya’s, but slightly more furnished, and with a bigger television blaring Tamil Vision news. The woman, Kanthi, asked her husband, Vignesh, to put the television on mute. Vignesh continued to sit on the sofa, scowling at the disruption, while we sat at a table behind him. Next to this table was a chalkboard easel, on which several letters and simple words were written in Tamil: *A – Amma; Aa – Aanil.*<sup>277</sup> Their young daughter played nearby.

I was about to explain the purpose of my research, when V stood up, and the interview began – with an accusation, and an interview of me. The husband, his lips slightly curled, expressed doubts about the purpose of our conversation and asked, “Why should we speak to you? You could be a spy, you know this CSIS, they are targeting our people, and they always get Tamils to do their work for them.” As he said this, his gaze shifted, from me to Jeevani and back. I explained that I hoped that my research would, in

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<sup>277</sup> These words, meaning “mother” and “squirrel” respectively, are commonly used to teach basic words in Tamil language primers for children in Sri Lanka.

the long-run, be of some benefit to the community, by giving Tamils an opportunity to reflect on their own community, and allowing others to better understand their lives and aspirations. The interview continued, with most of the answers from Kanthi, but I was nervous after such a rocky start.

With this interview, as in others, I had anticipated being careful, as always, to follow the social cues of my interlocutors and avoid subjects that I sensed would derail our discussion. I did not expect, however, after going through a mutual acquaintance, to be accused of being a spy. Our conversation revealed the level of mistrust among Tamils—not only the mistrust felt toward and expressed to me and Jeevani, as friends of a neighbor friend—but which we also felt toward the couple, and Vignesh in particular.

When we returned from speaking with the Tamil teachers, Jeevani and Thivya began to reminisce about their days together at Poorani. They remembered their peers, and the boldness of their actions—Jeevani recalls wearing shorts and cropped hair, and doing physical labor—and how scared they were at other times. Other members of the women’s group were living in Toronto, and they remained in touch – but it wasn’t always an easygoing relationship.

As we sat on the couch, Jeevani noticed something we had not seen before: A daily tear-away calendar for 2008. A large image dwarfs the square calendar: It is Velupillai Prabhakaran, leader of the Tigers, dressed in military fatigues. In the photo, he stands with the upright bearing of a soldier, but his face sports chubby cheeks and a friendly smile. The calendar was “sold,” or given in exchange for a one-time donation of \$40. In spite of the proscription of the LTTE, these calendars, as well as flags, posters,

and other paraphernalia continued to be sold by fundraisers for the World Tamil Movement.

As she caught sight of the calendar, Jeevani's eyes grew wider, and she gasped. "Why did you buy that?" she says, pointing to where our gazes have turned. She was more animated than I have seen in months—no longer subdued with fear, as she was while we spoke to the fundraisers/teachers. After leaving their home, we admitted our fear to one another, and continued to speak in whispers on the way back to Thivya's. Now, upon seeing the calendar, Jeevani could hardly contain the frustration and anger about the war that she carries with her, but rarely lets out. To Thivya, she said,

You know what they are doing with that [money]. How could you give [money] to them to kill our children over there?

I held my breath. Thivya, who has known Jeevani on-and-off for 15 years, appeared taken aback by her directness. In Toronto, community activists denied the Tigers' use of child recruitment, and laid blame for casualties at the army's door.<sup>278</sup> Thivya, however, did not contradict Jeevani's statement. Instead, she replied,

I know, but what can I do? What is to be done? They will come and ask every time.

They, she explains, are not only the Tamil teachers from the Movement, with whom she has become a little familiar—friendly, even—but pairs of young men who remind her of the war she left behind, and the suffering and sacrifice of others just like them. When reminded of those who were willing to make the ultimate sacrifice of their lives for the nationalist struggle, diaspora Tamils like Thivya feel the guilt of having left.

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<sup>278</sup> See Human Rights Watch (2004) for discussion of child recruitment by the LTTE; see also HRW (2007b) for discussion of state collusion with the Karuna group in this.

Not once are the Tigers explicitly mentioned in the above exchange. Members of the community know who “they” are, and typically do not refer to them—indeed, sometimes cannot refer to them. For example, when S Anna wouldn’t say “LTTE” or “Tigers” when talking about how Balraj’s memorial week cancelled a planned CTBC interview about the Karumaiyam performance. After the performances, he told me that attendance was down, and he believed it was due to the polarized atmosphere—many Tamils who were on the fence felt compelled to go along with the Tigers, or at least not appear to oppose them, in the face of a Sri Lankan government offensive that was killing Tamils. In such an environment, opposing the Tigers could appear to others as being supportive of the Sri Lankan government’s actions.

LTTE fundraising was not just an accrual of material resources for the cause; donations also created and maintained social relationships between Tamils, and as such, contributed not only to the LTTE or its struggle, but to the making and unmaking of a diasporic community. Donations were, in this sense, a gift. As anthropologists have shown, following Mauss, a gift appears to be voluntary, but entails an obligation. In this case, the social obligation was to support the struggle, as defined by the LTTE. The movement encouraged young Tamils in Eelam to make the ultimate gift of their lives for the future Tamil Eelam. LTTE poetry speaks to this idea, using images of the Tamil fighter’s blood mingling with the soil and giving birth to the future nation. In such poems, *thatkolai* (“self-death,” or suicide) becomes *thatkodai* (gift of the self) (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2005; Roberts 1996). LTTE martyrs lives were a gift that could never be reciprocated by diaspora Tamils, who instead donated funds and mobilized collectively in lieu of self-sacrifice.

After the ban, however, the social obligations that marked an apparently “free” gift were reconfigured for fundraising to continue. Instead of a “donation,” fundraisers “sold” items to Tamils door-to-door. What was once a “gift” exchange became an informal market transaction, as the donor had to be given something immediately in exchange.

The LTTE had clearly not stopped fundraising in Toronto. The Movement had sold calendars and other items before, but such activities became more central, as they could no longer rely on donations through pre-authorized bank deductions, or sell items at WTM-organized public events and Tamil stores. Large sums of money would appear suspect to Canadian authorities, who were monitoring WTM-affiliated activists. As a dissenting activist and colleague of Jeevani’s said, “Maybe they don’t ask for money at the doorstep, but they sell the calendars instead.” This man was known among Toronto Tamil activists for publicly critiquing the movement; nevertheless, fundraisers visited his doorstep too. In their understanding, anyone who could be identified as a Tamil was obligated to give. The gift was made under the guise of a commodity, a reification of the LTTE and its leader’s power.

Thivya’s calendar sits on a wall in front of the doorway. It greets—along with whoever answers the door—every person at the threshold to her home. When another round of fundraisers comes by, they too will see the Leader smiling down from her wall; when they ask for her contribution, she will direct their attention to the wall behind her. Turning her body away from the questioning canvasser and toward the calendar, she shows that she has already done her part for the cause. This year. With three children to feed on one wage, and her piecework, it is all that she can really do.





Figure 4.1: WTM calendar in a Tamil home in suburban Toronto, August 2009  
(Photograph by author.)

Each day, one page is torn off, and with it, a fact about LTTE history, a red or blue monochrome image of an important political event or cadre associated with battlefield glory. In the LTTE calendar, time begins and ends with the movement. What remains constant throughout is the figure of Prabhakaran, who appears above the

calendar, everyday, smiling beatifically from the household's wall. Prabhakaran thus seems to transcend time itself. Every year, his image is replaced—or, renewed—with another calendar, and another image of himself. His image appears on the wall across from the shrines of Hindu worshippers, facing Murugan, Lakshmi and Saraswati, and in Christian homes, next to images of Jesus and the crucifixion. Prabhakaran's photo even graces the walls of atheist Tamil Rationalists who inveigh against the religious fervor of their fellow Tamils in favor of a "pure Tamil" culture. As we view the image, each day, the image also views us. It solicits us to think of the struggle (led by the LTTE) and to contribute in some way to that which we, as a diaspora, have left behind.

Questions of diaspora complicity in the ongoing war were raised again and again throughout my fieldwork, as revealed by Jeevani's reaction to Thivya's calendar, and discussions about fundraising. Given the extent to which the Tigers' network pervaded diasporic economic, social and political space: Was there any way to be a "Tamil" in Canada without contributing in some way to the LTTE and its war for a separate state? It seemed practically impossible. This point was driven home to me once by Jeevani who was strongly committed to peace and social justice, and who, like other dissenters, was critical of the Tigers for creating suffering among the Tamils. Jeevani made great sacrifices to stand by her beliefs. However, the weight of exile—from Sri Lanka, from other Tamils and a sense of community—bore heavily on her at times. When we met for lunch in Scarborough one day, Jeevani took me to a well-known restaurant off Kennedy Rd. Our first meal together was at her home, and we had later eaten at other friends' houses, but this time, she wanted to eat lamprais—a Sri Lankan meal in which rice, various vegetable and meat curries and a boiled egg, are wrapped together in a banana

leaf parcel and steamed together. On the way, she lamented the restaurant's connections to the movement—the restaurant was one of several Jaffna-style, Sri Lankan restaurants and Tamil-owned franchises.<sup>279</sup> It was said to have received LTTE investment funds. She named a few other places we could go, but they were no less complicit. Jeevani paused before opening the door. Then she said, “We should go anyway. It is a taste of home.”

### *The WTM listing*

On June 16, 2008, Canada's federal Public Safety Minister, Stockwell Day, held an outdoor press conference in downtown Toronto, where he made an unprecedented public announcement: The Canadian government had officially added the World Tamil Movement to a list of “terrorist organizations” proscribed under the Criminal Code of Canada. He claimed that the federal government had evidence that the WTM had been raising funds for the LTTE. The government's decision had been in the making for over a decade. Manickavasagam Suresh had moved from Sri Lanka to Canada in 1990 to become the head coordinator of the WTM in Canada. In the mid-1990s, staffers of the WTM were investigated for alleged money laundering for the LTTE. Suresh was arrested in 1995 on an immigration order, and deemed a “potential terrorist threat” by the Federal Court. For years, community activists organized marches and rallies demanding the WTM activist's release while he awaited deportation.<sup>280</sup> CSIS investigations of Tamil organizations in Canada continued, and by the end of the 1990s, the agency determined

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<sup>279</sup> Popular restaurants during my fieldwork included Rashnaa on Parliament St in downtown Toronto, and Hopper Hut, Babu Catering, and Elephant Pass in Scarborough. The latter was named after the iconic battleground that the LTTE captured in 2000, and promises customers “the taste of Tamil Eelam.” Many stores also sold freshly-made *idiappam* and there were dozens of small home-based businesses catering to busy families and single workers.

<sup>280</sup> For example, a crowd of 1,500 (by police estimates) attended a candlelight vigil co-sponsored by the Federation of Associations of Canadian Tamils to mark the second anniversary of the WTM activist's detention and protest his deportation. See Josey (1997) for *The Toronto Star*.

that several non-profits and commercial enterprises were fronts for the LTTE, including the WTM.<sup>281</sup> After the passing of the Anti-Terrorism Act, Canada's federal law enforcement agency, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), began an investigation of the WTM in 2002—the year that marked the start of Sri Lanka's peace process.

When the LTTE was banned in 2006, the WTM came under much greater scrutiny and surveillance in the name of national security. Two days after the ban on the LTTE, the RCMP raided the WTM's Montreal offices. One week later, they also raided the Scarborough and Toronto offices of the group. Officers carried out boxes of documents and surrounded the building with yellow tape, signaling the locations as the scene of a criminal investigation. Documents that were subsequently leaked to the Canadian media showed that the WTM ran a program to make pre-authorized withdrawals from Canadian bank accounts, which added up to \$763,000 a year (National Post 2008). The RCMP froze the WTM's bank accounts, as well as those held by some of its officers. The organization's smaller Montreal outfit was shut down; eventually, the Scarborough-based main headquarters followed suit.

The Canadian government's decision to list the WTM sent shockwaves throughout activist networks in Toronto's Tamil community. The WTM was the first non-combatant group to be listed under the ATA of 2001. This iteration of the ban was more concrete for many Tamils, when compared to the general proscription of the LTTE in 2006. The WTM was present in the lives of many Tamils in ways they did not

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<sup>281</sup> It may be noted here that CSIS frequently recommended the proscription of the LTTE, and while the organization was proscribed by the Liberals in 2002, after 9/11 under ATA, this did not formally describe the organization as “terrorist.”

immediately connect with the LTTE, and was understood to be a “community organization,” even as they knew that its activities supported the Tigers. WTM activists continued to organize the diaspora community through cultural shows, memorials for Tiger martyrs, and commemorative ceremonies of the kind described earlier in this chapter. Toronto Tamils wondered whether they, too, would be targeted as individuals and organizations under the "material support" provisions of Canada's Anti-Terrorism Act of 2001.

Supporters quickly regrouped to organize against the ban. The Canadian Tamil Congress joined the WTM in condemning the decision (CTC 2008a). Activists argued that the state had not presented any evidence of the WTM raising funds, and that allegations of extortion in the community were unfounded, as the RCMP had not prosecuted any cases. The Movement's former president, Sitha Sittampalam, also issued a press release, during which he made the following statement:

"It's no secret that the World Tamil Movement supports the right of the Tamil people to self-determination in the Northern and Eastern part of Sri Lanka. This is a political position – perhaps one that not everyone will agree with, but one that we are constitutionally entitled to hold."  
(Tamilnet.com 2008)

Later, in an interview with The Toronto Star, Sittampalam stated that the listing was,

"the first step on a slippery slope, where all of our fundamental rights and freedoms can be eroded. We see the listing as a political move intended to silence a voice within the Tamil diaspora." (Loriggio 2008)

The above statements take issue with the listing as “a political move” that limits the “fundamental rights and freedoms” to which all Canadians are “constitutionally entitled.”

The metaphor of a “voice” being silenced contributes to the activist’s reframing of the

issue as one of political persecution, rather than the RCMP probe into criminalized fundraising and extortion that was used by the government to justify its decision.

Community activists like Sittampalam felt they were unfairly targeted by the federal government's new listing. WTM activists were especially upset that their work was suspended on account of the listing, which labeled them as terrorists. They anxiously awaited charges—whether against them personally, or the Movement—which they planned to disprove in court. Publicly, when addressing non-Tamils, they denied or avoided being connected to the LTTE. And yet, at the same time, WTM and other community activists admitted privately what Tamils already knew: That funds had been raised. There was nothing wrong with raising that money, they hastened to add: It was done before the 2006 ban on the Tigers.<sup>282</sup>

### **Citizenship, Diversity and Heritage in Multicultural Canada**

#### *A brief history of Canadian multiculturalism*

Multiculturalism is central to Canada's national image and public policy today. Canada has projected the following image, to itself and others around the world, over the last five decades: Canada, a prosperous and dynamic nation where people of diverse ethnic, religious and cultural origins live peacefully together; Canada, a “middle-power” country that values tolerance, fairness, and political equality; Canada, “a nation of immigrants,” where ethnic identities are preserved, enhanced, and celebrated as part of

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<sup>282</sup> I note this claim to demonstrate community activists' concern to appear to stay within the rule of law, and not as a pronouncement on the legality (or illegality) of such actions. WTM activists did not discuss fundraising that continued in 2008 (e.g. calendar sales discussed in a section above). Dissenting activists alleged that money was still being channeled to the LTTE.

the nation's multicultural "mosaic." How has this idea of a multicultural Canada come to be?

In contrast to the United States, where multiculturalism emerged out of the identity politics of new social movements, Canadian multiculturalism began as an official policy of the federal government.

Canadian multiculturalism developed as a way for the state to manage emerging tensions and conflicts through policies of cultural recognition and social "accommodation" in the 1960s. Two concerns, in particular, led to the development of multiculturalism as an official state policy. First was the growth of Québécois nationalism, and new separatist movements, which culminated in 1969's "October Crisis."<sup>283</sup> In 1963, the government set up a Royal Commission on Biculturalism and Bilingualism in response to Francophone grievances. The Commission's notions of "biculturalism" and "bilingualism" referred to the cultures and languages of Canada's two "founding nations"—Britain and France—and thus excluded Aboriginal peoples. Canadians of other "ethnic" groups also demanded recognition, leading the Commission to consider "the cultural contributions of other ethnic groups" to Canada in one of its publications (Canada 1970), and the first official use of the term "multiculturalism" in 1965 (Bennett 1998: 2).<sup>284</sup> Second, the "liberalization" of Canada's immigration policy in 1967 led to the arrival of new immigrants from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean—regions

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<sup>283</sup> For an anthropological study of Québécois nationalism, see Handler (1988).

<sup>284</sup> Paul Yuzyk, a Senator of Ukrainian descent, sparked a national debate by describing Canada as "a multicultural nation" in a 1964 speech—one year after the Commission began. This points to the influence of descendants of non-British, non-French European immigrants—the majority of Canadians at this time—on the emergence of multiculturalism in Canada.

that had been previously excluded from “open” immigration to Canada.<sup>285</sup> The new policy was part of a long history of Canadian immigration driven by the political-economic imperatives of settler colonization.<sup>286</sup> Post-1967 immigrants were racialized as “visible minorities,” whose ethnic and cultural backgrounds (and phenotypes) were presumed to be at odds with the predominantly European origins of prior generations of immigrants. As Canada’s demographics began to change, the state sought to avoid “racial conflict,” and determined that new policies would be necessary to facilitate the harmonious “integration” of these new populations into Canadian society. In sum, Canada’s policy of multiculturalism was instituted as a way of accommodating difference through the management of “diversity” amid demographic changes in “Anglo” Canada and separatist nationalism in Québec.

On October 8, 1971, Canada became the first country in the world to create an official policy of multiculturalism, when the Liberal Prime Minister, Pierre Elliot Trudeau, announced the state’s new policy in the House of Commons.<sup>287</sup> Trudeau announced “a policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework,” as two years before, the government had declared English and French as the country’s official languages in the Official Languages Act of 1969. The 1971 policy led to the appointment of a Minister of Multiculturalism, but in these early stages, multiculturalism was largely a symbolic recognition of cultural diversity rather than a substantive change in government

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<sup>285</sup> Of course, this system was not truly open, and Canada’s Immigration Act of 1971 created a “points system” to limit immigration to highly-skilled professionalized immigrants, contributing to the “brain drain” of medical, engineering and other technical professionals from postcolonial countries.

<sup>286</sup> For a history that examines the use of Canadian immigration in settler colonialism, see Day 2000. Also see Bannerji (2000) and Mackey (2002) for a discussion of this in relation to state multiculturalism.

<sup>287</sup> In Canada’s parliamentary system, elected Members of Parliament sit in the House of Commons, while the Senate is for appointees.



policy (Moodley 1983; Abu-Laban 2002). Few resources were directed towards multicultural initiatives, which were not often in tune with minority groups' concerns—particularly those who were deemed “visible minorities” and concerned with racial discrimination and economic inequality.

Official multiculturalism as a discourse and institutional practice emerged from two additional moments in the 1980s. First, in 1982, the Canadian constitution was patriated, and with it, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms replaced the Canadian Bill of Rights. Section 27 of the Charter was widely held to be an affirmation of Canadian multiculturalism. It reads, “This Charter shall be interpreted in a manner consistent with the preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians.” Then, three years later, the government began a process that would see the passage of Bill C-93, the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1985*.<sup>288</sup> With the Act, Canada's policy of multiculturalism became law, and received Royal Assent on July 21, 1988.

Subsequent policies, acts and proclamations contributed to the making of a Canadian multicultural state, including policies that continue to transform local and national media.<sup>289</sup> However, official and elite discourses of multiculturalism emerged from the three moments cited above, and the statements and documents the state generated during this time.

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<sup>288</sup> *Canadian Multiculturalism Act R.S.C., 1985, c. 24 (4th Supp.)*, available at: <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/C-18.7/>, <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/PDF/C-18.7.pdf>

<sup>289</sup> Of particular note is the Broadcasting Act of 1991, which asserts that Canadian broadcasting should reflect the diversity of cultures in Canada, and was followed by a CRTC Ethnic Broadcasting Policy in 1999, which led to a profusion of “ethnic” broadcasting in the following decade.

Today, the Canadian state and its citizens speak of multiculturalism in a doubled sense. On the one hand, multiculturalism is understood to be a social fact, and the term itself describes a multitude of cultures, and racial, ethnic and religious identities that constitute the country. On the other hand, multiculturalism also refers to a prescriptive, political ideology, and a discourse, with its own state institutions and techniques of government. By the 1990s and 2000s, many Canadians had come to view multiculturalism in both these senses as a fundamental part of their national identity and heritage.

Yet, by the mid-2000s, the value of multiculturalism was up for debate. Media outlets questioned the value of Canadian policies of multiculturalism in light of American and European debates about the “failure of multiculturalism” (Banting and Kymlicka 2010) and the growth of national security state after the September 11 attacks on the United States (Abu-Laban and Stanslius). Public commentators framed their concerns in liberal terms that acknowledged Canada’s diverse population of “immigrants,” but asserted a racially unmarked, core “Canadian national identity,” revealing a tolerance of “cultural difference” defined in relation to the desires of the White descendants of Canada’s settlers, and liberalism’s normative limits of toleration (cf. Brown 2006; Markell 2003; Povinelli 2002). This has led, in Canada and other liberal democratic states, to the notion of “we” who are tolerant of difference, in contrast to “others” who are not.

### *Critiques of multiculturalism*

In addition to the right-wing backlash noted above, multiculturalism as a set of policies, institutions and discourses has been subject to numerous criticisms from

scholars on the left and liberal-left. These scholars link the history of colonialism to the contemporary rational-bureaucratic management of populations through state policies of multiculturalism in Canada (Bannerji 2000; Day 2000). Critical scholars of multiculturalism have tended to make four major assertions in this respect. First, they have criticized the “culturalism,” or cultural essentialism of multiculturalism, which tends to reify and exoticize cultures as immutable entities possessing inherent differences, rather than attending to difference as a social relation (Bennett 1998; Abu-Laban 2002). This has led to the practice of multiculturalism as a form of cultural display, making Canada what Eva Mackey (2002) calls “the house of difference,” in which difference from an unmarked norm of “Anglo” whiteness is fetishized through the performance and consumption of the Other’s national dress, dances, and foods; this dynamic also lends itself to what political scientists Yasmeen Abu-Laban and Christina Gabriel (2002) term “the selling of diversity” in the context of neoliberal reforms in the 1990s, which makes Canada’s ethnic minorities “representatives” for their countries of origin in order to justify liberal immigration policies as a boon for Canada’s international trade and diplomacy.<sup>290</sup>

Second, scholars have critically examined the value of “tolerance,” in which cultural difference becomes something to be *endured* by a majority community, which remains the arbiter of the liberal multicultural nation’s fundamental moral values (Povinelli 2002; see also Brown 2006). In this form of politics, relations between different cultures must ‘managed’ so that “their” ethnic difference does not change “our”

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<sup>290</sup> The notion of culture as a saleable commodity also appears in earlier formulations of Canadian state multiculturalism. Moodley (1983) cites the government’s minister as referring to culture as “the handmaiden to the economy.”

national identity and cultural heritage. Third, Canadian sociologists have pointed out that multiculturalism as state policy and elite discourse obscures histories of settler colonialism, and the systemic hierarchies of race and class that produce inequality of opportunity among citizens (Bannerji 2000; Moodley 1983) which cannot be addressed by cultural recognition alone (as proposed by Taylor 1995 and Kymlicka 1997).<sup>291</sup> Multiculturalism in Canadian history marks an apparent shift from a policy of racial assimilation to the cultural integration of immigrants (Day 2000). However, Rita Dhamoon (2010) draws on anthropological critiques of the culture concept (Scott 2003) to suggest that under Canada's regime of liberal multiculturalism, "culture" has become a proxy for "race," allowing for public discussions of identity and difference without talking about power. Official and elite discourses of multiculturalism therefore sidestep the problem of justice (Young 1990). The fourth concern is related to the third, and is especially critical for this study: That cultural recognition in a multicultural nation replaces (or at the very least, inhibits) substantive citizenship, in which minority subjects actively participate in the political and economic affairs of the nation-state (Abu-Laban and Gabriel 2002; Bannerji 2000; Dhamoon 2009; Mackey 2002); in other words, the state's mandate to preserve and promote certain forms of cultural difference inhibits socio-structural change.

In spite of these critiques, the power of multicultural discourse is such that most critical scholars of multiculturalism are reluctant to withdraw from its terms entirely. Consequently, these writers have sought to differentiate between what they term

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<sup>291</sup> It is interesting to note that sociologists of South Asian and/or African origin like Kogila Moodley and Himani Bannerji cited above, have been early and persistent critics of multiculturalism in Canada. Moodley's (1983) article was the first critical analysis of multiculturalism in Canadian social science.

“official,” “state,” or “elite multiculturalism” (Bannerji 2000; Mackey 2002) and “popular multiculturalism,” (Bannerji 2000) “everyday multiculturalism” (Wise and Selvaraj 2009) or the possibility of multiculturalism as a “radical imaginary” (Day 2000: 222-227). Indeed, multicultural governmentality has become so integral to Canadian citizenship that it appears impossible among many immigrants and racialized minorities to discuss “community” and “culture” in Canada today apart from discourses of multiculturalism. In other words, multiculturalism is the discursive terrain upon which diasporas of immigrant citizens and their transnational networks—including Tamils in Toronto—must engage with the Canadian state. The following section illustrates the entanglements of community, culture, citizenship and the state that arise from Canadian multiculturalism as a discourse and social imaginary.

### *Contradictions of multicultural citizenship*

A closer look at a conversation with one of my interlocutors reveals the ambivalences Tamil activists felt about mobilizing diaspora demonstrations at the start of war, and the complex social meanings of “culture,” “community” and “citizenship” for Tamils in multicultural Canada. Two interrelated concerns appeared throughout our conversation, as they did in discussions that I had with other activists: (1) the question of community, or how to mobilize practical and effective action as an “ethnic” minority in relation to the governmental state, and (2) the question of citizenship, its social meanings, practices and demands in a multicultural polity. In the wake of a ban on the LTTE, Tamil activists grappled with the problem of how to mobilize other Tamils in public, as a community *and* as Canadian citizens, to change state policy and thus garner international support for the militant struggle.

Theepan was born in 1979, on Anaithivu, an islet off the coast of Jaffna. His father had left Sri Lanka in the 1960s to work on a ship, and then worked in Switzerland throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Theepan's family left for India in 1985, where they lived in the Porur neighborhood of Madras for four years. The family reunited in Canada, where they were admitted as refugees in 1989, and settled in Mississauga, in a middle-class neighborhood with a growing Tamil community. Several of Theepan's relatives—his grandmother and two uncles in Europe—followed in the 1990s, and today, most of his family lives in the Toronto area.

Living among a Tamil diaspora community was important to Theepan. "I didn't lose my identity, I was able to understand who I was." Thousands of Tamils were moving to Toronto in the late 1980s, and as a result of this "support," Theepan explained that he was able to identify as "Tamil" and become "Canadian" at the same time:

We didn't lose our culture, you still spoke Tamil at home. In that way, I was glad that I was able to hold onto both of them: my identity and my language. And as well, growing up here, becoming more Canadian.

Community, in this instance, derived from identity and language, and was culturally distinct from a parallel process that he referred to as "becoming more Canadian." Culture was something that already formed him, and which could be lost through migration and resettlement, without active practice such as speaking Tamil at home.

In university, Theepan joined his TSA, and became actively involved in the Tamil community. During this time, he and his peers developed an interest in learning about the Tamil political struggle—a subject his parents generally did not discuss. After graduation, Theepan traveled with two friends to Sri Lanka to visit their home-villages in Jaffna, and to see the Vanni. It was the summer after he graduated from university, in the

middle of the ceasefire, and he had not been back to his homeland in eighteen years. He felt “culture-shock” while visiting his *ur* on Anaithivu. “It’s funny to say that it’s culture-shock,” he says, “because it’s [my] culture, right?” Upon his return, Theepan joined other students to organize Pongu Tamil 2004 in Toronto where, as we saw in Chapter 2, he gave a speech about the role of Canadian Tamils in the struggle “back home.” Over the years, he continued to attend community events and public demonstrations. He felt it was important to attend these events in order to be a part of the Tamil community.

Theepan was a youth outreach worker in a working-class immigrant neighborhood with a large Tamil community at the time of my fieldwork. He mentored Tamil high school students, and in his spare time, he volunteered with youth-oriented Tamil organizations such as CanTYD and TYO-Canada. Several of his friends were involved with the CTC. He was, in many ways, at the centre of community activism in Toronto. He also enjoyed thinking and talking about Tamil community and identity in Canada.

Theepan, like many Tamils of his age, insisted that he was both Tamil and Canadian. Theepan spoke of this as a practice of multiculturalism: “I believe, as a Canadian, if I don't hold onto my identity, I'm not really contributing to the principles of this country and that principle is multiculturalism.” If he moved to Canada, only to lose his identity, how was he contributing to the broader society in which he lived, he asked rhetorically. In this statement, Theepan values his ethnic and cultural identity as the foundation of a multicultural citizenship. He highlights a critical tension within liberal multiculturalism: the notion outlined above that culture, while valued as ‘heritage,’ also presents “barriers to full participation in Canadian society” and citizenship. He spoke

extensively of the need for Tamils to participate in Canadian society, and to “be part of Canada as a nation.” However, he did so in the register of “community.”

Theepan was also critical of some aspects of official multiculturalism in Canada. He bristled at the spectacles of culture that make up “the house of difference” (Mackey 2002) in standard versions of Canadian multiculturalism. Getting up on a stage and dancing was not really a celebration of multiculturalism, he pointed out, because it did not require any “exchange.” Community action could be one form of exchange in a multicultural society, as would lobbying that informs the government about human rights violations in Sri Lanka. He wanted to fully participate in Canadian society, and to “be part of Canada as a nation.” And yet he still desired to be part of a Tamil community, and to “hold onto [his] identity.” For Theepan and many young Tamils, this was not a contradiction; it is the best of what Canada has to offer. In his view of multiculturalism, it *ought to be* possible to be Tamil and Canadian at once. Theepan’s views were widely shared by many Tamils, and second-generation youth especially, who came to identify themselves as “Canadian Tamils.”

And yet, there were (and are) practical social limitations to the ideal of full-fledged participation in multicultural citizenship, as espoused by liberal philosophers like Kymlicka and Taylor. Within the framework of liberal multiculturalism, Tamils and other “ethnic” groups remain minorities with limited political power. They receive instead a generalizing, state-defined form of cultural recognition (Taylor 1994) and a few group-differentiated rights (Kymlicka 1995). These “ethnic” subjects cannot claim “representativeness” of the nation. “Their” issues, as Tamils, are not “our” issues, as Canadians. For Canadian Tamils, their situation mimics to some extent the political limits



they had faced in Sri Lanka—a country that is, not coincidentally, also governed as a liberal democracy, and has frequently proclaimed its multiethnic and multireligious character over the last two decades.

Consequently, Theepan was also aware that some critics of multiculturalism feared the “political baggage” of those lobbying on behalf of their ethnic community’s interests at the expense of the unmarked Canadian good—what is posed in theories of liberalism and liberal nationalism as a conflict between minority rights and democratic citizenship (Kymlicka 1995). These critics would point to diaspora public events as a “security threat”—which is exactly how Canada’s mainstream media covered Tamil protests and other events that demonstrated political support for the LTTE.<sup>292</sup> This led Theepan to express doubts about the efficacy of protest as a form of political action and civic engagement. The way forward, as Theepan saw it, was a long and slow process that would require civic engagement and involvement in Canada's national political parties. “Us making a big *āthiri-pūthiri*<sup>293</sup>, is that going to make any difference?”

Instead of public protest, Theepan felt that Canadian Tamils would be better served by engaging with the Canadian state on its terms: participating in Canada’s political process, lobbying the government, and creating a more “inclusive” and “successful community” through social work. Taken together, Tamil action “at a higher level” of Canadian politics would yield gradual changes, with better results for the struggle “back home.”

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<sup>292</sup> For example, as part of the national security beat of newspaper reporters like the *National Post*’s Stewart Bell.

<sup>293</sup> This phrase may be translated as “show of support” (*ātharavu*, meaning support) and uses a suffix without literal meaning. This kind of rhyming is a rhetorical device used in Tamil for emphasis, and in this context, confers a sense of ridicule.

The latter notion of a “successful community” was central to Theepan’s strategic assertion of multicultural citizenship in a context of economic inequality in Canada. He spoke of a phenomenon referred to earlier in this chapter as “two communities” among Toronto Tamils: One community that was educated, and educating its kids, and the other comprised of “new immigrants” whose children were becoming “dropouts, being kicked out of school” and “falling into the cracks.” The economic divide among Tamils produced a community of new immigrant and working-class Tamils as the object of governmental interventions of social reform, to be helped by a community of middle-class Jaffna-origin Tamils who now work within the state’s multicultural apparatuses as community social workers, counselors, teachers, and so on. Theepan’s desire to create a “successful community” reflects the political ideology of official multiculturalism as a formula for unity (Moodley 1983), making “two communities” of Tamils into one community whose successes and overall social and political integration will aid the Tamil struggle in Sri Lanka. In this way, the ideological presuppositions of state multiculturalism and Tamil nationalism converged.

### *Pongu Tamil 2008*

Weeks after Canada’s listing of the WTM, activists revived Pongu Tamil in Toronto, and in diasporic locations across four continents.<sup>294</sup> Toronto’s event was held on Saturday, July 5, 2008—four days after Canada Day celebrations—at Downsview Park, a

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<sup>294</sup> As the war intensified in Sri Lanka’s north, these events were held over a period of three weeks in the following locations: Auckland, New Zealand; Oslo, Norway; Copenhagen, Denmark; Italy; Durban, South Africa; Paris, France; Sydney, Australia; London, UK and Canada. With the exception of South Africa, all of the events were held in countries with a Tamil diaspora from Sri Lanka. South African Tamils are mostly descendents of those who had migrated from India as indentured laborers, merchants and professionals in the British colony. Some were involved in anti-apartheid struggles and drew parallels to the LTTE’s freedom struggle. WTM and TYO activists in Canada were in communication with these pro-Eelam activists in Durban and other cities.

former military base in the northwestern corner of North York, a suburb of Toronto. Tens of thousands of Tamils attended the event with their families, friends, and home-village associations. Young men and women from the TYO circulated throughout the crowd, distributing vibrantly colored posters that protested Canada's ban on the LTTE.

Pongu Tamil was the event that Theepan had helped organize in 2004, and the kind of spectacular mass demonstration that he later felt was "useless" in creating policy change. He was not alone, among community activists, in questioning the event's political efficacy. Why, then, did Tamil community activists return to protest through public demonstrations? Theepan felt that such events were effective in another important way: They brought people together. Joining together to protest created a sense of community among Tamils who were otherwise dispersed throughout the city. One of his colleagues Nantha, who had publicly declared his support for the LTTE, agreed. He was one of several speakers at the July 5 event.

Glaring red eyes and an angry, snarling face: Pongu Tamil's new logo signaled a changed political situation. Sri Lanka was at war, and peace, the concern of the previous event in Toronto, was not an immediate prospect. Organizers were upset about the ban, which helped the Sri Lankan government's war effort by cutting off one of the Tigers' largest sources of funding. While the LTTE and government forces fought in the island's northern districts, diaspora activists mobilized Tamils to demonstrate their political grievances and support for the Tigers. The event was organized quietly and quickly; its location was not announced until two days before it was held. Activists relied on trusted community networks to disseminate information about the event, including Tamil-language radio, home village associations, and among youth, text messages and

Facebook. In the week leading up to the event, a few activists had told me that another Pongu Tamil “might” be organized, but they could not tell me when or where. I learned about the event through a text message from A., the youth activist who had been involved with organizing the 2004 event in Toronto.

When another Tamil friend and I arrived at Downsview on that sunny Saturday afternoon, we were met with a stunning, carnivalesque sight: Poppy red and canary yellow balloons in grand arches marked a stage erected in the middle of a vast field (Figure 4.2). Red and yellow, the colors featured at all Pongu Tamil events, flooded the field; two of the four colors on the Tigers’ national flag of Tamil Eelam, and the colors of their national flower, the flame-like gloriosa lily (*karthigaipoo*, Figure 4.3).<sup>295</sup> Tamils arrived wearing these fiery hues, on everything from pre-printed Pongu Tamil t-shirts to women's sarees, and umbrellas used to shade families from the hot, July sun, to the basketball jerseys and rubber bracelets of teenagers. A young child nearby carried a hockey stick, to which he had tied a shred of silky cloth, a band of red and yellow that formed a makeshift Tamil Eelam flag. In this way, Toronto Tamils creatively signaled to each other and themselves a national identity by iconically indexing the Tigers without holding the symbols of an organization banned by the Canadian government.

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<sup>295</sup> The LTTE designated the national flower in November 2003 during Heroes Week, and Tamils in LTTE controlled areas were asked to plant the vine in their homes, businesses, educational institutions, and public places, and wear it during functions of “national significance” (Tamilnet 2004).



Figure 4.2: Pongu Tamil 2008, Toronto (Photograph by author.)



Figure 4.3: National Flower of Tamil Eelam, *Gloriosa superba* (karthigaipoo)  
(Source: Tamilnet 2004)

Some members of the audience participated in ways that would be controversial to outsiders. One young man seated ahead of me wore a t-shirt with a drawing of a tiger on the back, and the words, “Canadian Tiger and proud of it!” A few young men unfurled the Tamil Eelam flag; others held small paper Eelam flags, at times alongside the

Canadian flag, as they had done in 2004. The face of the Tiger on each flag was unmistakable, jumping out at the viewer in photographs and videos of the event that were shared.

In contrast to the event in 2004, few people held images of the LTTE leader, Prabhakaran. This image, as discussed in Chapter 2, was repeated throughout the crowd in 2004. Prabhakaran's face iconically unified the crowd into a national body, represented by the Leader, the politico-military commander of the LTTE's struggle for national liberation. In 2008, however, this image was not widely distributed to the crowd. Only a few protesters used both arms to hoist placards featuring the National Leader's photo into the air. For most participants, Prabhakaran's image remained on posters and calendars hanging on the walls *inside* their homes, available for darshan in private viewing and shielded from public glare. What unified large numbers of people into a crowd was their use of iconically 'Eelam Tamil' colors, their proximity to each other in public space, and their participation in the event. They stood with attention, facing in the direction of the stage, listening to speeches, applauding and cheering statements with which they agreed, and answering call-and-response chants.

"The community," became a subject with agentive possibilities through collective actions and events like Pongu Tamil. Aravind, the activist who had texted me about the event, was glad to see a large crowd. "It's good to see the community out together like this again," he told me. Aravind had taken a back seat on organizing for a while to focus on his professional goals, but remained in the loop through his friendships with and connections to other activists. Pongu Tamil served as a reminder of a community to which he felt he belonged; in fact, it was one of many events and actions that created it.

This was corroborated in a different way by R., a dissenting activist who told me, “The community is nothing but events (*nikazhcci*).”

This time, “the community” of Pongu Thamil’s diasporic public not only called for the Canadian government to “take action” to end suffering and violence in Sri Lanka by recognizing the Tamils as a “nation” with a homeland and a right to self-determination; activists and participants also demonstrated against the ban on the LTTE and the WTM, and demanded that the Canadian government reverse these decisions. One sign, which was printed and distributed to participants, addressed the Canadian government in the form of the national anthem, “O Canada.” “Tamil Eelam MUST BE FREE, it says. The sign juxtaposes images of protesters, and Martin Niemoller’s poem, “They Came For,” with a statement that Canada had outlawed “our feelings and our representatives” and declared that participants obeyed the country’s “law and order.” Implicit to this statement was the notion of the LTTE and the WTM as the representatives of protesters, as a community, within the federation of a multicultural Canada.



Figure 4.4: Poster from Pongu Thamil 2008. *O Canada: You have ban(ne)d [sic] our feelings and our representatives; we obey [sic] law and order.* (Scanned by author.)

Another sign invokes the ban to make an affective appeal to the Canadian government and national public. “Canada, you have forbidden the entire Tamil community... is this what you call Human Rights?” asks the poster. The text is wrapped around a graphically designed image: Silhouettes of protesters behind barricades; one of the image’s demonstrators carries a sign, which reads, “Welfare not Warfare.” In this image, the notion of the Canadian welfare state is juxtaposed with Canada’s national image as a protector of human rights globally. The poster implicitly connects two different agendas of the Conservative government: the first, anti-terrorism, overlooks the Sri Lankan government’s warfare and human rights violations while banning the LTTE, and the second, continued neoliberal reforms that gut social welfare programs of particular importance to impoverished and racialized new immigrant communities. This



poster, like others that remind the Canadian government of a “responsibility” to protect human rights, carries a signature: “Tamil Diaspora, June 2008.”

However, the demonstration did not only reveal a concern for the public national “feelings” of a Tamil diaspora invoked by activists on behalf of the LTTE. Brian Seneviratne, a Sinhalese activist who speaks regularly to diasporic Tamil audiences, was invited to address the audience at Pongu Thamil 2008. He asked the crowd, “Is the Canadian government going to feed the people in Tamil Eelam?” “No!” the crowd shouts back in response. “Then we should be able to send them money! But you cannot, as though it is a crime.” Seneviratne’s appeal frames these transactions in terms that connote a *humanitarian response* (who will feed the starving people in need?) and *remittance* (to our kith and kin, our Tamil people), an important form of economic and affective exchange between Tamil families outside Sri Lanka and their relatives living in the island.

“To the young people here—  
To our brothers and sisters  
Are we ready to challenge the Canadian government... on the LTTE ban?  
Are we ready to challenge the WTM listing?  
Are we ready to demand our rights?  
Are we ready to free Tamil Eelam?”

After each question, the audience cheers and applauds in response. Each one begins with “Are we ready...” inviting the audience to reply affirmatively to challenge the LTTE ban, the WTM listing, to demand *our rights*, and finally, to free Tamil Eelam. Taken together, the posters, speeches, and questions posed by the event emcees were part of a larger discourse that understood political and financial support to the LTTE as a *right* of a “Tamil Diaspora” of Canadian citizens transacting in a legal regime to which they claimed compliance.

The contentious politics of fundraising was not a minor point of debate, but a key form of action among the LTTE, community activists, and diaspora protesters. For this community, the ban on the LTTE and WTM criminalized this form of political-economic activity. The rhetorical question of “Who will feed the people of Tamil Eelam?” brought into sharp relief the life-or-death stakes of war and abandonment for Tamils in northern Sri Lanka. Through the ban, nationalist Tamil activists felt attacked in a way they perceived as analogous to the war’s existential threat to Tamil lives and struggles for political autonomy and recognition. Protest, in the form of Pongu Thamil, became a way for activists to “do something,” by rallying “the community.”

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the cultural, social and political formation of a Tamil community in multicultural Canada. The first part of the chapter built upon Chapter 1’s study of Tamil migration to Canada by outlining the political and cultural organizations, social associations, social service providers, media, and businesses that comprise Tamil Toronto, as well as the alternative and dissenting groups among this community. Then I examined the ways in which the LTTE and its overseas network mobilized this community as a critical node of “the Tamil diaspora” to provide financial and political support for its struggle and war for national liberation.

The second part of the chapter considered the multiple meanings of the Canadian government’s proscription of the LTTE and WTM for Tamil activists in Toronto. I argued that community activists mobilized against these bans as an assertion of Tamil identity and citizenship in Canada as they expressed their support for the LTTE. In examining the relationship between “community” and “citizenship” for Toronto Tamils, I

argued that the ideologies of Canadian multiculturalism and Tamil nationalism converged in public actions such as Pongu Thamil to create the appearance of a “unified” Tamil community that rallied around the LTTE as their “sole representatives.” At the same time, alternative and dissenting activists created new political spaces to express—privately and publicly—their criticisms of the LTTE’s nationalist politics. However, their shared opposition to the LTTE did not bridge the many social and political differences among them, and they remained fragmented, apart from each other and the community. Finally, in a community where the vocation of “politics” was frequently controlled by men, Tamil feminists and their actions were subjected to the demands of the politics of community and dissent. Overall, Toronto Tamil activists’ responses to the ban and its effects on “the war back home” revealed political conflicts and growing polarization among them.

As the war spread throughout northern Sri Lanka, Tamils started to organize protests. The next chapter shifts the discussion to Tamil refugees living in camps and cities throughout India. While Tamils living in the camps performatively identified their plight as “refugees” to oppose war and make claims upon ‘home’ and ‘host’ states, Tamils in the city deployed ‘strategies of invisibility’ (Kibreab 1999; Agier 2002) while waiting to leave for a foreign land. As we shall see, both forms of action responded to what Tamil refugees described as the unlivable conditions that beset their lives in Sri Lanka and the denial of citizenship as a substantive practice of social membership and subjective belonging.

## Chapter 5

### *Camp Life and Refugee Politics in Tamil India*

“Can they protest the government that is sheltering and feeding them? Is it right?”

Constantin, a refugee and NGO case-worker, asked me this question less than two weeks into my fieldwork in Tamil Nadu. We were sitting at his desk in the Chennai headquarters of the Organization for Eelam Refugees’ Rehabilitation (OfERR), a non-governmental organization created by refugees to look after their relief and rehabilitation needs after 1983. That morning, OfERR leaders had learned that four refugee camps were fasting to protest the war. At the heart of these protests were two demands: Camp refugees were asking the Indian government to stop providing military assistance to Sri Lanka, and an end to a war that was killing civilians. This information was not directly related to OfERR—a reporter from an English-language newspaper, *The Hindu*, happened to be at one of these camps.

Why were Sri Lankan Tamil refugees protesting in their camps? And why was Constantin so upset about these protests? Why did he question whether it was “right” for refugees to protest a government providing for their most basic needs? In fact, Constantin was not the only person who was troubled by the protesters. The founder of the organization and local camp leaders were also concerned. In spite of their concerns, some OfERR staff who resided in the camps participated in these protests and other actions against the war. Why were these actions disconcerting to OfERR leaders, when they had already encouraged refugees to organize during the 2002-2006 peace process?

This chapter attempts to address these questions and others through an examination of Tamil refugee social and political life in southern India. I begin with a thick description of social life in the camps, and their architecture and administration by the state government and local NGOs. Then, I briefly discuss India and Tamil Nadu's relationship to the Sri Lankan war, with a focus on Tamil Nadu's political parties. I do so to provide some necessary context for my discussion of camp refugees' actions of protest and commemoration. This part of the chapter also includes a discussion of how anthropologists and philosophers have differently studied and theorized refugees.

The second part of the chapter examines camp refugees' actions against the war. I examine three facets of refugee mobilization. First, I show how camp residents who demonstrated against the war understood their actions as a continuation of their engagements that followed the 2002 ceasefire and peace process. As I explored in Chapter 2, refugees were encouraged by a refugee-run NGO, OfERR, to "speak up" and to discuss and debate the contents and contours of a peace process from which they were formally excluded by their exile. With the return to war, refugees sought to revive prospects for a negotiated peace through camp-based actions they construed as "peaceful." These actions were, however, a source of political anxiety for leaders of the NGO that attended to refugee relief and rehabilitation. Second, I consider the ways in which opposition to collective action – and camp protests in particular – was framed and mobilized by refugees at different levels of the organization. Even as some camp leaders and fieldworkers participated in protest, others questioned the motivations, morality, and efficacy of such actions, a stance bolstered by the head office's discouragement of

popular politics. Finally, I discuss limits to collective action as a result of state policing and surveillance of the camps.

### **Camps as (invisible) partitions**

Sri Lankan refugee camps are scattered throughout the state of Tamil Nadu. During my fieldwork, 73,387 Sri Lankan Tamils were registered as refugees with the state government, and living in 118 camps in 25 districts. Most of these camps have existed in one form or another since the early 1990s. Fourteen camps were newly established between April 2006 and September 2008 when fighting resumed in northern Sri Lanka, resulting in new refugee arrivals.<sup>296</sup>

In spite of their existence for the last thirty-three years, Sri Lankan Tamil refugee camps cannot be found on any official geographic or political map of Tamil Nadu. Instead, the map that indicates their location appears to be a *terra incognita*, an unknown land of blank spaces inhabited by no one else. Even as most of these camps take their names from nearby villages, they cannot be imaged by the same cartographic imagination; the camps and villages do not occupy the same map. That they are not of the same ‘place’ is evident in the fact that a letter must be addressed not to the name of the village, but that name, as a proximate location, followed by “Sri Lankan refugee camp” or simply, “SLR camp.”

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<sup>296</sup> 32 camps were newly created at the peak of arrivals in 2006. These camps were eventually consolidated. By the time of my fieldwork, there were 14 ‘new’ camps in addition to 101 already-existing camps and 2 special camps, for a total of 118 camps. The number of refugees is drawn from figures gathered by OfERR and the Department of Rehabilitation as of October 1, 2008.



A - Chennai Head Office / Regional Office  
 B - Nallayan Research Centre for Sustainable Development  
 C - Erode Regional Office  
 D - Tirunelveli Regional Office  
 E - Trichy region

- 1. 101 Already existing camp -- Marked in the map
- 2. 02 Special camp -- Not marked in the map
- 3. 14 New camps -- Not marked in the map

Figure 5.1: Map of Sri Lankan refugee camps in Tamil Nadu (Source: OfERR)

The cities and villages of Tamil Nadu appear on a “political map” that holds the same shape at its edges, but bears far greater detail than the map of the camps (Figure 4.1). The former is a map of land meant to be traversed, communicating information about topography, distance between cities, districts of governance, etc. The latter, on the other hand, uses black spots and numbers to indicate zones of partition and social control.<sup>297</sup>

On the ground, few local, Indian Tamils will find themselves in the vicinity of these camps, let alone enter them, as many are located beyond the edges of the village. These areas, deemed *ur-kaadu*, are inhospitable lands that are not the home-village (*ur*), but nevertheless exist in relation to them. *Kaadu*, or forests, were uncleared borderlands between villages, whose lands were places of habitation and cultivation. In contrast, the *kaadu* is viewed as a rough, wild, and generally unsuitable place for human habitation. As such, they were historically sites of banishment in the Tamil lands, as well as places for the self-willed renunciation of wandering ascetics. In other words, only two types of people would live in such places: Those who had done wrong and were to be exiled from the polity, and those who had willingly removed themselves from society.

These are the sites in which Sri Lankan Tamil refugees are housed. Other camps were located in defunct buildings, including mills, schools, cyclone shelters, and even warehouses.

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<sup>297</sup> And indeed, as they are lived, few local Tamils will find themselves in their vicinity of these camps, let alone enter them, as they are often located beyond the edges of the village. These areas, deemed *ur-kaadu*, are inhospitable lands that are not the home-village, but nevertheless exist in relation to them. *Kaadu*, or forests, were sites of banishment, as well as self-willed renunciation for the wandering ascetic.



Why have Sri Lankan Tamil refugees and their camps been physically separated from local Tamils in India? Although there is a longer history of Tamils crossing the Palk Strait in ancient and modern times—whether as fisherpeople, seafaring merchants, worshippers, or students—India and Sri Lanka exist today as separate nation-states. This is a historical, social, and political fact, and not one simply determined by Sri Lanka’s island geography, as some have argued. The Sri Lankan-British historian, Sujit Sivasundaram (2013) presents a compelling counter to such claims. He argues that the political unification of Ceylon (known today as Sri Lanka), which had been previously ruled by three separate kingdoms, and the governance of the island as a Crown Colony under British rule must be understood as a process of “islanding” that involved “partitioning” colonial Ceylon from the mainland of peninsular India. The political separation of the region has continued since.

Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 3, the consolidation of these borders after independence resulted in the making of stateless Tamils from the island’s central Hill-Country region. Hill-Country Tamils (*malaiyaha thamizhar*) were the descendants of Tamils from India who were recruited between 1850 and 1920 by British planters to labor on Sri Lanka’s tea plantations. In Chapters 1 and 3, I discussed how this group of Tamils was subject to several agreements between the postcolonial states of India and Ceylon, in which they would be divided into two populations distributed across the Palk Strait “border.” However, with each agreement, some people were left to remain stateless, their status to be decided at a future time. At the time of my fieldwork, one-third of the people living in Sri Lankan refugee camps in Tamil Nadu were Hill-Country Tamils; as many as one-fifth of this group were estimated to be without citizenship in any nation-state.

Tamil refugees fleeing Sri Lanka—whether of “Indian” or “Ceylon” descent—were crossing an international border from the perspective of the Indian state. In the context of the war, they were viewed as a potential threat to state security, especially after the LTTE’s assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. The state did not recognize the claims to Indian origin made by some of these refugees, who were viewed as “Indian Tamils” by other Sri Lankans. After making the reverse journey of their ancestors, the postcolonial descendants of plantation laborers were now viewed as “Sri Lankan” in India.

This chapter describes and analyzes refugee camps as an extension of these processes of discipline, regulation, and securitization, as well as sites of community formation and political activity for Tamils living in the camps. One of the arguments I present here is as follows: Tamil Nadu’s camps reinscribe and re-establish the geopolitical borders that divide India and Sri Lanka as sovereign nation-states, by partitioning people in geographic space and territory. They physically separate Sri Lanka’s Tamil refugees from India’s Tamils, and in doing so, socially reproduce within India the modern geopolitical division of lands that were once connected by religious, cultural and political exchanges. In doing so, however, the camps and their practices of policing and surveillance also generate new forms of sociality and political action.

The refugee-staffed organization, OfERR, maintained a presence in all of the camps, and its offices were divided into four regions (as indicated in Figure 4.1): Chennai (where the head office and its workers’ quarters were also located), Erode, Nellai (Tirunelveli), and Trichy (Tiruchirappalli). In the next section, I describe a camp from the Nellai region, and juxtapose this somewhat “typical” camp with four other camps of

various sizes and regions. Taken together, these camps present contrasting physical settings that constitute the same form of life: Tamil refugee camp life in India.

### **The camps in social space**

On the outskirts of a village in southern Tamil Nadu, about 50 km from each coast, an old godown<sup>298</sup>—a colonial storehouse—sits next to an abandoned cement factory. The building appears to be a ruin. Two columns leading up to the veranda are plastered over by an advertisement, juxtaposing contemporary consumerist aspirations with the colonial past. An adjacent building, painted a pale robin’s egg blue, is emblazoned with the word “Aarokkiya”—meaning, health—the name of a local brand of milk. On the main building of the godown, however, the paint has peeled from eroded walls, leaving traces of cream and chalky blue, now covered with rust-colored dust. The walls are in such disrepair that an extension of the building’s second floor has lost its roof entirely.

The factory remains unused. The godown now serves as the living quarters for Tamil refugees. On one side of the building, houses have been built out of concrete walls and sheet roofing. Those who arrived in 1990 live here. On the other side, behind a crumbling façade, broken walls line a dimly-lit hallway to form a row of separate living areas. More recent arrivals have found shelter here. Their rooms are less than ten by ten feet squared, with each one divided by thin fabric hanging from electric cables above. A single light bulb dangles from a long cable to provide the only light in these rooms. Over 400 families live in this building.

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<sup>298</sup> From the Portuguese word, *gudão*, and in Tamil, *kiṭaṅku*.



Figure 5.2: Camp in a colonial storehouse, February 2009 (Photograph by author)

Behind the godown, some refugee families have built one and two-room mud huts with clay from the earth surrounding this area. These huts afford families more privacy than the storehouse, with openings for windows curtained by a frayed grass mat or a sheet of discarded tarpaulin. Their roofs are covered with thatch woven from dried palm leaves. Living so exposed to the elements, they have raised floors or built a step before the entrance to block rainwater; a small hole at the back of the hut allows water to drain in times of flooding. Narrow by-lanes of patted-down earth divide rows of these huts. Some of these huts were once painted and sections of the mint-green paint remain, hinting at attempts to make this housing on government land more like a home. Metal and plastic vessels sit at the front of the house, picked up and brought back with drinking water from a bore well constructed by an NGO. Women sit out here, washing dishes and clothing in

a small plastic basin; in the space between their homes, they cook daily meals over the open fires of shared kitchens.

In this camp, I meet a woman from the village nearby. She now lives in the camp. Her husband is a Tamil refugee from Sri Lanka. Theirs was a “love marriage,” and after their nuptials, she moved into the camp.<sup>299</sup> She is an Indian citizen. Her two young children are also citizens. When I ask why they live in the camps, she tells me that in the village, it is also difficult to find work to survive. Whether we are inside the camp or outside it, she asks me, “What is the difference?”

There are dozens of other camps like this one. Sometimes, their names reveal their former industrial lives: “Metal Shop” and “Spinning Mill.” Others are named after the *ur*, *kuppam*, *patti*, *pettai*, or *nagar* in which they were established.<sup>300</sup>

Erumaipatti<sup>301</sup>, located in the middle of a verdant district in central Tamil Nadu, was a very different type of camp. It was set up in the 1960s for Tamil plantation laborers who were repatriated from Sri Lanka to India under the 1964 Sirimavo-Shastri agreement. The state’s Department of Rehabilitation built colonial-style dwellings in the form of line houses, recreating the houses constructed for Tamil laborers on Sri Lanka’s plantation’s estates. Line houses were long, concrete structures subdivided into several two-room houses; two rows of housing faced each other, creating a lane in-between.

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<sup>299</sup> Most Tamils in India are patrilocal, while among Tamils in northern and eastern Sri Lanka, the groom tends to move into his wife’s family’s home/village. The latter pattern is changing, as Sri Lankan Tamil refugees marry refugees living in other camps, Tamils living abroad in the diaspora, and Indian citizens. See Maunaguru 2009.

<sup>300</sup> These are all words used as suffixes for settlements of various sizes, ranging from home-village (*ūr*) and fishing hamlet (*kuppam*) to city (*nagar*).

<sup>301</sup> I visited and stayed in this camp during Pongal, as described in the Introduction.

Erumaipatti consisted of five lanes of nearly 40 families of Hindus and Christians<sup>302</sup> who were mostly from the Mannar district; among them were Hill-Country Tamils who had resettled in the north after the 1977 anti-Tamil riots. The camp was close to a village, and children from the camp and the village attended the same school and became friends.



Figure 5.3: Line houses in the Sri Lankan refugee camp at Erumaipatti during Pongal, January 2009 (Photograph by author)

Bhavani Sagar, also located in central Tamil Nadu, was one of the largest camps in the state, with approximately 3500 inhabitants. The camp was located on the outskirts of a panchayat town. Housing varied widely in this camp, which was home to some of OfERR's regional staff. Mathi Anna, an OfERR health worker and former TELO activist, moved here in 1986, and has lived here for the last 12 years with his wife and two India-

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<sup>302</sup> The latter lived in a separate lane, and held their own church services in one of the line rooms.

born sons. The family's house burned down due to a fire the previous year, and was rebuilt a few months later. Mathi took out a loan of 50000 rupees (\$1,157 USD<sup>303</sup>), which he was still paying back, to rebuild the house; he also added a concrete extension to the structure, creating a large front room, approximately 20 by 10 feet, for entertaining visitors and watching television.<sup>304</sup> Visitors commented that the room simulated the veranda at the front as it was customary to do in houses in Jaffna. Other staff remarked upon the room approvingly as they enjoyed its spaciousness, relative to others in the camp, where provisional huts and concrete houses alike were under 250 square feet.

Kummidipettai was as large as Bhavani Sagar, but was located within an hour of a large city. Several OfERR workers resided in this camp—they slept in the office five nights a week, and returned home for Sunday—or they had relatives who lived in the camp. The dusty lanes that separate sections of the camp are fenced with palm thatch—another Jaffna custom of boundary-making; the thatch also covers and protects the houses and huts in this camp. The camp is highly organized, but also divided politically between refugees who support OfERR's approach to refugee issues and politics, and those who did not.

When the war began again in 2006, the large number of refugees arriving put pressure on the existing camps. New camp sites were found. In 2008 and 2009, the state government also built new housing to accommodate long-time camp residents.

Gangaipuram was built under one such initiative. Unlike most of the state's refugee camps, these new houses were built with brick, concrete, and had whitewashed plaster

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<sup>303</sup> At the time of the loan in April 2007.

<sup>304</sup> Some refugees had televisions that were donated to people throughout the state through a Chief Minister's scheme. Mass gifts of this kind were a common tactic before elections.

walls, and were approximately 200 square feet. Many more homes have been repaired or newly built with the help of NGOs, including OfERR, CRS, ADRA India, and others.

Refugees were employed in the construction of some of these projects.<sup>305</sup>



Figure 5.4: New refugee camp housing at Gangaipuram, February 2009  
(Photograph by author)

#### *Refugee welfare: the government*

Camp refugees receive a monthly allowance and basic rations from the Tamil Nadu state government. This allowance—or “dole” as it is officially termed—is crucial to their everyday survival. The allowance for the head of household was Rs. 400, plus an additional Rs. 288 for other adults, Rs. 180 for the first child under 12 years of age, and

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<sup>305</sup> For an account of a recent housing project, see Ramakrishnan (2012) for *The Hindu*.



Rs. 90 for each additional child.<sup>306</sup> A household of two adults and two children under 12 years would thus receive Rs. 958 per month, or the equivalent of \$20 USD (at the start of fieldwork in October 2008). In addition, each household receives up to 20 kilograms of rice, and a ration card to purchase other basic items—namely, *maida* (wheat flour), *rava* (semolina), *dal*, sugar, palm oil, and kerosene—at concession rates.

Additionally, each person is given free clothing once a year, and blankets and aluminum utensils are distributed to each household once every two years through government co-operative stores:

Table 3: Clothing and Household Items Provided in Sri Lankan Refugee Camps

<b>Recipient</b>	<b>Clothing Item</b>	<b>Number</b>
Male Adult	Dhoti	2
	Vests	2
Male Child	Half Trousers	2
	Inner Garments (vests)	1
	Half-sleeve Shirt	1
Female Adult	Sari	2
	Blouse	2
	In skirt	1
Female Child	Skirt	1
	Blouse	1
	Frock/Gown	1
Every Family	Towels	2
Every Adult	Mat	1
Every Adult (1 x 2 years)	Blanket	1
Every Family (1 x 2 years)	Rice boiling utensils (5 Litres capacity)	1
<i>State's total cost for kitchen</i>	Sambar, curry utensils	1

<sup>306</sup> The monthly dole amount was increased to these amounts on August 1, 2006, which remained the same until the end of my fieldwork in India in May 2009. Previously, the monthly dole was half this amount, or Rs. 200, Rs. 144, Rs. 90 and Rs. 45 respectively. According to OfERR's website, the current amounts are as follows: Head of household Rs. 1000, Rs. 750 for each additional member of the household above 12 years old, and Rs. 450 for those under 12 years.

<i>utensils: Rs. 250 / family</i>	(2 Litres capacity)	1
	Large spoon	2
	Dining plates	2
	Tumblers	2

*G.O. No. 2 Public (RH.II) Department, 3.1.2001; G.O. No. 947, Public (RH.II) Department, 18.6.1998.*

(Sources: Government of Tamil Nadu Rehabilitation Department 2008, 2009)

Every household received free electricity under a scheme created in 1985 by then-Chief Minister MGR. Tamil camp refugees also receive free healthcare in Tamil Nadu’s government hospitals. However, treatment here was viewed as less effective than the private care they could not afford. Female children and women in the camps are eligible for government programs to ensure that they complete secondary or tertiary schooling before marriage, and in programs implemented in 2006 and 2007, they may access additional resources and services to stay healthy during pregnancy.<sup>307</sup>

All children in the camps receive a public school education and free school supplies, up to and including Plus 2 (i.e., the equivalent of grades 11 and 12), the higher secondary studies required for admission to colleges and universities in India. OfERR estimated that approximately 21,500 students were enrolled in local schools. Sri Lankan Tamil refugees have avidly pursued education as a means to future opportunities, whether

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<sup>307</sup> According to OfERR, the education schemes are as follows: Girl Child Protection Scheme (Rs.75,000), Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyar Memorial Marriage Assistance Scheme for girls at enhanced rate (Rs.50,000 with four gram gold for graduates and diploma holders, whereas Rs.25,000 with four gram gold for SSLC holders), Dr.Muthulakshmi scheme (Rs.12,000) and Janani Suraksha Scheme (Rs.700). The pregnancy schemes include the Dr. Muthu Lakshmi Reddy Maternity Financial Assistance Scheme of the Government of Tamil Nadu (G.O. 118 Women and Family Welfare Department—Government Assistance Scheme 21, dated 05.04.2007).

in India, upon their return to Sri Lanka, or abroad.<sup>308</sup> The state government has allowed them to pursue Arts & Sciences seats after general admission, and under an open quota for Engineering schools and faculties. This access to government-run colleges was withdrawn after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi—one of many punitive measures undertaken by the Jayalithaa’s AIADMK government at that time—and was restored when Karunanidhi’s DMK returned to power, after requests from OfERR. Under specific circumstances, refugee students at government colleges may be able to avail themselves of a tuition fee waiver.<sup>309</sup>

### *Camp administration*

Sri Lankan refugee camps were overseen by administrators and officials of the Tamil Nadu state government and thus enfolded into local structures and units of administration. The units are noted here in ascending order: village, taluk, district and state. The camps were assigned their own officers, however, as exceptional spaces that were mostly segregated from Tamil Nadu’s villages and cities. At the most basic level, each camp had its own Village Administrative Officer and a Special Revenue Inspector. The Village Administrative Officer was known as “the chief and primary guardian of all the refugee camps situated within the area of his/her competence” (Department of Rehabilitation 2008: 2) and was tasked with visiting the camps once a week, listening to camp grievances, and registering births and deaths. The Special Revenue Inspector’s duties required knowing families within the camp in order to conduct a monthly roll-call

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<sup>308</sup> OfERR’s education programs recall Jaffna Tamils’ pursuit of education as a means to opportunity and social mobility; they also recall a well-habituated tradition among the island’s Tamils of traveling across the Palk Straits to the Madras Presidency for higher education.

<sup>309</sup> According to OfERR, “Tuition fee waiver has been granted to the first professional graduates who secure admission through single window system for the first generational graduates from the families (families without graduates).” OfERR website, <http://oferr.org>.

and create lists for the monthly dole distribution to follow. The inspector was also responsible for forwarding recommendations to address camp residents' grievances, and coordinated with the administrative officer and the district on other administrative work.

At the next administrative level, the Taluk Tahsildar distributed the cash dole on the fifth day of the month among other intermediary duties, while the Special Tahsildar (Camp) oversaw welfare activities from the district headquarters, conducted weekly inspections of the camps in the district, and was responsible for receiving refugees' petitions and demands. Camps within a state district were assigned a District Collector, and his/her Personal Assistant, while the transit camps at Mandapam and Kottapattu had their own Special District Collector. The collector was vested with the authority to admit and transfer refugees to other camps, and also issued an "Exit Permit" to camp and non-camp refugees who returned to Sri Lanka or traveled to another country. In addition, each of the state government's departments—from Public Welfare to Law & Order—were assigned various responsibilities toward the refugees. Law & Order was especially involved, as each camp was assigned to a local police officer and an officer of the Q Branch, India's high security police. However, most other duties were managed and overseen by Tamil Nadu's Department of Rehabilitation. The Department was created in 1946 to provide relief to Tamils (of Indian origin) who were repatriated from Burma and Malaya at the end of World War II, and in the decades to follow, assisted repatriates from Sri Lanka. In sum, the state government assigned refugees to camps, provided them housing and certain benefits/entitlements, and maintained 'law and order' through surveillance and policing.

Everything else was left to internationally-funded NGOs, which looked after social and economic development in the neoliberal state. These organizations supplemented inadequate government facilities, mainly through repairs to government housing, supplementing education with tutoring programs, and health care through clinics, public health workshops and counseling. They also provided refugees with the resources for infrastructure and services not provided by the state, such as water tanks, toilets, nursery schools and tutoring rooms. NGOs were crucial intermediaries, observing camp living conditions and collecting and communicating camp refugees' grievances to the state.

*Refugee welfare: OfERR*

Non-governmental organizations were officially banned from Sri Lankan refugee camps after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination in 1991—a year that also marked the beginning of the liberalization of India's economic policies.<sup>310</sup> Although several organizations were granted access in the following years, they were not allowed full access for another fifteen years. In 2006, the Tamil Nadu government approved four organizations that continue to work in the state's refugee camps: the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the Adventist Development Relief Agency (ADRA), Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), and the Organization for Eelam Refugees' Rehabilitation (OfERR). Of these groups, the first three are international aid and development agencies with higher-level international staff and local workers. OfERR, though reliant on international funding for its programs, is the

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<sup>310</sup> These policies followed an IMF bailout from a Balance of Payments crisis, and led to market deregulation, lower taxes and import tariffs, and a marked increase in private and Foreign Direct Investments, which receive an array of incentives from the state. The most controversial incentive has been the creation of Special Economic Zones since 2000. On the latter, see <http://www.sezindia.nic.in> for more information.

only local organization, is staffed entirely by Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka, and maintains a presence in all of the camps. OfERR has worked in Tamil Nadu's Sri Lankan refugee camps since 1990.

OfERR was created “for refugees, by refugees” in the aftermath of Black July. The Founder and Treasurer, S.C. Chandrahasan, was a Colombo-based human rights lawyer and the son of the Federal Party founder and leader, S.J.V. Chelvanayagam, whose critical role in Tamil politics in Sri Lanka was discussed in Chapter 3. Chandrahasan, like many Tamil activists of this time, was known to be a supporter of one of the Tamil militant groups, the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization.<sup>311</sup> He fled to Madras in 1983, following death threats and a tip from a policeman about plans to abduct him. As refugees continued to arrive in Tamil Nadu, Chandrahasan worked with other activists and concerned individuals to identify and address the refugees' needs in a new land. He founded OfERR with others engaged in relief efforts—including his personal secretary, Ms. Sooriyakumary, and the Tamil activist, Mr. Arul Gopalan (formerly of the original *Nam Thamilar*, or “We Tamils” movement<sup>312</sup>)—to assist the refugees. From the beginning, OfERR has focused on Tamil refugees in the camps and securing their access to all levels of education.

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<sup>311</sup> Chapter 3 discusses the formation of this and other Tamil militant organizations in the 1970s, and their politics pre- and post-1983.

<sup>312</sup> *Nam Thamilar* was a Tamil nationalist movement founded by S.P. Adithanar, the founder of the Tamil-language newspaper, *Thina Thanthi* (“The Daily Wire”). The movement favored secession from India, and later merged with the DMK. It was revived by the Tamil film director, Seeman, in 2009 to protest the war and demonstrate support for the LTTE and Tamil Eelam.

As Krishna (2000: 92-93) notes, the DMK were outspoken about Sri Lanka's disenfranchisement of Tamils of Indian Origin, and during turning points in the 1950s and 1960s, encouraged the Indian government to pressure Sri Lanka's government to change its policies toward Tamils. At the time, the FP was well aware of secessionist currents in Dravidian politics, but maintained no political links with these groups (Arasaratnam 1979; Cheran 1992). It was not until 1970 that Chelvanayakam, Amirthalingam and others met with the DMK in Tamil Nadu, during Karunanidhi's first term as Chief Minister.

The organization has several interconnected aims. In its own words,

OfERR's mission is to improve and develop the life and well being of refugees in India by building the capacity of refugees, empowering them to make a significant contribution to their social and economic development and to rebuilding their homeland.<sup>313</sup>

In pursuit of these goals, OfERR grew from a small group of seven volunteers who drew on their personal resources in 1984 to over 640 Sri Lankan Tamil refugee volunteers by 2006. The organization has grown in other ways. First, with the start of the peace process in Sri Lanka, the NGO registered a new branch, OfERR Ceylon, to assist refugees returning to the island with their resettlement. Second, OfERR extended its work in 2005 to assist tsunami-affected villages along Tamil Nadu's coastline, and added 120 Indian volunteers from the affected areas to its ranks.

OfERR supplements government assistance to refugees to ensure basic improvements to the camps. These projects have included: bore wells and other points of access to clean drinking water, sanitation and drainage, electricity and power generation, common sheds and community centers, housing repairs, and more. Throughout my fieldwork, OfERR facilitated the construction of hundreds of new toilets and unveiled solar-powered lighting in the camp bathrooms. Such work addresses years and decades of disrepair that followed after initial government assistance in the 1990s, and in doing so, makes what were intended to be "temporary" camps more livable.

Moreover, OfERR created camp, district and regional-level committees to identify camp refugees' social and development needs; they also linked these committees

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<sup>313</sup> OfERR India. *Of, by, for refugees*. Undated brochure. This brochure title recalls the phrase, "government of, by, and for the people" in Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

to government officials and NGO professionals to address the needs identified. OfERR estimated that 90% of the camp-level coordination committees held monthly meetings, and that approximately 1,700 meetings were held each year.<sup>314</sup> For OfERR, the regular activity of these groups points to the desire of refugees to “participate in their own development.”<sup>315</sup> District and regional steering committees have allowed members of several camp committees to gather together to identify and discuss issues affecting refugees across the state. These groups meet once every two months, depending on the urgency of a particular issue, and have lobbied state and national governments, as well as NGOs, on issues related refugee rehabilitation and development.

*Tamil refugee as “coolie”*

Camp residents experienced significant obstacles to their ability to find and maintain regular employment. Paid work was necessary for their survival. The monthly dole and camp rations—though welcomed—were not enough to sustain most households, let alone secure access to the educations many parents and caregivers believed would create social mobility and personal security in their children’s futures. The social and financial insecurity of life as a refugee pervaded every conversation I had with Tamils living in the camps.

Most male residents engaged in what they and their female relatives called *kūli vēlai*, or “coolie labor.”<sup>316</sup> For refugees, this meant manual labor for substandard wages.

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<sup>314</sup> Personal communication, November 2008.

<sup>315</sup> Personal communication with S.C. Chandrahasan, and OfERR staff, and as noted in the organization’s internal reports.

<sup>316</sup> The word coolie is derived from the Tamil word, *kūli*, which refers to daily wages in grain or cash, depending on the type of labor. The term for the wage was later applied to the laborer, and spread globally.



They worked hard for long hours and had no guarantee of regular employment. They broke rocks, tarred roads, did construction, laid bricks and concrete, and painted buildings and houses. Tamils who leave the camps to work must obtain permission. To obtain permission to go outside the camps, however, involves days of waiting for the wheels of bureaucracy to turn, as refugees fill out forms and get bumped from office to office in search of the right official. Moreover, camp residents who work outside the camps were still required to observe the state-wide curfew, and could only work and travel outside during the hours of 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. The curfew limited their ability to travel further away from their homes for work. Some refugees have secured permissions to work and live outside the camps, but this required underwriting by an employer.

The jobs referred to as “coolie labor” gave refugee households *kai kaasu*, or pocket money—literally “hand cash”—between dole distributions. With this cash, they could meet regular or unexpected expenses, and if there was anything left over, they could try to save for large future expenses—typically, home repairs or a child’s college tuition fees. By and large, however, these expenses were too high for most refugee families in the camps.

Adults were not the only ones who worked. In some camps, children stayed home from school to work in textile industries, knotting threads to create fringed bedsheets for Rs. 20-30 per day (in 2009 USD, approximately 50 to 75 cents per day); they also did piecework sewing and embroidery for garment factories exporting clothing to the United

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through the colonial indenture of south Indian workers. See Daniel (2008) for an ethnographically-informed epic poem about “the coolie” on Ceylon’s tea plantations.

Kingdom.<sup>317</sup> In the poorest of households, older children were pulled out of school before completing their secondary studies—a phenomenon that troubled OfERR staff, who encouraged refugees to acquire educational qualifications and skills that could be used to build their homeland upon their return.

In interviews, Tamil refugees in and outside the camps often complained of not being able to find work commensurate to their expectations. Young women and men who were raised and educated in India spoke to me of their professional aspirations. They noted that, even after completing tertiary studies—whether undergraduate or post-graduate degrees, diplomas, or training certificates—they were unable to secure employment that matched their qualifications. India’s large public sector was closed to refugees, as non-citizens could not sit for the administrative or civil service exams. Private employers were also reluctant to hire them. They explained that once it became clear that they were refugees from Sri Lanka, they went no further in the application process.

The inability to find office employment combined with a desire to develop their communities led some college-educated refugees to work for OfERR. In Trichy, “Shoba” told me that she had completed her law degree, but was unable to work in her profession. Her colleagues were employed as magistrates; she was the only graduate who was not. She joined OfERR, and works in the Advocacy department on peace education among camp refugees. Like “Shoba,” other young staff at OfERR had completed or were in the

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<sup>317</sup> See, for example, The Observer and the BBC’s investigation into British fast-fashion retailer, Primark, McDougall (2008), “The Hidden Face of Primark Fashion,” *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/jun/22/india.humanrights>

process of finishing undergraduate and graduate degrees in sociology, social work, and the arts.

*“Self-help” groups and empowerment*

Economic activities were central to OfERR’s social work in the camps, given the pervasive unemployment and underemployment described above. The organization recognized that the government dole was not enough to meet refugees’ everyday expenses, let alone fees for higher education. In lieu of a regular income from steady employment, or access to land or sea to engage in traditional occupations of agriculture or fishing, OfERR provided camp refugees with vocational training and apprenticeship opportunities, including: sewing and tailoring; typing and computer applications; construction skills such as carpentry, masonry and electrical wiring. The latter was deemed especially important, “Since most of the buildings in the Tamil homeland from where refugees come from (sic) need to be rebuilt or built anew....” (OfERR n.d.: 21).

Women, in particular, were encouraged to participate in income generation activities within their camps. OfERR assumed that women would save any extra money for future family expenses. OfERR’s Women’s Empowerment wing organized trainings in the camps to build participants’ self-confidence (*thannampikai*, or “self-belief”). Women at these one and two-day trainings engaged in physical activity to strengthen their bodies and learned self-defense; they listened to motivational speakers who led them to chant, “I can do it!” (*ennale mudiyum*). In addition, microfinance discourses resonated with values of “self-reliance” at OfERR, leading to the installation of women’s self-help groups in camps throughout the state. Members of these groups pooled small amounts of money into a bank account and made small business loans to members, who repaid the

fund. Their income generation activities included: Small businesses serving (mostly) camp refugees such as bicycle repair, phone booths, tea and cool drinks' shops, jam and pickle making, vegetable shops and community canteens, mushroom farming, spirulina cultivation, poultry rearing. These groups exemplified neoliberal approaches to international development work in Sri Lanka among the internally displaced and women who were widowed during the war, and reflected broader trends throughout South Asia.<sup>318</sup>

### **India, Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka's War**

By October 2008, Sri Lanka's "Eelam War IV" had become a prime subject of public debate and action, coinciding with the start of my fieldwork in India.<sup>319</sup> Splashy headlines in the morning and evening dailies, and television news, brought political jousts and protests—and along with them, the war—into the everyday spaces of Tamil Nadu. Sri Lanka's war had become the topic of conversation from streets and colleges to teashops and households. It was not the first time. In 1983, thousands of people marched on the streets to protest state-organized violence against Tamils in Sri Lanka.<sup>320</sup> Twenty-five years later, contemporary protests reminded Tamil Nadu activists of the events they had organized and joined in response to July 1983.

Shortly after the riots of 1983, the government of India covertly established training camps for several militant groups through an intelligence agency called the

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<sup>318</sup> See, for example, Karim (2011) for an ethnographic study of microfinance and debt among women in Bangladesh.

<sup>319</sup> Eelam War IV is how the Sri Lankan government and press pundits in India referred to the war. The other three wars refer to periods of war in 1983-1987, 1990-1993, and 1994-2001. Tamil refugees did not refer to the war in this way.

<sup>320</sup> Personal communication with historian V. Geetha, and discussed by several activists. For reporting on this event see Tamil Times (1983).

Research & Analysis Wing, or RAW (Narayan Swamy 1994). The LTTE also found a patron in the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, film icon M.G. Ramachandran, who provided an ostentatious gift of Rs 1 million to the group in 1984. International and vernacular media, politicians, activists and militants were not the only producers of this public discussion. As noted in Chapter 1, large numbers of refugees arrived with first-hand knowledge of the war, which they shared with locals who became their neighbors, friends, and on occasion, affines.

Three events, however, changed the discursive conditions for public action in response to Sri Lanka's war. First, the Government of India's uneven and deceptive treatment of Tamil militant groups created mistrust, leading to internecine violence among these groups, through clashes and mass killings in Sri Lanka, and targeted attacks in India. As early as 1985, a public gunfight between LTTE leader, Prabhakaran, and Padmanabha in the busy commercial district of Pandy Bazaar in Chennai's Thiyagaraya Nagar led to public and political discontent. The then Chief Minister Karunanidhi sought to distance his coterie from the politics of militancy when "Tamils were killing other Tamils."<sup>321</sup>

Second, the rise of the LTTE through internecine violence as "the sole representatives of the Tamil people" placed the organization in an increasingly antagonistic relationship with the Indian government. The latter had favored other Tamil armed groups at various times in an effort to control the movement. When India attempted to broker peace with the Sri Lankan government through the Indo-Lanka

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<sup>321</sup> Also see his call for unity among militant groups: Mu. Karunanidhi, n.d. *Eelat tamilarkalē onRupaddup porādungal!* (*Eelam Tamils, Unite and Fight!*)

Accord of 1987, it used strong-arm tactics to secure the begrudging consent of the LTTE, the dominant militant group, and sent peacekeeping forces to the island. Within months, the island returned to war, with the LTTE fighting the IPKF, with arms provided by the Government of Sri Lanka to their erstwhile enemy. The IPKF war created immense suffering among Tamils, and the LTTE incurred severe losses despite claims that it successfully routed the 4th largest army in the world.<sup>322</sup> This violent and traumatic war drove many Tamil refugees to leave the island.

Bad blood between the LTTE and the Indian government culminated in the third event, which continued to have repercussions throughout the war: In 1991, a female suicide bomber detonated herself in Chennai before Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Though never claimed nor actively denied by the organization, the assassination was quickly ascribed to the LTTE. The group that executed the plan was based in Tamil Nadu. With this one explosive act, the lives of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India changed overnight.

The 1991 assassination of Rajiv Gandhi turned many of India's citizens against Tamils from Sri Lanka, and altered Tamil Nadu's political climate. Tamil activists in India told me that local Tamils had "forgotten" the sufferings of their Sri Lankan brethren. By late 2008, however, these "public feelings" had changed. Everyone—from the daily wage laborer to the Chief Minister himself—seemed to be concerned with "the war against Tamils," (*tamilarkal meethana poor*) or the "genocide" (*inapadukolai*). I felt, at times, a palpable sense of distress and a desire to alleviate Tamil suffering as I moved

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<sup>322</sup> The LTTE used guerrilla tactics throughout the 1970s and 1980s, while fighting the IPKF. Indian forces were often suspicious of the population for this reason—most in the first round could not communicate with civilians, as they were Punjabi, and not Tamil-speakers. The LTTE developed a more conventional military force while fighting the Sri Lankan government during the 1990s.

through the city.<sup>323</sup> Auto rickshaw drivers looking for conversation would comment on my ‘different’ Tamil (however much of it had been assimilated to Standard Indian Tamil) and ask whether I came from *Ilangai* (Lanka); one evening, on my way to a protest, a driver asked me to promise that my family would “never return to that land,” telling me I would certainly be killed.<sup>324</sup> The night watchman at the flats where I lived often told me about what he saw on the news that day, remarked that it was an unfortunate thing, a sin (*paavam*) and invited me to his church’s prayer vigil. These common expressions of sympathy and concern were accompanied by another form of talk buzzing throughout the city: public speech about the politics of war.

On October 2, 2008, the CPI (Tamil Nadu) organized a protest to draw attention to the war in Sri Lanka, kicking off months of protests throughout the state. Tamil Nadu’s major political parties—the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)—and several other parties, including the Marumalarchi DMK (MDMK), Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), and Viduthalai Ciruthaigal Katchi (VCK), all had a history of politicking on the issue, and were eager to weigh in. Tamil activists from India called on the Indian and Sri Lankan governments to “Stop the War!” by using a political idiom of shared Tamilness to “voice” the grievances of civilians who were said to be unable to speak for themselves. Activists in Tamil Nadu, using a rhetoric of fictive kinship, substituted their bodies for those of Tamils in the war zone, to not only seek an end to war, but chastise the ‘Sinhala government’ and praise the

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<sup>323</sup> This desire to alleviate Lankan Tamil suffering was somehow de-linked from the situation of refugees who were living in Tamil Nadu, including recent arrivals from the war zone.

<sup>324</sup> ‘Three-wheeler’ or auto-rickshaw drivers belong to unions that rely on the backing of political parties for their negotiations, and were in turn readily mobilized to attend rallies.

LTTE for fighting the army. In doing so, however, their protests did not include the tens of thousands of Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka, who crossed the Palk Strait to find refuge in camps and cities throughout Tamil India. Tamil refugees quickly organized protests of their own.

### **The Figure of the Refugee**

In the course of short-term research prior to my extended fieldwork, I had been told time and again—by activists and academics in India and the wider Tamil diaspora—that refugees in India did not and could not participate in political action. No distinction was made in these claims between camp and urban refugees, between sites of refuge, or modes of action. Rather, the shared basis of these claims was the legal and social identity of “the refugee” as a singular figure, and consequently, interpretations of what this meant: a person cast out of a territory, no longer a citizen, and therefore purged of “the rights attached to a national community as such” (Ranciere 2004: 298). As one local Indian activist told me, “If they do these things, they will be arrested and thrown into the Special Camp.”<sup>325</sup> The refugee was rightly understood to be subject to the extremity of state violence, as well as everyday regulatory techniques that defined and managed refugees (like prisoners, detainees, the tortured and the quarantined) as a population apart: techniques of containment, enumeration, categorization, surveillance, etc. Outsiders presumed that Tamils who were identified as refugees could only be subject *to* state power; as a consequence of these operations of power, they could not be subjects of

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<sup>325</sup> As noted in Chapter 1, special camps are internment camps for Tamils from Sri Lanka who are suspected to have militant, and especially, LTTE connections.



power. In other words, “the refugee” did not have a political subjectivity or the capacity for action.

In this regard, activists’ and local scholars’ claims converged with the constitution of “the refugee” in the domains of international law, development, and humanitarianism. The anthropologist Liisa Malkki's critical review of the ongoing construction of a generalized domain of “refugee studies” provides a starting point for this analysis. Malkki situates the emergence of “the refugee” as an object of bureaucratic knowledge in the wake of the Second World War, during which “certain key techniques for managing mass displacements of people first became standardized and globalized” (1995b: 497). Chief among these was the refugee camp, a technology modeled on the military camp—as hundreds of work and concentration camps were transformed into “Assembly Centres” for the displaced—and enabled the spatial concentration and ordering of people, their quarantine, confinement, segregation and “perpetual screening” (498-99). In parallel, legal instruments were devised to organize mass displacement and migration, state-centered policies developed to secure national borders, and organizations formed with a decisive role in consolidating an “international refugee system,” in which refugees became a “problem for development.” Taken together, “the refugee” of this discursive field could only be a figure of pure abjection; an individual case of a mass phenomenon who must be returned to “the national order of things” (Malkki 1995a; 1995b).

Refugees were recognized as political agents and those denied of political rights in this period. On the one hand, as the sociologist Hein has suggested, “Research on refugees accumulated with minimal conceptual elaboration: Immigrants constituted an

economic form of migration, refugees a political form” (cited in Malkki 1995b: 496).<sup>326</sup> That refugee determination is a politicized process also finds ample evidence in the post-WW2 era: in the granting of asylum to political dissidents of the Cold War, as well as the more recent resettlement of Iraqi and Afghan asylum-seekers after the American invasion and occupation.<sup>327</sup> However, as the work of Malkki and others demonstrates, the making of “the refugee”—from techniques, institutions and legal instruments developed in the post-World War II management of Displaced Persons, to the post-Cold War growth of humanitarianism—is a process of depoliticization. “The refugee” in this view is not a subject of history or an agentive person, but an object of charitable aid and development that remains a potential threat to national security.

There has been a surge of interest among philosophers, legal scholars and social scientists in studying refugees and refugee camps in the two decades since Malkki’s review essay was published in 1995. Anthropological studies of refugees have analyzed the powerful institutions and discourses of development and humanitarianism that manage and order refugee lives (Malkki 1995a, 1995b, 1996; Redfield 2005; Feldman 2007, 2008; Ticktin 2011). These studies draw heavily on Foucault’s (1977, 1978, 1991, 2003) analysis of power—specifically, the modes of power he terms discipline, biopower and governmentality. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault traces the prison

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<sup>326</sup> Academic scholarship has since developed more complex understandings of the reasons for immigration and asylum-seeking. Refugee determination among states nevertheless remains tethered to the UN Convention’s requirement of a “fear of persecution.”

<sup>327</sup> During the Cold War, one can also point to the screening of Cambodian refugees at a camp at the Thai border for connections to Khmer Rouge in U.S. resettlement programs, as discussed in Ong 2003. Cambodian refugees were construed by INS agents as victims of political persecution – and thus admissible under a right to asylum - as the violence that instigated their flight was perpetrated by a 'communist' regime. However, those who were even perceived to have connections to the KR, even under coercion, were deemed “undeserving” and therefore not eligible for resettlement. As I discuss here and elsewhere, the shift from resettlement programs to “source control” has profound implications for the movement and asylum-seeking strategies of Tamil refugees.

system's emergence in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the paradigmatic site of modern power—itsself the culmination of disciplinary techniques disseminated across a variety of social institutions, ranging from the barracks and the school to the hospital and the asylum. The “microphysics” of disciplinary power and its finely-calibrated arrangements of time, space, and movement produces self-regulating “docile bodies” resulting in a more “humane” approach of “perpetual reform” and “rehabilitation.” Whereas discipline acts on individual bodies, biopower entails the regulation of populations through the application of disciplinary techniques on individuals. Governmentality organizes the conduct of populations, which is exercised as the power to make live and let die.

While anthropologists deployed and expanded Foucault's theories of biopower and governmentality in their work on refugees, “the refugee” also became the subject/object of critical debates in political philosophy, most notably in the influential work of Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben. In his book, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben begins his investigation of biopower and what he sees as “the paradoxical logic of sovereignty” by revisiting the history of Western political theory from the separation of political life (*bios*) and biological life (*zoē*) in the classical Greek city-state to the Holocaust and mass deportations in the twentieth century. The philosopher takes his cue from Foucault's genealogy of power, which he then reverses. Agamben argues that biopower—the power over biological life, or “bare life”—was at the heart of sovereign power all along; the sovereign, as the power to decide the exception to the rule, holds power over “life itself. Where Foucault finds in biopower a transformation of modern politics, Agamben finds the essence of all politics.

In making his argument, Agamben turns to an obscure figure in ancient Roman law: *homo sacer* or “sacred man,” the life that is impossible to sacrifice, and may be killed with impunity. *Homo sacer* is the human being who is cast out of the *polis* by the sovereign ban, and in the process becomes “bare life,” which has “the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men” (1998: 7). Included by virtue of its exclusion from political life, “bare life” becomes “the originary political element” and its production “the originary activity of sovereignty” (83). In other words, “bare life” inscribes the power to kill in the biopolitical exercise of sovereignty, through the decision to eliminate some individuals from the body politic in order to preserve the life of the population. This ability to decide who lives and who dies through the structure of the state of exception culminates in “the most absolute biopolitical space to have ever been realized” (171)—in Auschwitz, and the Nazi concentration camps of the Holocaust.

At this point in his work, Agamben turns to the final chapter of Part Two of Hannah Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism*, “The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man,” to consider the problem of refugees in the twentieth century. He quotes the paradox from which Arendt (1968) departs,

The conception of human rights, based upon the assumed existence of a human being as such, broke down at the very moment when those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people who had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships—except that they were still human (299, also cited in Agamben 1998: 126).

What we take to be “the sacred and inalienable rights of man”—also known as human rights—is revealed to lack protection and reality when it is no longer in the form of the rights of citizens of a nation-state (Agamben 1998: 126). Agamben considers how this distinction between man and citizen was enshrined in the founding document of

popular sovereignty—the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of 1789. Refugees reveal the fiction of human rights and signal the end—in the doubled sense of “purpose,” and “completion”—of the nation-state. In their exclusion from the political life of citizenship, refugees (the displaced, the stateless and asylum-seekers) are made into “bare life” that may be killed. This is the “secret solidarity” between humanitarianism and the state. However, it is in the refugee's depoliticization that such a figure augurs a new form of politics for Agamben. Included by their very exclusion, refugees are not merely exceptions to the rule of modern citizenship for Agamben; rather, they exemplify a political modernity shared by all human beings. In other words, the exceptional figure of “the refugee” becomes the exemplary political subject of late modernity.

The example of the Holocaust leads Agamben to declare that the camp is the structure in which the state of exception is realized normally. The camp is revealed as “the hidden matrix of politics” appearing at a time of crisis in the nation-state. “The camp, which is now securely lodged within the city’s interior, is the new biopolitical *nomos* of the planet” (176).

The French philosopher, Jacques Ranciere, levels an important criticism at Agamben, and his use of Arendt. Ranciere calls into question Arendt’s rigid separation of “private” and “public” spheres, noting that her argument about the subject of rights has paradoxically allowed Agamben and others to depoliticize life by setting it apart in a zone of exception, in “an anthropological sphere of sacrality situated beyond the reach of political dissensus” (2004: 299). Ranciere argues that the difference between the political subjects of “man” and “citizen” does not void the rights of the former; instead, the gap

between these subjects is an opening for political subjectivization (304). In this process, the rights of man are enacted through the staging of specific scenes of dissensus.

Ranciere writes, “These rights are theirs when they can do something with them to construct a dissensus against the denial of rights they suffer” (305-6). He seems to suggest that by identifying “man” with a subject deprived of any right, Arendt and Agamben reinscribe the subject’s depoliticization. In a shrinking political space, Human Rights are inherited by others—i.e. citizens—who can enact them and in the process are transformed into the cosmopolitical “right to humanitarian intervention.”

If Agamben’s theory of the exception reveals critical insights about the nexus of biopolitics and sovereignty in modernity, I remain wary of his claim that “we are all virtually *homines sacri*” (115). Such a statement flattens the historical dynamics of social power under colonialism and capitalism, as explored in the work his theories are built upon: Arendt’s account of imperialism in analyzing the origins of totalitarianism (1968[1951]), and Foucault’s theory of governmentality and the development of state racism (2003). Agamben himself qualifies his general theory with the word “virtually.” We are not all actually homo sacer. Indeed, the notion that the “we” addressed by Agamben are all refugees or “virtually *homines sacri*” does not account for the specific ways in which human beings are othered and cast out, nor does it explain what happens to those who are already subjects of political exclusion (Ziarek 2008).

The legal theorist, Patricia Tuitt, expresses her concern over such appropriations of the refugee figure. She writes,

...I am concerned with those works that assert that the refugee condition is potentially productive of a new political consciousness able to challenge the nexus of state, territory and identity... the refugee has become

complicit (albeit unwillingly) in what is becoming an increasingly categorical determination of the ‘rightless’ person or the ultimate ‘other.’ Such a determination is troublesome simply because it masks other forms and instances of violence (2004: 37).

As Tuitt puts it, the manner by which political theorists invoke “the country-less refugee” does not enable a strong reappraisal of the state-system and its violences. Tuitt goes on to argue that refugees have instead “all too successfully been reduced to a legal construction” (2004: 38).

Even as I find value in Tuitt’s critique of the appropriation of “the refugee” by Agamben and others, I caution against her depiction of international law as a total system. Refugees live within the constraints of international and national laws, while living and acting in ways that exceed or evade the limits of these laws. Moreover, not all who are bound to the identity of a “refugee” are included within the legal definition—as was the case in my research among Tamil refugees in India, who received *de facto* recognition from the state government, but continue to live without international legal status. This very process of *de facto* inclusion and *de jure* exclusion shapes formations of social and political identity that cannot be reduced to a simple legal construction. I argue, following Agamben’s probe of sovereign power and bare life, that refugees become new political subjects in the very sites and processes of their depoliticization and “inclusive exclusion”: the (biopolitical) camp.

However, this study departs from Agamben on the nature of refugees’ political subjectivization. Following the abovementioned critiques of Agamben’s work, it must be emphasized that the legal and discursive construction of “the refugee” does not wholly determine refugees’ political subjectivities. Further, as important as Foucault and

Agamben's theories have been for analyzing the the biopolitics of humanitarianism, biopower and the universal figure of "bare life" do not fully account for the political subjectivization of refugees, and more specifically, the ways in which refugees negotiate power relations in their everyday lives. Bare life, as the anthropologist Miriam Ticktin writes, 'always comes with political and social attributes allowing it to be identified as human, as bare, and as "life"...' in need of management and care (2011: 14).

What are we to make of all this? When and how does the figure of "the refugee," an object of technical interventions and bureaucratic management, and a subject theorized in political philosophy, appear in the social and political life of displacement?

Ethnographic research among refugees and displaced persons destabilizes the notion of a universal refugee figure by directing our attention to the social and historical context of specific camps, urban settlements, and dispersed populations (Sayigh 1994; Malkki 1995; Daniel and Thangaraj 1995; Daniel 1996; Ong 2003; Peteet 2005; Ticktin 2006; Feldman 2007, 2008) and their various formations of identity and community, or what Ilana Feldman (2012) calls "the politics of living within a humanitarian space." Such studies have also analyzed the varied ways in which refugees negotiate power relations and differently experience constraint and freedom in these settings. Moreover, recent work has challenged the notion that refugee subjectivity is entirely determined by powerful international humanitarian aid and development regimes, through analyses of community formations within refugee camps (Chandrasekar 2014; Gabiam 2012), governing practices and law (McConnachie 2014, Feldman 2007), and memories of past humanitarian experiences (R. McKay 2012). In the following sections, I attend to such formations of community and power in Tamil Nadu's camps, which are analyzed here as



partitioned spaces of protection and surveillance. In particular, I examine how refugees negotiated power relations as they mobilized a variety of actions to protest the war in Sri Lanka from within the spaces of their camps.

### **Camp protests**

Three weeks into my fieldwork in Tamil Nadu, in late October 2008, camp refugees watched political parties staging actions throughout the state, and seized the opportunity to gather and hold events of their own. Tamil refugees followed the war in Sri Lanka and Indian protests closely through multiple media: they watched the news on television, read newspapers and visited internet browsing centers, listened to local radio and diasporic channels on the web, received intermittent calls from their families, and sought firsthand accounts of the war from other Tamils who had recently arrived from Sri Lanka.<sup>328</sup> When Tamil Nadu's Chief Minister, Mu. Karunanidhi<sup>329</sup>, called for a human chain in Chennai on 21 October to "support" and "protect" Eelam Tamils, Tamil refugees felt compelled to voice their own protest. Two days before the human chain, 1,550

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<sup>328</sup> I observed the following media being read or listened to, and discussed: Newspapers such as *Thinathanthi*, *Thinakaran*, *Thinamani*, *The Hindu*; Sri Lankan newspapers online such as *Virakesari*, *Uthayan*, *The Sunday Leader*, *Daily Mirror*; websites such as Tamilnet.com, Tamilwin.com, puthinam.net; and Canadian Tamil Radio. On more than one occasion, Tamils said that it was important to read multiple sources of news, including sources that were clearly partisan for, as I was told by one avid reader at OfERR, "the truth lies somewhere in between." In this practice of reading, what was not said could be as important as what any particular media outlet had written about.

See Chapter 1 for a discussion of recent arrivals to the camps following an escalation of violence in April 2006. Camp refugees in Tamil Nadu were joined by more than 18,000 people between April 2006 and September 2008, fleeing the return to war in the eastern and northern districts of Trincomalee, Mannar, Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu. Many people were seeking refuge for the second and third time.

<sup>329</sup> This was Karunanidhi's fifth term. Political power in Tamil Nadu has alternated between two parties—the DMK and the AIADMK—since the DMK's C.N. Annadurai became Chief Minister of Madras State in 1967. Either Jayalalithaa (AIADMK) or Karunanidhi (DMK) have been head of state for almost 25 of the last 26 years. Karunanidhi first became CM shortly after the state's boundaries were redrawn and renamed Tamil Nadu in 1969.

men, women and children at four refugee camps in the northern district of Salem observed a fast to protest Sri Lanka's war. In a statement to the press, they highlighted that, as Tamils from Sri Lanka, it was their people who were caught in the crossfire of the offensive against the Tigers. They termed the issue a "human rights violation," and asked the Indian government to intervene to bring a peaceful end to the war. A reporter from The Hindu, a Chennai-based English-language national daily, happened to be at one of these camps for another story, and wrote up the protest. Three days later, another protest took place at a camp in Tirunelveli district, and became front-page news in the Tamil-language media.<sup>330</sup>

I first heard about camp protests at the OfERR head office in Chennai, where refugee advocates received word of these demonstrations through phone calls from camp leaders and discussed ways to control the protests, for reasons and by methods of internal criticism, opposition and surveillance that are discussed in greater detail later in this chapter. Such internal oppositions added to already prevailing circumstances that limited the ability of refugees to gather and demonstrate outside their camps. For now, however, I focus on the specific ways in which camp residents articulated their grievances, and situate them in the context of camp life and its management and administration: how refugees understood their protests as a demonstration of and for peace in Sri Lanka, a country from which they had fled and to which they claimed they would return. This discussion reveals how, for many camp refugees, their actions were an extension of peace activism and preparations for return during Sri Lanka's ceasefire and peace process

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<sup>330</sup> See also Deccan Chronicle 2008 and Sundaram 2008. Apart from these early events, Tamil refugee protests received scant attention in the local and national press.

*A not-so-silent front*

Refugees organized protests less than three weeks after the Communist Party of India fast that initiated a wave of public opposition to Sri Lanka's war. In the days and weeks that followed, according to newspaper reports, at least twenty refugee camps organized fasts during the months of October, November and early December. Hundreds of “inmates”—as they were termed by state officials and the media—gathered in each camp. Tamil-language print and television media provided visibility to some of these protests, as state-wide television and newspapers' local editions apprised readers of the events and delivered refugee statements to a broader Tamil-speaking public. However, a number of protests were not reported.

One of the first protests in October took place at a camp two hours from Chennai, where hundreds of residents held a fast and led a procession around their camp. Residents of the camp demonstrated on a Sunday. Two OfERR workers were longtime residents of this camp, and quietly told their co-workers about the demonstration at work the next day. Seated on a bench near the office threshold, I listened as John Ayya<sup>331</sup> described how hundreds of demonstrators marched through the by-lanes of their camp, banging household implements against metal vessels that had been given to them in the annual government ration to refugees.<sup>332</sup> The group called themselves *amathi pērani*, or Silent Front. Lowering his voice, John whispered the slogans that the protesters had shouted the day before:

*Thamil makkal kolaathe!*

Don't kill the Tamil people!

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<sup>331</sup> *Ayya* is term of respect and status for an elder Tamil man.

<sup>332</sup> As noted in the tables above.

*Engada tamil makkal kaapaathunga!*  
*Mahinda Rajapaksevai olikka!*

Save our Tamil people!  
Destroy Mahinda Rajapakse!

The slogans were simple and repetitive, and shouted three or four times before the next one. These phrases mirrored those used by strident nationalist politicians, party activists, and cinema stars in their recent demonstrations against Sri Lanka's war. Asking listeners not to "kill" but to "save *our* Tamil people" (my emphasis), John and his fellow protesters claimed Tamils in Sri Lanka as their own people. In addition, they highlighted concern over civilian casualties, and expressed anger over the return to war under the government of Sri Lanka's President, Mahinda Rajapaksa, and his brothers.

However, as Mark reminded me in his recounting of the event, the term *amaithi* has a doubled meaning. It can refer to both "silence" and "peacefulness," and also means "calm" or "contained," i.e. that which is "without disturbance."<sup>333</sup> Clanging pots and roaring chants, the protesters were anything but silent in their protest of war. Their name was thus an ironic commentary on the conflation of "silence" with "peace," or the oft-propounded idea in the international community and refugee rehabilitation that an uneventful state of being without disturbance – i.e. without war – was "peace."<sup>334</sup> Sri Lanka's "troubles" were often described as a disturbance, while in India, militancy was seen as having the potential to incite disturbance among refugees, who themselves were

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<sup>333</sup> SJV Chelvanayakam once used the expression, *amaithi perani*, during in a 1972 interview with E. Valentine Daniel in which he described the Federal Party's performance of "calmness" in *satyagraha*, a Gandhian action of non-violent protest. Chelvanayakam, a Christian, cited his inspiration as Isaiah 30:15 ["In quietness and confidence shall be your strength".] This ideal was interpreted by Hindus as an expression of *dharma*, i.e. action without attachment, as exemplified by Arjuna the charioteer in the *Bhagavad Gita* (Personal communication, June 2015, E. Valentine Daniel.)

Interestingly, the LTTE also drew on the notion of "calm" or "contained" rebellion in their emphasis on the discipline and self-control of their cadres.

<sup>334</sup> For an example of rehabilitation rhetoric reliant on a negative definition of peace, see Rao 1993.

construed as a disturbance to the nation-state order. As John and others explained, the protest was itself a “peaceful” one. By this, he meant that they expressed their grievances without the tactical use of violence, but also that the protesters did not demonstrate support for militancy. The camp leader, Xavier, echoed John’s claim when he told me, on a visit to the camp, that the event was organized to provide refugees with a “peaceful way” to air their frustrations and fears. Xavier, instead, saw organized protest as a kind of carnivalesque “safety-valve” (Bakhtin 1984; Turner 1969) that would counter, not catalyze, militant aspirations. For these reasons, he allowed refugees to gather together and march—actions that also required permission from the police, if not the Department of Rehabilitation.

The camp was a place rife with tension, despite a strong OfERR presence: Xavier was, after all, the brother of a senior OfERR member, and maintained close communication with the organization; staff who were camp residents returned to visit their families every Sunday. In spite of the organization’s presence, Xavier related that he had difficulties in managing different factions of the camp that loosely coalesced around their feelings about the NGO’s leadership and the politics of the war. While many refugees supported OfERR’s mandate to work with governments to secure refugee lives and livelihoods, a few camp residents sought to participate in more confrontational political action, including but not limited to participation in Indian politics, and/or demonstrating support for militancy. In their understanding, OfERR’s rehabilitation programs made limited gains toward the development of Tamil refugees, and did not create significant changes in their everyday lives and the war that led to their

predicament. These refugees tried, with difficulty, to mobilize other camp residents, but they were largely unsuccessful.

*“By Peaceful Means”: Between Protection and Surveillance*

Camp protests continued throughout October and November 2008, and were organized again in January and February 2009 as military operations in Tiger-controlled territory cut off nearly all communications between refugees and their families. Sri Lankan armed forces had captured the LTTE’s headquarters in Kilinochchi on January 2, and continued their offensive in the Tigers’ last remaining territory: the district of Mullaitivu. Few households were left untouched by this sudden development. As I traveled from camp to camp with OfERR fieldworkers, many residents complained that it had been months since they last received word from their relatives—whether by letter or phone. Many of these close relatives—among them, elderly parents, siblings and cousins, aunts and uncles—were displaced from their villages in Mannar, Kilinochchi and Mullaithivu districts. Meetings were held with Miss Sooriyakumary, the Secretary of OfERR Ceylon, who traveled from Colombo to Tamil Nadu to visit the camps, explain the latest news about the war and describe OfERR’s efforts to track down their relatives. During and after such meetings at camps in mid-February 2009, women passed scraps of paper inscribed with their contact info and their missing relatives’ name(s), their *ur* and the missing person’s last known location to the Secretary. Women’s names—in blue ballpoint ink, lettered in Tamil—were on these scraps of paper, more often than not.

Worried for their loved ones, Tamil camp refugees re-mobilized to demonstrate against the war. The protest at ‘Manikandan’ camp in Tirunelveli, one of several refugee protests in the region, was one such event.

At the fast—*unnāviratham*, in Tamil—people sat cross-legged on grass mats, shaded from the hot, afternoon sun by a makeshift *pandal*. The young men have tied red bands of cloth around their heads, thereby indexing blood spilled at war and their protest at one and the same time.<sup>335</sup> While state politicians dressed in a white *verti* inaugurated the event with passionate oratory, speaking, as one person told me, “in such a way that those who hear would immediately understand,” it was refugees who primarily spoke to the assembled. Young men, elders and the camp leader took turns at the microphone, describing how war has affected them and their families. A group of women led the youth group in a song, beginning, as in every event, with “Valka Eelath Tamil Akam” (Long Live Eelam Tamil Homeland!) Some of these singers work as teachers and health workers for OfERR.

Sooriya supervised ten camps in the Tirunelveli district. He was central to organizing this protest and its mass dissemination, which he explained was to “seek a ceasefire” (*porai niruttum*) “by peaceful means,” a phrase that in Tamil employs the same word, *amaithi*, as used by Mark and others (*oru amaithiyāna muraiyilē*). Sooriya related to me how the war has affected him and his family. From Mannar, he and his family had lived in a camp in Coimbatore between 1983 and 1987, returned to Sri Lanka after the signing of the Indo-Lanka Accord, and left for India once again when fighting recommenced in 1990.

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<sup>335</sup> Red is the color of blood, but it is also a color strongly associated with Tamil politics, as it is claimed by all parties in Tamil Nadu, and the most prominent color in the Tamil Eelam flag.



Figure 5.5: Protest at a refugee camp in southern Tamil Nadu  
(Photograph courtesy of Sooriya)

Sooriya also explained to me how the protest was organized. He and the other organizers had initially asked the District Collector for permission for the rally. The Collector (also known as the District Magistrate, and typically male) is a central government appointee in charge of governance within a state district.<sup>336</sup> As an officer of the Indian Administrative Service, he is entrusted not only with revenue collection and taxation, but planning, law and order, and the power to initiate an emergency response. In other words, the Collector was a key authority figure representative of the state, and in Tamil Nadu districts with camps, refugees sought his permission to gather outside their households. Manikandan’s organizers had planned to hold the fast on February 4th, Sri

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<sup>336</sup> The district is a key administrative unit of the Indian state. Districts may be further subdivided into sub-divisions, *tahsils*, also known as *taluks*. In 2009, there were 32 districts in Tamil Nadu, and 610 districts throughout India. In 2004, there had only been one woman in the job of District Collector in 55 years of Indian independence. At the time of writing, there are only three women District Collectors in Tamilnadu. For this reason, I use the pronoun “he.”



Lanka's independence day, but were denied permission. They then submitted a request by fax to Department of Rehabilitation in Chennai. In this message, they pleaded, "Give us an opportunity (*vāyppu*) to bring out our feelings (*unarvu*)." They were allowed to hold their event a few days after the 4th. The event was held as an all-day fast.

This protest was typical of fasts held in several camps throughout the state. Around 300 people attended the event, at which Sooriya and other activists gave interviews to major Tamil-language networks. Held within the confines of the camp on the margins of a rural village, the immediate audience could only be participants and camp dwellers. Refugees were able to overcome this obstacle by employing protest as a modular media spectacle, detachable from the "context" of their camp and readily available to be circulated and cited by mass media. Several camps also joined to write to the United Nations to press for a ceasefire. Sooriya and a few camp leaders drafted the letter, and refugees were encouraged to attach their signatures to the letter as a petition.<sup>337</sup>

The relative ease with which Sooriya's camp and others organized was followed by a clampdown in view of upcoming general elections. Officials were concerned to mute criticisms of the state and central governments, and worried that refugee protesters might be encouraged to display public support for the LTTE, like their Indian and diaspora counterparts. While surveillance (*kankānippu*<sup>338</sup>) was a part of everyday camp life, it was renewed and intensified during this time.

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<sup>337</sup> OfERR placed a premium on education and literacy to ensure that refugees were able to sign and thus be recognized as individuals belonging to a household. Signatures were important for the refugee identity card and log books (which recorded entry and exit from the camp), among other things. See Das 2005, "The Signature of the State" and on signatures and literacy activism in rural Tamil Nadu, see Cody 2012.

<sup>338</sup> It is worth noting that the Sri Lankan word, *kangani*, for the supervisor of the plantation, derives from *kankānippu*, and that the word for surveillance carried this valence, especially among *malaiyaha* Tamils.

Camp protesters were well aware of this surveillance and suspicion; they lived with it everyday. Sooriya explained to me why the protesters at ‘Manikandan’ did not and could not demonstrate support for the LTTE.

Older people say ‘There is no chance to get Tamil Eelam.’ (*thamil eelam engira oru chance-um illai.*) When I watch the media, I also think there is no chance. Without problems (fighting) it is ok. ...The LTTE made some mistakes. The assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, like that. So we cannot work with them. But we will definitely ask for protection (*pāthukāpu*) for Lankan Tamils (*ilangai thamarilar*).

People abroad (*velināttu makkal*) can tell--international countries (*sarvathēsa nadukal*), they can definitely tell. But we cannot say that [about the LTTE] here. We have come here to live peacefully. Why pick a fight?

Sooriya’s rhetorical question, “We have come here to live peacefully. Why pick a fight?” underscores how refugees understood protest not as a “disturbance” or “disobedience,” but as peaceful action to oppose war. This action for civilian protection (*pātukāppu*) was to be distinguished from other forms of diasporic political action by Tamils abroad. In this way, their protests were in keeping with the rehabilitation efforts of the NGO that attempted to impose limits on demonstrations that might criticize the state; this demand also corresponded to India’s role in “protecting” Tamil refugees from the war. Throughout my fieldwork, both refugees and the social activists among them highlighted their desire to act “in a peaceful way.” A peaceful life, as Sooriya outlines above, demands “protection” for Lankan Tamils, but this was not a peace that could be secured through the then-present phase of armed struggle. Refugee protests thus steered clear of providing any visible support to the LTTE. They did not wave flags, or demand a separate state, as activists did in Canada (in the mass demonstrations under discussion in Chapters 4 and 7). As Sooriya’s reminder of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi’s assassination

indicates, they *cannot* do this, as refugees were “guests” of the Indian state; to wave the LTTE’s Tamil Eelam flag was to “pick a fight.”

Instead, camp refugees demonstrated by using a practice with a long tradition in South Asian societies: fasting. Studies of South Asian religions have theorized fasting as a ritual that cleanses the body, purifies the soul, and prepares the body as a ground for ritual reincorporation. However, fasting also has a role in the actions of the secular world, through the conduct of politics. Fasting as a practice of protest and civil disobedience was most famously used by Mahatma Gandhi in the non-violent movement to secure India’s independence from British colonialism. Gandhi’s writings reveal the spiritual and political dimensions associated with the act: At once an act of bodily purification and self-overcoming, fasting, as a form of public communication, was resorted to “for the good of others” (1996: 206, cited in Alter 2000: 41). “The effect of such action on the life of the people is that when the person fasting is known to them their sleeping conscience is awakened” (quoted in Iyer 1987: 208, in Alter 2000: 44). Refugees thus chose to protest using a practice with strong associations of non-violence, self-discipline and righteous action for Indian and Sri Lankan audiences.<sup>339</sup>

#### *Muthukumar’s sacrifice*

One morning in late January, an Indian friend returned unexpectedly from her daily routine of waiting at the regional passport office for an official stamp to travel on a new passport. The office was shut down, and the road was surrounded by police and cordoned off from traffic. Shaking, my friend told me what she had seen: On the road

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<sup>339</sup> Knowing that camp refugees had experienced food insecurity and malnutrition may have heightened the moral significance of their fasts, particularly when viewed as a sacrifice for others.

was the charred outline of a body. A man had lit himself in flames. She did not know anything else.

We turned the television on. Cable news channels were already looping reports about the death-by-fire. The dark lines on the road marked the spot where Ku. Muthukumar, a Tamil Nadu journalist and PMK party-worker, had burned himself to death to protest Sri Lanka's war. Muthukumar had doused himself with petrol and announced his intention to ignite his body midday in front of Shastri Bhavan, a central government office on Haddows Road in Chennai. He left behind a four-page letter to communicate his demands. Addressed to a Tamil-speaking audience, and later translated into English for global circulation, the letter encouraged Tamils everywhere to continue to protest by other means.

Muthukumar's self-immolation ignited a wave of a protest throughout Tamil Nadu, beginning with his funeral. Several Tamil political parties, under a newly-formed umbrella group, the Eelam Tamils Protection Movement (*eela thamilar paathukaapu iyakkam*) mobilized their party-workers, students and locals to hold a funeral for Muthukumar in his neighborhood of Kolathur on the northern edges of Chennai.<sup>340</sup> That day, the air was taut amid a dense, pulsing crowd as Tamil activists carried Muthukumar's body, shrouded and enclosed in a glass case, in a hearse decorated with pink and red garlands, and a colour-printed headshot of the deceased. At the front, young men occasionally raised and held the LTTE's national flag, or printed paper versions of it. Some participants also held mass produced images of Muthukumar alongside portraits

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<sup>340</sup> This movement was comprised of the following parties: Vaiko's MDMK, Dr. S. Ramadoss's PMK, Thirumaavalavan's VCK, and P. Nedumaran—who left his post in the state's Congress Party to found the Tamil National Movement (*thamilar thesiya iyakkam*). They later decided to change the Movement's name to the Lankan Tamil Protection Movement to include the state's CPI led by Tha. Pandian.

of the LTTE leader, Prabhakaran. The march was the first time in recent years—since the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi—that the flag of the LTTE and Prabhakaran’s photo had been given public display in India.<sup>341</sup> For these activists, the procession had also become a protest against the Government of India’s ban on the LTTE. They chanted anti-government slogans, and defaced posters that praised Karunanidhi and other leaders in power.<sup>342</sup> The march continued, in spite of rumors that the state would shut it down. Politicians, activists and film personalities paid tribute to the deceased, while media and onlookers watched, pulled along by a stream of people. An estimated one hundred thousand people joined the funeral procession, which lasted over eight hours.

In the following weeks and months, protests continued in cities and towns throughout the state. Possession of Muthukumar’s body and his ashes became a contentious issue for students who mobilized around his death, as per his instructions.<sup>343</sup> Black flag protests were held in Chennai and towns and cities throughout the state. People gathered at memorials for Muthukumar, where they listened to speeches about the war in Sri Lanka and the “genocide” (*inapadukolai*) of the Tamil people. Student activists held protests on their campuses in January and February 2009, leading to a government shutdown of all state-run colleges in Tamil Nadu. Law students also presented a memorandum to Russia’s ambassador to India. Protesters even gathered in front of

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<sup>341</sup> "Muthukumar triggers off mood of defiance in Tamil Nadu," Tamilnet <<http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=79&artid=28245>> Accessed: 2 Feb 2009.

<sup>342</sup> Larger-than-life cutouts of leaders and billboards and posters praising their qualities are a significant part of the public and political landscape of Tamil Nadu. See Bate 2003 for further discussion. Also see Pandian 1992 for an original study of M.G.R.’s use of film hero archetypes to mobilize Tamil Nadu’s subaltern classes.

<sup>343</sup> In a portion of his suicide letter addressed to law students who had begun a hunger strike, Muthukumar wrote: “The police force will try to lay my body to rest. Don't allow them to do that. Capture my dead body, don't bury it, and use it as a trump card to sharpen your struggle.”

Spencer Plaza, a shopping mall in Chennai. Women's groups held hunger strikes. In continuing with their protests, activists ensured that the Sri Lankan war and India's recent assistance would be a major issue in the upcoming state and central government elections in May. Moreover, Muthukumar's sacrifice led others to follow his example. Eight other Tamil men in India, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka's Tamil diaspora—in Switzerland (Geneva) and the UK (London)—self-immolated to protest the war.<sup>344</sup>

### *The letter*

Muthukumar's four-page statement ranges widely across hot topics in Tamil Nadu and Indian politics, including allegations of political corruption and dynastic politics, the Cauvery water dispute, attacks on Indian fishermen, and Sri Lanka's ceasefire, among others. The letter interpellates "the Tamil people," but also makes more specific addresses to law college students, people with origins in other states living in Tamil Nadu, the Tamil Nadu Police Force, "the people of Tamil Eelam, and the Liberation Tigers," and the "International Community, and our hope Obama." The letter is, above all, a lengthy and fiery condemnation of the Indian state, and more specifically, its assistance to the Sri Lankan military.<sup>345</sup> It was read widely, as it was photocopied,

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<sup>344</sup> These self-immolations took place between February and May 2009, but continued among Tamil Nadu activists after the war's end, as late as March 2013 in Cuddalore.  
<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/selfimmolation-for-twin-cause-of-sri-lankan-tamil-corruption/article4476179.ece>

Self-immolation is a not-uncommon tactic of protest among political workers in Tamil Nadu. This tactic was infamously used during 1965 protests against making Hindi the national language of India, and by fans after the death of Chief Minister M.G. Ramachandran. In 2013, 2,098 people died by self-immolation—nearly 13% of all such deaths in India, and twice the national rate.  
[timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Jayalalithaahad-opposed-self-immolation-but-her-supporters-resort-to-it-after-her-imprisonment/articleshow/43740524.cms](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Jayalalithaahad-opposed-self-immolation-but-her-supporters-resort-to-it-after-her-imprisonment/articleshow/43740524.cms)

<sup>345</sup> The Government of India provided training and radars to the Sri Lankan Army. This assistance was repeatedly denied by the state, which further argued that Sri Lanka's conflict was an "internal affair," despite a history of Indian involvement since 1983. For an excellent study of India's political and military

photographed, scanned, translated and disseminated through Tamil media and websites to reach a global, diasporic audience. Indeed, this was done as per Muthukumar's own instructions at the conclusion of his screed:

Dear Tamil people, in the struggle against injustice our brothers and children have taken up the weapon of the intellect. I have used the weapon of life. You use the weapon of photocopying. Yes, make copies of this pamphlet and distribute it to your friends, relatives, and students and ensure that this support for this struggle becomes greater. Nan'ri.

By using the "weapon of photocopying," student activists replicated and spread Muthukumar's message far and wide. Flyers of the letter were printed up for the dozens of political demonstrations and memorial ceremonies that were staged by Tamil Nadu's citizens in the weeks to come.

### **Surveillance and limits to collective action**

Where were Sri Lankan Tamil refugees amid these protests? Muthukumar's self-immolation was a solemn event that touched the minds of refugees in Tamil Nadu. For days, it was all anyone could talk about. At OfERR's head office, the mood among refugee workers was solemn. Quietly, we read the papers and clicked links and scrolled, as we did everyday for news and analysis about the war. This time, we tried to assess the meaning of this spectacular death and wondered what it might portend. Reactions were mixed, with a few people noting that Muthukumar's analysis of Lankan politics was lacking. One woman asked, "What use is this death, when so many people are dying in our homeland?" Most of her co-workers interpreted Muthukumar's death differently. To them, Muthukumar's letter was a sincere genuflection about the role of the Indian state in

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intervention in Sri Lanka's conflict, see Krishna 2000. Also see Rupesinghe 1988, Muni 1993 and Sivakumar 2001 for analyses of the IPKF period.

the Sri Lankan war. They appreciated his candor, despite his support for the Tigers. Even Siva, who vehemently disliked the LTTE and was usually so quick to jab local politicians with his jolly cynicism, was careful with his words when he spoke to me about Muthukumar. “We cannot dismiss what he did. He did it for us.”

If Muthukumar’s death was for Eelam Tamils, their actions in Tamil Nadu became subject to even greater scrutiny by state authorities and intermediaries, who also directed greater attention to local agitations acting in their name, or on their behalf. Camp refugees, as a result, experienced new limits to their previous efforts at mobilization. As the Tamil Nadu protests continued, and diaspora protests took off, refugees were increasingly discouraged and prevented from demonstrating inside their camps. In a few locations, camp residents were given permission to gather in protest, as long as there was no media coverage; in most other camps, they were denied permission.

For some, the denial of permission was not surprising; those who did not organize protests of their own explained to me that local people were protesting, and “since they are doing it for us,” it was better to avoid trouble. Others felt aggrieved. On February 15, when four camps submitted a request to hold a demonstration to the District Collector, they were denied and told they could talk among themselves—something they were not ordinarily allowed to do. There should be no media, they were explicitly told. One woman then told me, “We have a concern (*akkarai*, or compassion) for our people. But we cannot do anything. We are refugees (*ahathiyal*). I see their suffering (*vētanai*), their sorrows (*varuttam*), the news. We shall do it by peaceful means—they say Indians can do it, but we must not?” Her statement asserts a desire to protest as an affective response to Tamil suffering.



Not all refugee camps protested the war. In fact, the majority did not. At Manikandan, Sooriya and the camp leader were both deeply concerned about the effects of war on civilians in northern Sri Lanka. On the other hand, in the aftermath of Muthukumar's death and student mobilizations in Tamil Nadu, other camp leaders worried about upsetting the police and creating friction with the local communities near their camps. Instead of coordinating with other refugee leaders to organize protest, they watched for signs of "disorder" (*ozhunkīnam*), "movement" (*iyakkam*<sup>346</sup> – both in the sense of activity and militancy) and "opposition" (*ethirppu*<sup>347</sup>) around their camp. Such was the case at Gangaipuram, a camp adjacent to Manikandan.

I had come to the newly-built camp at Gangaipuram with Shanthi Akka, a female OfERR worker whose own camp was a few hours away by bus. Shanthi had come to inaugurate the camp's first self-help group, inviting women from several different camps in the area, as well as those who had just recently moved to this one, to participate. I was invited to observe the group and talk with the women after the meeting. Shanthi and I visited some of the women in their new, brick and whitewashed concrete dwellings, to make sure they attended the meeting. 96 families live here now. Though pleased to be in bright new homes, they had not been consulted about their needs, and voiced concerns as they showed us around: the latrines were inside, making the rest of the house smell; the indoor kitchens were long but narrow, and kept cooking fumes inside the house—they should have been built in the back, where the fumes would blow away.

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<sup>346</sup> I use "movement" to translate two senses of *iyakkam*, a word that refers, in some contexts, to activity related to protest to end the war, and in others, more specifically to militancy through membership in the LTTE specifically.

<sup>347</sup> This use of *ethirppu* referred to opposition to OfERR and/or the Indian state, in contrast to the use of the same term in the pro-/anti-LTTE binary of nationalist activists.

After visiting the houses and listening to the women's concerns, we walked over to a newly built open-air tuition centre, where the meeting was to take place. Thin reed mats were spread out on the cool concrete floor, and as we arranged ourselves in a circle, people continued to arrive and took their seats. Before long, we had a group of twenty-seven women. Not a few minutes later, an elderly man rushed into the room, demanding to know what we were doing. He, it turned out, was the camp thalaivar. He was worried about the meeting. Shanthi Akka told him that we were from OfERR and holding a self-help group, but this did not calm him. "Yes, but we must know-- we don't want any troubles (*piraccinai*)."

The camp leader, referring to "troubles," used the same word that Lankan Tamils use to refer to the conflict. As he said this, I noticed that he was on his cellphone. He was on the phone with the camp's Q Branch officer. Our meeting was unexpected, and it made him nervous. He reminded us that there had been "tensions" at a nearby camp, where a meeting had become "disorderly" and the police had gotten involved. The thalaivar felt the same thing could happen here. At any sign of outsiders, he was ready to inform the local police.

Shanthi tried to reassure him. "We did not know. Hereafter, we only will tell (you about the meeting)." (*Inimel nāngalē colliduvom.*) The thalaivar continued to explain his concerns. "If they say something against the country, if they say something wrong... it could show up in a newspaper, and we will have problems." Akka repeated what she had already said and added, "How were we to know we had to inform you?" OfERR, after all, had good relations with the police and the regional office informed the collector and officers of their planned visits. The thalaivar was not listening to her explanations; he simply wanted us to follow his protocol. He wants us to follow protocol. After Shanthi

explained the purpose of the self-help groups and our meeting, the thalaivar said, "That is your freedom, it's your money. This is my duty." (*athu ungodā cuthanthiram, ungodā panam... ithu ennoda kadamai*).

Before he left, the camp thalaivar's attention turned to me. "And who is she? What is she doing here?" I had been quiet, and he had noticed. Akka explained that I was visiting the camp to do a research project (*āyvu*) and documenting OfERR's history. The thalaivar related this to the officer on the phone.<sup>348</sup> Now appeased, the formerly-perturbed leader left us to the meeting.

Akka later explained to me some of the circumstances behind the conflict. The thalaivar had spoken to Loka Anna the day before, who said that there was "no program"- - "That is why he is so angry!" she says (*athanālē avarukku orē kōpam!*) The camp was new, and we were holding the first meeting there. There was confusion among the various levels of NGO management and camp leadership. Even though the thalaivar's role was created by OfERR, he questioned our motives. We had not sought his permission, and had circumvented his rules. These acts created a conflict between the camp leader, whose "You should have told me" was challenged by the OfERR worker, Shanthi, with "How did we know we had to tell?" Shanthi Akka was also upset because she was being treated as any refugee or village visitor to the camp would be. She reminded me that she was not 'any' visitor—she was there on behalf of OfERR, though she herself was a refugee from another camp. Like all OfERR workers, Shanthi had photo

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<sup>348</sup> The Q Branch officer was likely already aware of my work, as I had visited several camps in the area prior to this visit, and was staying at OfERR's regional office. The office head had already vouched for me.

I had also received a visit from a Q Branch officer the morning after my first camp visit. He asked questions about the nature of my research and checked my documents during this visit. Upon seeing my Canadian passport, the officer noted the country and asked whether I had any connections to the LTTE there. I was surprised by the directness of his question.

identification from the Department of Rehabilitation that authorized her to work in the camps and required renewal every two years. This documentation was not proof enough for the *thalaivar*, who clung rigidly to the rules he knew.

We sang “Valka Eelath Tamil Akam”—the song typically used at OfERR meetings was also sung at the camp protest described above. Each woman then introduced herself by stating her name, district or region of origin in Sri Lanka (sometimes adding their home-village), date or year of arrival in India, and her present camp residence. After the introductions, the *thalaivar* returned. He had suddenly remembered something. "There are people from other camps here, are there not?" (*veli mukaamilirunthu vanthavarkal irukkille?*) He told them to come and write their addresses in a log after the meeting. Then, and only then, was the women’s ‘self-help group’ meeting allowed to proceed.



Figure 4.6: Women's self-help group meeting, Gangaipuram camp, February 2009.  
Photograph by author.

However, just as OfERR could not anticipate camp protests, the camp thalaivar's interrogation of Shanthi Akka and the women's meeting had consequences he did not foresee. Since this was the first meeting to be held in this camp, the women who attended were curious but non-committal. Some had known Shanthi Akka from her visits to their neighboring camps and felt obliged to attend out of friendship, loyalty and gratitude, many were curious about opportunities to earn extra income and save for their family's health and education expenses; still others found the meeting to be an occasion for company outside their camp or their new houses. After the camp leader's outburst, the group of women was now transformed.

A moment's silence gave way to observations about the meeting's disruption. One woman opined that the extra surveillance was because they were in a new camp, and a few agreed. Shanthi Akka decided to direct the discussion. "Let's talk honestly/truly about our troubles" (*engada piraccinaiyai patti cattiyamā pesuvom*), she said. "It won't go outside." With that prompt, we considered what had just happened. Explaining that the NGO gives its 'program' in advance and talks to "our Q Branch people," Akka reminded the group that it was their responsibility to get permission/approval (*anumathi*) from their local Q Branch officer.

The thalaivar's anxious outburst—and the reminder of the need to secure permissions to hold a meeting—spurred the women to reflect upon constraints on mobility and action in the camp, and led to a discussion about what they could do as the war continued in Sri Lanka. A group of women were working on a statement (*aRikkai*) to

remember Muthukumar, who had immolated himself less than two weeks ago. They wanted to know whether they could hold an event, and circulated a list among themselves to collect addresses. Not all women were familiar with the protocols, however. A woman asked whether they required permission to fast (*unnāviratham ceyrathu anumathi edukka venumā?*). Yes, she was told. What else could they do to demonstrate? “We could have a human chain,” offered one woman. Another woman suggested an arts competition (*ōviya pōtti*) or an exhibition (*kankkātchi*) of stories, essays, or folk artforms like the *kōlam*, suggesting it would interest the young women in the camp as well. We should sign a petition (*kaiezhuttu pōttu*) stating that there should be peace in Sri Lanka, and send it to the UN, another woman remarked.

During this discussion, it became clear that the thalaivar’s concerns were not only due to the ‘newness’ of this camp. Some women commented on increased surveillance of the camps, after Muthukumar’s immolation the previous month. I learned that whereas camps usually have a roll call once a month, they have since been subject to “checking” (the English word is used here) once a week. And in the weeks leading up to central and state government elections, they would be closed to entry or exit. State officials justified these actions as being for the “protection” of refugees from pro-LTTE activists and militants, in addition to their concerns for India’s national security.

Camp refugees also worried about the potential repercussions of their protest. “Until it [the war] is over, it must be done peacefully,” suggested an older woman. “We don’t want problems (*cikkal*) to come to us. Look at what happened with Seeman,” she continued. “Only two or three words—like that, when our people do, they could put us in jail.” The Tamil film director had delivered a fiery speech during a fast and black flag

protest at Rameswaram in December, and traveled throughout the country, inciting Tamils to rise up against the Indian government.<sup>349</sup> He was detained briefly under India's Prevention of Terrorism Act and summarily released. Refugees who were suspected of any connections to militancy, on the other hand, were taken to "special camps," open-air prisons for detainees who could not be returned to Sri Lanka.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have provided a thick description of life for Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka living in the refugee camps and cities of Tamil Nadu, India. I unpacked "the refugee" and explored the ambivalent and multiple values of this polysemic figure for displaced Tamils living in southern India and mobilized by, in Hannah Arendt's words, a "new global political situation" (1968: 297). It is precisely in contested attempts to reinhabit a world that "makes opinions significant and actions effective," and to invoke and appropriate its loss, that Tamil refugees enacted a new political subjectivity at the limits of modern citizenship. In contrast to discourses of development and humanitarianism that depoliticize and construct refugees as passive, powerless victims, and scholarship that idealizes the refugee as a political subject 'included' by virtue of her exclusion by the state, this chapter has shown that refugees are political subjects with heterogeneous social identities. In Tamil Nadu's refugee camps, OfERR's non-governmental politics of development created conditions that generated political possibilities not foreseen by the NGO. Tamils in the camps made strategic claims to "refugee" as a social and political identity in order to protest war in Sri Lanka and India's military aid. They did so as refugees who were treated as "guests" seeking India's

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<sup>349</sup> For further details, see New Indian Express (2008).

protection from violence, and as those subjected to state surveillance. If the architecture of the camps exemplified processes of inclusion and exclusion in the production of state boundaries, camp refugees' actions temporarily disrupted the state's ordering of their lives. Refugees responded creatively to the state's shifting tactics of policing and surveillance by finding new ways to protest the war and the silencing of refugees.

The next chapter discusses another facet of refugee life in Tamil Nadu amid protests against Sri Lanka's war. It tells the stories of two Tamil refugees living as undocumented refugees at the edges of the city of Chennai, as they prepare to migrate from India to the West.



## Chapter 6

### *Waiting to Leave: Migrant Non-Belonging in the City*

#### **Introduction**

The previous chapter discussed how refugees negotiated camp life and the politics of Sri Lanka's war by organizing protests and other forms of collective action in Tamil Nadu. However, not all Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India live in the camps. As noted in Chapter 1, Tamil refugees also live in Tamil Nadu's cities and towns, and to a lesser extent, the state's rural countryside. While camp refugees mobilized and organized fasts and processions to demonstrate their opposition to Sri Lanka's war, their counterparts living outside the camps had a very different relationship to public action and protest. How did refugees who were suspended between the camp and the city interpret and enact opposition to Sri Lanka's war? If camps were at times sites of activity and contention for residents and those who worked with them, what forms of life characterized everyday politics for refugees who did not live within them? Why did camp inhabitants gather to fast and demonstrate as refugees, while those living in the city did not?

In this chapter, I shift from the social and political action of camp refugees to the lives of urban refugees<sup>350</sup> and their relationship to collective action during this time. In

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<sup>350</sup> I use the term "refugee" (in Tamil, *ahathi*) here to denote a social identity that was self-ascribed by nearly all of my interlocutors. Insofar as they are not recognized as de facto refugees who are registered and living in camps, and some Tamils from Sri Lanka—typically, more recent arrivals who left Sri Lanka after the return to war in 2006—have not registered with the Tamil Nadu police, while preparing for migration abroad, some urban refugees may also be described as "migrants." In this chapter, I alternate the terms "refugee" and "migrant" to refer to displaced Tamils without legal status who prepare to move from India to another country (that is not Sri Lanka).

the midst of local, daily demonstrations against the war that displaced them, I explore the everyday forms of life that led Tamil refugees in Chennai to avoid public demonstrations and other forms of protest. I begin with a discussion of undocumented or “illegal” migration, and the precarious status of “overstay.” This is followed by a mapping of the peri-urban and suburban areas where Sri Lankan Tamils live in Chennai, and my entry into fieldwork among Tamil urban refugees and migrants at the western edges of the city.

The bulk of this chapter centers on the lives of two urban refugees waiting to migrate to Western countries with large Tamil diaspora communities. I examine the life histories of Komathy, a woman who was preparing to migrate to France to reunite her family, and the story of Ruban, a young man who was awaiting the outcome of his refugee claim via group sponsorship to Canada. These two cases reveal the political rationality of migration for Sri Lankan Tamils in urban India. Tamil refugees live in the city to expand their prospects for everyday mobility, yet face social, economic and political constraints that shape their desires for migration to another country. I argue that urban refugees prepared for their migration abroad by temporarily sacrificing their ideals of Tamil community and struggle, while imagining their political futures as citizens. Tamil migrants in Chennai—and arguably, throughout the global South—believed that formal citizenship coupled with community (the idea and experience of living in large, organized Tamil diasporas in the West), would provide them with the sense of cultural belonging, political rights, and economic opportunities through which they would become “settled” and no longer have to move.

## **Refugees at the edges of the city**

Tens of thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils live in Chennai (the city formerly known as Madras), but exact numbers are unknown. Those who arrived in the early years of the war were counted upon arrival, but were not required to register with local authorities. As noted in a previous chapter, the state decided after the assassination that all refugees living in Tamil Nadu would be required to register with the police. Most did not comply with this order. Sri Lankan Tamils, as refugees lacking status, have preferred instead to avoid interaction with the authorities unless absolutely necessary.

Urban refugees live in a precarious situation they called “overstay.” They usually entered India on a tourist visa, while some young men arrived on student visas.<sup>351</sup> It was relatively easy for middle-class Jaffna Tamils to get tourist visas to visit South India’s holy temples; Hindu and Buddhist Sri Lankans have made pilgrimages to these religious sites, individually and collectively, and continued to visit as possible during and after the war. Moreover, some Jaffna families were historically connected to these temples, which owned lands in the peninsula. Jaffna Tamils could also obtain a tourist visa to see other sights or visit relatives. Tourist visas could not be extended or converted to another category, and the period of validity was decided on a case-by-case basis. As a result, once duration of the visa was up, the visitor was “overstaying” the visa. This meant being deemed an “illegal immigrant.” If caught, a person on overstay would be subject to fines and up to five years of imprisonment.

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<sup>351</sup> Student visas are provisional upon admission to a government-approved college.

*Tamil Refugees and Migrants in Chennai*

Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in Chennai live in several neighborhoods throughout the city. At first, they clustered in neighborhoods like Besant Nagar and Thiruvanmiyur on the city's southeastern coastline, or more central locations like Kodambakkam. Most of OfERR's refugee staff lives in quarters owned by the organization near its offices in Egmore. By the mid-2000s, middle-class families were moving to neighborhoods like Anna Nagar where they could acquire newer, more spacious flats and housing. During my fieldwork, more recent arrivals lived in suburban and peri-urban neighborhoods on the western and southern edges of the city: Porur, Chromepet, Ashok Nagar, K.K. Nagar, Alwar Thirunagar, Vadapalani, Valasaravakkam. Several of these neighborhoods were once villages that became residential colonies during the post-independence growth of Madras, and have witnessed rapid population growth in the last twenty years.

My fieldwork during this time centered on the peri-urban municipality of Valasaravakkam, and adjacent Chennai neighborhoods. Like many places on the western outskirts of "Greater Chennai," Valasaravakkam attracted refugees and rural migrants for one main reason: Rents were cheap. Chennai was often referred to as a collection of villages, and the ever-expanding city of 12 million encroached on this one too.<sup>352</sup> Residents felt that it was only a matter of time before their urban splinter would be incorporated into the city, and watched as land prices rose while new luxury flats spread and plans were drawn to expand commuter train lines to Chennai's center. A Mega Mart had opened on the main road, allowing shoppers of the new and aspiring middle-class to

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<sup>352</sup> In 2008-2009, Valasaravakkam was a separate municipality in Thiruvallur district; by 2011, it had become part of Chennai Corporation (Wards Nos. 149 and 152). Before 1991, a refugee camp was located not far from this neighborhood; as noted in Chapter 1, the government moved and resettled refugees away from urban areas in the name of security.

purchase cheap “readymade” garments and disposable goods in one convenient location; on an adjacent corner, a swath of verdant green was not a sign of local vegetation, but the painted billboard of a supermarket run by the communications conglomerate, Reliance. The air was filled with the industrious optimism and hubris of investors who hoped to sell high and get rich quick. Tamil refugees, however, did not expect to partake of these grand schemes. They instead trained their sights on more modest enterprises attuned to these changes, and obtained loans to start small internet browsing centers, roadside restaurants serving “Ceylon” food, clothing stores and more.

I first traveled to Valasaravakkam with Lakshmi, a young woman who had come to OfERR to provide assistance to another visiting researcher who required Tamil translation. A number of Sri Lankan families lived in Lakshmi’s neighborhood, as did a family friend, and she was keen to learn more about her neighbors. Lakshmi offered to make introductions and help me with my research. While I spent my days at OfERR, she introduced herself to people with the help of her family friend.

Lakshmi was at first taken aback by the difficulties she encountered in getting people to agree to meet with her, an Indian citizen. They were worried about their families, and did not wish to speak idly. One day, she took me to meet Mahendran, a Jaffna Tamil who worked at a local internet browsing centre. He was still a little suspicious after her approach. To put him at ease, Lakshmi told him, “Don’t worry. She is Sri Lanka people too.” Upon hearing this, Mahendran, like most Sri Lankan Tamils I met, asked me, “What is your home-village?” Once again, I was asked a chain of questions that I also used in my research and everyday life to emplace other Tamils. Convinced of my background, Mahendran made a few calls on his glossy black mobile.

The next day, Pradeepan, Mahendran's friend and co-worker, took me to the latter's cousin's house. Komathy, a Tamil Christian from Jaffna, was thirty-five years old at the time of my fieldwork in 2008-2009. She had been living in Tamil Nadu for nearly twelve years, with her son, her sister, and their elderly mother. Her husband was in France, and she had not seen him in six years. When we first met, she had just begun preparations for Christmas celebrations, a process that would continue for weeks—and which sometimes interrupted our conversations. We sat on brown plastic chairs in a sparsely furnished drawing room in her modest flat, while relatives walked in and out of adjacent rooms, at times listening in to our conversation, at others chiming in or having one of their own. Though we went on to discuss political events and their broader dynamics, Komathy first related to me a narrative of her displacement. Mapping a trajectory of displacement is a form of storytelling that has become widely shared by Tamils of Sri Lanka—and is in abundant evidence throughout this dissertation—whether in camps, in cities, or diasporic metropolises. The narrative that follows is summarized from my fieldnotes and a recorded interview.

#### *Komathy's displacement*

Komathy's family had nothing when they left their village in Jaffna. The army bombed their village at four in the morning, and the government provided no shelter or recompense. "If they had at least given us a place, it wouldn't have been a problem." Instead, she found herself on the run. Komathy was displaced several times within Sri Lanka before arriving in India by flight in June 1997. The move to India, she points out, was her tenth displacement. As we spoke, she began to chart the family's itinerary of displacement, beginning with her home village (*conta ūr*). Her fully-formed sentences

quickly fell away from place-names issued in a rapid-fire list. I hastened to record the whole list – from her village on the peninsula to another, back to her village, to another, then another, to Kilinochchi, to Colombo – but when she finished, I was still writing. She laughed. “You won’t get it all down!” (*niingal athellaam note-panna maattiinga!*)

They moved each time, due to the fighting (*candai*). Her home village was near a Sri Lankan military camp. With each round of bombing and shelling, they moved from place to place. Ending up in Colombo, away from the theatre of war, they found it difficult to survive. They were among thousands of Tamils who had arrived from the North and East seeking work. Instead, they received checking. This, she says, is when they decided to leave the country. Her husband went first, in 1996, and Komathy and her son flew to Chennai the following year.

### *Life in urban India*

Komathy’s narrative of displacement and migration did not end with her departure from Sri Lanka. In India, she first stayed with her father’s sister who had moved thirty years before to Kodambakkam, a bustling Chennai neighborhood that housed many families who arrived and resettled after 1983. From there, they went to the camps at Mandapam in southern Tamil Nadu to register as refugees, but decided against it; Komathy felt that the camps were poorly maintained and unsanitary, and did not want to stay there with a small baby. After some time again with her aunt, the family moved to a rented flat, where they continue to reside. They do not have any form of government-issued identification, like a ration card, or a voter’s ID, which would give them access to government-subsidized commodities, including cooking gas. The family purchased theirs on the black market. As with others who were not registered in the camps, they did not

receive any government assistance. Komathy's expenses were met instead through remittances: her husband's work abroad, and money from her sister in London. Like many refugees living inside and outside the camps, Komathy complained that everything in India required money, but it was difficult to find work.

Life on the edges of the city was (and is) not easy for refugees like Komathy and her family. On the one hand, they shared difficulties with other urban dwellers: The houses they rent have electricity and access to running water, but it was difficult to secure regular supplies of both; like much of the city's working class, they visited municipal trucks with plastic buckets for regular access to potable water. Their physical and social mobility was constrained by their location, which lacked affordable public transportation options. The neighborhood had little connectivity to local trains, autorickshaw rides were expensive over a long distance (approximately 200-250 rupees from the city center), and the aging diesel buses that plied the main road burst with young men riding footboards at the open door, while older women crouched next to the driver. A trip to the city center took well over an hour by bus, while points further north and south could require more than two hours each way.

Yet, unlike citizens, refugees could not legally obtain a driver's license, or any other form of government-issued identification as noted above. Even if some city drivers do not obtain such licenses and avoid punishment through informal payments, the importance of these documents to refugees must not be overlooked. An exchange between Lakshmi and Komathy reveals the pervasiveness of government documents and



their everyday circulation to life in urban India.<sup>353</sup> After a discussion about the difficulties of securing employment, Lakshmi offhandedly asked,

L: Do you buy lottery tickets?

K: (*laughs*) She's asking whether I buy-- no, even for that, you must have government ID! (*everyone laughs*)

Komathy's response reveals how even the possibility for social mobility that relies on the lottery's "luck of the draw" is conditioned by one's relationship to the bureaucratic state. Tamil refugees, included by their exclusion from the law, could only wait and find creative means to survive. Like camp refugees, urban refugees often complained of their inability to find work; in the city, they did not have access to government jobs, and often, private sector businesses would not hire them. With their urban physical and social mobility constrained, members of a family left to find work in other parts of the country abroad. While men traveled on their own or used agents to find work in restaurants or factories in Europe or North America, some women found work as a *viittu kaari* (domestic worker) in the neighboring state of Kerala, or took the voyage to Lebanon, Jordan, the U.A.E. and Saudi Arabia. Unlike domestic workers who leave from Sri Lanka, their numbers are unknown.

#### *The dual promise of foreign citizenship*

Unable to find regular work in India, Komathy's husband went to Qatar, where he worked for 2.5 years. His status as a temporary, migrant worker led him to pursue options for a more permanent migration through which he could reunite his family. He returned to Sri Lanka, where he approached an agent to migrate abroad in 2005. Though Komathy

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<sup>353</sup> On documents in India, see Tarlo 2005.

and her husband did not have enough money to pay the agent, their friends contributed to the agent's fees. The route was not a direct one, requiring travel from Sri Lanka to Malaysia, several countries in Eastern Europe, and eventually, France. He now lives in Paris, where he works two five-hour shifts at a restaurant everyday.

I.

At the end of 2008, Komathy's husband received asylum in France, and had just become a permanent resident by receiving his *carte de résident*, a card that allowed him to live in France and was renewable every ten years.<sup>354</sup> He soon started the process to bring his family to France legally.<sup>355</sup> Komathy awaits the day she can go to France, not only because she wants to reunite her family abroad. She would like to get citizenship, she explains, because it means she can return to her motherland (*thāyakam*). "People from all over the world – Canada, UK, France, Australia – go back to Sri Lanka.<sup>356</sup> But we are only one hour away by plane, and we cannot." Komathy knows that if she leaves India to travel to Sri Lanka, she has forfeited her de facto identity as a refugee in India, by returning to the country that she had fled. This identity, made visible through state bureaucratic practices of documentation, is not only a legal construction, insofar as her refugee status is not an official one. The recognition of her refugee identity, however, relies on a set of globally-circulating discourses that produce "displaced persons" and "refugees" within and across the borders of nation-states. If the UN Convention (and subsequent Protocol) does not bear the signature of the Indian state, the state nevertheless

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<sup>354</sup> The card replaced his *carte de séjour*, or "stay document," which provided proof of legal residence in France and had to be renewed regularly. He was able to apply for permanent residence after living in France for 3 years, with proof of financial self-sufficiency.

<sup>355</sup> Applying for Komathy and her son to enter France on a *privée et familiale* residence visa.

<sup>356</sup> Most of the travel she refers to here took place during the ceasefire period.

bears the imprint of the convention. Though some government officials and police instigated involuntary refugee returns, and subsequent administrators were aware of the problem, voluntary return and re-return to India can be viewed with suspicion. The sense that one must be fleeing persecution in order to be a refugee pervades. This enables the state to wield the force of international law in order to undermine a claim for protection that it is already not legally bound to heed.

Komathy's imagined "return," like that of her husband's actual one, is not a return that allows her to resettle in her village in Sri Lanka. Without state or international assistance, her family was not willing to live in perpetual internal displacement. Her return, then, is not a return to Sri Lanka, but one that compels her migration to another country. Instead, for Komathy, it is life abroad and the promise of citizenship in a country that is not Sri Lanka that ensures her return to a homeland. The certainty of her belief in a future of temporary "return" contrasts with the uncertainty camp refugees express when they discuss their possible futures.

That urban refugees occupy a liminal space, not only in Tamil Nadu, but in diasporic social life, can be seen in the ways in which other locales were figured in Komathy's discussion with me. As noted above, she explained that she traveled from Chennai to Mandapam (the large transit centre) to register with the police as a refugee, but ultimately decided not to stay in the camp with her infant son. She continued, "You would have seen what it is like there." She knew that I had done some work with the NGO, OfERR. Similarly, when I later asked her what she thought it might be like to live in France, she told me, "You have come from foreign [from abroad], you would know what it is like there!" In each of these statements, (Sri Lankan) Tamil life was described

as being somewhere else, not here but “there.” Throughout our conversation, Komathy did not discuss what people did “here” and explicitly counterposed diaspora and camp protests to their inability to participate in political action. If the former, the camps, were a form of life she sought to avoid, the latter, is what she aspires to. France is not a particular social and geographic location, but part of a broader social space of foreign countries (*veli naadukal*).

Komathy would like to go back to Sri Lanka, but as she tells me, she will not go without a “good solution.” Her reflection upon the im/possibility of return brings forth the following statement: “Wherever we go, we are strangers, strangers... refugees.” She lingers on the words as she alternates between “stranger” (*anniyān*) and “refugee” (*ahathi*). They are interchangeable, Komathy implies, as she makes a general claim about Tamil displacement. I ask Komathy to clarify what it means to be a refugee. For her, “This means someone without a motherland (*thāyakam*) in which they can live, or to which they can return. France... Canada... wherever we go, we are refugees. Refugee means refugee.” In its attempt to fix linguistic meaning, Komathy’s tautological conclusion -- “refugee means refugee” -- reveals not only that displacement has become self-evident for Tamils from northern Sri Lanka, who then acquire a de facto, if not legal identity by crossing waters and borders. It is also a performative enactment of a public identity, an act of naming that calls forth a being that seeks recognition. Komathy, her family and friends, like thousands of other Tamils before them, appropriate this name. For it is only if they are recognized as refugees - if they *become* and *are* refugees before the law - that they can move. Urban refugees like Komathy forgo the containment and community of camps, and thus, even the fiction of a “de facto” refugee identity. Instead,

they live within the constraints placed on their living conditions and livelihoods—their formal inability to own property, cultivate land, receive government rations, etc.—to make themselves moveable persons/properties with an eventual claim to resettlement. In doing so, they remake the borders of the state-centered refugee laws that would contain them (Aleinikoff 1995). By not participating in protest, they wait and defer their futures to participate in another form of action: international migration.

## II.

Before we left to meet another family, Lakshmi offhandedly asked Komathy a question that surprised me. She had been relatively quiet, up until that point. Her question was one I had asked during the early phases of my work, and had been disabused of its relevance by refugees, activists and academics alike: “Are there any organizations for Lankan Tamils here?” Sometimes, this question had to be clarified, to distinguish civic associations from the relief and rehabilitation work of non-governmental organizations. But Komathy stiffened in her chair; she understood the question perfectly. At the time, an immediate worry rushed in: Would Komathy think we were interrogating her to gather intelligence for the police or the CID? If Lakshmi’s question caught me off-guard, Komathy, to my even greater surprise, was quick to respond:

No, there aren’t, and I do not go out often so I would not know if there was one. No, there are no meetings. There aren’t events here like there are in Canada, because if people do such things here, they will be arrested for being LTTE.

*(Looks to me)* We don’t have your kind of freedom. You can move about, come and ask questions, but we cannot do the same.<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>357</sup> *engalukku ungal mathiri sunthanthiram illai. niingal inge vanthu pooy pesittu kelvi ketkalaam aanaa naangal appadi seyya mudiyaathu.*

Komathy's words here echoed a refrain among "non-camp" Lankan Tamils. They felt alone and abandoned, and deprived of the political rights enacted in global protests against Sri Lanka's war, whether abroad or here in their temporary homes. Komathy both makes a claim to nation-based citizenship (desiring the legal status bestowed by a nation-state) and offers a critique, by speaking of its exclusions. Her critique does not suggest doing away with the system itself, but seeks to expand its inclusion, to acquire full citizenship for herself and her family. Citizenship abroad was not only a legal status, but entailed political and social rights denied to her in India. Although Komathy was still formally a citizen of Sri Lanka, she and other Tamil refugees described themselves as being stateless and without citizenship. My discussion with Komathy reveals a distinction among refugees, located as she was within a form of life that bridges the Tamil camp refugee and the diasporic, yet remains excluded from the political community that allows them to protest. Her statements are those of the refugee who does not protest, out of desire to migrate and live in another diaspora community. As she recounted the difficulties of life in India, Komathy transitioned to discussing her husband's departure from India and imagined her own, with plans to reunite her family. Komathy felt that Tamil Nadu presented limited opportunities for her family. She focused instead on getting to France, studying words and phrases in French with her son. She knows it will a difficult life, from what she has read and what her husband has told her, but she believes that with hard work they will have a better life. Life in Tamil India remains foreign, and does not guarantee this better life. Komathy's diasporic desire critiques the exclusion of Tamil refugees from India, where even in a Tamil *nadu*, they are denied belonging to a national community.

## **Ruban's story**

Ruban is a Jaffna Tamil man who fled Sri Lanka for India after surviving abduction and torture. At the time of our first meeting, he was twenty-six years old and had been living in Chennai for approximately one year. Chennai was a temporary refuge, and he had no plans to settle there; he was planning to migrate to Canada, with the help of his mother's brother in Toronto. He has an older brother who works abroad, and a younger sister who recently immigrated to Toronto to join her husband. His mother still lives in a rural village in Jaffna.

Ruban was born in Maviddapuram, a small village in the northern reaches of the peninsula, but grew up throughout Jaffna due to several displacements. The war between the LTTE and SLA in 1985 displaced his family within Tellipalai; when the IPKF arrived in 1987, they moved to Chundukuli, near Jaffna town. The following year, 1988, they returned to Tellipalai, where Ruban continued his studies amid crossfire between the LTTE and IPKF. In 1989, the IPKF arrested Ruban's father, a pharmacist, for giving medicines to the LTTE. His father was tortured, resulting in lung damage and though he was released, his heart was severely weakened. He died of heart failure, when Ruban was seven years old.

The next year, 1990, the IPKF left and the SLA and LTTE returned to war with each other. The LTTE controlled most of Jaffna at this time, and the army sought to recapture the town, and eventually, the entire peninsula. Like Komathy, Ruban remembered "bombing and shelling everywhere" and living in a bunker "night and day" for several months during this time. In 1995-6, his family was displaced again, after the SLA took control of Jaffna. They stayed in the Chavakachcheri area, in a small village on

his father's family's land, where they built a hut from the trunk and dried leaves of a palmyra tree. This was a time of hardship (*kastam*) for Ruban's family and many Jaffna Tamils, living in overcrowded villages with little food and no sanitation. They had little money, and inflation was high.

The family was eventually able to move closer to Jaffna town again, which was at this time under SLA occupation. Ruban describes this time—1997-2001—as being “torturous.” At military checkpoints, Jaffna residents presented a military ID issued for such checks, instead of the government-issued National Identity Card, and were subjected to full body searches and questioning. They also had to abide by a 6 pm to 6 am curfew—the same period of curfew Indian authorities have imposed on Sri Lankan refugees in Tamil Nadu camps. Eventually, Ruban completed his secondary studies and entered Jaffna University in 2001, a few months before the LTTE declared a ceasefire. The next year, an agreement was reached and the peace process began. Ruban's story—up to his time at Jaffna University, and later abduction—reveals the extent to which militarized violence pervaded every aspect of life for his generation of Tamils. Only the first year of the ceasefire felt like freedom to him.

At the university, Ruban made new friends and became actively involved on campus. In 2004, he joined a group of students in organizing the Pongu Tamil event—the same event that students in Toronto cited as their inspiration when they organized a Pongu Tamil rally in September 2004, as discussed in Chapter 2. He was elected as a student leader, but unable to take the position due to his degree requirements. Instead, he offered advice to a friend who took the role in his place. Ruban described the politics of the students union and the students in general as supportive of the LTTE, while



government appointees in the university administration were viewed as pro-EPDP.<sup>358</sup> The mistrust between students and the administration created a climate of suspicion and secrecy at the university.<sup>359</sup>

### *Disappeared and returned*

During his final year of study, Ruban was grabbed in broad daylight outside his house by unidentified masked men in a white Toyota Hi Ace van, where he was beaten and blindfolded. Illegal “arrests” were made throughout Sri Lanka using such vehicles, which were known nationally as “white vans.” These abductions targeted minorities—primarily Tamils who were suspected of links to the LTTE, and Tamil and Muslim businessmen in Colombo—as well as dissenting journalists of all ethnicities (Human Rights Watch 2007). At the time, Ruban did not know where he was when the van stopped. He later identified the place as a military camp.

The year before Ruban was “taken by the army,” the ceasefire had completely unraveled, and white vans and paramilitaries roamed the peninsula. University students, and young men especially, were visible targets. In 2006, several other male university students went missing, and Ruban’s friend was shot while riding his bicycle.

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<sup>358</sup> The Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor of the university are appointed by the President of Sri Lanka; in Jaffna, university council appointments are monopolized by the pro-government party, the EPDP. See the Sub-committee for Academic Integrity, Jaffna University Science Teachers’ Association (JUSTA), *The Jaffna Precedent In University Council Appointments And Militarization of Education In Sri Lanka*, 5 December 2014. < <http://jfnusta.blogspot.com/2014/12/the-jaffna-precedent-in-university.html> > Last accessed: 8 January 2015.

<sup>359</sup> Many have written about the changing politics of the campus during the war. See Hoole et al. (1990) for an account of faculty and student dissent and anti-LTTE activism during the first Eelam war and the IPKF war (1987-1989). Many dissenting activists were forced to leave LTTE-controlled Jaffna. After the government secured control of Jaffna in 1995, students became increasingly pro-LTTE in their politics.

When Ruban and I first met, we spoke of Jaffna and Tamil politics, of India, and his hopes and plans for his future. He was very opinionated about all of these topics. Though he was open with me about the circumstances that led to his departure for India, he did not dwell on the details of the week he spent detained and tortured by the Sri Lankan army. Instead, when I gently asked him about what had happened and why, he told me of the documents related to his case. Everything was in those documents, he said, and he would send them all. True to his word, I received copies of his affidavit, his hospital records of treatment for his injuries, and letters that confirmed his submission of complaints filed to the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka. These documents transfigured his injuries into evidence, creating claims to truth for legal assessment. Ruban's family was distantly related to a Tamil lawyer in Colombo who advised him, filed the affidavit and filed a case against the police and military in the High Court. No investigations were made, however, no one was arrested, and the case never went to trial.

In his affidavit, Ruban describes his abduction, detention and torture plainly, and in chronological detail. His statement is a testimony in the first-person that begins with "I," stating his name and place of residence in Jaffna, before describing what happened to him. He was abducted by army officers in a "white van" and blindfolded before they took him to one of their camps. At the first camp, Ruban was tortured for two days straight. They hung him upside down and beat him with rods. They covered his head with a shopping bag filled with petrol, until he passed out from the fumes. Between such procedures, the army asked whether he recognized LTTE members among the men who were paraded before them. The soldiers violated him, and his body, in other ways: They forced a stick into his anus. They mixed chili powder with water, and put it in his eyes

and nostrils. His tormentors then covered the stick they used to rape him with chili powder. Over the next five days, Ruban was moved from army camp to army camp, where the violent interrogations continued, until his captors led him to a desolate expanse of land near the old railroad tracks. They left him there.

With broken bones and open wounds, Ruban managed to find his way to a hospital. He was examined by the Judicial Medical Officer, who made note of the patient's many injuries: left ear bashed and oozing discharge, an inability to use his left arm, and the many fractures, bruises and pains that resulted from his ordeal. His kidneys were also failing. Ruban received treatment at a Jaffna hospital for his injuries, but when the hospital's dilation machine did not work, the ICRC helped him complete the rest of his treatment in the capital. He continued to suffer nevertheless. Unable to eat, he lost nearly twenty pounds.

Ruban did not know why he was abducted—it was never stated—but he had some ideas. He noted that the army interrogated him about links to the LTTE. They wanted him to identify LTTE members on campus; some were said to have completed their A/Ls and were studying at the university during the ceasefire; military personnel assumed that any Tamil man—and some women—could be a Tiger. His interrogators suggested that Ruban himself was a Tiger; they expected he could tell them about satellite communications and where weapons were stored.

He also believed he was targeted by the army for speaking out about human rights violations. The state took notice of anyone who criticized the state and the military's actions. Ruban was especially conspicuous, through his campus activism. He assisted an international NGO that engaged in unarmed civilian peacekeeping, by documenting local

human rights violations. He had also spoken to foreign journalists. One day, a television reporter approached him and a friend about being interviewed. They agreed, provided their identities were concealed, and spoke about political tensions in Jaffna and Tamil students' aspirations. Ruban thought it probable that the interview factored into his situation: Word must have traveled back to the local army division, via EPDP informers on campus. However, Ruban suggested that a senior EPDP leader—a family friend—may have also helped in securing his release.

Ruban counted himself “lucky.” Hundreds of Tamil men had been “white vanned,” only to never be seen again. Ruban was one of the few who survived to tell the tale. He attributed his release to political pressure from Tamil politicians, media, and other activists.

### *Escape to India*

At the end of the affidavit described above, Ruban states that he was subjected to “inhuman and degrading treatment”—making citational use of international human rights law—and that due to the trauma he suffered, he wished to move abroad. He planned to immigrate to Canada through his family, but the process would take several months, if not years. He decided to go to India to ensure his physical safety, weeks after submitting his complaints to Sri Lanka's Human Rights Commission, which would serve as a record of his ordeal. The affidavit was an important legal step, as his future migration relied on a review of his case based on his narrative of the events and documentation of his injuries. He planned to travel to Chennai by plane, and applied for the visa required to enter the country. His first application was denied. He then decided to apply for the document via

an agent, who delivered the embassy's "fee" of SLR 12000 (roughly \$100 USD).<sup>360</sup> This time, the visa was granted.

Life in India was challenging at times. Now that his physical safety was assured, Ruban struggled to re-establish his life in a new land—one that he knew would be temporary, without knowing for how long. Chennai, like Colombo, was an expensive city. As a single, working bachelor, Ruban moved around the city, from neighborhood to neighborhood—Porur, Chromepet, Kodambakkam—where he lived in rooms in boarding houses. Young men like Ruban were constantly on the move, away from the surveillance of suspecting landlords and tenants, and toward cheaper housing and better jobs. Though dispersed, they formed a network that helped each other in times of need. Ruban recalled having to leave one neighborhood when foreign press about his case led to police surveillance and harassment. When Ruban was approached to tell his story of torture and exile to a journalist for a widely-circulating international publication, he hoped to communicate his experience to a wider audience. This time, a few sentences about his abduction—placed in a longer story about the war—caught the notice of India's Q Branch. They visited and questioned him frequently, and confiscated his passport, as well as the identity documents of the Sri Lankan owner of the house where he stayed. These documents included a rations card, and a voter ID. Ruban's passport was eventually returned, but the landlord's illegally-obtained documents were not. Q Branch officers continued to question him, and followed him around the city. This was

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<sup>360</sup> By contrast, the visa fee would have been approximately one-sixth of the agent's fee, or SLR 2000. I was told that Tamils often had to make such payments to an embassy's local staff. For example, the Sri Lankan staff of the Canadian High Commission in Colombo was believed to discriminate against applicants on this basis.

“psychological torture” for him, until a friend was able to help him find another room for rent.

*An incompatible place*

Ruban had traveled the length and breadth of Tamil Nadu, and found that it was not to his liking. Kerala, he said, was more like home. He also liked Bangalore, where he had worked for a few months, and on occasion after returning to Chennai. The climate was good, and it was a modern city. Chennai, on the other hand, was not suited to his body. Other refugees living in Chennai made similar statements. When Ruban introduced me to new friends who were from the same district in Jaffna, they described to me their first month living in Chennai. Kugen and his wife had arrived nine months ago, in March 2008. He and his wife were struggling to survive in the city; they did not want to live in the camps, but were too afraid to return to Sri Lanka, and could not afford to move abroad. Living in the city was difficult for other reasons: They began to fall ill. Kugen described coming down with a cold, and his body being covered with splotchy red “rashes” that sounded much like hives. Ruban commiserated, and described falling ill with a fever, and having difficulty breathing in the city. Ruban and Kugen, like many Sri Lankan Tamils, interpreted these illnesses as indicating the unsuitability of the city, and a sign of their being “out of place.”

Chennai, then, is an urban landscape that enters the individual body and produces physical ills. For Sri Lankan Tamils like Ruban, Kugen, and his wife, its substance is not compatible with their bodily qualities. Though they spoke together of doctors taking their temperature and medicines, biomedical discourses do not saturate or fully encompass their explanations of illness. Rather, the body erupts when taken out of “one’s own” soil

(*sontha mann*). As Tamils, their *ur* (home-village) was a substance that composed their selves (cf. Daniel 1984); now living outside it, their bodies became ill. Chennai was not as unliveable as Colombo had become for Tamil refugees like Ruban. As Kugen explained that he and his wife had left Sri Lanka, and did not stay in Colombo because of the war, Ruban interjected to say, “We Tamils cannot live there anymore. It is a genocide. They are killing Tamils everyday.” Colombo was a place of transit for Tamils leaving the island, or a place from which they were to be violently expelled (as in, for example, the anti-Tamil violence of 1983, or during lodge raids and “deportations” in 2007-2008). Chennai, on the other hand, was ostensibly a “Tamil” city, but Sri Lankan Tamils could not claim the city as their own.

*Linguistic difference and non-belonging*

My conversations with Ruban and other refugees in Chennai revealed that a shared language was not enough to create belonging for Tamils in the city. Language has typically been the basis of a presumably shared ethnic identity among Tamils in Sri Lanka and Tamils in India. Indeed, as we observed in the previous chapter, the notion of a shared language—and the extension of this notion into metaphors of relatedness—was mobilized during political actions by camp Tamils and citizens alike.

Ruban and other Tamils from Sri Lanka referred to linguistic and cultural differences between “Sri Lankan” or “Eelam Tamils” and “Indians” to make sense of their unease and non-belonging as refugees and migrants in an otherwise “Tamil” land. In one of our first conversations, Ruban began by pointing out the differences between Indian and Sri Lankan Tamil dialects as he knew them—that is, Chennai versus Jaffna Tamil. He describes the latter as “pure Tamil” (in English), while “Tamil in Chennai is

25% English, 10 or 15% Telugu, 10% Hindi, and maybe 50% Tamil.” In Ruban’s attempt to quantify language use, Chennai Tamil is adulterated, and only half Tamil. It is a hybrid language; a mongrel that lacks the “purity” claimed on behalf of Jaffna Tamil.

Unsurprisingly, he got into fights with friends at work about his views on the Tamil language. The notion that Jaffna Tamil was “archaic” and thus “pure” was widespread among Sri Lankan and Indian Tamils alike, particularly among lower- to upper-middle class Tamils of Ruban’s generation and his elders, but consequently, Indian Tamil dialects could be positively valued as “modern” and “cosmopolitan.”<sup>361</sup>

Ruban noted some of the regional differences he observed while he traveled occasionally for work, to the city of Bangalore in Karnataka, Kerala, and throughout Tamil Nadu. In Coimbatore, he felt that people were very polite in speaking Tamil. In Chennai, however, he saw rudeness and a lack of respect. “*Ingē vā, vā mā* (come here, come woman), they’ll say to their parents even!” Ruban’s example uses slang (*mā*) and informal conjugation to address a second-person (*vā* instead of the formal *vānga* in Standard Indian Tamil, or *vāngō* in Jaffna and Brahmin Indian Tamil dialects. When I try to explain that, in some dialects, the use of informality can be a sign of intimacy (*nerukkam*) between the speaker and addressed, he says that it cannot be so.

What Ruban does here is rely on the distinction between *koccai thamizh* and *centhamizh*.<sup>362</sup> The distinction is an important one to him, as it is connected with the reason he left Sri Lanka. When he later described his torturers to me, Ruban noted that

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<sup>361</sup> In contrast to Ruban’s assessment, Sam Sudhanandha, a Tamil professor at Columbia and former principal of American College in Madurai, has argued that a sentence is Tamil even if it is mostly comprised of loan words, provided it is structured by a Tamil grammar. Personal communication.

<sup>362</sup> “Rough” versus “pure” Tamil. For more on this cultural politics of this distinction in Tamil Nadu, see Bate 2009; in a diasporic context, see Das 2008.



they spoke *koccai tamil*. To Ruban, their manner of speech indicated that Tamil was not their first language, i.e. their mother tongue (*thaay mozhi*). It was learned, in order to communicate and commit violence. After describing the circumstances that led him to leave Sri Lanka, and his experiences in India, Ruban told me, “This is a separate country. The language, culture—everything is different.”

As noted in Chapter 1, many Tamils fled Sri Lanka for India due to the physical, cultural and historical proximity of the island and mainland. However, proximity does not presuppose identity, or even intimacy. Ruban was not alone in making distinctions between “Indian Tamils” and “Sri Lankan Tamils” (also described as “Eelam,” “Ceylon,” or “Jaffna” Tamils). At OfERR’s regional office in Tirunelveli, I met a young woman whose story I described in Chapter 5. She was in her mid-twenties and lamented that the generation born in India was using “Indian” slang. She, like many Ceylon Tamil refugees, viewed the island dialects as being “purer” forms of Tamil. She wanted to preserve this cultural distinction. The irony was that her complaint was made using an Indian Tamil dialect’s pronouns, vocabulary, and conjugations (for example, the third person plural, *avanga*, rather than *avaiyal*, the verb *pēcu* instead of *kathai*, and the conjugated form *-ānga* instead of *-īnam*.) These complaints also effaced differences among the island’s dialects—and their relationship to the mainland—in favor of drawing differences between “India” and “Eelam.”

Rather than feeling more secure and confident about their cultural and linguistic belonging in a Tamil *nadu*, Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka—and especially those of Jaffna origin—worried about the long-term future of their language and cultural practices, ranging from their food preparations and styles of dress to kinship and marriage

preferences. Far from being secure among “co-ethnics,” Sri Lankan Tamils had once again become a “minority” in search of a new land of their own.

*Waiting to migrate to Canada*

For Ruban, India—and Chennai in particular—was a waystation to a better place that would allow him to fulfill his aspirations. Like many other middle-class Tamils whose sights were trained elsewhere, he reminded me, “We cannot get citizenship in this place. So why should we bother to stay here?” Citizenship presented him with the possibility of opportunities that were largely unrealizable for Tamil refugees in India—employment opportunities, physical mobility, political rights, belonging and security.

In India, Ruban was able to complete graduate coursework, through funds he received from his *mama* (mother’s brother) in Toronto. His uncle’s family had emigrated to Canada in 1984 after being driven out of their house in Colombo during Black July. Ruban’s uncle, aunt, and two cousins were taken by ship to Jaffna. They were sponsored by Ruban’s *mami* (mother’s brother’s wife)’s elder brother, who had gone to Canada, via Britain, in the late 1970s. Now they hoped to help Ruban start a new life in Toronto.

Ruban was not seeking political asylum, a category of migration he could easily fit, and yet, was too risky to chance, due to a backlog in processing refugee claims.<sup>363</sup> Ruban’s *mama*’s family was sponsoring him as a group. At the time of our conversations, it would take approximately thirteen months for the Government of Canada to process his application. The application for group sponsorship of a refugee required five or more sponsors (Canadian citizens or permanent residents) and proof that his sponsors were

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<sup>363</sup> It is important to note that he had to apply in advance if he wished to avoid detention, as making a refugee claim at the border—as many Tamils did in the 1980s and 1990s—was no longer possible, due to the *U.S.-Canada Safe Third Country Act* passed after 9/11.

equipped with the financial resources, expertise and commitment to support him for one year.<sup>364</sup> Ruban would live under their roof, and they had to indicate their financial commitment and provide bank balances as proof of their financial support. In October 2013, the estimated total annual settlement cost amounted to CAD \$12,600, not including in-kind donations of shelter, clothing, furniture, food, etc., amounting to CAD \$8500.<sup>365</sup>

Before I left Toronto for Chennai, Ruban's *mama* wanted me to impress upon him the challenges of life in Canada as a new immigrant. He worried that his nephew would see his spacious and comfortable suburban home, his car, and his family's professional careers, and assume that life would be easy in Canada. He was also concerned that, as Ruban encountered obstacles such as non-recognition of his credentials or everyday racism, he might get frustrated. What Ruban had to learn, he told me, was that it had taken him 25 years to become "settled." Knowing that I had done research among Tamils in Toronto, including recently-arrived refugees, Ruban's *mama* implored me to provide his nephew a more "realistic" picture.

In Chennai, I asked Ruban what he knew about Canada. He knew little about Canada, he said, but one thing he knew—and that put him at ease—was the country's sizeable Tamil diaspora. Moreover, the Tamils had become citizens of Canada, and if sponsored for resettlement, he would eventually become one too. He felt he could belong there: "In Canada, there are many Tamils. It is like having our own country." (*kanadāvilē niramba tamil ātkal irukkinam. oru sonthanādu māthiri vazhrānga*.<sup>366</sup>) Notably, what

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<sup>364</sup> Effective October 19, 2012, a G5 may only sponsor applicants who are recognized as refugees by either the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees or a foreign state.

<sup>365</sup> See "Settlement Plan and Financial Assessment—Group of Five," <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/pdf/kits/forms/IMM5373AE.pdf>, tables on p. 4

<sup>366</sup> Literally, "They live as though in their own country."

Ruban refers to is a country (*nādu*), and not a motherland (*thāyakam*) or home-village (*sontha ūr*). For Tamils, an *ūr* has shifting and contextual meanings that vary according to a given person's spatial orientation. However, one's *sontha ūr* is a place from which one's ancestors hail; it is one's "real home," and "the place whose soil is most compatible with oneself and with one's ancestors" (Daniel 1984: 63-67). Like *ūr*, *nādu* is a contextual term with multiple referents, depending on the person's spatial and cognitive orientation, and may be as large as a continent, or small as a group of villages (Daniel 1984: 68-69). Canada—and more specifically, Toronto, or Scarborough—could become like "one's own country," but as Ruban's words indicate, it is still not imagined as his own home.

A few of Ruban's friends and former classmates were in Canada, and he could think of more than thirty people he knew in the United Kingdom. His other friends in Jaffna and Colombo wanted to move abroad too. They have heard that it is a "machine life," but see Canada as a place where "one can adjust and get by well." Ruban hopes to complete an MSc, and is considering a PhD in his field, and would like to work at a university. His mother in Jaffna has asked him about marriage, but he is in no rush. Once he is "settled," he will answer her. He tells me that his future partner can be "a different religion, different culture, or even Sinhalese."<sup>367</sup> He wants to "live with a human being."

Ruban and many of the Tamil refugees I spoke with in India were firmly convinced that Tamils living outside Sri Lanka have an important duty. "Tamils in other countries must pressure their governments to help Tamils. That they can do—nothing

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<sup>367</sup> Even as it expresses liberal values of tolerance, this statement also presents the Sinhalese as ultimate Other to a Tamil Self. This distinction was common among some Jaffna Tamils during my fieldwork. For example, in Toronto, one young man described something as *singalam* to refer to something being completely foreign.

else.” Non-camp refugees found it especially difficult to fulfill this duty, but hoped that international migration to a country with a path to citizenship would allow them to do so. In Canada, Ruban imagines that he will be able to go to demonstrations, like the ones many Tamils in Toronto were joining to protest the war. “I will do as people do there, within the country’s laws—not against. That is the duty of the displaced, living in diaspora (*pulam peyarnthor*).” Ruban understood that foreign governments were unlikely to do anything perceived not to be in their own interests. Nevertheless, he looked forward one day to actions he associated with full citizenship. Citizenship, for Ruban and other Tamil refugees, was connected to the notion of belonging to a place. Concerned about the length of his “temporary” stay in India, he told me one day, “I’m without an address—how can I have a future here? I want to be settled.” Here Ruban associates a temporal progression, or “future” time, with an end to his displacement that re-replaces him in a location with specific coordinates—just as the notion of refugee “resettlement” implies. A Tamil person’s resettlement becomes legible through the institutions and discourses of the nation-state. The future is to become a citizen of a nation-state. Cast out from Sri Lanka by discrimination, violence and war, migration became the Tamil’s chance for a “settled” future. But as his imagined future in Canada indicates, citizenship is not only a question of legal status and recognition; for Tamils like Ruban, it is embodied and practiced through action. The centrality of citizenship to Ruban’s life as a Tamil was made clear in a rhetorical question he asked me at the end of a long conversation about his resettlement and future: “What is a human? Fundamentally, it is someone with citizenship (*kudiyurimai*).”

Komathy and Ruban were both migrants in search of a country that would allow them to live as citizens. Each felt that there should be a separate country for the Tamils of Sri Lanka, whose lives were marked by the insecurity of war. In lieu of that country, still yet-to-be after a quarter-century of war, they decided to migrate to another country, where they could live among Tamils, and with the status, dignity and rights they felt citizenship would accord them. They moved in order to one day become “settled” and thus fully secure, and in Komathy’s case, to be able to return as a visitor one day.

Tamils like Komathy and Ruban decided to migrate to pursue what was desired and yet unavailable to them during the war: the idea of belonging to a people and territory. In this way, migration is a form of social action that must be understood in relation to political action. The “Tamil nation” and nationalism that emerged, as we saw in Chapter 3, in response to Sinhala chauvinism and the majoritarian logic of liberal democracy, becomes dispersed through Tamils who migrate abroad. While the nation is “unavailable” to many Tamil refugees (Daniel 1996: 167-169), and particularly those living in the camps, the nation as abstraction provides a sign of belonging that compels Jaffna Tamil urban refugees to migrate abroad. This is not, however, a simple case of “diasporic nationalism,” of a political ideology dispersed and transposed from homeland to host. Tamil migrants like Ruban and Komathy are instead guided by the social imaginary of a political community in future destinations that will secure Tamil life. As we have seen in this chapter, transnational belonging among Tamil refugees and migrants is shaped by experiences of violence and social exclusion—both at home in their country of origin, and just as importantly, in transit locations and impermanent settlements that promise a refuge from physical violence and death.

## Conclusion

In this brief chapter, I considered why and how Sri Lankan Tamils in Chennai did not participate in protests, temporarily sacrificing notions of struggle and community in their desire to remain mobile. I discussed how this mobility invited practices of self-surveillance that limited community formation and public action in India. In particular, I examined the political rationality of migration for two urban refugees from Jaffna now living in Chennai, India: Komathy, an urban refugee who waits to join her husband in France, and Ruban, a young man whose political activism and abduction in Sri Lanka led to exile in India, where he waits to be sponsored as a refugee before immigrating to Canada. Tamil activists often argue that it is their position, living outside Sri Lanka, that makes possible their acts of protest, and political activism more generally. But this “outside” is not an undifferentiated space; in fact, not all feel equally capable of articulating protest. Komathy made this observation as she led me through the twists and turns of her life in displacement. Her narrative, along with the challenges she posed to me as a diasporic ethnographer, demonstrated basic limits to philosophical attempts to position an ideal-type refugee as the prototypical political subject.

Further, I argue that when the previous chapter and this one are read together, the juxtaposition of ‘the city’ and ‘the camp’ provides insight into the ways in which the practice of citizenship, as a form of social membership and subjective belonging, intersects with the legal and political recognition of formal citizenship. This discussion also reveals how extraordinary camp protests were in their enactment of substantive rights. The camps, described by some as jails or open prisons, were also sites of politicization and a paradoxical kind of freedom; in contrast, refugees in the city enjoyed

greater personal freedom of movement but felt unable to organize collectively or participate in public action.

Tamils inhabited the figure of the refugee in different ways between the camp and the city. In Chapters 2 and 5, we saw that Tamils in the camps made strategic claims to a refugee identity in their activism. For Tamils living in the city, on the other hand, ‘refugee’ was a stigmatized personal identity. Tamils in Chennai who were waiting to migrate abroad nevertheless had to conform to the figure of ‘the refugee’ in official discourses of international law and humanitarian action in order to facilitate their movement. In sum, while camp refugees participated, along with NGOs, in the creation of new forms of community and action in their displacement, urban refugees prepared imaginatively and economically for their migration from India to the West.

The final chapter of this dissertation turns to the ways in which Tamil diasporic communities were formed out of action in response to (Tamil) suffering at the end of the Sri Lankan war. I examine two attempts to document, archive and exhibit Tamil suffering, and how these events revealed orientations to protest and dissent that shaped Tamil community formations in Toronto. As the war in northern Sri Lanka continued, and the number of casualties grew, camp refugees and diasporic activists turned to protests and street demonstrations to ask for an end to the war.



## Chapter 7

### ***Suffering Community: Tamil Protests & Dissent at the End of War***

The last two chapters delved into the social and political lives of Tamil refugees in Tamil Nadu, India. Chapter 5 explored how camp residents were mobilized, amid conditions of non-governmental rehabilitation and state surveillance, to protest the war in Sri Lanka, while Chapter 6 considered how urban refugees in Chennai pursued international migration as a form of action. In pursuit of diasporic futures, these Tamils hoped that their lives abroad would be “settled” when they became citizens, enabling them to participate in political action. In order to migrate abroad, however, Tamils had to be recognized as refugees; they, like Ruban, had to become suffering subjects before the international media and legal authorities to claim a need for protection. This chapter explores the relationship between suffering and action in diaspora politics. It considers how Tamil diaspora activists and protesters—whether immigrant citizens or refugees—were mobilized to protest Sri Lanka’s war against the LTTE.

During the final months of war in January to May 2009, Tamil diasporic communities mobilized in spectacular demonstrations around the world. In this chapter, I examine how these communities were formed out of actions in response to (Tamil) suffering at the end of the Sri Lankan war. Before I turn to these protests, however, I first examine two multimedia exhibits Tamil activists organized to raise awareness about violence and suffering in Sri Lanka. I suggest that these events reveal orientations to

protest and dissent that shaped Tamil community formations in Toronto. My analysis of these exhibits also reveals that, whether in protest, dissent, or otherwise, Tamil activists shared a desire to alleviate and end Tamil suffering in Sri Lanka. In contrast to received theories about the relationship between the spectatorship of suffering and action, I argue that Tamil activists were neither distant spectators, nor immediate sufferers, but intermediaries whose diasporic positioning created a new political subject compelled to “take action” to end the war “back home.”

As the war in northern Sri Lanka led to thousands of casualties, camp refugees in India and diasporic activists in Canada turned to protest through fasts and street demonstrations to ask for an end to the war. In the second part of the chapter, I describe these protests, and analyze the ways in which activists invoked and performed suffering to mobilize action against the war. This section of the chapter explores connections between affect and agency in the relationship between suffering and political action. Finally, by looking at the politics of protest and dissent, this chapter considers the notion of a “suffering community” in another sense: suffering *from* community, or the non-belonging experienced by Tamil activists who dissent and whose sufferings were excluded from recognition by the community of Tamil nationalism.

### **Violence, Suffering and the Ethical Politics of Humanitarianism**

The imperative to act to alleviate human suffering is a foundational tenet of modern humanitarianism and its contemporary ethics—and one that has received critical scrutiny from socio-cultural anthropologists. This scholarship, as outlined in the Introduction to this dissertation, critically informs my study of Tamil activism in response to the violence and suffering of Sri Lanka’s war. I also draw inspiration from

ethnographic and theoretical work that considers how suffering is deployed as a resource for making political claims (Brown 1995; Das 2007; Halpern 2000; L. McKay 2008; Ticktin 2006, 2011; Trnka 2013), and anthropological studies of the political aesthetics of suffering in the form of the nation-state (Daniel 1996; Axel 1997) and in transnational circuits of media and activism (Kleinman and Kleinman 1997; McLagan 2005).

In what follows, I shall describe and analyze how the “suffering body”<sup>368</sup> of the Tamil victim of war was deployed by diasporic activists to mobilize Tamils to join protests and street demonstrations, and in doing so, appeal to the “international community” and Western governments to “take action” to end the war and the suffering it has caused. Activists protested the denial of humanitarian aid and accused the government of genocide; the government argued that it was fighting a “humanitarian war” against the LTTE—who used the aid to continue to fight—and promised a military victory to end the war and the suffering it caused. Each party thus described their actions as humanitarian endeavors to end the suffering of Tamils and other Sri Lankans.

In other words, what this chapter reveals is a seemingly unlikely alliance between transnational humanitarianism and diaspora activism in the ethical turn to suffering—a relationship that has not been sufficiently explored in ethnographic work on humanitarian action. The following pages illustrate the power of humanitarian discourses and affects in mobilizing political action among Tamil immigrants and refugees. This requires a closer look at recent theories about the ethics of viewing and responding to the suffering of others.

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<sup>368</sup> I draw this term from Ticktin’s (2011) discussion of the “morally legitimate suffering body,” a recognizable victim figure that has also been analyzed in postcolonial feminist theory (Mohanty 1988; Abu Lughod 2002; Kapur 2002).

*Suffering, Spectatorship and Power*

In his influential book, *Distant Suffering*, the French political sociologist, Luc Boltanski examines the moral and political implications of the spectatorship of the “distant suffering” of others. He begins with a discussion of Hannah Arendt’s *On Revolution*, and her critique of the modern “politics of pity” as it emerged since the mid-eighteenth century, particularly in the work of the French *philosophe*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The politics of pity has three basic features according to Arendt (2006[1963]). First, it involves a distinction between those who suffer and those who do not. Second, this politics focuses on what is seen and on looking, or in other words, “the spectacle of suffering.” Finally, as a consequence of the introduction of pity into politics, Arendt argues that politics becomes centered not on action in a plural world but on observation—as Boltanski puts it, this is the “observation of the *unfortunate* by those who do not share their suffering, who do not experience it directly and who, as such, may be regarded as fortunate or *lucky* people” (1999: 3). Boltanski then draws on ideas developed in Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* to examine three ‘topics’ through which the observer, or *spectator*, expresses a response to another’s suffering: the topics of sentiment, denunciation, and the aesthetic.

Boltanski argues that, in lieu of the ability to act directly in a “politics of pity,” modern spectators can commit themselves to action by speaking about what they have seen in the other’s suffering, and how they were affected by it. It is his understanding that, “For a politics of pity, the urgency of action needing to be taken to bring an end to suffering invoked always prevails over considerations of justice. From such a perspective it is only in a world from which suffering has been banished that justice could enforce its

rights” (Boltanski 1999:5). However, he also argues that the mass mediation of distant suffering under conditions of globalization has led to a “crisis of pity” in relation to modern forms of humanitarianism.<sup>369</sup>

Boltanski’s theory assumes a necessary physical and social distance between spectator and sufferer as, in the rhetorical topic of denunciation, the active spectator’s sympathy must not derive from personal or group interests. Paradoxically, however, a spectator’s denunciation of suffering can be criticized as “false” when the spectator does not share in the sufferer’s plight (Chap. 4). Speech about suffering cannot be guaranteed as “truth,” and may be dismissed as “mere words”—or worse, as opportunistic. Similarly, on the topic of sentiment, Boltanski shows that the spectator’s sympathy may give way to a critique of sentimentalism (Chap. 6), in which the spectacle of suffering becomes a test through which spectators prove their own humanity. In other words, those who do not suffer may “feel bad” about another’s suffering, but in doing so, “feel good” about confirming the humanity by which their selves are defined. This leads to a questioning of the authenticity of emotions and selves, and the politics of pity becomes an endless politics of suspicion (in which justice is forever deferred). In the final chapter of his book, Boltanski attempts to lead readers out of this morass when he asks whether “action” is realistic in response to contemporary mediations of distant suffering. He answers, yes, with an emphasis on facing present suffering in response to the “crisis of pity” generated by mass media.

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<sup>369</sup> Boltanski’s work on the relationship between suffering and spectatorship has produced debates among scholars about the politics of media, leading one scholar, Chouliaraki (2013) to theorize “the ironic spectator” in an era of “post-humanitarianism” in the modern West. This chapter questions the pervasiveness of this “ironic gaze” via a consideration of immigrant activism.

## *Suffering Spectators*

As we will see in the sections to follow, practices of diasporic activism among Sri Lankan Tamils complicate the above reflections of Boltanski and others on the morality of spectatorship and humanitarian responses to ‘distant suffering.’<sup>370</sup> Much of this scholarship presumes a distance (physical and structural) between the sufferer and spectator (Boltanski 1999; Chouliaraki 2006, 2013). Insofar as activists recall their own experiences of war to respond to suffering ‘back home,’ Tamil protesters are neither immediate sufferers, nor wholly distanced spectators in diasporic public action. I argue that Tamils, who feel they constitute a ‘suffering community’ in Sri Lanka, became diasporic ‘survivors’ who felt obliged by shared experiences, and personal and social memories of violence and displacement, to act to end Tamil suffering in Sri Lanka.

As Rancière (2009) argues in *The Emancipated Spectator*, the very attempt to suppress distance between the spectator and the sufferer (and perhaps by extension, the agent and the recipient of humanitarian aid) is constitutive of that distance. On the one hand, Tamil activists generally understood this; namely that they were not living in the war zone. Attempts to act from diasporic locations, in order to bridge the distance with those who suffer in Sri Lanka, in fact reinscribed a constitutive distance between diasporic activists and Tamil suffering in Sri Lanka. In other words, demonstrations that sought to unify the diasporic spectator and the wartime sufferer—to enact a desired togetherness, as one people, “united in struggle and suffering”—revealed they are apart. When Toronto Tamils convened and joined together in public to claim a global unity,

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<sup>370</sup> Calhoun (2008), Chouliaraki (2006, 2013) and Wilson and Brown (2008) invoke and build on these reflections. Boltanski’s “commitment to action” in speech about suffering relies on a model of communicative ethics called into question by Agamben’s (1999) reflections on speech that bears the impossibility of true witness.

they embodied its very fracture—their physical and social separation from the Tamils of their homeland.

The transformation from immediate “sufferer” to “survivor” was the ground for extensive political and cultural work as Tamil activists mobilized a second generation to be the forefront of their struggle. In doing so, diasporic activists navigated between a desire for their community’s children to understand pain and suffering in Sri Lanka and the social realities of “life on the outside” (Fuglerud 1999) in a new country. In the first part of this chapter, I examine how diaspora constitutes an ‘archive’ for Tamil activists in Toronto who seek to communicate narratives of Tamil loss and suffering to a younger generation and a wider Canadian public.

### **PART ONE: Stories of Suffering**

#### **“Please Give Us Justice”**

In the bitter cold of a snowstorm in early March 2008, nearly two hundred Tamil women (along with a sprinkling of middle-aged men) gathered to celebrate International Women’s Day inside the Scarborough Civic Centre.<sup>371</sup> The event was organized by the Tamil Women’s Service Providers Working Group, an ad-hoc group of social workers and service providers in Toronto’s Tamil community.<sup>372</sup> The evening aimed to celebrate the achievements of Tamil women and draw attention to their struggles, as women within a community of Tamils living in Canada and around the world.<sup>373</sup> The event showcased

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<sup>371</sup> In Tamil, the event was translated as *penngal ezhucci nikazhcci*, or Women’s Uprising Event.

<sup>372</sup> The Women’s Day event was one of a few community events led and organized entirely by women, while the leadership and membership of their financial sponsor was primarily male.

<sup>373</sup> Organizers presented a lifetime achievement award to Kuramagal, the pen name of a diasporic Tamil woman writer.

arts and cultural performances by women active in Toronto's Tamil community, ranging from a film about a young Toronto Tamil woman's changing relationship with her mother, to songs about the devaluation of women's work. That evening, before announcing the event's finale, the emcee took the opportunity to remind the audience that women were suffering all over the world from multiple forms of violence: Political cruelties (*araciyal kodumaikal*), domestic violence (*kudumpa vanmuraikal*) and social violence (*samuga vanmuraikal*). The next drama would show us how women are affected by political violence.

The short dramatic play, "Please Give Us Justice," begins with a scene of a woman huddled on the ground with three children. The woman massages the faces and shoulders of the children to comfort them. A recorded voice plays over the event's speakers, and the actors perform in silence while a woman explains, in Canadian-accented English, the scene before the audience:

This is my sister... fleeing as a refugee, all through life. She has lost her peace of mind entirely.

For the past thirty years, having no shelter to call her own, she is in search of a permanent mailing address. From the day she got married, and up to now, she's been chased by the atrocities of the military. Deprived of the opportunity to enjoy even an iota of the bliss of married life.

Having lost all hopes in life, her only aim now is to provide, at least, the basic protection for her children. With no income, and the added burden of the family on her shoulders she is drifting with the ebbs and tides of fate, hoping against hope to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

In the above, the narrator describes her sister as a woman "chased by the atrocities of the military," "fleeing as a refugee" without a shelter, "in search of a permanent mailing address." The voice continues, telling the audience about the woman's sister and her relatives:



My sister-in-law is spending her life, expecting to see her husband, who was arrested and taken away by the military, within a few months of her marriage. For the past twenty years, shedding tears, is my mother. She is losing [her] grip and [the] strength to move about. And also, her eyesight is forever looking at the photograph of her son, my father. Having never seen the face of her father, my niece only can imagine the appearance of him from the description provided by her mother and her grandfather.

Fighting against all odds, and living with the hope that there would be peace in the future, is my sister. Even-willed, living with desperation, with her husband whose mind [???] in an earlier rocket attack.

*(Narrator's voice wavers)* Having witnessed, the death, of her young child, in an air bombardment at Vanni, she now resembles a person who has lost all mental facilities.

Only women and children appear in this dramatic scene; the men are either dead or gone. Children are represented as especially vulnerable to the devastation of war: the sister in the scene has lost her daughter to an aerial bombing. The life of a Tamil woman in Sri Lanka is marked by such losses and emotional pain. The narrator's sister, having suffered a great deal of loss, appears to go mad.

The diasporic narrator is the "voice" of this drama. She is the only one who speaks, verbalizing and translating the actors' silent embodiment of pain to present a coherent narrative of suffering to a diasporic Tamil audience. After representing the suffering of her relatives, the narrator then invokes her own suffering:

I have no complaints, as such, about life in this adopted country of mine. But I am unable to detach myself, from my kith and kin, and lead a completely independent life. The deprivation and desperation of my relatives are having a terrible impact on my body. I am unable to smile or laugh. The sufferings of my mother, and my siblings, are torturing me.

The play depicts the tremendous hardships and the suffering of Tamils in Sri Lanka, as mediated through a diasporic relationship to that suffering. The narrator observes the family's suffering, but not from a position of total distance—though physically separated,

the diasporic narrator and the suffering Tamil woman are close relatives. The diasporic narrator feels “tortured” by the suffering of her kin. She feels psychic pain at the thought of their suffering, but their “deprivation and desperation” also has somatic effects. The narrator thus shows the audience how she is affected by the thought of her relatives’ suffering. The performance transforms their suffering into hers. In addition, the narrator’s voice reports her sister’s suffering to an audience, but in doing so, her sister’s suffering becomes the ground on which her own thoughts can be voiced. In other words, the act of narrating suffering substitutes the diasporic Tamil’s voice for that of her sister, displaced within the homeland.

The narrator then asks,

Why is the world refusing to see the sufferings of my race? When will this white humanitarian world of ours bring us justice? Please! Give us justice!

The above questions indict the international system for ignoring Tamil suffering, while simultaneously recognizing the power of this unequal system by appealing to a “white humanitarian world” for justice. The final words of “Please Give Us Justice” thus speak to a tension in the contemporary politics of humanitarianism. On the one hand, diaspora activists recognized the limits of humanitarianism, which was in contradiction to their pursuit of justice. On the other hand, they understood that assertions of “humanity” had become a new way of doing politics. Sometimes, politics was work that had to be distanced from the “political.”

## Remembering Black July

July 2008 was a busy month for Tamil community activists. Twenty-five years before, in July 1983, Tamils, and their homes and businesses in Colombo and other parts of Sri Lanka, were targeted with violence over several days, killing an estimated three thousand people.<sup>374</sup> The destruction was later estimated at \$1 billion dollars in damage to the Sri Lankan economy. In spite of government censorship of the national media, foreign tourists' photographs and eyewitness accounts were published abroad, drawing international attention to the events.<sup>375</sup> And in time, it was learned that the state was involved in planning and organizing the violence, which the police and army did nothing to stop. These dark days came to be known as Black July.

One quarter-century later, the Canadian Tamil Congress organized several events to commemorate the event's twenty-fifth anniversary of July 1983. The CTC had organized an annual vigil in the city's public squares, where Tamils gathered to remember the violence and war. These events were organized by and primarily for (Canadian) Tamils, and invited local, provincial and federal politicians to address the crowd; featured speakers were often parliamentarians who echoed the diasporic audience's desire for an end to war in their homeland, and expressed their support to Tamils demanding Canadian engagement to exercise pressure on the Sri Lankan government. For the twenty-fifth anniversary, the CTC also planned a number of events

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<sup>374</sup> The violence occurred between between July 23<sup>rd</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup>. The government's official count of the dead stood at 317, but it was not in the state's interests to reveal the extent of the damages and losses incurred. The higher figure of three thousand deaths is frequently cited, while other estimates have suggested a number between one and two thousand. For one contemporary account of the violence, see Piyadasa (1984).

<sup>375</sup> The New York Times, Washington Post, and Times of London were among the international publications that reported the events. For one example, see William Claiborne (1983), "Sri Lanka's Tamil Refugees Fear Massacre as Killing Continues." *Washington Post*. July 30. A1.

to address and communicate “the issues” and a narrative of Tamil suffering to a wider audience: a website to archive their community’s Black July stories, an exhibit to present these stories—through personal narratives, media coverage, material artifacts and a documentary-in-progress—at various locations in the Greater Toronto Area and Canada, and a play dramatizing the violence of July 1983 through the story of a Tamil man’s migration to Canada. Other events were aimed at Canadian Tamil youth, including an essay contest to encourage second-generation youth to learn their relatives’ stories and to reflect on the meaning and importance of Black July for Tamils in Canada. Activists also organized a day-long conference for Tamil youth on the history and politics of the struggle and connected it to their lives in Canada.

“Remembering Silenced Voices” opened on Saturday, July 26, 2008, with an afternoon artists’ reception featuring poems and stories by survivors, and performances of an original play—*What If the Rain Fails?*—composed by the Tamil poet, sociologist and activist, Rudramoorthy Cheran, and performed by the Asylum Theatre Group. The play depicted the events of Black July through a series of flashbacks during the refugee determination hearing of a survivor seeking asylum in Canada. The play, as described to me by one activist, was made to answer the question, “Why are we here—why do Tamils live in Canada?”

The exhibit and the play were presented in an art gallery and performing arts centre in Toronto’s hip new Distillery District, a pedestrian-only “village” where fashion boutiques, restaurants, cafés, artisanal chocolatiers and fine art galleries jostled for consumers’ attention in a former whisky distillery; the District was a collection of reclaimed and redeveloped Victorian-era industrial buildings and streets that were

reopened to the public—with great excitement—only five years earlier in 2003. The venue, with its downtown location and upscale shops, was not a typical location for Canadian Tamil events.<sup>376</sup> On the other hand, the District was registered as a National Historic Site of Canada in 1988, and was known as a place one went “to visit the past.” In this instance, attendees were invited to visit a scene of Sri Lankan violence and Tamil suffering.

*The exhibit: Remembering Silenced Voices*

The lights were dim, and people spoke in hushed tones, as I walked into the Arta Gallery on a summery afternoon. The gallery evoked the past, with its twelve-foot high ceiling, antique copper-colored distillery equipment, and exposed nineteenth-century brick walls, while concrete dividers and floors, exposed silver ducts, and track lighting added to the industrial feel of the space. A banner in the doorway explained to visitors the significance of the event they were about to enter:

Black July is an unforgettable part of Canadian Tamil history. At a time when Tamils from Sri Lanka were seeking refuge from persecution, Canada opened its doors to provide a safe haven.

In commemoration of its 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, this exhibit is a powerful collection of survivor stories, archival footage and work of local artists which narrates the recurring episodes of discrimination and violence over the decades and the journey of Tamil Canadians out of Sri Lanka.

Framed photos and documents hung from metal chains and formed a line of black boxes that snaked around the room; before these boxes, people slowly shuffled from side to side while they took in a historical narrative about the events that led up to July 1983 in Sri Lanka. I joined a group that was forming around a guide near the entrance. Our

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<sup>376</sup> The location appeared to reflect the organizers’ intent to reach out to “mainstream” Canadians—a term that referred not only to “non-Tamils,” but to a dominant public of non-immigrant White Canadians.

tour guide turned out to be someone I had already met during my fieldwork, a young student of Indian (and Tamil) origin. That day, he wore a crisp white t-shirt screenprinted with two splashes—one red, one black—and covering them, the address for the exhibit’s web archive: BlackJuly83.com.

The first half of the exhibit constructed a narrative of the events leading up to Black July, and it began with two images:



Figure 7.1: Map of three kingdoms “before” (*left*) and Ceylon “after” colonial occupation (*right*), at Remembering Silenced Voices, July 2008 (Photograph by author)

The first was a print of a small colonial map titled *A New Map of Ceylon*, surrounded by a thick wooden frame labeled “Before, with highlighted lines dividing the Low-country and Kandyan kingdoms, each ascribed to the Sinhalese, and the Jaffna kingdom (of the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries) in the north, ascribed to the Tamils. Placed next to the first map was a second: the same map, this time labeled “After” with the lines stitched together with blue, red, and white ribbons—the colors of the Union Jack. With these two maps, the exhibit makes its first argument—one that is common to Tamil nationalist histories, as discussed in Chapter 3: Decades of political conflict and

ethnic violence in Ceylon/Sri Lanka began with British colonial unification of the island's administration in 1796.

Our tour guide then led us through several events in the island's postcolonial history: the Ceylon Citizenship Acts in 1948, which disenfranchised and made stateless Tamils of Indian origin; the 1956 Sinhala Only Act; the abrogation of pacts between the Prime Minister and Tamil political leader, S.J.V. Chelvanayakam in 1957 and then again in 1965; the anti-Tamil riots of 1958, accompanied by a survivor's account of how he and his brother prevented a mob from entering their home, where ninety other Tamils were hiding from attackers; peaceful protests in the Federal Party (ITAK) activists' satyagraha of 1961; the start of university standardization in 1971; a poster of the full text of the 1976 Vaddukoddai Resolution, demanding a separate state for the Tamils; and a painter's rendering of the burning of the Jaffna Public Library's rare and irreplaceable Tamil-language texts in 1981.<sup>377</sup> This last event was viewed by many Tamils around the world as an act of "cultural genocide"—an attempt to eliminate the Tamil language in Sri Lanka, and its speakers' documented linguistic and cultural history, and thus the claim of Tamil-speaking people to territory and sovereignty in Sri Lanka's north.

The aforementioned events were presented chronologically as part of a chain of violent episodes in "Remembering Silenced Voices," building up a historical narrative of discrimination and violence against Tamils in Sri Lanka that culminates in the violence of July 1983. The atrocities of that week were the subject of the second half of the exhibit.

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<sup>377</sup> This was a coordinated act of arson by elements of the state that went unpunished. Carried out by approximately 200 police officers in the presence of two Sri Lankan ministers of the ruling UNP: Cyril Mathew and Gamini Dissanayake. See Leary 1981 for discussion.

*Survival and the Witness*

The second part of the exhibit presented the events of 1983 with material artifacts and survivor testimonies from Canadian Tamils. At this point, our tour guide left us to wander the exhibit on our own. In the back of the gallery, installations, documentary videos, material artifacts and panels about the events of July 1983 alternated with large, glossy black posters that hung from the concrete walls. Each poster presented a first-person testimony of a survivor's experience of Black July and their life in Sri Lanka, culminating in his/her migration to Canada. The following excerpts from survivors' stories exemplify the general structure of the narratives presented at "Remembering Silenced Voices," and in the exhibit's digital archive:

"One Sunday, after my classes in Jaffna, I was travelling with my husband towards Mullaitivu. All of the sudden (*sic*), we heard the firing and the screams of people. When we passed Punkankulam Railway station, we saw a body hung on a tree. I was shivering. It reminded me of the 1977 riots, when thugs entered our house in Negombo and threatened us with death if we did not leave. We were refugees in our own hometown. All the way to Jaffna, stones were thrown to the train. Luckily, we were all safe but left with nothing." (#9)

"When it started on our street, it came all of [a] sudden. Vanloads of loud men started driving down the road. While my parents were scurrying around the backyard trying to figure out a way to escape, I got out of the bedroom where they had asked us to wait and went to watch the mob from near the living room. A group of men had gathered outside our home, throwing stones and breaking windows, while others started pouring kerosene on the house. I also saw a few outside with axes and other weapons. I was dragged by my dad back to hide in the bedroom. (#18)

"There was a lot of police, army jeeps and helicopters flying above but none of them attempted to stop the thugs from maiming Tamils publicly, looting and burning their homes.

"A lot of people, who were doing well before the riots, were suffering without any food or proper clothing in the camp."

"Through the support of external donations from Tamil businesses and volunteered services of the camp refugees, there was a single daily meal, medical services for the injured and maintenance of the toilets. We were



on our own without any protection or assistance from the government.”  
(#16)

“My paternal grandfather was a Senator and my dad had lived in Colombo since childhood. Colombo was no longer a home for the Tamils who had lived there for many decades.” (#39)

In the stories quoted above, the Tamil survivor describes how she learned of the violence, and where she was at the time. An angry Sinhala mob armed with basic weapons (such as hatchets and sticks, or petrol and matches) arrives, setting houses on fire, and beating people up in the streets. The survivors describe how they were affected: the fear they felt, their sense of loss, and the means by which they escaped, often thanks to relationships with Sinhala and Muslim neighbors, co-workers, and friends, to whom they are grateful. In these stories, the survivor found no solace or justice in the local police, and several express their disbelief and anger at the police for condoning and abetting the July pogrom. Made homeless by the violence, they were taken to makeshift “refugee camps” created out of schools, temples and churches, until they were placed on a ship to Jaffna. While some of the survivors end their narrative quickly, making brief reference to their migration abroad to Canada, others describe living through the early years of war, until they decided to leave. These survivors thank Canada for giving them “new life” in “a safe country,” and express their deep gratitude to the country’s leaders and public.

Several of the testimonies linked their experiences of Black July to the violence that continued to beset Tamil civilians during the war:

“We suffered only 14 days. However, many Tamils continue to suffer in Sri Lanka without food or shelter every day. It is quite unimaginable.”  
(#16)

“Still, we are lucky to be in Canada now.... Most Tamils who are in Canada now, might have died long ago if they stayed in Sri Lanka. We are very grateful to Canada, their people, and their leaders.” (#38)

Canadian Tamil survivors linked their personal experiences of suffering collective violence to the suffering created by Sri Lanka’s war in 2008. Even if July 1983 was a turning point in the lives of these survivors, many of their narratives concluded with a brief description of life during the early years of war before migration abroad. One woman describes how her family became “refugees in our own land,” after leaving Negombo for Jaffna after the 1977 riots. Their stories mention the violences that “still continue today”—events that makes Sri Lanka inhospitable for them, as Tamils. Survivors also noted their difference from the victims of war, by stating they were “lucky” to now live in Canada, to have escaped.



Figure 7.2: Survivor testimonies and silhouettes of Tamil refugees fleeing violence at *Remembering Silenced Voices*, July 2008 (Photograph by author)

Each story presented was of someone who was still alive at the time of the exhibit. The survivor's story was accompanied by their name, a brief quote from their testimony, and a black and white photo of the story's subject(s). The photos were close-to-medium shots, allowing viewers access to the subject's facial expression and bodily gestures. The survivors appear in these photos in a variety of naturalistic poses in their everyday life—some stand before their home's doorway, while others sit at a window; some look at the camera (and the viewer), while others look to the side or gaze into the distance; a few smile, one woman laughs.

One of the most striking pieces in the exhibit was an installation of piled objects: Two tires, and inside them, two cricket bats, a bicycle chain, a petrol can, and two brass lamps strewn about—the kind lit by Hindus during ceremonies. On top of the pile sits a document of several pages, singed at the corners and filled with Sri Lankan names: A voter's list. While photos and first-person testimonies invited viewers into the survivors' subjective experiences of violence, this installation presented the tools of the perpetrators of violence, without narration. Instead, the scene implicitly asked viewers to imagine how these everyday objects were used, in acts that were described in some of the testimonies. Tamil survivors vividly remembered these scenes when speaking about their experiences. And for many second-generation diasporic Tamils (including this ethnographer) such scenes were quite easy to imagine, as we had grown up piecing together the fragments of our families' stories about anti-Tamil violence.

CTC activists also built and launched a website to gather and archive the abovementioned stories alongside the exhibit.<sup>378</sup> The website holds forty testimonial narratives from survivors, whose stories are listed by name.<sup>379</sup> At the end of the website’s list of survivors is a link, “Submit your story,” which invites readers to contribute a narrative of their own experience of Black July. While the Remembering Silenced Voices exhibit transformed an art gallery into a temporary, physical space for imagining, remembering and reflecting upon violence against Tamils and their suffering, the website continues to serve as a virtual repository for survivors’ testimonies. Indeed, the creation of a digital archive allowed Canadian Tamils’ recollections of violence and stories of survival to “survive” beyond the life of the exhibit in a decentralized network.



**Figure 7.3:** *Remembering Silenced Voices* homepage at blackjuly83.com  
(Original source: Canadian Tamil Congress; screenshot by author)

<sup>378</sup> The exhibit was displayed in four Toronto-area locations during the month of July; in addition to the Distillery District opening, an abbreviated version of “Remembering Silenced Voices” was displayed in Mississauga, Toronto and Scarborough city halls.

<sup>379</sup> Several of these stories were added after the anniversary weekend.

*The diasporic meanings of Black July*

Community activists commemorated Black July to remember the victims of that particular event, and the effects of that event and anti-Tamil violence more generally on the Tamils of Sri Lanka. They also felt it was important to remind the “international community” at large of the “state terror” that spurred Tamil militancy and the turn to armed struggle. Black July was (and still is) widely understood to be a turning point in the Tamil national question, when decades of political action in response to discrimination and growing conflict gave way to an all-out war with the state.<sup>380</sup> Garnering a great deal of international attention, Black July also became the last large-scale, state-planned act of mass violence against Tamils in Sri Lanka. The violence of Black July mobilized thousands of Tamil youth to join fledgling militant groups. All future violence would be deemed a necessary consequence of war and ‘collateral damage’ in fighting terrorism.

However, Black July ceremonies did more than encourage Tamils to remember the loss of Tamil lives in Sri Lanka, and remind audiences of the violence that led to war with the Sri Lankan state. In the CTC’s words, “The annual event commemorates the exodus of Tamils to the West in the wake of the anti-Tamil riots staged with the connivance of the Sri Lankan government of the day in 1983” (Canadian Tamil Congress 2007). The event commemorates *an exodus*, a forced departure from Sri Lanka. In doing so, the event reminds Tamils of the sufferings they endured, as individuals and as a collectivity, at a fixed moment in time – at a turning point, just before the war officially

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<sup>380</sup> See, for example, Ponnambalam 1983; Tambiah 1986; Wilson 1988. For anthropological accounts of the violence, see Roberts 1994; Siriwardene and Rajasingham-Perera 2003; see also Kanapathipillai 1990, 2003 for interviews with survivors living in Sri Lanka.

began. And it is this moment that provides the “humble beginnings” of a diasporic origin story. The violence of Black July and the “untold suffering” it has caused generates a Tamil diaspora, and justifies to Canadians why “we” are “here.” Black July is not just a watershed moment in Sri Lankan history; for activists, the event is—as stated on the banner at the exhibit’s entrance--“An unforgettable part of Canadian Tamil history.”<sup>381</sup>

Black July was not the only commemorative event Tamils held, but it was unique. Unlike *Maaveerar Naal* (Great Heroes Day), an explicit commemoration of martyred LTTE cadres that was, by 2006, under a great deal of scrutiny, the CTC’s Black July events allowed Tamil activists to remember a moment of apparently unalloyed suffering—it provided a space within which Tamils could inhabit the space of the blameless victim. The violence was a touchstone in the lives of these activists – every activist who was old enough to remember could narrate where they were, and how it affected them, and the children of Tamil immigrants learned to narrate a version of their parents’ stories. This moment of intense conflict *between* Sri Lankans is, historically and politically, a unifying moment for diasporic Tamils in that the violence did not discriminate *among* Tamils—indeed, as has so often been the case in the contemporary history of Sri Lanka’s Tamils, we find unity only in death.

Moreover, the exhibit depicts Canadian Tamils not only as victims who suffered from violence and its after-effects, but as survivors who have established successful new lives for themselves in Canada.

### **Call of the Conscience**

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<sup>381</sup> Canadian Tamil Congress. 2008b. Black July '83: Remembering Silenced Voices. Brochure. Also see the homepage of the archive’s website.

One month after Remembering Silenced Voices, another exhibit was held in Toronto. “Call of the Conscience: Photographs and documentary films on Sri Lanka” opened on August 23, 2008, at Roy Thompson Hall, a performing arts venue in the heart of downtown Toronto and home to the city’s symphony orchestra. The exhibit was billed as a momentous occasion:

Call of the Conscience is a landmark event that will walk you through the history of violence in Sri Lanka with six short documentary films and more than 500 historical and contemporary photographs—showing how all sides of the civil war have contributed to the suffering of ordinary Sri Lankans.

Invitations to the event pointed out the exhibit’s unique chronicling of the historical suffering of “all peoples in Sri Lanka,” in its aim to unite Sinhala, Muslim and Tamil aspirations. What was the purpose of this chronicle of suffering?

A postcard for the event provides some insight into the event’s purpose. The postcard promised attendees “a greater awareness of the roots and the outcome of the conflict in Sri Lanka.” The postcard continued:

An accurate understanding of the problem is essential, before we can lend a hand to end the agony of war.

Walk through the suffering of the Sri Lankan people trapped between a known devil and a better known devil. This audio-visual tour will show how the forces that maintain the crisis are as oppressive as the currents that brought the country to war.

In the above statement, “Call of the Conscience” interpellated viewers as subjects who could act to end the war, once provided with a factual understanding of the war. (The final line of the statement is a coded one that appears to refer to the LTTE and the state, and attributes oppression to both.) The exhibit’s goals of awareness and action were reiterated in an invitation to the opening ceremony for the exhibit:

Our objective is two-fold: to activate Canadians in the struggle for peace, human rights and dignity in Sri Lanka; and to facilitate a constructive dialogue among the rich and diverse Sri Lankan diaspora.

How were the exhibit's representations of suffering connected to these aims? Before I address these questions, I tell the life history of Mano, the primary organizer of Call of the Conscience, and the Coordinator of a new initiative he called the International Forum for Peace and Justice in Sri Lanka.<sup>382</sup> Mano's life as a journalist and dissenting activist in Sri Lanka led to his eventual exile in North America, and Call of the Conscience marked his return to public activism, for the first time in a diasporic location. I turn to his story of dissent, exile and persistence to provide context for an analysis of his exhibit's representation of suffering.

*A life of dissent: Mano*

Mano was born in 1959, one year after the anti-Tamil riots of 1958; his mother liked to claim it was the reason for his involvement in politics. His mother was a Tamil Catholic from Mannar, in northern Sri Lanka, while his father was a Tamil born in Kandy, to parents of Indian origin. Mano was raised in Kandy, a pluralistic city in a mostly Sinhala region, and lived in a Tamil neighborhood with his family of seven. When he was 16, the family was caught up in the anti-Tamil riots of 1977. Mano was attacked at his school, and his father was beaten up two times. A neighbor warned them of thugs roaming the village, and anticipating violence, they decided to leave their home that night. The anxiety of displacement took a toll on the family: Mano's mother became "emotionally disturbed" and would not eat. After his mother received some treatment,

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<sup>382</sup> This forum is not to be confused with the Canadian Forum for Peace and Justice in Sri Lanka, a different forum coordinated by another left activist in Toronto at the time. That forum sought to engage Tamil community organizations and especially progressive Tamil youth.



Mano and his family went to Mannar. As he put it, “We went to our native village as refugees.”

In Mannar, Mano joined the TULF’s Youth Front (*ilaiñar pēravai*) unofficially, putting up posters and getting swept up in the rising tide of Tamil militancy. He took care of his family, while his brother was tapped to join the Tigers (which he later left, due to a bout with brain malaria.) Now that his brother was back at home, Mano wanted to join the Tigers, but his brother advised him against joining: “That’s not the right organization.” When Mano asked why, he was told, “There is no space for our opinions.” Instead, Mano continued to work odd jobs. When approached by a friend about a job organizing laborers in the plantation areas, Mano moved back to the Hill Country in 1980. He learned “the ABCs of Marxism and the Socialist language” and as he saw “the real life of [his] father’s people” he started to feel that the Tamil struggle in the North had little to do with him.<sup>383</sup>

The events of July 1983 changed Mano’s relationship to Tamil nationalist politics once again. Mano began to argue with the friend who had taken him out of “Jaffna politics,” and told him, “This [the national question] has become the primary struggle again.” Mano went to Jaffna and met with Tamil leftists, on the suggestion of his friend; many were Maoists who dismissed the national struggle as a bourgeois one. The next year, he went to Madras, received training from the National Liberation Front of Tamil Eelam (NLFTE), and went back to Jaffna by boat at the end of 1985. When Mano moved back to Mannar for work, the NLFTE opened a branch. When the LTTE started attacking

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<sup>383</sup> He noted, however, that during this time, he was held in detention for three days, after being seen by the police as someone who had come from the North to organize Hill Country Tamils.

TELO in May 1986, Mano was transported back in time to the violence of 1977. He began to understand the need to challenge the LTTE.

From 1987 to 1990, Mano worked with a group of Tamil human rights activists who documented violations by the state, the LTTE, and the other armed groups, produced analyses of the war, and documented its effects on ordinary people. This group was the University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna). When the group had to escape the LTTE's control of the north (after the assassination of Dr. Rajani Thiranagama<sup>384</sup>), Mano also moved to Colombo, where he began a new career in journalism. For three years, he wrote a column for the Movement for Interracial Justice and Equality (MIRJE)'s Sinhala-language newspaper, *Yaukataya* (Justice), to provide "a window on the Tamil struggle" to readers in the south. In 1991-1995, Mano became involved with peace activism and, with the South, in his words, "opening up," he began to focus on Tamil politics. He was approached by Lake House, the government press, to write for their Tamil magazine. In his writing, he criticized the Tigers and the notion of 'the traitor' in Tamil nationalism.

In 1995, Mano campaigned among Tamils and Sinhala villages in the south to gain support for President Chandrika Kumaratunga's devolution proposals, a package that was widely viewed at the time as the best option presented to minorities. He eventually became the Managing Director of Lake House and a television manager at the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation.

For his work as a journalist, Mano became the target of two attempts to take his life, which he attributed to the Tigers. He did not receive security during the second attempt, which took place during a transition of power from the SLFP to the UNP, and he

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<sup>384</sup> See Appendix III in Hoole et al. (1990) and Thiranagama (2011).

had to live underground. During this time—the start of the peace process—the LTTE intimidated and killed dozens of their political opponents. For the next two years, Mano moved from safe house to safe house, without a job. After an American journalist interviewed him, the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists helped Mano leave Sri Lanka in 2003. He spent two years in the United States on journalism fellowships, where he read Sri Lankan news everyday; during this time, three of his colleagues were killed and he grew very unhappy about living in exile. In 2005, his wife decided they would move to Canada, where she had relatives and a good friend.

Mano was wary of Toronto, a hub for LTTE nationalists and activism in the diaspora; he worried he might be recognized there, and feared for the safety of his family. Unlike most Tamils who moved to Toronto seeking relatives or “known people” and a community, Mano and his family settled in a smaller town in southern Ontario, where they would be largely unknown to its residents.

One day, while we were talking, Mano told me about the exhibit he was planning. He had spoken with other dissenting activists about this idea, and had been thinking about it for more than three years. He wanted to talk about the thousands of people who had died during the war, including those who had died at the hands of the LTTE and other militant groups. He also wanted to reframe the way people saw activists critical of the LTTE as “traitors”; for Mano, dissenting activists were “the people of conscience, the soul of our society.” “After the 23<sup>rd</sup> [of August], everything will change,” he said. This was the date of the opening. He called it his “coming out”<sup>385</sup> to the diaspora.

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<sup>385</sup> A turn of phrase that references “coming out of the closet” as a form of queer and LGBT liberation.

The timing of Mano's exhibit was not a coincidence. He explained, "During Black July, we always talk about Welikade, but these things [imprisonment and torture] were also done within Tamil society—political prisoners—I have seen it." He hoped that at least the second-generation would have access to a history that is "not so one-sided," and might bring it back to their parents. The timing was right for Mano, in 2008; as the situation got worse in Sri Lanka, anti-LTTE activists could not get the government to work on Tamil disappearances or other issues.<sup>386</sup> Mano wanted not only to end support for the Tigers, but to create the conditions for political dissent in general.

Mano hoped that he would one day be able to take the exhibit to wherever Tamil and Sinhala people lived in diaspora, together or apart; in an invitation to the event, he announced plans for a tour of the United States, Europe, Australia, and India. In his dream scenario, the exhibit would be seen in every district in Sri Lanka.

### *The exhibit*

On a late Saturday afternoon in August, nearly two hundred people—Canadians of Sri Lankan origin, Tamil and otherwise—gathered to inaugurate Mano's "chronicle" of suffering in Sri Lanka. The audience sat in rows of seats before the stage, in the open lobby of the grand, drum-shaped concert hall. Above us, the summer sun streamed in through a glass canopy overhead, spotlighting the exhibit's pitch-black panels of image and text—events of war in stark contrast with the city outside the dome. That afternoon, the audience was an amicable one: Many of the people present were Mano's friends and colleagues, or were part of his wider network, as dissenting activists or members of Sri

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<sup>386</sup> On the issue of disappearances and abductions at this time, see Human Rights Watch (2008).

Lankan community associations. A few non-Tamil (and mostly White) journalists and leftist activists were also present.

“Call of the Conscience” opened with songs by a local band and four speeches: Mano, as the creator of the event, spoke of his life and the brutal war; Melani M., a singer and musician of Tamil and Sinhala Catholic background; Kevin Shimmin, a labor organizer who had worked with human rights activists in Sri Lanka for sixteen years; and V. Anandasangaree, the President of the TULF who was well-known in Sri Lanka and the diaspora for his criticism of the Tigers (and had written the letter about Pongu Thamil addressed to a Tamil diaspora cited in Chapter 2).

Each of these speeches placed “Call of the Conscience” in the context of an *ongoing* war in Sri Lanka: they linked past sufferings to the present suffering of civilians caught between two warring parties. Several of the speakers criticized the government and the LTTE, and emphasized the difficulty of dissent. In doing so, these activists also spoke of and addressed a Tamil diaspora that was widely presumed to support the LTTE, and thus complicit in continuing the war and the suppression of dissent. At the conclusion of the opening ceremony, the audience made their way through the exhibit.

“Call of the Conscience” directed viewers’ attention to those who had suffered and/or been killed due to violence inflicted by the state *and* the LTTE. The first panel formed the backdrop of the stage: a digital collage of photographs of Tamil activists, politicians and community leaders who were killed during the emergence of Tamil militancy and throughout the years of war (Figure 7.4). Other panels presented lists of the names of aid workers, media professionals, and political leaders who were killed; these



Figure 7.4: *Call of the Conscience* banners: “Tamil Torture Chambers” (*above*) and four banners depicting Tamil activists, politicians and high-profile cases of civilians killed (*below*). Toronto, August 2008 (Photographs by author)

In addition to the activists, politicians, community leaders and media personnel whose lives were lost, “Call of the Conscience” highlighted the suffering of three socially marginalized groups among Tamils on the island and in diaspora: Sri Lanka’s internally displaced, war widows, and refugees in India. The first two were depicted as sharing experiences with members of the Sinhala and Muslim communities. In the first instance, in addition to the expelled northern Muslims and the eastern Muslims displaced by war, Sinhala residents of the northwestern and eastern “border zones” (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2001a) are among the people described and depicted as displaced due to war. In the second instance, the widows of war are not only Tamil, or even Muslims from the north and east, but Sinhalese too, as the panel includes the government’s figures for widows of soldiers in the armed forces and home guards.<sup>387</sup>

The “refugees in India” are specifically Tamil, however, and as discussed in previous chapters of this dissertation, this group was often omitted from representations of the Tamil diaspora and diasporic discussions about Tamil suffering. “Call of the Conscience” included Tamil refugees living in India, and in doing so, claimed their suffering for Sri Lanka, rather than as part of a global diaspora.

The exhibit also showed viewers that Tamils were not the only ones who had suffered during the war. During the exhibit’s opening reception, guest speakers noted that many of the soldiers who fought and died in the war were from poor, rural Sinhala

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<sup>387</sup> At the end of the war, women who were widowed by the war headed an estimated 40,000 households in the Northern Province. See Human Rights Watch (2009).

families. Mano also noted one event in particular that upset him and turned him toward the path of dissent: When the LTTE hijacked a bus in Anuradhapura, killing 146 predominantly Sinhala civilians in 1985 (Hoole et al. 1990); until then, Tamil militants had stuck to targeting the state's institutions and leaders. The suffering of Sinhala civilians at the hands of Tamil militants thus raised an ethical question for the diasporic activist; Mano used this event to reframe a popular narrative of the war as one between "Sinhalese persecutors" and "Tamil victims." The exhibit revealed a more complex narrative than this, even as Tamil civilians were the majority of victims, in the names and photographs shown.

Most critically, *Call of the Conscience* dissented from Tamil nationalist and community-based activism by raising two issues that were erased from dominant community representations of suffering during the war. The first was the problem of LTTE violence against the Muslims of northern and eastern Sri Lanka, communities that also suffered greatly during the war. The exhibit's panels centered on three historical moments of violence and social suffering: the Kattankudy mosque massacre of August 1990, including a list of names of the men who were killed during Friday prayers; the LTTE's expulsion of nearly 75,000 Muslims from the Northern Province in May 1990; and "Forgotten Muslims," which depicted the struggles of northern Muslims resettled in the northwestern district of Puttalam, where they continued to live in neglected refugee camps with no assurances of return.<sup>388</sup> A few Sri Lankan-Canadians expressed surprise to one another that these events had occurred—particularly the eviction of Muslims—and

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<sup>388</sup> For discussions of these events and Muslim displacement from northern Sri Lanka, see Thiranagama (2011) and Brun (2008).



they had not known about it.<sup>389</sup> This provided visitors with an opportunity to sit down, talk with each other, and ask questions of each other and Mano, the event's organizer.

The second issue that challenged dominant community activists' representations of Tamil suffering was that of *intra*-ethnic violence, and particularly, the LTTE's use of prisons and torture to punish the cadres of other militant groups, dissenters and Tamils who did not comply with the organization's rules and demands.<sup>390</sup>

Two panels of quotes from a February 1992 UTHR(J) report titled *The Trapped People Among Peacemakers and Warmongers* flank the story of "Samaran," an escapee from an LTTE detention camp. Samaran's pseudonym meant "warrior," and was a reference to his militant past.<sup>391</sup> All three panels depict human body parts—hands, ankles and legs—in chains and shackles. Below these three panels are two quotes:

It is sad enough to note that neither responsible organisations nor religious institutions such as churches have raised these things with the LTTE. Some Church dignitaries who go abroad and speak about justice to the Tamil people, and some leading intellectuals from the expatriate community who are the apologists for the LTTE never ponder why these things are happening in the midst of a liberation struggle. – UTHR

The quote is juxtaposed with a second quote, in which Samaran describes one aspect of his torture at the hands of an LTTE leader:

"He [Carles] (sic) puts about hundreds of prisoners in a tiny room (10" x 12" and shuts them in. Later he chooses 10 of them and chains them in a

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<sup>389</sup> I did not learn the ethnicity of these visitors, but they were apparently from a Sri Lankan group in Canada and were likely from the western or southern regions of the island, as minorities in the north and east were all too familiar with these events.

<sup>390</sup> The UTHR(J) also notes that some of the prisoners held were the parents or siblings of those who belonged to non-LTTE groups (1992).

<sup>391</sup> One of my informants told me that *samaran* was also chosen to evoke the term's use in Tamil Christianity, but I could not confirm its meaning. In any case, the latter connotation would not have been evident to most Tamils, including many Tamil Christians.

strange way, i.e. right leg with the left leg with the right hand and asked them to walk and he enjoys the suffering. While he tortures the prisoners, he mocks at them and laughs.” – Samaran

The quote from Samaran reveals that the LTTE had at times a different relationship to Tamil suffering than what was presented in diasporic community narratives, which typically depict the Tigers as the Tamils’ protectors and defenders. In his story, Samaran documented the existence of a network of LTTE prisons. He described how an LTTE leader tortured Tamil prisoners in the early 1990s, and enjoyed the sight of their suffering. In contrast to the image of the Tamil Tiger as a protector or a heroic martyr dying while defending the Tamil people, the Tigers are shown to be responsible for inflicting pain and thus causing the suffering of some Tamils.

Over sixteen years after his imprisonment, Samaran was living in Canada, and attended the event. He knew Mano and a few other dissenting activists quite well. Mano’s “coming out” evinced the modest political space that had opened up for dissenting activists in Canada after the ban on the LTTE and the return to war in Sri Lanka. Still, activists like Samaran were cautious. We were introduced, and after agreeing to speak with me, Samaran provided his contact information, paused, and watched as I jotted down his phone number. When I was done, he said that he was waiting to see whether I would write down his proper name. (I had not done so.) He did not want to be publicly identified. Even in Toronto, he feared what might happen to him for making public criticisms of the Tigers.

The panels on Tamil prisons were the most controversial part of “Call of the Conscience” and upset many community activists. Most diasporic supporters of the LTTE were unaware of the group’s prisons, even though they had been documented by

local human rights groups in Sri Lanka. When confronted with information that tarnished the Tigers' reputation, they were likely to dismiss it as "anti-Tamil" misinformation put out by the Sri Lankan government. Since "Call of the Conscience" was not organized under the auspices of the dominant community groups, the exhibit was viewed by these activists with suspicion. Rumors swirled about the funding behind the exhibit before and after the opening. When another researcher arrived during the public event after the opening ceremony, she asked me, "Is this being put on by the EPDP?"<sup>392</sup> When I said no, not as far as I knew, she explained that was what she had been told. Members of another organization speculated about funding from the Sri Lankan government. Dissenting activists frequently had to contend with such accusations, and the notion of being a "traitor" (*thurogi*).

In presenting cases of Muslim and Tamil suffering, Call of the Conscience posed two problems to the diasporic viewer, each of which suggested that those who claimed 'sole representation' of the Tamils were responsible for the suffering of others, whether the 'other' was defined as internal or external to the group. The first problem presented members of one minority group (the Tamils) as responsible for oppressing another minority (the Muslims) in their midst. To put it another way, where Tamils were numerically significant and dominant in the north and east, LTTE nationalism operated according to a majoritarian logic analogous to Sinhala nationalism, meting out the discrimination and violence experienced by Tamils in southern and central Sri Lanka upon a minority within the north and east: the Muslims. While Tamil-speaking in the

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<sup>392</sup> The EPDP, as explained in Chapter 1, are a militant group turned political party that formed in 1988 under the leadership of Douglas Devananda. During my fieldwork, they ruled the north via their alliance with Mahinda Rajapakse's SLFP, and were known to many Tamils in Jaffna and abroad as a violent paramilitary force.

north and east, Muslim specificity could not be subsumed within a category of “Tamil-speaking people,” as Tamil politicians and other militant groups had tried, and so in Muslims, the LTTE created an internal other, which it then expelled or killed. Violence against Muslims, and the unwillingness of the LTTE and many Tamil nationalists to acknowledge these events as a moral problem, thus became a central political problem for the dissenting Tamil.<sup>393</sup>

The second problem pointed to the internal oppression of those identified as Tamils. The exhibit revealed that some Tamils suffered (and in the return to war, continued to suffer) at the hands of other Tamils. In doing so, the exhibit questioned the notion of the LTTE’s “sole representation” of Tamils, and refuted the idea that the Tigers’ nationalism was a ‘defensive’ nationalism in response to state violence and ethnic chauvinism. However, the exhibit did not refute the image of the Tamil as a “victim” in need of protection; instead, it identified the LTTE as a second persecutor alongside the Sri Lankan government.

Finally, Call of the Conscience also used photographs to construct an iconography of suffering *shared* by Sri Lankans of many ethnic and religious backgrounds. For example, the panels about the expulsion of Muslims in 1990 and of Tamil refugees in India used historical photographs of people carrying babies and small children, and framed a mass of people carrying their belongings while traveling on foot. The panels on the multiethnic cities of Trincomalee and Colombo presented photos taken at funerals for

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<sup>393</sup> During my fieldwork, nationalist and community activists did not publicly discuss the LTTE’s use of violence against Muslims, and rarely did so in private. I once observed an attempt to discuss this during a casual conversation among activists following an event at the CTC office. When a young man who was sympathetic to Tamil nationalism raised the issue of the 1990 expulsion (less out of moral than political concerns) an older member became very upset and did not wish to talk about it—to the point of walking away from the conversation.

the casualties of war; the former, about the execution of five Tamil students in 2006, and the latter about a suicide bombing in the capital's main railway station that killed eleven people and injured nearly one hundred in February 2008. Under the panel's title, "Trincomalee," a notice about the five young men appears in the Tamil language; a similar notice about those who died at the railway station appears in Sinhala on the Colombo panel. The different languages in each notice signal the ethnolinguistic audiences for which these deaths became legible and grievable, marking a difference between communities in order to demonstrate similarities in their suffering and public mourning.<sup>394</sup>

While "Remembering Silenced Voices" constructed a history of violence against Tamils that culminated in the events of July 1983 and the Tamil diaspora, "Call of the Conscience" constructed an alternate history focused on the years of war from 1983 to 2008, the year the exhibit was held, and primarily on the decades of the 1980s and 1990s—the period during which Toronto's Tamil diaspora grew. Moreover, while the former exhibit centered on acts of physical violence, and the results of these acts in displacement and emotional trauma, the latter also directed viewers to the "social suffering" of economic marginalization.

The one event that both exhibits presented was the massacres of Tamil political prisoners at Welikade prison on July 25 and July 27, 1983. Remembering Silenced Voices presented this event in the context of a historical narrative about Black July, in which anyone could be a victim simply for the "crime" of being a Tamil. Call of the Conscience instead located this event alongside other prison massacres: an LTTE

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<sup>394</sup> There are clearly other differences, but this is beyond the scope of my argument here.

massacre of surrendered TELO cadres at Kanthan Karunai on March 30, 1987, and the murder on October 25, 2000 of Tamil inmates at the Bindunuwewa rehabilitation camp.<sup>395</sup>

Above all, both exhibits underscored the distinct ways in which diasporic activists, whether Tamil community activists or dissenters, turned to the problem of Tamil suffering—whether exclusively, or as interconnected with other sufferings—to intervene in Sri Lanka’s war. Whether publicly mobilized as a Tamil community, or sharply critical of community politics, Tamil activists shared a diasporic ethics and politics requiring engagement with the problem of suffering—and Tamil suffering in particular. As we shall see in the sections that follow, activists’ orientations to protest and dissent continued to shape diaspora activism, as Tamils in Canada and India mobilized against the war.

## **PART TWO: Suffering and Protesting the ‘Humanitarian War’**

Discourses of humanitarianism pervaded and fundamentally shaped the conduct of “the final war” in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan government argued that it was fighting “a humanitarian war” to liberate the Tamils, who were being held hostage by the LTTE. The LTTE countered these claims, and lambasted the government for blocking international aid (including food and medicine) to the suffering Tamil population of the north. During the 2002 ceasefire, the group had focused much of its energy on establishing parallel state-like structures<sup>396</sup>, cultivating international relationships, and redirecting international

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<sup>395</sup> The Bindunuwewa massacre, like the massacres at Welikade, was done with the police in attendance. Officers stood by, and some even fired at the prisoners who came seeking their protection.

<sup>396</sup> For a discussion of these structures, see Stokke (2006); for a rejoinder to the notion of an LTTE quasi-state, see Sarvananthan (2007).

aid through its coffers. And as noted in Chapter 2, a dispute over the distribution of international aid in response to the 2004 Asian tsunami was a critical factor in the breakdown of the ceasefire.

The Sri Lankan war was thus also fought on the grounds of public relations. This is not surprising given that scholarship on humanitarianism has revealed the power of “humanity” as a subject of politics, with the latter also known as a waging of “war by other means” (Foucault 1978). Moreover, while humanitarianism and militarism have long been connected through “the laws of war,” they have become tightly interlinked to each other in new ways (Chandler 2001; Fassin and Pandolfi 2010), allowing governments to justify all manner of violence against others in the name of “saving” humanity, and along with it, the political project of democracy.

Human rights and humanitarian discourses also provided activists with a way to “do morals and politics with new words” (Fassin 2008: 532). Anthropologists have, by and large, focused on the institutions of transnational humanitarianism and the unintended consequences of their work for those in their care (Ticktin 2014). This chapter reveals how such discourses circulate in times of crisis, when humanitarianism—as an ethos and a moral imperative to end suffering—provided the discursive terrain for a government fighting the war, and those who mobilized collective action against the war. The focus here is on activists and protesters who felt it was their diasporic duty to act collectively to secure a “humanitarian ceasefire” to reduce Tamil suffering in northern Sri Lanka. In the sections that follow, I turn to the ways in which activists mobilized Tamils to alleviate and protest suffering through cultural productions and political action.

## **Camp protests in Tamil Nadu**

In Chapter 5, I described two of the dozens of demonstrations that were organized by Tamil refugees in their camps in Tamil Nadu to protest the war in Sri Lanka. I focused on the work of Sooriya and Mark, two refugee activists who organized and participated in these protests, and examined how these camp protests appealed to the Indian government to “protect” the Tamils. I also examined the context of surveillance in which these protests occurred, and how statist discourses of protection and security were entangled with camp activism and created limits to refugee protest. In this section, I return briefly to these protests to describe and analyze how they invoked Tamil suffering to mobilize action to end the war. As noted in the previous chapter, camp refugees were careful not to show signs of support to the LTTE or their political goals.

Instead, refugee protesters located their political participation in their predicament as refugees, which they connected to that of displaced civilians in Sri Lanka. By organizing protests against the war, camp refugees also demonstrated against the interconnected forms of political and structural violence that shape their lives in India. They demonstrated in the space of their camps. They made visible their own suffering, as the relatives of those suffering through the war in northern Sri Lanka, but also as Tamils who were living as de facto refugees of that war. In their everyday speech and acts of protest, camp refugees appropriated circulating discourses of human rights and humanitarianism (in ordinary language) to make claims upon the states that govern and neglect their lives.

*“We live as refugees”*



The protest Sooriya organized at Manikandan exemplifies how camp refugees tied their struggles as refugees to Tamils suffering in Sri Lanka's war zones.

At the protest, a new generation of refugee children chanted slogans asking the Indian government not to give weapons to the Sri Lankan army. The extent of India's military assistance to Sri Lanka was not fully known, but Sri Lankan soldiers had received training in Tamil Nadu, prompting protests from local nationalist parties.<sup>397</sup> It was also later reported that Indian radar operators were found in the war zone. They held hand-written signs that read, "We who were born in my motherland, we live as refugees." (*en thaay mannil pirantha naam... ahathikalaaka vazhkinroom.*) Seeking a solution, they proclaimed, would be the refugee's greatest gift.

The juxtaposition of their chant, "India, don't give [weapons] to the [Sri Lankan] army!" (*inthiya ranuvathai kodukkathe!*) and the sign, "We live as refugees" implied what could not be explicitly said at the protest: We, who live as refugees, are here because of the war. India played a part in this war. We are here because India, along with other powerful states, help the Sri Lankan government continue this war. *We are here because you are there.* Such a statement could not be explicitly made because, in Tamil Nadu, the dominant narrative in refugee rehabilitation made no mention of India's support to Tamil militant groups, nor its role in the Indo-Lanka Accord and subsequent war. Sri Lankan refugees in Tamil Nadu were thus expected to be grateful as recipients of India's "hospitality," instead of an approach that would grant them legal status, and take responsibility for India's entanglement in the Sri Lankan conflict.

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<sup>397</sup> In addition to training facilities in Tamil Nadu and neighboring states, India reportedly provided "non-lethal" military assistance such as radars, and naval intelligence to sink LTTE supply ships.

Moreover, the children's posters revealed important ambivalences in the social location of Tamil refugees in India. The statement, "We who were born in my motherland..." appears to refer to Sri Lanka as their retrospective point-of-origin, the land from which their parents had fled. For some of the children, almost all under ten years old, this would be possible. But for many in this camp, their parents arrived during the early 1990s. These children were born in Tamil Nadu, in Manikandan and other camps. Their *ur* was not that of their parents, who claimed consubstantiality with the soil of villages in northern (and, to a lesser extent, eastern) Sri Lanka. When asked, most were able to name this place. Some, following their parents' example, located it with markers of proximity after first naming the region or district to which the village belongs (e.g. "It is in Mannar, close to Talaimannar, where we left by boat.")<sup>398</sup> By taking into account this critical distinction between the birthplace of an older generation of migrants and their children, the statement reads differently. The "motherland" of the statement becomes India, and the rest of the statement laments the differential treatment meted out to its children, the Tamils, and *these* children, in Tamil Nadu camps. The signs thus drew on a discursive tradition in Tamil historical and literary texts that sees Tamil India and Sri Lanka as part of a wider, pan-Tamil-speaking world of goodness (*thamil ulaga nanmai*), and Indian and Lankan Tamil activisms that explicitly refer to Tamil Nadu as the mother of Eelam Tamils (Cheran 2007).<sup>399</sup>

By making claims upon India as their motherland, camp protesters provided a subtle critique of their non-legal status in India by linking the conditions of their lives as

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<sup>398</sup> Refugee children and youth who mistakenly connected one place to the incorrect region or district were the subject of laughter from their peers and adult consternation.

<sup>399</sup> This also recalls the image of the Tamil language personified as one's own mother (*tamizhhtay*) in Tamil language devotion (Ramaswamy 1997).

refugees to their children's futures. Furthermore, they used this claim—the claim of a child upon mother, thus reworking a familiar trope of regional paternalism—to invoke the state's responsibility to protect, which becomes analogous to a mother protecting her children. They did so while chanting slogans that asked the Indian government not to assist the Sri Lankan army: "Don't give! Don't give! India, don't give [weapons] to the [Sri Lankan] army!" (*kodukkathe! kodukkathe! inthiya ranuvathai kodukkathe!*) They ascribed this responsibility to India without reference to the Indian state's earlier role in the conflict, which exacerbated the war and produced more suffering. The protesters instead focused on what India could do to end Tamil suffering due to the current phase of the war.

Refugees connected the social uncertainty of their present lives in India to the physical vulnerability of Tamils caught in the crossfire of Sri Lanka's war—people whose very lives were threatened by a war that had the Indian state's tacit and material support. The same war, in earlier phases, had driven them out of their homes and brought them to India's shores. Their immediate concern was to stop the war to protect the lives of Tamils in Sri Lanka. However, even if the war ended tomorrow, most Tamil refugees—camp residents and OfERR staff alike—explained that they would not return to Sri Lanka without a just political solution to the conflict. They doubted whether that solution would be forthcoming under the Rajapaksa government. They had survived the war, and had become refugees in the process. They often wondered: Would their children remain refugees?

When refugees were denied the permission to protest, they felt aggrieved and distressed. On February 15, 2009, four camps submitted a joint request to their District

Collector to hold a demonstration. The request was denied, and in the words of one active camp resident, they were told they could talk among themselves instead. They were told that the media should not be present. One woman then told me, as she held out her upturned palms, “We have a concern (*akkarai*) for our people. But we cannot do anything. We are refugees. I see their suffering (*vētanai*), their sorrows (*varuttam*), the news. We shall do it by peaceful means. And they say the Indians can do it, but we must not?” Many camp refugees felt this to be deeply unfair. They understood that the reason they were denied rights to protest was their status as refugees who were dependent on the state for their refuge and welfare and lacked citizenship rights in their country of residence. But it was precisely their lives as refugees that many camp residents felt bound them to the plight of displaced Tamils in Sri Lanka. The camps were heavily surveilled by police, and every gathering in the spaces outside their huts required permissions that were usually secured through bureaucratic administrative protocols. In this case, the collector’s denial of their request foreclosed the possibility of action through organized protest and media coverage. Feeling unable to “do something” to intervene in the war compounded anxieties among camp refugees, and contributed to a sense of isolation and helplessness.

### **The “Tamil diaspora protests” in Toronto**

May 2009: Toronto had never seen the likes of protests like these. Tens of thousands of protesters lined the streets of downtown Toronto, calling upon the Canadian government to take action on the war in Sri Lanka. Their actions were a part of several weeks of “non-stop” protests organized by Tamil activists. The protesters were mostly of Sri Lankan Tamil origin. These demonstrations also took place in several locations

outside Canada. They included protests in the Western world's financial and political capitals and cities with sizeable Tamil diasporas: Ottawa, New York, Washington D.C., London, Paris, Geneva, Oslo; smaller protests took place in Australia, Germany, Malaysia and Sweden. The media referred to them as "the Tamil diaspora protests."

Tamil activists organized several public events between September 2008, when the Sri Lankan government evacuated international aid workers and banned all media from the country's northern war zones, to March 2009. When the government's assault on the Vanni<sup>400</sup> region began, youth activists from CanTYD, TYO and Tamils Against Genocide formed a new organization, Canadian-HART (Humanitarian Aid and Relief for Tamils) to draw attention to the impending crisis. In November, they constructed a makeshift IDP camp surrounded by barbed wire in the middle of Yonge-Dundas Square, a large concrete public square in the middle of a shopping district downtown, and handed out pamphlets and flyers.

On January 25, 2009, Sri Lankan government forces took over Kilinochchi, home of the LTTE's headquarters and their last stronghold. The state announced it had the Tigers cornered in Mullaitivu. At the time, anywhere from 250,000 to 400,000 people were trapped between the warring parties. Within days, Tamil activists organized several events. On January 27, they held a protest in front of the Sri Lankan consulate, and a university TSA held a 30-hour fast to raise awareness about the war. On January 30, tens of thousands of Canadian Tamils stood outside in subzero temperatures to form a human

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<sup>400</sup> The Vanni is a dry zone in northern Sri Lanka and consisted of the parts of the Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu and Vavuniya districts that were under the control of the LTTE. According to a TRO report, by the end of August, 249, 612 people were internally displaced in the region, out of a total population of approximately 500,000 people. See "Humanitarian Crisis in the Vanni: Need for Action by the International Community." September 1, 2008.

chain around the city's downtown core; the next month, the Canadian Tamil Congress organized a protest on Sri Lanka's Independence Day (on February 4). The following month also saw a protest in front of the U.S. consulate, and a second human chain.

Sri Lanka's war was referred to as "a war without witnesses": It was not televised outside the country, for the most part. The government had banned journalists, most aid workers, and other independent observers from traveling to the war zones. Western mainstream media outlets provided little coverage of the battles and casualties. Tamil writers and journalists were, by and large, the only source for daily coverage of the events.

Protesters organized increasingly spectacular demonstrations in response to the crisis and lack of attention it received. They rallied in the Canadian capital at Parliament Hill in Ottawa, and blocked traffic for several days; in New York, they marched from the UN's headquarters to Times Square. They marched in front of the Toronto Sun newspaper's offices, demanding coverage of the war and the ensuing humanitarian crisis, and in February, held memorial services for the young men who had immolated themselves in Tamil Nadu and Europe to draw attention to the war. Activists organized in the suburbs of Toronto as well. In the Peel Region, youth held a three-day hunger strike and outdoor performances as snow fell from the sky.<sup>401</sup> In Markham, community elders held a 30-hour fast in a Tamil "banquet hall," where they brought student and youth activists together with members of home village associations and other political organizers.

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<sup>401</sup> Images of this and other events appear in an issue of *TYO Reach*, Feb 2009.

By April, two things became apparent to those who impartially gathered information about the war from outside the country: The Sri Lankan army was firing into the “no-fire zones” it had announced and created to ostensibly protect civilians; the Tigers, who were hiding among civilians, were preventing people from escaping to government-captured territory. The war continued, with government spokespersons denying allegations that the army was firing into the no-fire zone, amid increasing international concern over rising civilian casualties. Pro-LTTE activists organized protests, accusing the government of “genocide” while deflecting questions about the organization’s conduct. Over the next few months, the LTTE and its diasporic supporters claimed that civilians were following the fighters further inland out of fear of what the government forces would do to them if they surrendered—a fear that was not entirely unfounded, and that some people surely had. In the months to come, however, this assertion proved increasingly difficult to sustain, as human rights groups reported that civilians who escaped the war zone said that cadres shelled and fired shots at them.

Tamil protests took an even more dramatic turn at the end of April when Tamil activists and protesters blocked traffic for one week on University Ave, a major thoroughfare in the center of Toronto’s downtown core. Youth activists decided to occupy the street with their seated and prostrated bodies to ensure the community could maintain a continuous presence in front of the U.S. consulate, where they had just held a demonstration. The protesters demanded an end to the war, along with recognition of the Tigers and their goal of a separate state as “the only solution” to the conflict. Toronto Police tried to negotiate with the event’s spokespeople, who refused to move. (Second generation diaspora youth were at the forefront of these protests, and sometimes had

tense confrontations with the police.) After several days, they were forcibly dispersed by horseback riding officers with batons. Activists' rallies and demonstrations in front of the provincial and federal parliaments, culminated in a group of young activists, children, parents and grandparents walking onto the ramp of an urban expressway. (Their actions were unprecedented for a recent immigrant community in Canada.<sup>402</sup>) They brought Mother's Day traffic to a standstill for several hours (and were eventually talked down from the ramp by the leader of Canada's liberal Party.)

A Tamil diasporic public was mobilized in Canada at the intersection of two circulating forms of public communication: actions of protest, and digital video. In what follows, I describe video footage of a protest aired live and re-edited for broadcast on a Tamil-language channel in Canada, as a program titled *Adankāpatru*. I analyze the social semiotics of how diasporic activists transformed suffering into action through the coordinated use of public performance, personal testimonies and appeals.

*Love without Bounds (Adankāpatru)*

The opening sequence to a protest video, produced by the subscription service, Tamil Vision International, projects this desire to demonstrate a community unified in struggle and suffering. *Adankāpatru* (Boundless Love) named after the protest event it depicts, took place a mere two days after the Gardiner expressway demonstration spurred widespread condemnation in Canadian public discourse. The video begins *in media res*, with discontinuous images of the crowd that it seeks to mobilize. Whereas videos circulating among Tamils during the 1990s and 2000s documented the Tigers' battlefield

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<sup>402</sup> Before this, indigenous activists had occupied the expressway to protest government inaction, and there has been a Critical Mass rally in 2008. For one commentary on this point, see James Bow (2009), "Human Shields on the Gardiner?" <http://bowjamesbow.ca/2009/05/13/human-shields-o.shtml>



protest exclusively, videos such as this one depicted civilian injuries and death in an on-site dramatic re-enactment of the war edited in-camera. (These re-enactments drew on images and videos that were posted online and circulated among diasporic activists.) In the video, an electric speaker plays sounds of aerial bombing and shelling as local actors (from the WTM's Central Toronto Arts and Culture group) run and take cover. Some sustain injuries, while others appear to die. The living remain beside the bodies of those injured and killed, wailing in pain and singing *oppāri*<sup>403</sup> (songs of lament) to the dead. Mostly women and children, they shout for someone to save them, crying for their own loss.<sup>404</sup>

In their midst rise a group of young girls, some clad in black blouses and slacks, others in dark blue sarees, who dance with bold gestures. The young women are Tigers, who have come to fight for the civilians. But their suffering continues. For when the Tigers are gone (leaving to fight elsewhere?), the army arrives to round them up and assaults them.

This scene reveals the dominant image of the war among Tamil protesters – a scene of inevitable death and suffering in Sri Lanka – and is anchored by testimonial appeals in another video. A self-styled “documentary” of the same name aired three days later with titles, fast-paced editing, intercutting between scenes, and a soundtrack of local

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<sup>403</sup> These songs are classified according to categories of social relationship, particularly kin. See Clark-Deces (2005) and Trawick (1990).

<sup>404</sup> In her book, *No One Cries for the Dead: Tamil Dirges, Rowdy Songs and Graveyard Petitions*, the anthropologist Isabelle Clark-Decès describes the groups of women who encircle the mourner at a Tamil funeral: “As the crowd continues to swell, the number of clusters increases to twenty or more, made up of women swaying, moaning, and crying out dirges beside the dead person” (2005: 22). She argues, based on fieldwork in Tamil Nadu, India that Tamil women cry at funerals not for the dead or the mourner but for themselves and their own losses in life. In doing so, they also fulfill a gendered social obligation to mourn publicly. Tamil women’s grief is linked to *kurai*, or the experience of “deficiency” or “want” and the anthropologist suggests that “Kurai is also associated with a particular symptomology, etiology or “cure” that stresses the necessity to cry out laments and *make others suffer for you...*” (my emphasis)

Tamil hip-hop and propaganda songs. First, the documentary's producers make a specific appeal to a Tamil viewing audience, later repeated in its entirety. A Tamil Vision announcer, accompanied by one other person, stands in front of a milling crowd, faces the camera and tells the audience in Tamil,

We have gathered here once again in front of the Ontario parliament in Queen's Park... we have come to make the following demands:

The international community, and particularly the Canadian government must make a great effort to heed our demands, the international community must recognize the Tamils' rights to their own, separate motherland (*tani tayaka urimai*) to self-rule; they must recognize the united and indivisible Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, they must strengthen the leader, the leader of the Tigers... to this end these people are struggling to put forward many such demands.

Whether protesters or viewers would agree or not, the announcer denotes these multiple statements to a Tamil audience as "our demands," which are taken to be self-evident to a diasporic viewing public. These demands are intercut with a montage of protesters depicting suffering on the island, ranging from a man dressed as Sri Lankan president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, covered in babies dripping in fake blood, to protesters holding images of charred and disemboweled bodies over their own.

The announcer then narrates a brief history of the national struggle. The video cuts from photos of past actions and violence in Sri Lanka to the event at Queen's Park, and in doing so, establishes a visual continuity between Tamil politicians' and activists' historical opposition to majoritarian rule in Sri Lanka, the plight and future of Tamils within the country, and diasporic action. Tamils were thus presented with a historical duty of "non-violent" protest "within Canadian laws" distinct from, but parallel to, the

military efforts of the LTTE within the island. The narrative of the video echoes what I was told by several activists in our conversations about these protests.

The diasporic Tamil's historical duty is rendered as being inseparable from obligations to kin, as illustrated in testimonial appeals that urge viewers to attend the ongoing protest. In one segment, an elderly woman explains why she has come to the protest by describing her displacement and suffering to the audience, and her subsequent move to Canada that left dozens of relatives behind. In another, a young woman speaks in English, reminding the viewer that the cousins with whom she played as a child are now scared to leave their bunker. She says, "I am here, protesting today, because I want my people to be safe." Both conclude by reiterating demands for a free Tamil Eelam. These statements are delivered within a medium close-up shot, in which the speaker takes up much of the frame to make an intimate appeal to the viewer.

In the longest and least-personalized testimony, the video returns to the two-shot with which it began. The TVI announcer introduces a man, bandaged and apparently bleeding, as a "man of the people," or literally, "common son" (*pothu makan*) before asking him, "Why are you participating in this event? Can you tell us why you are dressed this way?" The man replies,

Why? Because... look a little closer! Look at what is on my body. This many blood relatives (*udanpiRappukal*) are before your eyes. Thousands of relatives... yesterday, today, this has been going on for sixty years. The international community is doing nothing. (...)



Figure 7.5: *Adankāpatru* (Boundless Love) protest in Toronto, May 13, 2009  
(Original source: Tamil Vision International; screenshots by author)

The speaker, Kalainathan, continues

At this time, three or four lakhs of Tamils are living in this country, Canada. This country has not betrayed us in any way. If we had not set foot in this country, we would have been destroyed there. Therefore, in this country, Canada, everyone must think and do something. Our Tamil people, please try thinking of them. Who will be killed? Your siblings (*sahotharangal*). Your blood relatives.

Those of you who would be watching TV, please come! Please come!  
Bring out the suffering (*vētanai*) that lives inside you (like a potato in  
darkness) and tell our Canadian government!

Kalainathan is a member of the WTM arts and culture group that performed the re-enactment described earlier. His body is covered with photos of Tamils who were killed on May 11, 2009, when over a thousand people were estimated to be killed during fighting that day. (This was the same event that prompted diaspora youth to occupy the Gardiner Expressway.) Kalainathan's speech creates continuity between "this" (*intha*) violence of "yesterday, today" and the past sixty years of post-independence history. He refers to the people in the photos as his "blood relatives" and "siblings," making fictive kin of the hundreds of Tamils killed in the previous day's battles, and reminds viewers that, had they not left Sri Lanka, "we [Tamils in Canada] would have been destroyed there." This knowledge is a part of the suffering that "lives inside" the diaspora audience. Kalainathan invokes this suffering to remind diaspora Tamils of their obligation to "do something," as those who escaped the war and continue to live.

Kalainathan's speech continues in this vein, alternating appeals to viewers to join the protests with descriptions of Tamil suffering. He reports a rumor circulating at the time, "You would have heard that they are taking our relatives to Sinhala villages, tearing their bodies apart, and—[stumbling] I cannot even say it!" He gestures toward his sign instead, reminding the viewer to look at his body, which acts as a screen for mutilated and violated Tamil bodies. In doing so, Kalainathan relies on images to communicate what cannot be said. Images of war victims are "a species of rhetoric" that invoke a

hypothetical shared experience and “create the illusion of consensus.”<sup>405</sup> When viewing these images, “we” feel able to agree on one thing: Tamils in Northern Sri Lanka are suffering. This affect does not require dialogic or analytical thinking of how this suffering came to be, aiming instead to motivate action. Moreover, Kalainathan's speech demonstrates the commitment to act made through public speech that, according to Boltanski (1999), reports to another “both what was seen and how this personally affected the spectator.” Kalainathan has seen the violence and death, and communicates how it affects him *not by saying it*, but showing us images of that violence, and how he feels about it—his rising voice, anguished expression, and tears allow us to see and sense his pain, and thus become entangled with Tamil suffering.

However, Kalainathan’s public speech blurs the sociologist’s distinction between sufferer and spectator by asking viewers to recall their own experiences during the war, and join the protests to “bring out the suffering that lives inside [them].” In other words, unlike Boltanski’s “distant spectator,” diasporic Tamils felt intimately connected to the war in Sri Lanka. These public acts of suffering, as subjects of a community, constituted the ground for diasporic Tamil activism, even as activist speech enacted a split between diasporic action here and Tamil suffering there. Activists invoked moral discourses of kin and community as grounds for solidarity to encourage identification with Tamil suffering and compel action. In asking the viewer to look at *his* body, however, the activist became the medium through which Tamil suffering was rendered visible. Protest and its mass-mediation here constituted a dispersed form of transnational political action, in which activists and media-producers were acting upon Tamils to act upon others—international

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<sup>405</sup> This point by Susan Sontag (2003: 6) is also discussed in Butler’s (2009) discussion of the “frames” of war.

media, governments, and ‘the international community’—in a kind of inverse governmentality.

### *Signs of Protest*

In addition to representations of the suffering body of the Tamil civilian, diasporic activists and protesters used two other signs that gave aesthetic and political form to their suffering, grievances and aspirations: the LTTE-designed Tamil national flag, and the map of their aspired-to homeland, Tamil Eelam. These signs were used to create a spectacular appearance of unity in the public formation of a Tamil identity and diasporic political community. However, these controversial signs and their significant effects also created disagreement and dissension among Toronto Tamils during protests.

In Toronto, early demonstrations against the war in January 2009 focused primarily on the humanitarian crisis as a result of embargos on supplies to the north and inadequate aid to the war zones—aid that was also reportedly used by the Tigers. Protesters formed a human chain that circled the city’s downtown core, and held signs demanding a ceasefire, as well as food and medical supplies for Tamils in the north.

As the protests continued, however, diasporic activists added explicitly “political” claims to their “humanitarian” appeals: They asserted their support for the LTTE and their desire for Tamil Eelam as “the only solution” to the devastating war.<sup>406</sup> They did so by chanting slogans, hanging banners printed with the map of Tamil Eelam, and above all, by hoisting and waving the Tiger flag—which they referred to as “the national flag.” In doing so, the Tamil diaspora protests of 2009 visually resembled prior events,

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<sup>406</sup> While some commentators viewed the abovementioned “political” claims and “saving the Tigers” as the “real” reason for the protests, I argue that “humanitarian” and “political” claims were both central to activists’ demands.

including Pongu Tamil (discussed in Chapter 2) and protests against Canada's proscriptions of the LTTE and WTM.

The LTTE was, however, still banned as a terrorist organization in Canada (as discussed in Chapter 4 of this dissertation), and consequently, the Tamil Eelam flag became a focal point of action and debate during the Toronto protests. In response to questions raised in the Canadian media, Toronto police deemed the use of the flag legal.<sup>407</sup> However, the Tiger flag was still read by most non-Tamils as a sign of militancy in Canada, within a counter-terrorism narrative that did not consider what the flag meant for those who held it. Tamil activists' use of the flag of a "banned" organization thus placed them—and the civilians on whose behalf they protested—outside the law.

For the American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce, a sign is "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (1955: 99). If the Tamil Eelam flag (Figure 7.7) is one such sign, who is the "somebody" to which it stands "for something," and what is that thing? Why did activists and protesters hold this controversial flag when trying to gain sympathy for their cause?

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<sup>407</sup> In London, however, some protesters were reportedly arrested for holding the flag. In Toronto, a white Canadian student activist, Angela Regnier, was also arrested, and Tamil students claimed the arrest was made to make an example out of her and isolate their protests.





Figure 7.6. Flag of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (Source: Wikipedia.org)



Figure 7.7. National Flag of Tamil Eelam (Source: Wikipedia.org)

The LTTE's Tiger emblem was created in 1977. While hiding in India, the group's leader, Prabhakaran, chose the tiger as a symbol expressing heroism, as well as the strength, courage, agility and aggression of the animal presented. He commissioned his friend Nadarajan, a Madurai-based artist, to design the new flag (Figure 7.6).

For the LTTE, the tiger was a symbol of a revived martial tradition (Taraki 1991). As stated in a February 1991 issue of the eponymous periodical, *Viduthalai Puligal* (Liberation Tigers),

The Tiger symbol illustrates the martial history (*vīra varalāru*) and national upheaval of the Tamils. It signifies strength, valour and self-confidence of Tamils. It was under this symbol the Chola Kings led their campaign of conquest in the whole of South and Southeast Asia in 10th and 11th centuries AD. Tiger symbol echoes Tamil ethnic patriotic and courageous feelings. This symbol is deeply imprinted in the minds of the people. The soul of the nation is rejuvenated because of this symbol. Moreover, Tiger was chosen to recreate each and every member of the LTTE as a Tiger to fight with enough courage and agility.

If the tiger, as a symbol, “was chosen to recreate each and every member of the LTTE as a Tiger,” what did the repeated use of this image do for Tamil activists? When held at Tamil demonstrations against the war, the Tiger flag semiotically regimented protesters and their actions, creating and recreating their membership in a Tamil community they believed was inexorably bound with the LTTE.

The LTTE removed the its name from the Tiger flag and declared the new version “the national flag of Tamileelam” on *Maaveerar Naal* (Great Heroes Day) on November 27, 1990. An LTTE document on the flag includes a code of usage that stipulates that “all important ceremonies and events in the Tamil homeland are begun with the hoisting of the national flag accompanied by the singing of the song of veneration meant for it.”

When asked by outsiders why they held the Tiger flag, activists said, “It is our national flag,” and asserted their right to hold it. They pointed to a key difference between the LTTE flag and the one designated (by that organization) as the national flag of Tamil Eelam—only the former was imprinted with the words, “Liberation Tigers of

Tamil Eelam.” This minor difference aside, most Tamils and non-Tamils viewed the flag as the flag of the Tigers.

Protesters held and the flag, the map of Tamil Eelam, and photos of Prabhakaran as representations—using Spivak’s terms, in the sense of a portrait and proxy—of their cause.

They felt that holding the flag was “an act of resistance” to the media and politicians who told them to put it down. (To Canadian media and politicians, and some activists, the flag indicated a “remote-control politics” in which the LTTE dictated diaspora activism through its agents abroad.) Putting down the flag was analogous to the demand that the LTTE put down their weapons and surrender. However, for many protesters and activists, the flag was a sign of their political unity; the Movement made possible the coordination and organization of popular demonstrations, and effected this unity by printing and disseminating posters and flags.

In Toronto, the Tamil Eelam flag was both an indication of normative aspirations to statehood, and a practice of everyday identification for Tamil activists and protesters in Toronto. Its ubiquity was clear to anyone who lived or worked in Scarborough. At one intersection near Kennedy and Eglinton in 2008-2009, a van sold this mass-manufactured flag alongside those of Canada, the United States, Italy, Jamaica, Brazil, and others. Although much less visible after the 2006 ban on the LTTE, the flag returned to public demonstrations after the ban on the WTM when, as discussed in Chapter 4, thousands of Tamils gathered at Pongu Thamil in 2008, Pro-LTTE activists handed out small, paper flags, and some participants brought their own flags printed on t-shirts, umbrellas, and other items received at past events.

The Tamil Eelam flag also traveled beyond spaces of public protest and throughout the suburban grid, shaping public space in Tamil Toronto. It fluttered in the wind of moving vehicles as families tied small flags to their car's radio antenna. Pasted to the bumper, the Tiger sat alongside a school decal. It also found company in the parking lot of schools and banquet halls to which Tamils took their children to perform in dance and music recitals, cultural programs, soccer tournaments. The flag announced to one and all the family's public, political stance. More than that, it indicated, through iconic resemblance, their membership in a Tamil community that is both local and transnational, wherever the flag and its colors might wander.

After the ban, some Tamils feared that the flag and other emblems could be used as evidence of "material support" to the LTTE. However, they did not wish to dissociate themselves from images that had become integral to their social identities and political activism. Tamil activists and protesters found other ways to signify political support for the Tigers in their community. My interlocutors felt it was important for me to become adept at reading these signs, which became a popular subject of discussion among us. "You'll see things like an umbrella with Tamil Eelam on it," I was told. This umbrella was present at many demonstrations, made of black and red nylon panels with a yellow homeland—the colors of the LTTE flag. On other occasions, I observed a stuffed toy tiger or decal in the back of a car. At home, one might find a framed picture of an orange tiger. As one community member and brother of a pro-LTTE activist explained: "There is a desire here to identify with something that is not necessarily about nationality. Tamils cannot embrace the Lankan flag. In the absence of such a symbol, *that* Eelam silhouette

becomes important. We don't necessarily want to be "Separate, but equal." We want to have a symbol of power, and not just a stripe on the flag."

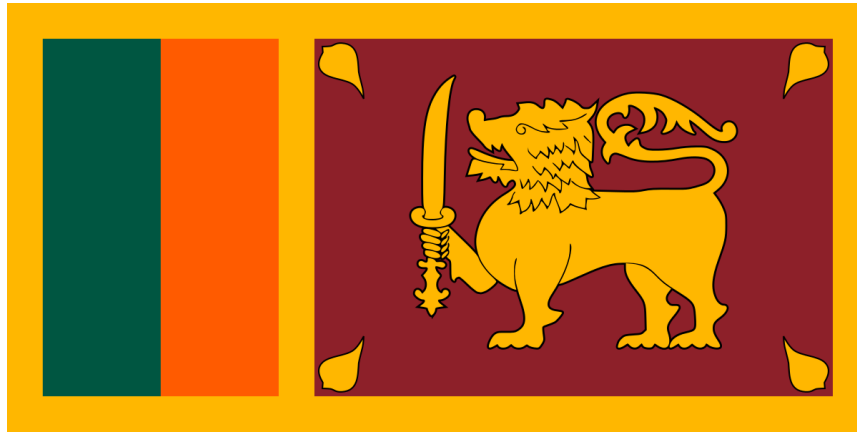


Figure 7.8: Map of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka  
(Source: Wikipedia.org)

The Sri Lankan flag was often pointed to as a potent sign of inequality for Sri Lanka's minorities, and on more than one occasion, this flag was described to me as one in which the country's majority, in the form of a lion, points its sword at the minorities, which were represented by saffron and green stripes, for (Tamil) Hindus and Muslims respectively.<sup>408</sup>

In lieu of a more "representative" Sri Lankan flag, diaspora Tamils were mobilized under the sign of the LTTE as a symbol of the dignity and political power to which they aspired. The Tiger, as a symbol of the Chola kingdom, also connoted an ancient sovereignty and cultural heritage that Tamil nationalists claimed and wished to revive. With the return to war, the Tamil Eelam flag became more visible than it had ever been before. The flag, alongside images of the "national leader," visually asserted the

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<sup>408</sup> This of course omitted other minorities, such as the Christians among Tamils and Sinhalese, and groups such as the Burghers and indigenous Veddas. Activists' critiques of the flag rhymed with Qadri Ismail's (2005) observation that the armed lion is a Sinhalese nationalist symbol that "dominates the Sri Lankan flag" and commands the allegiance of all citizens (151).

LTTE's cultural and political hegemony among active sections of Toronto's Tamil diaspora.

The map of Tamil Eelam was another organizing sign. Just as the Sri Lankan anthropologist, Pradeep Jeganathan, argues about the diasporic webspace of Eelam, the map of the homeland is "devoted to an argument for and about a nation that might be—it tells of its right to existence through a history of adversity" (1998: 527). It is not a specific, locational identity, but an "emptied-out map" that, in its imaging and imagining in diasporic life, "preserves the *form* of the nation-as-territory" for those who wish to believe in its mission (528).

In the images that circulated at the protests, the map was an outline of the homeland for which Tamil militant youth have fought, now under the "sole" leadership of the Tigers. This form is a solid and undifferentiated territory, usually appearing in red or yellow. It was defined not by geographic features of its territory, but by political boundaries that functioned as a *de facto* border. According to Kittu, a senior leader of the LTTE, acts of violence created this territory: Tamil Eelam could be mapped wherever the government had dropped a bomb.<sup>409</sup> However, the outline of a map can only approximate, rather than indicate what it contains. Another map at the protests attempted to do this.

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<sup>409</sup> Kittu noted this at a *Maaveerar Naal* speech in Zurich in November 1990: "I was once asked by an Englishman connected with the British Refugee Council: 'You say Tamil Eelam, but where are the boundaries of this Tamil Eelam that you talk about? Show me.' I was taken aback by the directness of the question. I thought for a while, searching for an appropriate response. Then I replied: 'Take a map of the island. Take a paint brush and paint all the areas where Sri Lanka has bombed and launched artillery attacks during these past several years. When you have finished, the painted area that you see - that is Tamil Eelam'" (Satyendra 1993).

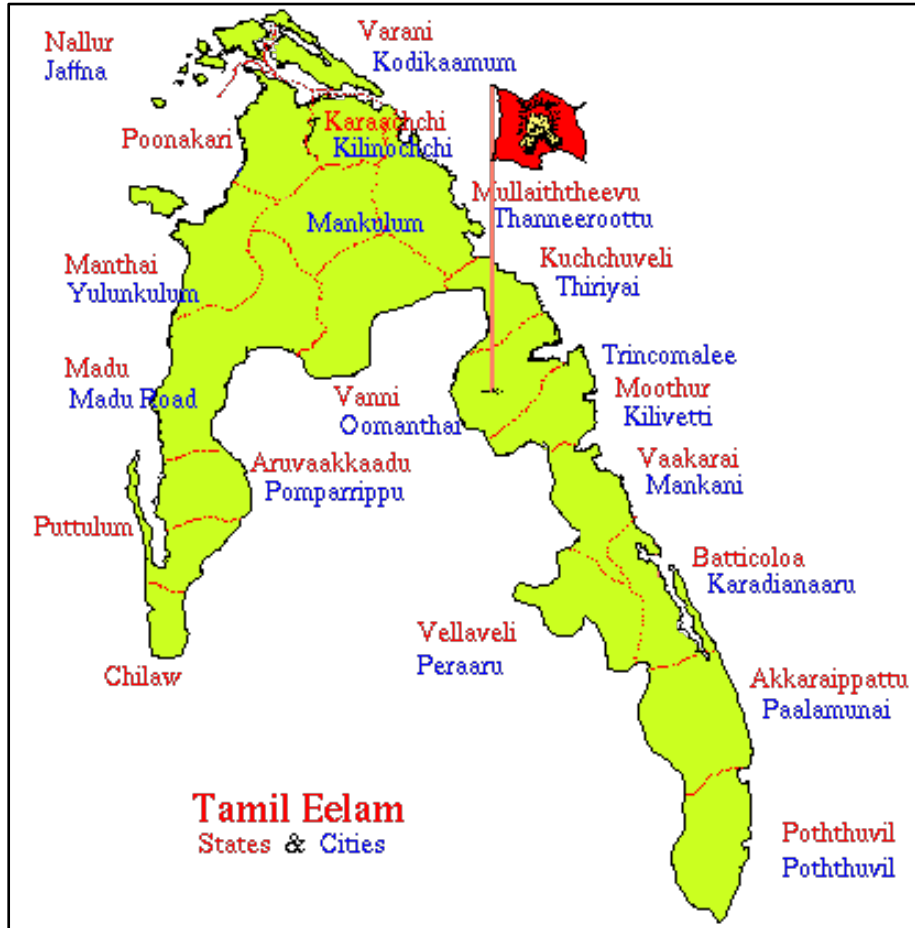


Figure 7.9: States and Cities of Tamil Eelam image used on protest banner in Toronto, April to July 2009 (Source: Tamilnation.org)

On a fence hangs a large vinyl-printed map of Tamil Eelam. At the top, it reads “States and Cities of Tamil Eelam” (Figure 7.9). This map shares an iconic resemblance to the flags, t-shirts, and other propaganda images that move through the crowd. Like them, its disputed territory hangs apart from the rest of the island. This map, however, is colored green. It features major roads, some tributaries, and indicates cities and towns. A Tiger flag stands atop a flagpole to indicate the capital at Kilinochchi, the base and headquarters of the LTTE’s parallel state. Further, unlike the undifferentiated arc of

Tamileelam, this map indicated regions within the map as “states” and designated “state capitals.”

If the map provides the form of a homeland that Tamils may imagine as theirs, and provides an argument for the LTTE’s exercise of state power, it also does something else for Tamils living in diaspora. The map is an index of a place they have left behind, and to which they stand in relation. As families pass through the protest, parents sometimes bring their children to stand in front of this map. Most often, they are young children, who tightly grip an adult’s hand as they listen. I observed a father in his thirties do this with his young daughter. He asked the girl, “What is your home-village?” She repeated the name, Neerady. “Where is it on the map?” and told her to point to it. She touched the map with her index finger. He moved it over to where the village was, unmarked on the map.<sup>410</sup>

### *At the edges of protest*

Protesters’ use of the Tamil Eelam flag, map and other signs of LTTE separatism generated debates among Toronto Tamils. Many in the community questioned activists’ use of the flag, beginning with the second human chain held in March 2009. They felt it was more important to highlight the ongoing humanitarian crisis due to the war, and its toll on civilians. They argued that the flag, as a symbol of a banned organization, obscured this concern.

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<sup>410</sup> Not knowing one’s home village was a source of painful anxiety for the parents, aunts and uncles, and grandparents of this new generation: “They should know their culture, they should know where they are from,” I was told. On one occasion, however, the map was an object of scorn: “They don’t know anything about the ur, they only know how to point to it on the map!”



Some Tamils who attended the first human chain described how upset they felt when activists raised the LTTE's flag during subsequent events. Community activists like Chandran tried to persuade youth and Movement activists to shift their tactics. On the other hand, Tamils who were less active dropped away from the protests altogether. Many did not attend them at all. One young professional who had previously been more involved in community activism explained that he avoided the protests at Queen's Park by taking alternate routes to his workplace. Another young woman who worked for the provincial government felt "embarrassed" by the pro-LTTE protesters, who were visible from her office window, and found it difficult to discuss the political nuances of the war and the protests with her colleagues.

For a few dissenting activists, the protests provided a space where they could gather together with other Tamils in opposition to the war. Like the woman above, Jeevani, the feminist activist who appeared in Chapters 1 and 4 of this dissertation, watched the protests from a distance. She explained that, on the one hand, it was hard to see that people were suffering due to the war. On the other hand, the protesters were holding flags and posters in support of an organization that was party to the war—although not as powerful as the government—and was thus culpable in creating human suffering. The LTTE and the government had both created immense difficulties for her and other Tamils, as activists and civilians, and she could not muster support for either side. But as the military assault on the Vanni intensified, and with reports that Tamil civilians were unable to leave the no-fire zone, she felt compelled to visit the protests, "just to see what was happening."

When she arrived, Jeevani stood on the edges of the crowd at Queen's Park. That day, she cried. It was the sight of so many Tamils who needed a place to express their distress. People were streaming to the site, and "it was an emotional time." Her friend Thivya (who was discussed in Chapter 4) and Thivya's husband wanted to join the protesters—they followed the diaspora media, and were upset by the government's actions—but Jeevani felt she could not join them. She continued to watch from the sidelines.

The second time Jeevani went to the protests, she had a very different experience. She went with a mutual friend of ours—a journalist who had helped Ranjan organize "Call of the Conscience." A man approached them, and told Jeevani to stay away from our friend, whom he assumed was Sinhala and sent to spy on the protests for the Sri Lankan government.<sup>411</sup> He warned Jeevani in Tamil, "Sister (*akka*) don't go with her... she's a bad person." They decided to leave, and Jeevani did not return.

Jeevani's friend, Leena, whose story of activism and migration was briefly discussed in Chapter 1, also went to the protests. In 2008, Leena felt that public actions were not the most effective form of activism. Many of her friends had been killed, were kidnapped, or in hiding, and she was fed up with "the politics back home." In Toronto, she engaged in "grassroots work," ranging from organizing immigrant workers to forming a volunteer response group to domestic violence in the community. She explained that she wanted to protect her work from "the politics" that seemed to infiltrate all forms of community activism. In April 2009, however, she joined Tamil activists on

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<sup>411</sup> She was, in fact, a diaspora Tamil raised in Canada; when this friend visited the protests with her Sinhalese friend, he was threatened by a group of men.

University Avenue. She told me she felt she had to “shout with the people,” even though she did not agree with some of their demands. She politely refused when activists gave her the LTTE flag. When protesters shouted slogans in support of the LTTE, Leena improvised and shouted her own chants.

Even though the crowd’s chants drowned out her message, Leena felt it was important to register her feelings and demands among and with them. Her modest performance of dissent was a part of her belonging to a Tamil political community. (It mirrored how Tamil activists protested the ban from within, as Canadian citizens.)

Leena felt that other dissenting activists were not critical enough of the state, and that their focus on publicly denouncing the LTTE drew attention away from civilian suffering in the final months of the war. She criticized some of her colleagues: She, like them, had experienced violence at the hands of the LTTE, but she told me that her pain could not motivate her politics.

Feminist and dissenting activists like Jeevani and Leena stood on the margins of the Tamil diaspora protests, literally and figuratively. Like community activists and protesters, they were drawn by a desire to affectively respond to Tamil suffering in Sri Lanka; a desire shaped by prior experiences of violence and action. They too felt compassion and empathy for the plight of civilians, and shared feelings of distress that shaped their limited participation in collective action. Their affective and critical engagement did not transform the protests and its spectacular image of a Tamil community mobilized in support of the LTTE while demanding an end to the war.

## Conclusion

While the 2009 protests failed to achieve its participants' demands—which ranged from a “humanitarian ceasefire” for civilians to recognition of the LTTE and a separate state—they accomplished one thing: The “agentive moment” of protest, as a form of linguistic and social action, brought together diverse groups of Tamils. Protests expressed and enacted diasporic Tamils' desire to “do something” in response to Tamil suffering. They mobilized middle-class professionals who generally stayed away from “politics,” and workers from factories and laundries who took time off work and traveled with their co-workers to protest; a small group defining themselves as Queer Tamils joined the protests, as did a few dissenting feminists. All of these people, and their various cross-cutting identities and social and political differences, were mobilized *as Tamils* under the sign(s) of the LTTE. Photos and videos contributed to this making of an apparent unity in the public formation of a Tamil diaspora.

Ruban's aunt, Vani, was one of the many Tamils who attended the first human chain. When she saw activists raising LTTE flags at the second event, she left. The flag left its imprint anyway. As Vani told me later, “Now the war is over, and we can never go back. It is as though we all held the flag.”

## **The war's end**

On May 18, 2009, the war ended. Twenty-six years of civil war were brought to an end by one simple declaration. Sri Lanka's President, Mahinda Rajapaksa, made the announcement along with his brother, the Defense Secretary: The LTTE's senior leadership were all killed in a fight to the finish, and now the fighting was over. A military victory parade was held in Colombo. In the streets, people celebrated by lighting up firecrackers, dancing, and feeding each other milk rice. In many parts of Colombo, however, Tamils stayed indoors, afraid to leave their houses. Stories were told of those who had ventured outside, only to be required to eat in celebration, or to hand over their gold jewelry.

In Toronto and other Tamil diaspora communities around the world, a very different response to news of the war's end took hold. Tamils poured into the streets to hold public vigils in which they mourned for the victims and their own losses. Many were in shock and disbelief that the war had ended with the Tigers' defeat—in other words, that it had ended with a military victory for the Sri Lankan government and Sinhala Buddhist nationalists—or that it had ended at all.

Some diaspora Tamils refused to believe that Prabhakaran had been killed. Within days, they had come up with theories about how he had escaped. These theories circulated around the Tamil internet, and diasporic community newspapers and small newspapers in Tamil Nadu published speculations of what had occurred in the last days of the war. An image of Prabhakaran watching news of his death on television was published by a magazine in Tamil Nadu, and replicated across the diaspora.

I returned to Toronto at the end of May to attend a memorial for my paternal grandmother, who had passed away in Jaffna, less than two months before the war ended. Most of Appamma's children and grandchildren now lived in Toronto, and so we gathered at a local 'banquet hall' with our *uraatkal* (people of the same village) to remember her. The thirty-first day ceremony had already taken place in Jaffna. When the memorial was over, we ate together at the tables at which we were seated. It was difficult not to talk about recent events: The war, and the way it had ended. The conflict and the war had shadowed our lives. My cousins and I had grown up on the other side of the world from our grandparents because of the war; our parents had lived for decades not knowing whether their parents, siblings and other loved ones would survive it. The war's end converged with our personal grief.

In Toronto, before and after the memorial, I heard a great deal of talk about the end of the war. People explained to one another why and how Prabhakaran had escaped. The photos aren't real, many Tamils said. The government would do anything to prove they had won. You could do anything with Photoshop these days! He must be hiding in a place no one knows about.

Or, perhaps *Thalaivar* dug a tunnel below his bunkers and took a boat to Malaysia. Maybe he really was alive. He was going to revive the Tigers from abroad. It would take months, yes—years, even—but he would never give up on Tamil Eelam. He would never give up on his people.

These stories spoke to the hope so many Tamils had invested in the LTTE, and the future of their homeland.

Amid this talk, however, was an overwhelming sense of loss, grief, and the exhaustion that had already begun to settle upon a community of people who were beginning to lose that hope. They did not know which way to turn.

The LTTE's representatives abroad differed about how to respond to the government's claims that Prabhakaran had been killed. They began to fight among themselves, as they jockeyed for power. K. Pathmanathan, who had been appointed Head of International Relations by Prabhakaran, released a statement that confirmed the leader's death after a few weeks. Another group, known as the Nediyan faction, continued to deny the news, even as most of the diaspora had come to accept it.

In the days and weeks and months after the war, some Tamils continued to protest.

I wanted to know why the protests continued, even though the war was over. I headed down to their epicenter, University Avenue in downtown Toronto, to find out.

## *Conclusion*

### *After the War*

Two weeks after the end of the war, Canadian Tamils continued to demonstrate on University Avenue. Their protests resembled their protests in the preceding months, with a few changes: The war's end made the demand for a ceasefire unnecessary; they focused more attention on the camps at Menik Farm, where over 350,000 Tamils who had escaped the Vanni war zone were being interned (UTHR(J) 2009; HRW 2009). Now fewer in number, protesters stood on the sidewalk in front of provincial law courts, and opposite the United States consulate—at one point, barricaded from the road—and held posters while chanting slogans:

*“Dear President Obama! Save the Tamils!” “Media! Media! Open your eyes!”  
“Tamils need! Food and medicine!” “Shut down the! Concentration camps!” “World  
recognize! Tamil Eelam! Recognize! Tamil Eelam!”*

Many Tamils either did not know, at the time, that these protests continued, or had lost hope after the Tigers were defeated. Activists on the street, however, felt that it was more important than ever to continue to voice their concerns. As one young second-generation activist explained to me, the Menik Farm camps were a serious problem: “The Times [of London] says that 1400 people are dying every week [in the camps]. If that's without a war, there's still an issue.” She wanted the Canadian and US governments to pressure Sri Lanka to release Tamil IDPs right away. Other activists argued that the internment camps were part of a genocidal government's plan to eliminate Tamils from



the island. Protesters and many diaspora Tamils understood that the war that had ended on May 18<sup>th</sup> now continued by other means.

And indeed, as their protests illustrated, while the conventional war had ended, the conflict was not over.

Two months later, in July and August 2009, activists' protests continued. In addition to the "non-stop" demonstration on University Avenue, events were held opposite the Sri Lankan consulate. Amnesty International worked with CTC activists on a rally named "Unlock the Camps," demanding that Tamils be allowed to return to their homes throughout the north.

The end of the war was also a time for reflection for many Tamils.

During follow-up interviews, Tamil activists in Toronto expressed shock and dismay at the way the war ended. Some of these activists had felt that past protests were ineffective (see Chapter 3), even as they recognized the assertions of Tamil unity and strength made through these public events. Those who were skeptical of the efficacy of protest attended them anyway; they felt it was the only thing they could do to intervene. They did so, in part, by expressing their anxiety and frustration. Chandran was one of these activists. While many activists were hurt and confused by the end of the LTTE, Chandran was not surprised by the end, but by "the brutal manner" by which it had ended.

The widespread international support for the Sri Lankan government's military defeat of the LTTE led one supporter to tell me, "We didn't realize they *hated* us so much." As we sat in her living room, and she recalled the final weeks of the war and its

end, her body slumped, and sank further and further, until she was lying down on the couch with her forearm over her eyes. In this way, some activists embodied the organization's defeat. Indeed, for many diaspora Tamils, the LTTE's defeat weighed heavily, as they had learned to identify the LTTE with the struggle. They wondered whether the struggle would continue—the LTTE had claimed “sole representation” of the Tamils, and their defeat had created a vacuum in leadership.

In the months to come, however, nationalist activists rebounded. They announced diaspora-led activism as “the third phase of the struggle” (Tamilnet 2009). They created new organizations, such as the National Council of Canadian Tamils, and networked with other Tamil diaspora groups. TYO youth activists who had mobilized protests took up leadership positions within these emerging political structures. When I interviewed these nationalist youth activists in July and August 2009, they recognized that the protests had failed to secure a ceasefire, but remained hopeful. One nineteen year-old woman, Rani, was one of several student activists who had taken a semester off from university to organize the protests full-time. According to her, the protests had achieved one important result: “Today, Tamils are now more united than ever. Now everyone knows what the struggle is about. We had to feel *that pain*.” For youth activists like Rani who were born and raised in Canada, “that pain” refer not to an experience of the war's physical violence, but diaspora activists' digitally mediated practices of witnessing, and the failure of their protests to end the violence and Tamil suffering. This diasporic suffering of failure, guilt, and shame—as well as a sense of responsibility and commitment—motivated their continued activism for an independent homeland.

However, the end of the war also led some Tamils to question the LTTE's legacy, and especially the means by which it fought the struggle. As discussed in the final chapter of this dissertation, negative media coverage and a public backlash against the protests generated debates among Toronto Tamils about the efficacy of protest as a form of political action. The social circulation of protests disseminated and dispersed Tamil actions, producing new forms of dissent within a putatively "unified" community. Taken together with the end of the war, and the dissemination of information about how it ended, some Tamil activists who had supported the Tigers expressed their feelings of disappointment and betrayal.

Father Antony, the community leader whose story of activism and migration I briefly told in Chapter 1, was among those who became disillusioned with the Tigers at the end of the war. He had been a prominent and vocal supporter of the organization. "No one can hope to understand popular support for the Tigers unless they understand how much Tamils have suffered in this war. We must enter into their hearts and their psyches. Above all, to experience the pain—which is home of hope." The hope to which Fr. Antony referred was the desired political future of an independent homeland. Experiencing the pain of Tamils on the island and entering into their hearts and minds was what solidarity meant to Fr. Antony. He was disappointed that the LTTE had lost the war, leaving the Tamils at the mercy of the government. Upon learning from other Tamils (and human rights reports) that the Tigers were shooting at civilians trying to leave the war zone, he felt betrayed. Reflecting upon the end of the war in July 2009, he felt that the Tigers had violated this diasporic desire to show solidarity. He questioned some activities he had observed in the community: those who were trying to raise funds,

shopkeepers with boxes that promised to send money to suffering civilians—how were they able to send it? Were they keeping the money for themselves? Could the Tigers—in the diaspora, in Sri Lanka—have been so selfish all along?

This disappointment and, to some extent, a sense of betrayal was experienced by many throughout the diaspora. During a trip to London in February 2010, I visited Kanthan, the EROS activist whose story was told in Chapter 2, at his home in a south London suburb. He introduced me to other local activists, including a Jaffna Tamil man in his late-fifties who had raised money for the LTTE for nearly twenty years. With the end of the war, this man felt disillusioned. He had believed in the struggle, and he wanted to help the people. When we spoke, he had just returned from a trip to the Vanni, where he was trying to learn more about local needs. “We are a devastated people,” he said.

In November 2009, six months after the war’s end, the protest on University Avenue had dwindled down to a committed group of between ten and twenty people. Pro-LTTE community activists organized and held their annual *Maaveerar Naal* ceremony to mourn and commemorate LTTE martyrs in the struggle. Thousands of Tamils queued around the perimeter of a convention center northwest of Toronto, where two consecutive ceremonies were held to allow all to attend, and remember. University students organized ceremonies on their campuses as well. Every year on this day, November 27, Prabhakaran had given a speech addressing the Tamil people. This year, there were no words from the charismatic leader. Prabhakaran’s iconic image continued to preside over Tamil events and homes, in the form of posters and calendars, while his death cleared the way for a “new phase” of diasporic struggle.

Through this dissertation, I have attempted to address the following concerns:

First, this dissertation is a historically-informed ethnographic document of the social and political life of Sri Lanka's Tamil diaspora through a study of Tamil activists in Toronto, Canada and Tamil Nadu, India.

The first two chapters of the dissertation focused on the social transformations of Tamil militancy in Sri Lanka and migration abroad that led to the creation of new diasporic political subjects. In Chapter One, I described two different trajectories of migration, and the state policies, institutions, and juridical practices that produced sizeable Sri Lankan Tamil communities in each of my fieldsites. In Chapter Two, I argued that the Norwegian mediated peace process and ceasefire of 2002-2008 was a critical period during which the subject of a Tamil diaspora emerged. In making this claim, I tracked two political movements: The *Pongu Thamil* movement, and the events organized by activists in Toronto; and a refugee movement organized around the idea of "return" to Sri Lanka.

In Chapter Three, I argued for the ethnographic utility of historiography in analyzing diaspora politics and community formation. A synthesis of historical and social scientific accounts of Sri Lankan politics was followed by a reading of Tamil political histories written by scholars and activists during the war (1983-2009), in order to trace the emergence of "Tamil politics" in Sri Lanka. The second half of the chapter supplemented this historiography with the ethnographic insights of my fieldwork by examining how diaspora Tamil activists narrated stories of their lives in politics. In contrast with the linear and continuous historical narrative presented by individual nationalist writers and other activists, I juxtaposed several narratives and the 'critical

events' (Das 1995) they invoke to construct a genealogy of the political conditions and contestations at the core of an emerging Tamil diaspora politics. In doing so, the chapter revealed how the emergence of a specifically "Tamil" politics and the production of Tamil political identities in postcolonial Sri Lanka was displaced—figuratively and literally—in the parallel developments of Tamil militancy and diaspora activism. I also briefly considered how these varied and intersecting trajectories of Tamil politics have contributed to the concepts of "community" and "struggle" used by diaspora activists.

Third, the dissertation considers the nature of moral and political formations of community and dissent among Tamils as new modes of transnational belonging and citizenship.

Chapters Four, Five and Six ethnographically detailed diaspora social life and politics in each of my fieldsites, and examined how Sri Lankan Tamils live as communities on the margins of liberal democratic and pluralist states. In Chapter Four, I examined how Tamils in Toronto mobilized in the context of a ban against the LTTE, and the politics of Tamil "unity," as a community living within and between Sri Lanka's war and Canadian multiculturalism. In Chapter Five, I described the underresourced and heavily surveilled conditions of camp life in Tamil Nadu, India, before discussing how camp refugees organized protests to make claims upon the Indian state as a substantive practice of social citizenship. In contrast to this chapter's discussion of formations of camp community and protest, in Chapter Six, I traced life histories of two Jaffna Tamils preparing for migration abroad, hoping to gain citizenship and political rights in Canada and France.

Finally, in all of these chapters I have examined how diaspora subjects were mobilized to action as a *Tamil diaspora* (or, *pulam peyarnthor*). In spite of many differences among them—whether in protest as a community, or in dissent from that community, in an Indian refugee camp, or suburban Toronto, of Sri Lanka’s Hill-Country region, or the northern Jaffna peninsula—and wherever they lived in the world, Tamils felt obligated to act to end the war in their homeland.

Chapter Seven examined how Tamil diasporic communities mobilized at the end of Sri Lanka’s war against the LTTE. The chapter began with a study of two multimedia exhibits organized to raise awareness about violence and suffering in Sri Lanka. On the one hand, this discussion continued a central concern of Chapter Four, which analyzed orientations to protest and dissent that shaped Tamil community formations in Toronto. On the other hand, my analysis of these exhibits revealed that, whether in protest, dissent, or otherwise, Tamil activists shared a desire to alleviate and end Tamil suffering in Sri Lanka. In contrast to received theories about the relationship between the spectatorship of suffering and action, I argued that Tamil activists were neither distant spectators, nor immediate sufferers, but intermediaries whose diasporic positioning created a new political subject compelled to “take action” to end the war “back home.” I described how camp refugees in India and diasporic activists in Canada turned to protest fasts and street demonstrations to ask for an end to the war. I also explored how Tamil activists and protesters invoked, represented, performed and embodied suffering to mobilize action against the war. In so doing, I argued that Tamil protests constituted a form of ethical and political action and intervention shaped by transnational humanitarian discourses and affects.

The conclusions of this dissertation reveal that Sri Lanka's Tamil diaspora became a recognized and influential political subject at the end of the war. Sri Lanka's 'post-war' political futures will depend, to a great extent, on how the country addresses the conflicts and grievances that produced decades of political violence and war, as well as the transnational dimensions developed throughout.

Indeed, devising a political solution to the conflict will not only require a leader with 'political will' or a 'return' to liberal democratic norms, as is commonly suggested. As this inquiry into the diasporic Tamil political shows, a lasting peace entails significant social transformation and a radical rethinking of what constitutes Sri Lankan democracy and citizenship in a globalizing world.



## *Epilogue*

### ***Post-War Sri Lanka, Diaspora and the Tamil Refugee***

Over six years have passed since the end of Sri Lanka's war. This warrants an update on the social and political changes that have followed since the time of my extended fieldwork.

The war is over, but the conflict has continued in a new form, one that is now primarily between the state and a small but influential network of diaspora nationalist activists living in Canada, Britain, and other parts of Western Europe. The Sri Lankan state detained thousands of ex-combatants in "rehabilitation camps" throughout the country, and continued to intern Tamils who had escaped the war zone at Menik Farm, and nearly forty other army-run camps. Menik Farm was, at the time, the largest IDP camp in the world with over 300,000 internees (HRW 2009). Amid an outcry from international human rights organizations, governments, and diaspora activists, the state slowly allowed civilians to leave.<sup>412</sup> In late 2009, USAID intimated that it would cut off aid to the World Food Program in the camps if the Sri Lankan government did not release and resettle the internees. By early 2010, thousands of people were leaving the camps. However, they could not return to their homes. They received little to no assistance from the state for their resettlement.

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<sup>412</sup> In the beginning, a small number of people with family connections abroad bribed army officials to secure their release (Personal communication, relatives of internees).

The government continued to claim that there had been “zero civilian casualties” during the war, and severely limited access to the former war zones. Humanitarian assistance was thus limited in the months immediately following the war. The policy also deterred foreign visitors and journalists planning to report conditions in the former war zone.

Moreover, Mahinda Rajapaksa’s government made no moves to address Tamil political grievances and aspirations. Instead, what followed was a growing militarization of the Northern Province—now governed by a military commander—and, to a lesser extent, the rest of the country. Between the end of the war in May 2009 and 2015, the number of military personnel deployed in Sri Lanka was projected to double, from 200,000 to 400,000. In lieu of political transformations of the state and society, Rajapaksa’s government pushed economic development projects mostly funded by China, India, Iran and other powers in the global South. Private companies from abroad brought in their own contract workers instead of unemployed locals, who already had mixed feelings about “development” that did not take into account their needs. In 2012, a visit to the north revealed the nature of this much-publicized development. Much of the government’s money had gone into roads and other infrastructure to encourage private businesses and multinational corporations—such as Cargills and HSBC—to “open” the northern economy.

### *Tamil diaspora activism*

Diaspora activists were concerned about all of the above, as actions continuing what they viewed as “genocide” during the final months of the war. They mobilized to pressure the international community, and the United Nations in particular, to investigate

Sri Lanka for war crimes. In so doing, they continued to protest, but also organized campaigns, a boycott on Sri Lankan products sold in their communities, and most importantly, met with politicians and lobbied their governments, and made presentations to international bodies such as the UN's Human Rights Council. They became more active in local and national politics, and in 2011, Toronto Tamils elected Canada's first Tamil MP (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 2011).

Tamil diaspora activists also created new political organizations to continue their struggle to achieve a separate state. They felt that separation was warranted now, more than ever, by the manner in which the war ended. In Toronto, these organizations included the National Council of Canadian Tamils, a national body to represent Canadian Tamils, Two transnational organizations were also created: The Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam, led by the LTTE's former New York-based legal counsel, V. Rudrakumaran, and the Global Tamil Forum, and umbrella group for several national organizations led by Fr. S. J. Emmanuel. They held elections in 2010, as well as a referendum on the Vaddukoddai Resolution, among their community. Similar elections and referenda were held in Britain and throughout Europe. While the vast majority of Tamils did not participate in these fora, these organizations claimed to represent all Tamils in their countries of residence and/or citizenship. In sum, diaspora activists continued to build up their transnational networks and developed new forms of organization across them.

The politics of the LTTE remains contentious among diaspora Tamils, and in their countries of settlement. However, some youth continue to articulate and inhabit the LTTE's nationalist politics as a form of Tamil culture and identity in diaspora. For

example, in 2011, TYO youth organized online and offline campaigns to promote understanding of the use of the Tamil Eelam flag.<sup>413</sup> In 2014, a twelfth grade student who carried the Tiger flag at his London, Ontario high school's multicultural assembly was barred from the event. The student identified the flag with his culture, saying, "It's pretty upsetting that I can't represent my culture in a multicultural country like Canada where we embrace other cultures" (Carruthers 2014).

With the end of the LTTE, dissenting activists became much quieter. Some activists in Toronto initially attempted to work with CTC activists in a group organized by a prominent Canadian union to conduct Sri Lanka-focused advocacy.<sup>414</sup> The effort, called Canadians Concerned about Sri Lanka, did not last for long. Some dissenters, like Jeevani, whose story bridges a few chapters of this dissertation, instead turned to organizing working-class Tamils who were employed in—and often exploited by—Tamil-owned businesses. These efforts crossed lines previously drawn by homeland politics, and were mutually rewarding.

However, new diaspora groups that are partially or fully outside the orbit of LTTE nationalist politics have also emerged. Some, like The Sri Lanka Campaign, were human rights advocacy efforts that brought together non-Tamil advisors and Tamils. Others, like Lanka Solidarity, a multi-ethnic diaspora network of second-generation scholars, writers and activists based mostly in North America, held critical political dialogues in conjunction with rights-based advocacy. In Toronto, young professionals from Tamil,

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<sup>413</sup> The campaign was primarily endorsed by TYO groups around the world. See their website, Tamil National Flag, available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20100210161024/http://tamilnationalflag.com/>

<sup>414</sup> I was told that CCASL was initially comprised of members of this union and the CTC—in line with community activists' claims to representativeness—but a union activist who had worked with dissenting activists made the case for including others.

Sinhala, and Muslim communities formed Sri Lankans without Borders to engage Sri Lankan-Canadians in dialogue and development efforts. The latter's efforts were criticized at times for including too many differing views. More recently, they launched Comdu.it, a diaspora network that places students, professionals and retirees in local sustainable development projects. In 2012, the prominent Sri Lankan-Canadian writer, Shyam Selvadurai (who now splits his time between Toronto and Colombo), created Write to Reconcile, which organizes workshops in locations throughout the country.

### *Tamil refugees*

Amid great insecurity, thousands of Tamils have left Sri Lanka to seek asylum abroad. They have mostly taken boats to Indonesia and Thailand, from where they hoped to leave on ships bound for Australia and Canada. Several of these ships were intercepted before they reached their destination. However, in the first two years after the war, two boats reached British Columbia, on the western coast of Canada. The first was the MV Ocean Lady, which was seized on the northern coast of B.C. in October 2009 with 76 Tamil passengers; the second ship, the MV Sun Sea, arrived in August 2010 with 492 passengers. The Conservative government of Stephen Harper decided to intervene in the refugee determination process: All of the passengers were detained in local prisons, and government officials spoke to the media, framing the issue as one of national security by suggesting the possibility of ex-LTTE “suspected human smugglers and terrorists” and “war criminals” on board. Hearings were held, one at a time, over a period of several months.

The CTC, activists from No One is Illegal, and local community members visited the detained refugees, who were given calling cards to connect to any family or friends

they may have had in Canada. The CTC also spoke to the media to challenge the prevailing narrative, by describing the circumstances under which the refugees had left. Although the government had done much to slow the process, almost all of the people whose cases were heard received asylum.

Tamil refugees living in India's camps also tried to migrate abroad. The conditions of camp life—heavily surveilled, impoverished, and lacking opportunity—motivated these risky journeys. They paid agents in Tamil Nadu to arrange the trip, usually on ships leaving from Kerala. One such ship, bound for Australia, was intercepted by authorities and the passengers detained. Under pressure from local and international human rights groups, who feared the passengers would be returned to Sri Lanka, the government sent the group to Nauru for further detention and application processing. Some detainees (in India, as well as the UK) have been deported to Sri Lanka where they fear persecution from authorities that perceive exiles as potential threats.<sup>415</sup>

Camp refugees who stayed in India organized processions to demand legal residence and citizenship. Chief Minister Karunanidhi took up this demand, making headlines in 2009 for saying he would get the Centre to grant citizenship. (He later stepped down to asking for permanent residence.) No such assurances have been made since. While camp refugees were reluctant to return to Sri Lanka immediately after the war, over the last five years more than 6,000 people have decided to return to the island. They returned to reestablish their lives and hoped for better opportunities—from education and employment, to everyday survival—as Sri Lankan citizens. This was

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<sup>415</sup> Indeed, in 2014, the Government of Sri Lanka published a list of names and addresses of diaspora Tamils living in Canada, Europe, and India who were believed to be LTTE activists. This list had been rumored for some time in Toronto, and some Tamils feared they would be placed on it for simply attending a protest.

simply not possible for some families. Although OfERR made painstaking efforts to obtain legal documentation—including birth, marriage and death certificates—for Sri Lankan Tamil refugees, more than 17,000 remained without documents that would lead to citizenship. Many of these stateless persons are children born in the camps to Tamil refugees.

The future for post-war Sri Lanka, and its relationship to its Tamil diaspora is uncertain. While Tamils in Canada and the United Kingdom are mostly citizens who have formed sizeable and influential multi-generational communities in diaspora, more than half of Sri Lanka's Tamil diaspora lives as refugees in India and Europe. The Rajapaksa government antagonized diaspora activists, who publicly shamed the government in international fora for its actions during and after the war. Consequently, its approach to this diaspora alternated between demonizing its political activity and desiring its foreign exchange and investment potential. In doing so, the government fundamentally misunderstood the social and political heterogeneity of Tamil diaspora communities; it also swept aside Tamil refugees' concerns. In January 2015, the country elected a new president: Maithripala Sirisena, the Rajapaksa government's Minister of Health, defected to the UNP and ran on an anti-corruption platform of government transparency, and promised to mend international relationships. Let us hope that Sirisena's government learns from the mistakes of the previous regime, especially as it prepares to write a new constitution for Sri Lanka. If the government *acknowledges* the impact of the past violence and war, and *addresses* it alongside the political problem of power sharing with the Muslim and Tamil communities, it would find broad support from the Tamils of Sri Lanka and the diaspora.

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