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# **Sri Lankan Tamil Migration to New Zealand**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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# Abstract

*Over the past few decades there has been an increasing number of Tamil migrants immigrating to New Zealand from Sri Lanka. This thesis, which is primarily based upon oral history interviews with a group of Sri Lankan Tamil people currently residing in New Zealand, explores the background and proximate reasons for this migration (from Sri Lanka and to New Zealand), the experiences of the migrants in their quest for safety and a better way of life in New Zealand, and some of the challenges met by them in this quest. It is argued that the increasing migration of Tamil people from Sri Lanka to New Zealand reflected a need for a persecuted minority of a country to seek safety and a better way of life, fortuitously intersecting with the needs of the New Zealand economy to attract skilled migrants.*

*Notwithstanding the lasting effects of trauma upon the mental health of some of the interviewees, it is also contended that this group of people represents an example of successful acculturation to a new way of life. They not only have desirable skills to contribute to the New Zealand economy but have demonstrated the ability to adapt successfully to New Zealand society whilst at the same time maintaining a strong cultural identity.*

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# Chapter 1. Introduction

The numerous waves of migration into the island now known as Sri Lanka, the more recent civil war, and other historical events and international connections have given rise to a relatively consistent migration of Sri Lankans both to and from the island across history. For instance, the early establishment of Theravada Buddhism in the island meant that long before the arrival of the European colonial settlers, Buddhist monks and nuns from Sri Lanka crossed the Bay of Bengal to contribute to religious developments in Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> Following Sri Lankan independence in 1948, the outflow of Sri Lankans comprised refugees and voluntary migrants fleeing from the civil war and professional and highly skilled migrants, as well as semi-skilled and unskilled labourers seeking economic opportunities abroad.<sup>2</sup> In 2010, it was estimated that over one million Sri Lankans (from a total population of 20.6 million) were working overseas. Between 2000 and 2010 the number of migrants leaving Sri Lanka for employment had increased from 182,188 to 266,445 people annually.<sup>3</sup> Research indicates that such movement and settlement out of the country's borders has played a key role in the economic development of Sri Lanka through for instance, an increased inflow of remittances.<sup>4</sup> Of equal importance, this outflow and settlement of Sri Lankans has resulted in the movement of social norms, cultural 'artefacts' and religious traditions, practices, ideas and values from their country of origin to other parts of the world.<sup>5</sup> Thus, wherever Sri Lankans have migrated, they have carried with them the social, religious and cultural identities of the homeland, which they have actively preserved as part of their everyday lives in their new homes. And some have migrated to New Zealand.

A significant proportion of the migrants who have left Sri Lanka for New Zealand have been comprised of Tamil people who represent an important ethnic minority in Sri Lanka. Historians have not paid much attention to the migration of Tamil Sri Lankans to New Zealand over the past 70 years. Like other smaller, new immigrant groups in New Zealand, there is a paucity of government-sponsored, individual researcher or community-driven research studies and published reports about Sri Lankans of any ethnicity in New Zealand. A search of [nzresearch.org.nz](http://nzresearch.org.nz) revealed that since the 1970s there have been four PhDs, two

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<sup>1</sup> P.D. Reeves, Rajesh Rai, and Hema Kiruppalini, eds., *The Encyclopedia of the Sri Lankan Diaspora* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2013), 169-173.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Migration Profile:Sri Lanka. In *Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka 2013*. (IPS Colombo, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Reeves, Rai and Kiruppalini, 16.

journal articles, two Masters theses and one conference paper registered with this organisation which have related to Sri Lankan migrants in or migration to New Zealand. Even more graphic is the fact that there does not appear to be a single study published dedicated to those of Tamil ethnicity from Sri Lanka apart from when they have been included under the more general category of Sri Lankan immigrants.<sup>6</sup> There has been little, if any, work undertaken to specifically study the Tamil community systematically by interviewing members or by involving the community in the research process. More broadly, to my knowledge there has been no systematic effort undertaken to record the New Zealand ethnic community history of either Sri Lankans in general or those of a particular ethnicity or religion, for example, ethnic Sinhalese, Tamils, Hindus, Buddhists. This historical research will focus on four main aspects of the migration of Tamils from Sri Lanka to New Zealand:

1. A history of Sri Lanka especially since Sri Lankan independence exploring the context, circumstances and issues faced by the Tamil immigrant group over the period and what it was that fundamentally drove the demand for the emigration of large numbers of the Tamil ethnic minority from Sri Lanka in the mid/late 20<sup>th</sup> century to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The bipolar concept of the Sinhala-Tamil ethnic divide, and its origins, will be briefly explored as part of this background. It will be argued that the Tamil-Sinhala ethnic divide is of relatively recent origin generated by nationalists on both sides of the divide. This will be followed by a section on more recent post-independence Sri Lankan history. Here it will be argued that the prolonged nature of the endemic violence and destruction together with the Sinhala-dominated government's discriminatory policies in education and language, which struck at the heart of Sri Lankan Tamil colonial socio-economic success, led to the decision of many participants to emigrate from Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the impact of the trauma experienced in Sri Lanka had a profound effect upon the mental (and sometimes physical) health of a significant number of this cohort of immigrants. It will be argued that this is in line with recent meta analyses with respect to the impact of trauma on refugees and migrants, and its relationship to the ability to largely maintain daily routines in day to day life.

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<sup>6</sup> There is one Master's thesis from 2008 that is dedicated to Tamil identity but it relates to those in Sri Lanka and not to migrants to New Zealand. See Anushka Perinpanayagam, "Tamil Identity in Sri Lanka: A Secular State of Becoming", (Victoria University of Wellington, 2008) at <http://hdl.handle.net/10063/1784>. Retrieved 14/9/2020.



2. The history of immigration to New Zealand is one at times of quite profound antagonism to those of non-European descent, especially Asians. It will be argued however, that due to the need for the New Zealand economy to deal with significant skill shortages after economic and social liberalisation (especially in the 1980s) , together with local and international humanitarian pressure, there evolved over the middle to late twentieth century an immigration policy which was based primarily on skill needs and was non-discriminatory toward those from non-European countries.
3. Following (1) and (2), it will be argued that during the late twentieth to early twenty-first centuries the histories of Sri Lanka and New Zealand represent an intersection point in their respective pasts. The personal circumstances of a lot of the interviewees in the context of government-led discriminatory practices, and endemic violence and disruption resulting in full scale civil war in Sri Lanka, coincided with significant immigration policy changes in New Zealand. This historical, albeit fortuitous, intersection set the stage for a significant increase in the migration of Tamil Sri Lankans from Sri Lanka to New Zealand.
4. It will be contended that the transition by this group of Tamil migrants from Sri Lanka to a satisfactory life in New Zealand has been possible for three main reasons: the ability of the migrants to find employment in professional, middle class roles, the support they received from family, government and non-government social agencies, and some common cultural features between themselves and the 'host' community (e.g. most could speak English, a common colonial legacy ). A number of aspects of contemporary life in New Zealand for this group of Sri Lankan Tamil immigrants will also be explored. It will be argued that though prejudice and discriminatory practices were and are encountered by Sri Lankan Tamils in New Zealand these are perceived by them to be dwarfed by what they had previously knew in Sri Lanka, and are therefore downplayed by them. It will also be argued that, despite some cultural challenges, the active participation in local community cultural life, and the fostering of Tamil culture ( principally language), has contributed significantly to the successful acculturation of the Sri Lankan Tamil community in New Zealand and the ability of that community to develop and maintain a rich and strong cultural life. Finally, it will also be noted that a significant proportion, albeit a minority, of the interviewees reported ongoing mental and physical health issues attributable to their

experience in Sri Lanka. This is in line with other studies concerning the impact of trauma upon the wellbeing of migrants.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the history of the migration of a group of Tamil immigrants from Sri Lanka to New Zealand, principally from the 1980s to 2009. Given the paucity of information currently published on this group living in NZ, this research will serve to fill a knowledge gap. It is out of the scope of this work to include a Sinhalese perspective.

## **1.1 Background: Sri Lankan Tamil Migration to New Zealand**

The earliest purported evidence of Sri Lankan presence in New Zealand is that of the Tamil Bell. The Tamil Bell is a broken bronze bell discovered in approximately 1836 by William Colenso, a missionary. It was being used as a pot to boil potatoes by Maori women near Whangarei in New Zealand. The bell is 13 cm long and 9 cm deep and has an inscription which translated says "Mohoyiden Buks ship's bell". Some of the characters in the inscription are of an archaic form no longer seen in modern Tamil script thus suggesting that the bell could be about 500 years old, possibly from the Later Pandya period.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The Pandya Dynasty, also known as the Pandyas of Madurai, was a dynasty of south India one of the three ethnically Tamil lineages. The Pandyas ruled extensive territories, at times including the large portions of present-day south India and Sri Lanka. The Later Pandya period refers to the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries AD.



Tamil bell. Te Papa, Wellington New Zealand.

The Indologist V.R. Ramachandra Dikshitar states that ancient Tamil seafarers might have had knowledge of Australia and Polynesia. The discovery of the bell has led to speculation about a possible Tamil presence in New Zealand at a very early time, but the bell is not in itself proof of early contact with New Zealand.<sup>8</sup>

The earliest Sri Lankan born migrants living in New Zealand in the 1800s were prospectors attracted by the gold rush in addition to people moving from one part of the British colonial empire (Ceylon) to another (New Zealand) in search of fresh opportunities.<sup>9</sup> But Sri Lankan immigration into New Zealand of any notable magnitude has only occurred in relatively recent times, commencing in the 1950s. The first Sri Lankan migrants from the 1950s to the 1970s included a number of students and trainees travelling to New Zealand for education under the ‘Colombo Plan’.<sup>10</sup> Subsequent to that the arrival of Sri Lankans into New Zealand also began as a result of the island becoming a republic in 1972, with associated increased

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<sup>8</sup> V. R. Ramachandra Dikshitar, *Origin and Spread of the Tamils*. (Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1948), 29-30.

<sup>9</sup> P.D. Reeves, Rai Rajesh, and Hema Kiruppalini, 169–174.

<sup>10</sup> The Colombo Plan is an organisation that was established in the early 1950s, with a focus on collective intergovernmental efforts to strengthen economic and social development in a number of member nations; including Sri Lanka and New Zealand. In its early years, the organisation was instrumental in facilitating assistance from developed to developing countries entailing both a transfer of physical capital and technology as well as skills development.

racial and economic tensions in the nation. However, even by the mid-twentieth century, there were still only 150 Sri Lankan migrants living in New Zealand.<sup>11</sup> While this group of migrants identified broadly as being born in Sri Lanka, it also included Europeans born in the island previously named Ceylon.<sup>12</sup>

It was at this time too that the New Zealand government also began to adopt a more open, less discriminatory immigration policy, which meant that skilled migrants and people escaping the racial and economic tensions that intensified after the declaration of the republic in 1972 could more easily enter New Zealand. Following the outbreak of war in Sri Lanka in the late 1980s, the Sri Lankan-born population in New Zealand began to rise dramatically. Since then, the numbers arriving have continued to increase steadily, to over 16,000 in 2018.<sup>13</sup>

The New Zealand census figures listed in Table 1 from 1951 onwards show the number of residents in New Zealand who were born in Sri Lanka, or Ceylon as it was previously called, until 1972. The numbers also include Europeans born in Ceylon. It should be noted that from 1981 it is ‘ethnic group’ in the census that is recorded rather than ‘birthplace’. In reality, it is still birthplace and there was no ethnic breakdown.<sup>14</sup>

**Table 1. NZ residents, birthplace Ceylon / Sri Lanka, 1951-2001.**

1951	152
1956	175
1961	194
1966	231
1971	320
1976	973
1981	933 <sup>15</sup>
1986	1101

<sup>11</sup> N. Swarbrick, 2005, 2015. Sri Lankans. In *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*. At <https://teara.govt.nz/en/sri-lankans/page-3> Retrieved 15/9/2020.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> 2018 New Zealand census data at: <https://www.stats.govt.nz/2018-census/> Recovered 14/9/2020.

<sup>14</sup> *Census of NZ 1961* Vol. 6 (Wellington NZ: Dept. of Statistics, 1964), 8 and *Census of NZ 1971* Vol. 7 (Wellington NZ: Dept. of Statistics, 1980), 18.

<sup>15</sup> *Census of NZ 1981*, (Wellington NZ: Dept of Statistics, May 1983),79. Curiously, this particular figure is further broken down to those who were full Sri Lankan, ¾ Sri Lankan + ¼ European, ½ Sri Lankan + ½ European and ¾ Sri Lankan + ¼ NZ Maori.

1991	2598
1996	4659 <sup>16</sup>
2001	6042 <sup>17</sup>

In the 2006, 2013 and 2018 censuses, however, respondents could self-identify into the separate ethnic groups of Sinhalese or Tamil in addition to Sri Lankan. Table 2 portrays the result.<sup>18</sup>

**Table 2. NZ residents, birthplace Sri Lanka, by ethnicity, 2006-2018.**

	<b>2006</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2018</b>
Sri Lankan	8313	11274	16830
Sri Lankan not further defined (nfd)	7041	9561	4245
Sinhalese	792	1020	9171
Tamil	540	732	3501
Not elsewhere classified	0	0	3

However, despite the above data it is still not clear how many Sri Lankan Tamil people currently reside in New Zealand. New Zealand census data from 2018 states that there were 16,830 people who identified as Sri Lankans in New Zealand of whom 2850 were born in New Zealand (i.e., non-immigrants). The same 2018 data states that in 2018 there were 3501 people identifying themselves ethnically as Sri Lankan Tamils living in New Zealand of whom 819 were born in New Zealand. However, this data also suggests that there were 4245 residents identifying themselves ethnically as Sri Lankan (not further defined) an unknown proportion of whom will undoubtedly be Tamil. This proportion is possibly substantial and so it is not possible to identify the total numbers of Sri Lankan Tamils in New Zealand from this

<sup>16</sup> 1986, 1991 and 1996 data from *Census of NZ 1996* (Wellington NZ: Statistics NZ, Dec 1997), 23.

<sup>17</sup> 2001 data from "Census of NZ 2001" at <https://cdm20045.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p20045coll19/id/160/rec/12> Retrieved 11/8/20.

<sup>18</sup> From NZ Stats <https://www.stats.govt.nz/tools/2018-census-ethnic-group-summaries//sri-lankan-tamil> Retrieved 11/8/20.

data. Furthermore, it is possible that some Tamils have identified themselves as “Indian” for census purposes.<sup>19</sup> At the very least, it appears census data does not give a very accurate picture of the presence of Sri Lankan Tamils in New Zealand.

In summary, the census data show that over the past few decades, New Zealand has received an increasing number of immigrants from a wide range of source countries. In 2018, 27 percent of the New Zealand population (or 1,271,775 people) were foreign born, and most of these individuals were from Asian countries.<sup>20</sup> The largest Asian ethnic groups were, in decreasing order, Chinese, Indian, Filipino, Korean, Japanese and Sri Lankan. From this immigrant population in 2018, 12,672 people identified as Sri Lankan from both Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic groups. There has been significant migration of Sri Lankan Tamils to New Zealand as a result of the Sri Lankan conflict and civil war which ended in 2009. The 2018 census shows a 49 per cent increase in the Sri Lankan population in New Zealand since 2013; a significantly larger annual growth than the 36 per cent increase in this population between 2006 and 2013. From the census data the growth in population of those who identified themselves as of being of Tamil ethnicity (from Sri Lanka ) had risen from 540 in 2006 to 3501 in 2018. That said, the earlier figure for 2006 for this subgroup is probably even more unreliable than the 2018 figure.<sup>21</sup> In terms of which parts of New Zealand this group are residing in 2018 the census data records that out of a total of 3501 declared Sri Lankan Tamils, Auckland houses the greatest number of Sri Lankan Tamils, with 2373 migrants settled in the region, followed by 582 people in Wellington and Lower Hutt and 132 in Christchurch.<sup>22</sup> As mentioned, these numbers are clearly an underestimate but it is a reasonable assumption that these numbers are also steadily increasing over time. It can be confidently stated that at a minimum there were 3501 Sri Lankan Tamils resident in New Zealand as of 2019. What is not so certain is the actual number – at a very rough estimate the numbers are likely to be of the order of between 5000–6000 for Sri Lankan Tamils based on 2018 census data and other more informal information.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Wardlow Friesen, and Robin A. Kearns. “Indian Diaspora in New Zealand: History, Identity and Cultural Landscapes. In *Tracing an Indian Diaspora: Contexts, Memories, Representations*, ed. Parvati Raghuram (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), 216-217.

<sup>20</sup> 2013 census data at :

<http://nzdotstat.stats.govt.nz/wbos/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TABLECODE8021& ga=2.109139072.461157173.1526614042-1608412251.1497131041#> Retrieved 20/8/20.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> This is very much an estimate as it is based on conversations with a number of otherwise knowledgeable Sri Lankan Tamil interviewees in 2019.

While the precise numbers of Sri Lankan Tamil residents in New Zealand may be unknown, the increasing numbers of these immigrants to New Zealand call for more culture-specific research to be conducted with these communities. Accordingly, this research was conducted with Tamil immigrants from Sri Lanka living in New Zealand.

## 1.2 Methodology

Massey University Ethics Committee approval was sought and obtained for this thesis.<sup>24</sup> The methodology used for this research was primarily two-fold: firstly background reading and a literature review were carried out and then, most importantly, this was followed by the taking of oral histories from a selection of Sri Lankan Tamil participants from within New Zealand. Overall there is an emphasis on the use of testimony derived from a series of oral interviews in this piece of work. That is, the use of oral histories.

Patricia Leavy states “Ontologically, oral history is based on treating research as a process rather than event... Social knowledge does not exist independent of the research process, but is created through the process. Researchers actively participate in the knowledge-building process. Because research is a process, there is no one correct way to do it.”<sup>25</sup> Because this particular piece of research had not been carried out in this ethnic sub-group in New Zealand previously, it was important that maximum flexibility was maintained in terms of how the subject matter evolved and so an oral history methodology seemed to be most appropriate. Furthermore, Leavy maintains “epistemologically, oral history positions the researcher and participant in a collaborative relationship”<sup>26</sup> and hence for this piece of research it was intended that both the researcher and participants would guide the direction of the interviews. That said, governance of this research lay principally with the researcher and the extent of interviewee participation was to collaboratively inform, enlighten and clarify.

Another related issue here is that of potential language and other barriers associated with the researcher being an outsider. Most Sri Lankan Tamils speak English; those that came to New Zealand earlier have excellent English proficiency (for reasons of exposure to the language and also due to the fact that Tamils in Sri Lanka tended to prefer English and were taught by excellent teachers). Later arrivals (e.g. those who have arrived over the past five to ten years)

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<sup>24</sup> The application NOR 19/15 was approved on the 10/9/2019.

<sup>25</sup> Patricia Leavy. "*Oral History: Understanding Qualitative Research*." (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 8.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 8.

are thought to be generally less proficient in English but none of the interviewees for this thesis fell into this category. Before the interviews commenced it was not clear to what extent this was be a barrier, but the option of an interpreter did exist. It was considered that the researcher had good relationships with a number of key people within a local Sri Lankan Tamil community and this would be maintained and hopefully strengthened. It should be remembered too that being an outsider is not always deleterious.<sup>27</sup> As it transpired, language issues did not materially affect the conduct of interviews for this thesis as all participants were proficient in English.

The participants were selected by the following means. Firstly, support was obtained from both of the Tamil cultural societies in Auckland and the greater Wellington region respectively (Auckland and Wellington were initially chosen due to these being the New Zealand population centres for Sri Lankan Tamil migrants). The local chairpersons of the respective Tamil cultural societies of Auckland and Wellington were then emailed with a summary of the intended research and a request for interviewee contact details. This request was then circulated by them to their members (see Appendix C). Those who expressed an interest and willingness to participate were then contacted by the researcher, and interview times arranged. Each participant signed a consent form prior to interview (see Appendix B). It was intended to interview no fewer than 10 interviewees for the purpose of this research. Some interviewees were couples. Each interview lasted for around 90 minutes and was recorded (audio only) and a written summary transcription made of the interview. This summary transcription was then emailed to the participant(s) who commented on it if desired and verified its accuracy. Contributors were assured of anonymity and non-traceability. For this reason the interviewees are referred to in this thesis by a series of meaningless initials; their current and past places of residence in New Zealand and / or Sri Lanka are obscured, their current or past employment status is generalised, some non-gendered language is used (e.g. 'partner' instead of 'wife' or 'husband' in describing marriage relationships) and some other information is aggregated. The reason for this is that some of the Sri Lankan Tamil community continue to have fears for their, and their families', safety either in Sri Lanka or

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<sup>27</sup> Susan Barton, "Issues in cross-cultural interviewing : Japanese women in England" in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks, and Alistair Thomson, 2nd ed. ( New York: Routledge, 2006). Barton points out that her group of interviewees often felt more comfortable in opening up to a foreigner than to a fellow Japanese person.



in New Zealand. At times this makes the reading / writing of the thesis somewhat ponderous (e.g. 'him/herself' etc.) but there was genuine anxiety by some of the interviewees on this point that needed to be assuaged.

A cultural advisor from a local Tamil Society was engaged from time to time to clarify issues. A starting set of interview questions is listed in Appendix A. Though these questions formed the basis of the interviews, other topics were developed and explored as the interviews took place.

### 1.3 Literature review

A number of general history of Sri Lanka publications were consulted as part of gaining background knowledge of the history of Ceylon / Sri Lanka including the works of De Silva and Peebles.<sup>28</sup> There have been a number of books and papers written on the immigration of peoples including south eastern Asians to New Zealand but as far as this researcher is aware there has been little if anything devoted to Sri Lankan Tamils.<sup>29</sup> In contrast to the paucity of information available on Sri Lankan Tamil migration to New Zealand there is some international literature available on aspects of Sri Lankan Tamil migration to countries other than New Zealand, principally the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Norway and other parts of Europe. However, as will be seen, only some of the overseas literature is useful for this thesis.

Van Hear describes the migration of Sri Lankan Tamil immigrant community to the UK as occurring in a number of successive phases.<sup>30</sup> The first phase comprised those that arrived shortly after Ceylonese independence in 1948 and are described by Van Hear as a mix of upper class and upper caste Sinhalese and Tamils, migrating for the purpose of professional

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<sup>28</sup> See :K.M. De Silva. *A history of Sri Lanka*: (London: C Hurst & Company,1981). Patrick Peebles. *The history of Sri Lanka*, (Westport CT:Greenwood Press. 2006,).

<sup>29</sup> See for example: W.H. McLeod. *Punjabis in New Zealand : a history of Punjabi migration 1890-1940*. (Amritsar India: Guru Nanak Dev University.1986).

Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, "A History of small numbers. Indians in New Zealand, c.1890s-1930s." *New Zealand Journal of History* (2009), 43 (2):150-168.

Jacqueline Leckie. "The southernmost Indian diaspora:from Gujarat to Aotearoa." *Journal of South Asian Studies* 21 (s:1) (1998) :161-180. doi: 10.1080/00856409808723354.

Jacqueline Leckie. *Indian settlers : the story of a New Zealand South Asian community*.( Dunedin, N.Z.: Otago University Press. 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Nicholas van Hear. "Sri Lankas Diasporas." in *Routledge Handbook of the South Asian Diaspora.*, edited by Joya Chatterji and David Washbrook, (London: Routledge 2013), 236-247

degree study. The second movement arrived in the 1960s and 1970s and were of a more mixed class and caste background but again comprised those wishing to extend their professional studies against a background of increasing difficulties at home in Sri Lanka. Expectation of tightening immigration rules to the UK also stimulated this phase. The escalation of communal strife into civil war in Sri Lanka (between government forces and the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE)) fuelled the third phase of immigration in the 1980s which comprised increasing numbers of subordinate class and caste arrivals with poor English and supposedly unsophisticated lifestyles (according to those of earlier migration). The fourth phase in the 1990s was marked by an acceleration of asylum migration as more Tamils fled warfare and intolerable living conditions. Van Hear then ends this chapter by describing a fifth phase of decreasing Tamil migration to the UK as a ceasefire took hold in Sri Lanka. Because this chapter was written in the very early 2000s there is no analysis of the effects of the resurgence and final end to the civil war in 2009. It can be seen from Van Hear that there is a strong relationship between the outbreaks of violence in Sri Lanka and levels of Tamil emigration from Sri Lanka. It can also be seen that at times the levels of migration are also related to immigration policy changes in the 'destination country'. As will be seen later, these observations will become a central argument of this thesis.

Other aspects of international Sri Lankan Tamil migration have been described. Ratnapalan describes the role of memory amongst UK Tamils who had been displaced from Sri Lanka during differing phases of the conflict. So, for example, in 2002, Tamils who had supported parliamentary action in the 1950s and 1960s were left in a difficult position as violence erupted in the 1970s.<sup>31</sup> However, none of the interviewees for this thesis migrated to New Zealand in the 1950s or 1960s so this piece of work is not that useful in this context.

In a 2010 article, Kadirgamar outlines the nuanced nature of the Tamil diaspora stating "The Tamil diaspora is not monolithic; it is differentiated by class and entails certain exclusions of caste, and gendered in its exploitation. Furthermore, the Tamil diaspora, while having a tortured historical relationship with the Sri Lankan state, resides in western countries, and is very much affected by the policies of those western states."<sup>32</sup> From this work, as with the

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<sup>31</sup> M Laavanyan Ratnapalan. "Memories of ethnic violence in Sri Lanka among immigrant Tamils in the UK." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35 (9) (2012):1539-1557.

<sup>32</sup> Ahilan Kadirgamar. "Classes, States and the Politics of the Tamil Diaspora." *Economic and Political Weekly* 45 (31)(2010):23-26.

work cited above by Van Hear, it can be seen that the policies of the ‘destination’ country can have considerable influence upon the diaspora.

In a recent 2017 paper, Kabir and Stirrat examined the motives and meanings of Sri Lankan migrant international remittances and concluded that central to these was a preoccupation with identity. In their view, donated charity is not concerned primarily with effects on the recipients but (in referring to the donors) how giving in this way can “transform, reinforce and recreate their own sense of self.”<sup>33</sup> This aspect of Sri Lankan Tamil immigrant life in New Zealand will be briefly examined in this thesis.

There is a reasonable amount of literature attesting to the effects of trauma and violence on the subsequent mental health of immigrants and/or refugees. Numerous studies have found that populations of traumatised migrants have demonstrated a high burden of common mental disorders including anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder ( PTSD ) has been observed in studies included in a recent meta-analysis.<sup>34</sup> Psychological distress among refugees and forced migrants is largely explained by exposures to stressors occurring across the migration continuum.<sup>35</sup> According to some work published in 2010 in describing the Daily Stressor Model <sup>36</sup>, there are various categories of stressors including low intensity stressors that are present daily, and potentially traumatic stressors that occur occasionally and recurrently but not necessarily daily.

A model proposed in some recent literature describes in further detail low-intensity stressors that are specified in the Daily Stressor Model. According to the Drive to Thrive (DTT) theory, psychological resilience, indicated by the absence of psychological distress and/or presence of psychological well-being, is determined by sustaining regularity and structure of daily routines after conflicts.<sup>37</sup> Two types of daily routines are identified in the DTT model, namely primary and secondary daily routines. Primary daily routines are behaviours that are

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<sup>33</sup> Sarah Kabir, and R. L. Stirrat. "Philanthropy, Remittances and Identity: The Case of London-based Sri Lankans." *Society and Culture in South Asia* 4 (1)(2017):61.

<sup>34</sup> A. Akhtar, et al., "Psychiatric disorders in refugees and internally displaced persons after forced displacement: a systematic review." *Psychiatry*, 9 (2018), 433. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2018.00433>

<sup>35</sup> Cathy Zimmerman, Kiss Ligia , Hossain Mazed. "Migration and Health: A Framework for 21st Century Policy-Making" 24 May 2011. doi: <https://doi-org.ezproxy.massey.ac.nz/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001034>.

<sup>36</sup> Kenneth E. Miller, and Andrew Rasmussen. "War exposure, daily stressors, and mental health in conflict and post-conflict settings: Bridging the divide between trauma-focused and psychosocial frameworks." *Social Science & Medicine* 70 (1) (2010):7-16. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2009.09.029>.

<sup>37</sup> W.K. Hou, B.J. Hall, S.E. Hobfoll. "Drive to thrive: A theory of resilience following loss." In *Mental Health of Refugee and Conflict-Affected Populations: Theory, Research and Clinical Practice*, (2018)111-133.

necessary for maintaining livelihood, such as hygiene, sleep, eating, and home maintenance, whereas secondary daily routines are more discretionary or optional behaviours that are dependent upon motivation and preferences, such as exercising, leisure, social activities, and employment or work.<sup>38</sup> This thesis will assess the impacts of these stressors on this particular group of migrants in the light of these cited works relating the effects of previous trauma on migrants.

Finally, a number of texts were consulted relating to the history and evolution of New Zealand immigration policy, especially as it related to Asian migration.<sup>39</sup> Overall, most of the contemporary literature relating to the Sri Lankan Tamil community in Europe and Australia reflects media treatment of immigration issues and in particular to public perception (or more precisely public anxiety) of these matters. There is also a plethora of literature relating to the relationship of Tamil transnational communities and diaspora to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)<sup>40</sup> but this thesis is not going to directly examine any real or potential political activities of this group in New Zealand. However, as noted above, the intersection of the economic needs of the 'destination' country coupled with the strong forces driving the need for migrants to emigrate from another country is one of the central elements or contentions to this thesis and is referred to as a 'transnational transaction'.

## 1.4 The Interviewees and Their Lives in Sri Lanka

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<sup>38</sup> W.K. Hou, F.T. Lai, C. Hougen, B.J. Hall, & S.E. Hobfoll. "Measuring everyday processes and mechanisms of stress resilience: Development and initial validation of the Sustainability of Living Inventory (SOLI). ." *Psychological Assessment* 31 (6) (2019) :715-729. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1037/pas0000692>.

<sup>39</sup> For example, see: Sean Brawley. "No White Policy in NZ: Fact and Fiction in New Zealand's Asian Immigration Record, 1946-1978." *New Zealand Journal of History* 27 (1) (1993):16-36.

Andrew Drago Trlin, Paul Spoonley, Noel Watts, and Richard Bedford. *New Zealand and international migration: a digest and bibliography*: Dept. of Sociology, Massey University. 1986.

Jeffrey Miles Scofield. "The Promotion of Place: Immigration Policies, Citizenship and Economic Reform in New Zealand." MA, Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, University of Otago. 2011.

Andrew Drago Trlin et al.,. *New Zealand and international migration : a digest and bibliography*: Dept. of Sociology, Massey University. 1986.

<sup>40</sup> See: Stine Bruland. "Nationalism as meaningful life projects: identity construction among politically active Tamil families in Norway." *Ethnic and racial studies* (12)(2012) :2134.

Kristine Høglund, and Isak Svensson. "Mediating between tigers and lions: Norwegian peace diplomacy in Sri Lanka's civil war." *Contemporary South Asia* 17 (2) (2009):175.

Paul Kaihla. "A divided community." *Maclean's* 109 (18) (1996):22.

Carmilla Orjuela. "Violence at the Margins: Street Gangs, Globalized Conflict and Sri Lankan Tamil Battlefields in London, Toronto and Paris." *International Studies* 48 (2) (2011) :113

A Pande. "Role of diasporas in homeland conflicts, conflict resolution, and post-war reconstruction: the case of Tamil diaspora and Sri Lanka." *South Asian Diaspora* 9 (1) (2017) :51-66.

There were a total of eleven participants providing oral testimony for this thesis, of whom three were female and eight were male. There were two married couples; one couple was interviewed together and the other separately. Six participants lived in Auckland whilst the remaining five lived in Wellington or the greater Wellington region. The age of the participants was either cited by the interviewee or was estimated by the interviewer - at the time of the interviews (in 2019), one interviewee was in the 20-30 year age group, two in the 30-40 year group, five in the 40-50 year age group and there were three participants who were older than 65 years. One participant emigrated in the 1970s, four in the 1980s, two in the 1990s and four in the 2000s. All but two participants declared their religion as Hindu; there was one Catholic and another participant who described their religion as 'Spiritual'.

The class composition of the group is of some interest. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to delve too deeply into a detailed discussion on the conceptualisation of the class characteristics of either Sinhalese or Tamil immigrants (or both ) to New Zealand. The 'nearest' information relating to this group of immigrants relates to Australia and it is not clear at all if the Australian experience can be assumed to be the same for New Zealand. In fact, a cursory glance suggests that perhaps the opposite is the case i.e. the Australian experience is quite different to that of New Zealand.<sup>41</sup>

In this thesis statements are made on the class composition of Sri Lankan Tamil immigrants based on their occupations. Sociologists who deal with class stratification of societies like New Zealand have used occupation as one criterion in determining the class status of individuals.<sup>42</sup> However as Gamage notes in his article describing mostly Sinhalese Sri Lankan immigrants in Australia, any class analysis is compounded by several factors such as questions of definition, the impact of social mobility, a lack of research, and intra and inter-ethnic group considerations which can be complicated by caste considerations.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Siri Gamage. "Curtains of culture, ethnicity and class: The changing composition of the Sri Lankan community in Australia." *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 19:1(1998) 37-56.

<sup>42</sup> Mark Western. "Class in Australia in the 1980s and 1990s", in *A Sociology of Australian Society* edited by J. M. Najman and J.S.Western (South Yarra: Macmillan.1989), 68-88.

<sup>43</sup> Gamage, "Curtains," 52.

For this thesis the following table describes the occupational group to which the interviewees belonged at the time of interview (2019). It should be noted that four of the interviewees had retired at the time of interview but their former professions are included in the table.

**Table 3. Interviewees' occupational groups**

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Number</b>
Healthcare practitioner	2
Business executive	1
Self employed / entrepreneur	1
IT specialist	1
Engineer	2
HR consultant	1
Teacher/lecturer	2
Accountant	1

In determining the class status of Sri Lankan immigrants (or indeed any immigrant group) occupational figures have to be interpreted cautiously. Occupation is only one factor affecting one's class status. Those who are in a middle-class occupation might have other avenues of income, wealth and secondary occupations. In particular the cohort of immigrants selected and interviewed for this work may have been living in New Zealand for a reasonably long time and in that time may have been socially mobile. Indeed, it should be noted that there is a lack of representation here of more recent migrants for example those who arrived in New Zealand less than ten years ago. However, with these reservations kept in mind occupation figures can be used as a crude measure or an index of the class status to obtain certain clues about the nature and characteristics of this group of Sri Lankan Tamil immigrants.

Clearly the interviewees for this thesis can be generalised as middle-class professionals with the possible exception of one businessman who nonetheless had a professional background. None could be said to belong to the landed property class nor can any be described as manual labourers. Furthermore, though it is not tabulated here, it was clear from the interviews that the vast bulk of the participants also came from families with similar professional attributes.

Where applicable and noted, it appeared that the children of the participants also belonged to the professional class.

Of course, this may have been due to the selection methodology employed for this thesis. For example, the selection of interviewees depended very much upon those who headed the Tamil cultural societies at the time of setting up the interviews and this could well have introduced selection bias. So, to generalise the class composition of this interviewee sample to all of the Sri Lankan Tamils resident in New Zealand is undoubtedly a step too far. Nonetheless the picture is one of a very well-educated group of people who have succeeded professionally in an adopted, translocated environment.

Turning now to which categories of migrants are represented in the cohort selected for this thesis, it is useful to consider whether the interviewees previously presented are refugees, economic migrants, forced migrants, or asylum seekers. An economic migrant is someone who emigrates from one region to another, including crossing international borders, seeking an improved standard of living, because the conditions or job opportunities in the migrant's own region are insufficient. The United Nations uses the term *migrant worker*.<sup>44</sup> According to the United Nations a *refugee* is someone outside their country of origin, who has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of nationality, religion, political opinion, race or membership of a particular social group. They also have no national protection. A *forced migrant* is defined by the International Organization for Migration as any person migrating to "escape persecution, conflict, repression, natural and human-made disasters, ecological degradation, or other situations that endanger their lives, freedom or livelihood".<sup>45</sup> Specific examples may include civil wars, deportation and population transfer forcing populations to relocate or flee to another country. A person or people experiencing forced displacement may be referred to as a "forced immigrant," "displaced person/persons" (DP), or, if within the same country, internally displaced person/persons (IDP).

However, it is the contention of this thesis that most of those interviewed for this thesis do not fit into any of these categories. Rather, it is argued that most of the cohort of participants interviewed for this thesis could mostly be described as people who emigrated from Sri

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<sup>44</sup> United Nations Convention on the protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. United Nations. Retrieved 19/3/2020 at [www.ochchr.org](http://www.ochchr.org).

<sup>45</sup> International Organisation for Migration at <https://w.w.w.iom.int/key-migration-terms>. Retrieved 19/3/2020.

Lanka for economic reasons either for themselves or their families but did so in the context of a long ethnic conflict in their homeland that had been occurring either continuously or intermittently for many years since independence. This group of migrants may not have directly experienced violence or disruption (though only two interviewees reported that they had not directly experienced this) but their community had borne the brunt of years of escalating discriminatory practices, violence and disruption directed at themselves within the country. And in many cases, it seemed to them that the government of the day was dominated by Sinhala nationalist elements which condoned, or even actively encouraged and promoted, a Sinhala-nationalist anti-Tamil programme. It is argued here therefore that the recent late twentieth century history of inter-ethnic violence and discrimination (as perceived by the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka) was a crucial factor or enabler in the decision of all of the participants interviewed for this thesis to emigrate from Sri Lanka.

It will be seen from what follows that the backgrounds of most, if not all, of the participants was one of belonging to a section of society within Sri Lanka that was well educated and that valued education, were generally employed in middle class occupations (e.g. medicine, engineering, teaching, other civil servants) and were at least bilingual if not multilingual including being proficient in English language. With higher education came a proficiency in the use of English either as a second or a third language. This all added up to a skill and educational mix that was at least potentially readily transferable to an anglophone society such as New Zealand at a time when New Zealand was attempting to reorient its immigration policies toward a skills-based entry system. It was also a time when Tamils in Sri Lanka rightly perceived that they were facing increasing barriers to higher education in Sri Lanka after the 1972 university admission policies were enacted and the quota systems that were introduced in 1974.<sup>46</sup>

Considering first education, employment and language ability, nearly all of the interviewees had been educated to university level and were proficient in English before they came to New Zealand. There were three exceptions, but they were all children (EF, ST and AB) when they arrived in New Zealand - it should be noted that all of these exceptions went on to succeed in

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<sup>46</sup> G. Pieris, "The Contribution of Education to Tamil Separatism and to the Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka." *Aleph, UCLA Undergraduate Research Journal for the Humanities and Social Sciences* 2019:16.



tertiary education whilst in New Zealand. Furthermore, the participants usually had parents and siblings who were also generally well educated. Some examples now follow.

IJ's father was a civil servant in Jaffna and was fluent in Tamil, Sinhalese and English. IJ was educated to university level and at school and university learnt the Sinhalese language. IJ and partner KL left Sri Lanka not only because they had the opportunity, against a background of what they now characterise as continual low-level disruption, but importantly they also wanted a better life and future for their children. And so, they were able to leave safely. KL was brought up near Jaffna, and his/her father had a government job. He/she was an only child and did all of his/her schooling and higher education in Jaffna, completing a BSc degree and then went teaching science in a primary/secondary school in Colombo.

Another example is that of MN who grew up in a village near Jaffna – his/her father was the Principal at a school. At the time that his/her father died in 1956 MN had two sisters who were studying at the university in Kolkata. So MN had to assume 'head of the family' responsibilities and obtained a position with a public works department as an apprentice engineer. In 1967 MN entered the Royal Ceylon Navy as a civil engineer and worked in this role until early retirement in 1979.

OP was born in Jaffna but had relocated to Colombo; his/her father was a teacher and his/her mother an office worker in a government office. He/she described him/herself as coming from a prosperous background; by way of illustrating that point OP said they had a farm with animals and as a family they always had food. At school he/she learned the Tamil language (having attended a Tamil medium school); his/her mother learned Sinhalese and he/she also studied English as a second language. From the age of eleven OP obtained a scholarship and attended an elite school in Colombo, the Royal College.

CD came from a family of 5 children, living about 30km from Jaffna. He/she was educated to university level, graduated with an engineering degree and then took up an appointment at the university. Whilst in Sri Lanka, CD would spend around 30-40% of his/her salary on day to day living so he/she considered themselves to be reasonably well off.

Whilst a lot of the interviewees for this thesis were professionally qualified and worked in a profession QR ended up being a self-employed businessman in New Zealand. But even in this case QR was university educated. QR lived with his/her family in Kandy until 1977.

QR's mother and father were both teachers. QR graduated from the engineering faculty in 1981 (his/her degree was taught in English too, so when the time came to emigrate he/she was fluent in English), and in 1982 was married and then moved to Jaffna. After the 1983 riots one of his/her brothers moved to London (at the time England had an open visa system), whilst another brother entered medical school in Jaffna. QR started working in Jaffna for a cement production company and in 1984 started a business manufacturing water pumps. Within two years this business had become the largest manufacturer of water pumps in the northern provinces. Whilst in Colombo QR started a wholesale business importing light fittings and in a short space of time his/her business became the largest importer of light fittings in Sri Lanka.<sup>47</sup>

GH, one of the older participants in this thesis, came to New Zealand in 1976. His/her mother was a housewife and his/her father a lawyer and he/she graduated in medicine in Colombo in 1967. At the time of emigration to New Zealand he/she was already proficient in English as a second language and of course was also proficient in Tamil. Simply put, GH pursued an ambition to leave Sri Lanka for a better economic and social life within the context of a deteriorating situation for Tamils in Sri Lanka.

UV, also an older interviewee, moved to Colombo to Jaffna in 1961 to take up a position as an assistant accountant and his/her partner, (they were married in 1975), was a medical officer in Colombo. He/she described their lives in Sri Lanka before the 1983 violence as "doing alright".<sup>48</sup> UV migrated directly to New Zealand in 1983 under the general points system after obtaining a permanent residence visa.

In these instances, one can see that IJ, KL, QR, UV and GH could not be classified as 'forced migrants'. But for UV it may be that he/she felt more directly threatened by the endemic nature of the violence and it was a stronger factor for him/her than the others in determining his/her decision to leave Sri Lanka. He/she felt as though it was a decision essentially forced upon him/herself and family. And even for those who felt the threat to themselves less seriously, the background violence and disruption in their lives was real, pervasive, had been ongoing for many years and most importantly was perceived to be close to home. The perception in all cases was the situation was only going to worsen over time and that for a

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<sup>47</sup> Ironically, though QR's business distributed light fittings throughout Sri Lanka, they did not do so to Tamil areas in the north and east as there was little electrification in those areas.

<sup>48</sup> From transcript of interview with UV on 30/10/19.

long time to come the position of Tamils in Sri Lanka was going to be fraught. The economic, political and personal future of Tamils in such a situation was far from assured. And in the face of such uncertainty and endemic violence and discrimination it was felt by many participants that a better life for themselves and their families could be had elsewhere.

Some of the interviewees were children when they emigrated to New Zealand. It is notable that without exception they all went on to attain tertiary qualifications in New Zealand. An example of an interviewee who was a child when at the time of arriving in New Zealand is ST who described his/her family in Sri Lanka as being well off though not rich. His/her father worked for a British multinational bank and financial services holding company for 31 years and his/her mother worked in the insurance industry.<sup>49</sup> His/her elder brother went to Royal College in Colombo whilst in the 1970s ST went to a Hindu school (previously he/she had been to a Catholic school). By 1983 he/she had two brothers at university whilst he/she was studying for his O levels.

An exception to the middle-class background of most of the interviewees, at least in terms of immediate family is EF. EF's family came from Jaffna and was the product of a religiously mixed marriage (mother was a Catholic and father was Hindu) who had married at a young age. EF described his/her parents' situation as "didn't really have a job when they were married"<sup>50</sup> and they never completed their education. That said, EF did describe his/her grandparents as being as wealthy in the same way he/she "imagined the other interviewees being wealthy."<sup>51</sup> In 1995 EF's family, in response to official demands, moved from Jaffna and for a year or so they moved from place to place. The reason they kept moving was EF's father fitted the profile of a potential Tamil Tiger or recruit ie he was young, male and Tamil. Whilst on the move in this way, his/her father worked in a number of jobs (e.g. baking, retail, cutting and selling firewood when in the jungle). And in another example of exceptionalism, EF could not speak any English when he/she arrived in New Zealand - schooling at a Catholic school in Sri Lanka had been fragmented and intermittent due to the civil war at the time of his/her childhood up to the age of seven.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Incidentally, ST's father was also a national coach of the Sri Lankan basketball team.

<sup>50</sup>From transcript of interview with EF on 22/7/19 and personal email correspondence to author dated 7/4/20. EF knew the identity of some of the other interviewees as a group email invitation was circulated from the local Tamil Society to a number of the potential participants.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> And in New Zealand EF can speak, but not write in Tamil.

In summarising this chapter, there are a number of points to note. Almost without exception the interviewees for this thesis came from a background of attaining tertiary education qualifications in Sri Lanka if they were old enough ( and if they weren't they went on to tertiary education in New Zealand ), they nearly all came from educated families ( whether immediate or from a generation removed ), and they were all ( with two exceptions ) proficient in English language at the time of arriving in New Zealand. By the time of the interviews for this thesis in 2019, they were all living professional lives in New Zealand or were at an age at which they had retired from professional lives.

# Chapter 2. The Histories

## 2.1 Sri Lanka

### 2.1.1 The Ethnic Divide in Sri Lanka

The contemporary migration of Tamil people from Sri Lanka was and is directly driven by a history of endemic violence and destruction culminating in a long civil war waged between the Sinhala dominated government and a large segment of the Tamil minority group who wished to create a separate Tamil state. Underpinning that was a post-colonial history of real and perceived socio-economic and political discrimination perpetrated against the Tamil ethnic minority of Sri Lanka. In order to understand this, it is crucial to background the nature and origin of what may be termed the ‘ethnic divide’ that underpinned the mutual enmity that existed between the majority Sinhala and minority Tamil peoples in Sri Lanka during this relatively recent time. This section therefore will provide a contextual backdrop to the development of this divide and then a view will be posited that the divide upon ethnic lines is a false delineation that had only come into being during the British colonial period. Furthermore, this section will then briefly explore how this ethnic division may have affected relationships between the cohort of Tamil migrants interviewed for this thesis and close Sinhalese acquaintances.

As with all cultural and religious distinctions in Sri Lanka, the ethnic divide between Sinhalese and Tamils is more complicated than it first appears. As it is commonly misrepresented today the Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic divide is often presented as a reductive narrative something like the following. In 1981, prior to the outbreak of the civil war, the Sinhalese constituted seventy four percent of the island's population, and the Tamils, thirteen percent. The language that Sinhalese speak is Sinhala, an Indo-European language only spoken in Sri Lanka, and most Sinhalese identify as Buddhists. On the other hand, Tamils speak Tamil, a Dravidian language that is also spoken in south India (although the dialect differs somewhat). Most Tamils are Hindus although there is a significant Christian and Muslim minority. And indeed, many Sri Lankans would accept this description.

However, the Sinhalese-Tamil distinction as presented above has not always been represented in the way that it is today. Nationalists on both sides of the divide project the Sinhalese-Tamil identities of today upon peoples who inhabited the island in pre-colonial times. While not a lot is known about the Sinhalese and Tamil identities prior to colonial contact, it can be reliably surmised that these identities were unfixed constructs or entities. Unlike today, difference was accepted, and the two peoples easily cohabited alongside each other. As Stirrat and Nissan state "Speakers of Tamil, speakers of Sinhala, speakers of Tamil and Sinhala, Buddhist Tamils, non-Buddhist Tamils, Buddhist Sinhala and non-Buddhist Sinhala, Shaivites- Tamil speakers and possibly Sinhala speakers drifted with relative ease, at different times for different purposes and conveniences, from one sociological formation into another."<sup>53</sup>

But it is more than this. From this notion of a flexible cultural identity comes the concept of cultural 'hybridity'. That is, it is not useful to project back in time and seek examples of cultural purity as there is no such thing. Rather, and as Guneratne states, "All cultures are hybrid and have always been so."<sup>54</sup> And in the case of Sri Lanka, the cultural elements that were brought to the island from the Indian sub-continent were worked and reworked all from the same stock.<sup>55</sup>

Migration has shaped Sri Lanka's history, ever since the initial arrival of the Aryan (later known as Sinhalese) conquerors from Northern India around the 5th century BC. The Aryans established their settlements in the island already populated by indigenous people known as the Veddhas, who had established a hunting and gathering society.<sup>56</sup> There is some controversy over the ethnic identity of the Veddhas population and the subsequent contact between Aryan (from the north) and Dravidian (from the south of India) cultures. Sinhalese tend to minimise the contact with south India whereas Tamil accounts take the cultural similarities between south India and Sri Lanka as evidence of Dravidian origins of Sri Lankan culture.<sup>57</sup> In fact, the Veddhas culture probably preceded both Dravidian and Indo-Aryan influences. Furthermore, both of the more recent cultures (i.e. Aryan and pre-

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<sup>53</sup> Elizabeth Nissan, and R.L. Stirrat, "The Generation of Communal Identities," in *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict*, ed. Jonathon Spencer (London: Routledge, 1990), 26-30.

<sup>54</sup> Arjun Guneratne. "What's in a name? Aryans and Dravidians in the making of Sri Lankan identities." In *The Hybrid Island*, ed by Neluka Silva, (Sri Lanka:Zed. 2002) 21.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid 22. Guneratne goes further and suggests that instead of classifying the people of Sri Lanka in a Eurocentric way by language, he proposes uniting them by kinship patterns.

<sup>56</sup> Patrick Peebles, *The history of Sri Lanka*, 15.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 15.

Dravidian) originated in the north west of India and slowly diffused south, with both south India and Sri Lanka being at the end of this diffusion.

These groups brought with them and established the languages of North Indian Prakrit (which later became Sinhala) and Tamil, as well as Theravada Buddhism<sup>58</sup> and Hinduism among the island's peoples from early on in history. The process of colonisation that occurred between the Vedddhas and the Aryans and/or Dravidians is unclear. Eventually, the Vedddhas became rice farmers and most of them became members of the dominant (Sinhalese) farmer caste. However, the culture and beliefs of the Vedddhas people have not vanished completely with various elements of this culture being integrated into the Sinhalese Buddhist culture. Thus, the present-day Sinhalese people of Sri Lanka are said to be a mixture or a 'hybrid', and thus the descendants of the Vedddhas and the Aryans.

The third group of people who populated Sri Lanka in proto-historic times were the Dravidians ( from whom the Tamils are descended ) and though it is not clear exactly when they first came to the island from south India, by the third century BC their presence had become marked. So from very early in its recorded history Sri Lanka has been characterised by a multi-ethnic society in which a recognisable Dravidian component was present. However, and this is an important point, ethnicity was not at this time an important point of division in early Sri Lankan society – as De Silva puts it “ Sri Lanka in the first few centuries after the Aryan settlement was a multi-ethnic society ( a conception which emphasises harmony and spirit of live and let live ) rather than a plural society ( in which tension between ethnic or other distinctive groups is a main feature)”.<sup>59</sup>

That said, the conceptual divide of Aryan and Dravidian ethnicities has served to divide rather than to unite Sri Lankans especially in the present day. One of the most fundamental issues of the conflict in Sri Lanka is in understanding how it got to the point of recent fractiousness, violence and division initiated and perpetuated by apparently deep-seated ethnic tensions between the Sinhalese and Tamils. Communal violence, as portrayed by separationists from both camps in Sri Lanka often appears to have an ancient history. Sinhala and Tamil communities in Sri Lanka both tend to view their relationship in terms of histories

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<sup>58</sup> Theravada Buddhism is one of the two main streams of Buddhism the other is Mahayana. It is practiced mainly in Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Sri Lanka.

<sup>59</sup> K.M. De Silva. “A history of Sri Lanka”13.

which stretch back for at least 2,500 years. These histories strengthen the opposing territorial claims of the two communities and engender an inevitable conflict. For Sinhala, history validates their claim to impose their rule over the whole island of Lanka. For Tamils, too, history is used to justify demands, in the past for a degree of autonomy for Tamil-dominated areas, and at least to the end of the civil war in 2009 for total separation from the Sinhala-dominated parts of the country. Yet looking at the shorter historical context, it is found that during the colonial period any violent clashes that erupted were between groups who defined themselves in terms of religious association but not between groups defining themselves as Sinhala and Tamil.

In fact, the Aryan / Dravidian divide is really a nineteenth century construct developed by philologists and orientalist who proposed that Sanskrit, Latin and Greek were all descended from a proto-Indo-Aryan language originally spoken in Central Asia.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, even though some of the more factional theorists accept that the boundary between the Sinhala and Tamil groups has been permeable in an historical sense with some south Indian immigrants having gradually become Sinhala, the two polar identities are nevertheless assumed to have existed as ‘nations’ in similar form throughout the centuries, despite the lack of accuracy in these works.

There are many examples to show how the imposition of national categories on to the past produces apparent anomalies which are resolved when a different view of the pre-colonial state is adopted.<sup>61</sup> For example, in Jaffna, the centre of Tamil culture, there are place names, palaces and monuments undoubtedly Sinhalese in origin. It was not uncommon for a Tamil King to marry a Sinhalese wife or Queen, and rule a Sinhalese kingdom, and vice versa. Sri Lanka was ruled by the Sinhalese and Tamil Kings from around the 4th century BC until the 1800s. There are Tamil inscriptions in the great historical centres of Sinhala-Buddhist civilisation such as Anuradhapura.

In essence then, precolonial and most of colonial Sri Lankan history does not conform to the model of two opposed nations imposed upon it by present-day Tamil and Sinhala advocates. For long periods of time groups which would now be characterized in terms of the Sinhala-

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<sup>60</sup> Guneratne. "What's in a name?", 20-40.

<sup>61</sup> Elizabeth Nissan and R.L.Stirrat, "The Generation of Communal Identities", 23-4.



Tamil divide lived more or less at peace with one another. There were dynastic wars, but Sinhala-Tamil *communal* violence dates from after Independence in 1948.

In order to explain the anomalies of a two-nation narrative, pre-modern and modern state formations models developed by theorists such as Anderson help us understand historical material from Sri Lanka.<sup>62</sup> From such work, the pre-modern states of south and south-east Asia emerge as relatively loosely structured organisations built up on the bases of heterogeneity, relativity, and gradualness, and on the ideal of the entrustment of power from the centre.

Pre-modern society consisted of horizontally stratified ruling, administrative, and commercial classes over isolated communities and was characterised by cultural diversity rather than uniformity. In essence, what writers such as Anderson describe is a state based on very different principles from those which underlie the modern nation-state. The pre-modern state was defined through its centre rather than by its boundaries with power radiating out from the centre. Boundaries, in Anderson's words, were "porous and indistinct"; "sovereignties faded imperceptibly into one another".<sup>63</sup>

By contrast, the modern state is territorially defined through rigid boundaries which are recognised in international law, and which can only be crossed on the fulfilment of legally defined criteria. Despite the claims made by many modern historians and ideologues, and despite the assertions made by various rulers at various times to be rulers of the whole island, it seems that the political entity of pre-modern Sri Lanka was firstly, even at its most centralised moments, a series of semi-autonomous states owing certain ritual and material obligations to an overlord. Second, and perhaps of most significance for our present purposes, ethnic, religious, and linguistic differences were not used as the basis for inclusion or exclusion from the 'state'.<sup>64</sup> At various times groups would speak alternative languages, adhere to alternative religions and claim alternative identities. In other words, in the pre-modern states of Sri Lanka, there could not have been signs of incipient Sinhala-Tamil conflict as understood today because these categories did not bear the nationalist

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<sup>62</sup> For a comprehensive treatise on this see Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined communities : reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*: (London ; New York : Verso,1991).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid 26.

<sup>64</sup> C. A. Bayly. "The Pre-history of Communalism Religious Conflict in India, 1700–1860." *Modern Asian Studies* 19 (2) (1985) :177-203. doi: 10.1017/S0026749X00012300.

connotations that they now bear. So the principal question now is why politics in Sri Lanka today has come to be dominated by the violent opposition between two groups—or ‘nations’—defined with reference to linguistic and racial criteria, whose identities have emerged and become progressively polarised over the last 150 years or so.

Because we can see that the so-called ethnic divide has been a rather recent phenomenon perpetrated by nationalist elements on both sides, one could hypothesise that being such a ‘top down’ political and economic construct it may not necessarily permeate deep into social and personal relationships. And it is argued here that this is the case. A number of the interviewees for this thesis made it quite clear that whilst living in Sri Lanka, their personal or employment relationships with other Sinhalese were harmonious, friendly and mutually respectful. This is despite there being a pervasive background of many years of violence, disruption and a perception that their community was under threat from a Sinhala nationalist majoritarian polity. It was not that personal or even economic relationships with colleagues or friends had disintegrated to the extent that the radical decision was taken to emigrate from Sri Lanka – it was the perceived and real discrimination at the institutional, political and economic fields such as education and language, against a background of mounting collective violence and disorder that for a lot of the participants reached a ‘tipping point’ at some stage. Consequently, despite this background, and the continual turmoil at the political and institutional level, relationships at a more personal level continued seemingly largely unaffected.

And so, we have the example of IJ who at university in Sri Lanka mixed a lot with Sinhalese people and learnt the Sinhalese language. And whilst IJ conceded that at university there was ‘ragging’ of Tamil students by some Sinhalese, at the same time he/she had a lot of Sinhalese friends. And then later on when he/she was subsequently employed as a lone Tamil supervisor (supervising staff comprising a lot of Sinhalese) for an engineering company, this never caused any problems in terms of an ethnic or cultural divide. In an analogous work situation, but this time in the Ceylon Navy, MN worked and associated with many people from different ethnicities and religions and again he/she perceived no issues with that. Another interviewee, KL, had had the recent experience in New Zealand of Sinhalese friends expressing their condolences after the recent death of his/her father, whilst AB had a similar recent experience in New Zealand associated with some recent tragedies with his/her partner. At school OP reported his/her time at the Royal College as being happy; he/she felt there was

no racism or ethnic tension, and there were a lot of multicultural events and performances in which he/she took part. The only time he/she was aware of anything different, of there being ethnic tensions within the country was when he/she visited Jaffna from Colombo. This journey would involve numerous military checkpoints and it seemed to OP that Tamils were treated differently at these checkpoints. Additionally, there is the example of CD who, even during the time of the war, was living in a Sinhalese area, mixing socially with Sinhalese people stating that “they were the nicest people to mingle with”.<sup>65</sup> Indeed his/her children were “looked after very, very well” by a Sinhalese family.<sup>66</sup> Another interviewee, ST, who could speak both Sinhalese and English (in addition to Tamil) had no problem with Sinhalese people with whom he/she associated. For example, ST’s family *dhobi*<sup>67</sup> was Sinhalese. There was one exception to this generalisation that he/she could recall, a Sinhalese policeman, whom ST described as a “racist” but this was clearly an exception.<sup>68</sup> And as an example of the oft cited experience of the different ethnic groups maintaining good personal relationships between themselves in Sri Lanka ST mentioned that quite recently a Sinhalese ex-colleague had sought him/her out to have dinner with him/her after 25 years of not being in contact.

To summarise, it is the contention of this thesis that the bipolar concept of an ethnic divide within Sri Lanka is one that, though it certainly exists, has been exploited by nationalist politicians in particular in order to justify various discriminatory practices on one hand and the reaction to them on the other. That the ethnic divide is not a long-standing historical reality seems clear. What is also clear, at least with the cohort of interviewees that contributed to this thesis, is that this divide has not eclipsed the multifarious personal interactions between the interviewees and the friends, colleagues and acquaintances from the other side of the divide.

## 2.1.2 The Colonial Experience.

In 1505, the Portuguese were the first European colonisers to take control of a number of the island’s coasts, followed by the Dutch, who took over the Portuguese strongholds in 1658.

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<sup>65</sup> From transcript of interview with CD held on 5/9/19.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Dhobis belong to a caste group of people who do the laundry for others.

<sup>68</sup> From transcript of interview with ST on 1/10/19.

The Portuguese and the Dutch brought Roman Catholic Christianity to a country whose peoples were predominantly Buddhist and Hindu. The colonisers, however, did not succeed in colonising the whole island, and thus the kingdom of Kandy persisted as the final kingdom of indigenous rule in the central highlands.

In 1796 the British took over the coastal regions from the Dutch. In 1815 they annexed the interior of the country including Kandy and united the island under one political authority. British interest in Sri Lanka first arose from its strategic significance in the Indian Ocean, but soon the country became an important arena for British commercial interests. The British introduced a capitalist sector, centred on coffee and, later, tea estates. One of the results of the growth of the capitalist estate sector was the arrival of large numbers of south Indian Tamil labourers to work the estates. There were other important changes as well. The British colonial authorities in Sri Lanka were committed to the liberal values of nineteenth-century Britain and hence ideas about individualism, bourgeois private property rights, and other aspects of modern society were all parts of the colonial process. It was not so much an explicit 'divide and rule' policy but part of an Empire-wide 'civilising mission'. Yet at the same time, in Sri Lanka as in India, the British recognised that they were dealing with a heterogeneous situation, with people speaking a variety of languages, wearing different garments and following different religions.

Such diversity posed both intellectual and pragmatic problems which were 'solved' by the British by introducing racial distinctions new to Sri Lanka. At a pragmatic level, these differences were instituted slightly differently in the colonial legal system than they were in the political system – more groupings were given legal recognition at the level of family law (which was to follow each group's customary practice) than were granted the right to political representation. Categorisation also identified and objectified the group to which the particular law applied. This involved a radical change whereby a 'racial' category was created on to which political representation was grafted.

From the beginning of their colonial rule, political representation at a national level was instituted by the British on a communal basis with the population divided into distinct communities, each with their own representation. In 1833 a common administration for the whole island was set up, consisting of government by the Governor and Legislative and Executive Councils. Three unofficial members of the Legislative Council were to be natives

nominated by the Governor, who chose one Low-Country Sinhala, one Burgher (of Sinhala-Dutch descent) and one Tamil. In 1889 two more unofficial members were added to represent the Kandyan and the Moorish communities. Although communal representation had been supplemented by other kinds of representation in the 1920s, it had remained an important political principle for one hundred years. This changed in 1931 when a new constitution based on the recommendations of the Donoughmore Commissioners was brought into being which abolished communal representation in favour of territorial electorates.<sup>69</sup> Although the commissioners suggested means by which communal interests might be protected, these recommendations were largely ignored by the colonial authorities. Of equal importance in the long term was the administrative division of the island according to language. Areas with a predominance of Sinhala speakers were administered in Sinhala whilst areas with a predominance of Tamil speakers were administered in Tamil. Most schools used one or other of the mother languages, but a small élite was educated in English.

By the end of the nineteenth century there was a major paradox at the heart of the Sri Lankan polity. On the one hand all citizens in Sri Lanka were to be treated equally: the island was subject to one set of rules and one set of governors; in terms of citizenship, all should be equal. Yet at the same time, British rule formalised cultural difference, making it the basis for political representation. As suggested previously this should not be interpreted as the manifestation of a wish to ‘divide and rule’; it was done out of the prevailing ‘liberal’ sentiments which sought to protect the different customs of different ‘races’. British policy was deeply influenced by the racial theory that had developed from the relationship between contemporary studies of language, etymological, historical, and evolutionary theory. The ‘Aryan Myth’, had a particularly strong hold in European thought of the period, and in Indology. Anglo-Saxonism was associated with the rise of England as a nation-state, and its subsequent imperial development which was justified in part by ideas of inherent Anglo-Saxon superiority over other races, and by the idea of the ‘civilising mission’. European scholarship on Sri Lanka (as on other colonies) was structured by these interests too, and they conditioned colonial historiography. Language and race were conflated and with that ‘Aryans’ (Sinhala) came to be opposed in absolute terms to ‘Dravidians’ (Tamils).

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<sup>69</sup> The Donoughmore Constitution created by the Donoughmore Commission (appointed by Sidney Webb ) served Sri Lanka from 1931 to 1947. It was a significant development. First, it was the only constitution in the British Empire (outside the "white" dominions of Australia, South Africa and Canada) enabling general elections with adult universal suffrage. Secondly, it created a committee system of government specifically to address the multi-ethnic problems of Sri Lanka. Under this system, no one ethnic community could dominate the political arena.

### 2.1.3 Post-Independence

The origins of the Tamil-Sinhala conflict can be traced back to the later part of Sri Lanka's colonial history. During the period of British colonial rule, which extended from 1815 to 1948, the minority Tamil community took up various opportunities for economic advancement. Because they had limited economic opportunities in the regions in which they were located, significant numbers of the Tamil community availed themselves of a colonial education. Conversely the dominant Sinhala community distanced itself from the British. The end result of this was that when independence came to Sri Lanka in 1948 (largely as a consequence of British colonial withdrawal from India in 1947), Tamils were disproportionately represented in public services, higher education, journalism, and the legal profession. The Sinhala elite, who had worked with the British from the early 1930s to bring about an eventual transfer of power, had paid little heed to the inherently ethnically plural features of the country. When universal adult franchise was extended to all Sri Lankans in 1931 under the Donoughmore Constitution, no provisions were included to guarantee minority rights. Not surprisingly key members of both the Tamil and Muslim communities protested the absence of clear-cut provisions for the protection of minority rights. In response Tamils boycotted the elections held under the auspices of this constitution.

The subsequent Soulbury Constitution of 1947, which paved the way to independence, also did not include a bill of rights. It did include a clause that prohibited discrimination against any citizen on the basis of ethnicity or religion, but this constitutional provision proved to be weak. In fact, the constitution laid the foundation for what was soon to emerge as a unitary and majoritarian state. Worse still, in the aftermath of independence, Sri Lanka's first prime minister, Don Stephen Senanayake, passed legislation that effectively disenfranchised a significant segment of the Tamil community, including the descendants of Tamils who had been brought to Sri Lanka in the nineteenth century as tea and coffee plantation labourers. The passage of this legislation gave the Sinhalese an effective two thirds majority in Parliament, thereby ensuring their dominance. Senanayake's successor, Solomon West Ridgeway Bandaranaike, also exploited the overrepresentation of Tamils in both the governmental bureaucracies and the private sector to stoke resentment among the majority

community. Among other matters, they argued that since Tamils were disproportionately represented in the field of higher education, they were prone to favour fellow Tamils. Ultimately, the Sinhala Only Act of 1956 was passed, which effectively marginalised the Tamil community in many spheres, from employment to higher education.

Matters worsened over the next two decades for the Tamil population of the country. One important turning point came in 1971 when the regime of Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike introduced a system of 'standardisation' in university admissions. This procedure stipulated that Sinhala students with lower scores could be granted university admissions. Whilst on the Sinhala side this could be seen as positive discrimination in order to counter perceived Tamil privilege, the policy further alienated Tamil youth and contributed to their radicalisation. Subsequently, in 1972, the country adopted a new constitution. Under the terms of this constitution, Buddhism was given foremost status, a move perceived deeply as a slight to other faiths. This decision contributed to an environment of growing majoritarian Sinhala-Buddhist sentiment and created conditions conducive to the growth of anti-Tamil commentary in public discourse.<sup>70</sup>

In 1976 a young Tamil, Velupillai Prabhakaran, created the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as an alternative to the more moderate politics of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). Unlike the TULF, the LTTE was prepared to wage an armed struggle to achieve the goal of a separate Tamil state. Prabhakaran had concluded that, after the 'standardisation' legislation of 1971 and the republican constitution of 1972, the rights of Tamils in the country were now under serious assault, and these sentiments were widely shared among Tamil youth whom Prabhakaran had steadily recruited to the cause of a secessionist revolt against the country's majority Sinhalese political order.

The civil war in Sri Lanka is frequently divided into four distinct phases, starting in 1983 with the anti-Tamil pogrom in the capital city of Colombo. This first phase culminated with the Indian intervention in the conflict in 1987. The second phase started in 1990 and ended in 1995 with the collapse of the direct talks between the LTTE and the government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga. The third phase began in 1995 and ended with the final collapse of

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<sup>70</sup> This is not to suggest that the Sri Lankan government is comprised only of Sinhalese representatives. In fact, parliament contains Tamil, Muslim and burgher representatives, amongst others. Since independence though, successive governments have adopted rhetoric and policies which are Sinhalese-Buddhist in tone.

the cease-fire agreement in 2006. The fourth and final phase began shortly thereafter and lasted until 2009, when the LTTE was finally defeated and annihilated.

The significance of 1983 in this history for Tamils especially is not to be underestimated and has been debated by scholars ever since. It will be argued here that it has significance still for a large portion of the interviewees involved in this thesis. Even though the origins of the civil war are widely attributed to the anti-Tamil pogrom<sup>71</sup> that had swept through the capital city of Colombo in July 1983, the catalyst for the conflict had been set in motion somewhat earlier when in mid-July 1983, Sri Lankan security forces killed Charles Anton, the head of the military wing of the LTTE. In retaliation for his killing, the LTTE ambushed a Sri Lankan military patrol in the northern Sri Lankan province of Jaffna and killed thirteen soldiers. The regime of President Junius Jayewardene chose to bring the bodies of the slain soldiers to Colombo for a mass funeral. This act no doubt inflamed Sinhala sentiments and almost certainly intentionally created conditions for a violent reprisal against the Tamil community. There is evidence that elements of the regime quickly became complicit in an orchestrated attack on Tamils over the course of the next few days.<sup>72</sup> Reliable reports suggest that as many as two thousand Tamils were killed in the course of a week in Colombo and elsewhere.<sup>73</sup> In the wake of the pogrom and the governmental response, more than one hundred thousand Tamils were rendered homeless, and several hundred thousand fled the country to India over the next several years.

In effect, the origins of the full-blown civil war that came to engulf the country for the next thirty odd years can be traced to the events of July 1983, though some authors suggest this is a false delineation which diminishes the significance of other periods of violence and disruption prior to 1983.<sup>74</sup> The pogrom in Colombo inflamed public sentiments in India, especially among fellow Tamils in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. Over the next several years, the conflict expanded with successive peace initiatives from India and then Norway all foundering on the irreconcilable and intractable positions of both the government and the LTTE.

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<sup>71</sup> The words 'pogrom' and 'holocaust' were used by a number of interviewees in describing this part of Sri Lankan history.

<sup>72</sup> Sumit Ganguly. "Ending the Sri Lankan Civil War." *Daedalus*; 147: (2018).78-89. doi: 10.1162/DAED\_a\_00475.

<sup>73</sup> Charles Haviland. 2013. "Remembering Sri Lanka's Black July," <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-23402727>. BBC News.

<sup>74</sup> For example, see L. Michael Ratnapalan. "Before and After 1983: The Impact of Theorising Sri Lankan Tamil Migration History around the 1983 Colombo Riots." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 37 (2) (2014) :281-291. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2014.882874>.



In 2005 Mahinda Rajapaksa was elected to prime ministerial office. Over the course of the next few years, Rajapaksa, in conjunction with his brother, Gotabhaya, who was made the Minister of Defence, brought about significant changes in military organization and strategy that would eventually defeat the LTTE. The fundamental difference between the Rajapaksa regime and its predecessors lay in its willingness to grant carte blanche to the military to fight the LTTE to the end, regardless of the economic, human, and diplomatic costs. It also permitted anti-LTTE Tamil militants to carry out punitive operations at will. The critical turning point in ending the civil war came in 2006 when the LTTE, believing that military victory was within reach, broke off the Norwegian-brokered cease-fire agreement and started what is popularly referred to as the Fourth Eelam War. It was at this point that the Sri Lankan regime made a calculated decision to annihilate the LTTE. The LTTE had also been weakened as early as 2004 with the defection of an important leader, Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan, popularly known as 'Colonel Karuna', along with some six thousand LTTE cadres. Ruthless tactics involved the targeting of civilian areas where LTTE cadres may have taken refuge, the shelling of hospitals where wounded LTTE forces were being treated, and the summary executions of any number of individuals suspected of being LTTE sympathisers. The LTTE also resorted to brutal military tactics as the war drew to a close. Its leaders deliberately placed civilians in the line of fire causing substantial casualties in the hope that civilian losses would generate international opprobrium against the government and its security forces. In 2009, the war ended with the final defeat and destruction of the LTTE.

However, though the war resulted in the destruction of the LTTE the underlying grievances that had precipitated the civil war largely remained unaddressed. Significantly, in the wake of the military victory there was an unrestrained sense of majoritarian ethnic triumphalism. Only under significant international pressure did President Rajapaksa appoint a Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission in May 2010. The Commission released a final report in November 2011, which came under considerable criticism from global human rights organizations for failing to fairly examine allegations of rampant human rights violations during the final phases of the conflict. Its shortcomings aside, the report did have a range of practical suggestions for promoting reconciliation. These recommendations, for the most part, have yet to be implemented.

Despite the defeat of the LTTE and the emergence of a new regime, the perceived injustices of the Tamil community that had set in motion the social and political forces precipitating the

civil war, for the most part remain unaddressed. Even with the establishment of a new Office of National Unity and Reconciliation, which has been partially successful in dealing with the release of detainees and the return of civilian land that the military had occupied, the Prevention of Terrorism Act which granted the government sweeping powers of arrest and detention, still remains in force, and many who had been incarcerated under its auspices have yet to be released.

Much disaffection with the present Sri Lankan regime still pervades the Tamil diaspora communities. The government's stated willingness to address the concerns of the diaspora notwithstanding, it is far from certain that it will be able to win the necessary domestic political support to effectively pursue such a strategy. Significant social forces and institutional barriers that remain could hobble any steps toward reconciliation and so Sri Lanka is likely to remain a deeply fractured nation riven with profound ethnic cleavages. The shared sense of national identity that Francis Fukuyama postulates that is necessary to underlie a state's validity does not exist in Sri Lanka.<sup>75</sup> Instead, significant segments of the Tamil community remain disaffected from the Sinhala-dominated Sri Lankan state.<sup>76</sup>

## **2.2 New Zealand**

### **2.2.1 New Zealand Immigration Policy**

Given the focus of this thesis, it is somewhat ironic that it was in Ceylon (as it was known at the time) in 1948, that the New Zealand Prime Minister Peter Fraser was asked at a press conference as to whether New Zealand operated its own 'White Australia Policy'? Fraser replied that there was no discrimination against 'Indians' in New Zealand 'because no white policy on Australian lines operated there'.<sup>77</sup> Subsequently Ceylon's national daily newspapers carried the headlines 'No "White Policy" in NZ'. Taken at face value, this was not a lie. But neither was it the whole truth.

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<sup>75</sup> Francis Fukuyama. "The Last English Civil War." *Daedalus* 147 1( 2018): 15-24.

<sup>76</sup> Chas. Morrison. "Buddhist extremism, anti-Muslim violence and civil war legacies in Sri Lanka." *Asian Ethnicity* 21 (1) (2020) :137-159. doi: 10.1080/14631369.2019.1610937.

<sup>77</sup> Brawley, Sean. "'No White Policy in NZ': Fact and Fiction in New Zealand's Asian Immigration Record, 1948-1978." *New Zealand Journal of History* 27 (1) (1993): 16-36.



Anti-Indian cartoon, 1917.<sup>78</sup>

Over the years, laws and regulations in New Zealand had been designed and used to advance specific economic strategies of the country and/or to restrict or prevent the entry of 'undesirable' individuals or groups. And 'undesirable' had generally meant those of non-

<sup>78</sup> From Te Ara , The Encyclopaedia of New Zealand. At <https://teara.govt.nz/en/cartoon/28178/anti-indian-cartoon> . Retrieved 18/6/20. Truth newspaper 1917. In 1896, the British government struck down the Asiatic Restriction Bill passed by New Zealand. In this 1917 cartoon a British politician is attempting to open a door that New Zealand has shut against Indian immigrants. In 1920, New Zealand passed a law that was acceptable to the British: it excluded Asians without the overt discrimination that might have embarrassed Britain in Asian countries.

European descent. Making and keeping New Zealand British and white were the goals of immigration policy until the early 1970s. People from Britain were actively recruited, while people perceived as ‘different’ (especially Asians) were prevented from entering and were ‘othered’.<sup>79</sup> Changes in immigration laws and regulations over the years also highlight the close links between immigration controls and economic strategies.

Amongst the first non-European immigrants to New Zealand to suffer from Eurocentric immigration policies were the Chinese. Fears about the increasing number of Chinese in New Zealand grew during the 1870s. Chinese labourers had arrived when they were invited to work Otago’s declining goldfields and in many cases they were only allowed to work on the ‘tailings’ already worked by European miners. In 1881 the Chinese Immigrants Act was passed, the first piece of legislation to restrict the entry of a specific group of people. The number of Chinese who could arrive on one ship was limited to one for every 10 tons of the vessel’s weight. Furthermore, a poll tax of £10 was also imposed on each Chinese person entering the country, an infamy still remembered by some of their descendants. In 1896 New Zealand attempted to pass the Asiatic Restriction Bill but the required assent was refused by the British government. However, Indians were free to enter New Zealand until the end of the century as they were British subjects. From 1896, despite objections from the British government, New Zealand tried to pass more comprehensive legislation restricting the immigration not just of the Chinese but also of Indians and other Asians. The 1899 Immigration Restriction Act was not aimed overtly at Asians. It prohibited the entry of immigrants who were not of British or Irish parentage and who could not fill out an application form ‘in any European language. This of course meant the English language in practice. These rules were in place for the next 20 years. But the application form was standard, and savvy applicants found it easy to memorise a few lines of English. Despite this, the requirement was used to keep Chinese, Indians and others (including presumably Ceylonese) out of the country.

The 1920 Immigration Act invested in the Minister of Customs absolute power to determine who was eligible to enter New Zealand. To replace the much discredited education test a permit system was established which meant that all migrants entering New Zealand would require a permit. But there was a notable exception to the permit system and that was with

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<sup>79</sup> Brian Moloughney, and John Stenhouse. “‘Drug-besotten, sin-begotten fiends of filth’: New Zealanders and the Oriental Other, 1850–1920.’ *New Zealand Journal of History* 33, no. 1(1999): 43–64.

those who were of British birth and parentage. So all non-Europeans required a permit and for this group these were almost impossible to obtain. Furthermore, a reason did not have to be given for a permit declination and thus a discriminatory immigration policy was able to be obscured in opaqueness. This system was able to be maintained until the early post world war two period.

Difficulties with this policy arose in the post-world war two period. International, affordable and rapid mass transport, coupled with the rise of a plethora of travel agents who were expected to comply with the procedure meant the maintenance of this confidential and opaque discriminatory policy became unwieldy and problematic. Furthermore, by the late 1950s the world was becoming intolerant of racial discrimination with Asian and African countries in the United Nations attempting to remove discriminatory practices around the world. New Zealand for a time was shielded to some extent from criticism of its immigration practices by the local and international perception of harmonious race relations between Pakeha and Maori within New Zealand.

In the 1960s, pressure mounted from the international community and tentative steps were taken towards a non-discriminatory immigration policy. Under the 1961 Immigration Amendment Act, British and Irish immigrants, along with other non-New Zealand citizens were required to have a permit before entering New Zealand; that is, the exemption system was removed. In practice, little had changed beyond the words - the permit was only a formality for Britons and Irish as they were issued with permits on arrival. Nevertheless, for the first time, the 1961 Act put British and non-British people on the same footing when they sought to enter New Zealand.

In 1972, the New Zealand Labour Party gained office on a platform which included a new immigration policy making no reference to race. Importantly, the new Prime Minister, Norman Kirk, recognised that New Zealand's economic and strategic future belonged with Asia and that immigration policy influenced relations with Asia. It is probably not a coincidence that at this time (in 1973) New Zealand lost its previous guaranteed primary produce market as Britain entered the European community<sup>80</sup>. The need to acquire new and expanding markets for New Zealand exports had therefore become crucial. With the need to develop new markets came the need for a fair and just immigration policy. So beginning in

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<sup>80</sup> This had been announced by Britain in 1961.

1974, the criteria for entry to New Zealand gradually changed from race or nationality to merits and skills. Officially, from 1974 applicants were granted permanent entry into New Zealand on the basis of the demand for their skills and qualifications. But although there was a distinct shift away from racism in official rhetoric, in practice migrants from the traditional source countries (Britain and northern European countries) continued to be favoured. But in 1975 with the election of a new National Party there came a turning point in this situation as the then Leader of the Opposition, Robert Muldoon, in the context of a declining labour market, had mounted a vigorous campaign against illegal Polynesian ‘overstayers’.<sup>81</sup> This had foreign policy implications and in 1978 the New Zealand government announced that its immigration policy would become non-discriminatory in deed as well as word.

Prior to the 1980s therefore, New Zealand's immigration policies were driven mostly by one, over-riding consideration: to preserve the country's essential ‘Britishness’. By the 1980s, however, with the economic revolution of ‘Rogernomics’<sup>82</sup> heralding a radical liberalising of the New Zealand economy, this nationalist position was being widely dismissed as an unhelpful barrier. The country's almost entirely monocultural institutions added another complication. Since the land wars of the nineteenth century, New Zealand's indigenous Maori people had been largely shut out of national life. Progressive New Zealanders demanded a new, bi-cultural, definition of nationhood. They also wanted New Zealand's foreign affairs, defence and trade policies to reflect its geographical location in the Asia-Pacific region.

The immigration review launched by David Lange's Immigration Minister, Kerry Burke, in 1986 touched upon all of these considerations. Its findings represented a decisive shift away from the de-facto ‘White New Zealand’ policy that had, hitherto, preserved the country's narrow ethnic profile. The Immigration Policy Review of 1986 was the culmination of the gradual shift which had begun in the 1960s. Any person who met specified educational, business, professional, age or asset requirements was to be admitted, regardless of race or nationality. Subsequent to the review, the Immigration Act 1987 was passed under which immigrants were selected according to three categories – a skills and business stream, a family stream and a humanitarian stream.

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<sup>81</sup> It was noted at the time that in contrast to Polynesians, white South Africans and Rhodesians seemingly had little problem entering New Zealand.

<sup>82</sup> Named after the then Finance Minister, Roger Douglas who led the programme.

In 1991, the Immigration Amendment Act replaced the occupational priority list with a points system. As a result of the 1991 Act, immigrants from non-traditional source countries found it easier to meet the criteria to migrate to New Zealand and consequently the number of Asian migrants grew. But there was still media and some political concern at the number of Asians living in New Zealand and the regulations were reviewed again in 1995. The previous points system was replaced with a 'pass mark' which was adjusted according to a set quota or target. This provided more control over the numbers of migrants each year. English language requirements also became tighter. The aim was to attract business migrants perceived to have been put off by earlier changes in the regulations.<sup>83</sup>

Further changes were enacted in the 2000s in an effort to attract immigrants in areas of skill shortage, and perhaps also as a response to growing public concern about levels of immigration from Asia. In 2002 the standard of English required for the general skills category and some of the business categories was raised to the level required of students entering university. In 2003 the general skills category was replaced by a skilled migrant category. This replaced the pass mark system with a process whereby people qualifying above a level of points entered a selection pool, from which they were invited to apply for residence.

This in fact leads to the central proposition of this thesis: the changes in the economic structure of NZ toward neoliberalism, together with rise in aforementioned demand of Tamil emigration, represented a (fortuitous) intersection of transnational phenomena, which can be termed a transnational transaction, resulting in increased migration of Tamil Sri Lankans to New Zealand. It will also be contended that the transition by this group of Tamil migrants from Sri Lanka to a satisfactory life in New Zealand has been made possible for three main reasons: the ability of the migrants to find employment in professional, middle class roles, the support they received from family, government and non-government social agencies, and some common cultural features between themselves and the 'host' community especially being proficient in the English language together with some other aspects of a common colonial legacy.

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<sup>83</sup> Richard Bedford, Elsie S. Ho, and Jacqueline May Lidgard. International migration in New Zealand : context, components and policy issues. In *PSC discussion papers: no. 37*: Population Studies Centre, University of Waikato. (2000). 21-23.

In terms of the ease or otherwise of adaptation to life in New Zealand in the face of some prejudice and discrimination encountered by Sri Lankan Tamils in New Zealand, it is also argued that such features are perceived by the interviewees to be of little consequence, if somewhat disagreeable. Any such barriers are perceived by them to be dwarfed by what they had experienced in Sri Lanka, and so it is downplayed by them.

It is also argued that, despite some cultural challenges, the active participation in local community cultural life, and the fostering of Tamil culture (principally language), has contributed significantly to the successful acculturation of the Sri Lankan Tamil community in New Zealand. and the ability for that community to develop and maintain a rich and strong cultural life.



# Chapter 3. Impact of Trauma

## 3.1 Impact of trauma upon interviewees

One of the interview questions included for this thesis related to whether or not the interviewee or any member of their immediate family had directly or indirectly experienced any violence or disruption to their lives in Sri Lanka as a result of the civil war. This question then usually led to a conversation as to whether this affected their decision to emigrate from their homeland. Furthermore, participants were also asked whether they had suffered any long lasting psychological or impaired mental health effects that may have occurred as a result of the participant's experiences of violence or disruption whilst living in Sri Lanka.

All of the interviewees for this thesis stated they had either been affected directly or indirectly by violence or disruption whilst living in Sri Lanka prior to emigration. The effects of such trauma were two-fold. Firstly, they played a very significant part in the decision of the interviewees and their families to emigrate from Sri Lanka. Secondly, for a proportion of the interviewees, the effects lingered as various manifestations of mental health impairment, some even lasting to the present day. In one case an interviewee stated that their physical health had also been seriously affected. Narrative from some of the interviewees will be presented to support these contentions.

This section will highlight the significance of the endemic violence, disruption and discriminatory practices within Sri Lanka in leading a large proportion of the interviewees to decide to emigrate from their homeland. It will then be shown that during this time that quite independently, New Zealand's immigration policy changes facilitated the immigration of numbers of immigrants from a broader range of source countries than had been permitted hitherto. This will lead to a central argument of this thesis – namely, that corresponding, but quite independent, historical phenomena in Sri Lanka and New Zealand in the 1980s onwards represented an intersection of histories between Sri Lanka and New Zealand that allowed and facilitated the successful immigration to New Zealand by a group of immigrants who, until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, would have found it almost impossible to do so. Later in Chapter 3, the more direct effects of the trauma in Sri Lanka upon the mental (especially) and physical

health of the interviewees in the context of the Drive to Thrive (DTT) theory will be considered.

### **3.2 Narratives of Trauma and Leaving.**

In 1974 GH could see the signs that things were “not good” in Sri Lanka.<sup>84</sup> As he/she recalled, there had been repeated riots against the Tamils in Colombo in 1956 and 1958. It seemed to GH that every few years Sinhalese mobs would go out and burn houses, there would be killings and other acts of violence toward life and property. GH and his/her family were not directly affected although he/she had a relative whose car was stopped and the relative was beaten. GH represents one of the earliest migrants from Sri Lanka who participated in interviews for this thesis having emigrated to New Zealand in the 1970s. And he/she was invited to New Zealand by their eventual employer who also organized visa applications etc. Nonetheless, even in this situation and although GH did not report any lasting personal impacts from traumatic experiences, the experiences were clearly a factor in the decision to leave the country.

MN personally witnessed the first riots in Colombo in 1958 and had to run for safety. In 1983 his/her house was attacked by a stone-throwing mob in Colombo who also had Molotov cocktails. MN believed these mobs were supported and abetted by Sinhalese politicians and there is good evidence to support that.<sup>85</sup> MN lost 70,000 rupees and some jewelry. MN also had more indirect experiences of the endemic violence in Sri Lanka at the time – he/she knew of a colleague who had changed their car number plate numbers which meant they were then recognisable as belonging to a Tamil – he was chased down and his car burnt. It was under these circumstances, together with the fact that both of his/hers partner’s brothers (who were already overseas in New Zealand and the USA respectively) kept suggesting that the family emigrate, that MN took steps to emigrate. Subsequently MN and family emigrated in 1984. During the interview MN intimated that due to the general stresses at the time (including being separated from his/her family as work was sought in Saudi Arabia ) his/her physical

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<sup>84</sup> From transcript of interview with GH on 23/7/19.

<sup>85</sup> For example, Charles Haviland. 2013. “Remembering Sri Lanka’s Black July,” <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-23402727>. BBC News. Also see The Review. International Commission of Jurists. December 1983 pp 20 -26 at <https://www.icj.org/icj-review-no-31-december-1983/> Retrieved 24/7/20.

health was significantly impacted and as a result he/she had suffered from transient ischaemic attacks (TIAs).<sup>86</sup> To this day MN has suffered from a number of cardiac issues and had a third heart attack, in 2019.



MN's destroyed house, Colombo, 1983.

In 1990, during a ceasefire, QR and family decided to visit Colombo to visit his/her brother, but war broke out again and QR was unable to return to Jaffna. Because of this he/she lost everything that they had in Jaffna. This was bad enough, but it was sometimes more symbolic incidents that provided the 'tipping point' in the decision to emigrate. One of the 'tipping points' in QR's decision to leave Sri Lanka related to a regulation in 1997 that meant that schoolchildren had to carry their belongings to school in a clear or transparent bag. One day QR's son was stopped and searched by army personnel in Colombo and it was at this point that QR felt they should leave the country though as yet no concrete steps had been taken to

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<sup>86</sup> A TIA is a brief episode of neurological dysfunction resulting from an interruption in the blood supply to the brain or the eye, sometimes as a precursor of a stroke.

do so. Later, QR witnessed a petroleum base burning and the very next day he/she read an article about emigration to New Zealand. So it appears clear that the ongoing strife in Sri Lanka was at least one factor in QR's decision to leave Sri Lanka. In addition to this though, QR also mentioned that there were also other aspects of life in Sri Lanka that were instrumental in the decision to leave Sri Lanka. For example, QR recalled taking their son to hospital with a broken arm. The service was superb but everywhere one had to pay a bribe in order for a service (e.g. get an X-ray done, get an X-ray read etc.) to be performed. This made QR question as to whether this was the sort of life or country that they wanted for their children. Nonetheless QR did not report any ongoing effects or impacts on his/her physical or mental health associated with the experiences in Sri Lanka.

Another interviewee who experienced both the direct and indirect effects of violence and disruption in Sri Lanka is CD. Although CD was never involved in politics, he/she and other members of the intelligentsia were victims of the war and associated strife. The worst experience was in 1990, at a time when a refugee camp was being cleared and CD was in charge of child burials (those that had died from health issues, shelling etc.) In another incident a cousin was killed. In early 2000s, due to the deteriorating situation in Sri Lanka's civil society, he/she moved to New Zealand with his/her family. The impact of these experiences has been direct and indirect for CD. In a direct way these experiences affected CD's mental health and still does to some extent. He/she stated that he/she has experienced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of the traumatic experiences in Sri Lanka; for example, sometimes CD wakes up in the night and thinks someone is going to shoot him/her. CD also feels that he/she tends to 'catastrophise' and becomes anxious at times. More indirectly, it has sometimes affected other members of his/her family in the way they behave and react to events. CD recalled a time in a shop in New Zealand when his/her young daughter hid behind him/her when she saw a person in an army uniform entering the premises and she had to be "dragged out and introduced" to the army man to assuage her fears.<sup>87</sup>

UV is an interviewee who, despite describing his/her life in Sri Lanka as "doing alright"<sup>88</sup>, decided that there were opportunities for a better life after having experienced a series of circumstances that "forced us to leave our country".<sup>89</sup> The final straw for UV, who was 40 years old at the time, were the events of July 1983 which he/she described variously as a

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<sup>87</sup> From transcript of interview with CD on 5/9/19.

<sup>88</sup> From transcript with UV on 30/10/19

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

“pogrom” and a “holocaust”.<sup>90</sup> During this time he/she experienced many instances of escaping from indiscriminate shelling and bombing in the aftermath of the 1983 riots and pogrom. He/she was forced to live in a refugee camp immediately after these riots for around four to five days and then was sent to Jaffna on a container ship. Despite all of this, at the interview UV did not report any ongoing effects or impact on his/her mental or physical health associated with experiences in Sri Lanka.

IJ and KL had somewhat different experiences, and reactions to those experiences, in their time in Sri Lanka. There were examples of witnessed or indirect violence experienced by IJ; for example, one time when he/she was travelling in a bus with others back to Jaffna from Colombo there was gunfire in front of them as they were caught in a crossfire and the bus had to be diverted. He/she stayed a night in a “church-type” place and then had to turn back. Another incident IJ also recalled occurred during the time that there was also violence in Sinhalese areas (1988–90 and involving the JVP), and he/she saw bodies on the side of road. IJ can also recall a time when a whole area was undergoing a process euphemistically known as “liberation”, and pamphlets were dropped saying they (he/she and family) should leave the house and stay in a temple. IJ’s father told them not to go, and they remained in the house for four days. Even when they saw that the army was withdrawing his/her father told him/her just to pray, and that they would not come to harm as they had no involvement in the situation. Eventually the army commander entered the house asking questions. IJ was able to reply in Sinhalese and it turned out that army commander came from the same university in Colombo as IJ. IJ also felt that employment prospects in Sri Lanka were impacted by the civil strife, recalling that when he/she applied for a job as a demonstrator at an institute all of the interview questions related to attitudes toward the LTTE and not to the job itself. Subsequently IJ was never offered the position. IJ’s partner, KL, experienced around 12 years of bombing and destruction in Sri Lanka. He/she did not have any of their immediate family killed during the war but some close relatives had lost their lives. One time in 1987 he/she was hiding in a house with about a hundred other people with the feeling that if the army had found them there they would have all been shot. This was recalled vividly and at the time he/she felt very frightened and vulnerable. KL said that all he/she could recall of his/her childhood is a feeling of fear and these experiences and their memory still affect him/her. He/she still feels very emotional when relating upsetting episodes and began to weep whilst

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

describing this during the interview. And similarly, during the aftermath of the mosque shooting in Christchurch<sup>91</sup>, KL found that they simply could not watch the media coverage as it was unbearable.

Even children were not safe from the violence. AB is an example of someone who experienced violence whilst in Sri Lanka but because he/ she was an infant at the time he/she cannot recall it. Six months after AB was born the 1983 riots broke out. However, AB's family was eventually left alone and AB surmises it was because the man who was carrying him/her out of the house would not have fitted the profile of a youthful Tamil Tiger. Their home however was burnt down. Conversely, and in keeping with one of the themes of the previous chapter on the harmonious and friendly personal relationships between Sinhalese and Tamil people, the person who helped AB and his/her family to leave Colombo whilst it was under curfew at the time was a Sinhalese friend. AB did not report any ongoing mental (or physical) health issues related to experiences in Sri Lanka which perhaps is to be expected from someone whose experiences of Sri Lanka occurred when he/she was very young.

Like AB, EF was also child during his/her early years in Sri Lanka but is old enough to have many memories of violence and disruption to his/her life. A lot of these memories were while he/she was accompanying her family "on the move"<sup>92</sup> away from indiscriminate bombing and war. EF recalls witnessing many times the after effects of brutal acts of violence and also recalls one time of being in a boat which was being shelled and bombed. Sometimes the events were not explicit, but the conclusions were just as ominous. An example of that was an instance when he/she was going to school with other Tamil children in a van and an autorickshaw pulled up beside the van. EF was passed out the passenger window to the autorickshaw driver and delivered home. But he/she never saw any of those Tamil schoolchildren in the van again despite being classmates. A lot of EF's memories relate to a glimpse of something before his/her mother covered his/ her eyes. EF reported many ongoing symptoms of anxiety and depression which he/ she attributed to childhood experiences of war violence and disruption. For example, when his/her family moved close by to an airport in New Zealand, the noise of aircraft brought graphic memories back to him/her. He/she has had

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<sup>91</sup> On March 15<sup>th</sup> 2019, a far-right gunman went on a shooting spree at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing 51 people. He has been convicted and has been sentenced to life imprisonment without parole.

<sup>92</sup> From transcript of interview with EF on 27/7/19.

periods of clinical depression throughout his/her life and anxiety has never left; EF attributes much of that to his/her childhood experiences in Sri Lanka.

More commonly, interviewees reported not having any ongoing overt episodes of mental health dysfunction though some provided a caveat to that. For example, ST experienced the riots of 1977 when he/she was a young child. In response to the riots his/her family had to move out of their house for about a week or more as a precautionary measure. They felt vulnerable at that time and school attendance was severely disrupted. In 1983 on the Sunday after the Friday killing of army personnel in Jaffna (Black July, 1983),<sup>93</sup> ST witnessed coffins being transported back to Colombo. On the Monday morning he/she went to buy bread and upon his/her return his/her father forbade him/her going to school as he (the father) had received phone warnings of impending trouble at 3am that morning. When ST went to get some anti-epileptic medications for his/her brother from the local pharmacy, he/she found the latter's business had been set alight and was burning. He/she went to a pharmacy run by a Sinhalese owner instead and then watched fires over the city. That night their own house was attacked and the family stayed in a refugee camp for about five days and then in bank quarters for about sixteen months. Though these experiences resulting from the 1983 riots probably represented the tipping point in the family's decision to leave Sri Lanka and did probably affect him/her it has not been to the extent of producing clinical symptoms. The experiences have remained as memories for ST.

OP was very aware of underlying tensions in the country when he/she travelled to Jaffna from Colombo at holiday time and there were frequent checks at checkpoints as they were identifiable as Tamils. And it pained OP a lot when his/her mother tried to cover up for the fact they were Tamils. His/her mother would not take his/her elder brother on these trips to Jaffna as the latter was in his late teens and could be suspected of being an insurgent. OP witnessed Tamil teenagers being beaten up in front of him and he/she had a lot of experiences where he/she felt personally aggrieved by what he/she viewed as Tamil people being treated as second class citizens. OP had relatives who joined the LTTE (Tamil Tigers) and he /she went on "camping" duties with the LTTE.<sup>94</sup> In 1996, a close relative was shot dead at a checkpoint. This was the trigger that made OP hate the military and it was during this time that a lot of OP's relatives joined the LTTE. After OP's mother arranged for two of his/her

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<sup>93</sup> See P41.

<sup>94</sup> From transcript of oral interview with OP on 29/10/2019. "Camping" refers to the construction of military bunkers, filling of sandbags etc.

brothers to emigrate to Australia a deposit for OP to relocate to Indonesia was paid but he/she then become “ stuck there for three years”.<sup>95</sup> Eventually whilst in Indonesia he/she heard about applying for UN sanctioned refugee status and OP went through that process. Finally, OP arrived in New Zealand in 2004 which by now had become the first-choice destination as he/she knew the English language and he/she felt that they would be able to complete his/her computer studies there. Clearly, in the case of OP, the decision to emigrate from Sri Lanka, a decision taken by his/her mother, was in direct response to the civil war and associated violence in Sri Lanka at the time. OP represents a clear-cut case of someone who was felt to be in clear danger if he/she remained in Sri Lanka. There was a period after completing his/her university degree in Auckland in 2008, that OP describes as feeling stressed and depressed for quite some time. Although in the interview he/she did not explicitly attribute this to experiences in Sri Lanka there were hints that his/her pre and post emigration experiences had had a strong psychological impact in later years.

### **3.3 The Transnational Transaction**

The interviewees’ experiences of trauma had a number of aspects in common. They or their immediate family may have been attacked or assaulted directly, or they may have had relatives or close friends or colleagues who had had such experiences. They may not have actually been attacked themselves, but many had witnessed attacks, in some cases these had resulted in fatalities. Or they may have witnessed the aftermath of such violent attacks. Additionally, in many cases their homes and/or their businesses or places of work had been attacked and, in some cases, destroyed. And in all of this was the knowledge of the context of such violence – that of a systematic and non-systematic government-led campaign of suppression of Tamil political, economic, civil and social rights.

We can clearly see then that with context of ongoing endemic violence toward Tamil people in Sri Lanka provided sufficient impetus and rationale for the all of the interviewees (or their parents ) to make the decision to emigrate from Sri Lanka. Almost all of the interviewees experienced significant violence or disruption (for example the loss of a business or property)

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.



in their lives in Sri Lanka and this was seen to be part of an ongoing, seemingly never ending programme of discrimination and persecution of Sri Lankan Tamil people. Even for those that were not directly affected the perception was that the situation for Sri Lankan Tamils was only going to get worse.

And we have seen that it was at around this time (i.e. in the 1980s especially) that New Zealand's immigration policy was undergoing significant reform ending the traditional source country preference system which had underlain the immigration policy since the 1840s. That is, a policy which deliberately favoured countries such as the United Kingdom and Ireland as sources of migrants and the careful regulation of entry from countries in Asia in particular. The Immigration Policy Review of 1986 stated that the aim of new immigration policy initiatives was "to enrich the multicultural fabric of New Zealand..."<sup>96</sup> and though some have questioned the economic rationale behind this,<sup>97</sup> nonetheless the effect upon potential migrant populations from Asia, including Sri Lanka, was profound. Doors, mostly previously shut, had been opened. That meant for those making the decision to emigrate from Sri Lanka another option became potentially possible. It was an attractive proposition too as the skills shortages that existed in New Zealand, especially in the fields of healthcare and engineering, were ones that represented a gap that often Sri Lankan immigrants could fill. Additionally, there was to some extent a common heritage between Sri Lanka and New Zealand, one of being an anglophone ex-British territory where the predominant language was English with which many Tamils were proficient. New Zealand also had a reputation of harmonious race relations and of promoting a multicultural society.

It can be seen then that the increasing emigration of Sri Lankan Tamil people to New Zealand from the 1980s represents an intersection, albeit fortuitous, of historical phenomena in each of the respective countries. It was a transnational transaction whereby the needs of a significant portion of an ethnic minority in one country intersected with the mainly economic needs of another land resulting in an increasing outflow of migration from Sri Lanka to New Zealand. In Sri Lanka, the increasing violence especially during and following 1983, which eventually morphed into full scale civil war in the 1990s, and the ongoing implementation of discriminatory laws and regulations especially in the field of education and language,

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<sup>96</sup> K. Burke. Review of Immigration Policy, *Appendices to the Journal of the House of Representatives* G42, Government Printer, Wellington. August 1986.

<sup>97</sup> See R. Walker "Immigration Policy and the Political Economy of New Zealand" in S.W. Greif (ed) *Immigration and National Identity in New Zealand. One People, Two Peoples, Many Peoples?* (Palmerston North: Dunmore Press 1995), 282-302.

provided very real incentives for those able to emigrate to do so. At the same time in New Zealand, the effective broadening of source countries from which immigrants could be obtained meant that for potential migrants from Asia in general, and Sri Lanka in particular, there was now a clear opportunity for those with particular skills and aptitudes, and who also had the means and motivation to do so, to consider New Zealand as a destination in which to begin a new life. The census data tells us that many Sri Lankan Tamils (and indeed Sinhalese as well) did in fact make this choice.

# Chapter 4. Adaptation and Connectedness

## 4.1 Introduction to Adaptation

This chapter will explore a number of issues that the interviewees faced having emigrated to New Zealand. It will be shown that despite real cultural challenges encountered in a new country, the support of family connections and social agencies, and the relative ease in obtaining employment in the context of a relatively non-discriminatory environment has led to a successful adaptation to a new way of life in an adopted country. Consequently, it will be shown that this community, small in numbers that it is, is well placed to continue to thrive culturally in its new space.

These issues will be explored through a framework of firstly adaptation to a new environment and then secondly through the lens of cultural connectedness. Though each interviewee's experience and perspective upon arrival and subsequent settling in a new society is of course an individual one, there was definitely a commonality of experiences as well. These commonalities were often associated with the degree of family, collegial, governmental and non-governmental support in establishment of a new life in a new country, issues associated with perceived or real instances of racial or ethnic discrimination, and the ease or otherwise in finding employment. These features will be examined.

Most if not all of the interviewees received support from a number of sources once they had arrived in New Zealand. For some in fact, this support commenced well before even arriving in their new homeland – this is particularly the case when immigrants already had family members or other connections within New Zealand. Some had been in contact with family members already in New Zealand for some time and had been influenced by them in their decision to emigrate from Sri Lanka. For others who had a professional qualification in high demand in New Zealand, transition to new employment was relatively easy. Many, but not all, of the participants though reported that they perceived having experienced at least a degree of prejudice or racial discrimination when they were seeking employment.

Furthermore, some also reported experiencing what may be called 'low level' racism in their

everyday lives. Having said that, invariably most of the interviewees who reported having experienced such prejudice went on to downplay it citing the context of the environment from whence they came. That is, those interviewees that reported having experienced some form of discrimination or prejudice in New Zealand were quick to emphasise that such instances palled into insignificance compared to what had been experienced in Sri Lanka. Some even claimed that such prejudice came not from New Zealanders but from other ethnic minorities.

## 4.2 Experiences of Adaptation

GH represents an early cohort of Tamil immigrants arriving in New Zealand from Sri Lanka – he/she came to New Zealand in 1974 having graduated in medicine in Sri Lanka. He /she was originally offered a position in Connecticut but decided to move to New Zealand. GH stated that a lot of those who knew him/her at the time thought this was not a good decision, but he/she now feels this was the best choice they had ever made. At that time New Zealand had a shortage of medical staff and GH was proactively offered a position by a health authority who then subsequently arranged visa applications and other documentation. So for GH it was relatively easy to settle and gain employment in New Zealand. After commencing but not finishing a specialist training scheme he/she moved into general practice from 1975 – 2005 (he/she was joined by his/her partner who is also a healthcare professional) but retired for health reasons in 2005 and from then on until 2017 did locum work. GH feels and has felt very satisfied with his/her life in New Zealand stating “nothing could be better”.<sup>98</sup> GH and his/her partner have practised medicine for many years and lived in an area of a city which comprises a predominantly European patient population, and feels that “people there have been good to me”.<sup>99</sup> In terms of barriers or challenges to life in New Zealand, GH recalled that he/she has experienced some incidents that could be perceived as comprising racial or ethnic discrimination in New Zealand, but considers such incidents to “have been no big deal”,<sup>100</sup> especially when compared to his country of origin where he/she feels that Tamils were and are treated like third class citizens. An example of one of those incidents which

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<sup>98</sup> From transcript of interview with GH on 23/7/2019.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

he/she perceived as being based on racial discrimination was when an “overly critical senior doctor criticised me for things I had never done”<sup>101</sup> though he/she was reluctant to elaborate on this incident as to why it was felt it may be related to prejudice.

As with GH, UV was one of the older interviewees. UV and partner (a doctor) migrated directly to New Zealand under the general points system after obtaining permanent residence visas. He/she is now 80 years old and is retired from paid employment (but still does volunteer work) and his/her partner still works at the local city hospital. UV said they “...have no regrets in moving to New Zealand, a beautiful country with loving friendly people. In New Zealand we are happy and life is peaceful. We are proud to be New Zealanders and we love the country, its diversity and respect for the rule of law”.<sup>102</sup> Further, UV stated that he/she and his partner have never had any difficulty in interacting with other New Zealanders or in seeking employment. Indeed, as with GH, it seems to be the general case that the Tamil immigrants who came to New Zealand at an earlier stage (e.g. 1970s – early 1980s), and who had either professional qualifications or skills in high demand had a more seamless and happier introduction to life in New Zealand. This was despite evidence presented earlier of a discriminatory immigration policy in New Zealand in favour of European (mainly British) immigrants.

Despite some challenges especially in regard to employment, family connections in New Zealand helped with some immigrants in transitioning to a new life in their newly adopted country. KL and IJ married in Sri Lanka in 1997 and had one daughter in 1998. They both worked in Colombo until 2000. IJ’s uncle had originally emigrated to the Cook Islands<sup>103</sup> where he had worked as a teacher but was now residing in New Zealand. IJ had initially resisted an uncle’s overtures to emigrate to New Zealand but after having been detained at checkpoints in Sri Lanka a few times<sup>104</sup> he/she applied under the general points system to relocate to New Zealand. So in 2000, with their application approved, IJ and KL and their one and a half year old daughter came to New Zealand, where they lived at an uncle’s house for three months. In retrospect this was seen as a difficult time for IJ as he/she applied for a lot of skilled jobs without success. IJ then took the advice of another cousin in New Zealand

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid

<sup>102</sup> From transcript of interview with UV on 30/10/19.

<sup>103</sup> A self-governing Pacific island country in free association with New Zealand. Cook Islanders are citizens of New Zealand.

<sup>104</sup> He had been born in Jaffna and was now living in Colombo and would travel between the two – this was often a point of contention with those questioning him at a checkpoint.

who suggested he/she should apply for unskilled jobs as a stepping stone which is what he/she then did. Within a matter of months, IJ had secured a position as a quality assurance engineer with a local company where he/she has been for around eighteen years. IJ's partner KL, has worked in various teaching roles since being in New Zealand.

IJ's first impressions confirmed what a cousin had previously told him/her about life in New Zealand. IJ recounted how he/she had been told that one could walk the streets alone at night and was amazed by that when they arrived in New Zealand. IJ reminisced that back in Sri Lanka one could be killed in such circumstances. IJ also found the people in his/her new homeland to be very friendly. For example, whilst flying from Singapore to Christchurch their daughter exhibited a high fever and was hospitalised when they arrived in Christchurch. The care and friendliness they experienced from those associated with their daughter's medical care is still something that IJ and KL recall fondly. And as he/she said "we were free!"<sup>105</sup> KL concurred with this too, though for some months he/she was "homesick" after arrival in New Zealand.<sup>106</sup> On the slightly challenging side, they did find it difficult to source some things that they liked such as particular types of food, though relatives in Sri Lanka did send items to them. KL said it is much better now in that regard as there is a greater variety of shops selling such items locally. Though IJ and KL spoke English when they first arrived in New Zealand, there was still somewhat of a language barrier at first due to their accents and also probably just a lack of confidence when speaking English. IJ recalled having to repeat him/herself often when conversing with work colleagues. That said, IJ did not and has not experienced any "bullying kind of things"<sup>107</sup> or what could be called racism or prejudice in their entire time in New Zealand.

There are others that had similar experiences of struggle to find their place in New Zealand society especially from an employment perspective. MN's move to New Zealand came soon after the 1983 riots in Sri Lanka and was in response to requests from family members in New Zealand and the USA to join them. Initially he/she attempted to emigrate to Germany where his/her partner's sister resided and then to London and finally Auckland via Singapore. MN feels that he/she was able to secure the right to enter New Zealand after pressure was applied on New Zealand politicians by Auckland and Wellington Tamil groups as 1984 was an election year in New Zealand. According to MN, this resulted in the approval of a cabinet

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<sup>105</sup> From transcript of interview with IJ and KL on 3/10/19.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid

<sup>107</sup> Ibid

paper allowing the admission of Sri Lankans to New Zealand if they could show that they had been materially affected (e.g. had lost property or family members) by the 1983 riots and their aftermath. MN found that it was initially difficult to get a job in New Zealand which he/she didn't think was due to discriminatory practices per se but rather that he/she was unable to cite proof of qualifications having lost them in Sri Lanka. After a lot of applications MN finally obtained a position in charge of a construction site at a provincial hospital. For the past 25 years MN worked as an engineer in a major New Zealand city. MN feels that he/she has been happy with life in New Zealand though conceded that there have been times that he/she has perceived racial discrimination particularly as it pertained to job promotions. A couple of times MN feels his/her children have been bullied for the same reason and there was an incident when he/she was assaulted in a carpark and as a result lost some teeth, though it is unclear from the interview the precise circumstances or motivation for this attack.

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QR is an immigrant who also had a struggle in terms of employment upon arrival in New Zealand. He/she and family came to New Zealand via Singapore where they had obtained their permanent residence visa. Upon arrival QR did not know a single person in New Zealand though he/she was very proficient in English as their first degree was taught in English. MT did find it difficult to initially find employment in New Zealand as he/she was repeatedly told that 'New Zealand experience' was required. Most of the time this was not put down by him/her to discrimination in any way but simply due to a "stupid idea that one needed New Zealand experience".<sup>109</sup> As an example of this, QR at one point wanted to purchase a petrol station franchise. He/she had the money, had already started two businesses from scratch in Sri Lanka but his/her application was declined. As QR put it with some incredulity, "what was the experience that you need to pump petrol in New Zealand?"<sup>110</sup> At other times though QR did feel that some decisions that blocked his/her employment prospects were due to some sort of racial or ethnic discrimination. Still, he/she did not allow that to completely thwart his/her ambitions as after QR arrived in New Zealand he/she quickly managed to complete three diplomas in Accounting, Banking and Management. Upon completion of these diplomas QR applied for a job as a bank teller and ensured that his/her age or ethnicity on the application form. He/she was called into the bank to sit a

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<sup>108</sup> From transcript of interview with MN on 30/10/19.

<sup>109</sup> From transcript of interview with QR on 23/7/19.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

mathematics aptitude test which was passed with a 100% pass mark. But the next day he/she received a letter saying that he/she was not suitable for the position.<sup>111</sup> In the end, QR felt forced to game the system. He/she enlisted the help of a friend who owned a garage to state (if required) that QR looked after the accounts for the garage. In this way QR could claim that he/she had gained some New Zealand work experience. This led to a one-year job for a transport company after which he/she joined a friend and colleague in the field of mortgage broking. At the time of interview QR had been in this line of work for about 15 years and was about to retire and devote some time to property development. QR felt that all was well that ended well and that he/she had in fact been very successful financially in New Zealand.

Another with mixed experiences of life in New Zealand is CD. CD's first impressions of New Zealand upon arrival was noticing that there was neither gunfire nor insect bites. CD felt he/she had arrived in a heaven where there was no corruption and everyone was treated as a family member. There were some cultural adjustments to be made and this sometimes not only meant with local customs and mores but also involved other members of the local Tamil community. Sometimes it felt to CD that members of this community, particularly those that who had lived in New Zealand for a relatively long period of time, treated their family as 'juniors' and tried to influence them in an unwanted way in family decision making.<sup>112</sup> There have been some unpleasant experiences too. On the morning of his/her interview with the author he/she was abused by people for allegedly parking his/her car in an incorrect parking place and CD felt this abuse was racially motivated; though as with some other previous examples it was not clear from the interview as to why it was felt that this was the case. Generally, CD felt that things had deteriorated in New Zealand in this respect and that although he felt things were fine within his/her own workspace, the situation was less welcoming and tolerant outside of that area. Interestingly, CD felt that this deterioration in attitudes within New Zealand was not so much from New Zealanders themselves but others within New Zealand who had come from other (unspecified) countries.

For those who came to New Zealand when very young there is not so much of a point of comparison between New Zealand and Sri Lanka. AB came to New Zealand when he/she was a young child. His/her uncle was already in New Zealand and he/she sponsored AB, her

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<sup>111</sup> It should be note that this is a possible example of how the general points immigration system, the aim of which was to attract migrants to New Zealand with specific skills needed by the New Zealand labour market, was being inadvertently undermined by decisions made by employers further down the line.

<sup>112</sup> From transcript of interview with CD on 5/9/2019.



mother and grandfather to emigrate to New Zealand. Their family had to start anew in a major city and he/she feels that he/she was (perhaps deliberately) not told too much about the civil war in Sri Lanka. But he/she feels that everyone in her extended family is very happy in New Zealand and are very 'kiwi' although he/she was uncertain exactly what that means or what is associated with that attribute.<sup>113</sup> AB downplayed instances of racial abuse or discrimination in New Zealand. When exploring this aspect of life in New Zealand and citing an acquaintance's experience of a time in Christchurch (the person involved had said that within a couple of hours of arriving in Christchurch she had been told to "go home to where she came from"), AB stated jovially "that happens every time I go to Christchurch too".<sup>114</sup> At school, there were "subtle things pointed out" to him/her about his/her dress and the lunch he/she may have brought to school, but AB puts that down to "five-year olds being five-year olds".<sup>115</sup>

As we have seen with some others, family connections helped ST in relocation to New Zealand as his/her mother's brother was a general practitioner in a small rural town in the North Island of New Zealand. This man then sponsored ST and his/her whole family to move to this town, a decision which he/she now considers to be "the best thing that happened to us, because it allowed me to understand the New Zealand way of life, whereas if we had come to Auckland or Wellington we may have just stuck to our kind".<sup>116</sup> His/her father though struggled to obtain employment here so he (ST's father) ended up working as an accounts administrator in a department store in a nearby city, commuting to and from the town and the city. ST and the rest of the family remained in the town for around 18 months and then relocated to the city. His/her older brother went to medical school and his/her other brother started a technology degree. ST subsequently completed an engineering degree. Eventually two of ST's brothers became healthcare professionals in another New Zealand city. ST has worked for twenty years for a large corporation located in a main city and is currently in a senior management role in that company. His/her partner is a healthcare professional in the same city. ST considers that fitting in to the life in the small town "was not too bad, I played a lot of sports there, and New Zealand is home".<sup>117</sup> He/she feels he/she has not experienced any overt racism in New Zealand and that in this regard New Zealand is better than Australia.

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<sup>113</sup> From transcript of interview with AB on 12/7/2019

<sup>114</sup> Ibid

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> From transcript of interview with ST on 1/10/19.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

Despite that, there did seem to be a small contradiction when ST then related that he/she had experienced a degree of racism at airport security customs and immigration control. In this, ST rates Auckland to be better than Wellington which is better than Christchurch. At these times ST feels he/she is treated less fairly than Europeans though he/she did not elaborate on this. That said, ST does not feel that he/she has been adversely affected by discrimination in education and employment choices whilst living in New Zealand.

OP's first impression of New Zealand was that it was so quiet and wet (it was the middle of winter when he/she arrived). At the time he/she felt that he must have been accepted into New Zealand as part of a deliberate programme of filling the country with people such as him/herself as there appeared to be virtually nobody living in New Zealand. But OP felt that New Zealand "calmed me down, it was so clean and quiet".<sup>118</sup> At that time OP was worried that he/she may get very bored in New Zealand, it was so quiet and peaceful. He/she stayed at a camp for a few weeks and then was relocated by Housing New Zealand to an old age/retirement village complex where he/she looked after a lot of the neighbours' cats. He/she did have one or two negative experiences in New Zealand at this time e.g. a professional counsellor sold him/her an unreliable car at an inflated price and was also offered work a number of times where it was proposed that he/she would be paid \$3 - \$5 per hour which was far below the legal minimum wage. Interestingly, OP pointed out that most, if not all, of these employment scams were perpetrated by fellow Sri Lankans though it is unclear whether he/she was referring to Tamil Sri Lankans or others with this. He/she also received government monetary benefits via Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ) but perhaps just as importantly OP was very much involved with Tamil community activities at an early stage upon his/her arrival. OP completed an undergraduate degree in 2008 and intended to join the air force. But then he/she met EF and because of parental disapproval of their relationship OP and EF eloped and married with the ceremony taking place in India. EF did not approve of him/her joining the air force as that would have involved relocation to the UK and so that ambition never materialised. OP feels he/she has adapted well to New Zealand currently working in business intelligence and now in his/her mid-30s feels has done well in life. He/she has liked the quietness of the country and "people smiling at each other".<sup>119</sup> OP has come across abuse in New Zealand but joked that the perpetrators "were

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<sup>118</sup> ] From transcript of interview with OP on 29/10/2019

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

Australians”.<sup>120</sup> That said, he/she often describes him/herself to others in New Zealand as a Sri Lankan and not an Indian (often New Zealanders may assume he/she is an Indian) as he/she believes some New Zealanders do not like Indians.

Finally in this section, the experiences of EF are also worth recording and noting. EF, his/her mother and sister came to New Zealand in 1998. EF was 7 years old at the time and was not conversant with the English language at all. He/she did not even know that New Zealand was a country though his/her mother had heard of Anchor milk products.<sup>121</sup> He/she went to school in a large New Zealand city where, though it was an “intense climate”<sup>122</sup> (e.g. prevalence of gangs, drug use in schools), he/she felt that it was a safe environment if one was part of the neighbourhood. He/she did feel that high school was full of “bullies”<sup>123</sup> but EF did not think this was unique to New Zealand. In fact, EF believes that New Zealand probably has a better school environment than a lot of other countries in this regard. There were cultural differences which sometimes presented a challenge in adjustment though, for example the use of depilatory products. EF also thought that it was always girls at the forefront of bullying and teasing rather than the boys. EF subsequently went on to complete an electrical engineering degree though by this stage he/she had advanced his/her skills and qualifications in Human Resources (HR) a field in which he/she now works as a Talent and Systems Manager. EF believes him/herself to be a New Zealander and feels that New Zealand is the only country in the world that allows a migrant to consider themselves to be a New Zealander.

### **4.3 Mental Health and Adaptation**

Following on from the narratives of experienced trauma related by the interviewees in Chapter 2.2 it can be seen that not only did the endemic violence and destruction (especially associated with the Sri Lankan civil war) have a critical bearing on the interviewees’ lives in terms of deciding upon emigration, but more directly it impacted significantly upon some of the interviewees’ short and long term mental health. In a few cases this was current and

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> This was mentioned in a number of interviews. In Sri Lanka, New Zealand was often associated with Anchor milk products due to extensive availability and marketing. In addition the New Zealand national cricket team (Black Caps and forbeats) was also widely recognised in the cricket loving nation.

<sup>122</sup> From transcript of interview with EF on 22/78/19.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

ongoing. Additionally, in one case, the interviewee attributed a serious decline in physical health to their experiences in Sri Lanka.

There is a reasonable amount of literature attesting to the effects of trauma and violence on the subsequent mental health of immigrants and/or refugees. Numerous studies have found that populations of traumatised migrants have demonstrated a high burden of common mental disorders including anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A recent meta-analysis has shown that among displaced adults and refugees fleeing armed conflict, the prevalence of PTSD varied from 2.2% to 88.3%, anxiety from 1% to 90%, and depression from 5.1% to 81%.<sup>124</sup>

Psychological distress among refugees and forced migrants is largely explained by exposures to stressors occurring across the migration continuum.<sup>125</sup> According to the Daily Stressor Model<sup>126</sup> one category of stressor involves low intensity stressors that are present daily, such as poverty, social isolation, and poor or insecure neighbourhoods. Another category are potentially traumatic stressors that occur occasionally and recurrently but not necessarily daily, such as armed conflicts, sexual violence, and death of loved ones. Prior trauma exposure is expected to contribute to more negative experiences in daily living (i.e., higher daily stressors), which, in turn, predict poorer mental health during or after conflicts.<sup>127</sup>

A recent model further outlines low-intensity stressors that are specified in the Daily Stressor Model (DSM). According to the Drive to Thrive (DTT) theory, psychological resilience, indicated by the absence of psychological distress and/or presence of psychological well-being, is determined by sustaining regularity of daily routines after conflicts.<sup>128</sup> In this model, trauma contributes to diminished regularity of daily routines, which, in turn, predicts poorer mental health. The mechanism underlying this process is a lower sense of predictability, reduced coping flexibility, and less engagement in important life tasks, which leads to lower mental health resilience over time. Two types of daily routines are identified in the DTT

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<sup>124</sup> A. Akhtar, N. Morina, J. Barth, U. Schnyder. "Psychiatric disorders in refugees and internally displaced persons after forced displacement: a systematic review." *Psychiatry*, 9 (2018), p. 433. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2018.00433>

<sup>125</sup> Cathy Zimmerman, Kiss Ligia ,and Hossain Mazed.. "Migration and Health: A Framework for 21st Century Policy-Making" *PLoS Med* 8(5) (24 May 2011): <https://doi-org.ezproxy.massey.ac.nz/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001034>

<sup>126</sup> Kenneth E. Miller, and Andrew Rasmussen. "War exposure, daily stressors, and mental health in conflict and post-conflict settings: Bridging the divide between trauma-focused and psychosocial frameworks." *Social Science & Medicine* 70 (1) (2010):7-16. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2009.09.029>.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> W.K. Hou, B.J. Hall, S.E. Hobfoll. "Drive to thrive: A theory of resilience following loss." In *Mental Health of Refugee and Conflict-Affected Populations: Theory, Research and Clinical Practice*, (2018) 111-133.

model, namely primary and secondary daily routines. Primary daily routines are behaviours that are necessary for maintaining livelihood, such as hygiene, sleep, eating, and home maintenance, whereas secondary daily routines are more discretionary behaviours that are dependent upon motivation and preferences, such as exercising, leisure, social activities, and employment or work.<sup>129</sup>

Though the majority of the sample of Tamil immigrants interviewed for this thesis could not be classified as ‘forced migrants’, it has already been shown that ongoing violence, and disruption was a significant factor in the decision to emigrate from their homeland. Based on the DSM, we would expect that despite the experience of past trauma, current and ongoing symptoms of poor mental health are more predicted by subsequent daily stressors and unfavourable life experiences than by the trauma itself. By and large this is the case with this cohort of interviewees.

It was apparent from the interviews that the respondents’ current daily lives were generally reported to be happy, fulfilling and satisfying – they were happy in their choice of a new homeland and not a single one expressed a regret about their move to New Zealand. Everyday life was and is sustained in a safe, non-threatening environment, cultural activities and associations were and are strong and the vast majority have pursued, or are pursuing successful professional lives. From this evidence, it is argued that the experience of this group of migrants would appear to back the supposition that through the support that was received at the time of migration to New Zealand, the maintenance of strong cultural norms within their community, successful acculturation in their adopted country and the pursuit of successful, fulfilling everyday lives for all of the interviewees have eventuated and are pursued.

That is not to diminish the fact that at least three of the interviewees (CD, EF and possibly OP) explicitly reported that they had suffered serious impacts to their mental health as a result of their experiences in Sri Lanka. It should also be noted that these three interviewees, on their testimony, had very direct, and graphic experience of trauma during their time in Sri Lanka. In the cases of EF and OP they were also prolonged and recurring experiences. Lastly in terms of health impacts, one interviewee (MN) was also quite adamant that experiences of

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<sup>129</sup> W.K. Hou, F.T. Lai, C. Hougen, B.J. Hall, & S.E. Hobfoll. " Measuring everyday processes and mechanisms of stress resilience: Development and initial validation of the Sustainability of Living Inventory (SOLI) ." *Psychological Assessment* 31 (6)(2019):715-729. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1037/pas0000692>.

stressors in Sri Lanka prior to emigration had resulted in significant negative effects upon his/her physical health. MN suffered from transient ischaemic attacks in Sri Lanka, culminating in subsequent myocardial infarctions. At the time of interview MN was recovering from a third heart attack.

To conclude this section, we can argue on two fronts. Firstly, it has been shown that the effects associated with the endemic violence and destruction in Sri Lanka upon the mental health of this cohort of immigrants is as broadly predicted within the framework of the DTT theory. That is, there have been effects (in some instances quite profound and ongoing) upon the mental health of some of the interviewees of this thesis. This relates to phenomena such as persistent PTSD, clinical depression and anxiety. Secondly, it is also been argued that despite these effects upon the health of some of the interviewees, there has also been clearly a successful adaptation to life in a new land by this cohort of immigrants. Factors enabling this transnational success include help and support from family members and social agencies, the ability to successfully pursue educational and employment opportunities and a lack of serious discriminatory practices within the newly adopted country especially as it relates to employment.

#### **4.4 Cultural Connectedness and Adaptation**

Hoebel describes culture as an integrated system of learned behaviour patterns which are characteristic of the members of a society and which are not a result of biological inheritance.<sup>130</sup> Culture includes religion, customs, traditions, food, political views, clothing, dance/music/art history and of great importance, language. Connectedness is the state of being connected and having a close relationship with other people. So cultural connectedness then is those elements of culture with which people feel they have a close relationship with other people.

Here it will be argued that despite some cultural challenges, the active participation and promotion of local community cultural life and its intersection with religious activities, the fostering of Tamil culture (principally language), and other social events, participation in the development and support of various projects at home and abroad (principally Sri Lanka) has

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<sup>130</sup> E. Adamson Hoebel. *The Law of Primitive Man: A Study in Comparative Legal Dynamics*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press. 1967), 3-7.

contributed significantly to the successful adaptation of the Sri Lankan Tamil community to life in New Zealand.

One of the results of Sri Lankan Tamil immigration to New Zealand, has been the increased number of Tamil Hindus in New Zealand which in turn has led to the establishment of Tamil Hindu temples in the host nation. Maintaining religious practices has been a way for Sri Lankan migrant groups to not only enact their cultural identities in their new homes, but to also stay connected to their country of origin.<sup>131</sup> Another way of maintaining cultural identities and ties to the homeland has been through ethnic associations. These include for instance, various Tamil cultural and sporting associations, and Tamil language schools. These organisations are also active in raising money for humanitarian programmes in Sri Lanka. Moreover, varying degrees of acculturation had already occurred prior to the actual movement of many migrants from Sri Lanka to New Zealand. For instance, the British colonisers who moved to Sri Lanka shaped the cultural identity of its people - these British norms, values, beliefs and practices have then been brought over to New Zealand by Sri Lankan migrants, and have aided their transition and settlement in the host nation.

Almost invariably the interviewees for this thesis appear to have transitioned well into life in New Zealand, whilst also maintaining a strong cultural identity through cultural connectedness. All were, or had been if retired, employed in what could loosely be termed as middle-class occupations and in many cases so had their children. There is and has been a strikingly high participation by the interviewees in Tamil social, cultural and religious activities in New Zealand and for many the boundaries between these activities are fluid. For example, a number of the interviewee participants mentioned that though they attend a local Tamil temple either regularly or irregularly they often maintained that this was less for religious reasons (though this was a factor) and more for social and cultural reasons. Of course, this could apply for many if not all other religions.

Based on the interviewees selected for this thesis it was very clear that on one hand that the interviewees felt like they were New Zealanders. In most cases though, it was difficult to define what that actually meant. On the other hand, in saying that they felt like they were New Zealanders, there was still a very strong Tamil cultural connectedness associated with Sri Lankan Tamils in New Zealand. For example, GH, one of the longest residing Tamil Sri

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

Lankans in New Zealand, having arrived in 1974, felt that he/she has been satisfied with life in New Zealand stating “nothing could have been better”.<sup>132</sup> GH considers him/herself to be a Tamil New Zealander but at the same time he/she has had strong cultural connections with Tamil culture.

IJ and KL also consider themselves to be New Zealanders “but not 100%”.<sup>133</sup> IJ would support the New Zealand cricket team if playing Sri Lanka<sup>134</sup> but not because he/she would see the latter team as being a mouthpiece for the current government but that in some way the civil war has affected his/her specific allegiance.

CD feels like a New Zealander too, and that means being honest and that “you can’t be fake” and “everyone has equal rights”.<sup>135</sup> LT stated that he/she learnt early on in New Zealand that “it is humanism that is the important thing”, an attitude that was confirmed after the 2019 mosque massacre in Christchurch, New Zealand, after which “all of New Zealand came together as one”.<sup>136</sup> That said, CD did have some challenges adjusting to a different way of life in New Zealand. He/ she did miss Sri Lanka, notably “the food, the culture and the smell of the soil”.<sup>137</sup> He/she still misses the tea from Sri Lanka – even when he/she has obtained good Sri Lankan tea leaves it still does not taste the same in New Zealand.

Some participants were unable to pinpoint their views so precisely. For example, AB said that he/she and the extended family are very happy in New Zealand and consider themselves to be “Kiwi” though they were not sure what that really meant<sup>138</sup>.

QR though had perhaps slightly different views to the rest of the interviewees though he/she too was also happy living in New Zealand, and considers themselves to be a New Zealander. For QR that means “I feel free, living my life and not for a moment thinking that I am Sri Lankan”.<sup>139</sup> In contrast to the others that have been cited in this section QR appeared to place him/herself as being in a different space compared to other Tamils in New Zealand as he/she feels that most of the latter do not realise they have moved out of Sri Lanka and are now living in a different country. QR feels that people should respect the country they are in, and

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<sup>132</sup> From transcript of interview with GH on 23/7/19.

<sup>133</sup> From transcript of interview with IJ and KL on 3/10/20.

<sup>134</sup> Cricket is a popular game in Sri Lanka. Some might say, obsessively so !

<sup>135</sup> From transcript of interview with CD on 5/9/19.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Of course, many New Zealand born citizens would also find it difficult to pinpoint what it means to be “Kiwi”.

<sup>139</sup> From transcript of interview with QR on 23/7/19.



in New Zealand that means using English in the workplace etc. QR gets annoyed when he/she sees storefront signs in Auckland that are written in only Chinese or Indian for example and though Tamils may not do exactly that, he/she feels they sometimes do not mix well with the rest of the community.

Sometimes however, views upon adaptation to a New Zealand way of life, whatever that may mean, were not so positive. For example, ST cited experiences at Tamil social gatherings where all of the men would be in one part of the venue drinking and all the women would be grouped together somewhere else. ST ascribes this type of behavior to cultural norms being imported from Jaffna (the principal Sri Lankan Tamil city in the north of the country), a society which he/she sees as traditional and conservative. ST also stated that this is not a phenomenon unique to New Zealand, he/she has observed it wherever Tamils have immigrated. In addition to this, ST feels that the assimilation of newer Tamil arrivals has been more difficult than had previously been anticipated. To ST, it appears that newer Tamil arrivals do not see the value of joining cultural societies and have less of an interest in strengthening and maintaining cultural connectedness. It is difficult though to verify this observation given the lack of a more recent demographic cohort in this thesis.

All of the interviewees bar one (for whom it is unknown) stated that they are involved in some way in contributing to local Tamil cultural activities; in many cases this has been for a considerable period of time. It is the contention of this thesis that cultural connectedness aided adaptation to a new life away from their original homeland and in support of this a number of interviewees stated quite explicitly that their religion had helped them to adapt to life in New Zealand.

The local temple, if there is one, is a common meeting ground for a lot of cultural activity associated with Sri Lankan Tamils residing in New Zealand. Most interviewees claimed to be religious in some sense, usually Hindu (there was one Catholic) with varying degrees of religiosity. In fact, the religious views of the interviewees were quite nuanced. For many of the interviewees there was little separation in the concepts of culture and religion – religion is seen as entwined with culture or sociability. Temple attendance was for many interviewees more of a cultural or social experience than a strictly religious one i.e. the local Tamil Hindu temple was where one often gathered to socialise rather than simply perform religious rituals or for prayer. For example, AB made the point quite explicitly that the temple is seen as a

place of gathering or a place to socialise rather than predominantly as a place of worship. AB illustrated this by stating that “if one takes one’s children to a cultural event and they are dressed in special attire then there is a religious aspect to that.”<sup>140</sup> Additionally, adherence to a strict schedule of temple attendance varied amongst the interviewees. AB stated that if he/she was far more strictly religious then she would probably attend the temple every Friday throughout the entire year with Friday being the most auspicious day of the week for Hindus. But the reality is that AB attends the temple around two to three times per year. Overall, AB felt that religion had helped their family to adjust to life in New Zealand due to it being a conduit by which they have kept in touch with their cultural life. But in itself, religiosity was not considered to be a large part of their household.

Another example of this is that of GH who is a Hindu though he/she stated that religion is not important to him/her. GH is “not against God, but is against the commercialisation of religion”.<sup>141</sup> In line with this, he/she does not attend the temple except perhaps if the temple administrators invite him/her to make a specific presentation. And though GH likes religious literature he/she does not like priests<sup>142</sup> or the power they have over people. GH had a Hindu marriage in Sri Lanka though he/she made the point that this was only because he/she did not know anything else. Both of his/her children are married – his/her daughter was married in a Hindu ceremony twenty years ago, and his/her son married an American in Auckland. In order to accept the religious involvement for the latter wedding, GH was able to procure the services of an accommodating priest to dispense with those rituals that were considered not in keeping with the modern age. So, some rituals such as the couple seeing a mirror together and feeding each other with fruits were omitted by GH.

EF believes in a spiritual God but does not consider him/herself to be a person of religion. Amusingly to the author EF initially described him/herself as an atheist and then almost immediately pointed out the prayer room in part of the house. He/she does believe it is important for religion to play a part in one’s upbringing as a way of providing comfort when one needs it and to inculcate discipline to a person’s life. EF does go to the temple at times but, as already mentioned with others, more as a place of social gathering, a place to dress up

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> The majority of Sri Lankan Hindus follow the teaching of Shaiva Siddhanta. Others follow Shaktism. Shaivism is one of the major traditions within Hinduism that venerates Shiva as the Supreme Being. The followers of Shaivism are called "Shaivites" or "Saivites".

for, to eat food and converse and socialise with people. EF doesn't perform any religious rituals in the home e.g. lighting a lamp every day.

To add to the complexities of individual religious beliefs, OP is a practising Hindu (i.e. does meditation etc.), and had a Hindu wedding, but would prefer to be known or portrayed as a Tamil rather than as a Hindu. Indeed, OP has been a Moslem and a Christian in the past. OP attends the local Hindu temple, and also attends the Catholic mass at Christmas – in essence then, OP believes in a generic God.

QR stood out as the exception amongst the other interviewees as being the only explicitly non – Hindu. QR is a Catholic, having attended both Catholic and non-Catholic Christian schools in his/her childhood. He/she had a Catholic wedding, but religion is still very important to QR. For QR, “if you believe in God, then anything is possible”.<sup>143</sup> Religion was seen by QR to be useful in adjusting to life in New Zealand though he/she did not elaborate as to what was meant by that.

Community involvement and associated cultural adaptation, is not however restricted to temple-based activities. OP, who feels he/she has adapted well to New Zealand and feels grateful to New Zealand for providing him/her with a home in which to live, has had, and continues to have, a lot of community involvement. This includes running an annual Tamil short film festival,<sup>144</sup> the profits from which are directed to a charity in Sri Lanka. OP considers that his/her example should encourage the rest of the Tamil community to do something similar.

The issue of Tamil language use, usually within the home environment, is interesting and nuanced, with conclusions difficult to be drawn. Tamil language was generally, but not always, spoken at home especially with one's partner. For example, MN stated that in his/her home Tamil is spoken generally but English is spoken to the grandchild. The eldest daughter can speak Tamil and English but the younger two can only understand Tamil rather being able speak it as well. So MN felt that in this sense the Tamil heritage in New Zealand is deteriorating if language ability is the marker.

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> The organisation involved with this is the Tamil Short Movie Association New Zealand (TASMANZ). It is a community organisation comprising directors and creative personalities committed to supporting the creation of short films in the Tamil community of New Zealand. The annual TASMANZ film festival gives an opportunity to aspiring film-makers, actors, musicians, cinematographers, and writers to showcase their work on the big screen.

But not all of the interviewees speak Tamil at home. For example, ST is one of the interviewees who speaks predominantly English at home. And AB's family speak both Tamil and English at home but mostly English (it is probably relevant that AB was a young child of four years old when arriving in New Zealand). AB described to me that if he/she has been at work during the day where it is only English that is spoken then that will continue to be the spoken language at home in the evening.<sup>145</sup> After AB first arrived in Auckland he/she also attended the New Zealand Tamil Society language school and the family was very involved in the Tamil community. AB maintains that this involvement is a defining characteristic of the Tamil community in New Zealand and includes Poonga (playgroup), language classes, community events and community voluntary work. The Tamil language school in the city where AB lives has been operating for thirty years and is considered to be very stable because Sri Lankan Tamils who use it see it as being the only option to learn and maintain their language. This is seen to be in contrast to Tamils from India who can travel freely back to their home country. The school predominantly provides Tamil language instruction to Sri Lankan Tamils but not exclusively.

At work IJ speaks English but Tamil is spoken at home with KL. Interestingly though, IJ and KL maintained that those Tamil immigrants who arrived in New Zealand earlier than themselves (e.g. 1970s) have less Tamil cultural awareness than those who emigrated in the 1990s onwards. But today IJ and KL's children all speak Tamil, and there is a language school in their city. They stated by way of a comparison that some earlier migrants (e.g. prior to the 1970s) and their children do not speak Tamil. However, it should be noted that none of the interviewees who participated in this project fit the category of early migrants, so it is difficult to verify this statement.

A final example is that of EF who necessarily speaks English at work but who speaks Tamil at home. EF speaks Tamil in his/her household and English elsewhere, the former because apart from anything else (convenience, familiarity etc) EF does that so that he/she does not lose touch with his/her first language. In EF's view it is a language which is old and sophisticated, and it requires regular practice in order to maintain proficiency.

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<sup>145</sup> From transcript of interview with AB on 12/7/2019. Curiously, AB said that he/she learnt a lot of Tamil language from his/her grandfather who pretended to the day he died that he did not know any English despite this not being the case. AB also learnt Tamil language from watching a lot of Indian Tamil movies and TV shows.

There were another couple of interviewees who felt that Tamil language ability is diminishing with younger generations reporting that the Tamil language is less well known among the non-first-generation immigrants. But as previously noted, there are now Tamil language schools in the main centres where Tamil Sri Lankans live in New Zealand (Auckland and Wellington) which facilitate the maintenance and development of Tamil language skills amongst the Tamil community. Overall, because of the limited number and lack of generational spread of participants in this thesis cohort, it is not really possible to draw definitive conclusions on the patterns of use of the Tamil language amongst this community- this is a possible area of further research. Nonetheless, irrespective of absolute numbers involved, it is apparent that there is a strong desire within a significant proportion of the Sri Lankan Tamil community in New Zealand to develop and maintain the use of the Tamil language within the Tamil community.

More generally, there is a strong sense of pride with Tamil culture, a feeling that it is one of the original very old cultures existing in the modern world with a strong literary, artistic and historic tradition. Houses that were visited often had some signs of cultural artifacts or objects that linked the interviewees to their Tamil culture and to their former homeland in Sri Lanka. For example, at the house of EF, seemingly entirely western or European at first glance, there was a prayer room (pooja) with a wall depicting many multi religion deities.



4. Prayer room wall in house of interviewee.

In another acknowledgment of his/her Tamil background at the front of EF's property there is a signpost with directional place names written in Tamil. The first sign at the top says "Eelam" in Tamil whilst the rest of the signs describe how far away some of his/her relatives or friends are located (pictured). There is a kiwi at the bottom of the sign too, perhaps as a signifier of EF's bicultural identity.



5. Transnational identity in front yard in New Zealand.

At another house of an interviewee this statue was on display beside a number of family photographs.



6. Statue in interviewee's home – probably temple related.



Sometimes the link was less cultural and more ideological - one interviewee had a poster photograph of the ex-leader of the LTTE, Velupillai Prabhakaran, on the wall of a room.

In some cases though there was little in the homes to suggest a link to Tamil culture especially if the interviewee had arrived in New Zealand with few belongings. But family is paramount too in Tamil culture and this was evident in the cases where there were many family photos on display.



#### 7. Family photographs.

Part of the cultural connectedness felt by the Sri Lankan Tamil community in New Zealand is an ongoing obligation to the forging and maintenance of support to people of their family and community both within New Zealand and also in Sri Lanka. Many of the interviewees have devoted time and financial support for many years to projects within Sri Lanka. Projects often involve the development and maintenance of orphanages, agricultural and educational projects and other more specific or one-off events (e.g. fund raising for victims and their

families of the 2004 tsunami).<sup>146</sup> It was also noted that there also appeared sometimes to be an element of reticence in discussing this topic – a couple of the interviewees explicitly mentioned this as being due to a feeling of modesty about such activity. For some, charity also began closer to home - KL for example, is involved in raising a lot of money for the wider local New Zealand community e.g. meals on wheels, a local school, and Christmas parcels for the needy.

Additionally, many interviewees had revisited Sri Lanka since emigrating; some have made multiple trips. Sometimes this was to visit family relations still residing in Sri Lanka or to accompany children or other members of the family in order for them to have some cultural experience or acquaintance with the land that they had been formerly connected. And at other times the visit was connected to ongoing support and oversight of humanitarian or other projects in Sri Lanka as described above.

For IJ and KL the maintenance of former homeland connectedness has meant that they have returned to Sri Lanka three times, the last time being two years ago. In 2005 there was a family reunion, in 2013 a brother's wedding and a couple of years ago IJ was accompanied by their daughter in a visit to Sri Lanka. The purpose of that visit was in order for their daughter to become acquainted with their former home country and there was also a twenty fifth anniversary of IJ's university graduate class. Whilst in New Zealand IJ also talks to his/her brother and mother in Sri Lanka and his/her brother in Melbourne by Skype at frequent intervals.

AB has also visited Sri Lanka twice in the last thirty-one years. The first time was when he/she was still at university and was accompanied by his/her mother. This was before marriage and was really just to see the country from which he/ she had come and also to visit some relatives. The second time that AB visited Sri Lanka was when he/she visited with his/her son in 2018 and they went only to Colombo. AB also does not send any remittances back to family in Sri Lanka as he/she feels that there is little need to do so.

ST has visited Sri Lanka a few times since emigrating to New Zealand as he/she still has some relatives living there. He/she did not visit at all between 2003-2014 (presumably

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<sup>146</sup> Sri Lanka was one of the countries struck by the tsunami resulting from the Indian Ocean earthquake on December 26, 2004. Sri Lankan authorities reported over 30,000 confirmed deaths. One and a half million people were displaced from their homes.

because of the war and its aftermath) but since 2014 he /she has visited his/her former homeland four times. The last time he/she visited was with a specific aim to get some projects up and running in the north of the country.

QR has been back to Sri Lanka several times for business reasons and in the tradition of a lot of other interviewees is also involved in running a large orphanage in his/her former home country. And last year he/she returned to Sri Lanka to attend a (Catholic) wedding.

EF has been back to Sri Lanka quite a few times particularly between 2001-2007, usually for family reasons. He/she also went back to Sri Lanka in 2019 as his/her grandfather, who lives in Jaffna, had just turned 90 years of age and EF was about to join the Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam<sup>147</sup> which meant future trips to Sri Lanka may not be possible.<sup>148</sup> But EF says he/she now feels culturally different to Tamils in Sri Lanka He/she related the story as to how when he/she use to live in Sri Lanka it was considered inappropriate to look into someone else's eyes. But that is not how it is in New Zealand and when he/she was planning on returning to Sri Lanka he/she was determined to continue behaving as he/she has been in New Zealand. But on getting to Sri Lanka, in a short space of time EF too was avoiding people's gaze.

The strong focus on education that is characteristic of Sri Lankan Tamil culture was evident in the background of the interviewees both in Sri Lanka and New Zealand. Indeed, it was one of the primary complaints of the majority Sinhalese that Tamils were disproportionately represented in the Sri Lankan/Ceylon civil service due to their high participation rates in higher education which provided a gateway to civil service occupations, And this focus on education appears to have been carried on whether or not in Sri Lanka or in their newly adopted homeland, with all interviewees having pursued and succeeded in higher tertiary education at some point in their lives. As AB stated, education is seen by Sri Lankan Tamils as a prerequisite for survival. Higher tertiary education, either in Sri Lanka or in New Zealand, has in turn led to professional middle-class employment in New Zealand for all of the interviewees.

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<sup>147</sup> The Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (TGTE) is a government in exile among the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora which aims to keep alive the idea of Tamil Eelam, a state which TGTE aspires to create in the north and east provinces of Sri Lanka.

<sup>148</sup> Additionally, EF also predicted that after the Easter bombings of 2019 in Sri Lanka that the authorities will be far more vigilant and that would be a heightened risk for his/her grandfather.

Finally, in this section a couple of interview questions related to potential political activity that participants may have been involved in New Zealand and also to their views on how the role of Sri Lankan Tamil women may have altered upon living in New Zealand. On the former, very little commitment to politics within New Zealand is evident, though PT did state that he/she had been approached at different times by both the New Zealand Labour and Green parties soliciting his/her support and involvement. AT has been involved in the Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (TGOT) in the past but at the time of interview was about to withdraw from that. A couple of the interviewees mentioned that fear of being 'tainted' by association with an organisation some have labelled as a terrorist organisation (the LTTE) has meant that involvement in politics in general is avoided for the most part. As to the latter question re the role of woman there were mixed views on this (and as previously noted the interviewees were predominantly male) so it is difficult, and probably misleading, to draw any conclusions from the responses.

Towards the end of the interviews all participants were asked as to their opinions on the future of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka. Whilst there were of course varying nuances in their responses, it was clear that overall interviewees viewed the future of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka in a pessimistic light. This is not surprising given what has been outlined in the part of this thesis dealing with the contemporary history of Sri Lanka in Chapter 2.<sup>149</sup> Overall one gets the feeling from many of the interviewees that the civil war that was waged in Sri Lanka as a result of the failure of political processes, was an extreme solution to what was perceived as an untenable situation for Tamils in Sri Lanka. A significant proportion of the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka felt there was no alternative to war but once the civil war was lost, it was now impossible for them to envisage any kind of positive future for Tamils in Sri Lanka. Some of the interviewees stated that though they supported the aims of the LTTE, they did not support the methods. One interviewee though perhaps took a longer view expressing the hope that a just solution will eventually be found.

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<sup>149</sup> It is also further reinforced by the recent news in 2020 of the election victory of the Sri Lanka People's Front (SLPF) and the probable appointment of Mahinda Rajapaksa to the position of Prime Minister by his brother Gotabaya Rajapaksa who is the President. The SLPF won 145 seats in the 225-seat parliament whilst the party representing the minority Tamils won 10 seats.

## Conclusion

With the exception of the Veddhas people, the land now known as Sri Lanka has been a land of immigration and emigration, since time immemorial. There is disagreement on the exact timings, but both the Sinhala and Tamil populations migrated from the south of India to Sri Lanka; the Sinhalese people first appeared at around the fifth century BCE and there is strong evidence of the Dravidian Tamils being present in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. Both of these groups also probably originated in the north of India and by a process of diffusion came to occupy the island. From very early on then Sri Lanka has been comprised of a multi-ethnic society; furthermore, the evidence is that early on, ethnicity itself was not a point of division within this society.

That said, the abstract divide of Aryan and Dravidian ethnicities has served to rive rather than to unite Sri Lankans especially in the present day. This ethnic division really only became apparent during the period of colonialism in the nineteenth century, culminating in a long and bloody civil war which commenced not long after independence and only finally ending in 2009 with the final defeat of the Tamil political movement, the LTTE. The threat of endemic violence and the perceived past and ongoing injustices perpetrated by the Sinhala majoritarian government against the Tamil ethnic minority within Sri Lanka led to a large wave of migration of Tamils to many parts of the globe, including to New Zealand.

Despite the presence of the Tamil Bell in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is not known when the first Sri Lankan (Ceylonese) Tamils arrived in New Zealand as the most reliable data is not broken down into ethnic groupings. However, it is clear that by the late 1970s or early 1980s the rate of Sri Lankan migration to New Zealand was accelerating and a significant proportion of those migrants have been of Tamil ethnicity. By the middle of the 2000s, the census data is recorded along ethnic lines and though the overall rate of both Sri Lankan and Tamil Sri Lankan migration had significantly increased, it is still not clear precisely how many Sri Lankan Tamil residents were populating New Zealand. It is estimated that by 2018 there were between 5000 and 7000 Sri Lankan Tamils resident in New Zealand.

This research selected a group of Sri Lankan Tamil migrants to New Zealand and by a process of a compilation and thematic analysis of oral interviews, has produced a history of those migrants. Themes which have been explored in some detail have been the experiences and the socio-political situation in Sri Lanka which motivated this cohort of Tamil Sri Lankans to leave their homeland, the impact of the civil war upon them including their decision to emigrate and also the long term impact of the civil chaos and destruction upon their mental and physical health. The challenges that the interviewees faced as they settled in to a new land, their adaptation to a new way of life in New Zealand, the perception and impact of racial or ethnic prejudice, their quest to survive and thrive within their new homeland together with their cultural life within New Zealand are also explored. Importantly this thesis has given voice to a small, and often overlooked, ethnic minority residing in New Zealand.

The primary argument of this thesis is that the phenomena of the relatively recent migration of Sri Lankan Tamil people to New Zealand represents a fortuitous intersection of socio-economic and political forces in both countries. In Sri Lanka, in an historical context of real and perceived discriminatory practices perpetrated by a majoritarian Sinhalese government against the Tamil ethnic minority group, culminating in a bloody and ruthless civil war, provided the motivation for a significant section of the population to pursue personal security and better life prospects in another part of the world. Contemporaneously in New Zealand, especially in the 1980s, the radical economic and social liberalisation of a society hitherto constrained by social conformity and economic nationalism led to the need for a non-discriminatory immigration policy (especially one with a focus toward Asia as opposed to Britain) coupled with acceptance of the free international movement of labour. This in turn meant that those with the requisite transferable skills and the potential ability to easily adapt to an anglophone society could now more easily migrate to New Zealand. And it so happened that the skills that English-speaking Sri Lankan Tamils, seeking safety and better life-prospects for themselves and their families, could bring to New Zealand (principally in the areas of healthcare and engineering) matched very well with some of the needs of the New Zealand economy at the time.

There are some acknowledged gaps in this thesis. The participants were not in any way randomly selected and may not be representative of the whole, even if only pre-2009 migrants are considered. There are no recent post-2009 migrants represented in this thesis –

this is potentially an important omission as such migrants may well comprise a significant number or proportion of ‘forced refugees’ or asylum seekers. This latter group is not well represented amongst the participants of this thesis and further research including this group of migrants is warranted. Co-ordination with organisations such as Red Cross may be useful in this regard. The cohort of interviewees presented here are also gender biased. A more in-depth study of the cultural life of Sri Lankan Tamils within New Zealand would also be of interest and in the author’s opinion would best be carried out by someone either from within the Tamil community itself (preferably) or with deep cultural knowledge of this community. An exploration of the relationships between the Sri Lankan Tamil community and the Sinhalese community in New Zealand would also be a possible avenue of research.

Despite the traumas experienced by the Tamil migrants represented in this thesis, the story that is told is one of a group of migrants who have succeeded not only to adapt in the multicultural environment of New Zealand but also to have prospered in the economic sense.<sup>150</sup> For some of them, their experiences in Sri Lanka have taken a toll in terms of their mental and physical well-being; nonetheless, they have continued to lead successful and fulfilling lives and have no regrets for the decision taken to emigrate to New Zealand. Sri Lankan Tamil culture is alive and well in New Zealand too; the formation of various cultural, sporting and language organisations has fostered the maintenance of a rich cultural heritage and the inter-generational continuance of the Tamil language. This cultural connectedness in a multicultural society has engendered a feeling of ‘place’ for Sri Lankan Tamils in New Zealand.

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<sup>150</sup> One could now add in the political sense as well. On 17<sup>th</sup> October 2020, Vanushi Walters was elected as a New Zealand Labour Party MP to the New Zealand parliament, the first Sri Lankan-born MP elected to office in New Zealand. Vanushi Walters is of Tamil descent.

# Appendix A – Interview Questions

1. May I ask you about your current situation in New Zealand? Why, from where, and when did you and or your family move to New Zealand?

2. Tell me about your education, tertiary qualifications, languages and occupations?

3. Do you keep in touch with other members of the Tamil community either here

in New Zealand or oversees, e.g. in Sri Lanka, and, if so, by what means? What about

your extended family? Do you send remittances / donations / money to others residing in Sri Lanka? What is the purpose of this?

4. Do you ever go to Sri Lanka to visit friends and family or to renew your

Tamil heritage? Would you ever consider returning to Sri Lanka either permanently or not, and if so, why?

5. Which religion do you follow and in what ways?

6. To whom would you look for religious guidance in New Zealand?

7. How does your religion relate to your identity now that you live in

New Zealand? Does it have any relevance for how you live in New Zealand? Has

it helped you to adjust to living here? Is your religion important to you?

8. Now that you are living in New Zealand, what marriage rites would you wish to

follow? If you could, would you like to return to Sri Lanka for a traditional

wedding?



9. Now that you are living in New Zealand, what funerary rites would you wish at a funeral?
10. Do you think New Zealand should have a central Tamil cultural organisation?
11. What particular individual or group characteristics do you associate with the Sri Lankan Tamil community and its unique qualities?
12. What particular individual or group characteristics do you associate with being a “New Zealander” or a “Kiwi”? Tell me what being a New Zealander means to you? Has this meant any challenges for you and how have you overcome those challenges?
13. What is the role of women in your home and your community? Do you think that has changed in New Zealand for the Tamil community?
14. What role do you think should the Tamil community play within the wider New Zealand community, in its connections with Sri Lanka and with other world-wide Tamil communities? What role should it play with others of Sri Lankan origin e.g. Sinhalese?
15. What of the future? How do you think the Sri Lankan Tamil community will develop in New Zealand? In Sri Lanka? Worldwide?

# Appendix B – Consent Form



**MASSEY UNIVERSITY**  
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA

History of Sri Lankan Tamil Immigration to New Zealand

## **PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM - INDIVIDUAL**

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree /do not agree to the interview being sound recorded.

I wish /do not wish to have my recordings returned to me.

I wish /do not wish to have data placed in an official archive.

I wish /do not wish my identity details to be anonymised .

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

**Signature:**

**Date:**

.....

**Full Name**

.....

# Appendix C- Information Sheet



**MASSEY UNIVERSITY**  
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA

## INFORMATION SHEET

**Project Title: History of Sri Lankan Tamil Immigration to New Zealand.**

### **Introduction**

My name is Neville Winsley and I am a post graduate student at Massey University . As part of my Master's degree in history, I am undergoing a thesis which will look at a selected history of Sri Lankan Tamil immigration to New Zealand.

As part of this thesis a number of participants (probably between 10 -15 in total) will be invited to take part in a series of oral history interviews which will form the basis of the information of this thesis.

### **Project Description and Invitation**

This project is to derive a selected history of Tamil immigration from Sri Lanka to New Zealand. The primary methodology for this project is to conduct a number of oral history interviews with volunteer participants from the Tamil community within New Zealand. A

number of themes will be identified and explored in the course of the taking of the oral histories and these will comprise the heart of the thesis. Participant anonymity and non-traceability is assured for those who wish it. It is expected that up to 15 separate interviews will be conducted. This thesis has the support of the Wellington and Auckland Tamil Cultural Societies / Associations.

As a member of the New Zealand Tamil community who have emigrated to New Zealand from Sri Lanka you are invited to take part in this research. Preference will be given to those who have personally immigrated to New Zealand compared to those who were the descendants of immigrants. A selection of participants spanning the years 1950s to the present are sought.

### **Participant Identification and Recruitment**

Participants will be asked to volunteer for this research ( by general request ) via the Wellington and Auckland Tamil Cultural Societies / Associations. All participants will be 18 years or over old and will give written consent to this research including an oral interview.

It is expected that up to 15 participants (either singly or as couples) will be interviewed. This number is considered sufficient to gain a reasonable representation of those that have immigrated to NZ since the 1950s to the present time whilst at the same time being a manageable number within the constraints of this thesis.

### **Project Procedures**

Participants will be asked to take part in an oral interview with Neville Winsley. Prior to this oral interview written consent will be required from the participant and this consent form will be securely stored at Massey University. The interview will be recorded ( audio only ) and is expected to last no longer than 1 hour. In some cases participants may be asked to participate in a second interview though this is expected to be rare. In other cases participants may be interviewed as family couples; if this was to occur it would be with the consent of all parties.

### **Data Management**

Data derived from oral interviews will be collected, collated and stored by the researcher and may be shared with the supervisor(s) of the thesis. Participants who have been interviewed for the project will be referred to as Participant A, Participant B etc in the final writeup of the thesis. Some place names mentioned in the thesis may also be anonymised in order to reduce traceability of the participants. After transcription in summary form and validation by the participant the recorded audio data will be securely stored at Massey University with access restricted to the researcher and supervisor. After 5 years the recordings will be destroyed. The final thesis, with anonymised data will be publicly available.

### **Participant's Rights**

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview;
- withdraw from the study up to 3 months before project completion ( expected to be September 2020);
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- be given a copy of oral interview summary for validation before finalisation;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

## Project Contacts

- Researcher : Neville Winsley [nevillew666@gmail.com](mailto:nevillew666@gmail.com) Ph 027 3898757
- Supervisor : Dr Christopher van der Krogt [C.J.vanderKrogt@massey.ac.nz](mailto:C.J.vanderKrogt@massey.ac.nz) (06) 356 9099 ext. 83562
- Supervisor : Dr Douglas Osto [D.Osto@massey.ac.nz](mailto:D.Osto@massey.ac.nz) (06) 356 9099 ext. 83566

You may contact the researcher or supervisors(s) if you have any questions about this project.

## Committee Approval Statement

- This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, Application NOR 19/15. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Associate Professor David Tappin (Committee Chair), Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, email [humanethicsnorth@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethicsnorth@massey.ac.nz) .

## Compensation for Injury

If mental trauma occurs and is not as a result of physical injury you may be directed to consult your GP who may refer you to other services. Some of these services are:

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/in-crisis/find-a-gp-or-counsellor/>

Includes phone numbers and a downloadable HELPLINE BROCHURE

e.g., National free Healthline service on **0800 611 116**

Free call or text 1737 to speak with a trained counsellor at any time

Depression Helpline 0800 111 757 or free text 4202 ([www.depression.org.nz/contact-us](http://www.depression.org.nz/contact-us))

Lifeline 0800 543453 (0800 LIFELINE)

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