

# Diaspora identification and long-distance nationalism among Tamil migrants of diverse state origins in the UK

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## Abstract

*Accounts of Tamil long-distance nationalism have focused on Sri Lankan Tamil migrants. But the UK is also home to Tamils of non-Sri Lankan state origins. While these migrants may be nominally incorporated into a 'Tamil diaspora', they are seldom present in scholarly accounts. Framed by Werbner's (2002) conception of diasporas as 'aesthetic' and 'moral' communities, this article explores whether engagement with a Tamil diaspora and long-distance nationalism is expressed by Tamil migrants of diverse state origins. While migrants identify with an aesthetic community, 'membership' of the moral community is contested between those who hold direct experience of suffering as central to belonging, and those who imagine the boundaries of belonging more fluidly – based upon primordial understandings of essential ethnicity and a narrative of Tamil 'victimhood' that incorporates experiences of being Tamil in Sri Lanka, India and in other sites, despite obvious differences in these experiences.*

**Keywords:** *Tamils, migration, diaspora, long-distance nationalism, ethnicity, transnational politics*

## Introduction

Nearly three decades of conflict between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) caused an exodus of a large proportion of the South Asian island's Tamil population, who are now found scattered across the globe, with refugees who have migrated to western states joining earlier waves of student or professional migrants (Daniel and Thangaraj 1995, 240–248; Velamati 2009, 272). Sri Lanka remained an important sending country of refugees to the UK into the twenty-first century (David 2012, 377), and in recent years the population has been further bolstered through onward migration to the UK from initial asylum destinations across Europe (Lindley and van Hear 2007; David 2012), and through marriage migration whereby Tamil (mainly) women from Sri Lanka take part in transnational marriages with Tamil men who arrived in the UK as refugees and have acquired citizenship, entering the country as their dependents (Charsley et al. 2012, 867; Sidharthan and van Hear 2012).

Throughout the years of conflict, Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism played out across a transnational political field (Brun and van Hear 2012), and the globally dispersed Sri Lankan Tamil population have been considered an exemplar of the politically active diaspora – a prime case of 'long-distance nationalism' (Anderson 1998). Scholarship documents this dispersed population's role in sustaining the Tamil nationalist movement (Fuglerud 2001; Wayland 2004; Fair 2007), and since the Sri Lankan military's defeat of the LTTE in 2009, their lobbying for an investigation into war crimes allegedly perpetrated by Mahindra Rajapaksa's regime, and for equity and security for the Tamil population in Sri Lanka's post-war reconstruction (Vimalarajah and Cheran 2010; Brun and van Hear 2012; Orjuela 2012).

But the Tamil homelands extend beyond Sri Lanka. Tamils form a local majority of around sixty million in India's south easternmost region – the Tamil-speaking state of Tamil Nadu. Sizeable Tamil populations are

also found in Singapore and Malaysia, as well as the Mascarenes and South Africa – the legacy of enslavement and transportation, and labour and trade migration from South India and Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) under European colonial rule (Lal, Reeves, and Rai 2006, 158–159, 178–179, 242, 263–266). Tamils in these lands share usage of the Tamil language (although dialectical differences exist), a regional mode of *Saivite* Hinduism and devotional art forms (Wickramasinghe 2006, 255–256), as well as a common popular cultural milieu through the circulation of Tamil cinema – produced in South India and consumed by audiences there, in Sri Lanka, and in global sites of Tamil settlement (Velayuthan 2008, 183–185).

Alongside these similarities, Tamils in Sri Lanka and South India have experienced very different recent histories. In South India, throughout the Freedom Struggle and into the early post-colonial era, the ethno-national Tamil or ‘Dravidian’ movement resisted the Hindi-speaking hegemony of the emergent Indian state, and mobilized around calls for an independent Tamil nation state (Wyatt 2004, 237–238). But by the 1960s these demands had been defused through concessionary measures, including the establishment in 1956 of the Tamil-speaking state of Madras within India's federal system (renamed Tamil Nadu in 1969). Additionally, the Tamil ethno-national parties accrued ‘mainstream’ political power through electoral success in Tamil Nadu (Chadda 1997, 7) and, from the 1990s onwards, as influential coalition partners within India's central government (Wyatt 2002, 736–737; Stepan, Linz, and Yadav 2011, 136).

In contrast, the Tamil movement in Sri Lanka has been ‘driven from moderation and desired accommodation to secessionism’ (Krishna 1999, 60). In the early post-independence period, the Tamil national movement, led by the Federal Party (FP), advocated federalism within a unified Sri Lanka, with, in 1975, the party's leader, S.J.V. Chelvanayakam, negotiating a consociational pact with Prime Minister Bandaranaike aimed at devolving power to provincial councils in Tamil areas. The governments' failure to honour this pact in the face of opposition from hard-line Sinhalese nationalists, and the breaking of two further pacts in 1961 and 1965, prompted a campaign of peaceful civil disobedience by the FP (Wilson 2000, 4), and the continued placing of the Tamil political leadership into ‘a defensive role by the force of Sinhalese majoritarianism’ (Wilson 2000, 11) led, in 1976, to the coalescence of the FP and other Tamil parties under one banner – the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) – which mooted the possibility of an independent Tamil state (Wilson 2000, 109–110).

Meanwhile, Tamil youths, disillusioned with parliamentary approaches to protecting Tamil interests, had turned to militancy. A number of armed groups emerged, including the LTTE, which under the leadership of Velupillai Prabhakaran, came to dominate the Tamil nationalist movement through violent suppression or incorporation of its rivals (Wilson 2000, 124–134). Atrocities such as the police attack on a Tamil research conference in Jaffna in 1974 and the burning of Jaffna's library by security personnel in 1981, fuelled violence by the Tamil militants against the Sri Lankan state (Wilson 2000, 125). Tensions exploded in July 1983, when the public burial in Colombo of thirteen soldiers who had been killed by the LTTE sparked mob attacks on the city's Tamil population. Up to 3,000 Tamils were killed and thousands of Tamil-owned homes and businesses burnt during a week of violence (Weiss 2012, 51–55; see also Krishna 1999, 116–117; Wickramasinghe 2006, 257–258).

The events of July 1983 marked the transition to war between the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE, while an amendment to the constitution that required all Members of Parliament to swear an oath of loyalty to a unified Sri Lanka forced TULF's representatives out of parliament, further ceding control of Tamil nationalism to its militant expression (Wilson 2000, 138–139). The conflict in Sri Lanka ended in 2009 when the LTTE was

militarily defeated following a sustained bombardment of its final stronghold in the island's north east – at the cost of some 40,000 Tamil civilian lives (Weiss 2012, 121–146).

While the recent historical context of conflict-induced refugee migration has meant that Sri Lankan Tamils form a majority among the Tamil population in most western sites of settlement, also present, in smaller numbers, are Tamils of non-Sri Lankan origin, many of whom have migrated as students or skilled workers, or through associated-dependant migration (Gibney and Hansen 2005, 296; Fuller and Narasimhan 2008, 184–186; Jones 2013, 31–32). Despite their nominally shared Tamil ethnicity, these non-Sri Lankan Tamil migrants remain largely invisible in accounts of the 'Tamil diaspora', which focus on Tamils of Sri Lankan origin. The purpose of this article is to bring these migrants into visibility, through an exploration of their engagement (or lack of engagement) with a Tamil diaspora and long-distance Tamil nationalism.

The article draws on Pnina Werbner's conception of diaspora as an 'aesthetic' and 'moral' community. In her ethnographic account of Pakistanis in northern England, Werbner (2002, 12) describes 'compelling diasporic orientation' towards:

an aesthetic world embodied in the flow of mass popular cultural products from the subcontinent, and by nostalgic reinscription in ritual and ceremonial of the pungent tastes and fragrant smells, the vivid colours and moving musical lyrics of a lost land.

She continues: 'the transnational diaspora these performances embody is a *depoliticised* one that demands from its members nothing except enjoyment and consumption. There is no sense here of a moral or politically grounded transnational subjectivity, of a responsibility for an other' (Werbner 2002, 12, original emphasis). Werbner additionally explains, however, that among these UK Pakistanis, imaginings of diaspora implies 'a compelling sense of *moral co-responsibility* and *embodied performance*, extended through and across national boundaries' (Werbner 2002, 11, original emphasis). This includes projects framed in nationalized terms of building a successful Pakistani community in the UK and contributing to the natal land, and through membership of the transnational religious *Ummah* (Werbner 2002, 12).

The concern of this article is to ask if the project of long-distance Tamil nationalism highlighted in scholarly accounts of the globally dispersed Sri Lankan Tamil population resonates with Tamil migrants of non-Sri Lankan origins. A shared Tamil language, performance of religion and ritual, and transnational consumption of popular culture engenders identification with an 'aesthetic diaspora' (Jones 2013). But does this trans-state identification extend to imagined membership of a diasporic 'moral community' given the divergent experiences of politicized ethnicity in these migrants' respective states of origin, whereby for Tamils in India, ethnic assertion has become largely symbolic in nature, while for Tamils in Sri Lanka ethnicity has remained (literally) a matter of life and death.

### **Ambiguous elites**

This question plays out ambiguously at the level of elite ethno-nationalisms. Tamil nationalist movements in South India and Sri Lanka emerged along distinct lines and, as described above, followed divergent trajectories. Among the early South Indian Tamil nationalists, imaginings of a Tamil nation state did not include the Tamil regions of Sri Lanka, but were limited to the territorial confines of India (Krishna 1999, 81). Meanwhile, among Sri Lankan Tamil nationalists, 'there was little or nothing to be gained and much to be

lost' in building connections with South India (Krishna 1999, 91). To do so would have played into the hands of opposing Sinhalese nationalists who attempted to diminish Tamils' claims by figuring them as 'traitorous' – as 'Indians in disguise' (Krishna 1999, 64–65). Rather, Sri Lankan Tamil nationalist interests lay in asserting the distinctiveness of Tamil heritage within the island (Wickramasinghe 2006, 260).

As the Sri Lankan Tamil nationalist movement militarized from the 1970s, connections with South India increased and Tamil Nadu's ethno-nationalist politicians openly supported the separatists. But from the late 1980s, this support waned as it became politically inexpedient given the New Delhi government's shift towards a more hostile approach to the secessionists. This inexpediency developed into political toxicity following the assassination of the former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by an LTTE suicide bomber in 1991 (Krishna 1999, 124–127).

Over the intervening two decades, Tamil Nadu's political elites have again rallied to the Sri Lankan Tamil nationalist cause, with moments of crisis offering opportunities to reiterate ethno-nationalist credentials and affect popular mobilization by drawing on the rhetoric of pan-Tamil nationalism. In 2006, for instance, the Sri Lankan air force bombed a school in a Tamil area, drawing strong public condemnation from both of Tamil Nadu's main ethno-nationalist parties, the *Dravida Munetra Kazhagam* (DMK) and the *All India Dravida Munetra Kazhagam* (AIADMK). When publicly rebuffed by the Sri Lankan authorities for his comments, DMK leader Karunanidhi stated: 'if Tamils condemning the killing of their Tamil brethren was dubbed a mistake, then they [the DMK] would continue to commit it' (Mayilvaganan 2007, 949). More recently, the huge civilian death toll during the Sri Lankan military's 2008/9 offensive against the LTTE sparked popular protests in Tamil Nadu. Capitalizing on this public mood, the then eighty-seven-year-old Karunanidhi embarked on a hunger strike (reported in *The Indian* on April 27, 2009), while the leaders of both main parties sparked controversy with remarks interpreted as supportive of separatist militancy (reported in *The Hindu* on April 30, 2009 and *The Times of India* on May 11, 2009).

The Sri Lankan Tamil separatist movement has also dealt in the rhetoric of pan-Tamil nationalism, through a 'tendency to look back in order to find the key to the present' (Fuglerud 1999, 160). The LTTE's popular name – the 'Tamil Tigers' – its flag and its tiger-striped battle fatigues evoked pan-Tamil historical imagery; the tiger being the emblem of the *Cholas*, an empire headquartered in the Kaveri delta of South India which, during its height in the ninth to twelfth century AD, encompassed much of modern South India and Sri Lanka, the Maldives and parts of the Malay Archipelago (Clothey 2006, 3–4). This 'ancient glory' of Jaffna's flourishing under the *Chola* reign furnished the LTTE 'with a powerful nationalist ideology' (Wickramasinghe 2006, 282). Prabhakaran adopted the *nom de guerre* Karakalan – a *Chola* king, while poems produced by the LTTE and circulated on cassette among Tamils in Sri Lanka and around the globe made yet more explicit the imagined homology of the LTTE's contemporary nationalist project and the imperial Tamil past (Fuglerud 1999, 155).

Thus, Tamil ethno-nationalist elites in South India and Sri Lanka have occupied a shifting and often vexed position on the question of trans-state solidarity among Tamils. Their approach has been at once particularistic in forging distinct nationalist projects, while also incorporating claim-making on behalf of the ethnic kin, or evoking a broader pan-Tamil consciousness or shared historical mythology in support of these projects. In the case of the Tamil Nadu elites, ethno-nationalist trans-state solidarity has been regularly evoked, but just as readily dropped when it became inexpedient to political participation in the broader Indian state.

## **The research and participants**

The remainder of the article considers how this elite-level ambiguity compares to the everyday perspectives of Tamil migrants of Sri Lankan and non-Sri Lankan state origins. The article draws on research involving interviews with forty-six Tamil migrants in the UK, including Sri Lankans, Indians, Malaysians and Singaporeans, alongside observational research in ethnic community associations, places of worship and research participants' homes. The research is framed by an understanding of diaspora as a process. This approach rejects interpretations of diasporas as 'tangible, qualifiable, and bounded entities' (Brubaker 2005, 11), arguing instead that diaspora may only become 'fruitful' as a category of analysis when considered as a 'category of practice':

we can then study empirically the degree and form of support for a diasporic project amongst members of its putative constituency ... and we can explore to what extent, and in what circumstances, those claimed as members of putative diasporas actively adopt, or at least passively sympathise with the diasporic stance. (Brubaker 2005, 13)

Within this approach, analysis shifts from a 'top-down' approach, which privileges the discourse of ethnic elites, to an empirical focus, which foregrounds 'the actual degree to which these elite depictions are appropriated by ordinary people (to the extent they are so at all)', and translated into everyday practice (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008, 538), or by which alternative formations of belonging and collectivism are created. This creates analytical space to explore engagement with Tamil long-distance nationalism and the 'diasporic' political project among Tamil migrants of non-Sri Lankan state origins, who may be nominally incorporated into a 'Tamil diaspora', but whose experiences are invisible in most existing scholarly accounts. A standpoint that de-substantializes diasporas in this way allows space for the emergence of diverse migrants' varying levels and intensities of identification with a Tamil moral community, accommodating a broader set of experiences and perspectives than has hitherto been the case.

## **Communities of suffering**

Werbner (2002, 69–71) conceptualizes diasporas as moral communities of 'suffering' and 'co-responsibility'. Fieldwork for this project was conducted from the autumn of 2010 and throughout 2011. The horrific events of 2008/9 in Sri Lanka were thus fresh in the minds of participants, some of whom had been personally impacted. Many Sri Lankan Tamil participants hailed from villages or towns in Jaffna or Vanni (the area to the south of the Jaffna peninsula and the arena of the 2008/9 offensive), and had lost relatives, friends or property in the course of the long civil conflict. Tales of the suffering endured prior to migration were a recurring feature of the narratives of Sri Lankan Tamils, and some too had seen the recent devastation wrought upon familiar landscapes during visits to relatives in Sri Lanka. Saama, for instance, had travelled with her family to Vanni in 2010: 'It was terrible. All the buildings were black ... Everything was demolished. Even the ground – no trees left, nothing. You could feel it was a place where so many people had died.'

Describing ethnographic research with Sri Lankan Tamils in Canada, George (2011, 149) reflects that 'suffering is personal and yet cannot be separated from the wider political struggles that many members have experienced and reflect upon in the present' and has both a 'personal and collective character' – a finding reflected in this research. Supriya described how many of the British people she had met knew little about the situation in Sri Lanka: 'A [British] woman – another mum at school – asked me, "why did you come

here then and leave your nice weather behind to struggle in the cold?" She said it to be friendly, but really! In contrast, Supriya feels that the fellow Sri Lankan Tamils she has met in the UK 'understand the bad feelings I am facing – they will feel them too'.

But as well as functioning as a bond among Sri Lankan Tamils, collective experience of trauma was highlighted as a differential from Tamils of non-Sri Lankan origin. Clare, for instance, feels that:

Because of the war our [Sri Lankan Tamil] mentality is different. But Indian Tamils and other Tamils – they didn't face any problems like we have. I don't know what kind of mentality they have ... but wouldn't be the same. The struggle has changed us a lot.

This assessment was echoed by Jamilah: 'The only difference is that we've gone through a lot, whereas Indian hasn't gone through that ... hasn't gone through that war, and people moving around all the time, no protection, scared in fear of life.'

But does this understanding of a uniquely Sri Lankan Tamil experience of suffering resonate with non-Sri Lankan Tamil migrants themselves? Do they share the assessment, quoted above, that they cannot know and share the suffering of Sri Lankan Tamils, or do they establish membership of this 'community of suffering' through means other than direct experience of persecution and violence?

The degree to which Tamil participants of non-Sri Lankan origin identified with the Sri Lankan Tamil experience of trauma varied. A minority had personal links to Sri Lanka, and so had comparable experience and knowledge to their Sri Lankan Tamil counterparts. Two participants were Indian, but had one or both parents who were up-country Tamils – the descendants of migrants from South India to colonial Ceylon. Judith was born in Sri Lanka, but moved to India as a small child: 'My parents wanted us to have a good and proper education, and because of the war ... there was no safety there.' Sebastian's parents lived in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo at the time of the 1983 riots: 'The war broke out and my parents' house was burnt ... there was a family that actually hid them in another house or they could have been butchered.' Another participant, Viveka, is Indian, but her husband originates from Sri Lanka: 'He told me what happened ... they lived in the cellar without food as the bombs went.' As mentioned at the outset, Tamil settlement in Malaysia and Singapore followed migration from both South India and colonial Ceylon. Among these Tamils, degrees of connection to ancestral homeland(s) vary (Clothey 2006, 18). However, the Singaporean and Malaysian Tamils encountered within this research had South Indian ancestry and no familial connections to Sri Lanka.

Personal experience of the conflict was not a prerequisite for identification with Sri Lankan Tamil trauma, with knowledge of the suffering of Tamils in Sri Lanka also being gleaned from media or popular culture representations. The Indian Tamil director Mani Ratnam's 2002 film *Kannathil Muthamittal*, which follows a Tamil Nadu family as they journey to war-torn northern Sri Lanka in search of their adopted daughter's birth mother, was mentioned by several Indian participants as informing their impressions of the situation of Tamils in Sri Lanka. Rabesh reflected: 'For me, all I understood about how Sri Lankan Tamils struggled was only from watching that movie ... It shows the struggles the people undergo.'

For a number of non-Sri Lankan Tamils, expressions of identification with the suffering of Sri Lankan Tamils rested on primordial understandings of ethnicity. Dinish was among the Indian participants who most

strongly expressed a sense of personal identification with the suffering of Tamils in Sri Lanka, and sympathy with the project of long-distance nationalism:

What Rajapaksa has done has badly and worstly hurted me a lot. And not only hurt me, but all the Tamil people who love their fellow Tamils. They've been badly hurted. I felt very sorry and like tears in my eyes when I see the people has been genocided ... It is a very hard thing for every Tamil to see. Every day I think about it. How people suffer and how they died [*sic*].

Through evoking his own sense of a trans-state Tamil ethnicity that inevitably results in 'hurt' at the sad fate of his co-ethnics on the island, Dinish's narrative echoes recent elite-level discourse of Tamil Nadu ethno-national politics, for instance this 2006 statement by DMK leader and then-Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Karunanidhi: 'Our brethren, our own race are being killed and hunted down in Sri Lanka. This is no pleasant news for us. It is like bombarding *us* with missiles' (quoted in Kapur 2010, 207, emphasis added).

Chandra, a Malaysian Tamil with family roots in Tamil Nadu, explained that she felt 'so shell-shocked' and 'so upset' by recent events in Sri Lanka as 'it's my blood as well – you know?' While Pratheep, from Tamil Nadu, reflected: 'As a Tamil person I feel it quite bad actually. Obvious right! If a dolphin sees another dolphin get hurt it will hurt, right? So I feel it quite bad.' While theorizations of ethnicity have traditionally been drawn along primordialist versus circumstantialist lines – the former understanding ethnicity as an immutable bond; the latter holding that ethnic attachment instrumentally adapts to socio-political contexts – a vein of scholarship suggests that this dichotomy is overstated. Geertz's ([1973] 1993, 259) account of ethnic attachments as stemming from the 'givens of social existence ... congruities of blood, speech and custom' is often interpreted as an example par excellence of the primordial position. In fact, however, Geertz ([1973] 1993, 159–160, emphasis added) refers to '*assumed* givens' and congruities that '*are seen* to have an ineffable, and at times overpowering coerciveness'. This is not to say that ethnic groups are 'natural', but rather that they are often viewed as natural by invested actors – a 'participants' primordialism' (Smith 1998, 158). Gil-White (2001, 515) argues that establishment of the 'ontological fact' of the fiction of ethnic 'essence', risks 'cloud[ing] our understanding of local epistemologies', within which essentialized ethnicity may be 'a self-evident worldview' – a 'folk sociology' of 'ethnic common sense' (Brubaker 2010, 35). Both Chandra's reference to ties of blood and Pratheep's comparative use of the taxonomy of the animal kingdom suggest an empirical realization of this 'folk' or 'everyday' primordialism in non-Sri Lankan Tamil participants' expressions of solidarity and emotional attachment to their Sri Lankan Tamil ethnic kin.

For other non-Sri Lankan Tamil participants, co-ethnicity was less central to their responses, which drew rather on general humanitarian concerns. Keerthi remarked: 'As an Indian Tamil you do feel close to the problem ... but even if it is happening for the British people it doesn't matter – all are humans.' This assertion was echoed by Puneeth: 'It's not about the Tamil people – whether it's Tamils or the other Sri Lankan people – if they need a help we need to help them.' Similarly, Rabesh said: 'We felt very sorry for people over in Jaffna, but also for the people in Haiti for instance following the quake 'cos it's just the human tendency. You tend to feel for the humanity, not for the specific community.'

Most Indian Tamil participants felt that the Indian government had behaved badly in failing to stand up for the human rights of Tamil civilians. But while some participants framed these issues in terms of broad humanitarianism, others' talk around these events reproduced a historical narrative of Tamil victimhood and subordination to a north Indian, Hindi-speaking hegemonic state. Sharuk, for example, theorized that India's response to the Sri Lankan crisis was attributable to Congress President Sonia Gandhi's desire to avenge the

murder of her husband, the former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, by an LTTE suicide bomber in 1991, rhetorically positioning the 'northern' Indian government in antagonism to Tamils:

The northern India – the central government, is the family of the Prime Minister who was killed. She is the wife, so she always wants the revenge ... When you have the government of a country you can do everything, especially with India – India has so much money and can do anything. So they help the Sri Lankan government to go against the Tamils, and genocide the entire Tamil population.

Talk of this kind suggests that alienation from the Indian state is a live issue for some of these (mainly young) Indian Tamil migrants. A fiery discussion erupted on a Facebook group frequented by Indian Tamil migrants about Rajapaksa's presence at the 2010 Commonwealth Games in Delhi, which, it was felt, 'insulted Tamils' given the situation in Sri Lanka, and the Sri Lankan navy's alleged murder of Tamil Nadu fishermen (reported in *The Times of India* on January 14, 2011). It was even suggested that Rajapaksa was being 'rewarded' by the New Delhi government for 'killing the Tamils'. As with the symmetry between Dinish's earlier comment and the nationalist rhetoric of DMK leader Karunanidhi, these concerns around Indian government overtures towards Rajapaksa are again mirrored in the discourse of Tamil Nadu's political elite, this time by the incumbent State Assembly ruling party, the *All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (AIADMK), which, in August 2012, passed a resolution opposing the training of Sri Lankan military personnel in India. A media statement accompanying the resolution read: 'That the Centre has taken it up as a duty to train Sri Lankan personnel who harass Tamils in Lanka ... amounts to insulting the entire Tamil race' (*The Economic Times*, August 27, 2012).

Another online discussion contrasted a national outpouring of grief in India following the July 2011 terrorist attacks on Mumbai with perceived indifference to the slaughter of Tamils in Sri Lanka. One comment read:

Everyone praying for 21 [the initial casualties figure in Mumbai]. No one even know 210,000 or more are killed without humanity ... The people who were killed in Sri Lanka were my brothers and sisters ... Can you point out any Indian except from Tamil Nadu bothered about what happened to our Tamils in Sri Lanka?

Indian Tamil participants also felt let down by the very actors expected to offer resistance to this marginalization of Tamil concerns – Tamil Nadu's ethno-nationalist politicians. Many expressed the view that engagement with the Sri Lankan issue by Tamil Nadu's political elites was motivated by opportunism, rather than genuine co-ethnic or humanitarian concern, as exemplified by Dinish's narrative:

Karunanidhi has got votes for nearly fifty years by saying that he is the saviour of Tamils – the only person for Tamils. But because of his own wealth and his own power he backstabbed Tamil people ... He could have ordered them [central Indian government] to save [Sri Lankan Tamils] because he has so many [parliamentary] seats in his hand ... They [Congress] rely on him, and just withdrawing seven or eight seats they would have done it – they would have shaken. But he didn't do that ... We thought he's a saviour, but he didn't save ... He's backstabbed and he's let us down.

In some cases, this 'betrayal' at the hands of both national and regional governments galvanized identification with a trans-state Tamil ethnicity at the expense of Indian nationality. Remaining with Dinish: 'I used to hate Pakistan, 'cos all Indians they don't like Pakistan. But my Pakistan feeling has been replaced, and my hate for Rajapaksa has gone to the front.' Social constructivist theories of ethnicity highlight the



identification of a 'significant other' as central to relational constructions of group consciousness, in particular at moments of 'crisis': 'It unites the people in front of a common enemy, it reminds them "who we are" and emphasizes that "we are different and unique"' (Triandafyllidou 1998, 603). For Dinish, then, this 'significant other' no longer speaks of an Indian identity, but a trans-state Tamil ethnicity. Kulam shared this sentiment, expressing admiration for Seeman, an actor turned politician, who in 2010 founded *Naam Tamilar Katchi* (We Tamils Party): 'He's trying to build into everyone that they're not Indians – they are Tamils first, and then Indians afterwards.'

For these participants, 'membership' of the community of suffering is not the sole preserve of Sri Lankan Tamils, but can be claimed too by Tamils of non-Sri Lankan origin. Cohen's (1985, 118) notion of symbolic community is helpful here: 'People construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity.' For some non-Sri Lankan Tamils then, 'membership' of the community of suffering does not necessitate personal experience of suffering, but is rather constituted through attachment to a symbolic notion of trans-state 'Tamil-ness' marked by victimhood and resistance to political or cultural domination, within which historical and contemporary experiences of being Tamil in both India and Sri Lanka can be incorporated.

One Indian Tamil participant additionally raised the situation in Malaysia, where the Indian population (among whom Tamils are the majority), complain of institutionalized discrimination under the Malaysian government's *Bumiputera* (sons of the soil) policy, which favours the Malay Muslim majority: 'It is going on anywhere we Tamils live. The trouble is we are very soft people ... everywhere we are pushed aside by others.' This concern for ethnic kin in Malaysia again echoes the elite-level discourse of Tamil Nadu's ethno-nationalist parties. In 2007, protests by Tamils in Malaysia against the curtailment of religious freedoms were violently suppressed by police. Karunanidhi publicly urged the Indian government to intervene, prompting the Malaysian government to reprimand his 'meddling' in their affairs (Kapur 2010, 207–208).

Non-Sri Lankan Tamil migrants thus construct a trans-state identification with Sri Lankan Tamils that is based not only upon their emotional response to atrocities (framed in primordial understandings of ethnicity), but is also related to their own perceived marginalization by the Indian state (or the Malaysian state). Within Cohen's (1985, 12) reading, the boundary of community 'may be perceived in rather different terms, not only by people on opposite sides of it, but also by people on the same side.' This is illustrated through the difference in views between the non-Sri Lankan Tamils described above, and the Sri Lankan Tamils quoted earlier. While Sri Lankan Tamils like Clare and Jamilah feel that direct experience of violence and persecution sets them apart from Tamils of other state origins, non-Sri Lankan Tamils, like Dinish and Kulam, set this boundary to the community of suffering more flexibly, allowing for their own incorporation.

### **Communities of co-responsibility**

As well as reflecting on 'communities of suffering', Werbner's (2002, 61–64) theorization of diasporas as 'moral communities' highlights a sense of transnational co-responsibility. Indeed, these two 'dimensions of community' (Werbner 2002, 61) appear intimately linked, and Guribye's (2011, 377) exploration of how, among Sri Lankan Tamil migrants in Norway, 'traumatic experiences' are 'channel[ed] into collective cause' correlates with the narratives of some of this study's Sri Lankan Tamil participants. As Anthony, a Sri Lankan Tamil, explains: 'A person who has come away from that violence, you would love to help another – one who is in the same situation that I have experienced. We all have a responsibility.'

The majority of Sri Lankan Tamil participants in the research had attended the large protests at Westminster between January and April 2009 calling for an end to the Sri Lankan military's bombardment of Tamil areas and for international intervention to end the bloodshed. But widespread involvement in these protests was not indicative of an ongoing engagement with the transnational political field of Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism, and with a few notable exceptions, direct and sustained involvement in nationalist projects was rare. But this lack of active involvement did not indicate a lack of interest in affairs of the 'homeland'. As well as receiving regular updates from relatives, the majority followed events through the consumption of transnational media, and many engaged in philanthropy by donating to aid projects in the island's Tamil regions. Other practised 'everyday resistance' (Scott 1985, 29), commemorating the Tamil war-dead in local ceremonies within ethnic community associations, choosing to self-identity as 'Eelam Tamils' rather than Sri Lankan Tamils in everyday interactions, and framing their desire for their UK-raised children to learn the Tamil language in politicized terms that invested language maintenance with the survival of the ethno-nation. In Priya's words: 'That's why the Tamils [overseas] are working hard to teach Tamil to their children ... Our language shouldn't die with that generation.'

Support for the LTTE and the Eelam project has by no means been universal among Sri Lankan Tamils within the island or in the diaspora (Fair 2007; Orjuela and Sriskandarajah 2008; Brun and van Hear 2012, 70–73). But despite this, and despite the lack of sustained involvement in elite-led long-distance nationalist projects among many of the Sri Lankan Tamils I encountered, most non-Sri Lankan Tamils within the study perceived widespread and active support for the LTTE among Sri Lankan Tamil migrants. This perception created a barrier for some to trans-state identification, solidarity and collective action in the UK setting, as well as limiting socialization in more everyday forms. For example, Malia, an Indian Tamil, explained:

If there is a cultural programme or a fundraising event or something we will go along and support. But I'll never give out my phone number or email to them [Sri Lankan Tamils] – you'll never hear the end of it! It'll be, 'come on, come to this meeting, give money, do this' ... They'll guilt-trip you basically. To them, it's their politics, their everything, but I'm busy with my own problems and my own life. It's not my struggle.

Samuel stated: 'I don't have any Sri Lankan Tamil friends here [UK]. I tend to keep myself away 'cos I'm frightened because some of them support the LTTE and the ideology of terrorism – I'm not for that.'

Several non-Sri Lankan Tamil participants discussed 'Tamil-ness' in terms of a stigmatized or 'spoiled' identity (Goffman 1963). These participants' experience in the UK had been that the general population's knowledge of 'Tamil-ness' was limited to Sri Lankan Tamils, through media coverage of the Sri Lankan conflict and its aftermath, the arrival of asylum seekers and the Westminster protests. Kaalan explained: 'They identify me as a Sri Lankan Tamil ...'Cos most of the people know the Tamils only because of the Sri Lankan issue.' This pars pro toto understanding was in turn stigmatized because of the inevitable expression of folk knowledge of the LTTE that followed. Kaalan continued:

They'll call me Tiger actually ... They'll ask me are you from Sri Lanka, and I'll say 'no, from India'. They'll ask me whereabouts in India and I'll say Tamil Nadu, then it's 'oh really – Tamil – Tamil Tigers! Are you a Tiger?!' ... Sometimes it gives an annoyance when they say you are a Tiger ... I don't like that tag at all.

Maya, an Indian Tamil, and Shreya, from Singapore, recalled similar experiences. The latter recounted how an ex-boss had asked her: "'You're not a Tiger are you – you're not going to shoot me?' ... It was meant as joke, but it's really rude.' In some cases, this stigmatized association led participants to conceal their Tamil

identity. Chandra, despite strongly identifying with a trans-state Tamil ethnicity (as seen earlier), tends to describe her background as 'Indian Malaysian – to keep it easy ... If I say I'm Tamil they'll ask, "are you Sri Lankan Tamil then?" ... Straight away they'll associate me with that, and they even ask me, "are you Tamil Tiger?'. Similarly, Sebastian explained: 'I don't just tell "Hi, I'm a Tamil". I find myself always in the boat of having to explain I don't support the LTTE, this and that. So you get fed up and just don't talk about it.'

This stigmatization resonates in non-Sri Lankan Tamils' practice in the political field. Although Kulam is sympathetic to the Eelam movement, he speculated that Indian Tamils were deterred from attending the Westminster demonstrations by the presence of LTTE flags: 'One major fact is that LTTE is banned in India, so most of them don't want to be part of protests.' He also recounted being told off by his mother (who lives in Tamil Nadu) after she saw Facebook posts that he had made criticizing the Indian government's inaction over the abuses committed during the Sri Lankan military's 2008/9 offensive: 'She is quite scared that I do this, and get involved with Sri Lankan Tamils in case I'm branded as [LTTE] sympathiser.'

## Conclusions

This article has explored the resonance of diasporic political projects and long-distance nationalism in the narratives and practice of Tamil migrants of diverse state origins in the UK. Among Sri Lankan Tamil participants, identification with a community of suffering was strong. Suffering was deeply personal, but also collective in its potential to forge connections to others who had lived through these events, and to enforce distance from those who had not, including Tamils of other state origins. But for some non-Sri Lankan Tamils, the boundaries of this community of suffering were imagined more fluidly and did not necessitate personal experience of trauma. Rather, 'membership' was constituted through attachment to a symbolic notion of Tamil ethnicity marked by victimhood and resistance to political or cultural domination, and within which recent historical and contemporary experiences of being Tamil in both India and Sri Lanka (despite the clear differences in these experiences) could be incorporated. In other cases, a primordial understanding of ethnicity was evoked – a sense that Sri Lankan Tamil pain was necessarily 'their' pain also by dint of their shared 'Tamil-ness'.

However, other non-Sri Lankan Tamils, while expressing deep sympathy with the trauma of conflict-affected civilians and refugees, distanced themselves from an ethnicized identification with this trauma. Despite the lack of sustained and active involvement in elite-led transnational politics among Sri Lankan Tamil participants in the study, some non-Sri Lankan Tamil participants nonetheless characterized Sri Lankan Tamils as highly politically engaged and committed to the Eelam project. For some, this established 'Tamil-ness' as a 'spoiled' identity (Goffman 1963), and they preferred to avoid contact with Sri Lankan Tamil migrants who they stigmatized as LTTE supporters, or by whom they felt pressured to contribute (in kind or financially) to a nationalist project that was 'not [their] struggle' (Malia). For others, the pars pro toto understandings of 'Tamil' as indistinguishable from 'Sri Lankan Tamil' that they encountered among the British populace, and the subsequent stigmatization stemming from folk knowledge of the LTTE, discouraged (at least publicly) an identification with 'Tamil-ness', with some participants preferring to evoke alternative identifications, such as 'Indian', as a result.

While attention to long-distance nationalism has focused on the Sri Lankan Tamil population, this research has shown that it is worthwhile to extend the analytical lens to include Tamil migrants of other state origins, who, although nominally incorporated in conceptions of the 'Tamil diaspora' or 'Tamil ethnic community',

are excluded from most scholarly accounts. Returning to Werbner's (2002) conception of diaspora, while Tamil migrants of diverse state origins may express identification with an 'aesthetic diaspora' (Jones 2013), the imagined boundaries of a 'moral diaspora' of suffering and co-responsibility are subject to a greater degree of contestation. A standpoint that de-substantializes diaspora and treats it as 'process' (Brubaker 2005) allows analytic space for the emergence of these diverse migrants' varying levels and intensities of identification with this moral community, and with long-distance nationalist projects in their everyday UK lives.

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