
Tamil Diaspora Politics

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INTRODUCTION

The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora consists of some 700,000 people settled in North America, Europe, India, and Australasia. Most members of the diaspora have migrated since the mid 1980s, primarily as a direct or indirect result of an ongoing civil war in Sri Lanka. Like many modern diasporas, the Sri Lankan Tamil community has developed multidimensional linkages that strengthen the nexus between the diaspora and erstwhile homeland, as well as between different diaspora settlements across the world. One of the most notable of these linkages has been the diaspora's "translocal" political practice (Appadurai, 1995, 1996). The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora has been instrumental in shaping the Sri Lankan political landscape, particularly through its support for and sponsorship of the Tamil nationalist project. During the 1990s, there has been growing interest from scholars and security analysts in the diaspora's role in supporting and financing the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in its insurgent war against the Sri Lankan state.

Sri Lanka's civil war has persisted, with several pauses, for the better part of 20 years. The signing of an indefinite ceasefire between the state and the LTTE in early 2002 ushered in perhaps the most promising pause ever. However, even if this ceasefire continues to hold, there are many highly contested issues that will need to be resolved before a sustainable peace is achieved in Sri Lanka. Such a peace may reduce the immediacy of the question of Tamil diaspora support for insurgency, but the broader issue of Tamil diaspora political practice will

remain salient to the study of the Tamil diaspora, to the historiography of the Sri Lankan conflict, and perhaps to the study of other diasporas.

HISTORY

The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora originates from the northeastern part of the island of Sri Lanka, formerly known as Ceylon. While Sri Lanka's total population of around 19 million is differentiated along ethnic, linguistic, religious, and regional lines, the northeastern Tamils have come to identify themselves and been identified by others, at home and abroad, as a distinct community. While the boundaries that demarcate the group are by no means clear, the label "Sri Lankan Tamil" refers to this population of just over two million, Tamil-speaking, predominantly Hindu people. On occasion, the term "Tamil" is also used here to describe this group. For present purposes, neither term refers to the so-called "upcountry Tamils" who hail from the central hill regions of the island and, though of recent Indian origin, are no less "Sri Lankan" or "Tamil," nor, unless expressly stated, will the terms include a distinct population of some 60 million Tamils resident in Southern India.

Sri Lanka's external linkages forged before and during colonization by successive European powers over nearly four centuries, and consolidated since independence from Britain in 1948, have underpinned a long tradition of people moving to and from the island. Sri Lanka's social and economic elite has had a long history of

temporary emigration for education, usually to Britain or North America, and employment, all over the West and the Commonwealth. In more recent years, migrants from a broader socioeconomic base have sought employment opportunities in the Middle East (usually as manual and domestic workers) and the West and other developing countries (mainly as professionals).

However, it is in the context of growing political conflict in Sri Lanka that the formation of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora should be seen. In the decades after independence, rivalry between the island's Sri Lankan Tamils (composing roughly one-eighth of the total population) and Sinhalese (who are predominantly Buddhist and Sinhala speaking, and account for over 70% of the population) became the source of increasingly violent confrontation. The Sinhalese perceived the Tamils to be a privileged minority, while Tamils felt discriminated against by the Sinhalese-dominated state apparatus. Several incidents of anti-Tamil violence, culminating in a pogrom in 1983 in the capital Colombo that resulted in the deaths of an estimated 3,000 Tamil civilians, led to growing fears among Tamils that their physical security could not be guaranteed in Sri Lanka.

The events of 1983 mark the watershed in the island's descent into a separatist civil war. Intermittent encounters between the Sri Lankan armed forces and several Tamil militant groups became more regular and intense, turning much of the northeast into a war zone. During most of the 1990s, a conventional war was fought between the armed forces and the LTTE, which had emerged as the most dominant Tamil militant group and one of the world's most sophisticated insurgent groups. The LTTE sought an independent state of "Tamil Eelam" covering about one-third of the island's area, an aspiration that has been unacceptable to successive governments in Colombo and an overwhelming majority of the Sinhalese polity. In its first two decades, Sri Lanka's civil war claimed at least 60,000 lives directly, and resulted in mass destruction in the northeast and displacement of Tamils usually resident there.

Besides their military implications, the events of 1983 also had a direct impact on the formation of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. First, most Tamils already living overseas and reluctant to return had more reason (and justification) for staying away permanently. Across Europe and North America, thousands of Tamil students and

guest workers lodged asylum claims. Second, the emigration flows of professional and middle-class Tamils gathered strength. Some of this group migrated for education and employment to the West or to take up contracted appointments in countries as far afield as Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, and Guyana (though many of these people ended up in the West). Third, the events of 1983 mark the start of the widespread conflict-related flows of Tamils seeking asylum overseas and later through family reunion programs.

DEMOGRAPHY

According to the UNHCR, between 1980 and 1999 some 256,307 people of Sri Lankan origin applied for asylum in Europe, one of the top 10 groups of claimants during this period (UNHCR, 2001, Tables V.4 and V.13). The contribution of the three years prior to 1983 (3.8%) was relatively small, while the periods 1984 to 1985 (16.6%) and 1989 to 1992 (31.1%) saw the biggest clusters of applications. Between 1990 and 1999, people of Sri Lankan origin (possibly including small numbers of non-Tamil Sri Lankans) were the single largest group applying for asylum in Canada (34,186 applications), with nearly half of those applications being lodged in the first three years of that period (UNHCR, Table V.21). Not all of these applications were successful, but large numbers of applicants have been granted some form of resident status in their host country. Over time, those who were permitted to stay sponsored family members and also started their own families, thus increasing the numbers of Tamils beyond the official asylum-seeker figures.

Though the absolute number of Sri Lankan Tamils settling overseas may not be large when compared to other recent flows of people, the proportion of the Tamil population affected is notable. By one estimate, accredited to the UNHCR (Ganguly, 2001), there are more than 800,000 Sri Lankan Tamils living overseas in Canada (400,000), Europe (200,000), India (67,000), the United States (40,000), and Australia (30,000), with the rest (80,000) spread mostly in a dozen other countries. Other estimates place the size of the diaspora around 700,000 (Fuglerud, 1999, p.1; Subramaniam, 2000). It is likely therefore that one in every four Sri Lankan Tamils now lives outside Sri Lanka. When the several hundred

thousand Tamils who have been internally displaced as a result of the war are added to this figure, as many as one in every two Tamils has been displaced.

COMMUNITY TIES

The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora is by no means a homogeneous social formation. Instead, it is divided not only by premigratory cleavages along lines of caste, class, gender, village or town of origin, education, and religion, but also by differences arising from the process of migration. Members of the diaspora can thus be differentiated according to when they migrated, the means by which they gained residence in host countries, and how successfully they have integrated into host societies. Despite these internal differences, the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora is very close-knit community. Four developments resulting largely from recent flows of conflict-related migrants have created spatial, social, and political conditions conducive to fostering close community ties.

First, relatively large flows of Tamil asylum seekers to the West have created clusters of recent arrivals in established diaspora centers, such as London, where earlier phases of elites, students, and professionals had settled (Daniel, 1996), as well as in completely new locations. This clustering has taken place on several spatial scales: in certain countries, in certain cities, and in certain areas within those cities. For example, Switzerland's relatively welcoming stance has attracted large numbers of Tamils (McDowell, 1996), whereas neighboring countries, such as Austria or Italy, have attracted relatively few Tamils. In Canada, Tamils have tended to settle in Toronto over other cities or regions. Within Greater Toronto, the estimated 130,000 Tamils (Calleja, 2003) rank as one of the most clustered of the city's immigrant groups (City of Toronto, 1998, p. 7). In Denmark, due to the Danish state's policy of dispersing asylum seekers, Herning (a small town in Jutland) and not Copenhagen has emerged as the Tamil "capital" of Denmark. As a result, these locales, despite their differing scales, have emerged as key nodal points in the material and discursive flows of Tamil diaspora life.

Second, this spatial clustering has been reinforced by the tighter social networks established by asylum seekers. Whereas earlier settlers had usually arrived independently

and dispersed through the host community, newer arrivals, predominantly young men (Baumann, 2001; McDowell, 1996), tended to rely more heavily on Tamil community support networks to find employment and accommodation and establish themselves. While this gender imbalance has been corrected somewhat through the migration of spouses, the initial networks provided the foundation for fostering close community ties.

Third, as asylum seeker numbers swelled the size of the diaspora, there was soon a critical mass for the establishment of dedicated social and economic services and various diaspora associations. Typically, these activities include commercial outlets catering to Tamils needs, extracurricular Tamil-language schools, music, and dance academies, student and youth groups, sporting clubs, curricular tuition classes, drama groups, religious groups (of all faiths, including a sizable following of Sathya Sai Baba) sometimes with dedicated places of worship, alumni networks, business chambers, community media ventures (usually radio and newspapers, but also some television in Europe and Canada), and migrant and refugee lobby groups. Today, in the larger diaspora settlements such as Toronto or London there are voluminous annual directories containing thousands of community listings and calendars listing hundreds of events. These various services, associations, and activities have, in turn, reinforced linkages within the growing community.

Fourth, whereas many earlier migrants may have mixed with other ethnic groups from Sri Lanka, newer arrivals did not forge any substantial links with the Sinhalese diaspora. Though numerically smaller than the Tamil diaspora, there are sizable Sinhalese diaspora settlements in many of the places where Tamils migrated. Part of the reason for this lies in the fact that many of the newer arrivals came from predominantly Tamil regions of Sri Lanka where there would not have been a tradition of interacting with Sinhalese. Thus, notwithstanding the existence of a few examples of efforts at dialogue between the two diaspora communities (Wijesinha, n.d.; <http://www.fpsl.org.au/>), the Tamil diaspora has become more insular.

Finally, while India had provided a safe haven for refugees in the aftermath of the events of 1983 as well as to Tamil militant groups, by the early 1990s the situation had changed. India was no longer as welcoming to asylum seekers or militants, thus increasing the importance

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of the growing Tamil diaspora in the West. Soon, the political, social, and, to some degree, cultural center of gravity within the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora shifted away from India. Members of the diaspora in places ranging from New Zealand to Norway felt a new responsibility to protect the cultural and political future of the Sri Lankan Tamils.

Together these factors have served to bolster the linkages within the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora so that, despite being numerically small and geographically dispersed, it has emerged as a vocal and influential force in shaping political developments in Sri Lanka. The diaspora's economic, cultural, and political importance in relation to the Tamil community in Sri Lanka has also increased. With so many Tamils displaced within and outside of Sri Lanka, and with widespread destruction of economic infrastructure, diaspora remittances to family in Sri Lanka have come to become an important source of income. Efforts by diaspora community leaders to protect Tamil cultural heritage and the opportunities afforded by many host governments in this regard have resulted in considerable Tamil cultural activity within the diaspora. Politically, especially with the withdrawal of Indian sponsorship, the Tamil diaspora has also become an important advocate of Tamil grievances (*vis à vis* the Sri Lankan state and the international community), articulating Tamil nationalism and supporting the LTTE's militant secessionism.

LONG-DISTANCE NATIONALISM

In defining contemporary diasporas, scholars have pointed out that diaspora communities do not necessarily yearn to return home or articulate their primary connections through a real or symbolic homeland (Clifford, 1994). On the other hand, that diaspora communities are interested and involved in political developments in their erstwhile home is not particularly surprising. This form of political engagement can be considered a subset of the "transnational political practices" of migrant communities (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2001) and also as one of the linkages that serve to differentiate a diaspora from other forms of social groupings. Similarly, the collective self-identification of a diaspora as a distinct community in a triadic relationship with host society and home society also has political implications. Collectively, the diaspora

community is strategically positioned to engage in both immigrant politics (say, to better its situation within the host society) and homeland politics (say, to better the situation in the land left behind). The latter, a form of "translocal" political involvement, has come to be labeled as "long-distance nationalism" (Anderson, 1998) or "diaspora nationalism."

Well-established diaspora communities like the Jewish, Armenian, and Chinese communities have all played important roles in homeland issues. With greater access to cheaper, more efficient travel and communication, more recently established diaspora-communities have been able to strengthen the diaspora-homeland nexus. The impact of this process on diaspora identity and community life is increasingly of interest to scholars [see, e.g., Skrbis (1999) on Croats and Slovenes in Australia; Toticagüena (2002) on the Basques; and Schiller and Fouron (2001) on Haitians in the United States].

Meanwhile, the proliferation of insurgencies and intrastate conflicts around the world has produced growing numbers of refugees seeking a new home. This, in turn, has created a number of diasporas that have a more recent, stronger, and arguably more emotional connection with developments in their erstwhile homes, especially where there is social and political upheaval. The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, with a majority of members recently dispersed from a war-affected country, has thus been the subject of recent scholarly work [Fuglerud (1999) and McDowell (1996) are the two best examples].

Where these conflicts are ongoing and "orphaned" by major powers, diaspora communities can shape political and military developments and, it has been suggested (Collier, 2000), even trigger intrastate conflict in their homelands. As a result, security agencies and analysts have become increasingly interested in diasporas that support (or oppose) insurgency at home, particularly through financial support and, to a limited extent, through providing diplomatic backing, arms, training, and intelligence (Byman *et al.*, 2001, Chapter 3). In a climate of international concern about transnational terrorist activities and as a result of lobbying by the Sri Lankan state, the Tamil diaspora, particularly its role in funding the LTTE (e.g., Byman *et al.*, 2001, p. 43; U.S. Department of State, 2002, Appendix B) and providing it with legitimate "fronts" (Bell, 2000), has come under close scrutiny. Despite protests and appeals by sections of the diaspora, several

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Western states (the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia) have proscribed the LTTE and outlawed certain activities in support of the movement. This has placed Tamil diaspora politics in the international spotlight.

TRANSLOCAL POLITICS

Political discourse and practice has become a powerful mechanism for strengthening the diaspora–homeland nexus as well as intradiaspora connections among Sri Lankan Tamils. The intensity, duration, and impact of the civil war in Sri Lanka have made this politicization more concrete. Key premigratory experiences have become politicized and shaped the political identity of diaspora Tamils. Almost all Sri Lankan Tamil migrants (and those still resident in Sri Lanka) have some experience of being discriminated against by the state (and, by proxy, it is often perceived, by the Sinhalese). In the case of more recent migrants who have lived through war in Sri Lanka, many have also experienced violence or persecution at the hands of the armed forces. This feeling of alienation from the Sri Lankan nation-state has conditioned how many Tamils see themselves in and as a diaspora.

Fuglerud (2001) suggests that the diaspora experience among Norwegian Tamils is understood through two frameworks: one (labeled “traditional”) that sees exile as a way of preserving culture, enabling Tamils to be Tamils in a non-Tamil environment, and another (labeled “revolutionary”) that sees exile as being rooted in a homeland and part of the war to achieve social change back at home. In both cases there is a sense of attachment to an ethnic identity. Both cases also represent forms of resistance in which identities can be reaffirmed, either in relation to the host community or the homeland. In the Sri Lankan Tamil case, the past has been pressed into service for the present: Organic linkages that cut across time and space are used to lend meaning to uprooted and disjointed lives as well as to bolster transnational politics. Political formations (most notably, the Tamil “nation”) and aspirations (Tamil Eelam) that were forged at home have been transported across space and time, and continue to be relevant in the diaspora.

While only a small part of the diaspora may be actively involved in overtly political activities, Fuglerud

(1999, p. 85) suggests that whereas 5% to 10% of Norwegian Tamils are actively involved in diaspora political organizations and only a smaller subset of that group is actively supportive of the LTTE, almost all Tamils are aware of and interested in political developments at home. The ongoing conflict and the plight of family and friends still in Sri Lanka mean that many members of the diaspora have a real and direct connection to events in their former home. As a result, the spaces, events, and initiatives produced through Tamil nationalist political discourse are some of the most important factors in the life of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora.

Tamil diaspora political activism emerged well before the start of civil war and certainly before the dominance of the LTTE. The role of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in influencing politics in Sri Lanka, particularly in providing the ideological basis for Tamil militant secessionism in Sri Lanka, has been noted for some time (Coomaraswamy, 1987; Matthews, 1982). Many diaspora associations bodies set up to publicize the plight of Tamils in Sri Lanka and lobby host governments were formed in the aftermath of the 1977 anti-Tamil riots in Sri Lanka. These include the Ilankai Tamil Sangam, the most active political group representing Sri Lankan Tamils in the United States; the Standing Committee of Tamil Speaking Peoples (SCOT), a London-based group concerned with providing relief to Tamil areas; and the Ceylon Tamil Association (Australasia) (renamed the Eelam Tamil Association [ETA] in 1982), a peak-Tamil community association in Sydney. These groups mobilized within their host communities, and on occasion even took to the global stage, most notably in 1978 when a London-based Tamil activist addressed the United Nations General Assembly by pretending to be the Sri Lankan foreign minister (Rajasingham, 2002). The intruder managed to highlight the “genocide” of Tamil people in Sri Lanka before the real foreign minister reached the stage. Two decades on, perhaps the best demonstration of the diaspora’s influence on Sri Lankan politics was the presence of two diaspora Tamils among the four official LTTE delegates to the first session of direct negotiations with the Sri Lankan government in September 2002 (*TamilNet*, 2002).

When it is considered that the chief negotiator was himself also based for many years in the 1970s in the United Kingdom and currently resides there, three of the

four delegates had lived outside Sri Lanka for considerable periods.

In the relatively permissive environment of Western host societies, Tamil diaspora associations have articulated Tamil grievances, something that many argued was not possible because of repression in Sri Lanka (see, e.g., Ilankai Tamil Sangam, n.d.). This activism stands in contrast to the marked lack of participation by Tamils in contemporary Sri Lankan civil society and the impossibility of gauging the views of northeastern Tamils during the conflict. Tamil diaspora activists claim to fill this gap, especially as it is illegal to articulate a Tamil secessionist position in Sri Lanka.

Whereas premigratory experiences can underpin diaspora politics, postmigration experiences can create the context in which political practice is manifested. As migrants struggle to settle into host communities, identification with others in diaspora and participation in diaspora activities can be reaffirming. In the Tamil case, the socialization of new arrivals into local diaspora networks and activities serves to help the former adjust while strengthening the latter. Often these Tamil migrants ended up in remote settlements, such as fishing villages in Norway's far north, or in relatively poor urban areas, such as London's East End or Paris' Twentieth Arrondissement. For those asylum seekers whose self-worth may be challenged by their displacement, identification with and involvement in diaspora politics offer a form of positive identity (Fuglerud, 2001, p. 206). The predominance of the Tamil language in political communication, while reaffirming the aspirations of a Tamil state, has also helped cultivate a sense of community within and across diaspora settlement.

In most sizable diaspora settlements, especially during periods of war in Sri Lanka, there have been regular mass political rallies and meetings. Some of these events, such as the annual Maaveerar Naal (Heroes Day) commemorated around the diaspora to remember the war dead, are overtly political and attract large numbers. On other occasions, large cultural and recreational events may also feature political messages, often supportive of the LTTE (Guha, 2003). Indeed, in Switzerland during the early 1990s, when the LTTE was very active in organizing community activities, McDowell (1996, p. 33) was forced to use the LTTE as the entry point for his research partly because LTTE political events were the only large gatherings of Tamil people in Switzerland.

The blurring of the distinction between pro-Tamil and pro-LTTE positions makes the separating out of diaspora activities from those of the LTTE extremely difficult. In material terms, discerning what portion of the sizable remittances the diaspora sends through private, informal channels to family members and to relief projects in the northeast ends up in the LTTE coffers is not easy (Srisikandarajah, 2002, pp. 294–300). There is evidence to suggest that the movement does raise (or has raised) funds overseas through donations and revenue-generating activities in some countries (McDowell, 1996, Chapter 11), but the opacity of the process means that estimates of how much is raised annually are unsubstantiated, and range from US\$24 million (Subramaniam, 2000) to 20 times that figure (*The Economist*, 2001).

Without doubt the LTTE has fostered the politicization of diaspora life. The movement has certainly been very successful in exporting Tamil Eelam to the diaspora and recruiting diaspora Tamils into its liberation project. This has been done primarily by making developments in Sri Lanka more proximate to the diaspora through initiatives such as “hotlines” with the latest news, specially produced videotapes documenting each major military operation, and several publications and speeches by senior members of the movement [see, e.g., Balasingham (2003) for an English translation of one such speech].

The LTTE has thus emerged as a vital (and, many of its advocates would argue, sole) conduit through which the homeland–diaspora nexus can be manifested. In this regard, the LTTE's role in the community extends far beyond just fundraising or advocacy of Tamil nationalism. The LTTE has come to shape the very nature of the diasporic imaginary by shaping a common identity in exile (Fuglerud, 2001, p. 198). The liberation ideology of the LTTE, in particular, offers members of the diaspora the chance to participate in the playing out of history and shape the Tamil nation's future (Fuglerud, 2001, p. 205). As a result, the aforementioned triadic relationship host–diaspora–homeland is complicated in the Sri Lankan Tamil case by the presence of the LTTE as an additional stakeholder and the diaspora's translocal political practice rooted in a putative *homeland* that does not coincide with the erstwhile nation-state.

Also important in facilitating diaspora political practice has been new, virtual spaces enabled by technologies such as the internet [see Toticagüena (2000) for a discussion of the Basque community]. In contrast to the

Conclusion

relative neglect of the Sri Lankan conflict in international news media, new media have created new spaces in which the diaspora can communicate within itself and with the rest of the world in an effective, low-cost manner. As a result, the Internet is dotted with numerous Tamil diaspora-related spaces, featuring the news and views of a mix of formal organizations, looser networks, and individuals spread across public (web sites) and semiprivate (discussion groups) domains, expressed in Tamil, English, or a range of other European languages, and serving a myriad of community functions. However, just as in the real world of the Tamil diaspora, its virtual world is also permeated by political discourse. News portals such as www.tamilnet.com and www.tamilcanadian.com provide almost instantaneous news and analysis, often from an overtly Tamil perspective, and have come to be important reference points for diaspora Tamils. Other sites, such as www.sangam.org and www.tamilnation.org (now offline), are important spaces of both cultural contact and political discourse. The importance of cyberspace as a domain for the playing out of Tamil politics is perhaps best demonstrated by the fact that even key pro-Tamil Eelam sites (e.g., <http://www.eelam.com>) and the web sites of those "local" organizations critical of LTTE activities (e.g., <http://www.uthr.org>) are registered overseas.

CONCLUSION

The political discourse and practice of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora evokes several important issues flagged in recent scholarship on migration, identity, and transnationalism. In particular, the experience of the Tamils has implications for host communities and the homeland and for theoretical frameworks that might be used to understand diasporas.

While it is common for diasporas to be concerned about homeland conflicts and lobby host governments (Demmers, 2002, p. 88), the values espoused within some diaspora politics do not always sit well with host societies. Contrary to some expectations, diasporas like the Sri Lankan Tamils have not adopted the cosmopolitan, multicultural framework espoused by many Western host societies in relation to their homeland. Rather, despite their dispersal and residence in liberal states, these

diasporas cling to traditional loyalties associated with nation and ethnicity, and draw on premigratory frameworks.

In the case of the Canadian Tamil community, the interest and involvement it has shown in Sri Lankan affairs has come under close scrutiny by the media and authorities in Canada. The community has repeatedly expressed its dismay at being "vilified" for its political stance (see <http://www.eelamnation.com/nationalpost.html>). The Tamil community, along with several other diasporas, has also complained about laws brought in to control illegal or undesirable activities in host countries. It has been argued that the response by some Western states of placing limitations on the operation of several organizations and their representatives has come dangerously close to limiting key political freedoms and rights of citizens (see *Janet Reno v. Humanitarian Law Project*, 2001).

Another issue relates to the role of diaspora in fuelling conflict or, conversely, promoting peace and reconciliation in its homeland. The Tamil diaspora is often accused of being belligerent in its support of the LTTE and recalcitrant in its advocacy of secessionism, especially as the diaspora is supposed to be removed from the immediate and negative consequences of its action. Not only do such accusations ignore the diversity of political views within the diaspora, but they also fail to see the dialectic relationship among diaspora, LTTE, and homeland Tamil population. Diaspora politics cannot be disassociated completely from the other stakeholders: Just as the LTTE propaganda has mobilized the diaspora, so, too, must diaspora sentiment impact on the LTTE. Similarly, given the close ties between diaspora and homeland, the diaspora is not entirely immune from feeling the consequences of the war in Sri Lanka.

Indeed, the Tamil diaspora has the potential to facilitate the peaceful settlement of the Sri Lankan conflict in several ways. Diaspora activism has, to some degree, ensured that Sri Lanka remains a foreign policy priority in some countries. It could even be suggested that the Norwegian government's involvement as peace facilitator in Sri Lanka from the late 1990s has, in part, to do with the presence of a sizable Tamil migrant community in that country. Second, the Tamil diaspora has the potential to be a strategic player in the process of peacebuilding in Sri Lanka, even if primarily through material support. It is clear that Sri Lanka's war-ravaged northeast will

need to be rebuilt, and the Tamil diaspora, with substantial financial and technical resources at its disposal, can play a vital part in this process.

Finally, the political practice of the Tamil diaspora also raises important theoretical issues. The diaspora may well transcend spatial dislocation by forging transnational sociopolitical spaces, but many of its concerns are inherently tied to a piece of territory and many of its aspirations concerned with territorial expressions of nationhood. Diasporas may be the archetypal communities of the global era, but the issue of diaspora political involvement in homeland politics, especially where it involves insurgency, may serve to root diasporas in an older era. In doing so, older notions of nationalism and nationhood have been transposed onto a new spatial landscape so that, despite the fact that diasporas are imagined communities that know no spatial boundaries, diaspora politics is often grounded in very local spaces.

Similarly, diaspora involvement in homeland politics questions the validity of concepts such as “domestic” politics and “internal” conflict. It can also be asked whether “self-determination,” a central plank in LTTE and Tamil aspirations, can still be relevant when a significant and vocal group lives outside the territory that is being contested. That said, the very localized resistances by diasporas to their host countries, for example, in fighting the proscription of the LTTE or the labeling of the community as terrorist, is a reminder that diaspora sociopolitical spaces are nevertheless anchored in specific physical spaces that are often mediated by the nation-state.

In sum, the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora is a complex social formation that has been shaped by premigratory experiences, the process of migration and dispersal, the process of adjustment to host societies, the growth of Tamil nationalism, and the hegemony of the LTTE as the dominant Tamil political force. The diaspora’s emergence as an important player in Sri Lankan politics predates the war and the LTTE, but has been facilitated in recent years by the importance attached to the diaspora by the LTTE as well as technological advances that have fostered communication and quick dissemination of information. It is certain that the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora will continue to be an important player in the affairs of the island, even in times of peace and often through direct material or discursive interventions.

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