

Shifting forms of diaspora engagement among the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora

By Nicholas Van Hear and Giulia Liberatore

As argued elsewhere in this collection,¹ the degree of congruence between the perceptions and aspirations of people in diaspora and the perspectives of those who remain in the country of origin has long been a matter of debate. The notion of a disjunction between the diaspora and those at home has been hotly contested in the case of Sri Lankan Tamils, particularly in the wake of the defeat by government forces of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the annihilation of its leadership in May 2009. Many well-informed observers have held the view that the Tamil diaspora has long become somewhat divorced from the people left behind in the Tamil areas (e.g. ICG 2010; Rajasingam 2009). Others, particularly within certain sections of the diaspora, have argued that the connection between the diaspora and those at home remains strong (Advisory Committee of the TGTE 2010), or that the degree of disconnection has been overstated (Vimalarajah and Cheran 2010).

Analysis of evidence gathered over a decade or more in Sri Lanka, the UK, Canada and other diaspora locations² reveals that this question may be at least partly resolved if we disaggregate different forms and spheres of diaspora engagement, and observe the ways in which the interrelations between these spheres have shifted over time. The degree of engagement has varied among the three spheres outlined elsewhere in this collection:³ that is to say the household or extended family sphere, the sphere of the ‘known community’, and the ‘imagined community’ sphere. The evidence also suggests a shift away from collective and public modes of organisation of diaspora engagement during and immediately following the end of the war

in 2009, towards more individual and private modes, drawing on individuals' networks rather than more formal organisations and associations.

The household/extended family sphere

In the sphere of the household and extended family, connections stayed resilient during much of the war and remained so in the post-war period. Remittances to those remaining in conflict areas were the main expression of such connection. After the defeat of the LTTE in 2009 such linkages remained strong, the more so now that physical as well as digital linkages were possible, and visits could be made to participate in religious festivals and life course events such as births, coming of age ceremonies, weddings and funerals. Exceptions are where whole families have moved out and away from Sri Lanka, and there is little interest in continuing links, apart perhaps for maintenance of the family house if it is retained. In the post-conflict Jaffna peninsula and other areas that were embroiled in conflict, remittance use has to some degree spread beyond everyday consumption to medium- or long-term investments in property and small businesses, as well as to fund additional migration of family members to join their relatives in diaspora locations.

The known community sphere

In contrast to the continued and intense engagement in the household sphere during and after the war, there appears to have been a significant shift within the 'known community' sphere of associational life towards increasingly fragmented forms of engagement after the defeat of the LTTE in 2009. During the war, the LTTE exerted pervasive influence on Tamil associational life in many diaspora locations, though this was more intense in some places than in others – the LTTE's grip was stronger in places like Switzerland and Norway than in the UK and Canada which have larger Tamil populations that are more diverse in terms of class background, cohort of arrival, legal status and generation. Independently of the LTTE, diaspora members had influence on communities they had left in Sri Lanka through hometown and old school associations involved in recovery activities; this was particularly the case during lulls in

fighting and during a cease fire in 2002–04 (Brun and Van Hear 2012). However, this collective engagement appeared to subside in many diaspora locations after the end of the war, when fewer seemed to be active members of diaspora associations and efforts to help communities back home seem to have become more individualised: a pattern of fragmented diaspora engagement had emerged, characterised by predominantly *ad hoc* financial contributions, which were nonetheless highly dependent upon personal networks. Many said that they preferred to make financial contributions on an occasional basis towards humanitarian, educational, health and livelihood projects. They underlined their scepticism towards contributing through more formal organisations and their preference for channeling their contributions through informal networks of kin and friends. The apparent disengagement at the collective level was borne out by respondents in former conflict areas in Sri Lanka, most of whom said they had never heard of diaspora activities in their communities; those who did know of them said such activities were modest in scale and impact.

A partial exception to this story of collective disengagement was the position assumed by religious institutions, which played an important mediating role in the ‘known community’ sphere by channelling contributions from the diaspora through temples, churches and mosques in Sri Lanka. Thanks perhaps to their organisational structure, church groups seem to send more regular contributions, often used in rebuilding or sustaining other churches in Sri Lanka, or channelled towards various local poverty-alleviation, health and educational projects. Temples are also involved in collecting funds and in-kind contributions, but these are often organised through informal networks of devotees rather than by the temple management. Many of these forms of engagement, which might appear to be organised through formal institutions, are thus instead heavily reliant on informal networks which are created and sustained mostly (but not only) through these institutions.

The imagined community

Diaspora engagement within the ‘imagined community’ sphere has been seen most prominently in the mobilisation of sentiments and

political action connected with the idea of Tamil Eelam – a Tamil homeland. As already noted, during the war the grip of the LTTE remained tight, both among the Tamil diaspora and in the areas in Sri Lanka which it controlled. Support among the diaspora was generally strong, although it varied over time and by location, as already observed. Sentiment and support for Tamil Eelam was for the most part resilient throughout the war, although it weakened through war-weariness as the 2000s wore on, and surged again with a large-scale mobilisation in the diaspora at the war's end (Brun and Van Hear 2012). This latter movement saw the engagement of second and '1.5 generation' Tamils who in 2009–10 organised large demonstrations in most diaspora locations in Western countries to protest at the plight of civilians caught up in the final phase of the war and their detention in a holding camp in northern Sri Lanka afterwards. The post-war period was also marked by several significant institutional initiatives, which promoted the Tamil 'imagined community' in various ways: these included umbrella groupings such as the Global Tamil Forum (GTF) and an attempt at transnational government – the Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (TGTE), which was formed after elections in all the major Tamil diaspora locations in May 2010, a year after the defeat of the LTTE.

Not long after the end of the war though, disillusion and disenchantment began to set in as these efforts appeared to have little effect in Sri Lanka. Splits within these new diasporic organisations led to increasing scepticism among diasporans of the efficacy of these bodies. Many in the diaspora and in northern Sri Lanka expressed ambivalent attitudes towards the possibility of Tamil Eelam.

More than five years after the end of the war then, engagement in the 'imagined community' sphere pointed to a growing disillusionment with the LTTE and its legacy organisations formed in the wake of the defeat of the Tigers in 2009. These perspectives evidence a shift away from the politically active high-point involving second and 1.5 generation Tamils in the period between 2009 and 2010, and a counterpoint to the proliferation of political bodies and advocacy groups that emerged following the demise of the LTTE (Brun and Van Hear 2012).

Conclusion

It has been argued that in the wake of the LTTE's defeat in 2009 the views of many in the diaspora on the future of the nationalist struggle seem to have been at odds with the views of those in Sri Lanka (ICG 2010; Rajasingam 2009). Many of the post-war initiatives, which had varying support among the diaspora (Vimalarajah and Cheran 2010), appeared to have little purchase among Tamils at home who were more concerned with rebuilding their lives at the household level than with pursuing the separatist cause (Brun and Van Hear 2012).

This divergence may be overstated, however. As suggested above, there are significant differences among the various diaspora locations. Partly because of their size, different composition and migratory history, more diverse views hold sway among the largest communities of diaspora Tamils in the UK and Canada (Brun and Van Hear 2012; Amarasingam forthcoming), than in other important Tamil diaspora locations such as Australia, Germany, France, Norway and Switzerland, which tend to be more LTTE loyalist (Hess and Korf 2014). Many in Sri Lanka and the diaspora emphasise the importance of peace, recovery and development as crucial priorities, rather than continuing support for the cause of Tamil Eelam – though the meanings of 'peace', 'recovery' and 'development' are contentious and politically charged.

New connections or disjunctions may well emerge among the different parts of the diaspora and between the diaspora and those inside the country. Disaggregating diaspora engagement in the three spheres that we have identified, and exploring the interplay among them is, we suggest, a productive approach for understanding current and future connections and disjunctions in this and other diasporas generated by conflict.

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International Development Research Centre for financial support. See Van Hear (this collection, pp. 32–35) for the conceptual framework underlying this piece, and Liberatore (this collection, pp. 116–121) for another empirical case which deploys a similar approach. □

Endnotes

1. See Van Hear (this collection, pp. 32–35).
2. This contribution draws on some 80 interviews in northern Sri Lanka and about the same number in the UK conducted in 2010–14, under the rubric of the Oxford Diasporas Programme.
3. See Van Hear (this collection, pp. 32–35).

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