

## EDITORIAL

## TAMIL GUARDIAN

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## The Diaspora

## Expatriate Tamils will not be excluded from the Tamil question in Sri Lanka.

The global Tamil Diaspora has recently come to international prominence in the context of the seething ethnic question in Sri Lanka. While key Western states are expanding their interactions with expatriate Tamils within their own societies, the Sri Lankan state has intensified its shrill invectives against them - primarily on the basis of their ethnicity. The Diaspora Tamils, for their part, have begun, with determination, to organize themselves politically and marshal their not inconsiderable capacities anew towards the liberation of their fellow Tamils struggling under Colombo's heel.

While this transnational community is now the source of much interest, hope and fear, depending on one's politics, one thing is self evident: the global Tamil Diaspora is indispensable to resolving Sri Lanka's sixty year old imbroglio. However, much of the recent commentary on the Diaspora, both in research and media, not only fails to account for the specific reality of Tamil expatriates in the West, it consciously serves to misrepresent and vilify them. The Diaspora is typically presented in these sullen narratives as a petulant and indulgent grouping, one distinct from the 'reasonable' Tamils 'on the ground'. This deliberate characterization is, of course, a precursor to its real, if futile, purpose: denying expatriate Tamils their rightful place in the resolution of the Tamil question in Sri Lanka and limiting their role in the island's politics.

Crucially, these attempts to objectify the Diaspora Tamils turns on a double denial: on the one hand they are deemed separate from, even alien to, their brethren on the island; on the other hand they are held to be different from, and somehow lesser than, other citizens of the Western states where they have now long resided. Both claims, which together seek to position the Diaspora in some liminal zone of reduced relevance to Sri Lanka, are utterly untenable. In fact, the Tamil Diaspora makes up a complex transnational community, one completely at ease as both Eelam Tamils and as fully integrated and active citizens of Western societies.

To begin with, the Tamil Diaspora is a direct produce of Sinhala oppression. The early émigrés who left the island in the sixties and seventies for the West, sometimes via spells in other Commonwealth countries, did so when successive Sinhalese regimes forced them out of state employment, stacked the market against their entrepreneurial efforts, and foreclosed access to university education for their children. Let it not be forgotten that this was the era of Tamil mass agitation and civil disobedience, of the rise of the near universally-supported Federal Party and the Tamil United Liberation, yes, Liberation, Front. Let us also not forget this was the time of routine Sinhala riots and mob violence against Tamils and creation of today's majoritarian constitution.

But it was in the eighties and nineties that Tamils fled the island in massive numbers. Again, it was the specific military strategies and tactics adopted by the Sinhala state that spurred the desperate flight which brought the bulk of today's expatriates to the West. Let us not forget how, for

decades, Tamils outside government control endured mass bombardment and starvation by blockade while those under Colombo's heel lived under daily threat of torture, rape, disappearance and summary execution. The grisly details, should they matter, are to be found in the archives of international human rights groups, Western newspapers and asylum tribunals.

In other words, the majority of Diaspora adults have had direct experience of pernicious Sinhala rule, of the Tamils' daily struggle for survival and human dignity. We are thus in no way alienated from the experiences of the Tamils 'over there'. Moreover, the majority of Tamils who reached Western shores did not walk into a life of clover. Many arrived in debt, having paid the ruthless 'agents' who exploited as they saved lives. The arrivals struggled to also support families, both close and extended, left behind, while fighting repeated deportations by callous immigration regimes. The point here is that the Sinhala terror has been a constant part of Tamil lived experience, both 'over there' and 'over here'.

Yet the nascent Diaspora survived and later, thrived. They now form a truly global commercial, social and now political network. This did not happen by happenstance, but by myriad, indefatigable efforts to rebuild in the host lands what had been lost to Sinhala oppression in the homeland. And in past decades, the Tamils 'over there' have never been forgotten: apart from supporting their families, Diaspora Tamils have long supported the wider social fabric in their homeland, even as it was being torn apart by Sinhala regimes. We supported and rebuilt the main schools in the Northeast, while Colombo neglected, damaged and destroyed them. We rebuilt damaged temples and village infrastructure such as water tanks. When the Norwegian peace process began, we came back in droves, and with a will to rebuild and foster local capacities through direct help and training. Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu districts, ruthlessly razed to the ground by the Sinhala state, drew willing Diaspora funding, expertise and volunteers. When the December 2004 tsunami struck our people, the Diaspora mobilized as never before - even as Colombo blocked, pilfered and diverted international aid. Everything the Diaspora built was, of course, contemptuously destroyed by the Sri Lankan state - the same regime, incidentally, that mockingly calls on us to hand over our money for 'development'. The point of all this is to underline that Diaspora Tamils have long been involved in the rehabilitation and development of their homeland. None of their efforts have ever been welcomed or supported by international actors, whilst being actively despised and attacked by the Sinhala state. Indeed, the Diaspora has long been invisible in the scholarly or policy analysis or viewed narrowly as mere 'war mongers', by virtue of their support for armed struggle against Sinhala oppression.

But it is not the Diaspora's fault that they have been caricatured thus. Since the early eighties Tamil organizations in the West have tried to make their case, to Western states, media, politi-

cians, human rights groups and others. Arguing Sinhala oppression and slow genocide, they were met by these actors with condescension and patronizing advice to encourage Tamil militants to 'give up violence and separatism.' Of course, as the community struggled for stability and security in their host lands, they could neither mobilise effectively nor marshal their resources to ensure they have a say in their people's future. The passage of time has changed this.

The intense political activity in the Tamil Diaspora in recent times is a direct consequence of not only this historical trajectory, but expatriate Tamils' thorough integration into the emergent global liberal order. The Diaspora is often portrayed as somehow not really Western citizens. Nothing could be further from the truth. In many Western countries, and certainly the English-speaking ones, Tamils are engaged in all facets of social, economic and political life. They run for all kinds of political office and are employed or run enterprises in almost all major sectors while comfortably blending Tamil and Western cultures.

The point here is that Diaspora Tamils have as full an understanding as possible of core political phenomena, especially liberal democracy and market economics. They know how it should work and why it doesn't in Sri Lanka. The series of referenda on Tamil Eelam held across the Diaspora in recent times, the formation of numerous political organisations and structures, and undertaking of boycotts, protests and so on, are informed not by some narrow ethnocentricity, but by the experiences of living in states and societies that genuinely practice liberal democracy, pluralism and free markets.

In that regard, the second generation of Diaspora youth which has emerged in the forefront of protest, lobbying and other political activity in the past year are no different to their West-based counterparts who champion a myriad other causes. Indeed, many were active in other political spaces, both domestic and global, before Sri Lanka's brazen, systematic massacres, unfolding on Western and Tamil television screens, along with the defeat of the main Tamil voice, the LTTE, redirected their focus.

Sri Lanka's conflict is escalating. Whilst the high intensity violence of open war is no more, the vast majority of Tamils in the island live in conditions of manifestly deepening repression. As ever, many will try to speak for the Tamils, even as they struggle to rebuild their lives - their plight has been intensified acutely since the utterly unfulfilled clauses on 'Normalisation' in the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement were penned. Whilst the international community debates how to transform the Sinhala ethnocracy into a liberal democracy, the Diaspora will politically advocate the Tamil case. In doing so, expatriate Tamils will undoubtedly have to contend with those who continue to infantilise and seek to marginalize them. But, unlike at any time before, we are now equipped, politically, socially and economically, to resist this and pursue the Tamil nation's legitimate and long-denied aspirations.