

Caste within the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora

***Ūr* Associations and Territorial Belonging**

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Abstract

This article considers data on London Tamils from Jaffna peninsula, northern Sri Lanka, to examine caste interactions in relation to their efforts to reconnect with people in the diaspora and 'at home'. Tamils in and around London are part of a substantial number of ūr associations, which pertain to a particular village, region, or island in Sri Lanka, as well as a specific caste. I consider their efforts through changing and unchanging attitudes to caste to recreate a sense of community away from home. I examine the diaspora communities' understanding of the institution of caste as part of a wider landscape of belonging. I explore how caste divisions in the ūr become re-territorialized among the Tamil diaspora. The historical context of these activities relate to the wide dispersal and separation of Tamils from their Sri Lankan homeland during the upheaval of the armed conflict. The article also demonstrates how caste-based relationships and kinship ties shape the lives of members of the Tamil diaspora in London, and how caste-based and fragmented identities operate in such transnational Tamil diaspora localities.

Introduction

In November 2014, I received the following invitation via text from a fellow Sri Lankan Tamil:

Puṅgudutīvu association-UK proudly presents its annual event, *kārruvalik kirāmam*¹ 2014. We cordially invite you and your family members to participate in this event. Programme includes Puṅgudutīvu Got Talent show; *maṅṅin maintarkaḷ*²; honouring the graduates; raffle tickets; prize giving and many more. Free entry for all. Love our homeland like your own and help our Tamils through our charity. Date: 20/12/2014, Time: 5pm – 10pm. Place: Pinner. For further details, please call the following numbers...

This festival was organised around a specific island, Puṅgudutīvu, located in Jaffna peninsula, northern Sri Lanka, and was intended to stir a strong sense of 'ūr identity' and bonding amongst attendees. I was invited because a member of the organising committee knew I was conducting research on ūr associations in the UK. The Tamil term ūr can refer to a particular village, region, or island in their country of origin and is used by Tamil exiles to identify themselves as a group. This particular association hosting the aforementioned event is comprised of people from the dominant Veḷḷāḷar caste³ from Puṅgudutīvu Jaffna. Historically, the Jaffna Veḷḷāḷars had the privileged position of migrating overseas for educational and occupational purposes (Banks 1960; Daniel and Thangaraj 1995). However, following their horrific experiences in Sri Lanka after the escalation of civil war and political violence since the 1980s, other caste groups are also migrants through asylum claims.

¹ *Kārruvalik kirāmam* is an anthology of modern poems written by a writer and poet from Puṅgudutīvu, Jaffna, the late Mr. S. Vilvaratnam. The phrase *kārruvalik kirāmam* is also used as the title for the annual festival of the Puṅgudutīvu association-UK. A book titled *kārruvalik kirāmam* containing chapters on the history, heritage, customs and other aspects of island life is also published at every annual festival.

² *Maṅṅin myntarkaḷ* translates as 'the sons of the soil'. At every festival, members who have contributed to the educational, economic, and cultural development of Puṅgudutīvu island are honoured with the title of *maṅṅin myntarkaḷ*.

³ Veḷḷāḷars in Jaffna historically held positions as landowners and farmers.

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A limited number of studies conducted amongst Tamil asylum migrants across Europe illustrate the composition of migrants' castes and caste-related discourse as supplementary themes.⁴ Daniel and Thangaraj (1995) researched Tamil immigrants in the UK and divided them into three different groups based on the period of their arrival, the purpose of their migration and their class and caste background. According to their findings, the early immigrants to Britain came for educational and professional purposes from well-educated, 'upper caste' elite backgrounds. Immigrants of the middle phase, who came as students before the armed conflict, were from Veļļālar middle class backgrounds. Following the civil war, groups of mixed castes came as refugees claiming asylum in Britain. Likewise, Christopher McDowell (1996, 1999) illustrates the caste profile of Tamil asylum seekers in Switzerland between 1983 and 1991. Of the asylum seekers during this period, 62% were from the Veļļālar caste; 13% belonged to the Karaiyār⁵ caste; 4% were from the Mukkiyar (or Mukkuvar)⁶ caste; artisan castes⁷ accounted for 5%, while 11% were from the oppressed

⁴ Caste is not a census category in Sri Lanka. As a result, no reliable information is available presently about the size of population in each caste. Tamils in general, and those from historically oppressed castes in particular, are uncomfortable to disclose their caste identity in public or to a stranger or in any administrative survey. Jane Derges (2013: 76) points out how a Jaffna man from an oppressed caste (toddy tapper) politely refused to have his picture taken, saying that he did not want his name and picture with all the tools of his trade to appear in published form.

⁵ The traditional occupation of Karaiyārs involves shipping and fishing. The Karaiyār caste played a dominant role in the liberation struggle for an independent Tamil homeland for nearly three decades since the 1980s (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1993).

⁶ The caste-based occupation of Mukkuvars is fishing. McDowell considers Mukkuvar an artisan caste, though it is not recognised as such in the Jaffna caste system, and hence the Mukkuvar could be deemed a separate caste group and the percentage is calculated accordingly (McDowell 1996: 128). The Mukkuvar caste, over the centuries established themselves in the eastern coastal regions of Sri Lanka, namely Batticaloa and Ampara districts and became a dominant caste group. They have until today practised independent traditions, and enjoyed their own political power and ritual superiority in these regions (for further detail, see McGilvray 1982).

⁷ The caste groups whose occupations involve some form of art are called artisan castes in traditional Jaffna society. These include Taṭṭār (goldsmiths), Kaikuļār (silk weavers), Tachchar (carpenters), Kollar (blacksmiths) and Kusavar (potters).

castes⁸. The estimate indicates that 6% are from other castes (McDowell 1996: 127-129). The statistics further show that the proportion of Tamil migrants from the Veļļālar caste has steadily declined in recent decades, while Tamils from Karaiyār, artisan, and oppressed castes increased progressively.

On the day of the Puᅅgudutīvu association-UK annual festival, the festival hall, which could accommodate around 500 people, was fully occupied. Participants included people who had migrated from Puᅅgudutīvu, their UK-born children, and grandchildren. Migrant youth who have completed their university degrees successfully in the UK and are also from the particular geographic origin in homeland are honoured at this event. Funds raised from the raffle are used for natal to found community projects back on Puᅅgudutīvu. The association awards certificates of participation to all participants in the entertainment events during the festival celebration. The Puᅅgudutīvu community in the UK is committed to attending these ceremonies and, thereby showing their support for and also re-creating a sense of belonging to their particular geographical territory.

The majority of people belonging to Puᅅgudutīvu no longer live in their place of origin. According to the population census available at the Velanai Divisional Secretariat (DS office), Jaffna, there were approximately 20,000 people in Puᅅgudutīvu in 1990. As of January 2016, only around 4,000 remain on the island; most left during the 1991 exodus and subsequent violence and are now dispersed in other parts of Sri Lanka and abroad. The festival's name, *kārruvalik kirāmam*, indicates the notion of this depopulated island.

⁸ Five caste groups, namely the Ampaᅇᅇar (barbers), the Naļavar (toddy tappers), the Paᅇaiyar (funeral drummers), the Vaᅇᅇār (launder-men) and the Paļļar (agricultural labourers), are treated as oppressed caste groups. In this paper I use the terms underprivileged or oppressed castes to refer to people from the aforementioned social groups. Academics and researchers who looked at caste in traditional and contemporary Jaffna used different names for these castes, such as 'untouchables' (Banks 1960; Pfaffenberger 1981; 1982), 'low castes' (David 1974; 1977), 'minority Tamils' (Pfaffenberger 1990), 'depressed castes', 'oppressed castes' (Silva et al. 2009), 'aᅇimai/kuᅇimai' (slave/domestic servants) (Raghavan 1971), 'paᅇchamar' (the Tamil term collectively refers to the five caste groups) (Jeyarajah 2001; Silva et al. 2009) and 'dalit' (Ravikumar 2002). Kuganathan (2014: 79-80) calls this 'politics of naming the oppressed castes'.

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The Tamil word *kārruvali* may be translated as ‘wind’s path’, while *kirāmam* (also *girāmam*) means village. However, the actual meaning of the phrase *kārruvalik kirāmam* is ‘the village whose roads are used only by the wind’. This depicts the depopulated and dilapidated island in Jaffna, due to the displacement of its people during the armed conflict in northern Sri Lanka.

My conversation with one of the founding members of the Puṅgudutīvu association regarding his motives for initiating the *ūr* association in London, revealed the role this association plays in reuniting the dispersed community members, working towards the welfare of their *ūr* in Jaffna and also the tensions between such organisations and their pan-Tamil counterparts:

There are a number of organisations functioning in the midst of the Tamil diaspora, principally those who fought for political freedom and the sympathisers of the Tamil struggle in our homeland. We were unable to help our *ūr* people through these organisations. The only way to help them was through uniting our *ūr* community in London and other Western countries. When we proposed to form our own *ūr* association, we were advised by the London members of the LTTE⁹ [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam] and other Tamil national struggle sympathisers, not to start a separate association, as it could create divisions, eventually damage the unity of the Tamil community. They also stated that they could help our *ūr* and its development through their institutions. However, we knew that such political organisations would not help us in the way

⁹ LTTE, the Tamil militant movement fought for establishing an independent Tamil state (known as Tamil Eelam) in the north and the east of Sri Lanka. The LTTE movement was brutally defeated by Sri Lankan forces in May 2009. There is a ban imposed upon caste by the LTTE treating it as a potential obstacle to a unified Eelam liberation struggle (Silva et al. 2009). Cheran (2001: 7) indicates that ‘the issues of caste have been treated as *pesāp poru* (silent topics) in Tamil language nationalist discourses. There has been a general reluctance to discuss caste issues in public. The tendency is to assert that caste was a thing of the past and Tamil Eelam will be caste-free. Any open discussion on caste is seen as bringing the old divisiveness back and therefore not healthy for the Tamil liberation struggle.’

in which we wanted to support our community. Thus, we decided to form an association of our own. Now, we have been running it successfully for nearly twenty years.

The need to reunite with people from the same background, despite the efforts by the LTTE to downplay these ties, indicates the strong affinities diasporic Tamils continue to hold towards their *ūr*. The desire of the LTTE and their sympathisers was to achieve Tamil Eelam under a 'common Tamil national identity'. Efforts in this regard involved downplaying the fragmented identities of caste, kinship, class, and region within the Tamil nation.

The six *ūr* associations, among many located around London, where I conducted fieldwork operate in the name of their place of origin. Of the six *ūr* associations, four belong to the dominant Veḷḷāḷar caste, and the other two are run by Paḷḷars¹⁰, one of the underprivileged caste groups. By underprivileged or oppressed castes, I refer to the historically utilised caste hierarchical status, particularly those who were located at the 'lowest acceptance' stratum of Jaffna Tamil society. The committee members of these associations readily list their project activities that had been carried out so far, projects currently on-going and projects in the pipeline. Significantly, while these associations are closely associated with a particular caste group in exile, members avoid voicing their caste-based affinities, instead describing their welfare activities in their *ūr*, such as building community centres, running free tuition classes, giving donations to *ūr* schools and providing medical apparatus to their *ūr* hospital. This paper examines the hidden and unrevealed discourse of caste among the Tamil diaspora, and its role in the establishment of *ūr* associations in London. I analyse how caste extends itself through *ūr* affinity into the UK.

¹⁰ The Paḷḷar is one of the five underprivileged caste groups in the Jaffna caste system. They were traditionally known as toddy tappers and landless agricultural labourers.

Data Collection and Positionality

My fieldwork in London was conducted in different locations. I selected individuals and groups who associate collectively on a regular basis in the name of their ancestral *ūr*. I participated in their 'get-togethers' in places such as Harrow, Pinner, Northolt, Southall, East Ham, and other areas where Tamils largely reside in and around London and areas outside London. By doing so, I developed a list of potential participants for my formal and informal conversations and interviews. A part of my London fieldwork also consisted of visiting individuals in their houses and shops, as well as meeting them in restaurants and pubs. I used the 'snowball-sampling' method, which allowed me to find potential individuals who could share their experience on their involvement in their *ūr* associations. Most of my research participants belong to the first generation of Sri Lankan migrants and lived in their homeland prior to coming to the UK. I was also able to discuss caste with UK-born youths, particularly from the Vellālar caste background, at the same occasions where I had conversations with their parents.

I have been living in London and closely associating with the members of different Tamil diaspora organisations, including *ūr* associations, since 2010. Through these personal and research-led interactions, I study my own cultural identities and ideologies empirically and critically, coming from an oppressed caste background (Ampaṭṭar¹¹) and Tamil ethnic status. My caste status did not negatively or conspicuously affect my data collection with historically dominant caste members. It may be because caste status is not directly asked or spoken of in a public setting among Tamils. There are however, a number of indirect ways of knowing one's caste origin in everyday conversation among Tamils, when such needs arise. This aspect is discussed below. As a result of this unspoken attitude on caste status in public, I too did not divulge to my research participants that I was doing research on caste, until I established a good rapport with them. I do, however, hold a privileged position because of

¹¹ The caste-based occupation of the Ampaṭṭar is hairdressing.

my fluency in Tamil, ethnic origin, familiarity in my field, and long-term engagement in various positions from volunteering and working as a hairdresser, researcher, university lecturer, media coordinator, and documentary filmmaker during different periods of time in the UK and Sri Lanka. My privileged position as an insider and the expertise obtained through my lived experiences may lead me to a particular mode of inquiry into my own society differing from an outsider's perspective. I was in a position to play 'the native card' in negotiating dual identities (insider and researcher) (Jacobs-Huey 2002). I attempted throughout fieldwork to collect data from different caste groups rather than only looking at it from the perspectives of dominant castes. I was able to reflect and critically engage with the accounts given by the dominant castes on oppressed castes and vice versa. As Judith Okely (1992) and Narmala Halstead (2001) point out, this reflexive approach includes being critical of how one interprets data. Hence, my positionality at the time of fieldwork and post-fieldwork can be described as 'reflexive insider'.

Territorial Belonging: *Ūr* vs. Tamil Homeland

The Tamil word *ūr* has multiple meanings in terms of geographical territory, context of usage, and affiliation of individuals and groups. *Ūr* is seen by exile communities as a force that reunites dispersed members under the notion of *ūrchchaṅgam* (*ūr+saṅgam = ūrchchaṅgam*). *Ūrchchaṅgam* refers to the relationship between notions of home and a particular native village/region/island in Sri Lanka. The notion of *ūr* is discussed extensively in Daniel's (1987) ethnographic work on South Indian Tamil villages and Sharika Thiranagama's (2011) ethnography on Jaffna Tamils and the Tamil-speaking Muslim population in Sri Lanka. While Daniel glosses *ūr* as the English 'home', Thiranagama uses both 'home' and the English word 'village' because Sri Lankan Tamils and Muslims take *ūr* to mean village. The direct meaning of the English word 'village' however, in Tamil is *kirāmam*. Tamils from Sri Lanka use both *ūr* and *kirāmam* to refer to their villages. As Thiranagama suggests, my research participants also used *ūr* to refer to their native/ancestral place, which also refers to a specific area of a particular a village (i.e. an area historically inhabited by a particular caste(s) in a particular village). Banks (1960) and David (1973) call this a 'ward'. However, in everyday conversations,

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Tamil immigrants often use the term *ūr* to convey other meanings. *Ūr* in the Jaffna context was limited to a specific geographic, socioeconomic, and cultural landscape but is now utilised by the diaspora to denote areas beyond its traditional boundaries, due to the formation of transnational Tamil communities outside the country.

In Jaffna, the internal spatial organisation of each *ūr* was arranged in wards, where each ward belonged to a particular caste group/s and the relationships among the communities were built based on caste, kinship, and hierarchical differences (Banks 1960; David 1973). In the diaspora, each caste group creates a separate space for itself by reproducing their caste-specific *ūr* in exile. This practice is highly relevant to understanding the caste-based socio-economic and cultural landscapes of diasporic Jaffna Tamils, which are noticeable in their everyday conversations and social settings. For example, when I got to know my research participants in London, the first question usually asked was; where are you from in Sri Lanka? If the answer is Jaffna, then the second question will be what is your *ūr* in Jaffna? This question is asked mainly to find out the person's background, ancestry, caste origin, and character (Daniel 1987; Thiranagama 2011). The questions that follow delve deeper, involving inquiries about specific location, relatives and the occupation of ancestors in the homeland. These questions help to assess one's caste. The traditional caste geography in Jaffna has, to some extent, undergone changes due to repeated internal and external displacements of different caste groups. Caste divisions, however, often resurface either in London or Jaffna when people are provided with the stability to associate and reunite with their own caste group, including in long-term internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps¹² in Jaffna (Thanges 2008; 2015b) and through *ūr* associations in London.

¹² Long-term IDP camps in Jaffna peninsula are predominantly comprised of certain castes. As of November 2015, of the thirty-two IDP camps located in Tellippalai, Uduvil, Sandilippai, Koppai, Nallur, Karavetty and Point Pedro DS divisions, the inhabitants of twenty-five camps largely belong to three oppressed caste groups, namely the Naḷavar, the Paḷḷar and the Paḷaiyar, who were respectively known as toddy tappers, agricultural labourers and funeral drummers/cleaners. The remaining six IDP camps in the Point Pedro DS division are inhabited by the Karaiyār, known traditionally as fishermen.

The word *ūr* is, thus, used in relation to both a smaller unit (a native village/region/island) and a larger entity (Tamil homeland). *Ūrukku eppa porīṅka!*? (when are you going to *ūr*?) is the question frequently asked from one Tamil immigrant to another. The *ūr* in this context means 'homeland' rather than merely a 'native village'. The *ūr* here can be Sri Lanka, Tamil Eelam, Jaffna, their village or a combination of all. As Daniel (1987) indicates, *ūr* is contextual, self-expressive, person-centric, and fluid. Whereas *ūr* in some contexts overlaps with a Tamil homeland (Tamil Eelam) as a subject of fluidity, Tamil Eelam does not have the same flexibility. Tamil Eelam is an identified homeland, with fixed boundaries and an imaginary territory in the north and east of Sri Lanka.

Fuglerud (1999, 2001) conducted fieldwork among Tamil migrants in Norway and identified two different territorial principles, namely the nomadic and the sedentary. The nomadic viewpoint of territoriality is understood as traditional way of life of the Tamils with internal hierarchical status as well as adapting to new ways of life in their newly adoptive counties successfully; the sedentary is identified as a revolutionary model of culture in which territory always belongs to one or the similar space, i.e. their native village, region or Tamil Eelam. Similarly, Bruland (2012, 2015) shows that the Tamil diaspora's quest to recreate meaning is grounded in their perception of family, *sontam* (closed and distant relatives) and *ūr*, and their enthusiastic engagement with LTTE's ideology and practices. By exploring this, Bruland points out how the Tamil diaspora's engagements are shifting from micro social entities (person, family, relatives and *ūr*) to larger entities (Tamil ethnicity and Tamil homeland) and made meaningful in transnational diasporic settings. The ways in which people in London's Tamil diaspora identify with *eṅkada ākka!*/*sontakkārar* (our caste persons) as distinct from *maṛra/piṛatti ākka!* (other caste persons) is subtly and sometimes plainly visible in *ūr* associations and through arranged marriages. However, Tamil people in London also use the concept of *eṅkada makka!*/*saṅaṅka!* (our ethnic people) to identify with the wider landscape of the Tamil homeland and ethnicity, irrespective of caste. As shown, *ūr*, *sontam*, *eṅkada ākka!*, and *eṅkada makka!* represent shifting and multiple forms of identification amongst Tamils in the diaspora, categories through which individuals

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construct a sense of belonging to particular groups as well as create boundaries between them.

During the annual festivals of *ūr* associations in London, participants do not usually articulate Tamil nationalism or political issues relating to a fixed Tamil homeland. Members did not identify themselves with either Sri Lanka or Tamil Eelam in this context. Instead, they eagerly shared memories of their place of origin and talked about their school, hospital and welfare projects currently being undertaken in these Jaffna locales. This may be because there are a number of organisations among the Tamil diaspora working for Tamil political and national issues.¹³ Although they do not articulate Tamil nationalist narratives at *ūr* festivals, I observed the same people do articulate Tamil nationalism in other contexts, referring to the Tamil national struggle and political and human right issues in Sri Lanka. The *ūr* festivals usually start with a one-minute *mouṇa añchali* (silent prayer) in honour of their people (*eṅkada makkaḷ*) who suffered during the armed conflict in Sri Lanka. Apart from the silent remembrance, the events that follow do not touch on the homeland's national politics or related matters. The member of the association who invited me to participate in their annual festival stated the purpose of the gathering as follows:

We reunite as an *ūr* community [*ūrchchamūkam*], where we do not like to talk politics; that is something we do not want to bring here. There is our Tamil nation, for which Tamils have been fighting. But we do not have control over it. This is about our *ūr* where we were born and with which we have a sense belonging. We do not like to mix the 'politicised Tamil nation' with our *ūr*.

¹³ Approximately sixteen of the many Tamil diasporic organisations in the UK work exclusively work for the liberation of the Tamil nation. These organisations were banned by the Sri Lankan government in 2014 for their alleged anti-Sri Lankan activities. Amarnath Amarasingam (2015) discusses the reaction and activism of the Tamil diaspora and its movements during the final stage of the civil war in Sri Lanka extensively.

Another reason for not articulating national politics at their *ūr* event in London was explained by the fact that members of the diaspora want to work closely with people remaining in the village, as well as visit their ancestral home on a regular basis. Development projects for their *ūr* in the homeland require support from governmental and non-governmental organisations in Jaffna. Even though immigrants had a variety of experiences in their homeland with regard to Tamil national issues and nationalism (Daniel 2000; Cheran 2000), they consciously avoid articulating them at their community events thinking that this may damage their welfare projects and harm their socio-economic, cultural and religious/ritualistic connections with their place of origin.

Caste and Ūr Associations of the London Tamil Diaspora

While memories, history and identity are re-imagined, constructed, and realised within a nation (Anderson 1983), they are simultaneously identified with the local territorial and social identities within the nation and in many instances differ from and are in contrast to the constructed dominant Tamil national identity. Notions of Tamil identity relating to language, shared memory, history and territorial belonging often bring up a dominant discourse in relation to national pride. Hegemonic notions of 'Tamilness' often fail to illustrate local identities and their (re)construction within the nation, as well as beyond its traditional territorial boundaries. It is these simultaneously local and transnational identifications that are becoming increasingly important in constructing 'Tamilness' (Cheran 2001). The *ūrchchaṅgam* is one such social entity among the Tamil diaspora. The *ūr* identity is deeply rooted within the Tamil way of life; even after the Tamil individuals have learnt to cope successfully with life in new societies outside their country of origin. The Tamil diaspora is composed of different castes, classes, and religious groups including youths and children of the second generation (Daniel and Thangaraj 1995; McDowell 1996; 1999, Fibiger Qvortrup 2010; Hess and Korf 2014). However, each *ūr* association is populated and run by individuals from a single caste group; during my fieldwork, I could not find any *ūr* associations comprised of mixed castes.

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When the first generation of Tamils came from their homeland and attempted to reunite with members of their dispersed community under the notion of their native place, they drew a clear boundary in relation to caste identity and its traditional hierarchical differences. Amongst some well-established *ūr* associations in London operated by *Vellāḷars*, there is an open invitation for all caste groups to join and participate in their committees, as well as contribute to their welfare-oriented projects that are initiated in their *ūr*. However, people from the invited groups, particularly people of historically oppressed castes, do not usually accept such invitations. A former president of an *ūr* association stated that 'we do not practise caste within our association. I myself distributed membership forms among other caste groups who migrated from our *ūr*. But I have not heard from them in response'. A secretary of another association shared the same sentiment stating that 'they [members of oppressed castes] themselves avoid taking part in our association'. These statements indicate that some *ūr* associations run by *Vellāḷars* may be ready to welcome the oppressed castes from the same homeland village in order to motivate them to participate in the activities of their associations. This unwillingness is perhaps because of the possible differential treatment that may be meted out to them on the basis of caste status and social background. Because of these perceived or real caste-oriented attitudes of the *ūr* associations, certain Tamil intellectuals and activists, whom I had conversations with in London, claimed that 'all *ūr* *chaṅgams* (*ūr* associations) are *sātich chaṅgams*' (caste associations)', since they are formed, controlled and operated by a particular caste group. It is also because, in a number of instances, the welfare activities and financial support undertaken by these associations have gone to their own caste group, their caste-based temples and libraries in their *ūr* in Jaffna.

On a number of occasions, I put forward the question of caste to members of *ūr* associations in London. Some people, particularly *Vellāḷars*, claimed that their associations were not caste associations. For example, a *Vellāḷar* member who does voluntary service as a mentor in an *ūr* association stated:

We understand the caste-orientation of our *ūr* association. Hence, it cannot be called a caste association. It is an *ūr* association through which we help all the

people in our *ūr* irrespective of their caste or creed. We, for instance, financed our *ūr* hospital to undertake eye operations for elderly people. Most of them, who benefited from our project, are from the other caste groups. When this is the reality, how can one call this a caste association?

This narrative draws a distinguishing line between the conversion of a caste community into an *ūr* association in their adoptive countries on the one hand, and the welfare-oriented projects undertaken in their *ūr* on the other. Certain well-established associations attempt to undertake welfare-oriented activities, such as providing equipment to a local hospital, giving funds for school development and water supply in their village where caste is not a deciding factor, as all groups, despite their caste differences, benefit through these projects. However, the replies of others illustrated how caste consciousness among Tamil diaspora lurks within the notion of *ūr* and territorial identity. Their replies are usually as follows: 'whether we accept it or not, caste orientation in *ūr* associations are necessary, if they are to succeed in bringing individuals together as a group'. When it comes to bringing about *ūr* level mobilisation in London, caste is seen as a central organising principle.

No one can completely deny the existence of caste orientation in every *ūr* association. Even though the members of these associations accept that only a particular caste group controls and operates the activities of every *ūr* association in London, they reject the criticism that their welfare activities or the development projects undertaken in their villages in Jaffna are solely for the benefit of their own caste group. This claim however, is often contrary to remittance practices, as the funds are usually only remitted to caste-based temple or church renovation projects. Unregistered, informal *ūr* associations around the world openly collect funds from their caste community in order to support their caste-based Hindu temples and churches in their homeland, whereas registered or formal charity/*ūr* associations functioning abroad in the name of their respective *ūr* do not collect funds from their members for such religious purposes. However, they all share a common feature: each diaspora *ūr* association includes only one particular caste group as its members. I call this notion of caste orientation

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an 'extended form of caste agency' functioning in the name of their *ūr* in Tamil diasporic settings.

Members of certain associations have debated the issue of caste orientation in their *ūr* associations and have resolved to make them caste-free associations by including other caste groups who had migrated from a particular homeland village. A member of an *ūr* association belonging to the Vellālar caste points out this issue as follows:

This issue of casteism [the practice of caste-based distinction/apartheid] in our village association came up for a discussion. Most of us do not like the idea of limiting the membership of the committee to Vellālar. Hence we decided to appoint to our committee a person from the Paraiyar caste [an oppressed caste], who also came from our *ūr*. We appointed him as the secretary. He attended only one meeting. Thereafter he stopped coming to our monthly meetings. When I asked him about the reason for his absence, he listed many reasons. I importuned him to participate. Finally, he confessed that his caste people had advised him not to participate in our association, because one day, we [Vellālar] would show our *sātip putti* [casteist character] and that it would hurt him. He told me that we would still be friends despite his unwillingness to be a part of our association. I too realised much later that what he had said is true.

This shows that different castes feel that they cannot work together as members of a particular *ūr* association, and the strength of notions of caste distinction within the London Tamil diaspora. The incident quoted above also indicates that the institution of caste continues as an organising principle in the UK. As part of my fieldwork in London, I also conversed with the aforementioned man from the Paraiyar caste in order to discover his views. He explained that during the meeting he went to, after selecting committee members, there was a discussion on an *ūr* development project. During the conversation, another committee member from the Vellālar caste mentioned the name of an oppressed caste derogatorily. On the spot, he decided not to participate in their association. This is partly

because it is perceived that an invitation by Veḷḷāḷar is not about the construction of a single Tamil ethnic group and the creation of a casteless society in exile, but rather about making people from historically lower castes work under 'a particular agenda', which could undermine the interest of underprivileged caste groups and extend similar caste-related hierarchical differences in an entirely new social and transnational setting. In the diaspora, the bound-mode (*kaṭṭupadu* = the reciprocal system) of inter-caste relations between the dominant and oppressed castes have become a nonbound-mode (*iṣdamāṇa* = free willing) of relations, where the historically oppressed and serving castes are no longer bound to the dominant caste.¹⁴ The nonbound-mode inter-caste relationship in exile led each caste group to run their own *ūr* association independently. For example, there are two *ūr* associations in the UK formed around Mallākam village in Jaffna, but one is associated with the Veḷḷāḷar caste and the other with the Paḷḷar. Maran, one of my research participants of Paḷḷar caste background, explains how caste works:

We know there is a Mallākam association belonging to Veḷḷāḷar. We formed our Mallākam association to renovate our *ūr* temple [*ūr*k *kōyil*] and then to advance our children's education there. Most of us live close to one another in Hayes and Southall in London. We know some families who come from Mallākam belonging to other caste groups. They never ask us to join their Mallākam association and neither do we. We know them and speak to them, but never work together to contribute to our village development. We are living here with the same perceptions used in our *ūr* in Jaffna.

¹⁴ David (1972; 1974) identified two extreme types of inter-caste relations in pre-war Jaffna society. These are bound-mode inter-caste relationships and nonbound-mode inter-caste relationships. Bound-mode relations occur between dominant landowners and those that worked for them, such as domestics, barbers, washermen, and labourers. Nonbound-mode relations occur in the rural entrepreneurial sector, such as between artisans and fishing castes and every other caste with which they trade (1974:44). However, David's analysis of bound-mode inter-caste relations is less or not applicable to contemporary Jaffna society. There is a paradigm shift from bound-mode inter-caste relations to the nonbound-mode in Jaffna and within the Tamil diaspora.

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People from oppressed castes in diasporic settings have more freedom with regards to caste-based practices and inter-caste relations. Both the oppressed and dominant castes, by holding their monopoly over their *ūrchchaṅgam* in exile, extend their caste agency. Caste operates in such transnational settings as unbound and unrelated elements rather than as a system with a hierarchical order or difference (Shah 2007). The operation is not dependent on inter-caste groups of the *ūr* community; nevertheless it is led, run and controlled by a single caste group.

Members of a particular caste group reunite with members of the same caste under the notion of *ūr* identity, rather than by explicitly articulating their caste identity. The function of caste in organising the group is not openly discussed in public. Articulating such an identity openly is viewed as rude and offensive. For example, Maran, a few years after his arrival in the UK, enrolled in driving lessons. His instructor, another Tamil man, often asked him about his *ūr* in Jaffna, relatives and the occupation of his ancestors without directly asking his caste. Maran was uncomfortable with the questions and knew the intention was to discover his caste status. One day Maran disclosed his Paḷḷar caste origin to the instructor. After that the instructor stopped asking questions on his background. These roundabout conversations are prevalent in finding out a person's caste. Caste differences persist subconsciously, drawing boundaries and segregating one group from another, with an element of pride in these differences.

Rathan, another Paḷḷar caste person, indicates the functions of the *ūr* associations in the UK as follows:

Many Tamils in London say that caste will disappear in due course, when it comes to the second or third generation. I do not think so, because we all live as a group with divisions in place. We form our *ūr* association, which is organised and run by our caste group. The Veḷḷāḷars also do the same. We take our families for get-togethers and events and socialise within our caste. This indirectly generates the sense of caste in them.

Rathan's statement reveals the socialisation of castes through their *ūr* associations and the affiliation of older generations and kin group in exile. These mobilisations also create a scenario where children who are born in exile interact with their own caste groups in a particular context rather than extending relationships beyond caste boundaries. The new generation learns about their *ūr* from their parents and community members, and through their occasional visits to their native place in the homeland. Here the younger generation is expected to identify themselves with the *ūr* in Jaffna from where their parents came. The observation, which I made at community annual festivals, somewhat differs from the observation made by Thiranagama (2014) in the context of young diasporic Tamils in Canada, who identified themselves with Tamil Eelam. The homeland in London is viewed as the *ūr* in Jaffna from where their family. The younger generation conveys a sense of belonging, attachment and commitment towards their ancestral places in Jaffna, as their parents and the community reminisce about their home. The second generation, particularly those who identify themselves as 'upper caste' *Veḷḷāḷar*, know their caste background and status. *Veḷḷāḷar* parents mostly ensure the education of their children on their caste background. Understandably, the parents of the children of historically oppressed castes are not similarly inclined to let their children know about their caste background. They either are silent on this matter or pretend that they belong to the *Veḷḷāḷar* caste. Members of the second generation of the *Veḷḷāḷar* caste whom I had conversations with know about their caste and its status in Jaffna, but increasingly see caste differences as the culture of their parents (see also Fibiger Qvortrup 2010) and wonder what they can do with regards to casteism. They even do not quite understand its hierarchical differences and how it persists. In general, they feel that caste has no meaning in their lives.

Yet, the community get-togethers bring caste and kin based migrants together as a community. This happens at annual festivals and at other *ūr* events during the year and intermittently when a need arises. The circulation of ideas and memories of the *ūr* amongst members across the countries where they are dispersed not only helps individuals to reunite under the notion of *ūr* but also produces a 'new form of *ūr*' operating in transnational Tamil diasporic space. This 'new transnational *ūr*' has some internal functions.

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The older immigrants, particularly Vellālar who established their *ūr* associations long ago, expect to form a youth *ūr* association in the name of their village comprising of their children. Most of these immigrants expect that younger generations must take on such responsibilities. A former president of an *ūr* association belonging to the Vellālar caste indicated that 'parents in London worry about their children's marriage and do not want their children to find a life partner outside their own community'. He believes that the youth association will create a space where Vellālar boys and girls would engage with each other and work together as a community. He also believes that this will help them find a partner from within their community and hopefully within their own caste. Parents also have an opportunity to find potential partners for their children, as their community members get to know each other through the occasional get-togethers arranged by the *ūr* associations.

It is worth mentioning my own experience of a situation during my fieldwork in London, where I was approached by a woman who saw me as a prospective bridegroom for her daughter. The members of the community usually know each other, as they closely interact with the members who are from their own caste. They also try to identify a person who is a newcomer at their events. I thought that she was asking about me, as I was a new person in their group. In the middle of the conversation however, I discovered her intention, when she asked me if I was in a relationship with anyone. She had assumed I was from the same caste background as her, since I participated in the same festival. Towards the end of the conversation she mentioned she was looking for a partner for her elder daughter. In this context, the *ūr* associations of migrant Vellālar have multiple uses. These are not merely to support or sponsor development or welfare-oriented projects in their *ūr* but also to help sustain their culture in terms of caste, and associated kinship and marriage practices. This method of matchmaking amongst migrants in London differs from transnational marriage

alliances between Tamil migrants (refugees) and homeland partners in conflict settings that have been documented by others.¹⁵

Demonstration and Concealment of Caste Identity

The demonstration and concealment of caste origins are two caste-related expressions in Tamil diaspora localities, as well as in the homeland. The sentiment towards their *ūr* and/or *ūr* association in exile does not seem to operate at a similar imaginary level across caste groups. In other words, different caste groups do not share a similar romanticized imagination of *ūr*. The sentiment of *ūr* is a fantasy for the dominant Vellālar caste, but is not the same for the oppressed castes who potentially want to escape from the caste-based hierarchical relations and discrimination. While dominant castes celebrate their *ūr* through annual festivals, oppressed castes maintain low-key functions. Even if the oppressed castes run their own *ūr* associations in their adoptive country, they do not celebrate their village annual festival as Vellālar do.

The purpose of *ūr* associations across different caste groups varies in some aspects, although all *ūr* associations carry out similar welfare projects in their *ūr*. Vellālar attempt to recreate a sense of caste superiority and enforce the continuity of their caste-specific culture through caste endogamy in the UK and by celebrating their *ūr* identity. On the other hand, people from historically oppressed castes attempt to equalise their ritual, educational and social status by collectively sending money to their *ūr*, while at the same time concealing their so-called 'lower caste identity' and in some instances pretending that they belong to the Vellālar caste. For example, the collective caste-based remittance practice is widely seen in village

¹⁵ Sidharthan and Van Hear (2014) studied transnational Tamil marriages between Tamil refugees in the diaspora and their close and extended relatives in the homeland, which took place particularly during the armed conflict in Sri Lanka. Such marriages are still taking place in post-war settings. These transnational marriages are usually arranged within the same caste group by relatives and/or matchmakers. However, younger generations of the Tamil diaspora who have been born and brought up in multicultural western societies generally do not prefer such transnational arranged marriages when finding their life partners.

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temple development projects across Jaffna peninsula. Bryan Pfaffenberger (1982: 56-57) argues that 'the differences between the dominant Veļļāļar caste and oppressed castes do not simply relate to wealth versus poverty, or power versus powerlessness. Castes are also differentiated culturally, in that Veļļāļars invest substantially in religious rituals.' People from oppressed castes receiving remittances from their overseas relatives renovate and rebuild their caste temples in Jaffna at present, even as Veļļāļars continue investing in rituals. The remittances sent by members of oppressed castes in the diaspora for this purpose reveal their investment in creating infrastructure that would allow their communities in Jaffna to have greater autonomy in the realm of religious rituals. This practice, however, also leads to the reproduction and consolidation of caste-based religious identities.

People from oppressed castes with a good education and respectable jobs entering the 'middle class' in Jaffna and abroad either attempt to erase or hide their 'lower caste' identity, or pretend to be members of the dominant Veļļāļar caste. This pretence in a small geographic territory such as a village or region in Jaffna is impossible. But it becomes increasingly possible in an urban setting and in their newly adoptive foreign destinations. One of the caste identification methods is through caste-based occupation. For example, the caste-based occupation of the Ampaṭṭar is hairdressing. Even though few individuals from other caste groups do this occupation, this job continues to be a valid caste marker of the Ampaṭṭar in Jaffna and Tamil diaspora localities. However, most Ampaṭṭar who did their caste-based occupation in their homeland stopped doing it in exile. As one member of the caste told me during fieldwork, 'Out of more than 350 families from the Jaffna Ampaṭṭar caste background living in London, only two of them continue their caste-based occupation'.¹⁶ Other Ampaṭṭars usually disassociate themselves from the individuals and families who continue the caste-based occupation in London. I met a young Tamil man from the Ampaṭṭar caste who has been practicing his caste-based occupation in a barbershop in London where I too worked as a part-time employee while conducting my PhD research. Two marriage negotiations came to an end after the families of his potential partners got to know that he was working

¹⁶ Personal communication (February 2017) with an Ampaṭṭar caste person in London.

in a salon as a hairdresser. The third marriage negotiation was successful after he agreed with his partner's family and close relatives that he would stop working as a hairdresser before the marriage. Furthermore, Ampaṭṭars who do their caste-based occupation particularly in Canada and London are not usually invited to participate in celebratory events of their caste members. The caste background of those who are doing this occupation is easily recognized. For example, an Ampaṭṭar man was running a salon in London. His fellow London Ampaṭṭars avoided associating with him and did not invite him to their wedding or puberty ceremonies. He eventually moved to France where a number of Jaffna Ampaṭṭars continue their caste-based occupation. This may be because a large number of Veḷḷāḷars migrated to the UK and Canada, as English-speaking countries were their preferred destinations in the past. 'There is a very high number of oppressed caste population in France'.¹⁷ Most London Ampaṭṭars attempt to erase their 'lower caste' identity through migration and want to lead a new life in a 'casteless' and 'class-based' society. One of the reasons for this mobility is that there are many opportunities in the countries where they now live. They can easily do other jobs. They no longer rely on their caste-based occupation, as they did in Jaffna where there were limited alternatives. However, some individuals from the Ampaṭṭar caste ignore this sentiment, continue to carry out their caste-based occupation in their adoptive destinations, and have become well off.¹⁸

The downward mobility of the dominant caste, the Veḷḷāḷar, in terms of occupation is also prevalent in Tamil diaspora localities. Damaris Luthi (2016) indicates that in Switzerland, as

¹⁷ Personal communication (September 2016) with Sharika Thiranagama. Sharika is an assistant professor of anthropology at Stanford University. She has written extensively on civil war, violence and displacement in Sri Lanka.

¹⁸ Historically, individuals from this caste did customary caste-based occupations in rituals relating to births, puberty, weddings, and funeral ceremonies of dominant castes in Jaffna (Perinbanayagam 1965). Today, an Ampaṭṭar caste-based association actively functioning in Jaffna called *sikai alaṅkārippāḷar saṅgam* (hairdressers' association) enforces a rule not to visit other caste houses for any occupational purposes, as the youth of this caste group believe that it leads to discrimination in relation to their caste status. Instead, the hairdressers' association implements a set of rules such as fixed price for hairdressing, as well as fixed opening and closing times of salons. Those who break the rules of the association will be fined. This association received tremendous support from the LTTE in order to strengthen its agenda. This association continues to be very active throughout the Jaffna peninsula and other Tamil dominated regions in the north and the east of Sri Lanka.

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it is elsewhere in other western countries, so-called 'upper caste' Tamils work in the cleaning sector, which in their view is an 'impure' and 'low status' occupation. In one of my conversations with Maran, he argued laughingly that, 'If one justifies castes in terms of the occupation [division of labour] as people do traditionally, then the Veḷḷāḷars who do cleaning jobs here should be called Paṛaiyar'. These new realities and unrevealed aspects of caste, challenge the popular academic conceptualisation of caste in relation to purity and impurity, closed system, division of labour, hierarchical ranking and interdependency (Dumont 1970; David 1974, 1977; Banks 1957, 1960).

Changes in occupation, educational status, wealth, and ritual power are determining factors often over-riding caste identity and its discourse. M. N. Srinivas (1952:30) calls the rise of 'low castes' by adopting 'high caste' (Brahmin) customs, values, and life style practices in the context of India a process of 'Sanskritization'. Such mobility of underprivileged castes in the context of Jaffna Tamils has been understood as a process of 'Veḷḷāḷarisation' in the absence of Brahmanical ideologies of 'purity' and 'impurity' and instead the existence of Veḷḷāḷar domination (Arasaratnam 1981). The process of 'Veḷḷāḷarisation' in Jaffna can be defined as the upward mobility of people, particularly those of historically oppressed castes, who gain access to better education and employment prospects and control over religious and ritual power. In other words, 'Veḷḷāḷarisation' is an elite formation following the ideology of Veḷḷāḷar. Yet, the Veḷḷāḷars increasingly found themselves a minority and in subordinate positions at work (Derges 2013: 75) and powerless in politics particularly during the LTTE period (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1993; Jeeweshwara 2015). It should be noted that members of the Veḷḷāḷar leadership are in the process of regaining their political power in a scenario where the LTTE was completely defeated in Sri Lanka (Thanges 2015a). The concept of 'Veḷḷāḷarisation', however, has limitations in understanding the complex notion of upward mobility amongst oppressed castes.

I call members of underprivileged caste groups who either attempt to follow the ideology of Veḷḷāḷars or pretend to belong to the Veḷḷāḷar caste in exile 'foreign Veḷḷāḷars'. It can be, however, argued that increasing class-imperatives and mobility in the ritual domain of

underprivileged castes may 'upgrade' people's socio-economic and ritual status so as to create a casteless society. For example, members of underprivileged castes within the Tamil diaspora send remittances to their caste-based temple and church development projects in their *ūr*, as Veļļāļars have done historically. They see it as a process of being ritually independent and improving their ritual status. I call such efforts 'caste individualism' rather than 'Veļļāļarisation'. These support the reproduction of caste differences in a class-based society, rather than critiquing caste-based inequalities and differences. This demonstrates that the thrust of the diasporic response is neither radically transformative of caste hierarchy nor critical of social inequalities.

Concluding Remarks

Judging by public discourse, caste appears to hold little sway over diasporic Tamils. Many living in London claim that caste is an old and dying institution, and only a concern during the arrangement of marriage alliances. As this paper has demonstrated, caste continues to play a complex role in diasporic social and ritual life, particularly via *ūr* associations, which are organised and function along caste lines, even if not labelled as such. The significance of caste however, was made patently obvious by my research participants who, when questioned about the caste composition of *ūr* associations, used caste as an explanatory factor in determining the ability to work productively depending on the caste they belong to or not as the case may be. This process of mobilisation in the London Tamil diaspora shows how the invisible identity of caste increasingly becomes a visible identity of *ūr*. The *ūr* identity and territorial belonging are explicitly celebrated, whereas caste-oriented mobilisations, which function discreetly in such celebrations, are undermined either intentionally or otherwise.

Van Hear (2015) describes three general spheres of Tamil diaspora transnational engagements as 'the household/extended family sphere', 'the known community sphere' and 'the imagined community', and points out that the known community sphere (which includes 'home town and home village associations') have been important forms of

diasporic organisation and transnational engagement. He concludes that the influence of the known community sphere, which evolved in the context of conflict, may decline 'as time passes and connections grow weaker' (2015:33). However, my findings suggest that *ūr* association activities are much stronger among a segment of diasporic communities, particularly those of dominant castes. As noted earlier, *ūr* associations in London not only function in relation to their *ūr* development in Sri Lanka, but also carry out the rebuilding of the 'known community' in the diaspora, where institutions of caste, distant relatives and marriage practices continue to be vital. In this regard, caste plays a role in regrouping the dispersed migrant *sontakkārar* (relatives) and *eṅkada ākkaḷ/sontakkārar* (same caste group). What is observed here is that the institution of caste and *ūr*, while certainly changing their traditional characters, create a particular form of belonging for both the dominant and the underprivileged caste groups in Tamil diasporic settings, and thus (re)produces a transnational Tamil *ūr* that moves back and forth across national borders by creating and re-creating caste-based identities and forms of territorial belonging.

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