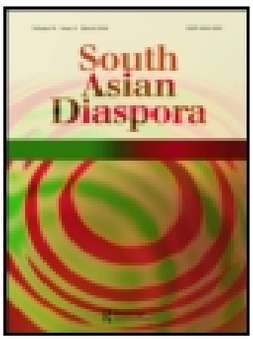

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Amba Pande

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Role of diasporas in homeland conflicts, conflict resolution, and post-war reconstruction: the case of Tamil diaspora and Sri Lanka

Amba Pande

Centre for Indo-Pacific Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

ABSTRACT

The case of Sri Lanka and the Tamil diaspora can be cited as a classic case of participation by a diaspora in the homeland conflict and to some extent also in conflict resolution. Influenced by lived experiences of discrimination and suffering in an ethnocentric homeland and a range of racial prejudices and economic deprivation, in the host lands, the diaspora Tamils developed a strong sense of Tamil identity and ethno-nationalism which the LTTE could successfully harvest on. However, with the devastating civil war coming to an end, and a new government in power, numerous opportunities have opened up for diaspora participation in the development and reconstruction of the war-torn regions. All that is required is a pragmatic and reconciliatory approach by both sides – by the diaspora as well as by the Sri Lankan state.

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The role of diasporas has come under greater scrutiny with their growing importance in the contemporary world. Their involvement in homeland conflicts and conflict resolution is one such sphere where opposing views have prevailed. Some studies have shown them as conflict promoters and peace wreckers (Skrbis 1999, 201; Lyons 2004, 1; Shain 2002, 115–144) while others show them as peace promoters and agents of development (Zunzer 2004, 10–11; Glick-Schiller 2004, 570; Cochrane, Baser, and Swain 2009, 698–700; Baser and Swain 2008, 3). In reality, the diasporas can, on the one hand, feed and prolong the conflict and, on the other hand, their strong sense of attachment to the homeland can play an important role in conflict resolution and support post-war reconstruction. The role of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in the ethnic conflict of Sri Lanka, hitherto, has been viewed mostly as that of a conflict promoter, but their role in the post-conflict development and reconstruction remains equally crucial and calls for a multi-pronged strategy and a reconciliatory approach by the government as well as the diaspora. This paper intends to investigate the role of the Tamil diaspora in the different phases of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, and to highlight the need for them to have a positive and constructive role in the development of war-torn regions in Sri Lanka.

CONTACT Amba Pande ambapande@gmail.com

Diaspora and homeland conflict: theoretical overview

The role and involvement of diasporas in homeland conflict and conflict resolution is not a new phenomenon. Well-established diaspora communities like the Jewish, Irish Armenian, and Chinese have all played active roles in homeland politics by either supporting the insurgent groups (often financially) or by engaging in conflict resolution or reconstruction and development. The intensity of this involvement has, however, drastically increased in the age of greater transnational connectivity that has made the diasporas nurture identities and function as transnational communities inspired by what Anderson (1992) termed 'Long Distance nationalism'. In addition, as the conflicts have become more and more ethnocentric and intranational, they generate massive displacements and create, the so-called, 'conflict generated diasporas' or 'political diasporas'. Such groups 'mostly possess a specific set of traumatic memories and sustain and sometimes amplify their strong sense of attachment to the homeland' (Skrbis 1999, 201; Lyons 2004, 1). The conflict in the homeland often becomes the yardstick of their identity which helps them mobilise their community members, raise funds, build institutions, and engage in political activism in the host state.

For such diaspora groups the idea of 'peace' itself can threaten the diasporic identity (Shain 2002, 129) and makes them less willing to compromise. This may lead to a protraction of the conflict (Shain 2002, 128–130; Lyons 2004, 4). Diasporas also tend to develop an ambiguous relationship with the homeland as, on the one hand, they develop close social networks to help their co-ethnics and keep alive their hope of being able to return but, on the other hand, most of them start living settled lives by acquiring citizenship in the host countries. According to Demmers (2007, 15) the idea of 'return' itself becomes a 'dilemma'. In such cases the discourses of war and peace start symbolising different meanings for the diasporic population and the homeland actors. Operating from thousands of miles away, diaspora nationalism as Michael Ignatieff (2001) suggests can be 'a dangerous phenomenon because it is easier to hate from a distance: You don't have to live with the consequences – or the reprisals'. On the other hand the war-weary homeland population, coming to terms with ground realities, may prefer a settlement and the resultant absence of war.

Rajasingam (2011, 23) explains these beautifully in the following words:

> 'nationalism (in the diaspora) can be incubated in a bubble, its ambitions becoming almost an abstract fetish, with an autonomous logic of its own, bearing no relation to changing realities on the ground,' but on the other hand, 'Nationalism of ethnic groups in their own habitats often have to deal with the vicissitudes of accompanying political and economic developments, the aspirations of contesting identities, the changing realities and the possibilities therein'. (2011)

Thus, despite the common identity that binds the diaspora and the homeland actors, such a situation could lead to a disconnection or even a contestation between the two (Demmers 2007, 13; Shain 2002, 136). According to Shain (2002, 118) 'The degree to which one influences the other depends on their relative strength, which is determined by, among other factors, monetary flows, cultural productions, and community leadership'. Nevertheless, the argument that diasporas face no direct physical suffering, risk, or accountability appears to be a somewhat sweeping statement, especially in the backdrop of what Tamil refugees faced in the host lands and the way they were coerced by LTTE

networks. La (2004, 383) holds the view that 'refugees do not necessarily secure freedom from coercion simply by relocating. Repression can traverse international boundaries, especially when doing so generates profits'.

The recent insights on transnational politics also challenge the assumptions about the 'disconnect' or the 'disjuncture' between diasporas and homeland actors (Bauböck 2010, 319–320; Laguerre 1999, 646–651; Levitt and Jaworsky 2007). Within this rationale, the growing embeddedness – in varying degrees – of social, economic, and political transnational practices appear to have re-inscribed the nations as 'transnations'.

In the words of Laguerre (1999, 646)

> State and Nation, once enclosed in the same territorial boundaries, have been decoupled through International migration and the rise of Diasporic communities. While the state continues to exist inside its legal and jurisdictional territories, the nation has expanded to include what had been extra-territorial sites which have now been converted into transnational sites.

Hence, recent researches argue that diaspora-homeland relations need to be theorised in this context. According to Cheran (2007, 130–131) 'those who leave and those who remain should be conceptualised as a single socio-economic and political field transcending the traditional boundaries and the boundedness of nation states and territories'. Modern technology and cyberspace (or the internet) has made the transnational spaces (social, economic, or political) so real and effective that the distance and territoriality seem no longer to be a factor for disconnect. While Østergaard-Nielsen (2001, 2) terms it as 'the death of distance', Cheran and Halpe (2015, 100) instead terms it the 'responsibility of distance', thereby accounting for the diaspora's shifting spheres of influence. What is more, the connectivity has now permeated to the local and the familial level and this generates a sense of solidarity and attachment that is much more localised and personalised. Boccagni (2010, 200) points out that 'the transnational practices, recreate a sense of community based "translocal" rather than transnational'. Kissau and Hunger (2010, 260) talk about 'Stable linkages between websites and user groups giving rise to durable transnational communities', rather than 'transnational practices'. In this context the dynamics of the exclusivity of the two does not hold ground. Scholars like Morales and Jorba (2010, 291) also insist that such closely interconnected transnational networks accommodate or rather get shaped by the changing patterns of homeland politics and keep alive the cooperation between migrants and parties at home.

Nevertheless, considering the fact that diasporic identities are shaped by both home and the host-land dynamics (See Pande 2013, 59–60; Sheffer 1986, 3) at least some divergence – on specific issues and agendas – between the diasporic and the homeland actors cannot be ruled out completely. Gloria (2004, 193) points out that 'a diasporic identity is not merely an extension of the homeland'. According to Glick-Schiller, Basch, and Blanc (1995, 48) 'Diasporas become incorporated in the economy and political institutions, localities, and patterns of daily life of the country in which they reside'. In such a case a 'disconnect' – to some extent – may exist especially with shifting generations. Now, how much can this be applied to ignited nationalisms and charged emotions of the conflict-generated diasporas can be debated.

To come to the point, the nature and the range of the involvement of diasporas in homeland affairs are highly case specific, and depend on a complex interplay of factors both in the homeland and the host land. As Demmers (2007, 14) explains it, both the

'homeland' (in the context of the intra-state wars and the concomitant centrality of identity groups) and the 'host land' (in the context of exclusion, discrimination, and deprivation) play a crucial role in shaping the 'diaspora behaviour'. Bercovitch (2007, 28–36) categorises the conflict into various phases: that is, (1) conflict prevention; (2) conflict emergence and continuation; (3) conflict termination; and (4) the post-conflict situation. He further states that the nature of the participation of the diaspora depends on the particular phase which the conflict has reached and the diaspora can exert influence through various measures covering: (1) political and diplomatic, (2) military, (3) economic, and (4) Socio-Cultural efforts.

Various other scholars like Zunzer (2004, 10–11), Glick-Schiller (2004, 570) are also of the view that the role of diasporas and that of long-distance nationalism does not necessarily relate to malignant activities only as their role in conflict resolution and peace settlement is equally effective and significant. They play a positively instrumental role by bringing their cause to the attention of the international community, by mobilising resources and also by organising transnational events through conscious, collective, and organised efforts, thus effectively working almost like social movements (Glick-Schiller 2005, 305). They can also influence policymakers and the media, acting like any other lobby group, or can provide direct political support to create a softer version of the homeland conflict (Cochrane, Baser, and Swain 2009, 687; Baser and Swain 2008, 3). According to Østergaard-Nielsen (2001, 15) 'Such transnational political practices are also facilitated by global institutional structures and international organizations, in particular, those related to the discourses on human rights and democracy'.

Apart from their participation in conflict resolution, the most important role of diasporas is manifested in reconstruction and developmental activities. Diasporas have emerged as the agents of development in the present world and countries and governments are conversing with them through various networks and policy initiatives. In fact, a number of diaspora groups too are keenly looking forward to be a part of this developmental process. The interaction takes place at various levels, that is, the 'macro' level, which is in the form of government-sponsored institutional linkages or, the 'micro' level which is the Community-centred approach (Sahoo 2006, 93; Hans 2009). Although the implications of diasporic engagements are many-sided, the direct benefits like brain regain/circulation/skill transfer (see Kuznetsov 2006; Saxenian 2004; Stark, Helmenstein, and Prskawetz 1997; Beine, Docquier, and Rapoport 2001); remittances (see Giuliano and Ruiz-Arranz 2005; Ratha 2012; Adams and Page 2005; Russell 1986); investment (see Terrazas 2010); philanthropy (see Newland, Terrazas, and Munster 2010, 2; Niumai 2009); and tourism (see Newland 2011, 8; Scheyvens 2007) are extremely significant.

The case of Sri Lanka and its Tamil Diaspora can be cited as a classic case of the diaspora participation in the homeland conflict and to some extent conflict resolution. The Tamil Diaspora helped to sustain the secessionist struggle in Sri Lanka in various ways and also contributed significantly towards peace building and settlement. Along with this, the contribution of the Tamil diaspora in the development and reconstruction effort has definitely been significant, but is less talked about and is yet to be mapped. The need for their future engagement in the developmental and reconstruction process is the call of the hour, which this paper seeks to highlight.

The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora

The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora[1] can be cited as a representative case in so many ways, that is, of diaspora participation in the homeland conflict; of the typical interplay of factors at home and the host land; and also of the narrative of the term 'diaspora' which characterises conditions such as forced migration, de-territorialisation/re-territorialisation, alienation, nostalgia, guilt, identity-consciousness, a sense of common belonging, and so on (See Safran 1991; Cohen 1996; Cheran 2003; Vertovec 2005). Like any other diaspora group Tamils in the diaspora are a heterogeneous formation and so are their organisations and networks. There are differences on the basis of when they migrated, the means by which they gained residence, and the level of integration in the host country. In addition to that there are pre-migratory cleavages along the lines of caste, class, gender, and religion and also in the political views within the Diaspora (Cochrane, Basher, and Swain 2009, 688). However, despite the differences Tamils have, to a large extent, managed to maintain their exclusive identity and strong community ties (Cochrane, Basher, and Swain 2009, 688). The earlier migrants (mostly skilled professionals) in various countries around the world were joined later by the conflict-generated migrants and grew as a close-knit community. According to Gunaratna (1997, 33) 'the pre-and post-1983 Sri Lankan Tamil émigrés are hardly distinguishable'. They have developed multi-dimensional linkages by establishing a range of institutions and organisations to strengthen their nexus with their erstwhile homeland as well as co-ethnics around the world.

Tamil migrants were also accused by some (Jones 2009) of gaining asylum by deceit and actually trying to move looking for greener pastures, though there could be no doubt that the majority were legitimate asylum seekers (Brun and Van Hear 2012, 61). Apart from the victimisation and injustice by the Sri Lankan state, the intolerance and violent attitude of the LTTE was also the reason behind the exodus of Tamils from Sri Lanka (ICG 2010, 4). All these factors have played an important role in the identity formation of Diasporas and their involvement in homeland politics. To quote Sriskandarajah (2004, 498) 'Whereas pre-migratory experiences can underpin diaspora politics, post-migration experiences can create the context in which political practice is manifested'.

In terms of host-land dynamics, the harsh lives, low wage employments, the high cost of living as also the social discrimination and exclusion from main stream society made the migrant Tamils depend more on community-based and ethnic networks, thereby pushing them into a 'ghetto'-like situation (Kadirgamar 2010, 23–24; Rajasingam 2011, 24). Sriskandarajah (2004, 495) points out at four major developments that created conducive conditions for spatial, social, and political ties among the Sri Lankan Tamils in the diaspora. First, the arrival of large number asylum seekers at locales where earlier migrants were already settled led to formation of clustered settlements which emerged as key nodal points in the Tamil diasporic life; second, the newer arrivals, also tended to rely more heavily on Tamil community support networks to find employment and accommodation and to establish themselves, further boosting these networks; third, as numbers swelled and the size of the diaspora increased, there soon emerged dedicated social and community services and associations which, in turn, reinforced linkages within the growing community; and fourth, unlike the earlier migrants the newer arrivals kept aloof from the Sinhalese diaspora[2] and other groups from Sri Lanka which effectively isolated them and made them even more insular. Together, all these factors served to bolster the linkages

within the Sri Lankan Tamils in the diaspora providing them with a sense of belonging to a wider collective, a pan-Tamil identity which over time tried to rope in Tamils from across the globe. The sense of victimhood further unified the Tamils and defined their goals, making them a vocal and influential force in spite of being numerically small and geographically dispersed. The Tamil elite played a significant role in mobilising the diasporic identity and strengthening the networks through variety of activities like exchanging information through Tamil newspapers, radio, the internet and ethnic organisations, spreading awareness about the Tamil struggle through marches, conferences and lobbying, lawful and illegal fund raising (Wayland 2007, 59).

The strong ethno-nationalism among the diasporic Tamils and the intensity of their involvement in the civil war of Sri Lanka also has to do a great deal with the homeland dynamics, that is, the pre-migratory experiences and continued suffering of the co-ethnics back home in Sri Lanka. The rise of Tamil separatism in Sri Lanka is a well-known fact and does not come under the scope of this paper. But the long-running social discrimination supported by a series of legislative and administrative measures denying equal educational, employment, cultural and political rights alienated the Tamils. The surging Singhalese nationalism fostered by symbols like religion and Sinhalese culture and language flared up into several horrific ethnic riots in 1956, 1958, 1978, 1981, and 1983. This led to waves of migration among the Tamils. According to Sahadevan (2009, 14) 'since the state power was used by the Singhalese to establish the majoritarian authority, the state itself became the centre of claims and counter-claims of ethnic contestation'. According to Uyangoda (2007, 2) 'Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict … (is) embedded in the vital question of state power'. Most Singhalese oppose federalism and the radicals adopt a hostile attitude towards the devolution of power (where the solution ultimately lies) as they think it would dismember the country.

It was a classic case of ethnicity and nationalism intertwining and reinforcing each other on both sides. The Sri Lankan state conditioned the strong ethno-nationalism in the Tamils which was further given air by the LTTE by way of successfully exporting the idea of a 'homeland for the Tamils' and roping in a strong 'conflict-generated diaspora'. In its fight against an ethno-centric centralised Sri Lankan state, Tamil nationalism itself acquired a ruthless, ethno-centric, statist character, not willing to share any power which led to the silencing of dissident voices and the ethnic cleansing of Muslims of Jaffna (see ICG 2007). The diaspora – willingly and forcefully – became the fundamental strength of this ignited ethno-nationalism of the Tamils which enabled the LTTE 'to raise funds; procure arms; and mobilise international advocacy' (Venugopal 2003, 23). The LTTE developed an extremely efficient fund raising system and most Tamils had to contribute regularly to the so-called 'freedom fight' in Sri Lanka. The Canadian Security Intelligence Service and the British Broadcasting Corporation have given a detailed picture of how the LTTE kept records of people living and working abroad, their earnings, and the amount of money they sent to their families back home, a portion of which was then taken by it. According to Kadirgamar (2010, 24) the LTTE acquired three characteristics, 'one, of a nationalist movement; second, it worked like a multi-national financial corporation; and third, it operated like underworld extortionist Mafia'. Into all these activities, the LTTE weaved in the Tamil diaspora intricately. Thus along with having an overpowering control over the Tamil population in Sri Lanka, the LTTE had substantial control over the Tamil diaspora, and most importantly held complete sway over transnational political,

social, and economic fields (Tambiah 2000, 112; Brun and Van Hear 2012, 68). In a way the LTTE became the major link between the diaspora and the locals, demonstrating full control over all the financial transactions and political developments. In the words of Brun and Van Hear (2012, 63) 'LTTE's power derived largely from its strategic control of the transnational political field'.

Yet it is difficult to determine the exact amount of support the LTTE had in the diaspora because (as the ICG report 2010:4 says) 'the relationship amounted a complex range of emotions and experiences'. The increasing pressure to contribute money, authoritarian activities coupled with taxation of impoverished Tamil civilians and the recruitment of young children by the LTTE had alienated many in the diaspora (Brun and Van Hear 2012, 67). Moreover, the branding of the LTTE as a terrorist organisation following the 9/11 incident had also left many in the diaspora 'dismayed' and further confused (Fair 2007, 187). According to Cheran (online conversation 2016) 'Tamil diaspora has been a very powerful source of anti-LTTE activism … .of course, the LTTE brand of Tamil nationalism was dominant but that does not mean that there were no dissidents or dissident voices'. In the words of Rajasingham (online conversation 2016)

> there was a silent majority of the SL diaspora, both Tamil and Sinhala, who are coping with their own everyday problems in their host countries, including adjusting in the host country's culture, and they just wish their kin who live in Sri Lanka be comfortable and enjoy full rights of citizenship. This is, in a sense, parallel to the conflict in SL itself, where extremist elements on both sides of the apparent ethnic divide captured the middle ground and drowned out the more moderate voices.

The dissident voices were often suppressed by the LTTE using coercive methods like torture and even killings. Moreover, a stronger feeling of disgust prevailed against the Sri Lankan government, and the majority in the diaspora thought that only the LTTE has enough power to stand up against the Sri Lankan government. In the final phase of the war as the 'information and propaganda about the sufferings of Tamils back home poured in, it mobilised many more to support the separatist cause and made even the dissident group in the diaspora hardcore Eelam supporters' (Rajasingam 2011, 24; Kadirgamar 2010, 25). As a result the LTTE effectively became the sole voice of the Sri Lankan Tamils with total control over the financial and political support from the diaspora.

Nevertheless, the ability of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora to provide support and resources to the movement for Tamil Eelam also gave them the potential to influence the peace process. The diaspora used its political and economic influence to promote the peace process and bring human rights issues to the fore. Six rounds of negotiations were held in Thailand, Japan, Norway, and Germany between September 2002 and March 2003 with a thematic focus on political issues, humanitarian relief, reconstruction and development, normalisation and de-escalation, human rights, and children in the armed conflict and in all these the Tamil diaspora played an extremely significant role (see Dhanapala 2005). The positive influence of the diaspora on the LTTE is particularly evident in LTTE's acceptance of the cease-fire agreement in February 2002 under Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe. Although short lived and fragile, the peace years were important for rehabilitation and reconstruction activities in which diaspora remained in the forefront. Fair (2007, 189) suggests that the post 9/11 developments gave an additional rationale to pursue political strategies for reconciliation.

The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora also played a significant role in generating a consensus in the international community to intervene in the developments in Sri Lanka. This it did by staging mass demonstrations, 'sit-ins', petitions, and even extreme steps like self-immolation in Europe and in India (Velamati 2009, 113–128). They also managed to influence the politics of some of the host countries so that Sri Lanka remained in their foreign policy priorities, the most significant moves being the involvement of the Norwegian government as peace facilitator in Sri Lanka. There could be different perceptions about the amount of success achieved or how assertive the pro-peace diaspora groups were. However, with their families and relatives caught in the conflict zone back home, they certainly had a difficult choice in either taking the LTTE line or opposing it (Cochrane, Baser, and Swain 2009, 690).

All through these years Tamils in the diaspora continued to have an important contribution in the development and reconstruction of the war-torn regions apart from sending remittances for family maintenance. In the absence of a functioning state, resources from the diaspora were often the only mechanism for relief, reconstruction, and development. As a matter of fact some studies (Brun and Van Hear 2012, 65–66) point out that towns and villages which were closely linked with diasporic networks witnessed greater developmental and reconstruction activities than those which were not. According to Rajasingham (2016), 'There was a lot of inter-personal giving between the diaspora and the families and villages at home. Of course, the LTTE also supported migration and channeled help'.

The short-lived ceasefire period from 2002 to 2004–2005 saw a large number of diaspora-funded developmental works with instances of the Tamil Muslim and the Sinhalese diaspora coming together for reconstruction works (Kadirgamar 2010, 26). The Tsunami period marked the high water mark of the diaspora-funded and LTTE-managed relief and rehabilitation work which was even recognised by the UN (Cheran and Aiken 2005, 12). However, as it appears since the political role of the diaspora and their support for LTTE has remained at the centre of the discourse, their role in the developmental activities went unnoticed. The idea of highlighting it here is to stress on the huge potential waiting to be tapped. The availability of literature on this subject is so constrained that Cheran's works turned out to be the sole source of information in this paper. Some of the important areas of contribution by the diaspora can be listed as follows.

Remittances

The major contribution of the Tamil diaspora has come in the form of remittances and remained the major source of reconstruction and household consumption. Differing estimates exist regarding the amount remitted, but it has been one of the most important sources for sustaining the society (Cheran and Aiken 2005). Sri Lanka is among the top 20 remittance receiving countries and received $3363 million in 2009, but it is impossible to estimate the Tamil share from this overall figure. However, in the absence of any adequate banking system, the system of unofficial transfers was rampant and was also used in LTTE activities. The informal 'Undiyal' remained the primary mechanism for remittances (Cheran and Aiken 2005, 15; ICG 2010) especially for the remote regions.

Return/recirculation

Since most of the diasporic Tamils are now settled citizens of their respective host countries the idea of their return to Sri Lanka appears to be unlikely, but brain recirculation has proved to be an effective tool for the development of human capital, knowledge capital, and knowledge transfer. According to Cheran (2007, 137–138) 'circulation is playing a critical role in the relief, reconstruction, rehabilitation and development efforts in the northeast Sri Lanka'. There are several individual cases of physicians, from England, Canada, and Australia doing voluntary work in the Jaffna and Vanni hospitals. The Medical Institute of Tamils and TAMMED, the Asian Medical Doctors Association, Tromso Tamil Sangam are some of the organisations being run by diasporic groups. Members of the Tamil diaspora in the USA have been instrumental in setting up the IT training venture of Vannitech in Kilinochchi with a vision of effectively utilising the expertise and resources available in the Diaspora (Cheran 2003, 12–16).

Philanthropy

The Tamil diaspora have been instrumental in building village hospitals, schools, and community centres in the Tamil-dominated areas. Several Alumni and Home Village Associations took the responsibility of reconstructing damaged school and providing scholarships and bursaries (Cheran 2003, 12–16) and have thus emerged as 'viable entities in their own right addressing unmet needs in conflict zones' (Cheran 2007, 132).

The diaspora after the war

The defeat of the LTTE left a complete vacuum in the leadership, thereby opening up new space for diaspora participation and collective action both in the negative sense and positive sense. While the LTTE has been destroyed, Tamil nationalism has not been destroyed. The movement for a separate Tamil State – though weakened – still lives on. Tamil identity continues to play an essential role in the diasporic Tamils who have come out to be the sole representative of the Eelam.

As a matter of fact diasporic activism has reached new heights after the end of the war. The last years of the war saw significant institutional initiatives such as the setting up of the Trans-national Government (TGTE) and the Global Tamil Forum (GTF). TGTE aims to mobilise the international community to support the demand for an independent state for Tamils, and the GFT aims to gather attention on immediate humanitarian concerns for Tamils. The report of the International Crisis Group (2010) also highlighted the active role of the diaspora during the fourth Eelam war and how they influenced the international media, academia, as well as international human rights organisations. Demonstrations are still being held in front of the UN and other International bodies to mount human rights charges on Sri Lankan government and demand protection of Sri Lankan Tamil interest. Nevertheless the post-war scenario has also left the diaspora divided as never before. As Brun and Van Hear (2012, 63) indicate while the LTTE heritage is being carried forward by some, the others are trying hard to isolate Sri Lanka by pressurising European Union to stop 'GSP Plus' trade concessions, and yet others aim at working with the Sri Lankan Government for the rehabilitation of Tamils.

The diaspora activism in the post-war phase is also said to have underlined the significant disjuncture or divergence between the viewpoints and aspirations of Tamils in Sri Lanka and those in the diaspora. While the politics of diasporic Tamil nationalism continue to prescribe a separate Eelam and carry forward the LTTE legacy, the homeland Tamils, exhausted by decades of war and complete breakdown of the socio-economic fabric, appear to be more concerned with rebuilding their lives, culture, and the guarantee of land. ICG describes this point of view in detail (2010, 17–18) quoting a Tamil politician who says, 'Forget Tamil Eelam. We just want some autonomy and self-governance so we can move on and have a life' (2010, 17).

However, as discussed earlier the idea of a rupture, a disconnect, a divergence cannot be taken too far (see Bourdieu 1986; Cheran 2007; Cheran and Halpe 2015; Rajasingham 2016). It is a complex situation as several organisations and their branches in the diaspora (like GTF, CTC, ATC, TNA) as well as a host of Home Village Associations support the idea of reconciliation under a federal framework but there are other organisations both at home (from Vanni and the East) and in the diaspora (like NCCT, TCC, etc.) that support Tamil Eelam (Cheran 2016). To quote Cheran (2016) again

> as long as there is a ban on freely express the will/wish for Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka, it is very difficult to say that Tamils in Sri Lanka have given up on TE… The conditions for the need for a separate state still exists i.e. the inability of the Sri Lankan state to reform/transform itself to accommodate Tamils and Muslims. Till the time this continues the desire to have a separate state and distinct Tamil identity will strive.

He also says, 'the tension lies between the responsibility of distance and irresponsibility of distance'… 'It is this that is going to determine the future of the separate state in Sri Lanka' (Cheran and Halpe 2015, 106). It is a strong argument indeed, more so, because homeland Tamils remain to be intricately connected to and economically dependent on the diaspora, a fact that shaped the domestic politics of Sri Lanka for a very long time.

On the face of it, however, at least some divergence in viewpoints and agendas did get reflected during the 2015 elections when the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) which is the ruling Tamil party in north-eastern Sri Lanka, tried to chart a separate course for itself away from the diaspora Tamils. It decided to support Sirisena in the elections and ignore the call for the boycott of elections by the diaspora groups. Over the time the TNA has grown stronger, as the main voice of the Sri Lankan Tamil polity endeavouring to pursue solutions within the national politics of Sri Lanka.

The 2015 elections, change of regime, and the future course

The crux in the future course rests mainly on the paradigm shift in the approaches of the extremist groups in the Tamil diaspora and the Sri Lankan state. The change in regime after the 2015 elections was hailed internationally and has brought hopes for a new political space towards reconciliation (Bandarage 2015). A glance at the electoral statistics reflects that the Tamil and the Muslim minorities voted out and out for Sirisena. The question is how has the Tamil Diaspora reacted to this change of regime? As already discussed there are sections in the Diaspora (may be more in number) as well as within Sri Lanka who still believe in separatist ideologies and assume that the Tamils do not have to be part of Sri Lanka's political main stream. However, the majority of Tamils appear to be

willing to shape their future within the national narrative of Sri Lanka which has facilitated greater Tamil participation in the 2010 presidential elections. It reflects a positive mood that should be availed to establish peace and harmony with the other social groups – Singhalese, Muslims, Mannar Tamils, Dalits, and women, which is as important as the devolution of political power and a speedy reconstruction and rehabilitation exercise.

Another important reality check for Tamils in the diaspora (along with separatists at home) is that despite their exceptional political activism during the final phases of the war, they could not generate an appropriate response from the international community. The geo-strategic interests of various countries in the Indian Ocean and Colombo's growing closeness to China under the Rajapakse regime was a matter of concern not only for India but also for the western powers and had put a limit to the diaspora's ability to influence the course of events (See Debate 2012; Dibbert 2016; Bandarage 2010). The report by the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (2009, 16) calls for a 'broader and robust approach (towards Sri Lanka) that appreciates new political and economic realities in Sri Lanka and U.S. geostrategic interests … and not to be driven solely by short-term humanitarian concerns'.

The new regime under President Sirisena has a pro-west tilt and is responsive towards the Tamil issue, committing to expedite the reconciliation process. There appears to be willingness towards transferring more power to the provinces, phased release of the land occupied by the military, to find the missing persons and to lift bans on several Tamil groups and travel to the North (*Indian Express*, November 21, 2015; *Economic Times* 2015). Rajasingham (2016) too seems to be optimistic on this as she says:

> The present SL govt. seems very serious about engaging Sri Lanka's diverse diaspora for reconciliation and development, following also from the LLRC Report recommendations, and, as a first step has planned to hold a festival for overseas Sri Lankans in June or July of 2016.

GTF's Suren Surendiran, in an interview with Indian Express, was of the view that the National Anthem being sung in Tamil was 'a very progressive step indeed towards reconciliation' (*Indian Express*, February 6, 2016). Such confidence-building efforts are significant towards convincing the 'separatists' about the government's intent.

Sri Lankan government also needs to develop clear-cut policies and plans to engage with its overall diaspora through necessary impetus and initiatives like dual citizenship; investment facilities; strengthening the already active self-help groups; and perhaps a separate department for the diaspora. Within this ambit a special and a more integrated approach to engage the Tamil diaspora is required. Despite the recommendations of the report of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC), state engagement with the diaspora had been minimal (*The Diplomat* 2015). The present regime, however, has shown willingness towards this (Colombo Gazette 2015). In this regard the first step could be liaising with the moderate groups or 'the silent majority in the Sinhala and Tamil diaspora' as Rajasingham (2016) terms it. This can be a stepping stone to open doors towards all the other groups- Sinhalese as well as the Tamil. Unfortunately, some moderate Tamils who are siding with the government for development are being played into the hands of government officials who want nominal devolution (Mehta 2009, 23). Recalibration of Colombo's attitude towards the Tamil diaspora will facilitate political reconciliation and can open the floodgates of investment from the Tamils across the world. According to Rajasingham (2016), 'It is also important to find

ways and means to create an atmosphere of trust and build bridges among the various diaspora groups and organisations, including those that represent and support the LTTE or Sinhala nationalists, again, among themselves and with the Government of Sri Lanka'. Similar sentiments were reflected by Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera, when he stated, 'Our aim should be to embrace all diaspora, irrespective of ethnicity and religion who are committed to support reconciliation efforts while pledging to uphold the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of our nation' (DNA 2015). He further added, 'It is a vital need to engage with diaspora groups, especially those who hold extremist views' (DNA 2015).

Peace in Sri Lanka appears to have taken a full circle and has come again to political reforms, Sinhalese hegemony, and the sharing of power – the root cause of the conflict. The Tamil diaspora is an important element in the achievement of lasting peace and sustainable development in Sri Lanka. The diasporas are integral to the international system today. The so-called 'transnations' are well co-existing with the territorial nation-states which, instead of being outmoded, are accommodating the transnational duel belongingness of diasporas. The need of the hour is to be able to draw the utmost out of the changing sphere of influence of the diasporas. As has been pointed out earlier, long-distance nationalism does not necessarily manifest itself only in malignant activities but also in a more constructive way in developmental activities.

Notes

1. Tamils in Sri Lanka and the Diaspora: Tamils in Sri Lanka are from mainly two groups: (a) Sri Lankan Tamils: who have lived on the island since around the second century Before Common era and (b) Indian Tamils: who are the descendants of indentured of labourers who were transported from Tamil Nadu in the nineteenth century, to work on tea plantations under the British colonial system. The latter can be included in the framework of the 'Indian Diaspora'. The Sri Lankan Tamils are around 12% of the population and are mostly concentrated in the Northeast of Sri Lanka or the Jaffna area. The Indian Tamils are around 6% of population and mostly inhabit the central highlands. Historically, both groups have seen themselves as separate communities, although there has been a greater sense of unity since the 1980s. The Tamil Diaspora consists of some 800,000 people concentrated mostly in Canada (approx. 300,000), Switzerland (approx. 40,000), Norway (approx.10,000), France (approx. 40.000), UK (approx. 110,000), US and Australia (approx. 30,000 each). One-third of Sri Lankan Tamils now live outside Sri Lanka.
2. Sinhalese Diaspora: The Sinhala diaspora is also much politicised with a significant element of 'long distance nationalism' and Sinhala chauvinistic rhetoric. They too are closely connected through networks. As the ethnic conflict raged the two diasporas saw complete polarisation.

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Notes on contributor

Dr Amba Pande is with the Centre for Indo-Pacific Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Her research focus has been Indian Diaspora and International migration and she has published various articles in national and international journals.

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