Chapter 7

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The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, a powerful minority, have now gained greater importance with the LTTE's losses on the battlefield. More than 800,000 Sri Lankan Tamils living abroad, as accounted by the UNHCR, are mostly settled in Western Europe, Canada, USA and Australia, mainly as professionals. Their political and economic support to the Eelam movement at home sustained and nourished the armed conflict. Even after the military rout that the LTTE has suffered, the Sri Lankan ethnic issue is still alive because of the vocal activism carried out by the diaspora in the Western countries.

The LTTE, the most nationalist among the militant groups, was adamant about achieving a separate Tamil homeland comprising the North and East of Sri Lanka since 1976. It gave a fresh impetus to Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism as it relied mostly on Tamil history and culture for propagating its cause. By developing an ideology of vengeance against the Sri Lankan State, which threatened the existence of Tamil identity, the cadres were made to commit themselves to the goal. Any group or individual advocating anything less than Eelam was silenced by the LTTE, in Sri Lanka and abroad.

The Tamils' migration to the West was propelled by the violence generated both by the Sri Lankan State and the LTTE. While a small number of Tamil professionals left the country between the 1950s and the 1970s because of the State's discriminatory policies, the maximum number of Tamil migrants after the orchestrated violence by the Sinhalese against the Tamils in 1983 and the subsequent civil war, were poor refugees, who left their home country because of the security crisis and human rights violations committed both by the State and the Tamil Tigers. By the mid-1980s, the representative associations of the Tamil militant groups among the Western diaspora together formed a Tamil Refugee Action Group to facilitate the induction of Tamil refugees into the West. Sri Lankan civil servants, lawyers and other professionals among the diaspora helped the TRAG in its mission.
With the establishment of a large Sri Lankan Tamil community in the West after 1983, efforts were made to preserve Tamil culture and religious traditions. Many institutions were established by various sections of Tamils for interaction within the community. Associations were formed by doctors, lawyers, engineers, writers, old boys’ associations by the alumni groups of almost every educational institution in Sri Lanka, and innumerable village-level organizations, especially by the people from the Jaffna region. Weekend Tamil schools were established to get the second-generation Tamils together. Tamil radio and television companies were also established.

The rich network of multiple community relations of the Tamil expatriates gave ample scope for the Tamil militant groups to reach the diaspora. By 1986, with the LTTE marginalizing the other Tamil militant groups, their respective associations in the West also got marginalized. From then on, the Tamil diaspora came under the complete control and influence of Tamil Tiger sympathizers in the West. Taking the diaspora organizations as the base, the LTTE developed its front associations and umbrella organizations in the Western countries, to acquire political and economic support for its militant movement at home.

Politically, the Tamil diaspora have been engaged actively in creating awareness among the international community on the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict. Thousands of them participated in rallies and demonstrations whenever there was any significant political development at home. Their hunger strikes, annual events and the petitions that they submitted highlighted the Sri Lankan Tamil grievances and generated sympathy for their cause. Tamil expatriates became active in the political parties in the West and even contested elections. There are many Tamil councillors in Canada, UK and Norway, who also have contributed to generating awareness about the problems of the Tamils in Sri Lanka. The instrumentality of Tamil diaspora was engaged in effective political lobbying in the West. Through their elected representatives, they debated their problems in the Parliament to make the West influence the Sri Lankan state’s decisions. They organized conferences and seminars, the internet, publications, radio and television was used effectively to propagate the cause of Eelam.
The diaspora network became an easy base for developing the LTTE's international network, with its own offices and cells in at least fifty-four countries by 1998, especially in the West. The LTTE owns many businesses in the West through front companies. Any successful business initiative or a flourishing company run by the Tamil diaspora was easily taken under the LTTE's management. Diaspora village-level associations and other non-profit organizations were also actively involved in sending economic contributions for the development of the Tamil Eelam region in Sri Lanka. When the LTTE gained control of this region in the early 1990s, the donations were diverted to the LTTE.

**Tamil Diaspora Nationalism**

Scattered away from home by the conflict, the Sri Lankan Tamils have been much more involved in consolidating Tamil nationalist feelings. With their increasing self-confidence and assertiveness, many in the Tamil diaspora proudly maintained their ethno-national identities. The memories of pain and suffering remained fresh in their minds and made them support the nationalist movement at home. Many of those who migrated in the late 1970s and especially after 1983 were direct victims of war-related violence or those who had undergone harassment by the security forces. Political activists, civil servants, cultural activists, writers and other intellectuals who were suspected by the government of sympathizing with the Tamil militancy, left the country fearing government retribution and institutionalized the support structures for the Eelam movement at home. Detention, torture and killing of Tamil youths by the state apparatus increased the flood of refugees from Sri Lanka.

With the increase in Tamil militant activities in Sri Lanka in the early 1980s, Sri Lankan state indiscriminately detained and tortured many Tamil youth and even led to many abductions and disappearances. This made many Tamil youth to leave the country. The poor refugees, who lost livelihood and relatives because of the war or for reasons of mishandling by the security forces, left the country, seeking shelter and survival. On reaching a foreign land they could be easily mobilized by the Tamil intellectual diaspora to participate in the political programmes supporting Tamil nationalism. The government, which was indulged in savage and indiscriminate violence against the innocent civilians in order to counter the guerrilla acts, was
perceived as an enemy to the Tamil community. The LTTE, which was mainly fighting against the SLAF was seen as savior of the masses and so Tamil expatriates readily supported its call for a separate Tamil nation.

Though a significant number of Tamils were dejected by the LTTE’s methods of spearheading the cause and resort to killing of members of other Tamil militant groups and anyone not clearly in support of the LTTE, they had no alternative to keeping quiet or supporting the LTTE.

With the weakening of the LTTE’s militant movement in Sri Lanka, Tamil nationalism as propagated by the LTTE sympathizers in the West now includes not merely the Sinhala majoritarianism or ethnic discrimination but also the cultural elements that are used to define pan-Tamil nationalism. They now desire for all the scattered Tamils in the world to have a nation, comprising not only the North and East of Sri Lanka but also the Tamil Nadu state of South India. The formation of Greater Tamil Eelam had been mooted in the twentieth century by Tamil nationalists. The military reverses of the LTTE have served to revive this aspiration.

There is a renewed cultural consciousness among the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora and a vibrant revival of cultural affinities. A great deal of effort is made to preserve Tamil language and culture. The observance of traditions and rituals in the temples constructed by the diaspora – which are in the hundreds in the West – and the community festivals that are being organized, manifest a greater verve than similar events held even in Jaffna. The weekend Tamil schools, established with the objective of strengthening the cultural roots of second-generation diaspora, teach not only the Tamil language but also classical music and dance. These new-generation Tamils hold more cultural performances than the Tamil children in Chennai or Sri Lanka. The Tamil cultural aspects have been propagated in the Tamil media. Tamil conferences and seminars are also organized with focus on Tamil history and culture, which are also highlighted in the diaspora websites. This effervescence supports our hypothesis that in the case of the Sri Lankan Tamils “Diaspora communities retain their nationalistic tendencies even after leaving their conflict-affected homelands.”
Overseas Support Network

Militant groups, especially the LTTE, have easily harnessed this new diaspora consciousness to sustain the militant movement in Sri Lanka, by establishing a wide network. As it was a dominant group among the diaspora, they made sure that the Tamil expatriates’ support for separate Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka continued unabated. With the LTTE sympathizers reaching every community aspect that determined the diaspora’s life in the West, nobody could escape the LTTE’s scrutiny. There are Tamil doctors associations, Tamil Creative Writers Association, Tamil lawyers associations, Tamil Youth Organization and Tamil associations in universities. With this multitude of Tamil diaspora organizations, LTTE sympathizers established front organizations the Illankai Tamil Sangam in the USA, the Swiss Federation of Tamil Associations, Australian Federation of Tamil Associations and the Federation of Associations of Canadian Tamils. They established charitable organizations such as the World Tamil Movement, Tamil Rehabilitation Organization, and British Tamil Association. By assigning political and economic functions to the umbrella organizations in each region, the LTTE attained greater thrust to the Eelam movement in Sri Lanka.

The diaspora also organized well-coordinated world-wide protests and demonstrations in support of the LTTE and its cause, through this network of organizations. Any programme that the diaspora organize could immediately reach every corner because of the well-connectedness. Any event organized turned successful because of this network, where constant advocacy of the Tamil Eelam was made. The Tamil diaspora, which served as a propaganda vehicle for the conflict at home, could easily be manipulated by the LTTE for acquiring economic resources.

The LTTE expanded its resource base through drug trafficking, money laundering, investing in trade, enterprises and stock exchange. The funds given, voluntarily or involuntarily, by the diaspora and the profits raised in its businesses were used to do its arms transactions and also to meet the legal defence of its international cadres. The finances raised also could help the LTTE to get military training from militant organizations including the Islamic groups. The Tamil diaspora helped in developing these links. Many Sri Lankan Tamils in the West were involved in purchasing arms
for the LTTE, whose arsenal was said to number 10,000 weapons. With the sophisticated weapons purchased in the international arms markets and the training received in using them, the LTTE could successfully combat with the state forces and survive for longer period. The Tamils were also engaged in criminal activities such as using counterfeit credit cards to siphon away gas station payments. Many Sri Lankan Tamils have been arrested for drug trafficking for the LTTE. For carrying illegal migrants from Asia to the West in its ships the LTTE charged individual migrants thousands of dollars. A report in 2007 claimed that the LTTE’s international network had a ‘profit margin’ of between $200 million and $300 million annually.

An overview of the LTTE’s international network clearly indicates that its survival was mostly based on its firm roots in diaspora scattered all over the West. This network served as a regular fodder to carry out its armed conflict in Sri Lanka. Improvements in weapons, communication, transport and electronics have made easy for the LTTE to sustain. The globalized world helped the LTTE to move anywhere in the world with restrictions and reach the diaspora. They could swiftly carry out their international activities of fundraising, propaganda and weapon procurement. Open borders and liberal markets allowed the LTTE to enhance its international operations which strengthened and sustained them. Without the external support of diaspora, the LTTE would not have been able to develop its international network. The vast presence of Tamils abroad certainly played a great advantage to the Tamil militants in getting political and economic support to their cause. These developments prove our hypothesis that “the greater the overseas support network of the militants, the brighter the chance for them to sustain their separatist movement.”

Internationalization of the Conflict

The network of diaspora organizations from the beginning of the 1980s has been greatly involved in political mobilization. Though the diaspora was exhibiting some political functions in the late 1970s, only with the massive influx of Tamil refugees in to the West after 1983, they could organise and define a well established role for supporting the Eelam movement. The political freedom enjoyed in the West made them publicly display their anger towards the State and, at times, even made the Western governments send their emissaries to assess the humanitarian situation in the
Tamil areas of Sri Lanka. Their independent reports did help the West to influence the Sri Lankan State’s actions and some countries even linked up their aid to Sri Lanka with the progress of the peace process.

The absence of the international media in the conflict region would have helped the Sri Lankan State to hide its human rights violations there. The LTTE, which had its own reporters and broadcasting stations in the Tamil territory, could disseminate its news and information to the West through its diaspora network. The photographs and video recordings of the events were immediately uploaded to the websites. The techno-savvy in the diaspora could help in maintaining this instant communication flow globally. The diaspora organizations regularly brought out research reports on the conflict at home. The Tamil diaspora organizations were also able to draw the sympathy of other international NGOs to legitimize the LTTE’s struggle for an independent Eelam.

Without the presence of Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, the Tamil ethnic conflict wouldn’t have gained much prominence in the international arena. Only because of the regular and intense campaigning done full time by the political activists, the conflict could get internationalised. Many claimed that a Cease-Fire Agreement could be signed in 2002 between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE because of the international support given to Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe. The Oslo Conference in November 2002 was marked by the presence of more than twenty countries and international organizations, where they pledged immediate humanitarian assistance in support of the peace process. The European Union agreed to strengthen its role in the peace process while engaging the Tamil diaspora. The expatriate community was suggested to assist in the peace process through financial assistance or through skills audits or training. The international community felt that improved economic conditions would bring ‘peace dividends’ to the people of Sri Lanka. Countries like Japan, Norway, the US and the EU worked as Co-Chairs of the peace process in Sri Lanka. It was the first time that the international community showed so much interest in and support to the peace process in Sri Lanka. The activism of the Tamil diaspora contributed a great deal in mobilizing the international community’s support for the peace process at home. This bears out our hypothesis that the “internationalization of conflict by diaspora communities results in
wholesome involvement of the international community for peacemaking". However, despite all the efforts of the international community and the SLMM, an atmosphere conducive to a lasting solution has not been created. There was criticism that the international community underplayed its expected role.

**Change in the International Environment and Defeat of the LTTE**

The Sri Lankan government, after realizing the importance of the LTTE's international network in sustaining the military conflict, concentrated on dismantling that network. In this decade, especially after the terror attack on the US on 11 September 2001, it could easily draw global attention to the LTTE's terrorist acts and its links with the other international terror groups. The global sensitivities to terrorism made the Sri Lankan government advance its political lobbying and acquire greater cooperation from the Western nations in curtailing the group. Sri Lankan foreign affairs officials were regularly involved in political lobbying in the West. They were successful in making many Western nations ban the LTTE. This could help in checking the fundraising activities of the LTTE and led to the arrest of the fundraisers. Consequently, the LTTE's arms procurement and other criminal operations also got affected. This factor also accounts for the Sri Lankan government's current military successes.

Many of the diaspora associations like the TRO and WTM, which were front organizations for the LTTE, have been internationally banned. There are restrictions on the political activities of the diaspora too, as they support the banned terrorist group. The Sri Lankan government could also get military support from countries such as the US, India, Pakistan, and China. This pressure on the LTTE’s international network, along with the international military cooperation given to the Sri Lankan state resulted in wiping off of the LTTE leadership. The territories, especially in the north of Sri Lanka which were held by the LTTE, since the early 1990s, have now been occupied by the government forces. With the LTTE losing its grip in Sri Lanka, now the diaspora have achieved all the more political prominence. The use of threat and intimidation by the LTTE made its opponents remain silent. But Karuna's split from the LTTE and the weakening of the LTTE in the post-2002 CFA period gave strength to moderate Tamil groups to emerge again. Non-LTTE Tamil diaspora
groups like the SLDF have been formed in this context. These groups, calling themselves democratic Tamils, have shown an active interest in the political process to solve the ethnic conflict.

For future studies on the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict this emerging role of the diaspora should be a topic of interest. Any initiative to politically solve the conflict inevitably has to include this active intellectual community living outside the home territory. Their affluence and ability to rebuild the war-torn Tamil region may allow the Tamil diaspora to play a constructive role in Sri Lankan politics.