

Forgotten Histories – Sri Lanka’s civil war and diaspora

Irene Trapani

A.Y. 2022/23

Mobility, Migrations and European Integration

Sri Lanka’s civil war – or national liberation conflict, depending on the perspective – has been an extremely grave conflict, lasting for almost 30 years and marked by multiple humanitarian crises. It has been characterised by mass killings, disappearances and rapes, and has created a climate of widespread and permanent violence that has led hundreds of thousands to seek asylum, or simply better life opportunities, abroad.

Yet, such a relevant conflict has not received much, if any, attention in the West. Both governments and civil society have been – and still are – mostly oblivious to the situation in the country, at most taking interest in it only when directly involved, may it be for physical proximity or for being a receiver of the diasporic emigration flows that emit from the island.

This paper has as its objective to shed light matter, giving an account of the causes and events of the conflict and highlighting the phenomenon of Tamil diaspora, with a focus on the biggest Tamil community in Italy, that of Palermo.

History

Sri Lanka’s ethnic composition is fundamental to understanding the history of the country. The population is divided into Sinhalese and indigenous Tamil. Sinhalese comprise 74% of the population, are Buddhist and inhabit the southwest and the interior. Indigenous Tamils constitute 12% of the population, are either Hindu or Christian and inhabit the northern and the eastern coast. Then there are *Indian* Tamils, brought to the island from India to work as plantation workers during the colonial period, and Muslims.

For centuries the two main ethnic groups have lived in relative peace, but British colonial rule changed their balance. Great Britain imposed a rule of *divide et impera*, favouring the Tamil minority. When the British reformed the education system and opened English schools to train local civic servants, such schools were opened mostly in the Tamil-populated Jaffna peninsula, reserving higher education and better jobs opportunity to that ethnic group, while rendering them inaccessible to Sinhalese population. A disproportionate representation of Tamil population was also present in the army of the country, with high-ranking positions reserved for them.

Moreover, English liberalist principles broke the union between political authority and Buddhism, leading to the creation of a resentful nationalism, centred on a fusion of language, race and religion to create a clear Sinhala/Buddhist identity which claimed as its territory the entirety of the island. Over time, Sinhalese nationalism became equally matched with Tamil one, which underlined Tamil standing as indigenous people that had equal rights to the island.

Independence, in 1948, was not able to unify the country, and the new state projected a very distinct Sinhalese identity – now supported by a universal electorate that favoured only the Sinhalese.

The promotion of Sinhala identity and discrimination against Tamils appeared immediately: the government favoured Sinhala settlement in the *Dry Zone* in the interior of the island, in a region that Tamils considered their ancestral homeland; in 1956 the Sinhala Only Language Act established Sinhalese as the only national language; in the 60s economy became increasingly state-controlled, resulting in difficulty for Tamils to access the private sector; in 1970 a higher education reform required them to get higher scores in tests to enrol in universities; a reform of the minority-led military led to the establishment of the Ceylonese army as a Buddhist-Sinhalese entity.

All of these acts served to consolidate the Sinhalese identity in the country and also improve the poor conditions of the population, but, on the other hand, they served to increase the resentment of minorities.

To further aggravate the situation, politicians of both ethnic groups intensified their use of violent and racist rhetoric and from 1956 onwards episodes of violence and pogroms against Tamils took place, to the point that many have indicated such actions as the beginning of a genocide that continues today¹.

From the 70s many Tamil extremist organisations began to form, often turning to violence. Of these, the most important was the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

LTTE was formed in 1972 and had as its main goals the improvement of living conditions for Tamils and the creation of the independent state of Tamil Eelam, which would be created as a Tamil haven inside the island of Ceylon. The organisation immediately started carrying out guerrilla and terrorist attacks against government institutions.

It is one such ambush that marked the beginning of the civil war: on July 23, 1983, the LTTE attacked an army patrol, killing 13 Sinhalese soldiers. The act was the start of the so-called Black July, a country-wide pogrom that killed over 3000 Tamils.

The first period of the war (Eelam War I), ranging from 1983 to 1987, is characterised by guerrilla attacks of LTTE and other Tamil associations against the government and by the engagement of India. At first, India supported the *rebels*, foraging them with weapons, resources and training; then, in 1987, after realising that the destabilisation of Sri Lanka could spill to its Tamil states, it turned to finding a non-violent solution. Talks were initiated with the government, resulting in the deployment of a Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to the north of the country (where conflict was concentrated) to ensure a ceasefire. In reality, the IPKF took control of the north, inciting a response by the LTTE, at a moment when the government was engaged in fighting another insurrection (this time Sinhala).

Guerrilla acts against the IPKF and its subsequent retreat from the island mark the beginning of Eelam War II (1990-94). This new phase saw the LTTE build a conventional capability – as it took over old Indian infrastructure – and yet continuing in committing terrorist attacks and brutalities against opposite forces, Tamil dissidents and Muslims. Such forms of retaliation were not, however, unknown to Colombo, as the government carried out massacres of Tamil civilians in its controlled areas. The escalation of the conflict and the weakening of both sides led, in 1994, to the beginning of peace talks. Negotiations, however, were soon met with the stubbornness of the LTTE.

Eelam War III (1995-2000) thus saw a massive retaliation by the government, leading to the siege of Jaffna (in the heart of LTTE territory) to force LTTE to accept negotiations. The siege constrained over 350.000 militants and civilians to flee the city, causing a humanitarian catastrophe. The resulting tactic of the Tigers was to carry out terrorist attacks in government-controlled cities and against the army. Once again, however, operations left both sides exhausted and unable to continue fighting, setting the war to another standstill.

Again, there were attempts at a political solution, this time with the help of foreign countries. In 2002 thanks to Norway a Memorandum of Understanding was signed, stating a permanent ceasefire. The peace process advanced with the LTTE and Sri Lankan government agreeing to meet humanitarian needs and to begin talks. Such efforts (especially those of foreign countries) were however not positively seen by many on both sides, and optimism soon faded when in 2003 the LTTE proclaimed they would not discuss any further. Things escalated again after a new presidential election in 2005. The new right-wing government aimed to finally end the war, and not on peaceful terms. It thus began improving the army, preparing an offensive against the Tigers, and increased retaliation

¹ Kanagasabai, Thambu. *Question of Genocide in Sri Lanka. Justifying a Referral to International Court of Justice*. 27 January 2020. <https://sangam.org/question-of-genocide-in-sri-lanka/> (accessed ottobre 24, 2022)

against dissidents and Tamils. At the same time, the LTTE reprised bombings, riots and assassinations, both against the Sri Lankan government and Tamil dissidents.

Eelam War IV thus broke out in 2006, this time seeing a massive counter-offensive of the government, getting back control of LTTE-held areas, forcing the population into *No Fire Zones* and refusing to supply them with adequate resources. The conclusion of the war in 2009, with the destruction of the LTTE, was characterised by increasing violence against Tamil civilians, to the point of being called a humanitarian disaster. Such acts comprised not only the refusal of assistance and adequate supply, but also massacres, disappearances, unlawful detention and extrajudicial killings, all of which, furthermore, have not ended with the end of the war.

A diasporic society

First waves of Tamil migration started already in 1948, after independence and the creation of discriminatory policies in the country. Such emigration pertained mostly to the wealthier and better-educated spheres of Tamil society, and targeted the UK and other commonwealth countries, making use of the former colonial ties.

The phenomenon, however, assumed a diasporic extent from the late 70s, as policies became more pressing on Tamil population. One clear example is the Prevention of Terrorism Act (1979), which had as its scope the detention (in prisons or other detention centres in the country) of people for *unwarranted activities*² and was enforced solely on Tamils suspected of collaborating with terrorist movements. Moreover, the general climate of violence, fear of detention and torture by the military and the LTTE (which targeted Tamil civilians that refused cooperation) and diminishing economic opportunities all contributed to expatriation. Between 1980 and 1999 it is estimated that over 250.000 Sri Lankans (mostly Tamils) applied for asylum in Europe, and at the beginning of the new millennium over 800.000 Sri Lankans lived abroad.

Preferred countries were, other than Tamil Nadu in India, western countries that offered better economic opportunities. Most emigrated to Canada and the UK, with some applying in the United States and Australia. But non-English speaking European countries were also targeted: Norway and Switzerland foremost and to a lesser degree Germany, France, the Netherlands and Italy.

People involved in this diaspora maintain form also very close-knitted groups around the globe, creating communities in certain states and in certain cities within those states and, at the same time, maintaining connections between such scattered groups and with those that remain in Sri Lanka. It is the so-called *global Tamilness*³, which sees Tamils around the globe maintain their own national identity through the preservation of their own religion, traditions and language and with the consumption of distinctly Tamil media, may it be literature, movies or tv. At the same time, such groups remain separated from the culture of the country they end up living in, respecting customs and laws but not participating in them. And such a tendency to isolation is even furthered by the high number of Tamil associations created, which mainly regulate life within the community. They are, however, also politically active both towards western societies, trying to improve the lives of Tamils in arrival countries and to gain recognition of the struggles they face at home, and towards their motherland, supporting (especially in the past) organisations like the LTTE or (nowadays) development and aid projects.

Receiving countries, especially the non-English speaking ones, have not much worked towards their integration as well. Asylum applications have seen very low acceptance rates (except for countries such as Canada), an instance given not only because of the reluctance of the country to give such

² Human Rights Watch. "In a Legal Black Hole" Sri Lanka's Failure to Reform the Prevention of Terrorism Act. 7 february 2022. https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/02/07/legal-black-hole/sri-lankas-failure-reform-prevention-terrorism-act#_ftn1

³ Burgio, G. (2016). When Interculturality faces a Diaspora. The Transnational Tamil Identity. *Encyclopaideia*, 20(44). <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1825-8670/5992>

protection, but also because of the belief that Tamils were “only” economical migrants (a conviction supported by the government itself) and ignorance towards the actual situation in the country. First expatriates have also usually been relegated to working menial jobs even when highly educated, even if these conditions have improved over time.

Immigration to Palermo

Italy has not been one of the main directors of emigration from Sri Lanka. Finding data is especially difficult, as official records do not differentiate between ethnic groups. Italy hosts, as of 2021, over 100.000 Sri Lankans⁴, and it is estimated that of these around 25.000 are Tamil⁵.

Palermo’s community is the biggest in Italy, but numbers are difficult to find: official data mentions 3200 Sri Lankans (regardless of ethnicity) in the province as of 2020, while an interview conducted refers to 400 families present in the city⁶.

Since the beginning of the war, Palermo has been an important destination to those fleeing, as it was easy to reach⁷. Many of those arriving took illegal routes, as quoted by local newspapers: there are mentions of arrivals by boat⁸ or from the Balkan route⁹.

The city was, most of the time, only a temporary stop to get to other more desirable destinations. Those remaining did so because the city reminded them of their motherland, and soon started arranging arrival for others, in the form of family reunifications or calling friends seeking to leave the country.

As in many other diaspora cities, the community has created its associations: the *Coordination Committee* (Comitato Coordinatore) was active in the city already in 1991, functioning as an *informal self-government*, as a political representative of Tamil instances in the city and maintaining links with the LTTE in the homeland. It promotes Tamil culture both *inside* the community, organising a language school and a traditional dance one, and *outside* the community, with the promotion of Tamil culture.

Religion is also central to the community’s life. Christian Tamils as of now follow mass in three churches, the most important one being S. Nicolò da Tolentino, and Hindus as well have their own temples¹⁰. Both, however, are involved in the celebration of *santuzza* Rosalia, the patron Saint of the city. Devotion of her figure fits well in the “mentality” of both religious groups, being seen either as a Christian Saint or as one of the Hindu deities. Such devotion can be well seen in the *acchianata* (climb) to the Sanctuary on Monte Pellegrino, conducted every Sunday morning, and in the participation in the *festino*, the yearly celebration of the patron Saint.

Relationship with Palermitans is, however, a peculiar one. Tamil community has initially (as it is peculiar to diasporic societies) been closed to local customs, and has resulted *invisible* to residents as well: the first generation has undertaken jobs of servitude, such as cleaning staff in private homes, dishwashers or waiters, regardless of their level of education. Over the years things have changed, with the opening of shops and restaurants that offer traditional foods and imported goods. As much

⁴ Ministero del Lavoro e delle politiche sociali. «La comunità srilankese in Italia.» 2021. <https://integrazionemigranti.gov.it/AnteprimaPDF.aspx?id=3487>

⁵ Tamilnation.org. <https://tamilnation.org/diaspora/italy.htm> and Giuseppe Burgio, *La diaspora interculturale. Analisi etnopedagogica del contatto tra culture: i Tamil in Italia*, ETS, Pisa 2007

⁶ It is reported, however, that residents are declining, as many have decided to move elsewhere, looking for better economic opportunities

⁷ Interview with D. Johnson, 9/11/2022

⁸ Castellano, Enzo. *L' ODISSEA INFINITA DEI 54 CLANDESTINI* - *la Repubblica.it*. 27 february 1990.

⁹ Longo, Alessandra. *Tra i clandestini in fuga, Alle porte della libertà* - *la Repubblica.it*. 26 may 1991.

¹⁰ Interview with D. Johnson, 9/11/2022

as they serve as a way to let Palermitans discover Tamil culture, they are mostly aimed at and frequented by other Tamils.

Time has, however, changed their standing in the city. The community, thanks to its activism, has been able to stand out more, organising manifestations to highlight the condition suffered at home, but also sports tournaments and celebrations of traditional festivities and community events. Younger generations have integrated into local society, getting university degrees and thus improving the social condition of the community.

One of the most important milestones reached is the signing in 2021 of a Memorandum of understanding¹¹ with the representatives of the city. The memorandum has led to the recognition of the Tamil genocide by the Sinhalese and to the sponsorship of initiatives to raise awareness on the topic and Tamil history and culture.

¹¹ TamilAction. Protocollo sul Genocidio firmato tra la Città di Palermo e la comunità Eelam Tamil. 24 september 2021. www.tamilaction.org/genocidio/protocollo-sul-genocidio-firmato-tra-la-citta-di-palermo-e-la-comunita-eelam-tamil/

Bibliography

- Burgio, Giuseppe. *La diaspora interculturale. Analisi etnopedagogica del contatto tra culture: i Tamil in Italia*. Pisa: ETS, 2007.
- Burgio, Giuseppe. «When Interculturality faces a Diaspora. The Transnational Tamil Identity.» *Encyclopaideia* 20, n. 44 (2016).
- Castellano, Enzo. *L' ODISSEA INFINITA DEI 54 CLANDESTINI - la Repubblica.it*. 27 february 1990. <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1990/02/27/odissea-infinita-dei-54-clandestini.html?ref=search>.
- Hashim, Ahmed S. *When Counterinsurgency Wins: Sri Lanka's Defeat of the Tamil Tigers*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.
- Henayaka-Lochbihler, Ranjith, e Miriam Lambusta. *The Sri Lankan Diaspora in Italy*. Berghof Research Center for Conflict Management, 2004.
- Henayaka-Lochbihler, Ranjith, e Miriam Lambusta. *The Sri Lankan Diaspora in Italy*. Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Conflict Management, 2004.
- Human Rights Watch. «*In a Legal Black Hole*» *Sri Lanka's Failure to Reform the Prevention of Terrorism Act*. 7 febbraio 2022. https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/02/07/legal-black-hole/sri-lankas-failure-reform-prevention-terrorism-act#_ftn1.
- International Crisis Group. «THE EMERGENCE OF THE TAMIL DIASPORA.» *THE SRI LANKAN TAMIL DIASPORA AFTER THE LTTE* (International Crisis Group), 2010.
- International Crisis Group. *WAR CRIMES IN SRI LANKA*. International Crisis Group, 2010.
- Interview with D. Johnson (9 11 2022).
- Kanagasabai, Thambu. *Question of Genocide in Sri Lanka. Justifying a Referral to International Court of Justice*. 27 gennaio 2020. <https://sangam.org/question-of-genocide-in-sri-lanka/> (consultato il giorno ottobre 24, 2022).
- Longo, Alessandra. *Tra i clandestini in fuga, Alle porte della libertà - la Repubblica.it*. 26 may 1991. <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1991/05/26/tra-clandestini-in-fuga-alle-porte-della.html?ref=search>.
- Ministero del Lavoro e delle politiche sociali. «La comunità srilankese in Italia.» 2021. <https://integrazionemigranti.gov.it/AnteprimaPDF.aspx?id=3487>.
- Rasaratnam, Madurika. *Tamils and the Nation: India and Sri Lanka Compared*. Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Sriskandarajah, Dhananjayan. «Tamil Diaspora Politics.» In *Encyclopedia of Diasporas*, di M., Ember, C.R., Skoggard, I. (eds) Ember. Boston, MA: Springer, 2005.
- TamilAction. *Protocollo sul Genocidio firmato tra la Città di Palermo e la comunità Eelam Tamil*. 24 september 2021. www.tamilaction.org/genocidio/protocollo-sul-genocidio-firmato-tra-la-citta-di-palermo-e-la-comunita-eelam-tamil/.
- Tamilnation.org. s.d. <https://tamilnation.org/diaspora/italy.htm>.
- Velamati, Manohari. «Sri Lankan Tamil Migration and Settlement: Time for Reconsideration.» *India Quarterly* 65, n. 3 (2009): 275-94.