This is an extract from an article looking at the ways in which Sri Lankan Tamil immigrants in the United Kingdom nationalized their past. The author distinguishes between what he calls the Phase I and II immigrants who went to the UK before 1983 and were largely members of the elite and students, and the Phase III refugees who fled the country after July 1983. We publish below the section dealing with the latter, a group who continue to suffer as a result of the pogrom.

THE NATION IN SRI LANKAN TAMIL GATHERINGS IN BRITAIN

E. Valentine Daniel

Phase III Refugees

Among the immigrants of this phase, especially in its latter half, we find not only the "national past," as an equipment completely missing, but also find its absence transforming the entire equipmental whole to which it belonged from the available to the occurrent. Of such a transformation Heidegger writes:

The more urgently we need what is missing, and the more authentically it is encountered in its unavailableness, all the more obtrusive does that which is available become—so much so, indeed, that it seems to lose its character of availableness. It reveals itself as something just occurrent and no more (1962:103)

In order to appreciate the manner of the total breakdown of nationalism resulting from the disturbance of the unavailable, the nation, which had once been a part of ongoing activity and a being-in reality, we need to sift through some of the trials of these immigrants before and on their entry into Britain.

The third phase of Tamil emigration to Britain and the West in general began with the Sri Lankan government's imposition of the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (P.T.A) in 1979 instituted in response to a certain section of the Tamil population's campaign for a separate state. To appreciate the scale of the government's excessive and indiscriminate use of force one can only sadly recite that prior to the 1983 anti-Tamil riots that left thousands of Tamils dead and thousands more homeless, there were no more than a dozen members of the LTTE, the separatist group that was to subsequently grow into one of the most dreaded militant groups of the world. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, for the average Sinhalese soldier every Tamil was not only an anti-Sinhalese but an anti-nationalist. The P.T.A fell hardest upon the Tamil youth. Every Tamil Youth between the ages of sixteen and forty was considered to be a terrorist whose tactic was surprise. For many young Tamil men (and later women) the choice was flight from the atrocity of the Sri Lankan armed forces or flight into the membership of one of the many militant separatist groups.

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The immigrants of this phase, which extends from the late 1970s up to the present, were not a homogenous lot. Apart from the fact that all Phase III Tamils are asylum seekers, this phase is characterised by its continuously changing social and economic profile. It may be divided into two parts: the first consisting of those who left before the full-fledged civil war of post-1987 and the second, those who left after. It is among the latter that one is likely to find those for whom everything that is national—including a nationalised past—has broken down. Initially, Phase III immigrants came as students either because that was the only way they knew how to get to Britain or because they were too embarrassed to seek asylum right away. Once the student-route was choked off by Britain's ever-increasingly restrictive policies, they openly sought asylum. For phase II Tamils this development was something they had feared, expected, and understood. So they went all out to assist these fellow-Tamils by serving as sponsors, by providing places to stay and by finding them jobs. Phase II Tamils were also more in touch than were Phase I Tamils with the constant changes in immigration laws, their interpretation, and enforcement—all set up as obstacles to immigration by the British authorities—and the ways of overcoming or circumventing them. The first generation's advice in these matters were outdated and irrelevant, as indeed the second generation's was to become soon. What the acquaintance with Britain's immigration laws—especially its treatment of refugees—gave these Tamils was a sense of cynicism towards all things national especially national laws, and even international laws. They saw for instance that international refugee laws were not in the interest of the plight of refugees as much as they were in protecting the sovereignty of nation-states and often in protecting these nation-states from embarrassment. These nation-states were constituted of

nationalised cultures and claims to hoary nationalised pasts that set up barriers to refugees at their borders. When it came to the question of immigrants—especially refugees— Phase I Tamils believed in the primacy of national sovereignty, especially the sovereignty of their adopted nation. Phase III Tamils, the later arrivals in particular, viewed it with cynicism, dread, or utter disregard. The sentiment of Phase II Tamils fell somewhere in-between.

Once Phase III Tamils had been admitted into the country, Phase II and Phase I Tamils—especially Phase I[2]—attempted to fit what they saw into a picture that they either knew, remembered or had heard of. This picture was one of a class/caste-based social order in which the upper castes, when at their best, were helpers and patrons of the lower castes. When advice was extended to these newcomers it was purportedly done with ultimate democratic intentions—in the words of a Tamil lawyer in Britain—"to help them become fit for a free and equal society". Initially there was even a sense of urgency in their gestures of help because, among other things they had the "image of the Ceylon Tamil in Britain to protect."[3] If nothing more, they had to preserve their identity as "not Pakis'" and certainly not "Afro-Caribbean". Before the mid-1980s, much help was given and much received. Phase I Tamils expected the newcomers to conform, to continue to take their advice, to rapidly move up in British society (even as they had done by turning to education, and above all to keep a low profile until they were fit enough to ensure that the dignity of the Ceylon Tamil would not be tarnished).

After the "July riots" of 1983, Phase I Tamils realised that they were fighting a losing battle against their decimated illusion of the "dignified Ceylon Tamil". For those who were arriving by then were not necessarily young men but older people who were dependents of the post-1979 asylum seekers. In the beginning, renewed attempts were made to cajole the young men and women of Phase III to fall into line with their class/caste based expectations. This they did by subtle assertions of caste prerogatives on the one hand and overt encouragement of old-country gerontocracy on the other, both being exercises of tradition. What they had not realised is that with the rise of the Tamil militant movements in Sri Lanka gerontocracy had been overthrown by a generalised neocracy. In the wake of the "July riots" entire families arrived in Britain. When unaccompanied individuals came, their dependents followed them soon after. Marriages were made and in-laws followed spouses. Some Phase 1 immigrants saw the "Paki phenomenon"[4] taking shape in the Tamil community before their very eyes. The character of the Tamil immigrant community in Britain was never to be the same. It did not take long for matters to sour or require radical re-framing. Those of Phase 1 who refused to re-frame their world withdrew from helping the asylum seekers, declaring at least among their own classes, that these "riffraff" were untrustworthy "tree climbers."[5]

Unlike their predecessors Phase 111 immigrants were highly politicised to the brute realities of discrimination and were willing to talk about it openly. Phase 11 immigrants in particular found in this considerable relief. For instance, any Sri Lankan who works in a London petrol station[6] is regularly at the receiving end of racist remarks from white customers. As one informant put it (with only slight exaggeration I believe), "there isn't a single night, when you work the graveyard shift, that some white punk doesn't call for your attention by shouting 'hey you black cunt'". The students found it difficult to convince Phase I immigrants that open racial abuse was a reality. The Phase I type "tended to blame the victim while they lived in their suburban homes in Surrey and voted for the Tories," one woman observed.

The largely politically conservative and socially well to do Phase I immigrants found it extremely discomforting to witness the arrival of Tamils from the lower ends of caste and class, with their poor—even zero—command of English, and their off-the-boat dress and demeanor. But they were most aghast by the "ungentlemanly political tactics they employed", such as stripping themselves down to their underwear at Heathrow to protest their threatened deportation. Above all, this group found it difficult to come to terms with the fact that they were seeing "Tamils as refugees".

Many of them turned to help instead those young men and women who never left Sri Lanka but had "chosen" to stay behind and fight the Sri Lankan and Indian armies. Ironically, that these fighters were also predominantly drawn form the lower castes of Tamil Sri Lanka did not matter to Phase I Tamils to help the militant "liberation groups" back home. Some of the wealthiest of this class in Britain and in the United States—more in the United States than in Britain—expected their "boys", as these militants were called, to establish a separate nation-state called Eelam in short order and a few expressed their hope of some day becoming ambassadors of this new nation in some of the leading European and North American capitals. In the meantime they were gallant warriors in a proxy war. One wealthy Tamil physician in America offered me an advance of $60,000 if I were to agree to write a book on the ancient Tamil nation. When I told this to a Phase III immigrant who had fled both the Sri Lankan state and the militant group to which he briefly belonged, he suggested, only half in jest, that if he were me he would take the money and hire a Buddhist priest for $30,000 to write the same history. He justified his suggestion by noting that only a Buddhist priest could write a convincing history, because wasn't it a Buddhist priest who wrote the Mahavamsa? The remark is one of the many indications of the scorn with which many Phase III immigrants were willing to regard the national past.

While, on the other hand, fantasies and hopes of nationhood and ambassadorships swelled among some Phase I immigrants, on the other, they came to read, witness and even experience open racism from Britain's whites. Not that Phase I Tamils did not admit upper level managerial positions in corporations was at issue. "At a day-to day level the Brits," it was said, "are a decent lot. They keep their prejudices to themselves.,we keep ours within us." In short, various forms of equivocation seemed to qualify British racism. But their own trust in the British was shaken when they saw Tamils being called "Pakis" and reports and stories that smarted even more, began to reach the self-assured British Tamils. They heard that some young Tamils who, when accused of being Tamil and threatened with physical violence by white youths, claimed that they were Indians or Pakistanis. They had heard that in the Netherlands, Tamils in trouble tried to pass as British Guyananians or Africans. In Germany they had heard that "Tamil" was the worst insult a German could extend to a swarthy foreigner, from Turk to Vietnamese. Some blamed the asylum seekers for having robbed them of their dignity. "They cannot even speak proper English. Some cannot even speak a word" complained one of the first generation Tamils. But others realised that all the while they had imagined that their white fellow Britons knew the difference, the fact was that these whites neither knew nor cared. A sense of identification with all other non-whites in Britain had begun among some of them, mainly among the children of this generation.

As Phase III immigrants saw matters, all Phase I types could say was: "Don't do this *thambi*[7] don't do that *thambi*, and be careful, *thambi*". The asylum seekers found both of them and their advice largely a recitation of irrelevant civilities. Unconfirmed rumours abounded that some phase 1 immigrants were in collusion with the Home Office, playing the part of loyal British subjects, feeding the latter information that could result in their deportation. The following were some of the typical statements gathered from Phase III asylum seekers about their Phase I predecessors: "They want us to go back and fight for **their** Eelam." "They want us to take orders from them; be their bearers." "They are jealous that we can drive cars here. Of course they don't know that we drove cars even in Sri Lanka. They remember the days when the only cars in that country belonged to their grandfathers, and their great-grandfathers sucked up to the colonial white man." "They cheated us then, they'll cheat us now."

The only route to dignified settlement that Phase I & II Tamils had known was education. For Phase III Tamils, this was neither their first nor their easiest choice. For one, they were escaping a civil war that had wreaked havoc on their progress in education. Second, they had also spent almost all of their family's resources to come to the United Kingdom. This had to be replaced. Third, they had to earn and save up their money to bring over their parents, siblings, brides, and spouses out of their strife-torn homeland. Unlike the students who preceded them in Phase II, there were many married men among these asylum seekers. Fourth, given the paucity of the earning potential of their fathers and brothers back home under civil war conditions, and their consequent inability to save for their sisters' and daughters' marriages, it fell to these refugees to save money for their dowries. Lucky indeed was she, whose prospective groom lived in the west and had permanent residency status—but such a man required a higher dowry. In essence, the times were too urgent for settling for the deferred gratification education had to offer. They needed cash and they needed it fast.

The move from a land-centred rural Sri Lanka on a cash bound quest to a cash-centred urban England, seems to have had an effect, on the Tamil nation. The nationalised past, in which the Tamil nation figured, was territorially grounded, even the current civil war, in which Tamil separatists are fighting for the "traditional homeland," is a war that has increasingly become one more over territory than over civil rights. For Phase III immigrants, the shift from the solidity of land to the liquidity of cash, seems to have, in its small way, undermined the land-bound nation as well as a grounded nationalised past. In this regard it is interesting to note that many Phase I Tamils had either bought or hoped to buy, large English homes with spacious gardens, in the exclusive outskirts of London. They called them estates. Those among Phase II and III Tamils, who did invest in real estate, in the 1980s, preferred to buy flats, and refer to them as "liquid assets." Flats in London were considered "liquid", land in Jaffna, "a beautiful lodestone". As one asylum seeker put it, "It is even more important to be solvent than to get asylum in England." He went on to elaborate: "Tomorrow I might get a chance to go to Canada. Then why would I want to be stuck here or miss the chance only because I was not solvent? Even the US, I understand, is now giving out green cards for those with a million dollars." Fluid metaphors such as solvency, and liquidity, figure prominently in the speech of these immigrants. Especially among those who escaped the ravages of the civil war, by the skin of their teeth, and those who saw their fellow Tamils, stuck in an undesirable second country, abandoned en route to a country of asylum for lack of money. "I am told", another informant announced "that in Toronto and Montreal there are places called `Little Jaffna'. That is enough of a Tamil nation for me. Wherever there are enough Tamils, there is a Tamil nation". A far cry indeed from a nationalised past that was determined by solid boundaries. The future is to be fluid, in more respects than one.

The early arrivals of Phase III had still been those with at least some means: the means to leave before Britain began tightening her laws before the immigration Carrier's Liability Act was passed[8] before racketeers got into

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the act of facilitating the asylum seekers escape with false papers at high cost, before the price for getting to Heathrow went from costing under 400 British Pounds to more than 5000 Pounds. The "success stories" with petrol stations and retail stores that one is likely to hear, from asylum seekers apply mainly to those early arrivals who came to Britain before 1985. For the very poor— increasingly the profile of the average Tamil arriving at Heathrow during the latter part of the 1980s— the new exorbitant passage is bought for only one family member by his or her family going deeply into debt; in some instances, after selling house and possessions, no longer could the one who entered Britain raise enough money to pay back his or her own debt, let alone raise enough to pay the going price for chancy "illegal" exits and entries of other members of the family. And even if and when this was possible the pits and snares were too many and far too hazardous. There are cases known to the London-based Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants in which middlemen—also Tamils— have abandoned groups at "transit points" in such faraway places as Bangkok and Nairobi, after these same middlemen absconded with the 5000 pounds "set-up money" they received from their charges. Such a middleman takes them to an apartment or a room, tells them to stay put,—lest they be caught by the authorities— until he makes arrangements for the next leg of the journey en route to London, or some other Western Capital. The room or the apartment in question is locked from the outside to ensure double-protection. The anxious and frightened group waits, at times for days, until hunger, and/or, suspicion gets the better of them, and they break loose or start screaming for help. Some such desperate and penniless escapees are then offered, by yet another set of racketeers, the opportunity of becoming drug couriers as means of buying their way back onto the road to asylum. A refugee who gave me the above account, concluded it by saying, "You ask me about Tamil nationalism. There is only Tamil internationalism. No Tamil nationals. Never was. Never will be. This is Tamil internationalism. Being stuck in a windowless room in Nairobi. Being part of a credit card racket in London. Crossing Niagara Falls into Canada. I'm told there is even a Tamil fisherman on a Norwegian island off the North Pole. All internationals. And don't forget the briefless barrister at Charring Cross who tries to hawk his specialty as an immigration lawyer to anyone who is gullible enough to believe him. He is a Tamil too."

Many of the men who came to Great Britain to escape death after 1985, having left their wives and children, now hold little hope of seeing them. They live in a state of heightened anxiety as they await the seven-year limit at which time, they will know by law, whether their application for asylum has been accepted or not. Many being unable to bear the strain, have returned home, regardless of the consequences awaiting them. Some have met their death there. Others have gone back after learning that the reason for which they came to Britain, in the first place no longer exists; their family has been wiped out by one armed group or another. The intransigence of British authorities and the scale of British xenophobia and racism, vis-a-vis refugees (as evidenced by the nature of the frequent headlines of London's tabloids) is astounding when one realises that between 1979-1989, Great Britain, with a population of almost 58,000,000 admitted only 54,935 refugees, a mere .09% of the total population. Of these only 7,910 were Sri Lankans.[9] If the white Britain's reluctance to give refuge to asylum seekers is astounding, Phase I Tamils' willingness to share in this sentiment is ironic, but also understandable. They, like the white Britons, believed in a nation and a nationalised past. In the case of Phase III refugees, the more urgently they needed a nation or a national past, the more authentically they encountered its unavailability. The more obtrusively this unavailability pressed itself upon the lives of these refugees the more the nation and a national past revealed itself as something just occurrent and nothing more. The national past had been loosened from its hitherto unexpressed inclusion in the background practices of these Tamils. The nationalised past became an isolated property, a cipher.

By the beginning of the 1990s, further changes were observed in the composition of the more recent asylum seekers. Now not only did young men and women who had escaped the Sri Lankan and Indian armies seek asylum in Britain, but war hardened and disenchanted militants, escaping tyrannous militant groups of their own, were arriving in London. This group introduced a climate of suspicion on the one hand and a pervasive cynicism on the other. The most prominent target of this cynicism was the nation. I have witnessed arguments between these Tamils and their fellow Tamils who had embarked upon the project of finding and establishing their national past in which the former thought that the distant past that obsessed their fellow-nationalists was irrelevant at best and a sign of derangement at worst. The only past they knew and cared enough not to want to be caught in it, is the recent past of war, rape, torture and death that they had just escaped.

The Disaggregation of Identity

Phase III Tamils have also begun to establish new alliances and adopt new attitudes towards identity and difference that are now marking them off from Phase I Tamils in unprecedented ways. A series of examples will illustrate my point.

A number of Phase III Tamils who began at the petrol pump moved up to managing the petrol station and the attached "mini-markets" to acquiring small grocery stores run by Ugandan Indians whose children now have no interest in inheriting their parents' businesses. Apart from

entailing late hours and hard work, the running of these shops presents a unique problem with customer relations. In Sivapalan's case, for instance, one of his customers is an older English woman who comes to his shop everyday to ask him why he sells these nasty smelling and strange looking things, and why he does not take it all and go back to where he came from. Sivapalan smiles, and checks out the items she buys—because they are inexpensive in his shop— and wishes her a good day. I asked him how he felt. He said, "Hate!" And then added, "But I also know we will win and they will lose" I didn't press him to unpack that statement but let it bask in its polyvalence. Sivapalan, and other Tamil shop owners like him, has another interesting customer in the young Afro-Caribbean British male. Some of these young men— "at least one per night"— walk into his shop and pick up a pack or two of beer, presenting however, only a packet of chewing gum at the cash register. When asked about the beer, the young man boldly declares—knowing full well that everyone knows otherwise—that he brought the beer from outside and owes money only for the gum he bought at this store. Sivapalan takes the money for the chewing gum and lets him go with his free pack of beer. This practice is so well known that it even perks the sympathetic ire of Phase I Tamils who wonder why the shop keeper does not inform the police. These Phase III Tamils consider this advice a sign of the utter ignorance of Phase I Tamils and the distance that separates the two groups. For one, the police is their foremost enemy. In support of these sentiments Phase III Tamils supplied me with stories of police racism, injustice and violence, too numerous to recount here. As one Tamil put it, "the policemen of the world would have a country of their own." For another, the shopkeepers find the rage of the "law-abiding" Phase I counterparts amusing and out of place. Even I was impressed by the equanimity with which these shopkeepers reacted to these acts of "shop-lifting". Even though these Tamils did not extend alliances of inter-personal relations to the Afro-Caribbean Briton, they extended them alliances of understanding. They did not see them as breaking the law but as having broken with the law. To this extent their experience was a common one.

While Tamils have little to do with the Afro-Caribbean community because, as they see it, they cannot relate to the "urban ways" and "low priority given to kinship", they find African immigrants much more compatible allies. Not only do many of them share Phase III Tamils' asylum seeking status, they also have "rural values". That these new links of affect materialise may be illustrated by the following incident:

> Sahitharan Panchatcharam was a twenty-nine-year-old-asylum seeker from Sri Lanka. He was waylaid by a group of young whites and bashed to death in London's Eastham. Several of the London-based organisations working for refugees organised a protest march. Over 4,000 people of all ethnic groups joined the march. But there were only 150 Tamils, all from Phase III The largest non-Tamil representation at the rally was made up of black Africans. It is of interest to note that the Trustees—all Phase I Tamils— of the Wimbledon Hindu temple refused the organizers of the march, the right to hang posters on the temple posters on the temple premises. Their reason? "We do not want to antagonize the white community."

There are other alliances between Phase III Tamils that have become more vital than any they ever had with their fellow Tamils of the other phases or the separatists/nationalists at home. Most of these alliances span across national boundaries, to fellow asylum seekers in other European countries who have fled both the nationalist Sri Lankan army and the equally nationalist Tamil militant groups. To these Tamils, the nationalised pasts that both these groups are frantically trying to construct is something they have broken away from in the same manner that they feel they have broken with the law. Alliances have also extended to other refugees fleeing other national pasts, and a keen interest is shown in organisations such as Amnesty International whose scrutiny transgresses national boundaries.

Conclusion

In the modern world we have come to view the nation-state as the ultimate unit of protection. What is it that renders a nation-state legitimate? John Herz's view is typical, combining nostalgic realism and nostalgic idealism:

> Legitimacy originates from feelings and attitudes of the people within as well as neighbours and others abroad in regard to the unit, its identity and coherence, its political and general 'way of life'. (1968:24)

He further held that a nation-state's internal politics requires it to be grounded upon a contiguous expanse of territory (1968:25), its "physical corporeal capacity" (1959:40).

What Herz failed to add to this is that the physical corporeal capacity in question is a thoroughly temporalised one in the modern nation-state, temporalised with the past. Micheal Walzer in his *Spheres of Justice* subsumes all plurality under the caption of "shared understandings", that make a modern nation-state possible, despite diversity. This, I presume, includes a shared understanding of the past. What political theorists

of the modern nation-state such as Walzer and Herz, and Schumpeter before them, failed to appreciate is how problematic a phenomenon "shared understanding" is, and that it has become increasingly so in late modernity.

This case study of Tamil immigrants to Britain is only one instance where nationalism and the national past have become such contested categories. I am certain that there are many more, and some being spawned at this very moment in other parts of the world. By contestation I do not mean the arguments that abound and are abundantly written about as to whose nation a particular territory is and whose nationalised past is a valid one. I do not deny the existence of such debates, but I wish to claim that they conceal a far more radical contestation; a contestation that has been made possible by the unavailability and occurrence of the categories in question in late modernity. Not only are shared understandings of and principles of common membership in nations and national pasts highly ephemeral affairs, but they also deny the reality of counter-nationalist currents that flow through and over the dikes of the territorial nation and the national imaginary. Refugees—not only Tamil refugees— are one of the many embodiments of this overflow that disturb "established priorities of identity/difference through which social relations are organised." (Connolly 477:91) The transformation of the Tamil immigrant in Britain is one among many representations of

> "a social process through which fixed identities and naturalised conventions are pressed...to come to terms with their constructed characters, as newly emergent social identities disturb settled conventions and denaturalise social networks of identity and difference" (Connolly 1991:477)

Notes:

1. Among other things this Act provides for arrest without warrant for "unlawful activity" (Articles 2 & 31), detention in "any place" incommunicado and without trial for 18 months (Sections 6,7, 111), detention without trial (Section 15 A), the treatment of confessions while in detention as admissible evidence (Section 16) [Hyndman 1988].

2. There were many among the Phase I immigrants, especially those schooled in the social sciences and some barristers, who were articulate critics of racism, classicism and casteism, the most prominent figure among them being the current editor of the journal, *Race and Class*; A. Sivanandan. My characterisation of Phase I immigrants in this essay fits best those who chose the professions of medicine, engineering, and the hard sciences.

3. This and all other statements within quotation marks that occur in this section of this essay are excerpts from interviews with Phase I Tamils during field research in London carried out by either Daniel or his Y. Thangaraj.

4. "Paki" is a pejorative name by which south Asians in Britain are called. It is intended to conjure up an image of poor south Asian Muslims (presumably from Pakistan) doing menial jobs, speaking a strange language, practicing a strange religion that requires them towards Mecca during prayer time wherever they happen to be, and above all, whose women dress in strange clothes.

5. An allusion to a low caste from northern Sri Lanka whose traditional occupation used to be the tapping of toddy from palm trees. Not all Phase III refugees were members of the lower castes. The early ones were of modest means. With the passage of time, however, each month of the late 1980s and early 1990s brought poorer and more desperate refugees. They truly had nothing to return to. They had sold their last goat or brass pots to buy their passage.

6. Since the early days of Phase II Tamil immigrants to Britain, employment as petrol station attendants seem to have become the monopoly of freshly arriving Sri Lankan Tamils. As the saying goes in this community: "Today at Heathrow, tomorrow at the petrol pump".

7. Thambi means "younger brother" It can be used as a term of endearment but also one of paternalism.

8. This Act made it the responsibility of air and sea carriers to ensure that its passengers carried valid papers. Failure to do so made the carrier liable to heavy fines.

9. See Turner this volume.

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