

PLACING
THE
PAST
IN
THE
PRESENT

TAMIL
ORAL
HISTORY
IN
LONDON

POORNIMA KARUNACADACHARAN | RYAN MAHAN | RANI NAGULENDRAM



PLACING THE PAST IN THE PRESENT
TAMIL ORAL HISTORY IN LONDON

THROUGH THE GENERATIONS
TAMIL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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Railway Track, Colombo (Poornima Karunadasacharan)

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Placing the Past in the Present: Tamil Oral History in London is one piece of the larger, one-year Through the generations: Tamil oral history project carried out in London in 2012. A series of short films were also produced and screened at project exhibitions in west London in January 2013.

A multimedia record of the full project can be accessed online at: www.rota.org.uk

With the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund, and a host of volunteers, the project aims to:

Conserve and communicate the stories, memories and reminiscences of different generations of Tamils in London

Encourage and facilitate an understanding of, and a participation in, the collection of heritage materials with fifteen community volunteers

Provide a space for different generations of Tamils to exchange their memories and experiences in intergenerational reminiscence sessions

Raise public awareness of the history of Tamil migration to, and life in, London from 1958 to 2009, and the interconnections between the UK and Sri Lanka during this time period

Explore the experience of community among Tamil-speaking people in London

Project staff and volunteers collected the oral histories of over fifteen Sri Lankan Tamils in London – along with shorter interviews with thirty more – largely in the west London boroughs of Ealing, Hounslow and Kingston.

Three reminiscence sessions were held in Hounslow and Kingston to coincide with International Women's Day in April and Chariot Festival celebrations in August. Representation was made at Thai Pongal celebrations in Hounslow, Tamil New Year and Chariot Festival celebrations in Ealing, and other community events throughout the year.

Participants were informed of the aims and objectives of the project through Internet communications, leaflets in Tamil and English, and via word of mouth at community events and Ealing Amman Temple celebrations. Participant selection was shaped and limited by a number of factors, most importantly the interest and willingness of individuals to participate in the interview process.

An advisory group of academics, oral historians, volunteers, Tamil Community Centre staff and Race on the Agenda (ROTA) staff provided guidance on local contacts, background literature, interview schedules, audio recording, video recording, ethics, interview conduct and transcriptions.

Over fifteen volunteers, both Tamil and non-Tamil, aged 13 to 40 participated in the project and were equipped with up to five days of oral history and transcription training. Younger volunteers also participated in the Migrant Project photography training, the outcome of which was featured in the exhibition to provide a visual and narrative glimpse into the daily lives of young Tamils in west London.

Interviews were conducted in English and Tamil. To ensure accuracy, each English language interview was transcribed as close to verbatim as possible. Tamil language interviews were translated and transcribed into English. Transcripts, video and audio recordings are to be deposited and stored at the London Metropolitan Archives.

Interviews were designed according to a semi-structured interview schedule to allow for as much narration and interviewee control over the substance of the material covered. The duration of the interviews varied but typically lasted between two and four hours and followed a life story timeline from birth to the present day.

Interview materials have been coded thematically using RQDA open source software to ensure consistency across themes. Huang, R. (2012). RQDA: R-based Qualitative Data Analysis. R package version 0.2-3. <http://rqda.r-forge.r-project.org/>

Though the history of modern Sri Lanka has been written about, debated and shared at length, both in Tamil and in English, there is currently no English language archive of the personal experiences of Tamils in London. The vast changes taking place within Sri Lanka and the wider Tamil diaspora, as a result of the end of war in 2009 and the latest displacement of Tamils towards its conclusion, only adds to the need to begin this larger project.

The terms Sri Lankan Tamils or Tamil-speaking people of Sri Lanka are used throughout this text to draw attention to the wider historical focus of the Through the generations project. The unique history and UK migration trajectory of Tamil-speakers from Tamil Nadu, Singapore or Malaysia are all subjects in need of further exploration. In addition, more work is needed to capture and communicate the experiences of Tamil-speaking Muslims from Sri Lanka now living in the UK.

With memories of war or persecution still fresh in the minds of some interviewees, and many continuing to maintain close ties to Sri Lanka, the safety of participants has been one of the primary considerations of the project. Moreover, some await decisions on asylum or refugee status and more still remain wary of the repercussions their stories may present in the future. It is with this in mind that many interviewees have chosen to remain anonymous. Where possible, names, places of birth and ages have been included to provide an insight into the diversity of voices interviewed for the project.



Tamil New Year Ceremony

INTRODUCTION

In January 2012, Race on the Agenda (ROTA) was awarded a grant by the Heritage Lottery Fund to collect oral histories of Sri Lankan Tamils in London.

Working closely with the Tamil Community Centre in Hounslow, and a large group of volunteers, the project's primary objective has been to bring recognition to the history and experiences held in the memories of Sri Lankan Tamils living in London, primarily those living in, or with links to, the Hounslow area and west London.

Despite the fact that in this short period of time the project team recorded the life stories of more than fifteen individuals – along with shorter interviews with thirty more – in many ways, it is a project that is destined to be incomplete. Much more time could be dedicated to the history and unique development of community in nearby areas like Harrow, Ealing and Wembley, the many different periods and circumstances of migration to London and further intergenerational work between Tamils young and old.

It is our hope that this project goes some way in leaving the door ajar for current and future generations to continue to preserve these personal and collective stories, and to spread the word about Tamil heritage throughout the country.

The book that follows is a collection of personal stories, memories, experiences and reflections of London-based Tamil-speaking people, and their descendants, who migrated from the island of Sri Lanka between 1958 and 2009.

As a collection, the stories fit within a larger history of Tamil life in Sri Lanka, the turmoil that struck the island after the British left in 1948, the early 20th Century routes of Tamil migration to the United Kingdom and the subsequent large-scale migration to Europe and the United Kingdom after Black July in 1983, the largest of a series of violent outbursts against Tamil people in Sri Lanka.

As such, many of the people who shared their stories came to London between 1983 and 2009, a time of conflict between armed Tamil organisations, most notably the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and Sri Lankan Government forces. However, the stories of pre-1983 migration to the UK also feature, as do stories of second-generation young people born outside of Sri Lanka. The history of Tamils in the UK is marked by a series of firsts. Not only was London one of the earliest destinations for education and employment of Sri Lankan Tamils prior to 1983, Tamils were also some of the earliest refugee and asylum seekers admitted in the post-1983 period. It is this series of interconnections, memories and experiences that this book seeks to explore further.

Chapter one presents narratives of life in Sri Lanka prior to the experience of migration.

Chapter two opens a window into the memories of belonging, identity and intra- and inter-community relations, within the context of a multicultural Sri Lanka and the escalation of political tension between majority Tamil and Sinhalese parties.

Chapter three explores the diverse experience of democratic party politics in the pre-war period.

Chapter four looks at the escalation of conflict in post-colonial Sri Lanka, highlighting the constantly evolving and dynamic experience of conflict, the resilience of Tamil people in these circumstances and the continued dissemination of these survival stories through the generations within the Tamil diaspora.

Chapter five focuses on the drivers, memories and impressions of leaving Sri Lanka and arriving in the United Kingdom.

Chapter six provides a space for the sharing of the many different experiences of transition and adjustment to life in the UK, along with reflections of second-generation young people.

Chapter seven is a meditation on the experience of home and identity in the present and the future.



Jaffna Market by David Brewer (Wikimedia)



Jaffna Peninsula by Anuradha Ratnaweera (Wikimedia)



Jaffna Market by David Brewer (Wikimedia)



Statues, Jaffna by Indi Samarajiva (Wikimedia)



Jaffna Paddy Fields by Indi Samarajiva (Wikimedia)

EARLY LIFE IN SRI LANKA

The life story approach to oral history often begins with childhood. For some of our interviewees, youth coincided with the birth of an independent Ceylon, renamed Sri Lanka in the 1972 Constitution. Others came of age during periods of communal conflict or war.

In each case, their stories vividly recall the ebb and flow of daily life in a close-knit Jaffna village or in the bustle of the capital in Colombo. The stories in this chapter touch on memories of childhood and relationships, experiences of town and village, school, faith, family and marriage before the long journey westward.

'Back then in 1947, it was a peaceful time; we lived happily. I was the fourth child born to my parents. We used to live all together, my mother's siblings and her relatives. Everyone was supportive of each other. We grew up happily... At that time, we didn't really know much. We were ten children at home. Our elders had to make sure we were doing our work and then we had to look after our younger siblings and help our mother. Back then, we weren't referring to our father as 'Appa', but as 'Aiyya'. We completed the tasks we were told to do and stayed at home, raising cows, cleaning large walls, time passed with helping our parents.'

FEMALE, 66, JAFFNA

'Lovely, I mean carefree, large family, you know. Though we were large I think I was kind of a bully, you know, being the eldest and my father's pet and the favourite, so I think the others were kind of, I don't know whether they were scared of me but I was a bully. And my sister who is next to me was more close to the brothers, the youngest girl – there is a ten-year gap.'

So when we were very young she wasn't around. But lovely memories, playing cricket, cops and robbers... So always in the evening all you remember is playing in the evening with neighbour's children, oh, carefree.'

AMBICA SELVARAJ, 62, COLOMBO

'I loved the festival times. We went to all sorts of temples. That's sort of part of everyday life and every week you will be going to temple at some point or one point... I loved the noise. I loved all the, you know, the children's stuff they had, all the rides and things like that, the, like, funfair, things about the festivals. They would have children's stuff, shops, unusual things in the shop and food and colourful stuff and you can wear all these colourful things. I used to wear the long skirt and the top, which is very sort of traditional for little girls. I enjoyed all that.'

LAVANNIYA LANGA, 41, KALUTARA

'Education, education, education, that's the only one thing everybody would say... There is a proverb in Tamil: 'Even if you want to raise chickens, you should be a government employee.' You have to be a government employee, you know. The reason is you could get a pension or whatever. So you should have a stable, permanent job. So the only way to find this is that government job. So whatever you do, you should go and join the government service – so whether you can be a teacher, clerk, anything. So education was given a priority. And, you know, all the parents, especially the lower middle class and middle class parents, their aspiration was to make one child an engineer or a doctor. So that was the dream at that time. So my parents thought that I would become an engineer [laughs] and make money and...'

RAJESHKUMAR, 56, JAFFNA

'Village life is a very happy life. I always had different types of motorbikes. I always brought my motorbike to the school... every year I would change my bikes... When I took my bike everyone looked at me, 'That man is a very smart person.'

KANDIAH NARENDRAN, 61, JAFFNA

'...I was a mutt at school – I'm still a mutt. For me school was a playground. I failed my university entrance exam. I had to wait another year. I wanted to do law. My father said, 'I don't have money and in any case you will make the worst lawyer in the world because you won't take any nonsense from anybody.' He used to complain that, especially when I ran off with a Sinhalese girl, he used to say, 'I gave him the freedom of the wild ass and now he is using it against me.'

AMBALAVANER SIVANANDAN, 89, COLOMBO

'When the proposal came, he [Mr Amirthalingam] heard that I sang that song and he said he knew me. And part of it was, he liked me, he loved me. So my father refused the marriage because he said, 'I don't want any politicians'... But my mother and her brother – her brother was from KKS, Kankesanthurai, and he was working with Chelva [S. J. V. Chelvanayakam, Federal Party leader]. He was also a businessman but he worked with Chelva. So he said, 'He's a very nice boy.' That is what he said, 'very nice boy.' 'He has no bad character qualities or anything. So if my niece is married to him, he will look after her very carefully and she will be happy.' So then my mother was insisting. And he came to our village for a meeting so my father and mother went there to see him. She came and told me, my mother, 'He's all right. He looks handsome. He's a good man. That is what people are saying. He's a good boy.' So my father also then agreed... When I married him, the first day, you know, when we were registered – he used to come and go but – he said, 'D. S. Senanayake [first Prime Minister of Ceylon] is coming and we are protesting it.' And he went and showed black flags with the younger – that is Thanthai Chelva [Father Chelva] was the leader and he [Mr Amirthalingam] was the leader for the young group, youth leader. So he gathered all the youngsters and protested. And he was beaten or something, at that time, by the police.'

MANGAYARKARASI AMIRTHALINGAM, 79, VADDUKODDAI



Mangayarkarasi Amirthalingam



School Exercise Book



Jaffna Train Station by Gerald Pereira (Wikimedia)

LAYERS OF BELONGING

Reflecting on relationships in Sri Lanka between people of different regional, economic, ethnic or linguistic backgrounds, many recall a rich diversity of interactions. While many grew up in largely Tamil-speaking areas of the Jaffna Peninsula or Batticaloa, the demands of work or education brought many to Upcountry tea plantation areas, Kandy or Colombo. As people grew up and changed, so did the political and social landscape. Discrimination and exclusion in work, education or language became a reality for some.

At the same time, many of our speakers report little separation and more fluid relationships between peoples of Muslim, Sinhalese or Tamil descent. There were, however, large variations in the experiences of place and identity among people living in Jaffna, Batticaloa, Upcountry, Colombo, or elsewhere, between people of Hindu, Buddhist, Christian or other faiths, in addition to gender, age, wealth and caste distinctions.

‘We all played together fine. The only difference was we knew we belonged to different ethnicity or linguistic groups, but otherwise we were children all playing together. With the Burghers obviously you spoke English, but, you know, there were children who spoke Sinhalese...and Farsi...you know those traders, those rich traders, Kundanmals and Nagindas? They were there in Kirulapana... so English and Sinhalese. There were Tamils, some Tamils. Can’t remember. We got on well. The language wasn’t in the picture at all. We just got on well. We had fun; we were children, climbing trees. No, language was not an issue. Even when the riots had happened, there was no issue afterwards with the children. When we were playing it never came into the picture.’

AMBICA SELVARAJ, 62, COLOMBO

'There was no distinction, no one said, 'You're Tamil', 'you're Sinhalese' – that never happened, so much so that by the time I moved out of college still there was no strong distinction...I was always in love with the Sinhalese; they were my friends [laughs]. My best friend was Sinhalese and even now, when I am in the company of Sinhalese, just to make them comfortable, I will speak to them in – you know, because I am familiar with the Sinhalese idioms – I break into Sinhalese, deliberately.'

SELLATHURAI SIVARASA, 81, JAFFNA

'My father was Tamil. You only saw Muslims when you went to Jaffna Town. At that time in 1947 and 1957, you would only find our people in Vadamarachchi. Merely in Jaffna Town would you encounter Muslims. Back then it used to be such a curiosity. Here, in London now, we see all kinds of people.'

FEMALE, 66, JAFFNA

'And my appa...he was telling me about the kind of positive relationships they used to have prior to the ethnic cleansing in the 1990s and how even when my grandmother died in the 2000s the majority of people who actually came to her funeral were Tamil Muslims instead of Tamil Hindus. So he keeps on telling us of his memories of how society used to be and how the interactions between people were, which is completely altered throughout the war...'

SINTHUJAN VARATHARAJAH, 27, GERMANY

'They [parents] had been trying to arrange marriages for me and I turned them all down and then this came along. I said, 'I'll never have an arranged marriage in my life' and I fell in love...And her parents didn't like it and my parents didn't know about it till a week or two before...Her parents didn't want a 'Demala' [derogatory term for Tamil] to marry their daughter and my parents didn't want, mostly I think they didn't want a Catholic, rather than Sinhalese. My father's argument was not as racist as theirs. His was much more in the religious vein. The only thing about the race part was that he said, 'Mixed marriages are not going to be accepted in this country and you are going to have a hard time and the children will be half-caste children. Half-caste children won't have a future in this country. You are getting yourself into a lot of trouble.'

AMBALAVANER SIVANANDAN, 89, COLOMBO

'I do remember grandma having different plates and cups for different caste people like, you know. And they would sit outside. They were not allowed to come inside. Some people were allowed to come into the living room or that entrance [points to the doorway on the right] but some people they were not allowed to come inside, they had to stand outside...At that time I don't think I understood much of it. I didn't question much. I don't think I questioned much at all. But I think I made friends with all of them – like my friends at school, they were all from lower castes and things like that. And I do remember my grandma was yelling at me that I was bringing friends home and they were all from lower castes. And then I also [would] go and visit them. And I think in the beginning, she didn't like it. But eventually I think mum said, 'Oh, let her go, that's OK.' And then that was OK eventually.'

LAVANNIYA LANGA, 41, KALUTARA

'In Sri Lanka, each and every area, the people have different, different laws. Even Portuguese and British time, they followed the laws. Mukkuvar is a caste, the dominant caste in Batticaloa...Jaffna was dominated by Vellalar caste... I belong to Vellalar but we are not majority in Batticaloa, we are few. And that is the first thing. Marriage customs, also there are some differences. And their [Jaffna] intention is always into studies and other things. They [Batticaloa] do the cultivation and other things...And the Jaffna people say they [Batticaloa] are low caste and they [Batticaloa] say they [Jaffna] are low caste [laughs]. But nowadays everybody has started to marry and other things, but anyhow there are differences still. Still there are differences.'

MALE, 47, BATTICALOA



Map of Tamil-speaking areas in the North of Sri Lanka



Sellathurai Sivarasa



POLITICS & THE NATION-STATE

When Britons arrived in Sri Lanka in the 18th Century, landing, as many tourists do now, on its coastal shores before carving a path deep into its lush, green geographic centre of Kandy, they were following a well-worn trail to the country opened up as early as 1505 by Portuguese and Dutch colonists (Wickramasinghe, 7). The stray bullets of war fired between European powers had begun to rifle through the globe, touching distant lands to the west in America and to the east in India and beyond. As elsewhere in the British Empire, migrating soldiers and 'money men' in the employ of the crown and East India Company were followed by many different types of migrants to the island, ranging from missionaries and civil administrators to plantation bosses (Wickramasinghe, 8).

By the time the British withdrew their imperial seat in Ceylon in 1948, economic and political life throughout the island had both gone through changes and at the same time retained many familiar features. English had been the language and custom of administration yet the vernacular languages and practices of Sinhalese, Ceylon Tamils, Burghers, Upcountry Tamils and Muslims became salient (Wickramasinghe, 40). Independence witnessed the growth of elite political parties representing different regional, linguistic, religious and ethnic communities, the Sinhalese-oriented United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the Jaffna Tamil-based Federal Party, the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) for Upcountry estate workers, and many more. Questions of migration and identity often took centre stage. Up to the deep political polarisation on communal lines in the late 1970s, when Appapillai Amirthalingam's Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) became the opposition party in government, party allegiance amongst Tamils remained diffuse. Politics, like life, fluctuated with the onset of time.

'You see, we were all happy because we had so many facilities that the British had brought in. You see, on the one hand, when you look upon the villagers, you found that our natives lacked so many things. They were – I won't say uncivilised – but the Western influence was lacking and – what can I say – the modernisation wasn't there.'

SELLATHURAI SIVARASA, 81, JAFFNA

'At one point in my last year, N. M. Perera, who was the leader of the Sama Samaja Party, gave visiting lectures on the Soviet Constitution. So we had some very good teachers. Don't forget, this was 1942, '43, '44, when the Sama Samaja's were just beginning to get their act together and the CP (Communist Party of Sri Lanka) was born with Pieter Keuneman and Wickramasinghe and so on and there was a pre-independence ferment which took off on the back of the Indian struggle for nationalism. We ourselves didn't have the same struggle as the Indians. We rode on the coattails of the Indian struggle for independence. And so we got independence about the same time in '48. But this was a period, before '48, where everything, politics was in ferment. I was caught up in the vortex of all this. I began to see what was happening to our country. I began to see that the plantations were at one time agricultural land, began to see that we were self-sufficient in food, that we were the granary of the East, all these things. So my growing into consciousness came through all these lecturers and teachers of the university.'

AMBALAVANER SIVANANDAN, 89, COLOMBO

'My mother used to be, she's very political and politicised as well. Her mother used to be part of the Federal Party, Federal Party kind of members and supporters so my amma was dragged basically by my ammamma to all of these political meetings by Chelvanayakam, which is like the Gandhian, the equivalent to a Tamil kind of Gandhian. And my amma, she used to go there. I wasn't very sure she was very conscious about the politics around her but because she grew up in that environment where women were especially very politicised she, later on with the war and with the developments and the discriminatory kind of evolution of Sri Lankan post-colonial politics, she used to become very nationalist and very supportive of the resistance and very understanding also of their ideas and of their aims.'

SINTHUMAN VARATHARAJAH, 27, GERMANY

'I grew up in a political household where politics was the subject. Even my mother, who was only educated up to grade 8, knew everything about politics. In fact, my father took a picture of the '58 riots from the YMCA top floor... I listened in on conversations with his friends so I knew all about the politicians and who did what, satyagraha and Galle Face sittings. And he [father] was also the right man. He was supporting Congress, Tamil Congress. He worked with G. G. Ponnambalam, intensely.'

PEARL THEVANAYAGAM, 58, JAFFNA

'My mum was not into politics at all but my father was very much into service activities and that kind of thing because he's originally from Upcountry. He had that passion, I think, that people who are from the Upcountry, who are educated and all that, should do something for the workers, estate workers who had a very raw deal he felt, let down by the Tamils – Tamil politicians from Jaffna and the Sinhalese politicians. But that age I can't remember anything. But later, yes, later I got very much into that. That's why I went and did political science in university too. I was very political. No, they didn't discuss. Mum and dad never discussed. I can't remember. But my father was very much involved. Later I remember meetings would happen, other solicitors and others who were interested, they would kind of have meetings.'

AMBICA SELVARAJ, 62, COLOMBO

'...My father always discussed about politics but he's not a Tamil nationalist. Actually his ideas belong to always UNP party. He's always talking about politics but there is no involvement in anything, not much, yeah.'

MALE, 47, BATTICALOA

'There was an organisation called Suya-Aadchi Kazhakam (Tamilar Suya-Aadchi Kazhakam) that is...it actually means self-determination, yeah. That organisation would put up posters saying that Tamils didn't have any nation so we should find a nation and all those kind of posters. I could have been, I don't know, but I could have been inspired by those posters and propagandas as well.'

RAJESHKUMAR, 56, JAFFNA



TROUBLES

With statehood came the challenge of defining who belonged to the new nation and in what language its laws and customs would be communicated. Sinhalese speakers were by far the largest group in Sri Lanka and so began, through national policy, to shape what would become Sri Lanka in their image. Following the election of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike in 1956, the Government attempted, through the Sinhala Only Act, to make Sinhalese the national language of Ceylon. This was one in a long line of policies that were seen to have a particular impact on Tamils in the North and East. Education standardisation, though reversed in 1977 after strong political pressure, required Tamils to score higher marks than Sinhalese students in order to access university (Hoole, et al.).

Tamil politicians protested against these controversial laws, forming parties with the aim of protecting Tamil rights. The long tradition of non-violent protest, in the form of satyagraha, was employed by the Federal Party to influence public opinion. Police action followed and as a result, these struggles increasingly spilled over into daily life, in the form of discrimination, violent riots against Tamils – the largest of which occurred in 1958, 1977 and 1983 – and war. Resistance intensified with calls for an independent Tamil nation emerging from some sections in society and many joining armed movements in the North and East. The sum total of these effects created a situation where being Tamil mattered more and more, both as a source of pride for Tamil people and as a target of violence. Here, people talk about the evolution of conflict and their resilience through extraordinary circumstances.

'So I knew there was this discrimination and especially my father experienced it. I mean he retired from a very good job all because they told him, 'You want a promotion? If you want to become Chief Inspector of Art, you must learn Sinhala.' My father said, 'No, I can speak Latin, Tamil, English, and that's good enough for me.'

PEARL THEVANAYAGAM, 58, JAFFNA

'...My son was six months or eight months at that time. This happened in '56, no. So I took him in the car. I was feeding my son. So my sister would keep him in the car. So I used to be on the street. We did that campaign on the streets. We stopped all the cars and changed the Sinhala shri [to Tamil language license plates]. So I used to feed him in the car, go and feed him in the car and come out, and along with the other ladies, I used to join in the campaign. So like that we did that. We had ready-made number plates and we stopped the cars and changed it. One or two people, they didn't want because the opposition, they go with the Government. They didn't allow it. So the boys who were there, the volunteers, they were so upset and they said...There were dogs also in the car. So there were dogs going and so on and they were shouting. You know, some volunteers were very much, they would shout and they made the people angry. Like that also sometimes the leaders suffer. They would go and plead and they would say sorry and all these things. So that thing ended. After that, they removed it and then the Government stopped it. And also Thanthai Chelva was in Batticaloa prison...The Sinhala buses were coming and going.'

MANGAYARKARASI AMIRTHALINGAM, 79, VADDUKODDAI

'Mobs were – you see, if there was open fighting between one man and another man, that's different – here, mobs were getting together and hammering you, causing all kinds of discomfort and disrespect. Even in '58, there were people who were set on fire and all of that, '58.'

SELLATHURAI SIVARASA, 81, JAFFNA

'It was a baptism of fire. It was the shock of the whole thing. I was such a cosmopolitan, I suppose...And I couldn't take the injustice, I suppose in the same way I couldn't take the injustice of the bank manager, injustice of my father when he asked me not to marry. He taught me to fight injustice and I turned it against him. So not that he taught me to fight injustice, he was an example of fighting for his peers and people like that. So when this happened, I began to look at my Sinhalese friends as Sinhalese because they are not saving any Tamils.'

AMBALAVANER SIVANANDAN, 89, COLOMBO

'Whilst we were studying they started the satyagraha movement in the 1960s at schools. We were sitting in Jaffna at the Mutavelli [open grass field] during one of the satyagrahas. It was organised through our school. The Thamil Arasu Kachchi [Federal Party] made a call for school students to participate and we all went there in our white uniforms and sat down there at the Mutavelli... Then, we were all patriotic. We had the will to sit down and struggle. Later, large protests were happening but I never really went there. There was a sense of fear then, and I retreated more and more.'

FEMALE, 66, JAFFNA

'And the '77 riots must have been very bad because when the thugs in the lane had told my father – because he was respected because he spoke Sinhalese fluently and we had no difference, we mixed very well – 'We protected you all, we didn't allow any thugs to come down this road this time. But if this happens soon, next time we won't be able to protect.' Just like that, people have turned and are seeing you like not Sri Lankans, different...and then of course '78 I go, so the discussion is all about maybe we shouldn't have our own house, not in that particular area anyway. My father had to sell it for nothing, really... So that's the time I felt, though I was not in the middle of the riots there, that 'OK, we are different and we could be hurt. We won't be protected, we won't have the same protection from our leaders, from our politicians, because we are different.'

AMBICA SELVARAJ, 62, COLOMBO

'One day I got in a bus at Kotahena...When the bus came to the Armour Street, the Armour Street police blocked the bus. We get down and he sees my Batticaloa identity, no problem, no questions [laughs], he just brings me to the Armour Street police guardroom. When I went there, the [Sinhalese police officer] of that guardroom – he's not my age, my father's age, nearly my father's age – he questioned somebody else and he called me and I went there. He asked me, 'Where are you working?' 'I don't have any work.' 'So what are you doing? Why?' 'I just returned from India. I just was studying there. My family is over there but anyhow I...' 'What are you doing in India?' 'I have done my degree over there.' 'Why didn't you do it here?' And I said, 'No, I got these marks but that's not enough to get into the university.' Very next question, he told me, 'No, no, no, no, you are wrong, my own daughter has the same marks but she's in the university.' Then I said, 'That was the problem.'

MALE, 47, BATTICALOA

'Sri Lanka was declared as Democratic [Socialist] Republic of Sri Lanka and a Buddhist country. I remember, yeah, at that time, my memory was the Constitution was burnt in a public place by, actually my father lit the Sri Lankan Constitution, he set fire to that with other leaders standing beside him in Navalar Hall...I was there, I was there but the meeting was organised in a public place. Then police refused to give permission because at that time you had the emergency in place after the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna) thing, the emergency continued...That was very fresh in my mind...Dr N. M. Perera, Felix Dias Bandaranaike and in a way my father's background, when he was in the Colombo University, he used to go and listen to the lectures of Dr N. M. Perera; he was a fan of Dr N. M. Perera. And when the LSSP (Lanka Sama Samaja Party) joined with the SLFP (Sri Lanka Freedom Party) to form the government, my father, I don't know whether how he felt that, but he must have thought highly about Dr N. M. Perera and Felix Dias Bandaranaike. When they drafted that constitution, they were part of it and our rights were taken away and he [Mr Amirthalingam] must have felt really bad about it because the people who taught him politics and the people who spoke about equality and humanity, rather than in politics, still everything was taken away. The whole Tamil people were left in a limbo at that point. So he was, he must have been upset about it.'

RAVI BAHIRATHAN, JAFFNA

'So '82 I came home, '83 we moved, lost everything in six months' time, brand-new house, whatever we saved for generations, including paintings and everything, were burnt right in front of our eyes...Mrs Perera who was teaching us, Mrs Perera or somebody, she asked me am I a Tamil because I didn't wear this thing or long hair or anything. I said, 'Yes.' 'Go home quickly,' she said. When I was going on the road, Ananda College and Nalanda College, Royal College boys in white trousers, and some were in shorts, came with sticks and I saw everywhere burning on Galle Road and High Level Road...Another Kandyan Sinhalese came and said, 'Look, we can't keep you here. There is an order that we can't keep you here. You have to go.' So we went out on the road and came near my house. There was this man, he rode a motorbike. He opened the petrol cap. Somebody was throwing paintings and everything from there – and we had a lawn. He rode a motorbike, set it on fire and jumped out, so everything burned quickly. So I'm pretending that I am not living in this house, we are just watching because if you said you were Tamil, end of story...'

PEARL THEVANAYAGAM, 58, JAFFNA

'Well my grandparents, they've told me for a few years about their stories and accounts but I was more interested later on so I asked them a lot more. And so like some of my extended family had to flee a house because the Sinhalese mob, which was sponsored by the Government, burnt down their houses and that street, and a mob came to the house that my family would normally stay in...So our family were very much involved in this. And so my grandparents have stories of the riots and friends and stuff...Thinking about it, it was really these atrocities that really kind of made me really think about my identity.'

ROHAN SARAVANAMUTTU, 23, LONDON

'What happened was all these youths went and joined the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) or any other organisation, all the militant organisations. J.R. Jayewardene government also banned all the opposition organisations such as all the communist parties, Sama Samaja Party, as well as TULF (Tamil United Liberation Front). So the TULF leaders had to go to India and they also lost their political base. That was a serious problem because it was...so they couldn't do anything in Sri Lanka as well. That political space was filled by the militant movements. And people also, especially after the riots, people also became, you know, they thought that these groups can only do something for us. They truly believed these militant groups. You know we had full support.'

RAJESHKUMAR, 56, JAFFNA



Colombo Airport (Poornima Karunacadascharan)

LEAVING & ARRIVAL

British Tamils had their own group of pioneers drawn to London long before it became a port of last resort and asylum for families and individuals fleeing conflict. Universities and jobs, built on the esteem instilled by British colonial power and reputation, often served as early transit stations on the way to Tamil settlement in this country.

Tamil temples in Wimbledon and elsewhere, as well as small Tamil schools and community centres, became a few of the now many visible impressions of Tamil life on the British landscape. In their footsteps followed a great many Tamils in search of many things, each and apart. Many wove through Malaysia, India, China, Eastern Europe or Africa. Migration increased dramatically at times of conflict, especially after 1983, and so too the routes out of the country and into the United Kingdom. In this chapter, speakers talk about the circumstances and memories of leaving and arrival.

'Nothing. I felt nothing, a huge void. It is very difficult to make decisions in a void. But when you do, only the decision matters. So I had to sell the house, sell the car, sell various things. Get the money. Get whatever the pension was due to me. At that time it was a lot of money, about five thousand quid, about that. Came by boat, tried to look for a place, couldn't get a place. Put down a deposit and lost the money because they cheated me. There was a lot of racism at the time. Not that there isn't now but it was very open then. After the riots, it was very difficult to get a place... My son turns around and says, 'Appa where's the sun?' And my daughter says, 'There are no flowers here and no garden to play in'...'

AMBALAVANER SIVANANDAN, 89, COLOMBO

'...So I came here in 1968 as a teenager, married, so I don't have any harrowing stories as the others have. It's more like happy, carefree days, coming here to London, getting married to Sir Cliff Richard and Engelbert Humperdinck and Tom Jones [said in jest]. 'Oh, I'm coming to London, I can go and see all of these singers.' There was no television at that time, it was the radio. So we used to listen to the Housewives' Choice [BBC radio programme] and it's Jim Reeves, Ricky Nelson, I could go through all these songs...So that was the happier times here. So you come here and then, you know, because I didn't want to be a housewife – I got married and came here, my husband was a student – so you sort of got to work so you could have some fun going out, meeting people, learning the culture, learning the other cultures as well and socialising. So I had happier times here.'

SUSIE RAVI, COLOMBO

'I came to England in '76, I was 21. I got the admission without telling my parents and then asked for the ticket. I didn't sit the A-level exam. My father didn't know [laughs]. Then, five and a half years later, I went home after my father died. I kind of didn't like England, the weather, loneliness. And my father died and I thought, you know, 'I'm not going to miss my mother either, what's the point in staying here?' England didn't appeal to me because I lived in the north and it was very cold. There were hardly any Sri Lankans...So reluctantly I came here [laughs] in 2001 again and claimed political asylum. Within three days I got it because in the Google everything was there. So they didn't doubt me.'

PEARL THEVANAYAGAM, 58, JAFFNA

'I came and of course I loved it here because it's, you know, staying at your uncle's house, wedding preparation, partying, going out, sightseeing, I thought, 'No way I'm going back!' So I spoke to my uncle and I said, 'I want to stay' but the problem was I had done a general degree in economics and political science so tried a few jobs, no. Can't study because there were four children to be educated. So my uncle said, 'The only option, if you want to stay here and support yourself, is to do nursing.' It came as a shock to me because I didn't even do medicine, think of medicine, because I used to feel sick of wards and the smell of medicine. So the time was getting nearer, either go – six months visa, I extended it for another six months. So my cousin said they had friends in the nurse's home. Their friends from Malaysia were doing nursing. They said, 'Why don't you just come meet them?' So when I went to the nurse's home, of

course lovely, met all the girls, their friends. And they said, 'Just apply, you can always say no.' I got the training. Then when I told my parents, my father said to my uncle, 'Send her back. You sponsored her. She is coming back. She is not doing nursing.' [To interviewer] You know how it's looked down on in Sri Lanka. Nursing is not accepted from certain families...'

I was excited because I came alone but I was coming for a wedding. I was going to live with my uncle, cousins. My cousin was going to get married; she was at the airport with her fiancée. Oh, fascinated, the materialism, the cleanliness. There was a touch of loneliness in the airport in you when you got off, until you are met. Because you know it's so lonely, so many people and rushing around and that feeling of being in a small place and a sense of belonging wasn't there. Suddenly I was nobody, among these thousands of people that were not from Sri Lanka, not Sri Lankans, I was nobody. So there was no sense of belonging. You were a stranger, you could drop dead and I got the feeling that nobody cared. You were nothing. And it was scary. But I knew somebody will meet me. Whereas when you go to Sri Lanka and you touch the thing, you look around and you are in your place where you belong. Even if there is racism but you just know you belong there. Nobody is going to look at you and say, 'Who are you?' Such coldness, no inquisitiveness, no curiosity, it's just like machines, people are just getting on with their lives.'

AMBICA SELVARAJ, 62, COLOMBO

'...But I didn't want to leave the country. At that time, I didn't want to come to the UK or any other countries. That was not my intention. To be honest, when – especially I have seen these differences even now as well – if you are in an organisation and had all these experiences, claiming refugee status, we don't think it's traumatic or problematic or anything like that because we have already had all these experiences. So actually, you know, in a certain sense you feel lucky that you are safe now.'

RAJESHKUMAR, 56, JAFFNA

'I had imagined how it [London] would be when I was in Sri Lanka but it was not like how I imagined...In London, life is...in my village you can meet a lot of people. If you urgently need to go to someone's house, you can go without telling them and see them – you can't here...'

NAGESWARY THAVARATNEM, 37, JAFFNA

'I met dad at the airport for the first time. I didn't know my dad...that was an awkward situation, you know, when you meet your dad only when you're eighteen years old...'

SIVATHARSINI SIVANESAN, 34

'...When I came to this country I was scared, you know, when I go to do shopping and I travelled from East London to Brixton, when I saw the police I was very scared. I thought, 'I am living here illegally,' and I was very scared. And all the incidents happened in Sri Lanka. After that, when I saw the policeman I always felt inside something's going to happen. And after a few months I felt comfortable, it's very good, very safe place and they treat us very well and I got permanent residence after I married my husband. My husband got a permanent visa, then I got the same status.'

FEMALE, 49, JAFFNA



Kolam by Rani Nagulendram



Pearl Thevanayagam



Sri Lankan Passport



Tamil Chariot Festival in Ealing, 2012

TRANSITIONS

As the mass migration away from Sri Lanka grew, Tamil life spread to many places, including Germany, Norway, Denmark, the UK, Canada, Australia and the USA. This type of experience is often referred to as diaspora. Transition relates to many types of experiences involved in this large-scale migration: immigration, finding work, claiming asylum or refugee status, being away from family and friends and staying connected with events in the country of origin.

Being 'in transit' may refer to feeling constantly out of place or finding the support of community in London. It also refers to the customs, traditions and beliefs transferred to the new residence and from generation to generation. Finally, it refers to the many different experiences of later generations growing up outside of Sri Lanka. In this section, our speakers talk about this experience of transition in London.

'... We met at one of my cousin's house in Wimbledon. Then my husband's family, my husband's sister and brother came, and my brother and my cousins. Then first my brother met my husband, then he was happy, he said, 'He's good - you can go ahead.' My parents, you know, we have got system, we need to see the horoscope and if the horoscope tells you and then we can marry – and same religion, same caste and everything, same... I was very happy and I didn't expect that quick, you know. I came here only January and all of a sudden they arrange and everything and it's nice. All my training students, all African, all the community people, all came to my wedding in Wimbledon Temple...'

FEMALE, 49, JAFFNA

'...Initially we had this plan to go back, both of us. And we didn't even want to – many people who came with us, they bought their houses and this and that. We decided not to buy anything. We still had that idea of not having any possessions. So we just rented out flats and moving here and there. I think we would have moved about ten houses between 1986 to 1994. Then obviously when you are living together, you will have children. I don't know, even now I am not fully settled as such. But I can say that now I'm, to be honest, now I am in quite a reasonable life, lifestyle and everything is OK, fine... Yeah, you have this, it's not about our life and our pleasure, it's a broader outlook you have. So you always think about your own failures. What you wanted to achieve is not like running a marathon and becoming first or whatever [laughs]. You know you think about it in a different way. So it's always lacking, whether we failed to do certain things, what is our mistakes. It's always unconsciously...'

RAJESHKUMAR, 56, JAFFNA

'...Now in the UK, I work as a specialist health visitor with mostly marginalised communities who are refugees, asylum seekers, and I work in Hayes, where there is a large Tamil Sri Lankan refugee population, and I speak Tamil, so I work very closely with them, with all of them. But because I speak the language, maybe more Tamils come to me, and I have listened to the stories, and I've cried with some of them, and I know they are suffering here too. Not because now they are fearful of the Sinhalese but their own issues, their own stuff is coming out, depression, anger, domestic violence, a sense of not belonging, you know, being in a place, but wanting to be in a place which is not there anymore.'

AMBICA SELVARAJ, 62, COLOMBO

'Things are OK here. My son is looking after me, my children and me. I want to take up a little job to help my son but I can't find anything. I'm thinking about working as a violin teacher somewhere to earn some pocket money. Things are getting more expensive. My son is looking after me but I don't want to always be a burden to him so I'm looking for something.'

FEMALE, 66, JAFFNA

'I have been here for ten years. My weakness is I am spending all the time with BBC and my family. I don't have any social life here because I lost everything because as you said, as a man repatriated, displaced from one place to another, I am always thinking about my family and my job here and always thinking about the studies of my children and other things, nothing else. I don't have any social life here. That is my very big weakness.'

MALE, 47, BATTICALOA

'We were involved in a project where we were trying to bring back into school the children who had dropped out. Because they are poor, the families don't let them go to school. So when they are not allowed to go to school they are on the streets. So we had to mobilise them in the guise of cricket matches, football matches and get the parents to come... Our role, what I always say is, our role is constantly to create space for the ordinary person. That's our role, nothing else. We took up an initiative on repealing the emergency regulation. The reason is because the emergency regulation, PTA [Prevention of Terrorism Act], curtails the ordinary person's space. For that if we can campaign, lobby, get the international community to put pressure on the Government of Sri Lanka to look at it differently and change, then the ordinary person will have space to talk openly for his or her interests or develop or do whatever they want. It is the same with development.'

VAIRAMUTTU VARADAKUMAR, 63, JAFFNA

'Obviously when I was five I didn't exactly ask my parents to go to Tamil school. I was sort of forced into going. But it was really fun. It wasn't necessarily like in-school atmosphere; it was very lighthearted and our teachers were very nice. And it was class just like in school, it was a class of, like, twenty-five people, students, and I remember it being interesting because I had my family around me – my cousin was in my class as well. When I was five, I started learning Tamil as well as vocal and classical dancing – vocal as in singing...'

LAVANYA LOGANATHAN, 16, LONDON

'I wanted to do music, I really did and I was very good. I could've done music but I didn't. I decided it wasn't a career for me, not because of ability but more the opportunities available, kind of the fact that it's very hard to make a name for yourself and I would only be interested in performing and you have to be both very good but also have lots of contacts – and like a dream, the dream I seriously considered was becoming a musician. And that's not a very Asian dream, like I'm very aware and I was very aware when I was growing up that, like, I would take part regularly in music competitions and obviously be the only Sri Lankan Tamil there for every concert I took part in. So you'd see the concert list and really that was one of the things that really kind of, although at that time I still wasn't really seeing myself as Tamil, I was just let's say fully aware that there would never be anyone else that wasn't white there. So that was quite interesting.'

ROHAN SARAVANAMUTTU, 23, LONDON

'So for many years all of us, all three of us, started to engage differently with our identities, which only came into question after being out of the Jehovah's Witness doctrine which really dominated most of our lives. And all of us took different approaches upon how we tried to understand ourselves and our environment and surroundings. One of my brothers became a philosopher and he detached himself from all these notions and these subjective kind of ideas and notions, whereas the other one started to engage much more in Hinduism and started to trace much more belonging in this identity of being a Hindu and being a South Asian and being from that particular subcontinent. And I found myself in my own identity much more in these kind of Tamil politics and the identity and the history... I mean like we had our own sheltered world where we kind of disconnected ourselves from our peers and from our environment, which started off with Japanese kind of comics, right. So that was in 1997, I was 12, right. So we started to live in a way, like in this parallel kind of world that gave us some safety and sanctuary that we never found within this real world that we lived in. And I think we spent a lot of years in that kind of world and we had this parallel world for a very long time. It altered. It became black music culture. It became even different forms where we tried to identify ourselves with and where we tried to find commonalities within it, right.'

SINTHUJAN VARATHARAJAH, 27, GERMANY



Tamil Chariot Festival in Ealing 2012



Intergenerational reminiscence session



Selected texts in Tamil



Health Check Stand at Tamil Chariot Festival 2012



Sinthujan Varatharajah

'I was seated with three friends, Sinhalese friends in a pub in Bayswater Road, a warm day. We were sitting outside the bar and somebody came, there were some people, and we heard something about trouble going on just a few miles away in Notting Hill. Some blacks were being attacked, or I don't know exactly what, but the rumour came that there was trouble there. I said, 'Good Lord, I must go and see this, see what I can do.' I said, 'Come on! I've just come from the Sri Lanka ones.' And one of my friends who was an income tax commissioner or something, he turned around to me and said, 'Those are negroes, nothing to do with us.' Those few months were a learning process I had never had. You see, I have always believed that going to university gives you only the wherewithal, the equipment with which to interpret experience. Experience itself must come along and hit you in the head, and it did for me, one after the other, my father's house being attacked, my getting them out, my fear, my despair, my sadness and my determination and I flee and I come here and I got these Sinhalese friends of mine talking about negroes.

I think it was about this time that I decided to chuck up everything and start writing. Because I felt that the only way I could fight was to write. Writing was a way of fighting but first of all I had to earn some money to keep my family going... So I became a librarian there [Institute of Race Relations] in 1964 and I began to overhaul the Library completely, utterly... And so that made it become political, so race and colonialism, independence, neo-colonialism, what happened and so on. And so my books and articles and things like that, they began to reflect that. And this was a private library, private in the sense of members of the Institute. But I allowed kids from the outside, mostly black kids, Black and Asian as they say now, kids who wanted to know about things which were happening in America – there's the Black Power movement. And they wanted to know about Black Panther Party newspapers, Elijah Muhammad's newspaper, Muhammad Speaks, The Liberator, all sorts of papers and this and that. And they couldn't get it anywhere. And I was also getting community papers from South Africa. So I was bringing in a Third World dimension in to race politics and that Third World dimension concerned with colonialism, independence, capitalism, etcetera. So it became a sort of kindergarten for the Left, if I may presume... And I had gone to America in the meantime and met some of the Panthers – at that time Bobby Seale was in prison, Berkeley – and I learnt a lot there. And they learned a lot from me because however revolutionary they were, till the Panthers, Newton and Seale and people, began to talk about Maoism and became politicised by going to China, Huey in particular, Huey Newton... I went to the Panther's office, I met various other people and I gave talks at various other universities... and I talked at Berkeley too. The new institute they were

putting up on race, I gave the inaugural talk – I was just a petty librarian. I gave the inaugural talk and when I talked I said black. They didn't understand it. They said, 'No Asian in this country calls himself black.' I said, 'That's the contribution that Britain has got to make to your struggles because we have still a Third World conscience and black for us has become now struggles in Britain, where Afro-Caribbeans and Asians came together on the factory floor or in the community and they fought as a people for a class and a class for a people. Because most of us were, we had loads, whatever our qualifications, discrimination prevented us from getting the jobs that we were qualified for.' And so I said, 'The Black Power movement doesn't have a Third World perspective. That is the thing that we bring to you. And black is a political colour, not the colour of your skin. When you mix up slavery and colonialism and racism and Christianity and all that, the conquerors and all that stuff, the colour of oppression today is black, like the colour of rebellion is red.'

AMBALAVANER SIVANANDAN, 89, COLOMBO



Cover of A World to Win – Essays in Honour of A. Sivanandan. Published in Race & Class



HOME

Placing the Past in the Present finds its resting place on the idea of home. For our speakers, home may be a place in the past, the present or the future, in the imagination or in the physical comfort of community or family, in Britain, Sri Lanka, a homeland in the North and East of Sri Lanka or somewhere else entirely. Reflecting on home may bring up powerful emotions of loss or injustice, hopes of finding a solution to challenges in Sri Lanka or ways of relating to identity in different places and circumstances.

'...I don't think a return will be a return for me because I think people who've had a similar kind of biography as I had have been lost somewhere on the way, and there's no real return for them anywhere, right. So it always seems like it's points of complacency and comfort but never real tranquility and peace. And you're always seeking but you're never finding and always departing but never arriving, right. So even if I go to Sri Lanka, it will never be what I ascribe to it, what I project upon Sri Lanka, right. It will always be, it will never live up to what I want it to be and it will never reflect the feelings that I have. I have all of these romanticised ideas as you know of like how it would be to return into a country where we are equal, where we are free, where we are able to rule ourselves, right.'

SINTHUJAN VARATHARAJAH, 27, GERMANY

'I love my country, all of it. And there's still a hole in me...'

AMBALAVANER SIVANANDAN, 89, COLOMBO

'It's our mother tongue and this is the identity. We are Tamil. We are proud. Tamil identity is, we are a very little minority group. Naturally, we are minority plus now here we lost too many people, only a few people are Tamils now... My husband says, 'No, in late age, we need to go and settle there [Sri Lanka].' He loves to go back. But still I am thinking because we have to think about our children's education.'

FEMALE, 49, JAFFNA

'I mean I have two lives I would say, you know, one is this Sri Lankan Tamil girl and one this girl who [has] grown up in Western world. That parallel world, it still carries on, yeah, yeah... Britain? I like it. I like it now. I feel this is becoming my home now. I have my freedom here. Britain allowed me to be who I am...'

LAVANNIYA LANGA, 41, KALUTARA

'...Before I would overwhelmingly say I was British and nothing else. Until very recently I was British and I would say I am originally from Sri Lanka but that's all, whereas now I would say I'm British Sri Lankan now or I'm British Tamil. I don't really say, associate myself with Sri Lanka, I associate myself with Tamils. So I would say I'm from Sri Lanka but what I really mean and how I view myself is a British Tamil kind of thing. Although I'm sure I still feel a bit uncomfortable saying British Tamil because I still feel that I don't know that much about my culture...'

ROHAN SARAVANAMUTTU, 23, LONDON



Lagoon, Jaffna by Indi Samarajiva (Wikimedia)



Street in Ealing 2012

'I will fight for Tamil rights until I die, that's for sure [laughs], you know, make sure we are treated equal.'

PEARL THEVANAYAGAM, 58, JAFFNA

'I have a dream, like Martin Luther King said, that I could maybe do some work in Sri Lanka, towards reconciliation and peace building. I have to brush up my Sinhalese so I can speak fluently, and from the work I'm doing here, I think, I know I can influence people in a positive way, in a non-threatening way, without getting defensive about my ethnicity and my religion, because I've no issues with it, because even now, when people say, 'Are you a Tamil?' I say, 'I'm British, I'm Sri Lankan, I speak Tamil, but I also speak Sinhalese, I also speak English' because I don't want to say I'm a Tamil, that immediately separates me – maybe I'm a woman. I'll use the things that bind us, not that separate us. And then when they say, 'What religion you are?' I just say, 'I'm everything.' And people are just saying, 'What do you mean everything?' I say, 'I'm everything, I'm a Buddhist, I'm a Hindu,' because I believe in all those things... Lots of good things are happening in Sri Lanka. I know there are lots of people working towards lots of good things...'

AMBICA SELVARAJ, 62, COLOMBO

I want to live in England. I've always felt quite at home here but I guess I don't really know what I want to do in life yet because I haven't experienced much. But I think it would be nice to go to Sri Lanka, not on work necessarily but just to help them out there, you know, just stay there for a while. It'd be nice... I want to become a journalist, which is my ultimate goal. I'm not quite sure what that entails yet. I don't really know much about it but I think it would be really good. I would love to work with BBC and just for people to come from Sri Lanka in this country and be able to go to a higher position in this country would mean a lot. Because I'm a British citizen but my parents aren't so I think it will be great for them to know that even though they haven't been given opportunities, we have. Our parents push us to our full potential so I think it will be great to be able to work with BBC and just that would be my ultimate goal.

LAVANYA LOGANATHAN, 16, LONDON



Remembrance day at Centre for Community Development in Kingston by Yanina Shevchenko

GLOSSARY

Amirthalingam, Appapillai	Tamil politician and leader of TULF
Amma	Mother
Ammamma	Grandmother
Appa	Father
Batticaloa	Majority Sri Lankan Tamil city in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka
Black July	23 July 1983, largest anti-Tamil pogroms in Sri Lanka
Chelvanayakam, S. J. V.	Federal Party leader
Galle Face Green	Colombo promenade served as the scene for Federal Party satyagraha protests
Jaffna	Majority Sri Lankan Tamil capital of the Northern Province
Ponnambalam, G. G.	All Ceylon Tamil Congress leader, first Sri Lankan Tamil political party
Satyagraha	Particular practice of non-violent resistance
Sinhala Only Act	Replaced English as the official language with Sinhalese
Standardisation	Education policy requiring Tamils to score higher marks than Sinhalese to access university
Tamil Eelam	Proposed independent nation-state in Northern and Eastern Provinces
TULF	Tamil United Liberation Front, largest Tamil political party in 1970s
Upcountry	Tea, coffee and rubber plantation areas
Upcountry Tamils	Estate labourers of South Indian descent



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Bharatanatyam performance at Through the Generations Project Exhibition 2013

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Race on the Agenda (ROTA) is a social policy and action research organisation focused on issues impacting on Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities. As a BAME-led organisation, all ROTA's work is based on the principle that those with direct experience of inequality should be central to solutions to address it. Our policy priorities are education, criminal justice and health.

www.rota.org.uk

Tamil Community Centre in Hounslow provides advice and support for Tamil-speaking migrants, refugees and asylum seekers on immigration, welfare, mental health, domestic violence, housing and employment. It also supports children, young adults and elderly through language classes, mother and toddler groups and leisure and dance activities.

www.tccentre.co.uk

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 **Through the
Generations**

Placing the Past in the Present: Tamil Oral History in London is one piece of the larger, one-year Through the generations: Tamil oral history project carried out in London in 2012. Funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the project's primary objective is to bring recognition to the history and experiences held in the memories of Sri Lankan Tamils living in London.

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