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Caste, Space, and Retail Religiosity in Tamil Toronto[1]

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Abstract

This paper is focused on ritually organized caste practices in the Canadian Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. It describes how Sri Lankan Tamils in Toronto, Canada, who in some ways have tried to turn their backs on caste (especially in the second and third generations), nonetheless use caste as a sort of marketing "brand" in an increasingly competitive Hindu temple "market". This paper is animated by an underlying concern with how spatial aspects of Sri Lankan Tamil religious life were formed and transformed in diaspora in ways that altered also what it means to act and be a Tamil person. It is important to note, however, that what is at issue here is not simply the effect on diaspora Tamil forms of exclusionary sociality (in this case, caste) due to the loss of an imagined or real territory – a traditional concern of diaspora studies and its worries about nostalgia – but rather changes in the religiously mediated relationship, via caste, between Tamil people and their landscapes, and hence changes forced upon social relations by confrontations with shifting or entirely new political geographies of an anxious world.

Keywords

Caste, Tamil Diaspora, Hindu Temples, Religious Markets, Personhood, Cultural Spaces

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Introduction

What happened to Sri Lankan Tamil notions of caste when the people who used them went into diaspora? More specifically, what happened to such notions (and associated practices) when over 100,000 Sri Lankan Tamils found themselves from the early 1980s onwards constructing new lives in Toronto, Canada, a place earlier little associated with Tamil people?[2] For the most part, caste-talk in Toronto has become a subtle practice in daily life, more often signaled obliquely and quietly in discussions of marriage or family history, and its importance may be quietly fading altogether for younger Tamils born in Canada. Many younger Tamil men and women I have spoken with, for example, claim to know little about caste, date across caste and ethnic lines, and do not believe caste identity should guide their marriage choices although some who have said this to me have gone on to have arranged marriages.[3] This development stands in some contrast to attitudes about caste that many members of the diaspora—the current older generation—brought with them into diaspora. Consider, for example, the famous case of Selvanayagam Selladurai, a 47-year-old father who in 2007 used his minivan to run down his daughter, her "low caste" boyfriend, and his son-in-law at a Scarborough strip mall, supposedly to prevent the "dishonor" her relationship would bring to the family. Most notable to me, here, is the obvious resistance of the victims—his daughter, her boyfriend, and, apparently, his son-in-law—to the strict caste etiquette motivating the father. The victims' apparent lack of interest in the everyday cultural practice of caste testifies to the shift I am interested in discussing here.[4] The more recent attempt by the Toronto School Board to ban caste-based discrimination at the urging of Yalini Rajakulasingham, a young Sri Lankan Tamil School Trustee from an oppressed caste, suggests, indeed, that second and third generation hostility to caste may be becoming more public in the future (Teotonio, 2023). In any case, fieldwork conducted in Toronto between 2001 and 2013 and continuous contact with Sri Lankan Tamil residents since then convinces me that this attitude is quite general.

Such anti-caste (or, at least, shy) attitudes among young Canadian Sri Lankan Tamils do not by themselves, of course, prove that caste is completely disappearing as

[2]Amarasingam (2013, p. 5) points out that while Sri Lankan Tamils show up in the Canadian census as early as 1948, the total population remained in the very low hundreds until the Sri Lankan civil war started in 1983. As of 2021 Statistics Canada counted 237,890 Sri Lankan Tamils in Canada of whom roughly half live in the Greater Toronto Area. (Bonnyman, 2023).

[3]Bucernius, Thompson and Dunford (2022) conducted interviews among young Sri Lankan Tamil men that appear to connect this anti-caste feeling to the war in Sri Lanka. For example, they record one twenty-six-year-old saying ""Our parents and grandparents still talk about the castes, and they used to dictate who you can marry and so on but really, this plays less of a role nowadays because of the war. There is no time to obsess....we are all in the same boat, so to say." (545).

[4]I am indebted to one of my anonymous reviewers for this example. See O'Toole 2010. I should note, however, that such attacks in the Tamil community (and in general) are rare according to a 2021 Government of Canada report, "Preliminary Examination of so-called 'Honour Killings' in Canada", which found only two reported instances, and only one—the Selladurai case—involving inter-caste relations.

a factor in daily life. Mounaguru (2019), for example, has documented the importance of caste considerations for diasporic Sri Lankan Tamils negotiating transnational marriages. Moreover, a disinclination to speak publicly about caste outside the family (or one's own caste and its associated controversies) has long been common among Sri Lankan Tamil people both at home and abroad, though I think for different reasons. I have experienced this reluctance to speak openly about caste—outside, that is, the special insider frameworks afforded by caste status battles and temple-centered arguments about "rights "(*urimai*)—in my own fieldwork in Batticaloa; and it has been noted by other scholars working in Jaffna (Thiranagama, 2018, p. 374; Kuganathan, 2022, p. 255). Yet in both regions caste has continued to be regnant despite such reticence (Paramsothy, 2018; Sanmugeswaran, 2020).

What explains this? In Tamil Sri Lanka this public reticence about caste (like an American reticence to talk publicly about race) likely emerged out of an ambivalent colonial and postcolonial history. The Portuguese and, later, the Dutch codified local caste practices into documents such as the 1707 Jaffna *Thesawalamai*, which legitimized Vellalar rule over four enslaved "untouchable" castes there (Esler, 2025, p. 384), and publicly accepted local practices such as those on the east coast involving spatially organized, pre-colonial, Mukkuvar caste-ruled, temple-centered polities, called *vannimai* or *teesam* (McGilvray, 1982, p. 59; Whitaker, 1999). But according to John Rogers (2004; Esler, 2025, p. 384), the British colonial government of Ceylon, unlike that of India, viewed caste as an illegitimate "form of social identification", outlawing compulsory caste labor in 1835, and officially ignoring caste henceforward, even while tolerating Vellalar dominance in the north, and never fully grasping the role that caste and temples were playing in local governance in the east (Whitaker, 1999). Here being quiet about caste fit the mutually incoherent agendas of both local caste elites and the British colonial government. If one adds to this the tenor of modernist rhetoric in later nineteenth and twentieth century state politics, which tended to ignore the local to advance the imperial or, later, the national, this public reticence to speak about caste outside the local communities where it was regnant becomes even more understandable.

Interestingly, somewhat similarly, American missionaries, who began to come to Jaffna in large numbers in the early nineteenth century to establish Christian schools and evangelize, eventually accepted caste for pragmatic reasons as a precondition of operating there. One American missionary, predictably, likened forcing Vellalar converts to associate with "low caste people" as amounting to forcing "affluent people in Boston and Newyork [sic] societies [….] to sit at the same tables with black or white labourers" (Amarasingam, 2015, p. 165; see also Balmforth, 2020).[5] One might argue that this tacit approval of (and subtle attraction to) caste may have been one reason the efforts of the Jaffna religious reformer Arumuka Navalar (1822-1879) proved so successful in resisting missionary Christianity. That is, in addition to being able

[5]Balmforth (2020) discusses in detail how the American Ceylon Mission after at first attempting to "break caste" in their schools eventually decided that an alliance with the Vellalar and a tacit acceptance of their enslavement of the three laboring castes, the *aṭimakaḷ,* was more practical.

to use the missionaries' own rhetorical and technological innovations against them, Navalar's full-throated defense of Jaffna Tamil Saivite practice (*samaya*) was also, without having to say so too publicly, a defense of Vellalar caste rule (Silva, 2021, p. 30; Thiruchandran, 2021, p. 59).[6]

Hence, in Sri Lanka itself a shyness about discussing caste openly has never been good evidence of the erosion of caste as an active form of social control and exclusion (Paramsothy, 2018). For example, Jaffna's Vellalars, have frequently defended the obligatory, caste-based, form of social control (*kaṭṭuppāṭu*) that favors their hegemony, opposing, for example, the *pañcamar* ("oppressed caste") temple entry movement of the 1960s (ibid; Pfaffenberger, 1982). In the east, meanwhile, caste disputes centered on temples continued to animate much public activity below the level (and understanding) of the postcolonial state (Whitaker, 1999). Of course, during the civil war caste talk and discrimination was vigorously suppressed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the militant separatist Tamil army which controlled much of northern and eastern Sri Lanka[7] until defeated (in sanguinary fashion) by Sri Lankan Government forces in 2009 (Bremner, 2013; Madavan, 2011; Kuganathan, 2022, pp. 245–251).[8] But during the war, caste continued as a central organizing activity within temples and the communities directly connected to them, often to the confusion and dismay of both Sri Lankan government forces and the LTTE (Maunaguru, 2020; Kuganathan, 2022, p. 253). And after the war, caste-based action returned to Tamil public life (if not as much to public expression) with surprising vigor. In interviews conducted in Jaffna, Batticaloa, and Colombo in 2015, middle-aged, dominant caste, men and women (in Jaffna, with Vellalar; in the east, with Vellalar and Ceerpathar) frequently expressed a fear that if "not high caste" people neglected their ritual caste obligations, this would create social chaos or, as they put it, a society of "no restraint" (*kaṭṭuppāṭu illai*).[9]

[6]Thiruchandran (2021) claims, correctly I think, that the role defending Vallalar caste privilege played in Navalar's reform efforts has been systematically under-emphasized by many scholars. She also raises the issue of whether caste and Hindusim are really linked. She thinks, theologically speaking, not. I think that empirically the link between caste and Hindu ritual in northern and eastern Sri Lanka is demonstrable. But since caste-style forms of organization extend, in South Asia as a whole, into Buddhist, Christian, Muslim and, Sikh communities, an essentializing definition of caste putting Hinduism (or the Vedas) at its core is also problematic (Mines and Lamb 2010: 154). See also Ambalavanar's discussion of the construction of a "Caiva Public" by Navalar (2006). Or consider Winslow's (2024) point that Sinhalese Buddhist caste is ontologically distinct. Caste in South Asia is a heuristic "family resemblance" category bespeaking similarities but, ethnographically speaking, not a singular, characteristic shared by all instances.

[7]Thiranagama (2018: 372) argues, somewhat to the contrary, that while the LTTE officially disallowed open expressions of caste prejudice it did not "rigidly enforce anti-caste laws, despite its official stance". Nonetheless, she also notes wavering transformations in practice, if not in attitudes, during the war such as inter-caste marriages within the LTTE between dominant caste and oppressed caste cadre, that, afterwards, were condemned by families trying to return to pre-war caste etiquette.

[8]A UN report (2011) estimated that at least 40,000 Tamil civilians died in the last month of the war.

[9]See Sanmugeswaran 2020 for a complete discussion of this fear among middle class Vellalar men.

This fear of social looseness was being expressed even as the departure of many relatively wealthy "upper" caste (and, a bit later, some "lower" caste) people from Jaffna and the eastern Batticaloa District during the war, and a subsequent eventual influx of diaspora money back to Sri Lanka, began to change some of the power dynamics of caste in Tamil Sri Lanka.[10] Sanmugeswaran (2020) has written with great sensitivity about attempts by Tamil people to rebuild villages destroyed by the war. He points out that the absence of the physical landmarks that once delineated caste spaces, and the presence of diaspora money flowing now, sometimes, to formerly oppressed caste people empowering them to "remember" old divisions differently, called old village hegemonies into question even if not, apparently, the very idea of caste itself (2020). Thiranagama (2012) has described this new postwar dynamic in Jaffna as a tension between two competing "poles" of Tamil civility: war-time ethnic egalitarianism (we are all Tamil!) and pre-war caste ("intra-ethic") hierarchy, with older, Jaffna Vellalars reasserting hierarchy and young oppressed caste people (newly empowered by Vellalar depopulation and diaspora money) championing egalitarianism. Sanmugeswaran (2020) has shown that similar postwar tensions often arise during the rebuilding of village temples as debates about the caste-rights (*urimai*) that emanate from them.

In Sri Lanka's Eastern Province, similarly, although caste practices have been revived with surprising enthusiasm, and the old game of temple-centered caste disputes continues, diasporic money is linked to the ongoing "agamic" (orthodox and Sanskritic) transformations of many of the area's important "regional" (*tēcam*) temples.[11] These transformations may ultimately roil caste positions in the region by

[10]Kuganathan (2022:260) suggests that Vellalar migration from Jaffna during the war may have cut down their population enough to have left them a minority in a District where they were once a majority.

[11]On Sri Lanka's eastern coast, and to a certain extent in Jaffna, people tend to distinguish between Āgama temples, organized along ritual lines laid down in a large set of Sanskritic texts, and *pattati* or, more often *pattaci (பத்தகி)* temples, organized according to local traditions. Since the war, there has been a tendency for east coast non- Āgama temples to "Āgama-cize". That is, by using orthodox texts to reorganize their rituals, by rebuilding their temples using South Indian temple architects, and by acquiring Brahmin priests – previously uncommon there. This process resembles what M.S. Srinivas famously called "Sanskritization" (1952). I avoid using that term about eastern temple dynamics, however, because local Batticaloa district intellectuals would, I think, vigorously protest its use, especially those I interviewed in the Batticaloa District in 2024 who are trying to preserve *pittaci* practices by arguing that they, to, are "traditional". Their arguments, of course, are also evidence of the postwar reaffirmation of caste, since the struggle between these forms of temple practice is also, often, a debate about which castes should control such temples. But other things are also going on, including, sometimes, a new emphasis on religious rather than strictly ethnic nationalism. Regarding the eastern term "*pattaci"* itself Fuller (2003) points out that in Tamil Nadu there was a similar distinction between Āgama texts written in Sanskrit and local rule books written in Tamil called *paddati.* This likely accounts for the origin of the East Coast Tamil term. For a comparable Jaffna instance see Ambalavanar's discussion of the transformation of Kannaki and Kali Ammon temples into Durga temples (2006, pp. 392–393). This involved a similar confrontation between Vellalar hegemony confirming *Caiva Āgama* texts, championed by Arumuka Navalar, and opposed to the local rules utilized in village temples dedicated to village deities such as

calling into question the status of individual castes in hierarchies linked to particular temples, but not without (quite "traditional") resistance, and, again, without calling into question caste as a form of daily life in itself. In sum, caste continues as an important practice in Sri Lankan Tamil daily life. A disinclination to talk about caste to outsiders, and even public disclaimers by some that caste is eroding, do not in themselves amount to evidence of its departure from socio-cultural practice.

Still, the anti-caste views and, increasingly, caste indifference of young Canadian Sri Lankan Tamils is, arguably, based on some fundamental factors unique to Canadian diaspora conditions and experience. First, young Canadian Sri Lankan Tamils of the second generation are rapidly moving out of the Tamil dominated enclaves (such as Scarborough) where their refugee and immigrant parents tended to cluster and where, perhaps, caste exclusions could most easily be practiced. Although most of the Canadian Sri Lankan Tamil population of 200,000 or more remained in the Greater Toronto Area through the first decade of the twenty-first century, many, perhaps half, have now spread out from central Toronto to Toronto suburbs and to other parts of Canada to seek (or express) upward mobility, and to find jobs and less expensive housing (Zarook, 2019, p. 34). This movement out from the center is also, as we shall see, a movement away from the close social relations that reaffirm forms of identity like caste.

Second, as several scholars have argued, many young Toronto Tamils carry a shared sense of collective trauma linked to how the 2009 LTTE defeat was experienced in diaspora. In 2009 numerous young and second-generation Sri Lankan Tamils, previously shielded by the preoccupations of young Canadian life—schooling, first jobs, dating—were suddenly thrust into politics by the catastrophic end of the civil war; a war in which, according to one UN estimate, over 40,000 Tamil civilians died in its final grisly month (Tamil Guardian, 2024; UN, 2011). Linked by sound and sight to the terminal battlefield's visual horrors via an extensive diaspora media network created by expatriates (most sympathetic to the LTTE), young people interviewed during and after 2009, some during the huge demonstrations that occurred that May all around Toronto, often described how they felt forced into a sense of common Tamilness even as they witnessed also, in their elders, a triggering of old trauma anew. One refugee parent, watching the event unfold, told me he suddenly found himself back in the massacre that destroyed his village, covered in remembered blood, and sobbing in front of his aghast children who had never before seen him cry. Witnessing all this, according to one study, led many younger Canadian Tamils to consciously reject caste divisions in favor of a "we are all in the same boat" sense of communal fragility (Bucenerius, Thompson, and Dunford, 2022, pp. 545–556; See also Esler, 2024, p. 386). These reasons alone would be enough to conclude that anti-caste sentiments among (at least) young Canadian Tamils rest on firmer foundations than mere embarrassment or a tactical shyness about addressing caste at all.

Kannaki generally controlled by oppressed castes. See Malathi de Alwis's (2018) masterful overview of the history of Kannaki-Pattini worship in Sri Lanka.

Yet in one arena of Toronto Tamil life caste is still, unabashedly, and publicly quite important: Toronto's Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu temples. There caste is important for two reasons: first, because of the role hereditary priestly castes and clans (*kuṭi*) play in temple organization and ritual; and, second, because of the way temples are used to provide *consilience;* that is, a temporary local environment in which various (sometimes contradictory) identity assertions can be made comfortably in an otherwise uncomfortable landscape, and where, if only briefly, what Appadurai calls 'life-worlds in flux" (1996, p. 56) can find momentary stillness amid intimations of theistic eternities (Whitaker 2015).[12]

Beyond this but associated with it as a kind of practical precondition, caste is also highlighted in Toronto's Hindu Temples because of the simple requirement such reassurance-providing temples have to *advertise* given the complex religious marketplace that neoliberal Toronto constitutes. That is, because Tamil people living in urban Toronto have lots of alternative temples (as well as other religions) to choose from, and because they lead complex, time-challenged lives that pull them in multiple directions at once, temples hoping to attract their attention as devotees must have, and must be known to have, 'genuine' (Brahmin) *aiyā* and *kurukkaḷ*,[13] that is, Brahmin priests with publicly unquestionable pedigrees, or, less often, priests from *Caiva Kurrukal,* or priestly clans. [14] This means, in effect, that the caste-identity of priests takes on something of the function of a neoliberal economic 'brand.' But does the 'branding' work of caste for retail purposes sit well with the sacred role caste plays in

[12]Is consilience merely diasporic nostalgia of the sort Appadurai wrote about in *Modernity at large* (1996)? The nostalgia of the deterritorialized is part of it, but only a part. In Kingsolver's (2011) *Tobacco Town Future: global encounters in rural Kentucky,* she writes about how people in one rural small town were so thickly tied together by overlapping webs of kinship, labor-swapping, and information that anyone even remotely connected to the town's people could be accurately "placed", as an identifiable social person, in relation to anyone else there. Kingsolver considers this cultural practice, "placing", a form of life, in Wittgenstein's sense, and as central to practical life in such small communities. I found this to be true while living for several years in a village in the Batticaloa district. In this light, consilience should be considered the practice of erecting this same sense of thick connectedness and, hence of identity confirmation "placing", through momentary ritual means. The impetus of doing this among Toronto Tamil people is not nostalgia, though doing so is clearly nostalgic. Rather, consilience, as I argue below, creates, momentarily, the confidence confirming arena people need to confront, negotiate with, and sometimes change the alien territory and forces they find themselves confronting in diaspora. It is not just remembering; it is reasserting.

[13]In Jaffna the term *kurukkaḷ* is used to refer to priests of non-Brahmin lineages; only Brahmin priests are called *aiyā.* However, I have frequently heard Batticaloa District Hindus refer to Brahmin and non-Brahmin priests alike as kurukkaḷ. This may reflect the hostility some eastern Tamil intellectuals have to admitting any real difference in sacredness between priestly lineages sanctified by local temple ideologies and imported Brahmin priests. As one of my anonymous reviewers helpfully pointed out, however, there is a priest at the Richmond Hill Ganesha Temple who uses *kurukkaḷ* as a suffix so perhaps the distinction is collapsing in Toronto.

[14]By "genuine" I mean priests who are either Brahmin or from recognized priestly lineages who are able to pass muster visually and in their competence as priests. Sri Lankan Tamils, however, are frequently skeptical about the pedigrees and off-duty behavior of Brahmin priests.

the construction of *consilience*? And what has all this to do with caste as it was once deployed in pre-war Sri Lanka?

To answer these questions, I will proceed as follows. First, to provide a kind of concrete baseline, I will discuss how caste as a cultural practice worked in eastern Sri Lanka before the inter-ethnic civil war. There, I will argue, caste consisted of a set of related practices concerned with the assertion of hereditary group rank and reputation generally connected to temple-anchored sacred landscapes.[15] I will turn then to the re-territorialized diaspora in Toronto and describe how, in my experience, caste tends to come up in everyday life mostly in subtle ways, and in venues such as marriages and family parties that focus on familial continuity. Otherwise, though, confronted by alien urbanity and the fact of diaspora itself, and thus removed from the sacred terrains integral to its use, I think caste is becoming increasingly difficult to deploy. An exception to this, however, is found in the Toronto Hindu temples I will turn to next, where people seek what I am calling *consilience*; a momentary ritual space within which identity assertions may comfortably be made. There caste practices are used more forcefully because they are so central to temple practice as such; but this centrality, in turn, is what turns the caste status of temple priests into a commodity within Toronto's religious marketplace. I will conclude with some remarks about how tensions inherent in the use of caste practices in the new landscape of diaspora may have implications for the future.

Caste in Tamil Sri Lanka before the War

I first did fieldwork in Sri Lanka's eastern Batticaloa District in the early 1980s before the war. At that time caste, considered as a set of familiarly related practices, was deeply tied to the district's sacred landscape as that was defined by a complex network of various kinds of temples. For example, the area surrounding the town of Mandur, roughly 20 miles south of Batticaloa town, was populated by three kinds of 'castes' (*cāti, kulam*). These castes were often described by people there as part of a moral hierarchy ranging from 'high' or 'good' castes at the top to 'low' or 'bad' castes at the bottom.[16] Hence, Mandur's Vellalar, Ceerpatar, Karaiyar and Mukkuvar castes,

[15]My assumption that temples and caste practices in the east are relevant to Toronto's Sri Lankan Tamils generally—despite most first-generation Tamils there having hailed originally from Jaffna—is, I believe, justified by my previous discussion of caste in both locations. This is not to argue that there are no important differences between how caste was practiced in the north and east before the war. Rather I am simply claiming that in this particular—the role of temples in articulating and maintaining caste distinctions and etiquette—Jaffna district and Batticaloa district practices are similar enough to warrant using my east coast findings as a baseline.

[16]In a fascinating overview of Sinhala caste practices Winslow (2024) argues that, contrary to scholarly assertions that Sinhala castes amount to a watered down versions of Hindu castes, they retain a character and ontology—based on a "cartwheel model of collective inequality"—that is quite distinct from castes in the Brahmanical "ladder" hierarchies with whom they are often compared. Interestingly, she points to a bifurcation of society in Sinhala caste practice into "high" and "low" that seems to find some resonance in east coast Hindu caste beliefs. This is not surprising since some villages in the east, such as the Ceerpatar village of

which dominated the demography, politics, and economics of the town, described themselves as 'high' people. But they tended to describe a middle group of 'service' (or *kuṭimai*) castes, composed of the town's washermen (*Vannan*), barbers (*Ampaṭṭan*) and temple workers (*Kōvilār*)—those still theoretically bound in hereditary service either to other castes or directly to a temple (or both)—as a mixture of good and bad, high and low. Finally, most Mandur people characterized as absolutely 'low' or 'bad' some castes such as the Cakkiliyar and the Paraiyar who were excluded from the town altogether in the 1980s except during ritual occasions (e.g., funerals, some exterior temple rituals) when they were needed.[17] But though this rhetoric of rank in Mandur was both hierarchical and moral, people mostly justified these rankings and judgments to me by talking about the relationship between these castes and Mandur's various temples. And this practice of discussing caste in terms of temples, though it was not the only practice available in Batticaloa, was, I think, generally in use among Tamils in the district as a whole.[18]

How did this work? There were three kinds of temples in the Batticaloa District that were directly relevant to caste practice: regional temples (*tēcattakkōvil*), village or *ūr* temples, and small temples (*cinna kōvil*). The first two kinds of temples tended to be large structures surrounded by walls and outbuildings and often supported by nearby farmland dedicated to the temple. Small temples, on the other hand, might range in size from a tiny, garlanded rock or hastily formed lingam at the base of a tree to a fairly full-sized worship hall. But the difference between these three kinds of temples was more a matter of organizational politics than size. Politically, regional temples tended to be owned and controlled by multiple castes and even multiple towns and villages; *ūr* temples by the dominant castes of the town or village they resided in; and small temples by the individuals who set them up or, perhaps, by no one in particular—as was often the case with, for example, the tiny roadside *Pilaiyar* (*Piḷḷaiyār* / Ganesha)

Thuraineelavanai, were set up under the auspices of the Kandyan kingdom (Whitaker, 1999, p. 128).

[17]The distinction between castes that were *kaṭimai* (bound in service to other castes) and *aṭimai* (enslaved by individual Vellalar landowners) is important to understanding how caste hierarchy was institutionalized in Jaffna prior to the 1840s (David, 1972), and the distinction was still clearly an important aspect of inherited social capital up to the eve of civil war (Pfaffenberger, 1982, p. 38). But this distinction was never so clear cut in Batticaloa. While the practice of caste in Batticaloa in the 1980s made use of the notion of *kaṭimai* as a social category—there were, some said, *kaṭimai* castes—I never heard anyone use the word *aṭimai* (slave) in this way—that is, to designate *aṭimai* castes. On the other hand, I did hear people use this term to accuse people they felt were treating them with disrespect, that is, as a slave. Nonetheless, Canagaratnam (1921, pp. 35–38) for example makes no mention of castes being neatly divided in this way between the bound and the enslaved. It is perhaps proper to note that in some contexts both words can mean "servant" or "slave".

[18]Other features of caste unique to the east coast was matrilineality (in contrast to a patrifocal emphasis, despite some bilateral and even matrilineal aspects, of Jaffna District practices; See David, 1973) and a "subclan" tradition ("*kuṭi marapu*") found both among Hindus and Tamil speaking Muslims in the region. In the case of Hindu *kuṭi*, however, these were still ranked and otherwise defined by their relationship to temples, their histories, and their village's sacred landscapes (Balasundaram, 2009, p. 142: McGilvray, 1982; Whitaker, 1999, pp. 14–18.)

shrines often found at particularly bad intersections in the district. In the Batticaloa District of the early 1980s, Mandur's Kandaswamy temple and Kokkadichcholai's Sivan temple provided good examples of regional temples owned and controlled by multiple castes and villages; Mandur's Mariyaamon (*Māriyammaṉ*)[19] temple and Karaitivu's Pilaiyar temple were fairly typical *ūr* temples controlled by key clans, lineages, and castes within their towns; and many a street corner, junction, or snake bite location from north of Batticaloa town to well south of Kalmunai were available to provide examples of the District's small temples, each an evanescent acknowledgment of some eruption of godly power.

Now in Batticaloa, at that time, 'ownership and control' of regional and village temples were generally expressed in terms of collective 'shares' (*paṅku*) and 'rights' (*urimai*) theoretically granted to particular castes, clans (*kuṭi*), matrilineages (and occasionally individuals) by the god at the time of the temple's foundation. This distribution of shares and rights often had a spatial character since their possession hierarchized and reconciled various groups distributed across the geographies of the villages and regions at issue by relating them to the sacred centers provided by gods. (The word *k*ōvil implies both a sovereign center, a ruler's palace, *and* a sacred one, a cosmologically generative God-point or *mūlastāṉam*.) In Mandur's case, for example, most of the castes, clans, and lineages of at least seven different villages found their ritual center, as defined by their rights and shares, in the Kandeswamy temple. Such original distributions were generally reckoned to have been accurately recorded in a special record, a *kalveṭṭu* or "stone cutting," at the time of the founding. But in most cases, I was told, such charters were eventually lost; and this ensured that the temple histories required to legitimate caste rank distributions generally had to be hotly debated.

This meant, in effect, that in Batticaloa temple histories acted as "sites" and "languages" of dispute for the groups whose status-positions were theoretically organized by the god. Temples, hence, were key arenas for the reiteration, challenging, and creation of the caste ranks and reputations they anchored to the district's many sacred landscapes. In the 1980s, for example, despite pressing national and global issues, local elites in the Batticaloa district spent much time and energy within temple communities competing for rank, power, and influence by arguing about the public reputation (or *kauravam*) of their respective groups in terms of relevant temple histories. And these intra-temple public disputes were complemented, at a district and provincial level, by similar *kauravam* disputes about rank argued in terms of regional historical poems (again, god-centered) such as the *maṭṭakkaḷappu māṉmiyam* (literally, Batticaloa's "greatness" or "treatise on the greatness of a sacred place…;" *Madras Tamil Lexicon*, accessed 8/14/2024), which similarly located the foundations of caste rank in grants of rights and shares in land and temples by gods or human sovereigns (sometimes even Kandyan sovereigns) acting as proxies for gods.[20]

[19] *Māriyammaṉ* is a goddess generally associated with protection from (and inflicting) infectious diseases, especially smallpox.

[20] I am aware that such historical arguments about the origin of *urimai* were also often used to assert caste status in Varnic terms. That is, by claiming the group's rights and status were

Was this way of practicing caste peculiar to Sri Lanka's Batticaloa District? Clearly, in many detailed ways, it was. Caste relations in Jaffna, for example, were both more rigorously hierarchical before the war, and more inflected by a key tension between the peninsula's Vellalar and Karaiyar elites, as well as by some modernist political mobilization of 'service' (*katimai*) and 'slave' (*aṭimai)* caste groups before independence (David, 1972; Russell, 1982). The rise of caste-antagonistic forms of Tamil nationalism in Jaffna in response to the increasing threat presented by government empowered Sinhalese nationalism also ensures that answering this question would require accounting for more than can be explored here. But I think, in outline, an important inter-relationship between caste, temples, their histories, and surrounding sacred landscapes can be seen in the Jaffna peninsula as well (Pfaffenberger, 1982; Banks, 1960; Kuganathan, 2022; Sivathamby, 1995). And Sanmugeswaran's work in postwar Jaffna, certainly, has demonstrated a still working (though weakened) matrix there between caste, memory, and the social imagining of a "bounded order" (*kaṭṭuppāṭu*) in Jaffna's large, borough-like "villages" (*ūr*)—really large towns divided into caste and caste-temple based "wards" (2020). Assuming, for the sake of argument, that a relationship between caste and space was indeed the case, what happened to Sri Lankan Tamil caste practices when such sacred landscapes were no longer available? What happened, that is to say, when caste went into diaspora?

Caste in the Toronto Metropolitan Area

Caste does not come up much in conversation among Sri Lankan Tamils in Toronto, Canada. Or, at least, it has not come up much among the people I have been visiting there since 2001. One could argue, I suppose, that as a white foreigner, Tamil people would naturally steer clear of a topic as touchy, misunderstood and, in the sense of Dirk's colonial 'Ethnographic State ' (2002), politically misused, as caste. But I am thinking here mainly of conversations I have had with people who have known me for many years and who could care less what I think because far too much water has passed under the bridge.

But to say caste does not come up much is not to say it does not come up at all. It does, I think, but obliquely, and sometimes nostalgically. For example, I once attended a family party in Scarborough with more than one hundred members of two Vellalar Tamil 'families', all originally from (or the children of those who were from) a single town in the Jaffna Peninsula. They were celebrating the birthday of the father of

obtained as warriors, and thus, as *kshatriya*. Hence, the Ceerpatar of Turaineelavanai in Batticaloa claim their rights in land descended matrilineally from grants given by a Kandyan king, Batticaloa's Mukkuvar claim their rights similarly descend because of the warrior role they played for the Magha of Kalinga in his conquests, as do the Jaffna Vellalar. But I do not see these as incompatible claims. As arguments they still tie caste status to a sacred landscape. One innovation of Tamil nationalism as early as the 1970s was the widening of this argument to include all low-land Tamils and the entire landscape, *Eelam*, as a single whole. But other research shows that the relationship of up-country Tamils to this construction was more complicated (Daniel 1996; Balasundaram, Chandrabose & Sivapragasam 2009).

the wife of a couple whose marriage united them. This marriage was arranged before the war by the most important male members of the two richest lineages of the two most important families in town, the couple's fathers. The groom's father had pushed for the marriage to occur, I was told, despite the youth of the bride at the time (she had just passed her "A levels"), because he wanted his son properly married before he sent him abroad to avoid the war he felt was coming. People at the party pointed to the only survivor of that arrangement, the wife's father, brought over by his daughter's husband in the late 1990s after his home was destroyed, and now a wary and dejected elderly man who, at one point, grasped my arm and, weeping quietly, proclaimed himself still in mourning for his lost homeland—"my Eelam",[21] as he put it. So caste was mentioned here, of course, but only as part of this family history and to explain why everyone was at the party. Nor was everyone celebrating. The wife spent an hour explaining to me why she thought her arranged marriage had been a mistake because, she said, it denied her the freedom to take advantage of the new opportunities moving to Canada had opened up.

More occasionally, at family parties, I have heard men and women who were born in Sri Lanka discussing weddings as 'proper' or 'not proper', at which point older people will generally look knowing, while some young people born or largely raised in Canada will roll their eyes. Proper, here, means first of all, marrying another Tamil person; but also marrying the right kind of Tamil person: a terminological cross-cousin, ideally, but at least a member of one's "community" or caste. Sometimes, I know, families have sought brides or grooms from Jaffna or Batticaloa to satisfy this kind of propriety (Maunaguru, 2019), though in my experience young Canadian Tamils seem less interested in using caste as a factor in marriage choice.[22] Yet even when this kind of familial concern with caste as a marker of communal continuity is no longer at issue, as when a young Canadian Tamil person has looked outside the diaspora for marriage, and even when their choice has been accepted by their family, caste can still come up. Consider the following wedding scene.

The wedding was between a Sri Lankan Tamil woman and a non-Tamil man she met at law school. The bride's diaspora Tamil family was wealthy and arranged for the wedding to be conducted by an *Aiyā*, in this case a South Indian Brahmin priest, in a large white tent at a country club. As the bride and groom's family were mounting the stage to complete the ritual, one of the bride's relatives—a man of the Point Pedro Karaiyar of the Jaffna Peninsula—jostled my elbow, handed me a glass of white wine,

[21]Tamil Eelam (*īḻam*) is the term Sri Lankan Tamil separatists used for the Tamil state they envisioned. As one might expect, there are conflicting theories about the origins of the word concerning whether it originated in Pali or in ancient Tamil. Perhaps more relevant is its colonial rendering. *Winslow's A comprehensive Tamil and English Dictionary* (1862) gives four meanings: "gold", "a mass of metal", "Ceylon" ("the Cingalese country"), and "toddy".

[22]This antipathy toward considering caste as a factor in marriage seems to be somewhat independent of an antipathy toward arranged marriage. Several young people of my acquaintance expressed admiration for arranged marriage as superior to the Canadian free-for-all love lives of their non-Tamil peers even as they derided using caste as factor in any potential future parental negotiations.

for he claimed I looked 'dry', and said, gesturing with his own neat whisky, "Well, I'm glad to see they have done this properly."

"Properly? What do you mean?"

For I was puzzled. Was he being sarcastic? But I knew most of the family, including this man, approved of the wedding despite the young bride's complete (and rather amused) disregard for any marriage restrictions regarding caste or community. I just looked at him.

"The priest, man. The Brahmin."

"Oh!"

"Of course he knows it, the beast. I bet he is being paid plenty for this job. Because it's all a business to them, you know. And a good business, too."

So here was caste again, present at once as homage to the Tamil past *and* as a kind of identity-brand poised in tension between the sacred and the commercial. What is more, as Trouillet (2020) has pointed out, this kind of disdain for Brahmin priests as expensive hirelings is common among South Asian Tamil members of locally dominant castes (paragraph 21).[23] But such self-consciously nostalgic, slightly sarcastic, retail references are the way caste tends to come up in diaspora in my experience: as a memento (that is, as part of a historical memory or discussion), as a (possibly) fading factor in marriage, and as a multivocal pivot point between temples (and their rituals) and the urban world they try, momentarily, to subvert. Hence it is to Toronto's temples that we must now turn.

Conclusions: Temples, Space and Caste

According to the Canadian Government there are 90 Hindu temples registered in the Toronto Metropolitan Area; of these in 2013 roughly 22 were currently owned or controlled by Sri Lankan Tamils. In 2009, 2012 and 2013 a colleague, the folklorist Dr. E Balasundaram, and I conducted interviews with the owners and staffs of seven of these temples, all of which made direct and important use of the concept of caste in their ritual procedures and staffing.[24] Thus, we found that all these temples legitimized themselves in the eyes of potential devotees by obtaining priests from priestly castes (mostly Brahmin, and less often Saiva Kurrukal, or priestly Vellalar clans). But all seven of these diaspora temples were also different in six key ways from their counterparts in Sri Lanka; and I think these differences imply important shifts in the way caste is practiced.

[23]See also Pffafenburger, 1982. Pffafenburger explains that in Jaffna Brahmins are a small minority and the Vellalar caste tends to be politically and economically dominant. Hence, Vellalar owners of temples see Brahmin priests as hired hands. Trouillet (2020) argues that Brahmin priests, and the *Śivācāryas* subcaste they come from, have suffered a similar demotion in Tamil Nadu since the beginning of the twentieth century because of the rise of DMK-influenced anti-Brahmin Dravidian nationalist rhetoric and the intervention in temple affairs by the state.

[24]That is, just under 32 per cent. This was a convenience sample.

In the interest of clarity, let me briefly summarize the six differences our research found.[25] First, Hindu temples in Toronto were movable, urban sites, often rented warehouses or recycled storefronts, with locations entirely determined by urban zoning laws and the 'light industrial' retail market. This stands in marked contrast to Sri Lanka where, before the war, as I have argued, temples were miraculously fixed points anchoring sacred landscapes theoretically laid out by gods. Second, those who controlled temples in Toronto uniformly spoke of 'ownership' (using the English word) rather than of *urimai* (or 'sacred rights') even when describing temple affairs in Tamil. Again, the contrast with Sri Lankan Tamil temple politics before the war is quite clear. There *urimai* implied a place in a temple-centered caste hierarchy centered on a god, was vouchsafed by historical claims about how one's groups rights in the temple were divinely granted, and carried important implications both about one's "honor" (*karavam*) as an individual and as a member of a caste (Whitaker, 1999; Pathmanesan, 2020). Third, Toronto temples were often started and owned by priests acting alone as religious entrepreneurs, most but not all Brahmins. The new importance of such priestly "religious entrepreneurs" in Canada has been well documented by Trouillet (2020) in Toronto and Montreal. But I know of no temples controlled by priests in this fashion in Sri Lanka prior to the war, although research in 2015 turned up several examples of priest-owned and controlled temples in postwar Colombo, Sri Lanka. Fourth, most owners and owner-priests we talked to found it easy to move back and forth between describing temples as businesses and as *kōvil*. One temple owner, for example, started a temple with his wife on the site of their jewelry business and saw the joint growth of both institutions as divinely connected. Again, although smaller temples in prewar Jaffna and Batticaloa were sometimes founded by wealthy individuals to express their *kauravam* and individual piety, such establishments were still generally justified in ritual terms by being tied to divinely specified locations. After the war, however, a large Ammon temple was established on the outskirts of Batticaloa town by a diaspora businessman who, apparently, funded the enterprise from a distance and on easily available land. Fifth, all the temple owners we interviewed were well aware of the need to advertise (in newspapers, online, on TV and so forth) to attract devotees in Toronto's increasingly competitive temple market; and thus knew that broadcasting the caste status of the temple's priests was also an important part of this. Hence, the frequency of web sites, posters, and glossy calendars featuring pictures of priests conducting *pujas* while conspicuously wearing *pūṇūl*, the sacred thread that signifies their special, 'twice-born' status.[26] For example, the website of the Richmond Hill Hindu Temple, one of the best known Tamil temples in the Greater Toronto Area,

[25]For a fuller discussion of many of these characteristics see also Whitaker, 2015.

[26]For further examples see the online photo galleries of the Sri Ayyappan Hindu Temple and the Canada Kandaswamy Temple (the later also features photos of its wedding hall, another aspect of its marketing). This point, however, only applies to temples owned by or hiring Brahmin priests. One of the temples we worked with was owned by priests from the Batticaloa District, Vellalar, priestly matriclans associated with a specific ūr *kōvil* in Karaitivu, a large, predominantly Vellalar town south of Batticaloa. Another temple, similarly, was controlled by *Saiva Kurrukal* priests. In neither case would *ṇūl* have been appropriate.

features a photograph of its "highly qualified priests" with their *pūṇūl* prominently displayed ([https://rhht.ca/about] Accessed 8/16/24).[27]

Finally, sixth, unlike in pre-war Sri Lanka, where temples anchored fully realized moral-social communities of various sizes to sacred landscapes, Toronto's temples were attractive to diaspora devotees primarily because they offered a shelter from what many first generation people believed were urban Canada's morally corrosive, identity-eroding influences, and a place of memorial stillness in a cosmopolitan diaspora where many also felt they had no fixed community—only jobs. Indeed, many Sri Lankan Tamils in Canada, male and female, made this point in conversations in 2001 and 2009. "Here" one middle-aged woman told me, "We work all the time. That is it." One young Tamil man in his early twenties described his existence to me this way: "Here life is lived through a windshield…", that is, he elaborated, in constant movement, always going back and forth to one's job, and all anonymously. Another man, middle aged, and well established in Canada with a growing business, put it this way. In Toronto, he felt, it was impossible to be the kind of "well known man" (*nalla terinka maṉitaṉ*) one was in Sri Lanka because the factors of shared home places (*ūr*), nearby family members, and a local reputation that surrounded one there—what he called, in one combinatory term, "honor" (*kauravam*)—was no longer present to keep one in place. And while this was an advantage when it came to sidestepping some traditions (such as caste restrictions on marriage, for he was married to a non-Tamil woman) he nonetheless found it personally disorienting. For "…. here I am living in a city, a big city, one of the largest in the world…I am one of a million."

Arguably, it was to assuage this kind of felt rootlessness in first-generation Sri Lankan Tamils that Toronto's diaspora temples offered services such as language learning and classical dance training. Out of the hope, that is, of passing on "Tamil heritage" (*pāramparai*) to an increasingly Canadian next generation. Perhaps more important, however, was that Toronto temples provided periodic, well attended, collective rituals such as annual temple festivals, that allowed people to assert their identities in venues momentarily Tamil rather than Canadian. These festivals could last a week or more, and frequently involved processions that spilled out into the surrounding streets and required city government permits that, in turn, enjoined the cooperation of the Toronto police for traffic and onlooker crowd control. There was an irony in this especially apparent in the early twenty-first century. The Toronto police were often, then, very suspicious of Sri Lankan Tamil people, especially in the early 2000s when the civil war in Sri Lanka still raged, because gangs named after Jaffna villages and affiliated with the LTTE or other Tamil separatist groups openly clashed in Scarborough,[28] and temples, like other local Sri Lankan Tamil businesses, were often penetrated by the LTTE for funds ("taxes") and access. But during temple

[27]One of the peer reviewers of this article helpfully pointed out that the Richmond Hill Hindu Temple was founded by a mix of South Indian and Sri Lankan Tamils. Only later, as the civil war swelled the number of Sri Lankan Tamils in Toronto, did the latter largely take control of the temple.

[28]See, for example, the 2001 CTV News report "Police arrest 51 gang members in Ontario" [https://web.archive.org/web/20090218052455/http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/print/

festivals, for a moment, contrariwise, Canadian streets and the powers governing them could be subverted into becoming supportive Tamil venues—cultural "hotspots" or *hauts lieux*, as Trouillet puts it—ordered by their own ritual agendas (Whitaker, 2015; Trouillet, 2012). Indeed, Trouillet' s discussion of Tamil temples in France and Mauritius suggests this subversion of local landscapes by ritual action may be a global phenomenon.

At the same time, however, such multi-day extravaganzas were always sponsored each festival day by a different named group—usually a specific Jaffna or Batticaloa Tamil community (ūr), that is, by their regnant castes—but also (in apparent contradiction) by caste-blurring local businesses and community groups. Arguably, then, these rituals also integrated together a remembered, homeland-style, Tamilness, including caste identity and its associated nexus of honor, with contemporary Canadian realities of urban agendas and deterritorialization. Such displays of sponsorship, then, provided Toronto's Hindu Tamils, especially (but not only) those of the first generation whose identities were once thickly tethered to practices, places and castes in Sri Lanka, a public communal site for the perpetuation and comfortable (if only momentary) display of themselves as people seemingly (but not really) fixed again by a specific, caste-infused, socio-cultural space. A ritual site, that is, of an all-enveloping, Canada-subverting, yet interpolating and ephemeral, 'consilience' (Whitaker 2015).[29]

But if these seven temples are at all representative of life in the Canadian Tamil diaspora more generally, then caste, shorn of its connection to specific sacred landscapes, and hence uncoupled also from its role in the local negotiation of ritually based social power, has shifted mightily from what it once was in prewar Sri Lanka to something somewhat new. Now a brand, a memory, a fading form of familial continuity, and a prop in the construction of ritual consilience and Canadian Tamil cultural resistance, but no longer really a fixed position on a socio-cosmic map, caste has been transformed by being uprooted. On the one hand, as Trouillet (2020) has argued, the important role that Brahmins play as agents of temple legitimization in Canada makes them, also, conduits for the continuing circulation and importance of caste as a form of

CTVNews/20011019/ctvnews818005/20011019/?hub=CTVNewsAt11&subhub=PrintStory] Accessed on August 19, 2024

[29]The meaning of such Toronto festivals is interpreted differently by the Consulate General of Sri Lanka, Toronto (representing the views of the Sri Lankan government) on its website, which primarily argues that their mixed bag of sponsors displays the interests of Sri Lankan Tamil "moderates" – that is, non-separatists. On its website, for example, the consulate discusses the Sri Varasiththi Vinaayagar Hindu Temple annual Chariot Festival on Jully 22, 2022 this way: "The festival was attended by more than 10,000 Sri Lankan Canadian Tamils including high-profile business community [sic] representing a cross section of their population. Also, the festival was attended by several Canadian provincial political dignitaries and senior officials of the public and private sector of Canada." It then claims: "This festival reflected the broadening space in the moderate Tamil community for a welcoming engagement with Sri Lanka." ([https://www.torontoslcg.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=684:toronto-sri-varasiththi-vinaayagar-hindu-temple-annual-chariot-festival] Accessed August 16, 2024). This is an unlikely interpretation; separatist sentiments remain strong in the Tamil diaspora.

socio-ritual life. And certainly, caste has maintained itself as a form of essentializing social exclusion among other South Asian diasporas in North America; for example, among the Sikh community in Vancouver and expatriate Indians in Silicon Valley, California, USA (Sabherwal, 2024; Tiku and DiMolfetta, 2023). But if caste among Canadian Sri Lankan Tamils is now (especially for most second and third generation people) a nostalgic brand one "buys" rather than a fixed position in a matrix of honor one inhabits, it remains to be seen whether its new retail utility will ensure its staying power amidst the diaspora's new uncertainties.

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