

Perspectives on Caste and Militant Tamil Nationalism in Sri Lanka: The LTTE and Resistance Against Vellalah Hegemony

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Abstract

By analyzing the intersection of caste and militant Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka, this article considers whether the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was a transformative force that disrupted the caste order, including the hegemony of the Vellalah caste. Tamil political leadership in the early twentieth century was dominated by Vellalah elites who carefully upheld caste privileges. The emergence of the LTTE in the late 1970s, led largely by non-Vellalah militants, disrupted this order and asserted a revolutionary Tamil identity transcending caste. Drawing on Vellalah-centered ethnographic fieldwork and testimonies, as well as media accounts and LTTE documents, the study scrutinizes how caste was both repressed and reconstituted within the militant nationalist project. The findings of this study suggest that the LTTE pursued radical measures to dismantle caste hierarchies via outlawing discrimination, imposing egalitarian discipline, valorizing martyrdom, and encouraging inter-caste marriage. These interventions were perceived by Vellalahs as having destabilized their hegemony and enabled wider social and political participation of intermediate and depressed castes. Yet caste has persisted subtly through private practices, silent discourses and enduring social divisions. The study maintains that while the LTTE's actions destabilized Tamil caste structures, they failed in permanently altering the underlying logic of the caste system, leaving a legacy marked by both disruption and the resilience of caste.

Keywords

Caste, Sri Lankan Tamil, Militant Nationalism, LTTE, Vellalah Hegemony, Depressed castes/Marginalized castes

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Introduction

In Tamil nationalist discourse, caste has often been silenced by elites who regard its discussion as divisive, if not altogether treacherous (Cheran, 2001; Thiranagama, 2011; Jeyaraj, 2015; Fuglerud, 2024).¹ Southern² and Western³ scholars, on the other hand, have emphasized its intersection with nationalism,⁴ unsettling Tamil elites who fear this interpretation weakens an imagined unity. Both these positions, however, overlook the lived and shifting dynamics of caste within Tamil society.

This article attempts to nuance these arguments by examining perspectives regarding how and why the LTTE—predominantly led by members of intermediate, non-dominant castes⁵ and whose ranks were disproportionately filled by depressed castes⁶—officially rejected caste, while at the same time mobilizing it for their own purposes. It sheds light on the interplay between LTTE-led militant nationalism and Tamil caste dynamics by focusing on Vellalah interpretations of the movement's efforts to overturn caste, and how this project was perceived to be a deliberate deconstruction of longstanding Vellalah hegemony.⁷ By focusing on Vellalah interpretations of this phenomenon, the work draws attention to an understudied dynamic within Tamil nationalist debates: resistance to the hegemonic position of the Vellalah. In doing so, the article treats caste as both a silenced contradiction and a structural force.

The nearly three-decade-long civil war between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE lasted from 1983 to 2009. While the early years of the conflict involved more than one Tamil nationalist group, the LTTE largely consolidated its dominance

¹Elites are defined here either as national elites who hold political power or local elites (Roberts, 1974: 550) with cultural, social, and caste-based influence positioning their own identity as the prescriptive model of nationhood. See Michael Roberts, "Problems of Social Stratification and the Demarcation of National and Local Elites in British Ceylon," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 33, no. 4 (1974): 549–577.

²Roberts, 1986, 1995, 1998, Mahindapala, 2009, Silva, 2014, 2017, 2019, 2020.

³Russell, 1982, Pfaffenberger, 1981, 1892, 1990, 1994, Hellmann-Rajanayakam, 1986, 1990, 1994a, 1994b, 2004, Stokke, 1998, 2006, Schalk 1997, Fuglerud, 1999, 2001, 2004, Bizouras, 2012.

⁴Nationalism, conceived here as a homogenizing, differentiating, and classifying discourse, is unsettled by the internal divisions (class, caste, ethnicity, region, and religion) it seeks to erase (Verdery, 1996, p. 227; Eller, 1999, p. 46, Brass, 1991, p. 46; Chatterjee, 1996, p. 210).

⁵According to Kenneth David, intermediate castes (*Thachar* or carpenters, *Kollar* or blacksmiths, *Thattar* or goldsmiths, *Asari* or masons/stone workers, *Kusavar* or potters, *Karaiyar* and *Mukkuvar* or fishing castes also involved in coastal trade, and other skilled workers such as the *Chaandar* or oil makers) were positioned between the dominant Vellalah caste and the depressed castes, and played a crucial role in maintaining social and ritual order in Jaffna. See Kenneth David, "Hierarchy and Equivalence in Ceylon: Normative Code as Mediator," in *The New Wind: Changing Identities in South Asia*, ed. Kenneth David (Moutan, 1976).

⁶The term "depressed castes" here refers to the so-called *Panchamar* (lit. "the fifth people"), which include the *Vannar* (washers of clothes and cloth), the *Ampatter* (barbers), the *Pallar* (agricultural labourers), the *Nalavar* (toddy tappers) and the *Paraiyar* (drummers). This article uses the terms peripheral castes and marginalized castes interchangeably with depressed castes.

⁷Due to both complexities arising from the author's own subject position and war-time restraints on the discussion and research of caste, the majority of informants interviewed for this work were Vellalah.

from 1986 onwards, through internecine rivalry and the elimination or assimilation of competing militant groups. From 1990 to 1995, the LTTE exercised significant political authority in the Jaffna peninsula, where it established a parallel state structure (Stokke, 1998, 2006). Between 2002 and 2009, key years of the civil war in Sri Lanka, the LTTE positioned itself as the sole representative of Sri Lankan Tamils. The Sri Lankan government's defeat of the LTTE in 2009 prompted a profound reassessment of militant Tamil nationalism.

I collected the data for this study in the Jaffna Peninsula, which is widely regarded as the cultural heartland and intellectual cradle of Sri Lankan Tamils. Jaffna was the birthplace of most elite Tamil political leaders of the twentieth century and the site where all Tamil militant movements first emerged. Crucially, it has also been the arena of numerous caste-related clashes. This study adopts a constructivist and critical qualitative approach to examine caste, situating Vellalah identity within the project of LTTE militant nationalism. Given the political sensitivities of this subject and other field constraints, I was required to take a flexible, pragmatic approach, relying on snowball and convenience sampling across ten sub-regions of Jaffna.⁸ Data collection included semi-structured interviews, non-participant and participant observation, casual conversations, a written student survey, and the use of myself as an informant. In total, thirty-eight interviews and ninety-three student surveys were conducted between 2003 and 2007, supported by extensive informal dialogues and documentary analysis.⁹ Textual sources—both historical and contemporary—were analyzed alongside oral narratives to trace hegemonic and subversive constructions of caste and identity. As a Vellalah researcher, my subject position played a central role in this research, resulting in my constant need to negotiate various insider-outsider dynamics. Consequences of this subject position included ease of access to Vellalah interlocutors and obstacles to interviewing other caste communities. Thematic organization of the data was informed by eight themes—politics, leadership, lifestyle, education, land ownership, temple affiliation, intra-Vellalah divides, and inter-caste relations—which emerged inductively from field narratives and literature. Analysis followed a narrative and interpretive-constructivist method, incorporating both the intersubjective and cognitive dimensions of caste identity.

In the first section, I trace the shift from a Vellalah-led nationalist project in the early twentieth-century to the turn to militancy among alienated youth, including those from oppressed castes, in the late 1970s. Next, I show how, by the mid-1980s, the LTTE consolidated its ascendancy by eliminating rival groups and reconfiguring leadership

⁸The research covered samples from the ten sub-regions in Jaffna, as Sivathamby recommended based on dominance and different caste relationships: 1) Vadamarachy, 2) Tenmarachy, 3) The islands, 4) Jaffna town, 5) Nallur-Kopay, 6) Manipay, 7) Tellippalai-Chunnakam, 8) Chulipuram-Pannakam, 9) Kankesanthurai-Pallali, 10) Vaddukkoddai-Araly. See Karthigesu Sivathamby, "Tamil Militants," in *The Challenge in South Asia: Development, Democracy, and Regional Cooperation*, eds. Ponna Wignaraja and Akmal Hussain (Sage Publications, 1989).

⁹This article draws on empirical findings from my doctoral research, completed in 2015. While the core analysis remains grounded in the original PhD study, subsequent updates and revisions have been incorporated only to a limited extent.

along non-Vellalah lines. Then, I examine the LTTE's de facto administration in the Jaffna Peninsula between 1990 and 1995, detailing the group's radical measures instituted to curb caste discrimination and reorder social hierarchies. The article then turns to the LTTE's internal organizational practices, where, according to my informants, a performed egalitarianism coexisted with subtle continuities of rank and habitus. Finally, I analyze Vellalah responses in this period—ranging from outward compliance to criticism, emigration, and selective alignment with LTTE authority—and assess how, after 2009, elements of Vellalah influence reasserted themselves within a reconfigured post-war field.

Historical Background

Caste abolition has been a platform for all Tamil political entities in modern Sri Lanka, with consensus at the official level that caste should be eliminated. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Jaffna Youth Congress (JYC) became the first organized Tamil movement to address caste-based discrimination, inspired by Indian nationalist politics and ideas from leading English newspapers (Russell, 1982; Hoole, Somasundaram, Kopalasingham, and Thiranagama, 1992; Kadirgamar, 2004). These youth were deeply influenced by developments in India due to cultural ties and proximity.¹⁰ The leaders of the JYC, who came primarily from Vellalah and Protestant Christian backgrounds, advocated liberal and progressive views on caste, yet their reformist stance exposed the paradox of elite-led nationalism, where calls for equality are articulated from within privileged identities, thereby reproducing the very hierarchies they sought to dismantle.

By the 1950s and 1960s, the Communist Party (CP) also advocated caste eradication, though with limited immediate effect in caste-conscious Jaffna (Senthilvel and Raveendran, 1988; Senthilvel, 2003).¹¹ In its effort to gain a foothold in northern Sri Lanka, the CP mobilised the resistance of the depressed castes. The Peking Branch, in particular spearheaded significant temple-entry struggles in the 1970s, directly confronting caste-based exclusion in religious life.¹² Although often celebrated as a radical grassroots victory against Vellalah supremacy, this mobilization was short-lived, curtailed by entrenched elite resistance and the absence of sustained organizational structures to translate symbolic gains into long-term social transformation.¹³

¹⁰For more detail on the Jaffna Youth Congress, see Silan Kadirgamar, "Jaffna Youth Radicalism: The 1920s and 30s," paper presented at the International Center for Ethnic Studies (ICES), Colombo, Sri Lanka. And Noolaham: https://www.noolaham.org/wiki/index.php/Handy_Perinbanayagam

¹¹It was named as a 'low caste party'. See S.K. Senthilvel, *Pothuvudamai Iyakkamum Tholar Karthigesanum* (Puthiya Poomi Publication 2003). The CP further divided into two in 1964 to form the Peking wing and the Moscow wing.

¹²According to Pfaffenberger, in 1967 only 17 per cent of the 1,309 Hindu temples in Jaffna were open to depressed castes. See "Introduction: The Sri Lankan Tamils," in *The Sri Lankan Tamils: Ethnicity and identity*, eds. Chelvadurai Manogaran and Bryan Pfaffenberger (Westview Press, 1994), 144.

¹³Ironically, in the new alignment of caste politics between South and North, the SLFP supported depressed castes while the UNP allied with Vellalah elites. This paradox led critics to note that

In the post-independence era, the Federal Party (FP), dominated by Vellalah leaders, incorporated caste abolition into its program, though again often more as a rhetorical commitment than a transformative practice. In 1976, the Vellalah-led Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) signed the Vaddukoddai Resolution, which explicitly asserted the abolition of caste in a future Tamil Eelam and declared untouchability or caste-based inequality punishable by law, a stance that was subsequently adopted by the LTTE.¹⁴ Although the TULF made tentative efforts toward promoting caste equality, genuine engagement was obstructed by anxieties about losing Vellalah support and by the elite's desire to preserve caste-based privileges. At that time, members of depressed castes were often not even regarded by elites as authentic "Tamils" due to widespread illiteracy and notions of impurity (Pfaffenberger, 1994). From the late 1970s onward, caste became further entangled with Tamil militant nationalism.

Emergence of Tamil Militancy (Late 1970s)

The scholarship on Tamil nationalism has been criticized for its limited attention to the emergence of militancy yet a notable number of studies by Sri Lankan and overseas studies have attempted to fill this gap.¹⁵ Fear of militant gun culture and the difficulty of obtaining reliable information about the LTTE contributed to the paucity of early research. Nationalist portrayals often suppressed internal Tamil contradictions of region, gender, caste, or religion, producing an overly simplistic binary of Sinhalese versus Tamils. The elitist, Vellalah-led nationalist project was increasingly perceived by both some Vellalahs and non-Vellalah youth as an opportunistic collaboration with the Sinhala-led government (Wilson, 2000; Hoole et al., 1992; Thangarajah, 2000, 2003). As a result, in the late 1970s the Tamil nationalist stage began shifting away from educated Vellalah elites, mostly lawyers and businessmen in their fifties and sixties, and towards militant youth (Thambiah, 1986).

Two distinct social groups entered politics during this period. At Jaffna University, math and science students from predominantly Vellalah families, frustrated by government standardization policies and unemployment, radicalized in opposition to both the state and their elders (Wilson, 2000; Thangarajah, 2003; Wickramasinghe, 2006; Thiranagama, 2011; Räsänen, 2015). In contrast, youth from Valvettithurai, an

the struggle against caste oppression was partly sustained by actors aligned with the very elites who upheld it. See Sivasegaram, 2008.

¹⁴"C. that in the state of Tamil Eelam caste shall be abolished and the observance of the pernicious practice of untouchability or inequality of any type based on birth shall be totally eradicated and its observance in any form punished by law." See https://www.sangam.org/FB_HIST_DOCS/vaddukod.htm

¹⁵For scholarship criticized by its lack of attention to militancy, see Hellmann-Rajanayakam, 1990, 1994, p. 32, Wilson, 2000, Sumathy, 2001, p. 15, Thangarajah, 2003; Ravindran, 2004; Hoole, 1997; Daniel, 1996. For scholarship that does attend to militancy, see Hellmann-Rajanayakam, 1994, 1998; Bose, 1994; Daniel, 1996; Silva, 1999; Cheran, 2001; Sumathy, 2001; Ravindran, 2004; Swamy, 2003; Hoole, 1992, 2001; Thiranagama, 2011; Balasooriya, 2013; Bizziouras, 2012.

area dominated by the Karaiyar caste who were less formally educated, were deeply angered by the caste injustices perpetuated by Vellalah elites (Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 1986, 1994a, 1994b; Stokke, 2000; Fuglerud 2004). While both groups opposed the older Vellalah elite, their divergent paths soon collided. Violent clashes elevated the Karaiyar-dominated Valvettithurai faction, displacing the university-based moderate youth and asserting prominence through radicalism, vernacular leadership, and militant violence (Ravindran, 2004; Wickramasinghe, 2006). This marked a paradigm shift, bringing new actors and strategies onto the Tamil nationalist stage, thus profoundly reshaping Jaffna society and destabilizing traditional hierarchies of caste and age (Stokke, 2000, p. 294; Thiranagama, 2011, pp. 216, 226).

Proliferation of Militant Groups (Early 1980s)

Among the militant organizations that proliferated by the early 1980s, many arose from the youth wings of the Vellalah-dominated TULF. In total, nearly forty groups emerged, though estimates vary.¹⁶ Caste was understood to be a factor in membership. Many members of the LTTE were Karaiyar or Mukkuvar. From its inception, the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) declared a commitment to transcending caste boundaries and actively recruited members from depressed castes (Thiranagama, 2011, p. 195). On the other hand, groups like People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) and Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) were primarily composed of Vellalah youth. Even geography reflected caste influence. The EPRLF and PLOTE maintained offices in Vellalah-majority localities, while the LTTE focused operations in Karaiyar- and Mukkuvar-dominated areas (Sumathy, 2001; Ravindran, 2004; Thiranagama, 2011). The LTTE's reliance on informal caste-based networks provided an organizational advantage (Stokke, 2000, p. 299). Each movement became locally associated with the caste group that predominated in the organization (Sumathy, 2001; Ravindran, 2004; Thiranagama, 2011).

Interneine clashes were frequent in these years, and the LTTE often targeted rival groups, many of which were Vellalah-led. Informants noted that the LTTE initially resisted caste distinctions but later actively recruited oppressed caste members, some of whom sought to retaliate against Vellalahs for perceived historical harm. In response, some Vellalah elites and militants fled Jaffna, accelerating the erosion of Vellalah dominance. Many middle- and upper-caste youth fled abroad, leaving poorer and depressed caste youth to fill the militant ranks (Daniel, 1996; Fuglerud, 2004, 2024; Stokke, 2000; Ravikumar, 2002; Ravindran, 2004).

From Vellalah Hegemony to LTTE Ascendancy (Mid-1980s Onward)

Through these violent rivalries, the LTTE consolidated power from 1986 onward, wiping out or absorbing groups such as TELO, PLOTE, EPRLF, and later the Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students (EROS). By the mid-1980s, the LTTE emerged

¹⁶Wilson records thirty-seven militant groups among Tamils (Wilson, 2000, p. 126) and Hellmann Rajanayagam records around forty-two (1998, p. 42).

as the most powerful and dominant group. With a cadre base disproportionately drawn from non-Vellalabs, the LTTE overturned Vellalah dominance in militant politics. In so doing, the movement projected an image of Tamil unity by rejecting caste publicly and incorporating depressed caste cadres. Yet this egalitarianism was only partial—Vellalah influence persisted in civilian politics, temples, and education, even within LTTE-administered areas. In other words, LTTE-led nationalism both challenged and reproduced caste hierarchy by undermining Vellalah hegemony in militant leadership while leaving its social and cultural legacies largely intact.

Deconstructing Caste: The LTTE's Vision of Equality and Justice

The LTTE's association with caste was deeply ambivalent and remains a subject of debate. On the one hand, its leader proclaimed an ambition to abolish caste differences and spoke of creating an egalitarian Tamil society free from entrenched hierarchies. On the other, their interventions often appeared to my interlocutors as less focused upon dismantling caste as a social system and more concerned with toppling the ingrained hegemony of the Vellalah elite, who had long monopolized political, social, economic, and religious power in Jaffna. This ambiguity raises the question of whether the LTTE sought to build a genuinely caste-free society or merely to reorder caste relations in ways that eroded Vellalah hegemony while consolidating its own legitimacy as the bearer of Tamil nationalism.

Evidence suggests that the LTTE aimed to abolish caste-based social injustices, instituting social liberation through both explicit and implicit actions. For nearly three decades, the LTTE was the most powerful militant group to address caste issues in Jaffna. Their approach was often violent, challenging assumptions in Sri Lankan Tamil society (Sivathamby, 1989; Bose, 1994; Thiranagama, 2011). Swamy (1995, p. 69) offers first-hand insights into the ideological tension within the Tamil militant project—when asked how one might lead a “Socialist Eelam” without deep ideological foundations, Swamy reports that Prabhakaran underlined his resolve to eliminate caste differences. The LTTE's political program, designed by Anton Balasingham, articulated a commitment to abolishing all forms of social oppression, including caste. He stated that the LTTE “must fight not only for the political liberation of our oppressed nation, but also for the prosperity of the oppressed classes and our people who are exploited in the name of caste.”¹⁷ Although the LTTE did not have a formal program to reorganize caste, the group implemented laws to punish caste-based offences. Scholars have also noted the LTTE's “silent campaign” against caste, which included penalties for caste assertion, bans on caste-based exclusion in public spaces, and positive discrimination in land allocation (Stokke, 2000; Thiranagama, 2011; Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 1994). The LTTE's Penal Code of 1994 established punishments for caste-based offences.¹⁸

¹⁷For an early articulation of this, see: *Towards a Socialist Tamil Eelam* (1979). <https://www.marxists.org/subject/tamil-eelam/1979/toward-socialist-tamil-eelam.htm>.

¹⁸Interview with an LTTE area leader in Jaffna, 2005. For more on the LTTE's court system, see <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/050227/news/20.html>.

Following the fall of Jaffna to Sri Lankan forces in 1995, the LTTE was forced to retreat to Kilinochchi district, which became its de facto capital. Although my visit to their stronghold in Kilinochchi to study the LTTE court system was thwarted by war-related challenges, the survey I conducted in 2005 among the undergraduates at the University of Jaffna revealed that the LTTE's 'Oruppu law,' or the Penal Code of No. 4 of 1994, emphasized punishment for caste crimes and provided the right to legal recourse for caste discrimination. Section 4 thus reads:

432) a) All are equal by birth; it is a crime and should be punished if they are dishonored by the name of the caste they were born into. Discriminating against someone based on caste or an act against his/her dignity, or by indicating his/her caste and hurting him/her are wrong according to caste abolition.

433) Penalty - If someone has committed the above-mentioned crimes, he/she can be either punished by imprisonment or a fine, for a term up to five years.

434) It is an offense to try to disrupt a love marriage between different castes. The penalty for this offense is imprisonment for up to seven years or a fine.¹⁹

Field testimony confirms that these laws were enforced. In response to an interviewer's question as to whether the struggle had produced lasting reforms to deep-rooted ills like casteism and dowry, Thamilini, head of the LTTE Women's Political Wing, stated: "Now the curse of caste. Within our movement there is no room for caste. We will take strict actions against caste discrimination. We equip our women, through women's groups in every village, with fresh thinking. We develop self-help programs."²⁰

The de facto rule of the LTTE, especially during 1990–1995 period, also had tangible effects on everyday caste practices and interactions in Jaffna society. Community members describe a climate of fear that discouraged any public expression of caste prejudice. A former village headman in an LTTE-administered area recalled even avoiding the word "caste" (*saathi* in Tamil), instead replacing it with words like "race" (*inam*), out of fear of reprisal.²¹ I also observed that caste names disappeared from public use under LTTE rule and were replaced with code terms linked to caste duties.²² Stories abound of immediate punishments for those who violated the LTTE's norms. For instance, there were rumors that individuals who mistreated members of depressed castes were forced to eat in those victims' homes or were detained in underground bunkers as punishment. Such tales, whether invented or true, had a

¹⁹Translation by the author.

²⁰Selected Writings-Chandiravarman Sinnathurai-Eelam Encounters

²¹Interview by author, 26 December 2004.

²²Maramerum akkal, or tree climbing people for the *Pallar* caste, melam adikum akkal or drumming people for the *Nadduvar* caste, Malai kaddum akkal or garland making people for the *Pandaram* caste, ennai ooththum akkal or oil making people for *Sandaar* caste, and meenpidy akkal or fishing people for *Karaiyar*, *Mukkuvar* and *Pattamkaddi* castes. In some cases, more than one coded word was used for the same caste depending on the context; for example, the chemical symbol Na (sodium) was used to denote *Nalavar*, while K (potassium) stood for *Koviar*.

chilling effect on public discourse around caste. Anthropologist Fuglerud described an LTTE-run detention camp in Jaffna, which he called a “concentration camp,” where harsh re-education allegedly took place (1999, p. 53). He argued that LTTE rule reshaped Vellalah identity, as many depressed-caste individuals quietly welcomed its curbs on caste discrimination, while educated, land-owning Vellalahs remained critical but silent out of fear. My 2005 survey similarly indicated that students were aware of LTTE regulations against caste discrimination.²³ This evidence proves that, despite societal silences around caste during this period, caste endured through a coded continuity that re-inscribed inequality even in the name of equality.

The LTTE closely monitored domains of society that embodied Vellalah hegemony, such as leadership, politics, land ownership, education, and religious rituals, and thus directly targeted key aspects of Vellalah identity and its power (Räsänen, 2015; Kuganathan, 2022). The LTTE’s organizational principles also challenged Vellalah hegemony on multiple fronts. First, it empowered depressed castes by actively involving them in the nationalist struggle, thereby dismantling the notion that leadership was an exclusive reservation for the Vellalah. Second, it elevated the concept of martyrdom to the highest status in society, transcending caste, and thus subtly diminishing the social prestige of the traditional Vellalah elite and projecting a reconfigured social hierarchy based on sacrifice rather than birth. Third, the LTTE promoted social programs aimed at breaking mono-caste hegemony, addressing caste injustice, such as the promotion of inter-caste marriages within LTTE cadres and in society. These combined efforts gave the temporary appearance of a repositioned caste order in LTTE-controlled areas.

Marginalized Vellalah Elite

One of the significant transitions in caste dynamics under the LTTE concerned Tamil political leadership. As the local Vellalah elite struggled to maintain its power in the face of militant domination, non-militant Tamil politics faced a leadership vacuum. Throughout the war years, Colombo-based Vellalah intellectuals and cultural nationalists continued to contribute to Tamil political thought through writings and seminars. They were influential in shaping Tamil political discourse and were even viewed with suspicion by Sinhalese observers, who worried about the resurgence of Tamil nationalism via these educated circles. Yet, groups like the LTTE were not receptive to their input; the rebels criticized the English-educated Vellalah for being out of touch with the reality of the struggle and for failing to support the vulnerable in the north. An older Vellalah generation of was criticized for practicing “responsive cooperation” with moderate Sinhalese leaders after independence, instead of fully backing Tamil separatism (Wilson, 2000; Jeyaraj, 2015). The LTTE went so far as to label some Vellalah politicians as *traitors* if they cooperated with Sinhalese-led governments against Tamil militant interests (Trawick, 2007; Tobias & Thiranagama,

²³Field interviews in Jaffna (2005–2007). See also LTTE’s Tamil Eelam Penal Code (1994) which criminalized caste discrimination (Oruppu Law No. 4 of 1994).

2011; Jeyaraj, 2015).²⁴ In such an atmosphere, many Vellalah felt politically orphaned, alienated by the LTTE and its supporters for their caste privilege and perceived disloyalty, and not fully embraced by the Sri Lankan state either.

Many prominent Vellalah politicians in Parliament were marginalized or silenced. Assassinations of Vellalah TULF politicians by the LTTE, with notable killings occurring between 1975 and 2006, left many Vellalahs feeling resentful.²⁵ The dominance of the LTTE suppressed emerging factions among the Vellalahs and exacerbated divisions based on their positions toward militancy. Some Vellalahs saw their roles diminished and their lives threatened, and so chose to emigrate during this period. Those who remained in Jaffna felt isolated and often avoided involvement in LTTE-led activities. In the process, they became spectators viewing the struggle from a distance rather than as key participants. Some consented to become figureheads under LTTE influence. Although a few continued to support the LTTE ideologically from afar, their enthusiasm eventually waned. While some Vellalahs agreed that violent struggle was necessary, many did not welcome the ascendancy of Karaiyar leadership within the nationalist movement and framed that frustration as alternative concerns. One of my informants, a 50-year-old Vellalah, described this issue as, fundamentally, a generational clash.²⁶ Another, a 61-year-old member of the same community, expressed disdain that the younger, less-educated LTTE leaders had displaced the old guard.²⁷ The sudden shift in power under the LTTE deeply shook Vellalah sensibilities.

Reengineering Residential Patterns and Property Ownership

Another striking aspect of the LTTE-led reengineering of caste was its effect on residential patterns and property ownership. Traditionally, Vellalah families occupied the center of the village or the heart of urban centers, whereas depressed castes lived in more peripheral or less developed areas. The war and LTTE policies disrupted this arrangement. A commonly cited story in Jaffna is that the LTTE confiscated houses abandoned by emigrated Vellalahs and allocated them to the families of LTTE martyrs. Whether by policy or circumstance, many Vellalah houses in Jaffna ended up occupied by non-Vellalah groups during the 1990s (Fuglerud, 2024). For many families, living in sturdy, centrally located houses, or “cemented houses,” was a first. Another informant, a 50-year-old Vellalah woman and a diaspora returnee, explained to me that she was dismayed to find her family home occupied by another family

²⁴Postwar usage of the term extends beyond caste boundaries, functioning as a label for Tamils perceived to be aligned with the Sinhala-dominated state.

²⁵In 1975, the ex-mayor of Jaffna, Alfred Duraiappah, was killed by the LTTE. Then in 1989, TULF Member of Parliament (MP) A. Amirthalingam was killed, followed by the killings of ex-TULF MP V. Yogeswaran in 1989, ex-TULF Mayor Sarojini Yogeswaran in 1998, ex-TULF Mayor Pon Sivapalan in 1998, ex-TULF leader Dr. Neelan Thiruchelvam in 1999, and TNA/TULF MP Raviraj in 2006. For more complete assassinations see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_assassinations_of_the_Sri_Lankan_Civil_War

²⁶Interview by author, 05 April 2006

²⁷Interview by author, 19 September 2006

who refused to leave, claiming an LTTE leader had given them the key.²⁸ Such cases were common after massive displacement events. The expulsion of Muslims from Jaffna in 1990 and the capture of Jaffna by the Sri Lankan Army in 1995 both led to waves of population movement. Properties were frequently entrusted to the LTTE when owners fled, especially since the Vellalah middle class was heavily tapped to finance the LTTE's war efforts (Fugleurd, 2024; Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 1994). In some instances, Vellalah families hired intermediate and depressed-caste individuals informally to look after their property in their absence, a practice cynically described by some Vellalah locals as "letting the thieves guard the bank." Vellalahs who remained in Jaffna largely disapproved of these new living arrangements and of the LTTE's enforced social mixing, as it conflicted with deeply internalized norms of social privilege and the status quo.

Professionalization of Caste-based Occupations

The LTTE's rule also accelerated changes that had begun modestly under earlier communist movements. One area was the professionalization of caste-based occupations. Traditionally, certain jobs in Jaffna were tied to specific intermediate castes who provided personal services within Vellalah homes, such as barbers and washermen, and were compensated in kind or with small wages, reinforcing a patron-client dependency. During the late 1960s, leftist movements and communist activists had started to push these service providers to operate from independent shops and be paid in cash, thereby breaking the personalized bondage of caste service (Senthilvel & Raveendran, 1988; Senthilvel, 2003). The LTTE solidified this trend. Barbers opened salons and washermen set up laundry businesses, serving clients of all castes as paying customers. By institutionalizing these roles through formal wage labor, the LTTE aimed to reduce caste-based stigmas, hierarchies and dependency upon Vellalah clients. Vellalahs grudgingly acknowledged that this approach lifted the dignity of those service castes, but they also noted economic disruptions. In addition, some older-generation service providers resisted the change. For example, a washerman explained to me that working in the traditional way ensured a steady income, since "people are less likely to take clothes to a laundry than to hand them to a familiar visiting *dhoby*." While many Tamils adapted to the changes enforced by the LTTE, those who valued the old social arrangements did not.

Importantly, the psychological disposition towards caste stratification was never fully addressed by either the LTTE or the prior Vellalah-dominated political parties or entities. Many existing inter-caste relationships had been paternalistic and caste-centered, and even after their formal end they left behind animosities and prejudices. Despite its efforts, the LTTE could only enforce behavioral changes, which could not immediately rewrite deeply internalized cultural attitudes. Thus, even as certain social practices evolved, like paying a barber instead of treating him as an obliged serf, the *habitus* of caste, based on superiority and inferiority, persisted in subtler forms (Bourdieu, 1977).

²⁸Interview by author, 18 September 2006

Promoting Mixed-Caste Marriages

One of the LTTE's most radical social interventions was its campaign to encourage mixed-caste marriages, thereby directly challenging an age-old pillar of caste segregation: endogamy. An informant, a 68-year-old Vellalah man, described a meeting in the late 1970s where senior LTTE members vowed to dismantle Vellalah hegemony in part by facilitating inter-caste unions.²⁹ Top LTTE leaders set the example: Velupillai Prabhakaran and S. P. Tamilchelvan, the leader of the group's political wing, both from non-Vellalah backgrounds, married women from Vellalah families. Some speculate these marriages were partly strategic, intended to symbolically erode the purity of caste lines and bind the communities together. Others suggest these marriages were intended to enhance the caste status of both the couple and their offspring. In areas under LTTE control, mixed-caste marriages became more common than before. Many of my informants, as well as young people who responded to my surveys, recounted cases of marriages across caste lines that took place under LTTE auspices. The "Tamil Eelam" courts established by the LTTE could officiate and legitimize such unions, bypassing the traditional authorities, often parents or clergy, who might oppose them. Vellalah parents, who would normally fiercely resist their children marrying someone of perceived "inferior caste," often remained silent out of fear of LTTE repercussions. Under LTTE oversight, a privileged caste spouse could no longer exploit or mistreat a non-privileged caste partner without consequence, which also provided marginalized caste individuals with a new form of protection.

However, these marriages were not always viewed as organic or positive. A 60-year-old Vellalah informant characterized the high-profile marriage of a Karaiyar LTTE leader to a Vellalah woman as "coercive," implying that such a union could only happen due to the power imbalance. In many instances, Vellalah families reacted to a son or daughter marrying outside their caste by disowning the couple or socially isolating themselves out of shame. It was common for mixed-caste couples to flee their home villages and resettle elsewhere, often in LTTE-controlled territories or even in nearby districts, to avoid continuous exclusion. Families whose adult children eloped with a marginalized caste partner often lived almost in hiding, as the contempt of the local community could be relentless. One Vellalah woman known to this author, who married a non-Vellalah man, did not see her parents for seven years after her elopement. When the family finally reconnected, her husband remained unwelcome and she effectively led two separate lives to conciliate her family's honor. Under the customary *Thesawalamai* law of the Tamils, as the sole heir she should have inherited her parents' property in full; however, the stigma attached to marrying a man from a less privileged caste rendered this legal right socially contested.

Before the militant era, any attempt at an inter-caste marriage involving a Vellalah (or even intermediate castes) could provoke violent reprisals from dominant castes. During the LTTE's de facto rule, that violence appears to have stopped. The fear of the LTTE's punishment reportedly served as a deterrent against attacking couples

²⁹Interview by author, 8 October 2005.

or their families. However, despite the LTTE's widespread efforts to eradicate caste discrimination, including through the abolition of the public use of caste titles, the enforcement of punitive measures, and the promotion of such marriages, caste consciousness persisted beneath the surface. One informant noted that even some LTTE cadres privately adhered to caste norms and were anxious about the societal reactions if they themselves entered a mixed marriage.³⁰ This was especially true among Vellalabs and intermediate castes, who often reverted to their old prejudices once LTTE pressure was gone. A young woman whose two sisters served in the LTTE shared that despite their militant background, when it came to marriage her sisters admitted being afraid to marry without knowing the groom's caste.³¹ This anecdote highlights how deeply entrenched caste considerations were, even among the LTTE cadres. While the LTTE's encouragement of mixed-caste marriages was a bold approach to blurring caste lines, the idea faced significant passive resistance and never fully took root in people's minds, illustrating the complexity of trying to compel cultural transformation through force.

Organizational Reforms within the LTTE

It is crucial to understand how the LTTE institutionalized caste equality within its own ranks as part of its militant nationalist project. My interviews with an LTTE leader, discussions with ex-combatants, and survey responses all confirm that the LTTE deliberately engineered practices towards caste equality.³² To enforce and sustain such an equality, the LTTE employed several notable practices: all cadres were made to abandon their birth names and adopt new noms de guerre; those who died in battle were all honored uniformly as "martyrs"; everyone wore identical uniforms, received the same food rations, and was buried in common cemeteries irrespective of caste. These methods created a strong sense of unity and uniformity known beyond just LTTE ranks (Schalk, 1997). When asked about the LTTE's stance on caste as a social injustice, for instance, the undergraduates I surveyed highlighted these practices, indicating their symbolic importance.

Testimonies by ex-combatants, including from Vellalabs who held high ranks in the LTTE before leaving the movement, provide further insight into internal dynamics. Despite the LTTE's formal egalitarian philosophy and the absence of overt caste discrimination within the organization, subtle inequalities persisted in different forms. The LTTE did have a hierarchy and division of labor, for example, intelligence and medical units had slightly different uniforms from the regular fighting cadres or the cultural wing. One ex-combatant noted that educational disparity sometimes influenced roles; Vellalabs and other traditionally privileged caste recruits—often better educated due to socio-economic advantages—tended to perform better in initial

³⁰Interview by author, 11 February 2004.

³¹Interview by author, 21 May 2005.

³²Interview by author, 22 April 2006 with an area leader, and on 15 November 2006 with two ex-combatants.

training tests and were assigned more technically demanding tasks. A Vellalah ex-combatant observed that even with equal treatment, friendships within the LTTE often formed along lines of caste or shared educational background, reflecting social habits formed before joining.³³ One Vellalah martyr's family explained to me that he privately identified other LTTE members by caste, illustrating how labels resurfaced even in the apparently caste-blind environment of the LTTE. While the LTTE's internal reforms largely eliminated overt caste markers and created a strong narrative of equality among castes, preexisting social divisions and personal habits ensured that caste consciousness could endure beneath the surface.

Deconstructing the Power and Status of Vellalahs

The intersection of caste and daily power dynamics also surfaced in more subtle forms during LTTE rule. When the LTTE positioned itself as the guardian of Tamil rights and regulator of social justice, it inherently challenged Vellalah privilege, which led to friction and sometimes quiet resistance. Intra-caste loyalties occasionally flared up during local political contests. For example, one of my informants, a 58-year-old school principal, recounted that during the 1998 local elections, conducted under government control after the LTTE's temporary ouster from Jaffna, campaign posters with the picture and the name of the candidate were defaced with caste labels that particularly targeted non-Vellalah candidates. My informant described this as an act of defamation and symbolic 'mud-casting'. Coming just a few years after the LTTE's 1990–1995 administration, this episode underscores that caste consciousness did not vanish. Rather, it intersected with ethnicity and nationalism and complicated the experience of belonging.

Importantly, the psychological disposition towards caste stratification was never fully addressed by either the LTTE or the prior Vellalah-dominated political parties.³⁴ Many of my Vellalah informants noted that the high honor given to LTTE martyrs and their families implicitly threatened the traditional status order. One interviewee remarked: "Although we don't attend LTTE meetings, we hear *athukal* are the ones in front and respected".³⁵ This response revealed a deep resentment. By referring to intermediate and depressed caste people as objects, the speaker highlighted his refusal to accept the new status quo.

During the war, many displaced depressed-caste families were housed in camps situated in village centers, forcing Vellalahs to encounter them in public spaces daily. This proximity led to frequent social frictions. One Vellalah man expressed his contempt through a local proverb: "Even if a dog barks at the moon, the moon is still the moon, and the dog is still a dog".³⁶ By this, he meant that no matter what the depressed castes

³³Interview by author, 5 August 2006.

³⁴Interview by author, 16 October 2005.

³⁵Interview by author, 15 July 2005. The use of *athukal* here is derogatory, as it generally refers to animals or people only in circumstances when the speaker seeks to be disrespectful or superior in some way, such as with regards to age or caste.

³⁶Interview by author, 17 June 2005.

did (the “barking dogs”), they would remain inferior and the Vellalabs (the “moon”) would remain superior. In other words, my Vellalah respondents felt that while the respect they once received had been eroded under LTTE rule, the social order had not truly changed at its core. Indeed, according to Wilson, Vellalabs tended to believe that the dominance of the Karaiyar under the LTTE was a temporary irregularity, sustainable only under war conditions. As one of my informants put it, “The changes in caste are due to fear of the LTTE, and are not permanent. The status of depressed castes without relatives abroad remains unchanged.”³⁷ This perspective suggests that any leveling of caste was seen as superficial. It was assumed that, once peace returned, the old hierarchy would reassert itself (Wilson, 2000, p. 112). Only those marginalized caste individuals who had the advantage of relatives sending remittances from abroad improved their lot.

Vellalah Perspectives on Caste and the LTTE

Education and wealth sometimes mediated how different Vellalabs responded to the LTTE. In some cases, being economically or educationally marginal within the Vellalah caste meant one might choose to align with the LTTE in order to gain power or protection. The boundaries of Vellalah identity with the LTTE proved flexible when survival or advantage was at stake (Barth, 1998). Poor or less-educated Vellalabs sometimes had close ties to the LTTE as a vehicle to gain influence they were denied within their own intra-stratified community. In contrast, middle-class, well-educated Vellalabs were more likely to resist the LTTE. For example, one poor Vellalah family that had three children join the LTTE moved to the rebel-held Vanni region and attained status as a “Martyrs’ family.”³⁸ The father, despite losing his children, gained local prestige by organizing public commemorations for dead heroes. Conversely, another, wealthy Vellalah family in Jaffna refused to relocate to LTTE territory even after one son died fighting for them.³⁹ These contrasting stories illustrate that Vellalah relations with the LTTE were influenced by lifestyle, education, and economic class as much as by caste.

One Vellalah school teacher bitterly recounted being detained by the LTTE, ostensibly for failing to repay a 3,000-rupee debt when in fact the punishment was for his refusal to teach in LTTE-run schools.⁴⁰ Another Vellalah man faced escalating monetary “donations” demanded by the LTTE as punishment for not offering any of his children to the movement.⁴¹ During the height of LTTE control, there was an expectation that each family would contribute at least one child as a combatant. Those without children of fighting age were often made to pay more money than those who “gave” a son or daughter.

³⁷Interview by author, 18 April 2004.

³⁸Interview by author, 11 March 2003.

³⁹Interview by author, 8 November 2006.

⁴⁰Interview by author, 21 November 2004.

⁴¹Interview by author, 26 August 2004.

When the LTTE engaged in peace talks with the government in 2002, many previously antagonistic Vellalabs suddenly became supportive, seeing an opportunity to regain influence in peacetime. Yet, those same individuals stiffened when, visiting LTTE-held areas in the Vanni, they were subject to security checks by teenage LTTE *kaavalthurai* (police) from non-Vellalah backgrounds. Such encounters offended their ingrained sense of social hierarchy. Historically, a Vellalah would not expect to be interrogated by someone from a “non-Vellalah” caste. Ultimately, some Vellalabs who shifted to support the LTTE did so without a deep change of heart regarding caste. Their loyalties often followed the changing fortunes of the LTTE, and sympathy emerged only after the eventual defeat of the LTTE, when they retroactively admired the sacrifices made by the militants.

Despite the LTTE’s attempt at social revolution, many Vellalabs sought to distance themselves from what they saw as the “egalitarian” social engineering of the LTTE. They harbored a desire to return to a more familiar social order. As one Vellalah interviewee summarized, national unity was important, yes, but caste status still mattered most in their personal spheres. Anderson’s (1983) concept of the nation as an “imagined community” is instructive here: the LTTE tried to foster a version of a singular Tamil national identity that would subsume internal divisions like caste (Chatterjee, 1996). However, caste, being a sensitive and deeply rooted cultural collective, required careful handling.

According to Hellmann-Rajanayagam, the LTTE specifically targeted the pillars of Vellalah power, education and property to dismantle their dominance (Hellmann-Rajanayagam, 1994). It has been claimed that the LTTE saw social liberation as a means to achieve national liberation (Fuglerud, 1999). According to this perspective, they saw the caste system as another oppressive structure to overthrow in the quest for an independent Tamil Eelam. Some older Vellalabs, including temple trustees and community leaders, privately conceded that the Tamil militant struggle had indeed united different strata of society under a common Tamil identity in the face of Sinhala oppression, at least temporarily transcending caste divisions (Kuganathan, 2022). Yet even these individuals, conditioned by a lifetime of cultural norms, struggled internally with the anti-caste measures the LTTE orchestrated.

Conclusion

When the war finally ended in May 2009 with the defeat of the LTTE, the social order in Jaffna underwent yet another dramatic shift. The vacuum left by the eradication of the LTTE was quickly filled by the reassertion of the old elites. Dominant Vellalah families and politicians, some of whom had spent years in Colombo or abroad during the fighting, stepped back into public life. In the Northern Provincial Council elections of 2013, the first major post-war Tamil democratic exercise, voters overwhelmingly chose candidates from traditional Vellalah backgrounds.⁴² This post-LTTE resurgence

⁴²See P. Thanges, “Will It Disappear, If You Stop Talking About It?”; A Question On Caste And Ethnicity In Jaffna - Colombo Telegraph, 21 June 2014.

of Vellalah leadership reflected the resilience of caste habitus, but it unfolded within a reconfigured political field. Rather than a simple return to pre-militancy hierarchies, the prominence of Vellalabs was recalibrated through the participation of intermediate and depressed castes, producing a hegemonic order that appeared altered in form but unequal in substance (Hashmi & Kuganathan, 2017; Kuganathan, 2022).

This is not to say that nothing changed in those tumultuous decades. The collective experience of militancy and war did leave an enduring impact on all Tamils, Vellalah and non-Vellalah alike. The social fabric had been stretched and tested in unprecedented ways. The fact that caste could even be discussed in the public sphere and in academic discourse owes much to the disruptions of the war. A younger generation of Tamils has grown up with more exposure to the idea of caste equality, even if practice lags behind. The steady flow of diaspora funding, channelled through village networks into community events, house constructions, and the erection or renovation of temples, has also shifted caste dynamics. The traditional elements of caste identity, such as the Vellalah-centred interdependencies, the rigid hierarchies of economic and ritual ranking, and the strict continuum of purity and pollution in public and ritual spaces, have effectively collapsed. This does not amount to the eradication of caste but rather to its persistence in an altered state that continues to shape social life in subtle and reconfigured ways.

As we have seen, various early attempts by high-caste Tamil elites to eliminate caste in Jaffna, from 1920s youth activism to 1970s temple-entry agitations and political pledges by TULF, were largely rhetorical and short-lived. They championed equality in principle but, led by privileged Vellalah, only made symbolic cracks in the caste order while leaving its foundations intact. A more profound challenge to Vellalah dominance emerged in the late 1970s with militant youth from oppressed castes, culminating in the LTTE's rise in the 1980s under a non-Vellalah leadership. The LTTE enacted bold anti-caste measures, including banning caste slurs and discrimination, redistributing lands and homes, professionalizing roles once bound by servitude, and openly encouraging inter-caste marriages. These strictly enforced policies disrupted age-old customs and opened new social space for marginalized groups. By the mid-1990s, Jaffna's public life was transformed; overt caste markers vanished, oppressed-caste youths held military and civic authority, and the once-dominant Vellalah saw their customary privileges curtailed by a rebel regime that valued sacrifice and loyalty over birth. In doing so, the LTTE briefly achieved what earlier Tamil nationalists could not, an enforced unity that loosened caste's grip on society. Tamil identity was recast around common struggle instead of inherited status, implying that a united Tamil nation required overturning the caste hierarchy.

Yet this revolution revealed the resilience of caste. The LTTE enforced a façade of casteless equality, but it could not wholly change private attitudes or ingrained habits. According to my interlocutors, many Vellalah families outwardly complied out of fear while quietly feeling superior and expecting the old order's return after the war. Within the LTTE, caste was never acknowledged openly, but subtle patterns persisted: better-educated cadres filled technical and administrative roles, and informal social bonds still

followed familiar caste lines. Common uniforms, shared rations, and equal honour in death fostered a myth of unity, yet ex-combatants recalled how some fighters hesitated at mixed-caste marriages or reverted to caste-conscious behaviour when outside strict supervision. When the civil war ended in 2009, suppressed attitudes quickly resurfaced. Traditional Vellalah elites regained their influence through elections, filling the void left by the LTTE. However, this occurred in a changed landscape. Years of conflict had weakened the open practice of caste norms and emboldened marginalised caste groups to assert themselves, even as economic disparities remained.

In sum, the LTTE era demonstrated both the potential for and limits of caste-blind nationalism. It showed that a determined movement can temporarily challenge entrenched hierarchies and enforce the practice of equality for a time, but deeply embedded social structures adapt rather than vanish. The Sri Lankan Tamil experience highlights a paradox: forging a unified “Tamil nation” required banishing caste from public speech, yet this quest often introduced new hierarchies or quietly preserved old ones. In the end, militant nationalism temporarily reshuffled social status and made public caste discrimination taboo, but it did not extinguish caste consciousness. Genuine equality demands more than battlefield victories or legal decrees; it needs long-term changes in cultural attitudes and material conditions, a challenge that has outlived the war and persists today.

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