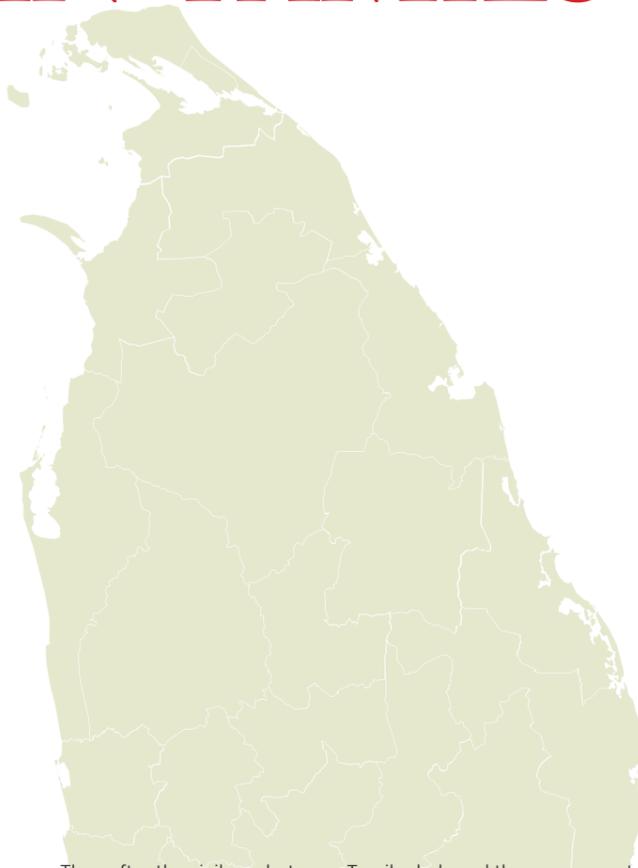


SRI LANKAN TAMILS



INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka, formerly Ceylon, has a population of 21 million (DFAT 2019). Tamils are the second largest ethnic group in Sri Lanka with 15.3% of the population. The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka can be dated back to the colonial period. Academic literature on this issue highlights that Sinhalese' grievances against Tamils mounted upon the perception that Tamils were favoured under British rule, particularly in the area of education and public employment (Amarasingam 2015; DeVotta 2005; Vimalarajah & Cheran 2010). On the other hand, lands in which Tamils were concentrated in the island faced economic negligence from British rulers since the economic interests of the British were largely placed on the plantation sector (Weiss 2012). The outcome, however, was the viewpoint that Tamils were preferred by the British and, therefore, benefitted disproportionately. This viewpoint was utilised to justify the actions of Sinhala politicians in rectifying given disparities in employment and education between Tamils and Sinhalese in the post-independence era (DeVotta 2005). Ethnic outbidding was used as a mechanism by Sinhalese political elites to acquire and retain the political power in the post-independent Sri Lanka.

In 1956, Prime Minister S.W.R.D Bandaranaike introduced the Official Language Act through the parliament of Ceylon, declaring Sinhala as the sole official language. The post-independent weak economy intensified the tendency for discriminatory politics (Nithyanadam 2010). Rulers employed ethno-based solutions as options to overcome the difficulties. As a result, Tamils were gradually deprived of their rights to access public services, and they ended up experiencing socioeconomic disadvantages as an ethnic minority. The constitution in 1972 guaranteed Buddhism a foremost place in the country and reaffirmed Sinhala as the official language of Sri Lanka (Amarasingam 2015). District quota system for university admission was introduced in 1974 which systematically reduced the percentage of Tamil students entering the universities (DeVotta 2005). Such measures intensified the unrest between Sinhala and Tamil communities. In 1976, the leading Tamil political party, Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), called for a separate state 'Tamil Eelam' for Tamils in its Vaddukoddai Resolution. Tamil youth, on the other hand, who lost their faith in state-politics and non-violent protests, formed number of Tamil militant groups to fight for the rights of Tamils (Nithyanadam 2010). The country experienced anti-Tamil riot in 1983, following the riots in 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, which was marked in history as the 'worst ever anti-Tamil violence'.

Thousands of Tamils consequently fled the island and thereby formed the Tamil diaspora that would fund the burgeoning Tamil separatist movement, while thousands of others fled to the Northern Province and joined the rebels fighting for separatism. (DeVotta 2005, p.154)

Thereafter the civil war between Tamil rebels and the government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) was intensified. Among the Tamil militant groups, Liberation of Tigers in Tamil Eelam (LTTE) claimed itself as the sole representative of Tamils and launched a war against the Sri Lankan government. After a certain number of attempts for peace-talks between GoSL and LTTE failed without making progress, the post-9/11 context turned to be the favour of GoSL (Faist 2007). President Mahinda Rajapaksa was determined to utilise this situation to harness international support for the fight against LTTE. The 30-years long civil war came to a brutal end in May of 2009. The question arises at this point whether the end of civil war marks the end of long-lasting ethnic outbidding and the ethnic conflict in the island or not. The shift back to 'nationalist-populist state centred economic policies' in post-war Sri Lanka was noticed (Athukorala and Jayasuriya 2013, Jayasuriya 2019). The multi-ethnic and multi-confessional coexistence in the island is further threatened by the majoritarian ideology which is Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist ideology (Devotta 2018).

Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora can be counted over one million (Institute of Policy Studies Sri Lanka 2013; Orjuela 2008; Vimalarajah et. al 2011). The size of the diaspora is more likely to be one-fourth of the total Sri Lankan Tamils. The largely conflict-induced nature of this diaspora consequently gave the community a self-identification and portrayal as 'victim diaspora'. The so-called 'victim diaspora' has been widely criticised as 'peace wrecker' for its long-distance nationalism and its role in funding LTTE (Fair 2007; Cohen 2008; International Crisis Group 2010; Vimalarajah & Cheran 2010; Vimalarajah et. al 2011). Nonetheless, Tamil diaspora had been effective in addressing unmet needs in the conflict zones of Sri Lanka (Cheran 2003). Cease-fire Agreement (CFA) between LTTE and GoSL in 2002 opened the gates for Tamils abroad to visit their ancestral lands, families and friends. It provided them with the opportunities to strengthen their ties with their counterparts in Sri Lanka and to engage in relief, reconstruction and development. Persistence of such initiatives wasn't guaranteed since the internal climate dramatically changed in the next few years. Tamil diaspora activism in the final months of civil war marked the history.

Tamil diaspora groups and organisations in Canada, Europe and Australia continue to support their homeland and people with post-war relief, recovery, rehabilitation and development besides their political activism. Some of the Tamil diaspora organisations move beyond their political differences to put a united front for common causes. Some of them celebrate and promote the Tamil language, which is one of the oldest classical languages in use, and the cultural heritage in their countries of residence.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF MIGRATION

The first international migration wave occurred right after the independence in 1948, mostly consisted of professionals and students mainly from the upper class and upper caste backgrounds (Van Hear et al. 2004). People with English proficiency migrated during this time (Orjuela 2008). The first wave cannot be labelled as 'forced' migration or 'victim' experience. The strength of literacy, English competency, affordability, and established attachments abroad might have been among the main reasons for Tamils to migrate at that time. The second migration wave occurred after the election in 1956. It consisted of those who were in search of higher education and employment opportunities. The civil war between Tamil militants and the government intensified after 1980s causing the next waves of Tamil migration, mostly in the form of asylum after the riot in 1983, increasingly from the lower class and rural backgrounds (Orjuela 2008; Van Hear et al. 2004).

According to the Department of Home Affairs (2016), the first Sri Lankan immigrants to Australia were recruited to work in the cane plantation in the late 19th century. Many Tamils and Burghers migrated to Australia after the introduction of the Sinhala Only Act in 1956. The changes in Australia's immigration policies in the late 1960s and early 1970s paved a path for further Tamil migration to Australia. While there were many who fled the war and reached Australia as humanitarian entrants, after the ethnic genocide in 1983 and 2009, there was also a significant number of Tamils migrating under skilled and family migration programs. It is also important to note the Australian government relentless campaign against asylum seekers from Sri Lanka in the post-war context despite the reporting on human rights violations and ongoing ethnic outbidding in Sri Lanka (Fernandes 2019).

DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIOECONOMIC PROFILE

The 2016 Australian census data for Sri Lankan Tamils do not accurately capture Tamils with Sri Lankan or Ceylon origin. There are different arguments in support and against nationality-based identification and ethnicity-based identification. Australian Tamil Congress (2016) highlights some of the practical issues with census questions on country of birth, language spoken at home and ancestry. Please note some people prefer to identify themselves as Tamils with Tamil ancestry or Tamils from Ceylon rather than using 'Sri Lankan' identity due to the conflict history. Muslims of Sri Lankan origin who speak Tamil and Indian Tamils from Sri Lanka pose further challenges with 'Tamil' and 'Sri Lankan Tamil' identifications. The census data used for this community profile is thus not 100% representative of Tamils from Sri Lanka or Ceylon. The following snippets from the community information summary by the Department of Home Affairs (2016) rather depict the nuances of Sri Lankan born population in Australia.

Gender structure

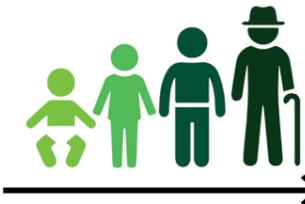


Female
52,573
47.9%



Male
57,280
52.1%

Structure by age



Language



49.9% Sinhalese
24.9% Tamil
23.1% English
1.1% Southern Asian Languages, nfd
0.6% Other languages

Ancestry response



58.8% Sri Lankan
12.1% Sinhalese
8% Tamil nfd
4.7% Sri Lankan Tamil
16.4% Other Ancestry

DEGREE AND TYPE OF ORGANIZATION

According to Ancestry Multi Response (ANCP) in Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016), there were **7127** Sri Lankan Tamils, **7128** Indian Tamils and **7131** Tamil not further defined (nfd).

The following table shows the number of people who responded to the question on language spoken at home other than English with Tamil:

People who speak Tamil at home				
	Male	Female	Total	Families
Australia	38,975	34,184	73,159	28,138
NSW	15,746	13,937	29,683	11,417
VIC	13,797	11,865	25,662	9,870
WA	3,607	3,285	6,892	2,651
QLD	2,951	2,564	5,515	2,121
SA	1,452	1,250	2,702	1,039
ACT	975	906	1,881	723
NT	285	233	518	199
TAS	158	148	306	118

Religion

40.8% Buddhism	4.2% Anglican
20.7% Catholic	3.8% No religion, so described
18.8% Hinduism	9.9% Other religion

Education Level



41.6% of the Sri Lanka born population reported having completed a Bachelor degree or above,
8.3% Year 12 as their highest level of educational attainment,
7.7% Certificate III or IV
14.8% Advanced Diploma or Diploma.

Legal Status



60.3% of Sri Lanka born are Australian citizens

Professional Activities



31.4% Professionals
14.6% Clerical and Administrative Workers
12.4% Labourer
10.6% Managers
9.5% Technicians and Trades Workers

Data Source: ABS (2016 Census) https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/7201_036

⁴ National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreter (NAATI), 2005
⁵ Australian Migration Statistics (Department of Home Affairs) — released November 2019.

Tamil community organisations comprise of Tamils of Sri Lanka, Indian, Malaysian and Singaporean origins. There is a plethora of Tamil community organisations, informal groups and networks in Australia. Some of them are formed on the basis of country of origin and others are formed on the basis of Tamil ethnic identity. Since the diasporic identity as a group identity changes through time and space, the profile, purpose, vision, and functions of these organisations evolve from their birth as well. The trajectory of Victorian Tamil Association can be highlighted for such evolution. The organisation changed its name to reflect the social ethos of respective periods – from Ceylon Tamil Association in 1978 to Eelam Tamil Association in 2007, and now by the name of Victorian Tamil Association, it serves Tamils of all origins in Victoria. Therefore, the characteristics of Tamil diaspora organisations are somewhat fluid.

Tamil community organisations mainly focus on the communities in Australia, counterparts in their country origin or both. Australian-focused organisations function to promote community connections, language and cultural heritage. These organisations also operate as supporting social agencies for socially and economically disadvantaged members of Tamil diaspora in Australia. For example, some of these organisations provide refugee students and their families with financial support.

The second type of organisations supports their homeland and the local Tamil counterparts in post-war development, humanitarian assistance and political resolution. Sri Lankan Tamil ethnic identity plays an important role for these organisations to drive their operations in post-war Sri Lanka. Homeland-focused organisations largely implement education-oriented programs besides economic enablement, information technology, health and life skill development.

Some of the homeland-focused organisations are actively involved in activism against human rights violations that took place in the last phase of civil war, campaigning for transnational justice for war crimes and shedding light on the ongoing struggle for self-determination. The third type of organisations, which operational focus is on Tamil community in Australia as well as the local counterparts in Sri Lanka, delivers actions in both Australia and Sri Lanka. Sometimes these organisations play as a focal point to maintain the ties between the diaspora and homeland as well as the Tamil diaspora across countries. Village associations and alumni associations are great examples for the third category.

In addition to the main categories discussed above, there are faith-based, professional and senior citizen organisations.

Tamil diaspora-led development and humanitarian actions can be divided into structured and unstructured contributions. Structured contributions have the following characteristics:

1. Prioritising the local needs
2. Contextual appropriateness
3. Intimate connections
4. Domain knowledge
5. Flexibility in decision making

Unstructured contributions have the following characteristics:

1. Trust issues
2. Duplication of activities
3. Lack of transparency and accountability
4. Ineffective in terms of impact and sustainability

CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND PRIORITIES

Six Tamil community organisational leaders were consulted to identify challenges, opportunities and priorities for Tamil diaspora communities and organisations in Australia.

CHALLENGES

'Tamil' identification in the census was noted as problematic. Leaders suggested a united 'Tamil Australian' identity for organisations working with Tamil communities in Australia. The lack of networking between Tamil diaspora organisations produces duplication of activities, misunderstanding in the community and ineffective use of resources. Male dominance in the leadership positions was also spotted during the consultation.

Funding is one of the key challenges for community organisations. Covid-19 poses additional challenges as it has a huge impact on the individual capacity of community members and thereby organisational capacity for supporting development projects in Sri Lanka as well as disadvantaged members of the Tamil diaspora in Australia, for example, Tamil refugees who struggle with employment exploitation and lack of financial support in this difficult time. Leaders acknowledged the willingness to help while indicating the need for additional resources from the government and capacity development for community volunteers. One of the members of the reference group suggested that government funding calls should be both activity-focused and vision-focused.

Connection with councils, state governments and the federal government was identified as an opportunity. However, these connections are limited to immigration, education and multicultural affairs. There is no systematic approach to community consultation.

OPPORTUNITIES AND PRIORITIES

'Tamil Australian' profiling is a key priority. Leaders suggested that organisations can overcome their nationality-based labels, such as Sri Lankan Tamils, for common causes. Tamil diaspora in Australia is a vibrant community. Celebrating and promoting Tamil as one of the oldest languages and the Tamil cultural heritage are very important to the Tamil diaspora.

Leaders emphasised the need for a dedicated government unit to govern diaspora affairs and promote meaningful collaborations. This could also lead to better management of diaspora-led development and humanitarian projects. DFAT can focus on areas of need based on its country evaluation of Sri Lanka and engage with Tamil diaspora community organisations that are willing to collaborate. Other opportunities and priorities are listed below:

- Improved networking between Tamil community organisations in Australia
- Sharing lessons between various diaspora communities in Australia
- Mental health awareness:
 - o The information translated in Tamil and delivered in a culturally appropriate way
 - o Training for Tamil community volunteers
- Better connection with councils, state governments and federal government
- Capacity development for Tamil community organisations
- Additional resources for Tamil community organisations that are engaged with socially and economically disadvantaged members of the community (especially during Covid-19).

List of Community Organisations

The following organisations mainly consist of Sri Lankan Tamils. Nonetheless, Tamil community leaders advised that most of these organisations work with and for Tamil Australians regardless of their country of origin and they are moving towards a united Tamil front in Australia. The list is not inclusive of senior citizen associations, village associations and school alumni associations due to their abundance.

Australian Tamil Congress

Australian Medical Aid Foundation

Australian Society of Graduate Tamils

Australian Tamil Literary and Arts Society

Bharathi Academy

Casey Tamil Manram

Ceylon Students Education Fund

Jaffna University Graduates Association-Victoria Inc.

Tamils Rehabilitation Organisation (Australia) Ltd.

Tamil Coordinating Committee

Tamil Engineering Foundation

Tamil Educational Cultural and Charitable Association

Tamil Women's Inter-cultural Organisations Whittlesea Inc. Tamil

Community Empowerment Council Australia

Tamil Refugee Council

Victorian Tamil Association

Victorian Tamil Cultural Association