

## Selected Writings Subramaniam Sivanayagam

### The Role of Tamil Expatriates "Grandpa, where were you when the Tamil people were fighting for freedom in Sri Lanka?"

Hot Spring Editorial, March 1999  
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A child of the new millennium asks: "Grandpa, where were you when the Tamil people were fighting for freedom in Sri Lanka?". "Well, I was minding my own business, darling, and making pots of money, here in England". "What was grandma doing then grandpa? "Why, she was doing the same thing, minding her own business, honey, and helping me to spend that money". That was an imagined futuristic dialogue. How about the present? There are an estimated half a million Eelam Tamils, scattered across the five continents, and spread over at least 30 countries of the world. living in the most unlikely places from Poland to Papua New Guinea to Bangkok to Botswana; a good majority of them minding their own business.

#### **The third generation**

They constitute two generations, sometimes three, as in Britain, with the third, which could be considered a write-off. That generation may not even qualify to be a part of the Tamil Diaspora. In their own time, they might be groping with the problem of self-identity, and may even harbour a grievance with their second-generation Tamil parents. Let us present here, for our readers, a montage of three aspects of expatriate life - all three real life happenings. It should serve as a mirror to look at ourselves as we should be seeing us.

**Scene One:** Three Tamils press the bell at the home of a Tamil somewhere in London. A little boy comes to the door. "Is your father home?", asks the visitors in Tamil. The boy blinks for a while, and shouts from the spot: "Dad, someone at the door speaking your language". Speaking YOUR language! Between two generations, the mother tongue itself had changed!

**Scene Two:** Two gentlemen in a car stop at the traffic lights somewhere on a London road. Another car comes and stops alongside A white-skinned man in the second car, appears to be in high spirits, lowers his window and shouts at the occupants of the first car: "P-AA-K-I-I !". Occupant of the first car, shouts back: NO, NO, SRI LANKA"! The answer from the other car : ooo- HEY. SRI LANKAN PAKI"! ("Paki" is a racist term used against all Asians in Britain)

**Scene Three:** This is from Canada. A marriage proposal is being discussed. Bride's party offers a certain sum of Canadian dollars A house in Jaffna is also thrown in. But bridegroom's party has an important point to be clarified. It must be a house that has not been shelled by the Sri Lankan army!

#### **The Western rat race**

Each of the above has a moral to offer. It is also time for introspection, by drawing the right conclusions from the above. Where have the expatriates positioned themselves in the context of the life and death struggle in which our kith and kin back home are involved? Do they think they have a role to play at all?

Many of the early professionals who settled down in the U.K. have joined the rat race, managed to beat the English natives in their own game and also managed in the process to acquire heart diseases and hypertension quicker than the white natives. All of that is commendable, but as to what percentage of those Tamil achievers have the Tamil interests at heart, or wish to preserve the Tamil identity for their future generations is a matter for speculation.

The Tamil expatriates are in miniature what the Jewish Diaspora was, before they went and created their own homeland in disputed terrain. The Tamils are more fortunate. Their homeland is already there. It is only a question of preserving it from external colonisation and subjugation, and securing it for the future generations, so that they at least do not have to become runaways a asylum seekers in foreign countries. Some part of the tenacity that makes them survive successfully in alien surroundings is all what is required to preserve what after all is their own soil that bred them and sustained them and moulded them before they abandoned it physically. A sheer sense of gratitude alone dictates that.

#### **Jewish Diaspora**

One does not have to live in one's own homeland to see the necessity to build up a nation state. The Jews are a classic example of a people, the majority of whom have always lived OUTSIDE the land they call their own. They continue to do so even today. There are more Jews living in the United States of America than in Israel, which probably accounts for the entrenched pro-Israel thrust of U.S. foreign policy at all times. It is to preserve one's own identity as a people and to hold one's head high in the outside world that one needs one's own nation state.

#### **The LTTE Factor**

There have been 55 million Tamils living in [Tamil Nadu](#) in India, but they could not create for themselves a defined ethnic recognition - either within the country or outside - despite living in a state that had its very name as Tamil Nadu. In New Delhi and in the North, they continued to be designated as "Madrasis" in the public eye, in a disparaging way, while in the world

outside they were simply Indians - like all other Indians. It is the emergence of the [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam](#), and the [cult figure of Pirabakaran](#), and their relentless fight [against State terrorism](#) that has today brought [Tamils all over the world](#) - including the non-Brahmin thinking sections of Tamils in Tamil Nadu - a new sense of pride and dignity that was never there before.

### **The backbone**

The very fact that the Sri Lankan government recognises the Tamil expatriate community in the West as a potent supportive force to the liberation struggle back home, and the very fact that Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar has been going round the world capitals pleading and cajoling world leaders to ban the LTTE in those countries, should awaken the eyes of the Tamil communities in the West to their own strength: this despite the sad fact that hardly 20 percent of Tamil expats are involved in some way or other in backing the struggle for Tamil rights.

The rest of course are busy minding their own business. But yet, the Tamil Diaspora is one of three main targets of the Sri Lankan war strategy, the other two being of course the LTTE, and the third - one section of the Tamils in the country, not the ones living in Jaffna and the East, not the growing number of Tamils living in Colombo and its suburbs, but those Tamils living in physical and emotional attachment to the [Tigers in the Vanni mainland](#), and who, the government is convinced are the ones who are going to provide the backbone to the emerging Tamil Eelam.

This is the reason why they, and they particularly, are being systematically deprived of food, medicine and nutrition for the young, thereby hoping to starve them and weaken them out of existence. Talking of his own people, the American Negro Martin Luther King once said:

"Like all people, they (the African American people) have differing personalities, diverse financial interests, and varied aspirations. There are Negroes who will never fight for freedom. There are Negroes who will seek profit for themselves alone from the struggle. There even are some Negroes who will co-operate with the oppressors. These facts should distress no one. Every minority, and every people has its share of opportunists, profiteers, freeloaders and escapists .... No one can pretend that because a people may be oppressed, every individual member is virtuous and worthy. The real issue is whether in the great mass the dominant characteristics are decency, honour and courage".

Tamil expatriates can recognise themselves among the categories that Martin Luther King mentioned, or not mentioned. But ultimately, if Tamil expatriates feel they indeed have a role to play in the building of a nation state in their homeland, they, like the Jews of old, have to write that role for themselves, and believe like them that they are a special people with passion and unanimity.