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Reconstituting ‘Pure Tamil Space’ after Sovereign Erasure

The May 2009 defeat of the LTTE was a watershed moment in modern Sri Lankan history. In the final year of intense fighting, the insurgency was gradually pushed back into an ever-smaller swath of the northern Vanni. With hundreds of thousands of civilians trapped between the battle lines, the humanitarian situation became more acute by the day. There was frantic speculation about an LTTE comeback, a final trick or a last-minute international intervention. And then the LTTE sovereign experiment disintegrated. Scores of battered survivors poured out of the last rebel stronghold in Mullivaikal, a sliver of northeastern coastline squashed between the lagoon, the sea and the advancing government forces (see Map 2.1). The remaining LTTE leaders were killed, including, in the final hours, the movement’s illustrious commander Prabhakaran. The news of his death, supported by graphic pictures, conveyed the definitive defeat of the LTTE and resounded throughout the global expanse of the Sri Lankan community. This changed everything.

Earlier phases of the war had been defined by violent turning points that left scars of irreversible societal rupture: Black July in 1983, the Eviction in 1990 and the Exodus in 1995. ‘The End’ in 2009 (Seoighe 2017; S. Thiranagama 2013) surpassed these junctures. In terms of historical significance, it arguably even surpassed Sri Lanka’s independence, which had after all been a relatively smooth, non-violent recalibration of the sovereign arrangement under the British crown. The 2009 military victory marked the singular sovereign assertion of the Sri Lankan government. It elevated President Rajapaksa to the level of a mythical and unquestionable father of the nation, at least initially. And it marked the perishing of LTTE sovereignty, voiding its moral and legal referents – acts committed in its name had now become baseless.

The pictures of Prabhakaran's corpse did not just display a fallen military commander. They showed the slain embodiment of the LTTE struggle, revered like a divine figure and the ultimate referent of the movement's sovereign power. His death had profound consequences for the Tamil nationalist movement at large. The collective trauma of the wholesale killing of civilians in the run-up to the LTTE defeat, widely considered genocide in Tamil circles, left deep imprints in Tamil political consciousness. But deprived of recourse to an insurgent military force, the Tamil polity was to abide by the government's rules of the game, a sovereign arrangement that was ultimately underpinned by the very violence of the End.

The LTTE defeat, the death of Prabhakaran and the military seizure of what had been *de facto* Tamil Eelam in the making comprised a process of sovereign erasure. The movement's performative repertoires and institutional apparatus were undone. By reflecting on this moment of defeat and the political landscape that emerged in its wake, we embark on an exploration of postwar transition as a process of continued and retrospective struggle. The present chapter focuses on the authority and cultural hierarchies associated with caste and clan strictures. We will later turn to the apparatus of the provincial civil service (Chapter 5) and the electoral politics of Tamil nationalist parties (Chapter 6). Each of these arenas was conjugated with (and implicated by) the LTTE sovereign experiment but never fully subjugated to it. And after the LTTE defeat, they were shaped by the renewed opening of public space and a concurrent sense of disorientation. The dominant narrative about postwar Tamil politics is preoccupied with the interaction between the Sri Lankan government, the Tamil leadership and international actors. It foregrounds the standoff at the United Nations Human Rights Council over the violent acts in the last phase of the war; the militarised and authoritarian conduct of the Rajapaksa government after its victory; Tamil demands for solutions; skirmishes over land, shrines and claims to sacred space; and revived attempts at a negotiated outcome and constitutional reform after the Sirisena government came to power in 2015 (Goodhand 2010; Harris 2018, 2019; Höglund and Orjuela 2012, 2013; International Crisis Group 2017; Rasaratnam and Malagodi 2012; Seoighe 2016a, 2016b; Stokke and Uyangoda 2011; Wickramasinghe 2009). While these are indeed the main contours of the political process, such a reading may easily skim over the broad and diverse arena that Tamil politics once more came to be after the LTTE defeat.

In this chapter, I will therefore take a perspective that deliberately avoids placing the Tamil leadership, its positions and its strategies at the heart of the equation. Rather than centring my discussion on elections, manifestos,

coalitions and elite bargaining, I will start my discussion of postwar Tamil politics by looking at the everyday struggles and contentions that unfold in the aftermath of sovereign erasure. This directs us to the troubled reconstitution of a postwar Tamil community and the resulting scuffles over designations of pure Tamil space and Tamil cultural stratification. In order to grapple with these questions of gendered subjectivity, social boundaries, hierarchies and antagonism within the Tamil community, I will draw on Sharika Thiranagama's (2011) work on the rearticulation of Tamil subjectivity and Spencer's (2003) essay on the politics of purification.

Rather than treating mundane social divisions and contested purities as cultural phenomena detached from politics, this chapter puts them upfront. The 2009 defeat did not only mark the termination of the LTTE sovereign experiment. The collective audience of Tamil nationalist performance – the Tamil community from which any Tamil political claim ultimately derives its meaning and legitimacy – was itself in complete disarray. The defeat of the movement, the unspeakable losses, the military seizure of Tamil land and the dashed prospects for nationalist aspirations left the Tamil community in a disoriented state. This gave renewed buoyancy to several long-standing identity struggles within the Tamil community. The fragments of the Tamil nation, to borrow Chatterjee's (1993) phrase, comprise of social delineations and hierarchies of caste, clan, class, generation, religion, region and gender. Each of these categories had been used for mobilisation and agitation, yielding a diverse spectrum of political repertoires, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. These were then silenced, co-opted or suppressed when the LTTE imposed its dominance, but now that the movement was defeated, these contentions came back out in the open, and this severely complicated the plight of Tamil nationalist politics. On the one hand, the arena of Tamil politics was severely constrained by the end of the war (due to a triumphant government setting the terms), but on the other hand, it radically opened up to become a pluriform arena for political mobilisation around *intra*-Tamil issues.

This chapter takes a specific Tamil community in eastern Sri Lanka as the point of departure to explore the simultaneous curtailment of Tamil nationalist politics and the invocation of renewed intra-Tamil antagonism. As such, it sets the stage for the remainder of this book. For reasons discussed in some detail ahead, the chapter is mainly focused on Sampur, rather than Mullivaikal, as the empirical site for studying the consequences and aftermath of sovereign erasure. The chapter starts out with a discussion of why Mullivaikal – the location of the war's final battles and the focal point of a highly staked discursive struggle – is such a difficult place to write about. It then turns our gaze to Sampur (which we encountered in Chapter 3), the place where the End

arguably began. The government military campaign started with the capture and erasure of Sampur in 2006. In hindsight, the nature and ramifications of this conquest were a harbinger of the turn of events to come. And in terms of postwar dynamics – Sampur was finally resettled in 2015 – it offers a crucible of what was at stake in the postwar Tamil community.

Writing the End

The Norwegian-brokered peace process had been moribund for some time but eventually collapsed in August 2006, when the government started full-scale military operations. Its first territorial gain was Sampur, one of the LTTE's two eastern hubs. From there on, the movement lost ground rapidly, and a year later, in July 2007, the government declared to have liberated the east. This then cleared the way for a full-scale offensive on the LTTE's main territory, the northern Vanni. A string of defeats and tactical retreats followed, each time condensing the LTTE and a large population under its control onto a smaller piece of land. This had been the case in earlier phases of the war and was generally seen as LTTE strategy: pull back to force the enemy to spread thinly, use the outcry about humanitarian crisis to deter attacks, dissolve cadres into the human and natural terrain, to then strike back with full vigour, force the enemy on the run, rapidly retake territory and negotiate from a position of strength. That is what had preceded the 2000s peace process when the LTTE had pushed President Kumaratunga on the back foot, and it is what pundits were reckoning with this time around. But with the fall of the main LTTE town Kilinochchi in January 2009, more heavily embattled LTTE retreats and the Rajapaksa government defying international pressure, the window for a retreat-and-strike-back strategy was closing. Government firepower had massively grown, and the military started beating the LTTE at its own game with effective adaptation of guerrilla tactics (De Silva-Ranasinghe 2010; Hariharan 2010; Hashim 2013). Weakened by the legacies of the Karuna split and the complete disappearance of a front in the east, the LTTE was pushed back further. It continued to fight a near-symmetrical war – apparently it was unable or unwilling to abandon its own sovereign self-image and revert to guerrilla tactics. What ensued was a sequence of beleagerments and the delineation of so-called no fire zones followed by more bombardments, finally culminating in the LTTE defeat at Mullivaikal in May 2009.

The government victory profoundly changed Sri Lanka's political landscape, and it endowed President Rajapaksa with unprecedented political capital. Upon seizing his victory, he held a triumphant address to parliament, where he famously declared:

We have removed the word minorities from our vocabulary.... No longer are the[re] Tamils, Muslims, Burghers, Malays and any other minorities. There are only two peoples in this country. One is the peoples who love this country. The other comprises the small groups that have no love for the land of their birth. (*Daily News*, 15 May 2009, adopted from Wickramasinghe [2009: 1046])

This perspective of what we may call a 'peace without ethnicities' denied the validity of minority grievances and the deep-seated perturbation about the final months of violence. What followed was a process of consolidating the government military victory in terms of electoral results (landslide wins in the presidential and parliamentary elections), the constitution (the eighteenth amendment further centralised power), the political economy (with highly militarised forms of development in the north and east, and an expansion of the military's role in government conduct more generally) and international alignment (attempts to solidify ties with China to offset pressures from either Western countries or India) (Goodhand 2010, 2012; Goodhand, Korf and Spencer 2011; Harris 2018, 2019; Jazeel and Ruwanpura 2009; Klem 2012; Rajamanoharan and Guruparan 2013; Sarvanathan 2016; Satkunanathan 2016; Seoighe 2016a, 2016b; Spencer 2016; S. Thiraganama 2013; Uyangoda 2011; Wickramasinghe 2014).

Hanging over this transition like the sword of Damocles was the interpretation of the military operations that culminated into Mullivaikal. In the government's view, the intense violence at the end of the war was foundational to a free sovereign order liberated from terrorism. But calls for accountability over that violence in the United Nations Human Rights Council and accusations of war crimes from Tamil diaspora networks did not let up despite deep-set government defiance. Civilians stood at the core of the disagreement, though calling them civilians already comprises a normative step into this embattled discursive terrain. Depending on the sources consulted, the fatalities at the end of the war were the result of people being held against their will by the LTTE (the position of then defence secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Government of Sri Lanka [2009]), unfortunate collateral damage of a counter-insurgency campaign (the position among government proponents, depending on the occasion, Jayatileka [2013]), victims of gross violations of International Humanitarian Law (civil society activists like Harrison [2012]; Human Rights Watch [2009]; Weiss [2011]) or deliberate targets of government-sanctioned genocide (Tamil nationalists, including diaspora platforms like Tamils Against Genocide, now renamed Together Against Genocide [2015]).

In reference to such situational uncertainty on the battlefield, the Prussian military strategist Clausewitz coined the phrase *Nebel des Krieges* or 'fog of war' (Clausewitz 1976 [1834]: ch. 3), a term famously adopted in Robert

McNamara's account of his involvement in the US bombing of Japan (Blight and Lang 2005; Morris 2003). But the metaphor of fog offers an overly convenient moral no man's land. It obfuscates the fact that the precipitation that obscures our view does not just come out of thin air; it is a human creation. This is more about smoke machines than mist. Irrespective of the conflicted nature of the various accounts, there is overwhelming evidence for three crucial observations: (a) many thousands of Tamil people who were not active LTTE cadres (including young children, wounded and elderly people) were killed in the final months of the war; (b) the LTTE tactic of enforced mixture of civilian and military positions created a condition that was prone to humanitarian crisis; and (c) many of those killed were victims of government bombardments of locations that either had a known civilian presence or that the government had itself declared safe. It is also clear that accurate conclusions about responsibility and culpability would benefit from more detailed research, as has been called for internationally, and that government affiliates have actively frustrated such efforts, disposed of evidence and intimidated witnesses.

The forensic scrutiny needed to adjudicate between the conflicting accounts of the respective fog machines is different from the analytical perspective needed to understand the historical significance of Mullivaikal as a moment of sovereign erasure. Among the Tamil community, Mullivaikal has become a central reference point for all that has happened, a codified term for the unspeakable, the zero point of post-defeat Tamil life. In Tamil Nadu, an official Mullivaikal memorial was erected in 2013, and Mullivaikal is central to the collective memory of the global Tamil community. It is also an actual place, a Tamil village in a rural backwater of Sri Lanka. Driving across the causeway from the district capital Mullaitivu, the contours of the palm trees along the lagoon shoreline resemble those of so many villages along the east coast.

Together with my friend and academic companion Shahul Hasbullah, I passed Mullivaikal in 2013, and again in 2018. It lies adjacent to the newly asphalted Kilinochchi–Mullaitivu main road. I probably was not the only one who gazed intently at the passing homesteads to try and discern something meaningful, a trace of the recent past, from the landscape. It felt counterintuitive to just pass, to not pay tribute, to not acknowledge – and to not stop and see for oneself. Staring at monumental human tragedy hiding in plain sight. Then again, just the thought of parking the car to walk about and do a spot interview with one of the inhabitants was unbearable. What to even ask in a place that commands solemn silence? And how to talk oneself out of the subsequent interception by security personnel that would undoubtedly follow?

I was immersed in these thoughts as Hasbullah drove on, leaving Mullivaikal behind us. Then he started talking, first in small fragments, as he so often did, extracting memories to formulate his thoughts and then gradually gathering speed. He had been here, he said, very soon after it all happened. Somebody he knew. Hasbullah's networks were boundless. Someone had brought him here well before it had all been cleaned up, navigating the ruined landscape, the checkpoints and all the security perimeters. The image that had stuck in his mind, he said, was what he saw when he passed the place we just passed. An enormous stockpile of vehicles: buses, lorries, trailers, cars, tractors, motorcycles, bullock carts, bicycles, wheelbarrows. Anything that could carry a load. Most of it ramshackle to begin with, then heavily worn by its last journey and finally shoved together by bulldozers in a grand graveyard of steel and rubber. The material terminus of a besieged society. Testimony to the story of a people on the run, settling in an ever more densely populated territory as they were forced to retract. And retract. And retract. Until there was no territory left, and those who survived were captured and housed in highly securitised camps, leaving behind the pile of vehicles that had amassed them here. The end point of an ever-more compressed space, collapsing into ever-greater density, Mullivaikal was akin to a black hole: a point of great density around which so many other matters revolve, matters kept in orbit by the pull of gravity, a pull from which no escape seems possible, a force so intense that it keeps us from seeing clearly what lies at its core.

Sovereign erasure, 'pure Tamil' space, 'Tamil-free' space

If Mullivaikal was the End, Sampur – in hindsight – was the Beginning of the End. The long string of military attacks that eventually crushed the LTTE's sovereign experiment in Mullivaikal in 2009 had started three years earlier in Sampur. When the Norwegian-brokered ceasefire unravelled, the first major offensives took place in Sampur. And the modus operandi was remarkably similar, even if the scale was smaller: the LTTE sought to hold its ground among the civilian population in Sampur; the government nonetheless subjected it to an overpowering barrage of rockets and aerial bombardment, literally razing the entire Sampur peninsula to the ground; international alarms sounded about the humanitarian consequences but did not turn the tide; the driving out of the LTTE promulgated an exodus of distraught civilians to positions further south, where a similar sequence of events was repeated; the displaced people were eventually housed in carefully monitored government camps; and the government firmly inscribed its victory in the landscape by declaring Sampur a depopulated military zone.

People refer to Sampur as a pure Tamil area. In its most straightforward usage, this phrase refers to the fact that it is an enclave exclusively inhabited by Tamils within the ethnic checkerboard geography of the east coast. The notion of pure Tamil space has a more encompassing set of meanings, however. One of the analytical threads of this chapter is to unravel and interrogate what these are, but in short, this notion of purity is also a signifier of caste positions, of Hindu space and of a broader cultural repertoire of purification aimed at preventing unwanted mixture – not just across the ethnic divide but also within the Tamil community.

Sampur lent itself to become a model village for the LTTE in the 1990s partly because of its reputation as a pure Tamil place but also because of its geographical location (see Map 2.1). As mentioned in Chapter 3, it is located right across from the Trincomalee port and thus offers an ideal vantage point for monitoring navy movements. In addition, it is part of the tenuous string of Tamil settlements along the coast that connect the predominantly Tamil areas to the north (Vanni) and south (Batticaloa). Sampur is not a well-known place in Sri Lanka, but it played a role in the heated disputation over the Norwegian-facilitated ceasefire in the 2000s, when the alleged placement of LTTE artillery in Sampur sparked a fierce argument.

It was also here that the ceasefire eventually collapsed. In 2006, the LTTE closed an irrigation sluice gate in neighbouring Mavil Aru, thus blocking the basic means of survival to riparian farmers, many of whom were Sinhalese. In doing so, it replicated the long-established government strategy of placing LTTE-controlled areas under embargo, but it also offered the government military a credible justification to break itself free from the ceasefire and openly start military operations. The Mavil Aru sluice gate scuffle ignited a rapid chain of events. The government captured the sluice structure. In response, the LTTE conquered the town Muttur. The government then recaptured it and initiated an all-out offensive with heavy bombing on Sampur. Using multi-barrel rocket launchers, the military razed the Sampur Peninsula to the ground. According to the exhibition of the naval base museum in Trincomalee, which gives a detailed if coloured overview, the military used 'approx. 30.000' rockets to seize the area. Given that the Sampur Peninsula is about 6 kilometres across, it is unsurprising that the people who saw the area afterwards described it as a desolate landscape of rubble – barely enough remained of the ruins to even see where the town had been.

What had been a 'pure Tamil space' in effect became a 'Tamil-free space' after 2006. With the whole population forced into displacement, the government declared the entire area around Sampur a high-security zone and established a large military base to secure the mouth of the Koddidiyar Bay and safe passage to and from the Trincomalee harbour. The people of Sampur, whom I periodically

interviewed over these years, were barred from returning. They were forced to stay in displacement camps in Batticaloa (see also Amirthalingam and Lakshman 2009, 2014). Some stayed with relatives; others took refuge in Tamil Nadu. What followed was a protracted legal-political struggle over Sampur. In 2008, while the war in the north was still raging, Sampur residents teamed up with Colombo lawyers to file a case with the Supreme Court opposing the high-security zone. This caused the government to reduce the size of the zone and to reconceptualise it as a special economic zone (Fonseka and Raheem 2009, 2010; Klem 2014).

What had been a key site of LTTE sovereign experimentation thus became a site of sovereign erasure by the government. Big fences were put up, and like my research participants, I could but stare through the barbed wire at the bulldozed flatlands, beyond which it was said lay military complexes and demarcations for a newly planned coal power plant and heavy industry zone. In 2009, the residents, who had been staying in Batticaloa, were transferred to new camps in the vicinity of the Sampur zone (near Kiliveddy and Thopur). At this point, the group split into four. One set of people was able to return to their lands because the special economic zone had shrunk. A small second group took up the government relocation offer and moved to the neighbouring village of Ralkuli. Most, however, rejected this proposition out of hand. A third group thus remained stuck in the camps, insistently waiting for their return. A fourth group, mostly comprised of the better-endowed families, decided that the camp was no place for them to live – for one thing, the quality of the water was poor – so they took their fate in their own hands and brokered a deal with their acquaintances in the newly released parts of the zone in Kaddaiparichchan. They set up their own camp to live among their own kind, have better facilities and be closer to their own homes and lands, even if most of those places remained off-limits. Among this latter group were the main leaders and activists from Sampur, who continued their campaign against the special zone to regain access to their lands.

There is more to this disaggregation of the Sampur community than meets the eye. When I interviewed people about their life in displacement, the relocation offer and their enduring struggle for return, they hinted at the notion of purity. For example, I asked one of the inhabitants of the Kiliveddy camp in 2011 about his refusal to relocate to Ralkuli. After all, he had lived in camps for six years, and the prospect of the Rajapaksa government releasing his land seemed remote at best. He said:

We will not go to Ralkuli. Not even animals can live there. There is no water.... Sampur people won't go to the jungle. They are cultivators. [In Sampur] there are so many [irrigation] tanks. All have so many acres [of paddy land]. We want to go to our own place.

At one level, this quotation makes agricultural sense: the owner of fertile and well-irrigated land will not trade his property for a barren place with poor water access. But the quotation also invokes a common South Asian trope about separating the pure from the impure. Clean water is not just an everyday life necessity; it is also a signifier of caste purity. The jungle is not just a forested area unsuitable for cultivation; it is also a signifier for wilderness, an uncivilised place of danger where animals roam. And a cultivator is not just a term for people engaged in planting rice; it is also a signifier for a respected 'high' caste community, in this case the Vellala. They are, it is implied, the kind of people who have a long-term commitment to work good land with clean water, and whose orderly lives are defined in opposition to the laws of the jungle. Rejecting relocation in Ralkuli, a 'low' caste Tamil area, was as much about upholding a cultural position as it was about preserving an agrarian livelihood. The insistent demand to return to Sampur comprised not only an economic attachment to property, homesteads and rice fields but also a cultural attachment to caste-based purities.

The perseverance to litigate against a powerful government and spend a decade in poorly serviced camps waiting for an uncertain outcome also derived from a larger political struggle. Leading Tamil politicians, such as R. Sampanthan – the leader of the Tamil Nationalist Alliance (TNA), who is from Trincomalee – put their weight behind the issue. Colombo-based lawyers and activists like the Centre for Policy Alternatives reached out to lend support. Then chief minister of Tamil Nadu J. Jayalalithaa (AIADMK)¹ – under pressure from her constituency for having silently stood by in the final months of the war – publicly declared her opposition. And United Nations human rights commissioner Navi Pillai visited the camps to underline her concern. The tussle over Sampur properties was not an ordinary land dispute. It attracted high-level interest because of its significance in the Tamil cultural and political landscape.

Bulldozing Sampur and declaring it off-limits did not just shrug aside the local community. This attack on prized Tamil space assailed a much larger community. The Sampur Vellala elite considers itself on par with elites in Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Jaffna. Because both the town and the famous Hindu temple have a long and respected history, the creation of a special zone mobilised resistance from people who had never before been to Sampur and might never bother to visit but nonetheless pitted themselves against the government. The sustained displacement of Sampur mattered to the international human rights community as evidence for government misconduct and human rights violations after the war. And it mattered to the international Tamil nationalist community as encroachment on a strategic territory in a wider ethnic geography: an 'ancient' Tamil enclave in a multi-ethnic district and part of a sequence of strongholds that connects the Tamil regions in the north and the east.

The persistence of the displaced Sampur community paid off. Fearing a pro-government court ruling irrespective of legal merit, the lawyers of the Sampur community opted for a tactic of trying to delay rather than win (see also Fonseka and Raheem 2009, 2010). They managed to stall the case for several years and eventually outlasted the Rajapaksa government, which was defeated in successive presidential and parliamentary elections in 2015. The Sampur community, which had spent a decade in temporary shelters, thus managed to withstand the formidable powers of the Rajapaksa government and claim their right to return.

Reconstituting Tamil purity

The triumph of the Sampur returnees was a muted one, for their victory was suffused with loss. Reconstituting pure Tamil space after the erasure by government bulldozers demanded more than rehabilitating physical structures. The cultural character of everyday Tamil life had been affected.

Photograph 4.1 Returning to Sampur



Source: Photograph by author.

Note: Temporary shelter in Sampur, a settlement erased by bombardments and the imposition of a military zone. In 2016, return was in full swing (after 10 years of protest and litigation). The bulldozing had been so thorough that it was hard to identify and demarcate plots. Temporary huts emerged and were soon converted into houses. The major Hindu temple was reconstructed, wells were rebuilt and the first paddy fields started growing.

I was in Sampur in 2016 when the bustle of return was still in full swing. Plots were being demarcated. Temporary sheds and half-finished houses sprawled (Photograph 4.1). The first paddy fields were growing while others were still lying fallow. And navy personnel were idling in their sentry points, overlooking the land they had been forced to yield. One of the people I visited was the principal of a newly rebuilt school. We had finished the interview about rehabilitation issues when he sat back in his office chair to ponder for a minute and said, 'We fear that our culture will break.... There is a lack of guidance and leadership.... We can no longer really identify as Tamil.' I asked him what he meant. 'Tamils have this moustache. The women have a *pottu* [a coloured dot adorning the forehead], and a *thali* [a sacred thread] when they get married. Some Tamil gents used to have these earrings and a ponytail. We had our strength, our heroes, our warriors.' All that was disappearing. 'Now, we can only identify by our language'. When I asked him what was causing these changes, he said, 'There is no obedience. Not following our culture. Not loving each other. Some people now send their parents to an elderly home. We had a structure of extended families. Now we are singular.' There was something ironic about the anxious feeling of becoming singular due to the crumbling of a collective Tamil character. Thirty years of separatist war had been fought in defence of a Tamil way of life in a Tamil homeland. Ten years of legal petitioning while suffering in displacement camps had centred on a desire to return to the pure Tamil space of Sampur. But now that the war was finished and they had returned to their homes, the Tamil way of life appeared to be slipping through their fingers, not because an outside assailant was taking it from them but because it was eroding from within.

My interpretation of these postwar anxieties is mediated by the work of two authors: Sharika Thiranagama and Jonathan Spencer. Thiranagama's (2011) discussion of how Tamil (and Muslim) subjectivities were rearticulated through the experience of war is very much in sync with the multilayered identity struggles I encountered in post-return Sampur. Her ethnographic work illustrates how 'war grounds life even as it takes it away – producing new people, new possibilities of voice, forms of heroism' (S. Thiranagama 2011: 12). The Tamil militancy, she posits, was caught up with intra-Tamil struggles over generational hierarchies, suffocating kinship trappings and the inequalities of caste and class. The impetus among Tamil youngsters to transform these conservative structures was 'part of the struggle for this generation to produce a new sense of Tamilness' (S. Thiranagama 2011: 184). However, partly because the LTTE disavowed much of its emancipatory agenda, many of the oppressive social structures from which youngsters had sought to escape remained intact throughout the war years. At the same time, the war unsettled the possibilities of social identification, affecting the very idea of Tamilness and its constituent elements. War does not

only happen to people; it makes them who they are. This chapter illustrates that the wartime processes that Thiranaagama describes – the rearticulation of the many aspects that comprise the self and the multilayered struggles over social difference and hierarchy – did not stop with the end of the war.

Closely related to these contested social delineations is the idea of purity vis-a-vis the question of mixture, for which I turn to Spencer (2003). The 'work of purification', he posits, comprises the 'cultural work that goes into maintaining the fictive separation of nature and society' (2–3). Such attempts at purification pivot on the management of movement and fixity. Purity requires spatial fixture and boundaries. And conversely, Spencer observes, movement and mixture are understood as a source of impurity and moral disorder. Excessive mobility produces morally loose people. The work of purification – regulating movement, instilling fixity – is necessary to 'maintain the illusion that "the nation is the same people living in the same place"' (3). However, purity and coherent nationhood are unattainable. The moral panic about the inability to sustain the idea of a nation as 'the same people living in the same place' is intrinsic to the fiction of the nation-state (Spencer 2003). These observations – both the preoccupation with purity and its mismatch with the fractures and rough edges that characterise the nation – resonate well with postwar tensions and anxieties among the Tamil community.

Both authors offer ideas that shed light on the irony of postwar Sampur: the notion of pure Tamil space, which had inspired the arduous journey of the Sampur community through war and displacement, disintegrated upon return. The desire to reconstitute Tamil cultural purities opened up social divisions and contested hierarchies, which then defied the supposedly harmonious quality of that puritan order. These divisions concern both caste (an identity typically apportioned to villages as a whole) and *kudi* (intra-caste clan delineations that regulate leadership, status and ritual hierarchies within villages). Put simply, caste mainly played a major role before return, in the tussle over displacement and resettlement; *kudi* mainly cropped up after return, in the contestation over leadership and Hindu religiosity.

Caste was an issue in regard to relocation because settling people in a different place interferes with the micro-geographies of caste. Even if there are often some families from other groups, most villages have a clear caste signature: Sampur is a Vellala (cultivator) village; adjacent Kunithivu is Thaddar (goldsmith); the neighbouring cluster to the south (Chennaiyur, Kaddaiparichchan, Kadatkaraiachenai) is Kurukulak Karaiyar (teachers who are historically linked to the fishermen caste); Pallikudiyirippu, a bit further afield, is Thimilar (warriors who have a history of owning land and are therefore associated with cultivation²); Ralkuli, to the west, is mainly home to Paraiyars (ceremonial drummers), Nalavars (toddy tappers) and Dobi (washermen),

groups that are understood as *panchamar* castes;³ and the villages to the east (including Nallur, Paddalipuram, Veeramanagar) are inhabited by Adivasis (Sri Lanka's indigenous population, often referred to as Veddahs). People's caste associations may no longer match their actual livelihoods. For example, many Vellala cultivators from Sampur, particularly the economically less fortunate ones, have turned to fishery. This affects their social status, but it does not make them Karaiyar (members of the fishermen caste).

Hierarchy between castes is not always straightforward. While some groups and villages are firmly understood as low caste (Ralkuli's Paraiyars, Nalavars and Dobis) or high caste (Sampur's Vellalas), many other hierarchies are unclear or contested, and this is further complicated by intra-caste *kudi* hierarchies. For example, the Kurukulak Karaiyars and the Thimilars consider themselves on par with the Vellalas, but Vellalas eschew arranged marriage with these castes (though a love marriage would be condoned). Conversely, Thimilars from a prestigious *kudi* may in fact look down on a Vellala who is either from a low *kudi* or a poor fisherman's family. The Thaddars may concede having a slightly lower place in the cultural hierarchy than the Vellalas but still consider themselves a high caste.

When the government offered the people displaced by Sampur's special zone a relocation site in Ralkuli, it effectively proposed to mix up caste-based settlement patterns. The diverse responses to this were also understood in terms of caste. The group that was able to return home early on when part of the zone was released comprised either Veddahs (from Nallur and its environs) or Kurukulak Karaiyar (from Chennaiyur and its environs). The group that accepted the offer of relocating in 'low'-caste Ralkuli were said to be 'low' caste themselves. The people who refused (with reference the above-mentioned tropes of pure water versus impure jungle) by and large belonged to 'high'-caste groups.⁴

Most of Sampur's Vellala community refused to stay in the government-serviced camp and moved to their self-managed shelters in Kaddaiparichchan (which is Kurukulak Karaiyar, not Vellala, but considered a respectable caste). I met one of the leaders of this self-managed camp in January 2016; I will call her Suriyamoorthy. She was from a respected Vellala family with a significant plot of paddy land near Sampur, and the family was getting ready to return. Sampur people 'love their home', Suriyamoorthy reiterated. They 'will not go anywhere else. Even if they are offered a place in paradise!' She smiled. 'Sampur is a whole Tamil area. We are not ready to mix with other people. Our unity and our culture will collapse.' Another leader from the camp, whom I will call Gnanasundaram, was a man in his thirties, also from a well-established family: a highly privileged *kudi* of the Vellala caste with rights at the Koneshwaram

temple in Trincomalee. People born on Sampur's soil will always want to come back, he underlined, even if they have moved to the city, or to foreign countries. Now that return is possible, they will also want to come back and 'start paddy cultivation at home. They will get a good yield. Sampur is a place of good health and wealth. The Kali temple is another reason people want to return. In Sampur nobody is born with disabilities. That is because our goddess is very powerful.' He told me in detail how the deity had survived the bombing. All of Sampur lay in ruins, but the goddess's statue at the heart of the temple had held out without a single crack.

With the return to Sampur, a clash over caste delineation (mixing different communities through relocation) was averted, but the contestation over *kudi* flared up instead. *Kudis* are matriclans within a caste group which are associated with leadership roles, Hindu temple management and hierarchies of ritual honours (McGilvray 2008). Some castes, like the Kurukulak Karaiyar (or the 'casteless' Veddahs), do not have *kudis*; others do (notably, the Vellala and the Thimilar). *Kudi* arrangements are broadly constitutive of social positions, but they become particularly acute and visible in the fierce and often contentious hierarchies of religious ritual. The composition of Hindu temple management boards is constituted on the basis of minute but tightly policed *kudi* differences. And they are highly present in the public displays of temple festivals, which are infused with the politics of honour, and smaller ritual occasions such as weddings or funerals (Klem and Maunaguru 2018; Maunaguru and Spencer 2013; McGilvray 2008; Whitaker 1997). While the hierarchies and the patterns of inclusion and exclusion tend to be quite persistent, they are almost invariably subject to contestation because different *kudis* jostle, often endlessly, for their precise positions and privileges (see Chapter 3 for the standoff with the LTTE over the *kudi* dynamics of the temple festival). With the return to Sampur, Hindu temple boards jumped into action to generate funds for the reconstruction of their shrines and to organise the parades and ceremonies of seasonal temple festivals. As a result, *kudi* hierarchies moved back to the centre of attention.

In fact, Suriyamoorthy told me, the management of Sampur as a Hindu space was more important than ever after the war. People were deeply concerned about the activities of proselytising churches, which were very active in the aftermath of both the tsunami and the war. Now that the LTTE was no longer there to police this, there had been an upsurge of conversions. At the time, only few people in Sampur had been affected, but in the surrounding villages, Evangelical churches were rapidly gaining ground, first among followers of the mainstream churches (Catholic, Methodist) but then among Hindus as well (Spencer et al. 2015: 139–154).

Many new Christians were from destitute backgrounds – those outside Sampur were often Veddahs, and inside Sampur they often belonged to the poor strata of the Vellala fishermen. I interviewed some recent converts, and they associated conversion with better social practices and having their own pride of place. But for Suriyamoorthy, such conversions were a symptom of moral corruption and a threat to the social order. ‘From birth they are all Hindu. Only because some benefits [do] they become Christian.’ But ‘mixing Hindus and Christians is seen as a problem’, she said. ‘People are not happy with that. They [Christians] have different manners.’ Gnanasundaram concurred: ‘Because of their poverty, they convert. They [Christian priests] are giving them money, that’s why... In Sampur, we are trying to block this.’ Rules were being put in place to prohibit Christians from being buried in Sampur. When they died, they would have to be evicted from the area. Such strong leadership was required to preserve the Hindu constituency, according to Gnanasundaram. ‘Sampur is a very rigid place,’ he said, ‘more than other places. [Unlike in Sampur] their leaders are not fit.’

People like Suriyamoorthy and Gnanasundaram – who were both in their thirties, occupied a position of social leadership and had a respectable family background – shared a disdain for mixture. This involved not only upholding ethnic boundaries and claiming ethnic space but also the preservation of supposed purities between castes and *kudis* and associated delineations of religion, class, livelihood and gender. For the leaders of Sampur’s prestigious Vellala *kudis*, reconstituting pure Tamil space also meant assuring the Hindu character of the area (at the expense of Tamil Christians) and reinstating temple hierarchies (celebrating and honouring some *kudis* while subverting or excluding others). And it comprised efforts to re-inscribe conservative norms of gendered conduct, particularly female chastity, as well as kinship structures and family life. This repertoire of identity politics, which predates ethno-nationalism, is mainly preoccupied with the preservation of cultural purities *within* the Tamil community rather than with the purity of the ethnic community as a whole.

Much in line with Thiranagama (2011), the effort of defining and delineating an ethnic community evokes struggles over caste, *kudi* and other forms of social differentiation, which then fracture that very ethnic community. And much in line with Spencer (2003), the preoccupation with purity, which centres on the need to mitigate mixture, is ultimately confronted with the problems of defining a national community in puritan terms. The accounts of Suriyamoorthy and Gnanasundaram show that the contradictions inherent to the spatial and cultural demarcations of the nation and its constituents came out in stark relief in the postwar context, when the landscape had been erased

and the problematic foundations of puritan order were laid bare. Reconstituting Sampur as a pure Tamil space comprised the remaking of a cultural landscape that not only embodied ethnic territory but also religious space, caste positions and social practices.

An emancipatory Tamil nationalism

As the earlier discussion on reconstituting pure Tamil space in post-return Sampur shows, ethnic nationalism and cultural conservatism may converge. After all, Tamil nationalism is rooted in the idea of a Tamil genealogy, a Tamil homeland and the Tamil people as a demarcated community with a distinguished language and culture – cherishing cultural purities, traditional gender roles, spatial orders and caste hierarchies fits right in. The Tamil nationalist leadership has historically advocated broadly preservative positions on cultural issues, though reference to caste was generally shunned and religion de-emphasised. The gentlemen politicians of the Tamil nationalist movement espouse what we may call a conservative Tamil nationalism. Even if the leaders of the main post-independence Tamil party (Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi, or ITAK) democratised Tamil nationalism and departed from the elitist approach of their predecessors (All Ceylon Tamil Congress, or ACTC), they sought to represent the masses with an all-Tamil agenda of collective grievances and aspirations, *not* a transformative agenda of mobilising the masses to address inequalities and injustices within the Tamil community (Sivarajah 2007; A. J. Wilson 2000).

As other scholars (De Alwis 2002; Hellmann-Rajayanakam 1994b; Sitralega Maunaguru 1995; S. Thiranagama 2011) have pointed out, however, there is a second strand of Tamil nationalism which marries ethnic liberation with a more encompassing programme of social justice. Many of the Tamil youth movements that sprouted up in the 1970s and 1980s had a leftist signature and revived the outlook of late colonial movements like the Jaffna Youth Congress in the 1920s and 1930s (Russel 1978). Nested within their separatist agenda was an emancipatory project aimed at abolishing caste and *kudi* hierarchies, overcoming class inequalities, redefining gender roles and age hierarchies, and embracing a secular worldview. For many of the youngsters, joining the militancy not only represented a nationalist duty but also an escape from the carefully surveilled confines of Tamil society (S. Thiranagama 2011: 183–227).

There has always been tension between the conservative and the emancipatory strand of Tamil nationalism, but persistent attempts at closing the ethnic ranks for a common cause have often kept these differences latent,

simmering in the background, deferred to a later date. Significantly, the LTTE had an ambivalent position on these tensions. While notionally a secular leftist liberation movement that opposed the caste system and purported to redress class and gender inequality, it also cherished Tamil cultural traditions and eschewed outright confrontation over intra-Tamil issues of religion, caste and *kudi* (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1994b). After the defeat of the LTTE in Mullivaikal, the lingering tension between conservative and emancipatory strands of Tamil nationalism came back out in the open.

Even in a rural backwater and a known 'high'-caste Hindu fortress like Sampur, this tension was evident. The person who first alerted me to this was a man I will call Nadarajah, whom I had come to know quite well over the years. He was a strong-minded activist. His achievements in education and business had enabled him to marry into a 'high'-caste family, and he had become a known political activist in and around Sampur. In the early days of the Tamil uprising, he joined the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (EROS), the Tamil nationalist youth movement that was most concerned with Marxist principles and social transformation. When the LTTE crushed the other Tamil militias in the mid-1980s, EROS cadres pre-emptively joined the LTTE. Nadarajah had also done things for the LTTE in the 1990s and 2000s. Fearing government reprisal, he was forced to spend some of the war years overseas. After the war, he became one of the organisers of the main Tamil party, ITAK, and its broader electoral vehicle, the TNA. He was one of the local assistants to party leader Sampanthan, whose home constituency is in Trincomalee. Nadarajah knew the ins and outs of Sampur society, the minute differences and their histories, the cultural boundaries within his electorate, the scuffles and sensitivities, and he was a man with a savvy political brain. He would generously educate me on the latest political rumours, problems and trickery, typically saving the more contentious issues for nighttime when we would bathe at the beach and chat away while watching the stars, floating in the lukewarm water of the Koddidiyar Bay.

We usually talked about the larger political issues, ITAK/TNA positions and the struggle for return in Sampur, so it was only after several years that I came to know about his unease with internal Tamil divisions and the conservative strand of Tamil nationalism. That particular day, I had asked him to show me some of the Hindu temples around Sampur. As we walked past the impressive, newly refurbished pillars and statues, he told me that his family's *kudi* was linked with this temple and that he himself had just contributed 70,000 rupees (some 450 US dollars, a significant amount of

money) to the renovations. My interview habitus caused me to nod at him in admiration, but then he said: 'all wasted'. I couldn't resist a smile. He also laughed. 'My wife forced me to. I am not religious. I am a Marxist.' I was astonished by his forthright blasphemy in the middle of the temple.

From that day on, Nadarajah would regularly tell me about his frustrations with cultural conservatism and tussles over social positions. Two villages adjacent to Sampur, Chenaiyur and Kaddaiparichchan, were locked in battle over the naming and delineation of their respective territory, he complained. And in Hindu shrines in and around Sampur, there were regular conflicts over temple management and the associated *kudi* hierarchies. These fiercely contested politics of honour were a completely anachronistic waste of time, Nadarajah felt. 'The Sampur people have returned, but there are so many internal crises', he said and imitated the people involved: 'I am big! No, I am big! And so on. I am with this *kudi*! No, you are with that *kudi*!' These contentions had become more pronounced after the demise of LTTE's social policing, and Nadarajah found them particularly disturbing now that the Tamil plight was in such jeopardy. After the war, he felt, 'unity has collapsed. All people are leaders now. They don't follow anyone else.'

I had similar discussions with a handful of people in the area, but they were exceptional in Sampur in terms of their openly secular outlook and explicit rejection of caste and *kudi* traditions. The many other people I met in and around Sampur over the years did not adopt such an open ideological stance on intra-Tamil issues. At the same time, however, they were typically ambivalent and even apologetic about the thing that supposedly served as the backbone to whole cultural hierarchy: caste. Rigid caste hierarchies were seen to be a figment of the past. Even respondents from the most prestigious families, who were adamant about keeping out other ethnicities and religions, were embarrassed by caste issues. They readily conceded that strict caste segregation – for example, in marriage choices – was no longer defensible. The youth were more modern. The experiences of war had shifted, rearticulated or diffused social boundaries. People of all kinds had fought side by side, and they had suffered side by side in displacement camps. This mingling could not be undone. Cultural positions were adrift and attempts to reinstate a puritan order would face pushback. But what would come in its place? What would hold them together as a cultural community? This was the conundrum that the school principal referred to when he exasperated that the people had 'become singular'. They were puzzled about redefining a Tamil way of life now that traditions were eroding and postwar Tamil village society had to be built afresh (Photograph 4.2).

Photograph 4.2 Beachfront in Trincomalee



Source: Photograph by author.

Note: Families enjoy themselves in the evening on Trincomalee's beachfront in April 2010, a rare sight in the preceding war years.

Before their return to Sampur, tensions between conservative and emancipatory Tamil nationalism largely remained under the lid. It was not so difficult to keep the ranks closed when rallying against the dispossession of the government's special zone in Sampur, but subsequent attempts to reconstitute pure Tamil space exposed the underlying fissures. Scuffles over the hierarchies and performative honours of the main Kali temple came back out in the open, and this conjured up challenges for the coherence of Tamil nationalist politics. People like Nadarajah were dismayed by the fact that Tamil nationalist leaders seemed to be more worried about pleasing the 'high'-caste stratum and preserving temple prestige than about the everyday plight of the people. Nadarajah was active in the so-called Tamil People's Council (Tamil Makkal Peravai) and the Tamil Rise (Eluga Tamil) movement, popular initiatives with an uncompromising Tamil nationalist agenda that turned up the heat on the mainstream Tamil political parties and their leadership. Crafting an agenda to unite all Tamils in pursuit of shared aspiration was going to be more difficult for Sampanthan and his affiliates after the war.

Conclusion

Unlike many other civil wars, Sri Lanka's ethno-separatist war had a clear and definitive end point. It stopped on 18 May 2009, in Mullivaikal. After the comprehensive defeat of the LTTE, many things were fundamentally and irreversibly different. The insurgent sovereign experiment perished. The bounds of politics and legality were redefined, permanently redrawing the space for Tamil nationalist politics. The final military operations constituted a foundational sovereign violence that newly premised the fundamentals of the state, the law and democratic politics, much like the violence that had occasioned postcolonial states across South Asia six decades prior (Beverley 2020a; Chatterjee 1993; Mukherjee 2010; Purushotham 2021). The massacre that preceded the End weighed heavily on the Tamil political consciousness. Mullivaikal signified a watershed moment, but it was also clear that many things did not end at the End.

Postwar transition comprises a process of fundamental change that continues to grapple with what preceded it. In resonance with the term 'postcolonial', the prefix 'post' does not signify a definitive after but rather the continued struggle over the retrospective interpretation and the enduring legacies of what has happened (Klem 2018). Mullivaikal marks the beginning of Sri Lanka's postwar transition, but this transition is riven with contentions over Mullivaikal itself and over the framing of the ethno-political conflict more broadly. Mullivaikal harbours unresolved grievances and an enduring refusal to embrace the present predicament as the end stage of the Tamil nationalist struggle. As my discussion of postwar Sampur shows, Tamil grievances over militarisation, land appropriation, skewed development opportunities and the burden of what many Tamils consider genocidal violence are heavily present. In Sampur's case, these processes were initially manifest in a crudely physical form. The town's erasure was followed by the imposition of a special zone from which Tamils were barred entry.

Alongside these shared ethnic grievances, there was a whole raft of concerns with internal Tamil matters. The desire to preserve the cohesion of the Tamil collective and its cultural tradition was troubled by the resurfacing of intra-Tamil divisions. With the demise of the singular nationalism of the LTTE, the Tamil political arena opened up. In Sampur, this became manifest in attempts to reinstitute caste- and *kudi*-based hierarchies and claims to religious space. These attempts were driven by repertoires of purity aimed at mitigating unwanted mixture, both across the ethnic divide and within the Tamil community. Closely resonating with Spencer's (2003) work on nationalism and purification, the 'high' caste and 'high' *kudi* stratum was strongly preoccupied

with reconstituting Sampur as a pure Tamil space, a notion that straddles the safeguarding of ethnic Tamil turf and the projection of a more particular cultural landscape with delineations of Hindu space and caste privileges.

Sampur can be seen as a crucible of Tamil society in Sri Lanka's northeast. Its recent history of conquest, displacement, sovereign erasure and troubled return resembles the plight of postwar Tamil society at large. It is indicative of the combined sense of freedom, subjugation, disorientation and loss in the void of the LTTE's de facto state, and the simultaneous opening up of a new political landscape with space for a plural kind of Tamil politics. It also underlines that these politics are not primarily about party politics but about a set of existential issues concerning land and social order, and about the anxiety of 'becoming singular' and losing the essence of what it means to be Tamil. Similar contentions over Tamil purity and delineations of caste, *kudi* and Hindu space have cropped up in other parts of Sri Lanka, probably most viciously in Jaffna, where a stiff tradition of caste discrimination has re-emerged after the war (Geetha 2020; Ratnajeevan Hoole 2013; Jeeveshwaran Räsänen 2015; Silva 2020; Silva, Sivapragasam and Paramsothy 2009; Thanges 2014, 2015).

These tussles over *kudi*-based temple rites, caste-based land claims and the demarcation of Hindu space are not cultural phenomena detached from politics. They are pivotal to Tamil nationalist politics. They pertain to the political community – a Tamil *demos* – in whose name the claim to sovereignty is advanced. They concern the reflexive 'self' of self-determination. Struggles over the reconstitution of Tamil society after defeat expose a long-standing rift in Tamil nationalism, between a conservative strand of Tamil nationalism (which marries the agenda of national self-determination to a celebration of cultural tradition) and an emancipatory strand of Tamil nationalism (which extends the outlook of ethnic liberation to a more encompassing programme of social liberation thus taking issue with class, caste and gender-based inequalities within Tamil society). As became clear in my discussion of the wartime period (Chapter 3), the LTTE forced this variety of contentions into a singular nationalist outlook: a single cause and a single sovereign framework where authority was fused into one adulated body of *Führertum*, embodied by the *talaivar* Prabhakaran, with no space for dissent. The defeat of the movement and the death of Prabhakaran heralded a moment of decompression for Tamil politics. On the one hand, the space for Tamil nationalism at large became more confined now that it was condemned to the bounds stipulated by the Sri Lankan government. On the other hand, the political space for contestation within the Tamil nationalist arena radically opened up.

Notes

- 1 All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) is a 1972 breakaway of India's main Dravidian party Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), in turn an heir of the Dravidian mother party: Dravidar Kazhagam. AIADMK was a significant pro-LTTE actor under M. G. Ramachandran in the 1970s and 1980s. Under Jayalalithaa, it resurfaced as a major political force in Tamil Nadu from the 1990s onwards.
- 2 For a detailed discussion, see Gaasbeek (2010: 90–95).
- 3 Panchamar castes, sometimes referred to as depressed castes or minority Tamils (Silva 2020), are considered the most underprivileged stratum. They have historically been conceptualised as servants, or even bonded labourers, to the land-owning castes, mainly the Vellala. While these groups are cognate to the Dalits in India and other countries, that term is rarely used in the Sri Lankan context, and the concurrent notion of untouchability no longer exists in the same strict terms.
- 4 On the densely populated Jaffna Peninsula, we have arguably seen a similar social mechanism that yielded an opposite outcome: some 'low'-caste communities remained stuck in camps (Silva 2020).