

Pol. S 425 Term Paper

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“How did ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka contribute to the formation of the Tamil diaspora in Canada?”

Ethnic wars are among the leading causes of forced migration globally, with conflicts such as the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009) displacing millions of people around the globe. This brutal, 26-year conflict was the result of armed clashes between the Sinhalese-majority government and the Tamil resistance group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or LTTE. The extreme violence and ethnic prejudice present in Sri Lanka during the war triggered large waves of Tamil immigration, with Canada being a major destination for Tamil refugees. Toronto quickly became one of the largest global Tamil diaspora hubs. Refugee migration is the movement of people triggered by violence or persecution, rather than economic opportunity (UNHCR, 2024), and diasporas are populations of people who are dispersed from a collective homeland, but maintain shared identity, connections and proximity (Kamboureli, 2013). Migration is not only about leaving one's country of origin, but how states receive immigrants and refugees, and how the driving factors behind the migration (in this case, ethnic conflict) shape diaspora settlement and community formation. The primary cause of Tamil refugee migration to Canada was the Sri Lankan Civil War, which drove Tamil peoples away through ethnic violence and insecurity; while Canadian immigration, labour, and cultural policy formed

and shaped the Tamil diaspora in positive and negative ways, promoting settlement and also reproducing exclusion.

Ethnic conflict is often worsened by a phenomenon called the “security dilemma”, originally identified by John Herz (1950), and further discussed by many acclaimed scholars, including Shiping Tang (2015). The basic theory is this: one nation begins actions meant to increase their own security, such as increasing military spending or presence, which in turn causes other states to fear attack, and strives to increase their security capabilities in turn. The dilemma can spiral, eventually causing war when the original purpose was to avoid it. This theory can be applied to Sri Lanka quite easily. Sri Lanka (at the time known as Ceylon) was ruled by the British between 1796 and 1948. The British heavily favoured the Tamil people, who rose to great prosperity, while the Sinhalese people remained economically and politically stagnant. The tables are turned, however, upon Britain’s exit from the country in 1948. After the British exit, Sinhalese citizens worked their way into the upper echelons of the country’s government, and began passing discriminatory laws that heavily favoured the Sinhalese majority. The most notable example was the 1956 Sinhala Only Act, which established Sinhala as the only official language of what was at the time Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). The act was vehemently opposed by the Tamil minority, and the passing of the act led to rioting (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2026), setting the stage for the greater ethnic war to come. The act also included clauses intended to provide more opportunities for disenfranchised Sinhalese students, but the legislation raised the test scores required of Tamil students to qualify for postsecondary education drastically above those required by Sinhalese students. These discriminatory measures, along with others, contributed to the rise of a movement called “Tamil Eelam” (Anandakugan 2020), which called

for a separate Tamil state in the Northeast of the country, where the majority of the Tamil population lived. This was the catalyst for the formation of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the militant group that advocated for the creation of Tamil Eelam. In July of 1983, a month now named Black July, 13 policemen were killed in a LTTE attack, which resulted in anti-Tamil riots across the nation, leaving thousands dead and causing Tamils to flee majority Sinhalese areas (Anandakugan 2020), leading to full-blown civil war. The power dynamic between the Sinhalese and Tamil people, particularly the extreme rise in Sinhale influence and power in post-Britain Ceylon (Sri Lanka) is exactly the kind of security dilemma that can lead to ethnic war. After centuries of preferential treatment, the Tamil are oppressed by the Sinhalese after the passage of many Sinhale-favouring laws, the group feels threatened by the power imbalance (which was a reaction to a reversed, historical power imbalance) and militarise, leading to escalation and eventually, war. When violence has started, it is unlikely that the root issue be resolved quickly, as ethnic identities “harden” (Kaufmann, 1996) and coexistence and cooperation become increasingly unlikely. For the Tamil minority experiencing violence from the Sinhalese people, the civil war created chronic insecurity; remaining in the country became dangerous, especially for those residing in majority Sinhale areas. Migration became a necessary survival response, characterizing the individuals fleeing the country as refugees.

Pre-1983, there was a very small, elite group of Tamil people who had migrated to Canada, arriving as early as the 1940s (Rezene, 2024). The immigrants were not refugees, but students and professionals coming to Canada to pursue economic opportunity. After the Black July riots however, and the organized killing of Tamils in the North of Sri Lanka, mass displacement of Tamil peoples led to a refugee crisis, with some of the first Tamil refugees

arriving in Newfoundland via ship in 1986 (Sundar 2025). Through the 1990s and early 2000s, immigration was relatively consistent, until the final stage of the civil war in 2009, which brought the worst violence and the highest casualties of the entire period of fighting. An estimated 40,000 citizens were killed in the first 5 months of 2009 (Hyndman, 2009) and the heightened violence and discrimination triggered another wave of Tamil refugees. Figures seen in Arul Aruliah's 1994 profile of Canadian Tamil refugee acceptance shows a dramatic increase post-Black July, and steady increase as the violence worsened and ethnic division grew.

Kaufmann notes that population separation can be used as an effective solution for ethnic war (1996), however, increasing migration and further separation of the ethnic groups can also reinforce ethnic division. Migration is influenced by push factors, such as violence and persecution, as well as existing migration patterns and networks. As the conflict in Sri Lanka went on and became increasingly more violent, and as more Tamil people fled to places like Toronto and established communities, refugee and immigration numbers increased. The waves of Tamil migration to Canada clearly intersect with events of the Sri Lankan Civil War, demonstrating a clear causal relationship between the ethnic conflict and Tamil migration.

The Greater Toronto Area is home to the largest Tamil population outside of Southeast Asia, estimated at 250,000 people (Hyndman, 2016). Why did such a large population of Tamil immigrants and refugees end up in Toronto, halfway around the globe from their ethnic homeland? As previously mentioned, the push/pull factors of migration are of great importance. The existence of a Tamil diaspora in Toronto starting in the 1980s creates a network—and therefore reduced migration costs, and possible assistance upon arrival. Other factors include the availability of jobs, community, and the Canadian value of multiculturalism, which Tamil people

saw as exceptional compared to other countries like Britain (Sundar, 2025). One Tamil man, interviewed for a study conducted by Harvard University's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs said that “In Sri Lanka, you’re not respected as a Tamil. You feel that you are one below, you know? The UK is not an immigrant country, so you are never a part of the country. You’re always an immigrant. In Canada, everyone is an immigrant. So, Canada can be your home.” (Hyndman, 2016). Sundar (2025) notes that this sentiment of a multicultural Canada is prominent amongst earlier generations of immigrants in particular. Another contributing factor to the formation of diasporas is labour market exclusion. The exclusion of skilled workers from jobs based on ethnic background can encourage the formation of ethnic enclave economies through ethnic clustering, building a reliance on cultural networks and capital for immigrants and refugees to support themselves financially (Hasmath, 2012). The formation of ethnic enclave economies and greater diasporas in Canada is also influenced by Canadian immigration policies like the Canadian Experience Class, which can have the unintended effect of pushing immigrants into lower-level survival jobs, delaying integration and affirming economic dependency on a ethnic enclave.

A key moment for the Canadian Tamil diaspora in Toronto was the 2009 Gardiner Street Protests. In 2009, amidst increasing violence against the Tamils in Sri Lanka during the final stages of the civil war, a planned march intended to show solidarity with the worldwide Tamil community, spontaneously diverted. What ensued was a complete blockage of Toronto’s Gardiner Expressway, leaving the road closed for several hours. While the protest did not receive international recognition in the moment, the way the protesters had hoped, scholar Amarnath Amarasingam noted in an interview that the protests became “a kind of flashpoint for many in

the community who were just coming of age, who had arrived in Canada when they were five or six years old.” (Simmons, 2019). The war ended shortly after the protests, when the Sri Lankan government announced the killing of the LTTE’s leader. The protests were distinct to the Tamil diaspora in Toronto, a culmination of Tamil identity in Canada. Ethnic conflict produces strong cultural identities, even amongst those who were young when they left the ethnic homeland. These identities persist in diasporas, they are not passive, but interpret and actively respond to ongoing conflict and events from the homeland. The political mobilization of the Tamil community in Toronto reflects the diaspora identities that are shaped by ethnic war, long after initial waves of migration occur.

The civil war in Sri Lanka was not simply the cause of migration, but a watershed moment that made migration unavoidable. Similarly, diaspora presence in Canada, along with Canadian policy actively shaped how the Tamil population settled, worked, and how they thought about Canada and their ethnic homeland. Refugee migration is not exclusively determined by ethnic conflict, but from the intersection of violence and persecution in the ethnic homeland, and the institutions and policies of the receiving country. The Tamil diaspora is not a product of displacement alone, but the result of a relationship between ethnic war, immigration policy and practice, and community formation. Ethnic wars and conflicts do not stop affecting the world when the violence stops or lessens: the 2009 protests illustrated that ethnic conflict can generate huge sympathy and can mobilize communities worldwide. Conflict continues to shape ethnic identity abroad, even for those primarily raised outside of the ethnic homeland. Ultimately, the events of the Sri Lankan Civil War, and the subsequent formation of the Tamil diaspora in Canada demonstrate interesting features of ethnic conflict. Migration is not the

endpoint, diasporas are still hugely affected by ethnic conflict in their country of origin, and the effects of the ethnic division that started the war are still being felt across the globe. Furthermore, migration is not the end point of the conflict, but the primary method the consequences of ethnic conflict and war are spread and redistributed across the globe.

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