



The Future of the Tamils
TWG 10th Anniversary CJT Thamotheram Memorial Lecture
Delivered by Ms Jan Jananayagam
of Tamils Against Genocide

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Tamil Writers Guild on the 10th Anniversary of its founding by Mr CJT Thamotheram.

I have been asked to talk on the 'Future of the Tamils'. I am conscious of the weight of the topic. And of the impossibility of doing it justice in the time available. It is somewhat like the story of the team of blind men touching an elephant and trying to describe it. My comments are in a personal capacity rather than on behalf of Tamils Against Genocide (TAG) because this is a cultural event and some aspects of the topic fall outside of TAGs mandate.

I start with a story. Bear with me, with luck its relevance will become clear.

On the Hawaiian Island of Kauai, that is rich in its own sacred traditions, and for its beauty and lushness the Hawaiians call it the garden island, on this Island stands a Saivite monastery with some twenty monks most of them American by birth and Caucasian by ethnicity. The monks are prolific writers and it is for this reason that I have chosen their example as relevant to this audience. For it is not widely known among the Tamil Diaspora that they are also publishers and editors of one of the leading English language Hindu magazines – Hinduism Today. Last year they published a book, the 'Guru Chronicles' on the history of their Guru Parampara [lineage]. They trace their Parampara to Yogaswami of Jaffna and from him 2000 years back along the Kailasa Parampara.

So this is their story –In the late 1940s, a young man from San Francisco went seeking enlightenment, and at some point in his travels arrived at Yogaswami's ashram in Jaffna. In time Yogaswami ordained him as a successor - thus a Satguru in his own right – and instructed him to take back his religion to American, 'go build a bridge'. In another anecdote from a Jaffna disciple, when this disciple visited Yogaswami, some years before he died, he found the Swami in tears. When asked for the reason, the Swami replied that he was crying for the coming tribulations of his people. Thus the monastery and its followers believe that Yogaswami foresaw the civil war and the destruction it would cause. The monks thus see themselves as the spiritual guardians of Yogaswami's Saivite traditions precisely at a time when their Guru had foreseen great risks to his tradition as well as forced migration that would create a vast Diaspora.

Next to the monastery is being built a hand-carved stone temple in the traditional Chola style. Being a temple to Siva, it is called Iraivan. It is the American founder's vision that the temple will last a 1000 years, akin to the great pilgrimage centres of Tamil Nadu. And having seen it, I have no doubt that it will.



Now this being a talk on the Tamil people, the question arises – is the monastery Tamil? Having thought on this, I can say this. Firstly ‘As Latin is to the Vatican, so is Tamil to the Kauai Monastery and Temple complex’. It is an intrinsic part of the Tamil heritage.

More importantly Tamil is a culture, perhaps primarily linguistic and the notion of Tamil is defined as a way of life and a value system. It is inclusive of multiple ethnicities and religions.

This is a good point for me to note, that this lecture, which marks the 10th anniversary of the Tamil Writers Guild, is the CJT Thamotheram annual memorial lecture and of course, Mr Thamotheram like many leading Tamil leaders, including Thanthai Chelvanayagam, is of the Christian faith. So in the course of preparing for this, I asked Mr Thamotheram’s son, what had been his father’s aims in founding these institutions - the UK Tamil schools, the Tamil magazine, the Writers Guild where we are today and so on. And so he said ‘ my father saw the Tamil people arriving (in the UK) and he wanted that they should not feel that they were, so to speak, ‘lost souls’.

So I was struck quite deeply by this term – ‘lost souls’. It’s a phrase that resonates fundamentally with a key mission of the monks whom I have taken as my example – to literally transport a foundation –in this instance, spiritual but also cultural to new shores.

Tamil is one of the world’s oldest living classical languages – by this is meant that by its breadth and depth of literature it is considered, along with Latin, Arabic, Ancient Greek, Sanskrit as a classical language, yet it is a living language, spoken daily now across the world. The question before us is this - our language having survived for over 2500 years of attested history(or 5000+ years of oral history depending on whom you ask) - can we aspire to have it thrive for a reasonable fraction of that? The Kauai Monastery Founder, Satguru Sivasubramunyaswami built the Iraivan Temple to last a 1000 years. Where do we as the global Tamil community intend to be in a fraction of that time? Indeed do we intend to be around at all?

Having posed this question about the far future I will not presume to answer it. Instead I will share a few thoughts on distinct but related issues that I see as relevant to the present moment.

The first is this. We tend to see the Tamil nation as centred ‘back there’ in Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka, and like a wheel with spokes we are connected, spiritually, culturally, politically to that centre.

But this model has fundamental risks – we are here, and therefore our spiritual and cultural foundations have to be here: in the present.

It is also only by building that foundation here, can we hope to share it. If we are to share any of our heritage with our British countrymen then it must be home-grown here. The model is thus a circle of equal participants than a wheel with spokes.



Here in Britain, we find ourselves with a choice of identities and need to ask ourselves what is compelling about Tamil and how do our multiple identities co-exist in our own lives. I choose my words in the knowledge that the English identity has much to commend it. It is strong and an enticing one – as we see played out in the Scottish independence debates.

If future generations of Englishmen (or women) are not convinced of the values and contributions of the Tamil heritage, then why must future generations of British Tamils, choose to prioritize elements of their Tamil heritage in their daily lives.

The monastery in Kauai stands out as a luminous example of how core elements of the Tamil heritage can and must be shared with a global community that does not see itself as ethnically Tamil.

In pushing for this decentralized model for our cultural foundations, I am conscious of the crisis in Sri Lanka. Internationalisation is not capitulation. It is an active recognition firstly of the unity of the Tamil people regardless of geographic dispersion and secondly of the benefits and risks of globalisation.

Indeed, in the present political context in the “original home”, Sri Lanka, it is a matter of survival. The Polish Jewish scholar Raphael Lemkin who studied the Nazis said of genocide:

"Generally speaking, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killings of all members of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves. The objectives of such a plan would be disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups.."

TAG (Tamils Against Genocide) as an organization, bases much of its work around Lemkin's theory of genocide. We are conscious of the ongoing ethnically-motivated destruction not only of individual lives but also of institutions in Sri Lanka.

If our future is guaranteed, and we are confident of it, we would not be today having this talk on the 'future of the Tamil people'.

The benefit of decentralization is that we build these institutions in relatively safe and geographically diverse spaces – so to destroy them one would have to destroy them simultaneously across a distributed network, which is harder to do.



So turning now to the immediate risk in Sri Lanka. I do not need to emphasize to this audience the nature of the risk that is posed by Sri Lanka's strategy of demographic change, its systemic enforced cultural disintegration via military occupation and all that accompanies it. The military's tentacles reach deep into civilian structures, including schools, its violence, particularly against Tamil women is calculated to erode the foundations of family, social and cultural structures. It is not merely a question of land but also of identity.

I am confident that in the post-2009 years we have decentralized the political institutions of the Tamil nation –diasporic political institutions in London,

Washington, Geneva, Toronto and so on have emerged as crucial drivers. It is in desperation and in recognition of this shift in the centre of gravity in the political battle from the Vanni to the global capitals where the Diaspora lives, that GOSL has sought to ban all major Tamil political groups in "the West".

In considering this decentralized and internationalized political movement I come to two key challenges that lie before us.

A central challenge of the next few years, one that will shape our future is the uncovering of the truth about the final years of the war – the establishment of an accurate historical narrative.

Because we rightly remain pre-occupied with the physical fallout of 2009 we are yet to come to terms with their historical impact. No catastrophe of such magnitude has been noted in the annals of our oral or written history. Yet the battles of 2009 will shape Tamil identity and politics for centuries to come.

While a primary impediment to the peaceful co-existence of the Sinhala and Tamil peoples in Sri Lanka remains Sinhala Buddhism's self-image as owners of the whole island – a second, linked impediment is the absolute lack of a shared understanding among Sinhalese and Tamils of the events of 2009. This is the soft outcome of the project for international justice.

For example, modern Germany and modern Israel have a fairly congruent understanding of what happened in Auschwitz. The Nuremberg trials were part of that journey.

What we realize less is that the truth of 2009 is also important to the identity of British Tamils in Britain. Even as the domestic ban on the LTTE impacted Tamil identity in Britain so will our shared understanding of 2009. Currently there are multiple narratives – some narratives that I can think of are ours, that of the Sinhalese, those of the Foreign Office, other governments and the UN, some of which is no doubt hidden in classified memos. In time a less fragmented narrative must emerge.



The second challenge and my closing observation to you is this. The greatest schism in the Tamil community in Sri Lanka is between those who have and those who have not - a result of the extreme poverty engineered by the Sri Lankan state among the former people of the Vanni and other displaced persons, and of the destruction of family structures.

It follows that in the largely remittance economy of the Tamil homelands, the divide is between those who are connected to the western Diaspora and those who are not. Those who have family abroad and those who do not.

This is also the most significant fault-line in the refugee communities now spread across Asia – in South India, Thailand, Malaysia and so on. It is the difference between those who embark on perilous boat journeys and those who escape Sri Lanka by plane.

If there is a single threat to our vision of a globally connected Tamil community – a network that survives trends towards disintegration - it lies in these economic fault-lines.

A critical responsibility of the Western Diaspora thus is to bridge these fault-lines.

Asylum is an area that TAG has only recently embarked on post 2009. The Diaspora institutions that assist refugees have not built capacity to reach the groups of people that are presently isolated from the Diaspora. Most refugees who arrive in Britain have some family connection here – this is not true for those arriving in Australia, Tamil Nadu - India or Togo.

I leave you with the thought that our institutions need to have both an international vision and capacity - refugee assistance on a broader international scale is a good place to start.

- End -

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