



Reconstruction of War-Affected Hindu Temples and Caste Reproduction: Sri Lankan Tamil Diasporic Interventions in Pungudutivu Area

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Abstract

The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora is spread across the world, maintaining transnational connections with developments in their homeland. The research objective is to examine Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic interventions in the reconstruction of Hindu temples and the reproduction of caste. During the civil war, many Hindu temples faced dire circumstances, with several being damaged by bombings. In the post-war era, the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora's focus on religious sites in the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka has emerged as a significant new dimension of this engagement. The ethnographic method was selected to gather popular and deeply held knowledge regarding religious and caste-based phenomena. Three months of fieldwork were conducted in the Pungudutivu area; 15 participants were recruited through snowball sampling. Primary data consisted of ten in-depth interviews and five case studies, complemented by secondary sources such as books, research articles, and scholarly journals. Research findings indicate extensive restoration of Hindu temple infrastructure, particularly concerning the temple tower, halls, and chariot halls. Financial remittances from the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora proved vital to these efforts. However, these works often mirror traditional social hierarchies; reconstruction remains largely caste-centred, with a distinct tendency for diaspora members to fund temples in their ancestral localities to reproduce specific caste identities.

Keywords: Caste Identity, Hindu Temples, Post-war Era, Religious Infrastructure, Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora

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Introduction

Present-day diaspora are embedded in elaborate transnational networks that are part of contemporary processes of globalisation (Ganesh 2020:316). Before 1980, Sri Lankan Tamils moved for a variety of reasons, including work and education, but after 1980, the civil conflict has been the primary driver of Tamil migration. The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora consists of some 700,000 people settled in North America, Europe, India, and Australia (Sriskandarajah 2004: 493). The political context in Sri Lanka has been a major factor in the relationship status between the Tamil diaspora and their homeland. During the thirty years of civil war, the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora's focus had been heavily concentrated on Tamil nationalist activities. However, since the end of Sri Lanka's civil war in 2009, different changes have been observed in Tamil diaspora interventions that go beyond what may be considered within notions of nationalism. The Tamil diaspora's focus on religious sites in their homeland in northern Sri Lanka has emerged as a different dimension in contemporary times. This study is focused on Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic interventions in the reconstruction of war-damaged religious infrastructure and the reproduction of caste identities that are embedded in these activities.

Religious infrastructure has also been affected by the civil war in Sri Lanka. According to the Ministry of Hindu Religious and Cultural Affairs in 1993, 1479 temples were damaged by the war in the north-east of Sri Lanka. Thus, after the war, the temples are being reconstructed with the diaspora's intervention. Especially the religious infrastructure, such as temple front towers, temple halls, chariot halls, and temple towers, is being reconstructed. More specifically, it will emphasise the Tamil diaspora's role in rebuilding the homeland's sacred sites. This can also be seen as a buildup for future religious existence and politico-cultural influence in the motherland, as caste is inseparable from religious concerns in Tamil culture. This study also examines how caste relations intertwine with these reconstruction efforts.

Temples have become symbols of caste pride and investment (Kadirgamar 2017: 214). According to Madavan (2011), in Jaffna, the majority caste is the *Velalar* caste. In the top layer, the *Mudaliyar*, *Thaliyali*, *Maniyakara*, and *Vidhanai*

subgroups are dominant. In the second layer are those who own large landholdings and are involved in rice production. The third tier consists of medium and small holders. In the fourth level are found the small-scale dwellers. Brahmins are found alongside *Velalars* in the Tamil caste system. They were hired to work in temples in the Tamil community. The *Velalars* performed religious rituals with Brahmins in their temples. Hence, they are projected to be of lower status than *Velalars*. In this way, when we examine the Tamil caste structure, we notice that, particularly in Jaffna, the Brahmins are associated with temple rituals and are hierarchically ranked above the *Velalars*. The Tamil caste structure is closely related to Hinduism. Specifically, in the Pungudutivu area, there are caste-based Hindu temples, which have sparked strong diaspora interest in their reconstruction.

The reconstruction of Hindu temples is also linked to the reconstruction of memories. Being involved in religious engagements gives Sri Lankan Tamil Diasporas solace on a mental and spiritual level in their host countries and a connection to the 'homes' they have left behind. In the course of human history, the connection made by faith among peoples is inevitable.

Literature Review

Diaspora and Remittance

This study focuses on the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, which sent funds to rebuild war-damaged religious institutions. To strengthen this, Kadirgamar's (2017) study shows that funds for temple investments are sent from abroad. Through this, they express their pride in terms of caste and family. Much of the social investment in the post-war context has been in temples, and a considerable amount of that capital comes from the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora, creating a link between migration, remittances, and the consolidation of caste in Jaffna. Hollenbach's, Thurirajha's, and Subramaniam's (2020) study supports Kadirgamar's study. However, the study by Hollenbach, Thurirajha, and Subramaniam (2020) reported that construction of the Shiva temple had begun. Diaspora Tamils launched a global fundraising campaign, and it is reported that most donors currently live in Switzerland. It is also mentioned that more than 300 families donated 300 million Sri Lankan rupees for the

construction of the temple. The 25-metre-long gopuram at the entrance has been constructed with the help of South Indian architects. These temple construction projects use granite stones. It is also mentioned that the diaspora contributed to the *Gnanaligesavarar* temple located in the Inuvil area of Jaffna. Both studies examine the role of diaspora remittances in temple construction.

Dhesi's (2010) study discusses remittances from the Punjabi diaspora in India. His study asserts that it identifies characteristics of social entrepreneurs and philanthropists among successful returnees in North Indian villages. Philanthropists invest only their money, but entrepreneurs invest their actions. The Indian Punjabi diaspora has been contributing to the rural areas of Punjab. Diasporas' emotional ties to their native places are highly diversified. They also infuse finance and, modern technology development-related ideas. This has helped modernise rural communities in Punjab, the study noted. However, it is noted that only 50 per cent of the present is used for secular projects, while the remaining 50 per cent is spent on sacred projects. It is also mentioned that they help other villages with projects like education and health. The study by Cheran (2004) noted that the Tamil diaspora used remittances to maintain the community in Sri Lanka's north. The Tamil diaspora is playing a significant role by contributing funds to relief, education, health, and rehabilitation projects. Cheran (2004) and Dhesi (2010) have focused more on social service purposes, but both researchers agree on the role of diaspora remittances in temple construction. The study by Pande (2016) demonstrates that remittances from the Tamil diaspora are a major source of household consumption. It is also an important source of social stability. They mentioned that philanthropic activities such as establishing village hospitals, schools, and community centres in Tamil areas, and providing financial assistance, are also underway. After the war ended, diaspora activity reached a new peak. Again, they play an important role in building their culture.

Diaspora and Caste

Rasanan's (2015) study noted that many temples in villages in post-war Jaffna society were being upgraded with financial contributions from the Diaspora. She has also discussed caste-based

competition in the expansion of these temples and the celebration of festivals. Most Vellala families from the Pungudutivu region live abroad. There is a tendency for them to maintain their caste identities by contributing financially to the reconstruction of such temples. Also, there is a caste-based division in how festivals are celebrated. Reservations have been made for all castes to perform puja on specific days. Oppressed castes are denied membership in temples. In Rasanen's study, it was also noted that the diaspora supported the reconstruction of temples. There is also competition in the Pungudutivu region to reconstruct caste-based temples. Diasporas play an important role in this matter. In the study by Hollenbach, Thurirajha, and Subramaniam (2020), the diaspora's role in caste-based stratification in temple-related reconstruction is examined. It differs from Rasana's perspective. The study by Hollenbach, Thurirajha, and Subramaniam (2020) asserts that the *Gnalinkeshwarar* temple in the Inuvil area of Jaffna allows people from lower castes to perform pujas. Still, they would not accept carrying the deity. It is mentioned that lower-caste people avoid this. It has also been noted that immigrants' contributions to this temple exceed those of locals. A temple belonging to the Barber caste in the Jaffna community is also mentioned here. The Nalavar caste also contributed to the construction of the temple. But they were denied membership in the temple association because they were not members of the Barber community. Thus, they were also excluded from decision-making processes. It is noted that this has created conflicts between the two caste communities, and further disputes continue. The study noted that diaspora relations have impacted the daily lives of neighbouring communities and played a role in the apparent renewal of caste-related tensions that had been submerged during the war.

In the study by Hollenbach, Thurairajah, and Subramaniam, despite the Nalavar caste's assistance with matters related to the Barber caste temple in Jaffna, they are still banned from joining the temple administration. The above topic has not been investigated in detail; this research aims to fill that gap. The study of Thangesh (2018) focused on Tamils living in London from the Jaffna Peninsula. Attention has also been paid to understanding diaspora communities' perspectives on the institution of caste. Many of the village societies operating in London are private and caste based. Welfare and

financial assistance are also given greater importance when given to members of their caste. It is mentioned that the welfare activities and financial support carried out by those associations are provided to their own caste group, their caste-based temples, and their libraries in Jaffna. Thangesh's (2018) study noted that caste-based associations operate in London and assist with temple-related matters in their home countries. So, these matters are related to my study. In my research site, community centres relate to specific caste groups. Community centres maintain good relations with the diaspora. The community centre administrations are doing work related to temple reconstruction under the diaspora people's guide. Although the largest-scale temples on the island, Pungudutivu, are being rebuilt, no significant research has been conducted in this context. So, my study will fill this research gap.

Research Objectives

- To examine Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic interventions in the reconstruction of Hindu temples and the reproduction of caste.

Materials and Methods

Pungudutivu is one of the seven islands located in the south-western part of the Jaffna district of Sri Lanka. It is a smaller island. The sea surrounds this island on all four sides. That is, it is located 23 metres from Jaffna city. A qualitative research approach was chosen to collect popular, often deeply held knowledge about religious and caste-based phenomena. My interest was that qualitative research can yield rich data because the religious interventions of diaspora communities were closely tied to their feelings, beliefs, religious rituals, memories, and nostalgia. About three months of fieldwork were conducted in Pungudutivu. The snowball sampling method was selected for this study. That is, 15 people were selected as a sample of the Pungudutivu area. This sample included people currently living in the area and those closely related to religious ideas. However, because they are geographically dispersed across different countries, the snowball sampling method was useful for collecting data for my study.

In this study, data were collected through in-depth interviews, case studies, and observation across multiple dimensions. It was focused on the

data collection process. These data were used to explore the phenomenon of Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic interventions in war-damaged religious infrastructure reconstruction and the relevance of caste. The in-depth interviews for this study focused on two primary categories: the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora who fund religious infrastructure reconstruction, and individuals involved in local temple administration. I conducted six in-depth interviews with participants abroad via Zoom after obtaining the necessary ethical approval. These virtual sessions were recorded and transcribed with the interviewees' consent. Additionally, I conducted four in-depth interviews with residents in the Pungudutivu area. These interviews helped identify how the diaspora intervenes in temple construction, particularly regarding financial contributions and personal nostalgia. Furthermore, I conducted five case studies to gather data on financial management, temple reconstruction supervision, the historical origins of these sites, and the influence of caste on religious activities within the study area. This process demonstrates that even when the diaspora provides funds, local supervision is essential to guide projects to completion. Consequently, the data collected through these case studies is vital for gaining a comprehensive understanding of these processes.

Secondary data, such as books, journals, research articles, and internet data, also supported the research. Videos of the dedication of recently rebuilt temples financed by the diaspora at the study site have been released on several YouTube channels. Data were also collected through photographs. These were used to highlight the temples' transformation, especially before the reconstruction. Data from archival materials, such as vernacular texts and advertisements related to temple festivals, were also considered. The study focused on photographs of pre- and post-reconstruction religious infrastructure obtained from texts in local languages. The study focused on revealing the changes in diasporic interventions at my study site through photographs.

This study employed thematic analysis to analyse the data. According to King, Rice & Ezzy, thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used to organise and analyse complex datasets systematically. It is a search for themes that can capture the narratives available in the account of

data sets. It involves the identification of themes through careful reading and re-reading of the transcribed data (Dawadi 2020: 62). Thematic analysis of the data allowed me to address my research questions, leading to a deeper theoretical understanding and a simplified representation of participants' perspectives through coding. These classifications captured the various dimensions and experiences relevant to this study.

In this study, data were collected only after participants received a detailed explanation of the study's purpose. The confidentiality of the data to be obtained and of the informants was protected. Data were collected only after obtaining the informants' consent. The data used for this research were used only for study participants, who were considered temporary participants in this study. No fake promises were made during the research process, and research ethics were followed appropriately.

Results and Discussion

This study explores the temple reconstruction and reproduction of caste in the Pungudutivu area. The temple's reconstruction and the structural changes in its context have become new forms of identity. An analysis of the functions and actors of a temple would reveal the internal dynamics of caste, culture, and religion in Jaffna society (Rasanen 2015:137). In the Pungudutivu area, the temple sphere is associated with various rituals and an entrenched system of hierarchy and the reproduction of caste. The concept of caste dominance originates in the sociological and anthropological literature. In Srinivas's (1955: 18) own words: "A caste may be said to be 'dominant' when it preponderates numerically over the other castes and when it wields preponderant economic and political power (Iversen, Kalwij, Verschoor, and Dubey 2014: 431). Quite similar to this description, but in an entirely different socio-cultural and political setting, this study site's massive temple reconstruction reveals high-caste dynamics and economic strength. To frame this analysis, three themes guide the discussion.

Hindu Temple Reconstructions

The reconstruction of religious buildings embodies the symbolic and sacred reappropriation of traditional living space by inhabitants (Madavan 2017: 18). The reconstruction of war-damaged religious

infrastructure is also linked to the reconstruction of memories. The existence of a large diaspora is a new factor in society's development. Their support plays a leading role in the village's reconstruction and economic development, as well as in people's upward mobility. Temples hold deep significance in Tamil culture, as evidenced by the proverb: "Don't stay in a village without a temple." This emphasis on religious infrastructure likely fuels the interest in reconstructing war-damaged temples. Wherever people dwell, they first prioritise building religious expressions and infrastructure. That is, it concerns reviving the religious infrastructure and way of life that were decimated by the conflict here in the research area.

Most of the temples in this area are dedicated to deities like *Amman*, *Iyanar*, *Murugan*, and *Shiva*. However, many of these temples were damaged due to the war. However, in the post-war period, the influence of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora on improving the religious engagement of the island increased. Most of the village temples in post-war Jaffna have been developed with funds from the diaspora, and it seems there is competition among caste-based village temples to expand their temples, the ways of celebration, and their communication with the people (Rasanen 2015:138). According to Thevathas in 1983, more families migrated from the Pungudutivu area to Canada, Australia, and European countries. The island's infrastructure was damaged during the war. The reconstruction history of temples in this study area spans different periods, especially the 1991 and the 2002 Ceasefire period. However, during the aforementioned period, due to ongoing apprehension about the war, large-scale religious reconstruction work did not take place. But after 2009, Sri Lanka's context changed dramatically; the 30-year war ended. During the post-war period, the diaspora began to focus on rebuilding religious infrastructure. Figure 1 shows the entrance to Pungudutivu; the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora fully funds its construction. However, this structure offers a new perspective on this area; at the same time, it is also connected to Hindu religious architecture.

Figure 1: Entrance of the Pungudutivu



Source: Author's File, 2023

The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora from Pungudutivu has formed associations in the name of their village in the countries they have migrated to. Through this, they are providing various social welfare services to their village. In particular, contributions to religious affairs are being made both as a group and individually. In particular, the reconstruction of damaged temples, the construction of new temples, the conducting of festivals, the construction of massive bell tower arches, etc., are being undertaken at a huge cost of money and materials. The UK Pungudutivu Welfare Association, the Canada Pungudutivu Alumni Association, the Swiss Pungudutivu People's Union, the Association Des Habitants De Pungudutivu – France, and the German Pungudutivu Island Renaissance Association are run by people from the Pungudutivu diaspora (Thevathas 2007: 279).

Fig 2: Construction work is going on inside the Kannagi Amman Temple



Source: Author's File, 2023

In most of the temples in my study area, one part of the reconstruction work has been completed,

and the *Kumbhabhishekam* has been completed; the other part of the reconstruction work is still ongoing. This situation is shown in Figure 2.

Fig 3: Entrance of reconstructed Kannagi Amman Temple



Source: www.Pungudutivu.org

Post-war temple festivals have undergone massive changes. There has been an increase in luxury, especially in my study area. There has been an increase in the tendency to hold unprecedentedly grand festivals in the renovated temples. In particular, migrants often return to their hometowns to attend their temple festivals. Thus, the 2023 Kannagi Amman Temple *Kumbhabhishekam* was one of the most grandly celebrated festivals. Rituals and their symbolism are significant means of transmitting social memory, which is seen as the essential condition for the continuity of collective identity and social life (Misztal 2003: 125). Reunions with family, expressions of devotion, expressions of happy feelings, etc., influence this situation. Even with all the comforts a new host country can offer, it's difficult to recapture the true sense of belonging one felt in their birthplace. In this context, such festivals offer the diaspora an opportunity to spend a few days happily in their homeland.

Involvement of Remittances

Remittances by international migrants to their countries of origin constitute the largest source of external finance for developing countries after foreign direct investment (Giuliano, Arranz 2009: 144). The caste-based village associations of the Tamil diaspora are closely associated with philanthropic activities. In Jaffna, much of what passes for philanthropy also carries caste connotations. In this sense, the Diasporas'

monetary contribution to the temple's reconstruction is crucial. Kadirgamar's (2017) research shows that funds for temple investments are sent from diaspora countries. Through this, they express their pride in terms of caste and family. Much of the social investment in the post-war context has been in temples, and a considerable amount of that capital comes from the Diaspora, creating a link between migration, remittances, and the consolidation of caste in Jaffna. Even though some funding was provided for temple reconstruction during the conflict, this study asserts that, after the war, the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora contributed substantial funds to religious activities.

The Kannagi Amman temple festival was a grand temple *kumbabishekam* held in the study area in 2023. Eventually, these financial contributions are indispensable to the reconstruction of every temple in my study area. Durkheim's concern with solidarity and his understanding of the importance of memory in holding societies together and in sustaining the transmission of values and desired patterns of behaviour offer us an interesting approach to situations in which both the right to historical truth and solidarity are at stake (Misztal 2003: 133). In the Pungudutivu area, everyone contributes to rebuilding their temple. In this context, people in my study area who belong to Hindu temples personally send money directly to the temple administration for reconstruction work. And some people are working in foreign countries by setting up associations in their village's name. The money is collected and distributed through those associations. Also, traders from Pungudutivu living in Colombo are collecting funds through relatives living abroad to support temple construction.

There is a collective representation in remittances. Such grand temple construction by individuals is impossible in contemporary periods. Funding for massive temple construction is essential, especially amid Sri Lanka's current economic crisis, when commodity prices are rising by the day. Thus, in this case, the financial assistance that the Tamil diaspora gave to the gods they worshipped indicates their collective representation.

Reproduction of Caste

In post-war Jaffna, caste exclusion is aggravated by both rural economic dynamics and oppressive caste relations: the rural economic crisis including widespread indebtedness has a disproportionate impact on marginalized oppressed caste communities and reinforces their social exclusion; and the discriminatory actions of officials towards oppressed caste wards and refusal of upper caste people to sell land to the oppressed caste people, leads to the further social exclusion of oppressed caste communities (Kadirgamar 2017: 20). In Pungudutivu area, it is also possible to know that even though people have migrated and live abroad, they have appointed people from their own caste to look after the maintenance of their temple. In some temples in the Pungudutivu area, there is a position in which only priests of a certain caste are involved in temple rituals through inheritance. Also, even though the majority of people in this area live abroad, they have found someone from their caste to take care of the work related to their temples and have been given administrative responsibilities. Although some temple administrations have included a few other castes, they remain nominal members. There are also cases where their views are not respected in major decisions. Since the temples are caste-based, financial contributions for their reconstruction are also provided by members of a particular caste.

Caste-based discrimination continues directly and indirectly in temple sites even after the war. The fieldwork data indicate that this condition is also present in Pungudutivu. It occurred during an interview with the leader of the *Kali Amman* temple in Pungudutivu 4th ward. He said the following: It was mentioned that people from other castes are not allowed to participate in the administration of the *Kali* temple, and he said he has been following this practice since the time of his inheritance. However, at its core, all temples are based on caste. In the field of study, it was found that a person's temple affiliation can indicate their caste identity. Caste is determined by one's geographic borders in northern Sri Lanka. The oppressed castes are not granted any position in the administration of the majority of the Hindu temples in Pungudutivu. During the *Kannaki Amman* temple festival, they still hold a boat festival for the fishing community. In this context, it is asserted that there is a tradition of

associating specific festivals with particular castes. However, this practice continues social divisions. It can be seen that caste identities are being reproduced again in contemporary periods. As discussed above and illustrated by the data, Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora interventions also influence caste-related factors.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The contributions made by the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora to religious sites are intrinsically linked to cultural values and the formation of social identity. One of the conclusions in the study area is that, despite the stance that everyone can worship in the temples, all the temples being reconstructed are based on caste. Caste also takes priority in reconstruction activities. It is also significant that members of a particular caste contribute financially to the reconstruction of a temple. Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic interventions have also emerged in the reproduction of caste identities in this context. These large-scale religious activities reflect the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora's strong social and economic standing. This research provides a new and contemporary direction for the field of sociology in northern Sri Lanka, focusing on the interplay of religion, diaspora intervention, and caste. It emphasises that the sociology of this region should now address the evolving identity formation among the contemporary diaspora. This study investigates a key aspect of the post-war religious landscape: the role of the Tamil diaspora. It explores how diaspora communities express their status, pride, and strong connection to their homeland through religious contributions, specifically the reconstruction of temples. While the current influence of the first-generation diaspora is significant, the future of these contributions by second and third-generation communities remains uncertain. This study highlights the need to explore how the future connection between the Tamil diaspora and their homeland will evolve. It provides valuable insights into the extent of Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora intervention in Hindu religious sites during the post-war era, laying the groundwork for further research in this area.

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