

TAMILS

Origins

The majority of Tamils are from south Asia, specifically the states of India and Sri Lanka (called Ceylon until 1972). Close to 60 million Tamils live in India (1991), primarily in the far southeastern state of Tamil Nadu (130,000 square kilometres) and in the small coastal Indian union territory of Pondicherry, both formerly part of the British colonial-administration entity called the Madras Presidency. The above figure also includes Tamils who live in major urban centres throughout India, including Delhi, Bombay, and Calcutta.

In Sri Lanka the Tamils number around 3.5 million (1989), a figure that includes Tamils who have been in Sri Lanka since ancient times, Tamil-speaking Muslims (Sri Lankan Moors descended from tenth- and eleventh-century Arab traders), and Tamils who came from India in the nineteenth century to work on colonial British plantations. The indigenous, or “Ceylon,” Tamils comprise approximately 12 percent of Sri Lanka’s population and live largely in the northern (Jaffna) and eastern regions of the country, as well as in the capital of Colombo. The descendants of Tamils who came from India in the nineteenth century (7 percent) live mainly in the central highlands of the island. The Tamil-speaking Muslims (7 percent) are concentrated in the eastern region.

In south Asia, over 94 percent of Tamils live in India. By contrast, in Canada nearly 93 percent come from Sri Lanka while only about 6 percent are from India, the remainder being from other countries and areas where Tamils had previously emigrated, including Malaysia, Singapore, Fiji, Mauritius, South Africa, and the Caribbean. (*See also* [INDO-CARIBBEANS](#); [INDO-FIJIANS](#); [SOUTH ASIANS](#).) Aside from a significant minority of Muslims and Christians, the majority of Tamils are Hindus belonging to the Saivite sect.

The Tamil language belongs to the Dravidian family of languages spoken throughout south India and is considered the oldest living language in the Indian subcontinent. It has its own script called *Vitteluthu* (round letters) and a rich two-thousand-year-old literary tradition. At present, Tamil is the official language of the state of Tamil Nadu in India, where it enjoys a fair degree of government patronage and support for its development.

During the first millennium B.C.E., Tamil kingdoms flourished in southern India and patronized the arts and literature. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism also took root, as did, in later periods, Islam and Christianity. As early as the sixth century B.C.E., Tamils began migrating from the Indian subcontinent across the narrow Palk Strait to the island of Ceylon, a demographic trend that steadily intensified during the first millennium C.E. One of the most powerful Tamil states was ruled by the Chola dynasty, which flourished during the tenth to thirteenth centuries in southern India. The Cholas also expanded into neighbouring Ceylon and southeast Asia. For several decades they ruled all of Ceylon (993–1070), and by the thirteenth century they had established a distinctive Tamil kingdom in the northern part of the island, with its centre in Jaffna.

Southern India and Ceylon were among the first places to experience European colonial expansion in south Asia. The Portuguese arrived in the early sixteenth century, followed by the Dutch, the French, and finally the British. The long history of European presence in southern India and Sri Lanka, especially in the Tamil regions, ensured a strong European and Christian impact on local culture, language, and customs. British colonial rule lasted in the Madras Presidency and Ceylon from the late eighteenth century until after World War II, when independent India (a federation of states, 1947) and Ceylon (1948) were created. In India, the

former British-administered Madras Presidency that had encompassed much of the southern part of the subcontinent was reorganized on the basis of linguistic states beginning in the 1950s. Eventually, a Tamil linguistic state called Tamil Nadu was created in 1969 with its own elected bicameral legislature, governed by a chief minister, and with a considerable amount of autonomy from India's union government.

In Ceylon/Sri Lanka, where Tamils formed the largest minority, a short initial period of Sinhalese and Tamil political cooperation had broken down by the mid-1950s following the rise of Sinhalese political nationalism, with its efforts to undermine the political, economic, and cultural position of the Tamils. The drive to make Sinhala the official (1956) and later national (1973) language of Sri Lanka provoked Tamil opposition that since 1958 has in turn resulted in a series of major riots against the Tamils. During the next few decades, the Tamil-Sinhalese conflict continued to escalate at the same time that Sri Lanka's economy declined and its population nearly doubled in size, causing increasing pressure on and competition for the country's limited resources. (*See also* [SINHALESE AND BURGHES.](#))

By the early 1970s, the failure of the moderate Tamil leadership to protect Tamil rights led to the rise of militant youth movements pledged to fight for a separate Tamil state called Tamil Eelam. The most powerful of these movements is the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which managed to wrestle the northern Jaffna region from state control and to run a de facto government for nearly a decade beginning in the mid-1980s. Although the Sri Lankan government has regained control over the north, fierce fighting continues between the Liberation Tigers and government troops, causing increasing dislocation, suffering, and the death of an estimated 50,000 people. The conflict has also forced a large exodus of Tamils to seek refuge by emigrating abroad.

Migration

Among the first Tamils to emigrate to Canada were predominantly English-educated individuals from India's upper-middle and middle classes and castes. Many had professional qualifications and were seeking to find better prospects for their education and talents. A substantial proportion came as graduate students and, after completing their studies, found jobs and remained in Canada. Political developments in southern India dating back to the first decades of the twentieth century may have also provided a strong incentive for Tamil emigration.

One of the earliest castes to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by English education in southern India were the Brahmin castes. By the early twentieth century, the Brahmins held a disproportionate amount of government and professional jobs in relation to their numbers within the general population. Their predominance in the professions and government and their religio-cultural ascendancy began to be challenged by the non-Brahmin, or Dravidian, movement which began to gather momentum by the early part of the twentieth century in southern India. The Dravidian movement, which later evolved into a Tamil ethno-nationalist movement, sought to overturn what it saw as Brahmin or Aryan domination of India's Dravidian south. Launched formally in 1916 as the Justice Party, the Tamil movement fought for and obtained quotas which by the 1950s had led to a significant reduction in the number of Brahmins in top government and professional jobs in southern India. Faced with diminishing career opportunities, many Brahmins in the Tamil region began migrating to other parts of India as well as to Britain, the United States, Canada, and Australia.

Tamils in Sri Lanka were also attracted to English education much more readily than the majority Sinhalese. In contrast to India, however, the majority of the English-educated Tamils in Sri Lanka came from the dominant landowning *vellalar* caste. Living mainly in arid and less productive areas of the northern and eastern provinces, many Tamils saw education as the key to economic well-being. Thus, by the time Sri Lanka achieved independence from Britain in 1948, the Tamils

held a greater proportion of the professional, technical, and administrative jobs than their numbers in the general population warranted. Independence confirmed their fears of being subordinated to the Sinhalese majority.

It was not long before Sinhalese-dominated governments, riding a wave of ethnic and religious populism, set out to correct what they considered the undue privileges held by the Tamils. Sri Lanka's first independent parliament passed legislation in 1948 excluding Tamils from India from citizenship, and a year later it disenfranchised them. The adoption of Sinhala as the official language of Sri Lanka in 1956 disadvantaged Tamils further. These laws were only the beginning of a series of government measures that reduced a once politically and socially influential Tamil community to economic and cultural marginalization. The failure of the moderate, English-educated Tamil leadership to safeguard the interests of the community led to calls by an increasing number of unemployed and disgruntled Tamil youth for more extreme measures. The result was the increasing level of confrontation with the Sinhalese that has characterized Sri Lankan life since the late 1950s and that has acted as a significant catalyst for large-scale migration of Tamils abroad.

Arrival and Settlement

The earliest immigration to Canada from both India and Sri Lanka followed a pattern not significantly different from that of other South Asian communities except for the Punjabis. Unlike that group, who began migrating to Canada as early as 1903, members of other ethnic communities in the Indian subcontinent arrived first only in the 1950s. There were overwhelming barriers to South Asian immigration before that time. Canadian policy, as well as numerous social, legal, and economic restrictions, reflected deep-seated racist attitudes towards all Asians. Many of those who had already arrived in Canada lived an uncertain existence without wives or children, and they did not have the right to vote. Significant changes to Canadian immigration policy with regard to South Asians after World War II gradually addressed the realities of the post-colonial era; overtly racist practices were harder to justify after the emergence of potentially powerful, independent Asian and African states. Thus, by 1951 annual quotas for a token number of non-sponsored immigrants, over and above those in the sponsored-immigrant category, from the three South Asian countries were established: 150 for India, 100 for Pakistan, and 50 for Sri Lanka. This landmark change in policy set the stage for a fundamental transformation of South Asian communities in Canada.

By 1960 Tamils had begun arriving in this country from the Indian state of Tamil Nadu and from Sri Lanka. The numbers from both areas before the mid-1960s were small, perhaps amounting to less than one hundred individuals by 1960, according to community estimates. Like other South Asian migrants at this time, they were predominantly English-educated professionals from the middle and upper-middle classes in their homelands. Given that both Tamil Nadu and the Tamil-speaking areas of Sri Lanka had produced an unusually large English-educated class with a long history of professional and administrative service under the British, it is not surprising that most of the early Tamil immigrants to Canada came from this background.

The numbers gradually increased after the introduction of the point system for independent immigrants in 1967 and also because of the sponsorship of family members. Unlike the Punjabis, who had come by ship and established themselves in British Columbia, most Tamil immigrants arrived by airplane and settled first in the provinces of Ontario and Quebec. A significant number in the 1960s and 1970s came by way of Great Britain, where they had previously settled but become disenchanted with increasing racism in that country and lured by greater economic opportunities in Canada. Since the majority of newcomers were well educated and familiar with British institutions, they had few problems adapting to Canadian life. These early Tamil immigrants were highly mobile and settled wherever they could find adequate employment. Many moved to Alberta during the boom in oil production there in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

There appears to have been significant growth in the immigration of Indian Tamils to Canada between 1970 and 1980. Their population at present is thought to be around 4,000. The vast majority live in Ontario. Smaller numbers are to be found in Quebec, Alberta, and British Columbia. India's Tamils are much more dispersed than those from Sri Lanka, especially when compared to the Sri Lankan Tamils who arrived after 1983.

The number of Tamils from Sri Lanka in Canada remained low until the early 1980s, reaching only about 2,000. In the following years, however, the population grew dramatically. The scale and ferocity of anti-Tamil riots in Sri Lanka in 1983 not only convinced many to leave but also persuaded the Canadian government to extend refugee status to those fleeing violence and political persecution in the homeland.

The 1991 Canadian census confirms an increase in the number of Tamils, although the figures in various reports differ, sometimes widely. With regard to the question of ethnic origin, only 15,695 responded they were wholly (8,690) or partially (7,005) of Tamil background. On the other hand, 30,220 persons responded that Tamil was their only (24,745) or one of their (5,475) mother tongues. Nearly as many – 26,825 – said Tamil was the exclusive (23,090) or one of the languages (3,735) spoken in the home. Since the 1991 census, the numbers have continued to grow significantly: in 1994 Immigration and Citizenship Canada reported that there were 67,837 Tamils from Sri Lanka as well as another 5,000 or so from other countries, bringing the total to about 73,000. Regardless of which 1991 census report is used, the information on settlement patterns is basically the same for ethnic origin, mother tongue, and home language. About 94 percent of all Tamils in Canada live in two provinces, Ontario (82 percent) and Quebec (13 percent), with only a few hundred at most in some of the other provinces. In all cases, Tamils have been attracted to urban areas, with Toronto accounting for nearly 64 percent of the entire group and Montreal 10 percent.

The post-1983 arrivals from Sri Lanka included not only the English-educated middle classes but also newcomers drawn from a wider cross-section of the population. Many were fleeing from the war-ravaged Jaffna peninsula. The overwhelming majority of the men, more than 80 percent, were between the ages of twenty and forty-five, and over half were single. Females constituted about 45 percent of the new arrivals, and approximately 80 percent of them were also under the age of forty-five.

Economic Life

Many of the Indian Tamil immigrants to Canada, who were in general highly qualified, found jobs in high schools, universities, and the professions. A number had come to Canada as graduate students and decided to stay only if they could obtain suitable employment. The majority were males. When they found work, they often sponsored their families to immigrate. It is difficult to know whether the wives were able to obtain employment in keeping with their educational backgrounds. Judging by community accounts, unemployment among Indian Tamil immigrants to Canada has been fairly low. The children of this group have been encouraged to pursue higher education in keeping with their families' ambitions. Many, like their parents, have university degrees and successful careers.

The educational and employment histories of the early Sri Lankan Tamil immigrants were similar to those of Indian Tamils. Many had professional qualifications and found jobs in engineering, accountancy, or other technical or managerial occupations. The experience of their wives was also probably similar to that of the Indian Tamils. Like their Indian counterparts, Sri Lankans placed great emphasis on their children's education. Both groups were highly mobile and not reluctant to move from one province to another in search of employment. Although they were well qualified, there is no doubt that many felt some form of racial discrimination. The older generation, with recent memories of the British colonial period, accepted such treatment as part of

the natural order. Their strategy was generally to make themselves indispensable to their employers.

The post-1983 immigrants from Sri Lanka have had more difficulty finding suitable employment. A number of factors contributed to this problem. They arrived at a time when the Canadian economy was only slowly recovering from a slump and, unlike the earlier immigrants, many did not have professional qualifications or fluency in English. The educational curriculum in Sri Lanka had significantly changed by the 1970s. In keeping with gradual decolonization, greater emphasis was now given to indigenous languages and cultures than had been the case in the earlier period. Even university graduates after the 1970s were not as fluent in English as those who had come to Canada in earlier decades. Also, the education of many of the new arrivals had been disrupted by the civil war. Those with adequate training and work experience in Sri Lanka faced the obstacle that Canadian qualifications were often required. The majority of post-1983 immigrants eventually found employment, but many did not obtain work commensurate with their qualifications or expectations and were obliged to take semi-skilled or unskilled jobs. Despite these hurdles, they have managed, through sheer hard work, to attain a fair degree of economic success. Many have bought houses and sponsored their families to immigrate.

Out of a small sample who reported Tamil as their first language in the 1991 census, around 50 percent indicated that they earned less than \$10,000 a year, and approximately 20 percent had an income of between \$10,000 and \$20,000. Another 20 percent reported earnings ranging from \$20,000 to \$40,000, approximately 3 percent from \$40,000 to \$60,000, and less than 1 percent over \$60,000. The number of males and females falling into the category under \$10,000 was approximately equal. However, with increasing income levels, the disparity between males and females broadened significantly. The total unemployment rate for Tamils calculated from this small sample was 22 percent, the figure for males being 18 and that for females 29. These calculations should be taken with extreme caution since they are based on a limited analysis of the Tamil-Canadian population. A high proportion of those in the sample were probably recent arrivals from Sri Lanka.

Some Tamil immigrants from Sri Lanka have opened their own businesses in order to circumvent the difficulties of finding suitable employment. The number of such enterprises has burgeoned, especially in the Toronto and Montreal regions, so that there is now a directory of Tamil-owned businesses in Ontario and Quebec. Published annually and called *Thamilar Maththiyil* (Among Tamils; Toronto, 1990–), it has a circulation of around nine thousand and lists over four hundred advertisers in both Tamil and English. Also included are institutions and organizations that serve the community. Tamil businesses range from grocery stores and restaurants carrying South Asian foods to astrologers, marriage brokers, car dealers, computer shops, insurance brokers, and real estate and travel agents. The majority of Tamil business ventures appear to be successful, and indications are that they are growing.

Community Life

The first Tamil immigrants from India and Sri Lanka had much in common despite their different origins. They came largely from the urban, English-educated middle and upper-middle classes and generally tended to have a liberal and cosmopolitan outlook. Although there were clearly some class and caste differences among these early arrivals, they were not as great as those that now exist within the Tamil community. Competition and social discrimination were minimal since the numbers were small, and Tamils tended to become integrated into mainstream Canadian society. Many settled wherever they could find employment and thus constituted a fairly dispersed community. Because their numbers were limited and the community scattered, it was difficult for these immigrants to transmit their culture to the younger generation. There were hardly any organizations catering exclusively to Tamils. Insofar as they belonged to community

groups, these tended to be either pan-Indian cultural associations or religious ones. However, they did have informal networks of friends and family that they maintained despite the great distances.

One of the first organizations that both Indian and Sri Lankan Tamils patronized was the south Indian cultural association called Bharathi Kala Manram, which has branches all over Canada. Formed in the 1960s, it is well known for its support of Carnatic music (the classical music of south India) and *bharata natya* (Indian classical dance) in Canada. The organization has often sponsored famous musicians and dancers from the home country to perform here. Many Tamils from Sri Lanka, especially before 1983, participated in both Indian and Sri Lankan cultural organizations in major cities such as Montreal, Toronto, Calgary, Edmonton, and Vancouver. The functions held by these groups, which included picnics, new year's dances, and cultural events, were the only occasions for many members of the community to get together, meet new arrivals, make friends, reminisce, and learn about events in the homelands. Tamils frequently drove hundreds of kilometres to attend.

With the dramatic increase in the Tamil population in Canada after 1983, the situation changed. Sri Lankan Tamils who arrived after that date were generally quite different from the earlier immigrants. The vast majority were from the northern Jaffna peninsula area, the heartland of Tamil culture in Sri Lanka, and were not drawn exclusively from the middle or upper-middle English-educated classes. Admission on humanitarian and compassionate grounds had enabled a wider cross-section of the population to migrate, and the newcomers were generally less anglicized and more imbued with a sense of Tamil nationalism and pride in their cultural and linguistic heritage. Even if they had not been personally involved with militant movements in Sri Lanka, they had lived through a strongly nationalistic phase in their community's history, and they brought with them a feeling of community solidarity and patriotism. These recent arrivals have managed to reproduce in Canada the kinship networks that they knew in Sri Lanka. The process has been made easier by the fact that the great majority have settled primarily in Toronto and Montreal. Many have sponsored family members and friends from their home village or the area of Jaffna. School alumni organizations established in Canada have also helped to re-create old connections.

The arrival of the post-1983 Tamils fundamentally changed Tamil community life in Canada. Since recent immigrants vastly outnumbered those who had come at an earlier period, the predisposition of the first immigrants to become acculturated to mainstream Canadian life has been significantly reduced, if not reversed. Community standards and cultural goals have increasingly been set by the new arrivals. The numerous Tamil organizations, businesses, religious institutions, and cultural programs, concentrated in the Toronto and Montreal areas, that have flourished after 1983 have led to a greater Tamil consciousness for both the earlier immigrants and the new arrivals. One of the first associations and now the largest is the Tamil Eelam Society of Canada. It was, in fact, founded as a cultural organization in 1976, before the influx of new immigrants, but it was transformed into a volunteer-based settlement agency in 1983. Currently it has four branches in the Toronto area alone. Although specializing in assistance to newcomers, it has begun to branch out to educational work, such as English- and Tamil-language instruction, computer classes, and employment counselling.

Many of the other community organizations, although not as long-established or as large as the Tamil Eelam society, offer a variety of services to the Tamil community in Canada. They include such groups as the Ulagiat Thamilar Iyakkam/World Tamil Movement, the Federation of Associations of Canadian Tamils, the National Association of Canadian Tamils, the Tamil Information Centre, the Tamil Resource Centre, the Canada Tamil Cultural Association, the Association of Sri Lankan Graduates of Canada, the Canadian Foundation for Tamil Refugee Rehabilitation, the Senior Tamils Centre, and the Canada Ceylon Tamil Chamber of Commerce, Ontario. Most of these organizations are based in Toronto or Montreal and are patronized largely, if not exclusively, by Sri Lankan Tamils. There seems to be only one organization devoted

exclusively to women, the group called Vilippu (Awakening) in Toronto. However, some of the other immigrant women's organizations, such as the Riverdale Immigrant Women's Centre in Toronto and the South Asian Women's Group, often have Tamil-speaking counsellors on their staff.

Family and Kinship

Though there are significant variations among Tamils in Canada, it can generally be said that families and family obligations play a significant role in the life of most members of the community. The family carries out functions that in other societies are left to the individual or the state, such as arranging marriages, providing for women in the form of dowries, and caring for widows and the elderly. Tamils have a tradition of cross-cousin marriages, which strengthens the family links, especially among siblings. The institution of caste also tends to reinforce family ideology. Because of its endogamous nature in Tamil society, members of a particular caste from a specific village are assumed to be at least distantly related.

The extended family is an important institution among Tamils from India and Sri Lanka. Even if the members do not actually live together, ties are generally strong. Despite both internal and external migration to more urban industrial settings, these connections have resisted erosion; indeed, family links may be reinforced by migration to unfamiliar locations because they help to overcome a sense of alienation. A great deal of respect is given to age in Tamil society, both within the family and outside it. Even among siblings, a sense of hierarchy is fastidiously observed. Most Tamils would not feel comfortable calling an older person by his or her name. They would either address such a person as *anna* (elder brother) or *akka* (elder sister), or, if the individual is significantly older, as uncle or aunt.

Tamils, especially from Sri Lanka, have an unusual combination of both matriarchal and patriarchal traditions. However, at least outwardly, authority is vested in the male. The husband is considered the head of the family, and the wife, at least according to tradition, is not supposed to address him by name. Women are encouraged to play a subordinate role in public. Within the domestic sphere, however, they often wield a considerable amount of power that compensates for the lack of power that they have in the public realm.

Dating is almost unheard of in Tamil society. Marriages are generally arranged by the family, the bride's family being expected to offer a substantial dowry (either land or money) in keeping with the status of the groom. The prospective groom or bride is sought among the same caste, with such factors as astrological compatibility, character, class and family background, employment, and dowry taken into consideration. The majority of Hindu Tamils would not consider marrying if the horoscopes of the partners were not compatible.

Rites of passage, especially for females, are observed. The most important one is the hair-cutting ceremony thirteen or sixteen days after birth, when the child ritually becomes a social person. The number of days varies with the caste of the family. For Brahman male children, the sacred-thread ceremony is seen as the rite of passage to social personhood; for females, significant rituals mark puberty, marriage, and widowhood. Marriage and children are highly valued in Tamil society, and single people and childless couples are often seen as having missed one of the most important functions of life. Since marriage is usually a social and familial agreement rather than a matter of personal choice, divorce is extremely rare, even for the most incompatible couples. Further, the position of women in Tamil society means that a divorced female is especially vulnerable, and it is considered a great wrong to place her in such a position.

Children, especially females, are expected to take care of their parents in old age. Though the handicapped and the mentally ill are generally looked after by the family, their presence is seen

by many of the older generation as a sign of misfortune. The strong family ideology that Tamil culture inculcates in its members prevents any public airing of marital or family problems. Physical and sexual abuse often go unreported since doing so would bring dishonour to the family.

Many of these values have been brought to Canada by the Tamils as part of their distinctive cultural heritage. The early immigrants, because of their greater degree of acculturation, slowly adopted many mainstream Canadian attitudes to family life. Some even allowed their children to date. Their views about marriage and family obligations, however, especially with respect to the care of elderly parents, remained largely unchanged. Most expected their children to marry Tamils from their own caste and class background. The partners were often sponsored from the home country. Nevertheless, a number of the children of early immigrants married non-Tamils from the general Canadian population.

The dramatic increase in the size of the Tamil community in Canada after 1983 has tended to reinforce the more traditional views about child rearing, gender roles, and family life. The fact that it is now possible for Tamils in this country to think of themselves as a community has led many of the earlier arrivals to conform to these standards. Post-1983 Tamil immigrants, because of their more traditional attitudes, have faced some problems adjusting to the Canadian environment. Many find that division of labour along gender lines is impractical. Wives who are left at home, often in large apartment buildings, do not have the same kind of community and family support as they would at home, and their life as newcomers to Canada is frequently one of extreme alienation from the society around them. The fact that many of the more recent immigrants are not fluent in English adds further to their feeling of estrangement. There has been a significant increase in family violence, wife assault, and divorce among Tamils who have come to this country since 1983.

Culture and Education

Traditional Tamil culture was formed by two distinct influences. The earliest came from ancient Tamil society. The ancient Tamils classified what they called *Tamilakam* (Tamil country) into five distinct ecocultural zones (*Ainthinai*), each with its own distinctive cultural and occupational characteristics: *kurinchi* (mountain areas), *mullai* (forest areas), *marutam* (fertile plains), *neithal* (coastal regions), and *palai* (dry lands). The literature from this period was largely secular in character and classified as either *aham* (dealing with inner feelings or love) or *puram* (dealing with outer life or heroic deeds) poetry. The worship of the mother goddess *amman* and the god *murugan*, still popular among the Tamils today, seems to have been prevalent already in ancient times.

The second influence was that of Indo-Aryan language, religion, and culture, through the migration of Hindu Brahmins to southern India beginning around the second century C.E. By the tenth century, Brahmanism and Sanskritic culture had been integrated with the earlier traditions of the Tamils. The dominant warrior-cultivating castes in the Tamil areas had adopted the Brahman ideology of caste and ritual practices to help them bring together a variety of heterogeneous groups and traditions within a social structure based on the supremacy of the landed, warrior-cultivating castes. These aspects of Tamil culture were subsequently adapted to the needs and imperatives of a predominantly agrarian society. European colonial rule and English education did not fundamentally alter the traditional Tamil social structure and culture. Instead, new ways were found by members of the various castes to retain their power, status and culture in the new environment.

The traditional dress of the Tamils is the saree for females and the *salvai* (shawl) and *vetti* – a long, rectangular piece of cloth, usually made of cotton or silk, secured around the waist – for males. The major festivals of the Tamils are Thaipongal (Harvest festival) in January,

Puthuvarusham (Tamil/Hindu New Year) in mid-April, and Deepavali (Festival of Lights) in October. Although Sri Lankan Tamils and Indian Tamils share a common language and culture, their different geographic environments and political histories have contributed at times to significant differences in spoken language, cultural practices, and outlook.

Tamils in Canada have access to a wide variety of organized cultural activity. In addition to pan-Indian, south Indian, or Sri Lankan cultural organizations, many early Hindu Tamils in Canada attended informally organized religious functions or lectures given by visiting spiritual leaders from India. They also participated in associations that disseminated Vedantic philosophy and Yoga. Sathya Sai Baba associations (a form of Hindu religious organization) were popular as well. None of these organizations were exclusively Tamil; rather, they encouraged a pan-Indian Hindu or South Asian identity. Many of the early immigrants even began speaking English at home so that their children did not learn Tamil.

With the dramatic increase in the Tamil population after 1983, members of the community began to attach more importance to their language and culture. Sinhalese-Tamil ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka also increased the sense of solidarity. Language classes and instruction in Carnatic vocal and instrumental music and *bharata natya* were organized in areas with a large concentration of Tamils. The Tamil language can now be taken as a credit course at the high school level in Toronto, and textbooks for language instruction have been prepared up to grade eight. In addition, there are at least six weekly community newspapers published in Toronto and Montreal, all in the Tamil language. The earliest was *Senthamarai* (Red Lotus; Toronto, 1986–). Their names, such as *Thayagam* (Motherland; Toronto, 1989– 94) and *Eelanadu* (Tamil homeland in Sri Lanka; Toronto, 1991–), reveal the orientation of the community that supports them. So far there are no Tamil newspapers published in English, a fact that may reflect the community's dramatic change in attitude towards cultural maintenance. Monthly magazines and news programs on video are also available. Radio programs in Tamil are broadcast daily in Toronto and Montreal, and there is a weekly television program. The radio and television broadcasts feature news and cultural programs from both Canada and the home country.

There has also been a tremendous growth in the importation and distribution of Tamil movies from India. They are regularly shown in cinemas in Toronto and Montreal; most, however, are watched at home since a great variety of movies are available on video cassette. Tamil musicians, artists, and religious figures from India and Sri Lanka regularly visit Canadian cities to give performances and lectures. A profound change has taken place in the cultural life of Tamil Canadians as a result of large-scale immigration from Sri Lanka in recent years. Unlike earlier immigrants, who often patronized pan-Indian or mainstream Canadian cultural activities, those who arrived after 1983 support programs geared more exclusively to a Tamil audience.

Tamils have come to Canada with relatively high levels of education. Out of a small sample of individuals who reported Tamil as their first language in the 1991 census, fewer than 0.5 percent indicated that they had a grade nine education or less, approximately 50 percent gave their educational background as between grades nine and thirteen, around 30 percent had some postsecondary education, and about 10 percent held a university degree. There was not much disparity between the sexes, except at the university level, where the number of females was about half that of males. In keeping with the emphasis placed on education in Tamil society, the children of most Tamil immigrants are receiving a great deal of support in their educational ventures. Many are encouraged to pursue professional studies, especially medicine, engineering, and computer science. There are already a significant number of Tamil students in many major Canadian universities.

Religion

The religion of the vast majority of the Tamils in India and Sri Lanka is Hinduism. It is a form of Hinduism that is distinctly characteristic of South India, however, and is marked by the central role that the temple plays in the life and activities of the community. South Indian temples have a characteristic *gopuram* shaped (cone shaped) temple architecture. Tamil Hinduism is also much more ritualistic and conservative than Hindu practices found in northern India. The vast majority of Tamils in India and Sri Lanka consider themselves as belonging to the Saivite sect of Hinduism. Their Saivite identity was strengthened by the Saivite renewal movements which began in the nineteenth century as a response to the impact of colonialism and Christian missionary work in the Tamil regions. The more recent trend in both communities is towards a more cosmopolitan Hinduism that embraces the many diverse strands of that religion.

The overwhelming majority of Tamils in Canada are Hindus, particularly Saivite Hindus from Sri Lanka. Saivite Hinduism, centred on the worship of Shiva as the ultimate deity, has a long history of saints and canonical literature in both Tamil and Sanskrit in south India and Sri Lanka. Although there were few south Indian Hindu temples in Canada until fairly recently, many of the early immigrants kept up their religious observances either through informal gatherings or by attending pan-Indian Hindu functions. The first Tamil immigrants were generally more predisposed towards what is considered Hindu high culture, that is, a preference for Vedantic philosophy and Yoga rather than temple worship. Since the visit of Swami Vivekananda to the United States at the turn of the century, Vedantic and Yoga centres have been established throughout North America by his followers, as well as by adherents of other Hindu spiritual leaders. The Society for Krishna Consciousness is probably the best known of such groups.

With the arrival of large numbers of Sri Lankan Tamils, the organization and construction of south-India-style Hindu temples in Canada began. There are now at least three such temples in the Toronto region alone. The most impressive is the one in Richmond Hill, built with the help of experts in the sculptural and architectural traditions of the homeland. The Richmond Hill temple is unique in that it was erected through the efforts of both Indian and Sri Lankan Tamils. Priests in these temples are recruited from both India and Sri Lanka. A temporary temple exists in Montreal, and land has been purchased at a downtown location for a permanent building at an estimated cost of around half a million dollars. This structure is to be devoted to the goddess Amman, who is very popular with Tamils. With the introduction of regular temple worship, one of the most central elements of Hindu Tamil life in both India and Sri Lanka has been brought to Canada. Every Tamil village in those countries has at least one temple. In addition to fulfilling spiritual functions, it also plays an essential role in community life. Through ritual observances, the temple has traditionally maintained social order and hierarchy in Hindu society. As well, many marriages take place on the temple premises.

Not all Tamils, however, either in their homeland or abroad, are Hindu. The early Tamil Christians in Canada, like their Hindu counterparts, did not have places of worship devoted specifically to their own community. With the great increase in their numbers in cities such as Toronto and Montreal after 1983, however, Tamil congregations and services became possible. There are now at least five churches in Toronto. The majority of Tamil Christians in both South Asia and Canada are Roman Catholics. Although they represent only a small percentage of the Tamil population in Canada, their influence on the politics and culture of the community has been significant. Their organizations assist members with settlement and other problems that newcomers face. Christian organizations in both Sri Lanka and Canada also play a significant role as mediators in ethnic conflict.

There are at least two Islamic organizations in Toronto catering to the Tamil community. Tamil Muslims in Canada account for only a few hundred individuals. The majority are from Sri Lanka, and many of them arrived recently because of increasing political unrest in the northern and eastern regions of the country. Their numbers in Canada are likely to grow as a result of continuing violence in eastern Sri Lanka.

Politics

The first Tamil immigrants were not particularly interested in political matters. Belonging as they did to the English-educated middle classes in India and Sri Lanka, they were on the whole either quite conservative or indifferent to politics. Many had been disillusioned by the problems connected with the rising nationalism in their own countries and, to escape from them, they came to Canada in search of prosperity and political stability. Their primary concerns were economic issues and discriminatory legislation towards South Asian immigration or those already in the country.

The more recent Tamil arrivals from Sri Lanka, by contrast, are much more politicized. Emigrating from a country in the midst of intense conflict, many have experienced directly the impact of political turmoil and war. The increasing violence directed against them as a group, at least since the early 1980s, has led to a greater communal consciousness and solidarity. The various militant organizations that arose among them served to politicize them and heighten their sense of a distinctive Tamil identity. Their presence in Canada in large numbers has stimulated interest among earlier immigrants in the political struggles of Tamils in the homeland. The dramatic growth in newspapers and in radio, television, and video news reports from Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu has likewise contributed to a closer identification with political and cultural developments in South Asia.

Thus, the greatest impact of the recent Tamil immigrants from Sri Lanka has been to shift the concerns of the community from a preoccupation with life in Canada to an increased interest in events in the homelands. There are no formal political organizations in Canada, but many of the Tamil groups, in addition to their concern with settlement, lobby various government agencies for a solution to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. They also collect funds for relief efforts in that country.

Intergroup Relations

Since the early Tamil immigrants to Canada were more predisposed to integration with mainstream Canadian society, they saw themselves as part of a general South Asian diaspora rather than a particular linguistic minority. Their small numbers and scattered settlement made such a strategy both practical and inevitable. Most mixed freely with members of other South Asian groups, as well as with the larger Canadian society. The earlier arrivals from Sri Lanka also associated with the Sinhalese community in Canada and participated in its organizations. With increasing violence in the homeland after the 1970s, however, the mutual distrust that developed between the two communities was transferred to Canada, and many Sri Lankan organizations lost their Tamil members, becoming, effectively, Sinhalese societies. Antagonism between adherents of the various Tamil militant groups also seems to have been transferred to the Canadian setting. The major division has been between supporters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and those who are opposed to this organization.

The existence of large concentrations of Tamils in certain regions of Canada after 1983, together with the lack of fluency in English of many newcomers, may have acted as a barrier to the development of relations with other ethnic groups. Most seem more interested in establishing stronger links within the Tamil community than forming new connections outside. The great majority marry within their own ethnic group, and many do so by sponsoring partners from the home country. This marriage pattern further cements their links to the Tamil community. Some, however, move out of the ethnic neighbourhoods once they become more familiar with life in Canada.

Group Maintenance and Ethnic Commitment

The overwhelming majority of Tamils now in Canada are from the Jaffna region, which has been the focal point of Tamil militancy in Sri Lanka at least since the early 1970s. One of the consequences of this protracted and brutal conflict has been that Jaffna has become increasingly isolated from the rest of the country, as well as from the world beyond. A once vibrant, outward-looking community has had to adopt an increasingly defensive nationalist orientation. This development may help to explain the strong ethnic commitment now evident among Tamils in Canada. Their sense of identity has also been fostered by the degree of concentration in a few urban areas in Canada and by the arrival of family members, especially the older generation.

The leadership in the community, which is largely held by more recent immigrants, has stimulated a high degree of interest in and commitment to the Tamil struggle in Sri Lanka. It has also encouraged a dramatic surge in cultural activities within the space of a decade. The earlier Tamil immigrants have either joined this movement or retreated to the margins of the community. What is difficult to determine is the degree of ethnic commitment or cultural orientation on the part of the new generation. Many of the children of immigrants have been able to grow up in a Tamil environment, and they have an extended network of relatives, including grandparents, in this country. Parents send their children to special classes to learn the Tamil language and traditional music and dance. Although their familiarity with the language and culture of their ancestors is not in doubt, it is a matter of debate whether these young people have the same attachment to the home country or the same degree of ethnic commitment as their parents.

Further Reading

There are numerous works on the Tamils in India, most being highly specialized academic studies. An exception is the engaging and insightful account of Tamil culture and family life in India by Margaret Trawick, *Notes on Love in a Tamil Family* (Berkeley, Calif., 1990). Susan S. Wadley, ed., *The Powers of Tamil Women* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1991), is a collection of essays on Tamil women both in India and Sri Lanka. For a good introduction to the history of the modern period of Tamil history in India, see E.F. Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India: The Non-Brahman Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916– 1929* (Berkeley, Calif., 1969).

A recent work that provides a good introduction to the Sri Lankan Tamils and the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is Chelvadurai Manogaran and Bryan Pfaffenberger, eds., *Sri Lankan Tamils: Ethnicity and Identity* (Boulder, Colo., 1994). There are also a number of more detailed works on Tamils and their culture in Sri Lanka, including Bryan Pfaffenberger, *Caste in Tamil Culture: The Religious Foundations of Sudra Domination in Tamil Sri Lanka* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1982), and R.S. Perinbanayagam, *The Karmic Theatre: Self, Society and Astrology in Jaffna* (Amherst, Mass., 1982). For a good introduction to the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, see S.J. Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* (Chicago, 1986).

There is little scholarly work devoted exclusively to the history of Tamils in Canada. Occasional references to their early history in Canada can, however, be found in many of the general works on South Asians. The most comprehensive of these is Norman Buchignani, Doreen M. Indra, and R. Srivastava, *Continuous Journey: A Social History of South Asians in Canada* (Toronto, 1985). Works dealing with South Asian life and adaptation in Canada also often contain information pertaining to the earlier Tamils in Canada; see, for example, Milton Israel, ed., *The South Asian Diaspora in Canada: Six Essays* (Toronto, 1987).

The few existing works on the Tamils in Canada deal almost exclusively with the Sri Lankan Tamils and are often brief sketches published by various organizations and interest groups of the Sri Lankan Tamil community. P.R.W. Kendall, *The Sri Lankan Tamil Community in Toronto* (Toronto, 1989), is a concise work that is largely concerned with the health practices of Sri Lankan Tamils in Toronto. See also Balagouri Vicky Kandasanny, "Findings on the Tamil Community" (City of York, Community Services, 1995). Although written in an informal style,

this work contains useful information on the Tamils in Canada. There is also a brief article on women: Sudha Coomarasamy, "Sri Lankan Tamil Women: Resettlement in Montreal," *Canadian Women Studies*, vol.10, no.1 (1989), 69–72. The experiences of a Tamil refugee family in Toronto, based on oral-history interviews, are recounted in Elizabeth McLuhan, ed., *Safe Haven: The Refugee Experience of Five Families* (Toronto, 1994).

Statistical information on Tamils in is found in Arul S. Aruliah, "Accepted on Compassionate Grounds: An Admission Profile of Tamil Immigrants in Canada," *Refuge: Canada's Periodical on Refugees*, vol.14, no.4 (1994), 10–14. There is also useful background information on Canada's acceptance of Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka, as well as other information pertaining to Tamil refugees and the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, in *Refuge: Canada's Periodical on Refugees*, vol.13, no.3 (1993). The Census Canada data on home language and mother tongue for 1991 are of some help for compiling an educational and occupational profile of recent Tamil immigrants: Statistics Canada, *Home Language and Mother Tongue* (Ottawa, 1992).

Other sources of information on Tamils in Canada are the various Tamil newspapers and magazines that are published in Toronto and Montreal. A particularly informative monthly Tamil magazine is *Thamilar Thagaval* (Tamil's Information; Toronto). The Tamil "yellow pages," *Thamilar Mathiyil* (Among Tamils), published annually since 1990, is also useful.

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(Source: Multicultural Canada)