United States of America

The United States today is home to a small but growing population of Sri Lankans from Sinhalese, Tamil, Moor, Burgher and Malay ethnic communities, among others. Sri Lanka’s ‘best and brightest’ have had a long history of taking up temporary residences in North America and Europe for advanced education and professional employment. Since the mid-1980s this profile has changed as greater numbers of Sri Lankans, primarily Tamils, have fled a lengthy civil war in their homeland to seek political asylum abroad, especially in Europe and Canada. Sri Lankans in the United States have shown themselves to be a versatile group of generally well-educated and solidly middle-class families active in the educational, medical, scientific, political, social, commercial, artistic, and philanthropic realms of American society.

Historical Origins

Sri Lankan Americans descend from a variety of ethnic groups, and the Sinhalese make up roughly half of the community in the United States. Sri Lankan immigrants have been differentiated from other South Asian ethnic groups in public records in the United States only since 1975. Earlier immigrant Sri Lankans were classified either as ‘other Asian’ or ‘South Asian,’ and the latter description remains on many data-collecting forms today (American Fact Finder, U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). The first Sri Lankans may have arrived towards the end of the 19th century along with roughly two thousand ‘other Asians’, according to U.S. immigration records—but it is impossible to confirm this. In 1975, fewer than 500 Sri Lankans immigrated to the United States (American Fact Finder, U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

Violence at home intensified in the 1980s and caused many Sri Lankan Tamils to seek refugee abroad. Few arrived in the United States compared to other countries such as the United Kingdom, India, and Canada. Of the estimated 25,000 Sri Lanka-born living in the United States in 2000, roughly 40 percent were naturalised U.S. citizens who mostly entered before 1989; by contrast, nearly three quarters of non-naturalized citizens entered after 1990, when the number of Sri Lankan asylum-seekers jumped as the danger of civil strife in their homeland grew stronger (American Fact Finder, U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Notably, between 1989 and 1990, this number increased by a remarkable twenty-seven fold in a twelve-month span.

Over the past decade, an average of 1,300 refugees per year (mostly Tamils) have been granted asylum in the United States [with the exception of 2004–05, in which relatively small numbers were admitted for reasons that are not clear (Statistics, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2011)]. Various estimates suggest that roughly 35 to 40 per cent of the Sri Lankan American diaspora today is of Tamil origin, with the remainder largely being Sinhalese. Of the two groups, the former tends to hold a higher profile both within and outside of the United States for their political activism.

Settlement Patterns & Population Characteristics

Sri Lankan Americans make up around six per cent of the entire Sri Lankan diaspora. The number of Tamil refugees accepted by the United States remains small especially when compared to Canada and Western Europe. Yet, notwithstanding stringent regulations on immigration, over the past ten years the Sri Lankan population in the United States has grown by an estimated 60 per cent. Many newcomers settle near their corresponding religious
Schools, charities, religious and cultural centres contribute to fostering a sense of collective identity and encouraging the preservation of cultural traditions alongside the incorporation of American values.

Some of the earliest Sri Lankan associations in the United States were formed in the 1970s, and were primarily aimed at promoting the welfare of expatriate members. The very first Sri Lankan-American community organisation—Sri Lanka Association—was established in 1978. The inaugural meeting on 2 October 1971, was attended by renowned Sri Lankan diplomat Hamilton Shirley Amrassanige as well as Cyril Ho High Commissioner to Canada William Silva. The association remains an important forum for social and fraternal activities among members, and encourages the retention of Sri Lankan culture among younger generations. It hosts a number of events ranging from annual Christmas gala to dinner dances, Sri Lanka Day celebrations, picnics, sports days and Sri Lankan New Year festivities. Besides serving the largest Sri Lankan community in the U.S., the association participates in charity activities and actively donates to government-recognised organisations in the homeland.

A similar organisation, the tax-exempt Sri Lanka Association of Greater Washington (SLAWGW) was set up in 2001 to field charitable and educational activities, and has received generous community support since its inception. In recent years, the number of Sri Lankan organisations in the U.S. has proliferated. That augmentation is largely the product of an increase in the size of the Sri Lankan-American population. While it is true that the growth of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has resulted in some Tamil emigrants distancing themselves from pan-Sri Lankan-associations, at the same time there have been efforts by these individuals to retain their sense of fraternity. Amongst these include initiatives by the Sri Lanka Association of New England (SLANE). The organisation, created by 50 Sri Lankan Americans in 1998 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, has sought to promote friendship, goodwill, peace and unity among the Sri Lankan community residing in and neighbouring regions of the state. SLANE has attempted to raise public awareness of and interest in Sri Lankan political and economic situation, to welcome new arrivals from Sri Lanka, especially students; to commemorate important national events; and to provide a forum for social, cultural and welfare community activities. Besides Christmas and National Day celebrations, the organisation hosts an annual Discover Sri Lanka project organised by young members for children to learn about their heritage in fun, interactive ways. The project simultaneously collects supplies to deliver to a school in Sri Lanka, and is one of three projects involving Sri Lankan-American youth in community service.

A distinctive feature of some of the more recent Sri Lankan American associations is the tendency to concentrate on educational and charitable activities. For example the Educate Lanka Foundation (ELF) launched in 2007 by two young Sri Lankan student expatriates at the University of Maryland, the non-profit organisation has sought to empower through education. With advisory guidance from two Sri Lankan-American professors and the greater Washington, D.C. area Sri Lankan community, ELF has developed a unique web-centric pre-to-peer model to enable underprivileged students in Sri Lanka to continue their education through micro financing. The foundation locates Sri Lankans around the globe, and publicises relevant cultural and social events. An electronic version of the publication is available free on the Sri Lanka Foundation Awards—to honour outstanding Sri Lankan Good News, a magazine that circulates to more than 10,000 Sri Lankan households around the globe, and promotes charitable giving events for government-led organisations. The SLF publishes more than 10,000 Sri Lankan households worldwide and specialises in health and business news. The magazine has attracted nearly a million readers from around the world, and a cultural parade known as PEARLxox is the main attraction. Additionally, the foundation holds an annual awards ceremony in Los Angeles—the Sri Lanka Foundation Awards—in honour of deserving members of the expatriate community in all disciplines. As part of a youth outreach-focus, the organisation also organises the Youth Exporter Sri Lankans (YES) World Youth Conference to foster networking, appreciation of Sri Lankan culture, and the empowerment of plans to aid the island nation. To address other aspects of Sri Lankan assimilation, the SLF stages an annual week Sri Lanka America beauty pageant and fashion show to showcase Sri Lankan elegance and culture to the American mainstream. Another popular event is the Cultural Concert, which brings well-known Sri Lankan performers before appreciative audiences. Finally, the foundation maintains social networking sites to facilitate community contact and provide a platform for such as Facebook, MySpace, Flickr and Second Life.

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While Sri Lankans identify themselves along various ethnic, linguistic, religious and regional identities, Tamils from the war-torn north and northeastern areas of the island have come to identify themselves as a distinct community both at home and abroad (Srikantharajah 2006). Often sympathetic to the LTTE in the past, the Tamil diaspora has significant lobbyists in the United States and generally maintains a higher profile around the world over their mostly Sinhala counterparts. For its part, the United States Department of State designated the LTTE as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in 2001. One consequence of this is the fact that the United States declines to extend asylum to any of its members. Combined with the more stringent overall immigration procedures, these designations likely account for the fewer numbers of Tamil immigrants admitted into the United States especially when compared to its northern neighbour, Canada.

Diaspora Politics

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Overall, transnational ties, political discourse and influence within a widespread Tamil diaspora were a critical mechanism for strengthening support for the Tamil cause within the homeland and direct Sri Lankan politics. The Tamil diaspora was intimately involved in the insurgency, using technology and social structures to mobilise and organise a specific diasporic identity that was strengthened over time (Fair 2005). Tamils all over the globe tend to view themselves as members of a single diaspora shaped by the politics within their home country. Shared grievances linked to ethnic identity, subordination and war tactics have, at times, attracted the attention of both the media and authorities in their countries of residences, which in turn has led to some clashes with local governments.

Buddhist Viharas, Meditation Centres & Societies

The Bhavana Society. Founded in 1985, the Bhavana Society began building a meditation centre in a mountainous forest region of West Virginia—not too far from Washington, D.C. The centre was opened in 1988, and expanded in the years that followed with the aim of protecting the Theravada forest meditation tradition within the context of the western culture. The Society provides a monastery for ordained monks and nuns to live as well as a training and cultivation for lay candidates. It also offers meditation retreats for the public, and is home to long-term residence. The founding abbot, Venerable Bhante Dr. Henepola Gunaratana, was born in the north of Sri Lanka and was fully ordained as a monk at age 20. In 1947. Popularly known as Bhante G, he internationally-recognized author and teacher spent five years doing research work among the Harjankas (Untouchables) of India and ten years in Malaysia before coming to the United States in 1968. He has worked as a chaplain at American University, where he obtained his degree and served as president of the Washington, D.C. Buddhist Vihara. He is the highest-ranking monk of his sect in North America.

The New England Buddhist Vihara and Meditation Center. Led by several Sri Lankan Theravada monks with experience practicing and teaching Buddhism and meditation techniques in Sri Lanka, South Korea and the United States, the centre is open to anyone who seeks solutions to life’s problems in a peaceful and understanding environment regardless of personal belief, begins with a Thera with the British Monks of the West and an official non-profit organisation in Framingham, Massachussetts, the centre offers meditation, counseling sessions, compassion and caring. Along with meditation classes, it holds discussion sessions on Buddhist philosophy, spirituality and counseling sessions based on Dhamma teachings and spiritual instruments for monks and lay persons. The centre occupies a 140-year-old house, home to four resident monks, and serves over one hundred New England families including those of Sri Lankan, Vietnamese, Bengali, Indian, Cambodian and Euro-American descent.

Ohio Buddhist Vihara. This Cincinnati, Ohio temple lists its primary objectives as providing for the spiritual, religious, ethical and educational needs of men and women of all faiths. It is serving the diverse spiritual needs of Buddhists and non-Buddhist alike, teaching and practicing meditation techniques in a calm, free-of-charge environment; and providing a cultural and social centre for Buddhists and non-Buddhist attendees. The temple’s mission is to disseminate the teachings of Buddhism, to acknowledge his services in disseminating the teachings of Buddhism, he was invited by Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapakse to visit the president’s official residence in Sri Lanka. Temple classes are given in epistemology, theory of knowledge, ethics and basic teachings. Other services include counseling, a dharma school, dharma conferences, discussion and meditation retreats. The centre is open to the Buddhist Vihara and Meditation Centre, language training and cultural activities to all communities in the area.

United States of America

Pro-LTTE Networks in the United States

The political activism of the Tamil American diaspora is instruction of Abrahamites, an in-depth metaphysical analysis of the mind and mental factors to advance understanding of Buddhist teachings; charting, and the observation of eight precepts over the more commonly-held fixed (detachment from things, keeping, being, from taking others’ belongings, from sexual misconduct, from intoxicating drugs and drink). The stated purpose of the temple is to promote Buddhist practice and insight in the minds of people; to advance cultural understanding; to advocate peace among nations; and to propagate places for Buddhist fellowship. Ministering to a stable Sri Lankan separate community, the temple, designed specifically for practitioners in English and Viemnese and is open to all religious traditions.

Minnesota Buddhist Vihara. The Minneapolis-based temple has affiliated temples in North and South Dakota, Iowa, Illinois, and Minnesota, all founded by the Minnesota temple abbot and president of the Vishuddha Sivayakasa, established since 2004. The mission of the temple is to create a peaceful and harmonious world. Overseas Sivayakasa also serves as a volunteer chaplain in the local police department and holds monthly meditation sessions for personnel. Under B. Venkatesh Thera, the temple has been involved in promoting Buddhist philosophy in disseminating the teachings of Buddhism, he was invited by Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapakse to visit the president’s official residence in Sri Lanka. Temple classes are given in epistemology, theory of knowledge, ethics and basic teachings. Other services include counseling, a dharma school, dharma conferences, discussion and meditation retreats. The centre is open to the Buddhist Vihara and Meditation Centre, language training and cultural activities to all communities in the area.

Georgia Buddhist Vihara. Open in Atlanta, Georgia since the summer of 2000, the vihara serves the religious needs of the region through daily chanting, puja and meditation, weekly Vipassana Meditation Dharma school, prayer (puja) and full moon observance, Dharma discussion and a meditation retreat alongside traditional Thai monastic life. The vihara is interested in the cultural practices of Sri Lanka and other Buddhist countries, as well as encouraging the practice of Dhamma (wisdom and meditation) and meditation techniques in a peaceful and understanding environment regardless of personal belief, begins with a Thera from the temple in Longmeadow, Massachussetts, the centre offers meditation, counseling sessions, compassion and caring. Along with meditation classes, it holds discussion sessions on Buddhist philosophy, spirituality and counseling sessions based on Dhamma teachings and spiritual instruments for monks and lay persons. The centre occupies a 140-year-old house, home to four resident monks, and serves over one hundred New England families including those of Sri Lankan, Vietnamese, Bengali, Indian, Cambodian and Euro-American descent.

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Tamil supporters ask for help in the battle for dignity

NOTABLE SRI LANKAN-AMERICANS

Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877–1947)

Born in Sri Lanka but raised in England, Ananda Coomaraswamy was a philosopher recognised for his exploration of the metaphysical nature of Eastern thought. His interest in the Sri Lankan subject matter and his drive to understand the Sri Lankan culture allowed him to publish a number of books and papers on Sri Lanka, which contributed significantly to the field of cultural studies. By the time of his death, Coomaraswamy’s work had established his reputation as an influential thinker whose ideas had inspired a generation of scholars and writers.

Ananda Coomaraswamy was a principal agency for the LTTE in the United States and decrying their influence over the Tamilobbies in the United States. He was a tireless advocate for the Tamil community, who maintained close ties with government officials. New York-based lawyer Visvanathan Rudrakumaran—afforded by the open border between the United States and moral support. Taking advantage of the easy access to the Tamils for Justice/Justice for Tamils organisation, and various U.S. government agencies became sites of introduction to the Tamil narrative of brutal Sinhalese against women, ethnic travel and rags-to-riches charts in record time. Known for themes of violence and post-war disputes, the Tamils are organised by high-profile activist groups.

The non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector, which influences Washington’s foreign policy agenda, and various U.S. government agencies became sites of introduction to the Tamil narrative of brutal Sinhalese against women, ethnic travel and rags-to-riches charts in record time. Known for themes of violence and post-war disputes, the Tamils are organised by high-profile activist groups.

Sangam Kumar (1942) – One-time Colombo native moved to the United States as a teenager and settled with his family in examining the role of the Tamils in the United States. The Tamils were closed only when it was determined that CA had generated enough revenue to meet quarterly projections. The company is now paying $225 million back to shareholders in addition to filing a claim with the Securities and Exchange Commission for the loss of the millions of dollars.

Ananda W. P. Garbha (1928–2013) – The Sri Lankan diplomat, author, and Buddhist leader graduated from the University of Ceylon at the age of 19 and went on to become a diplomat, author, and Buddhist leader. He served as Sri Lankan ambassador to France, the United States, and the United Nations. He was appointed as the second general of UNESCO. Dr. Garbha is proficient in English, Sinhala, and Tamil, and has held a variety of academic and leadership posts at the Los Angeles-based University of California, Berkeley, and the World Fellowship of Buddhists in addition to being Chairman of the World Buddhist University Council. Patrons of the Buddhist University were donor of the building.

Tamil supporters ask for help in the battle for dignity

Ponnamperuma was associated with the Apollo Program earned him cover stories in a variety of academic institutions ranging from the American University to the University of California, Berkley, where he taught a doctrine of universal peace, unity and equality until his death. People from all walks of life, including international figures such as West and East that served to cultivate appreciation for the richness of Indian heritage.

Coomaraswamy used intellectual exploration and founding an esoteric philosophical movement, literature and religion as well, and is credited with significant contributions to the fields of philosophy, and various U.S. government agencies became sites of introduction to the Tamil narrative of brutal Sinhalese against women, ethnic travel and rags-to-riches charts in record time. Known for themes of violence and post-war disputes, the Tamils are organised by high-profile activist groups.

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Respectfully the younger singer to Dr. Ponnamperuma’s classical compositions appears to be that he has not a fraction of his originality. While he was only a few years old, Dr. Ponnamperuma’s voice was noticed among the singers and he was brought to the attention of the public.

By 2002, he was both Chairman and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of CA, Inc. (now known as CA, Inc. (formerly known as Computer Associates International, Inc. (CA)) in 1987, he quickly rose through the ranks to head the company in 1989 and serve as its President and COO at the age of 31.

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of Tamil civilians. The Asian Tribune reported the large gathering as assembling on ‘short notice and little organisation,’ and providing a visible counter to the propaganda of ‘pro-LTTE professionals and activists’ (Gamage, 22 February 2009) in America. Congress also funds groups such as The Asia Foundation, which has occupied a ‘quiet but important’ role in strengthening democratic institutions in the country and supporting the Sri Lankan government long before civil war broke out and the Tamil diaspora took shape (U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations 2009).

Diaspora Influence On U.S.—Sri Lankan Relations

While Western countries with large Tamil diasporas grew critical of Sri Lanka’s handling of the war and human rights record, non-traditional, no-strings-attached sources of aid and investment—like China—stepped in to fill the void left by Western donors that preferred to qualify the terms of their loans (Mendis, 2010). This shift was charted by a Senate Foreign Relations report, the Kerry-Lugar Report, which noted the decisive role China played in determining the outcome of the conflict by providing massive funding to the Sri Lankan government that was then used to defeat the LTTE. Observing that the political environment in Sri Lanka was ‘not as black and white as many outside observers believe,’ the report quoted Sri Lankan government officials citing American refusal to ‘help Sri Lanka finish the war against the LTTE,’ for pushing the country to develop relationships with countries such as Burma, China, Iran and Libya (U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations 2009).

Concerns for human rights and other humanitarian issues, whether overstated or legitimate, led the United States to curb aid to the Sri Lankan Government. Colombo found it difficult to deal with the ‘stick’ approach employed by Washington, often lobbied by the Tamil diaspora, and relations between the two countries soured. The report closed by noting that future U.S. policy toward Sri Lanka ought not to be dominated by ‘a single agenda’ which ‘shortchanges U.S. geostrategic interests in the region’ (U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations 2009).

In sum, although the civil conflict in Sri Lanka officially came to an end in 2009, the diaspora’s self-perception remains largely ethno-centered. Despite residing mainly in liberal host countries, the community tends to stay tied to the traditional loyalties and social frameworks of their homeland. This highly politicised atmosphere is what migrants are welcomed into, which, while easing the process of integration into the local community, often simultaneously assimilates new arrivals into an anti-Colombo, pro-Tamil movement. However, in comparison to the Tamil Canadian diaspora (whose activities have received much scrutiny from Canadian media and authorities), the Tamil-American community goes largely unnoticed by the press. The United States’ early action to designate the LTTE as a terrorist organisation and prohibit fundraising on their behalf likely discouraged the formation of a robust and overtly politically active Tamil diaspora like that in Canada, which held no such view or prohibition against LTTE support until much later.

Participation rates in events such as protests and demonstrations were far fewer in the United States than in other countries with established Tamil diasporas. This is probably partly due to the fact that a larger percentage of Sri Lankan Americans arrived before 1990, looking for economic opportunity rather than political asylum. These typically professional immigrants escaped the bulk of the violence in Sri Lanka and as a group they appear to identify less with Tamil identity than later migrants, which has allowed for more complete integration into American society. One sign of this is that second generation Sri Lankan Americans tend to be highly Americanised and largely isolated from transnational diaspora politics. Young, second-generation immigrants also help each other with assimilation, and a plethora of South Asian and Indian student associations and cultural groups exist to aid newcomers. Another reason for the seeming lack of interest in Tamil politics in general is that the dispersion of Sri Lankans across the country has led to the absence of large Tamil communities (to rectify this, an allegedly LTTE dominated-Federation of Tamil Sangams of North America, FeTNA, was established in 1987).

Finally, while international Tamil political activities are carried out in high-profile public forums designed to attract attention, pro-Tiger Tamil Americans seem to prefer a Washington-centric strategy of relying on key individuals in positions of influence, as well as a network of savvy elites and professionals, to advance their agenda. This has led to less militancy within the Tamil American community and Washington has been, for the most part, a bit player in Sri Lankan politics. As Washington seeks to rework the power balance in its relations with Colombo, it may move away from advancing the Tamil agenda. This could cause a more noticeable split between Tamil Americans and the international Tamil diaspora, or could cause more radical Tamil Americans to reach out to a greater extent to their counterparts in Canada where the LTTE retains a much stronger hold.

Patrick Mendis

Dinner and Dance night by the Sri Lanka Association Washington, DC (SLAWDC).