

A KINGDOM LOST

THE STORY BEHIND THE TAMIL BOATS

Driving the boat journeys of Sri Lankan Tamils trying to reach Australia is the story of a forgotten people and a kingdom lost, writes STARTTS counsellor **NARMATHA THILLAINATHAN.**

● The trans-migration of Tamil Sri Lankans is certainly not a new one. It's the continuation of a journey taken by many Tamil civilians over the last 30 years. The Tamils, a minority in a majority Sinhalese county, have lived in Sri Lanka for thousands of years. I am one of those many Tamils who have left the shores of my homeland in search of safety and a more equitable way of life. This is my story.

My memory of Sri Lanka as a five-year-old girl growing up in our hometown of Jaffna in northern Sri Lanka is one of innocence and fear. The fear, which I can still clearly recall today, derived from witnessing various dark events in my homeland. The innocence came from the fact that I was too young to understand what was happening. Yet I still followed without question all the strict directions given by my mum and dad, fondly referred to in the Tamil language as my 'Amma' and 'Appa'.

Amma and Appa never uttered a word; they never explained the situation we lived in. I recall when we heard 'loud' noises my elder sister, brother and I would be terrified and run to hide in the bunker - a space under the chimney at the rear of our house - for a feeling of safety. I was too young to understand what a mortar shell was or what damage it could do, but the terror in my older sisters' eyes told me that I should hide too.

Thinking back, the violence that surrounded us shaped the way we lived and thought. I now understand why, when little five-year old girls in other parts of the world played with dolls, my most precious possession was a toy machine gun, which I would take with me whilst hiding under the bunker. I still remember my favourite gun.

Our family home was situated in the central part of the city, near Jaffna hospital, the heart of the Tamils and a popular target for aerial bombings and mortar attacks. Though I was too young to have memories of the 1983 riots I still experienced the brutality and destruction of the civil conflict.

My favourite cousin, whom I am ever so indebted to for saving my life, one day, came to visit our home. He jumped on an old bicycle and informed us we were going for a ride. My sister was seated on the back of the bike and I was on the handlebars. It was no ordinary ride, my cousin cycled with all his might to a far away town called, Thinnaveli. After many days, when we returned home to Jaffna, I recall seeing a massive hole in our living room and the roof. No one explained to me what had happened.

I rushed to its doors to see if any damage had occurred to the many framed pictures of Hindu deities which adorned the surfaces of our prayer room. Miraculously, not one single picture frame was damaged. It's a moment I'll never forget. I made sure no-one was watching and slowly closed the prayer room doors for privacy. I shut my eyes and bowed in gratitude with my hands together to the gods. Then I cried and cried.

As a little girl I didn't really know who the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE/Tigers) were or why they had been formed. I did know that if the Tigers visited we had to be prepared. In response to their demands my mother had to hand over some of the jewellery she owned (one of our biggest forms of wealth) and my father whatever money we had. If we didn't, we would have been branded government sympathisers, harassed by the Tigers and perhaps even killed. And yet in most quarters, that support came freely, as the Tigers put their lives on the line constantly repelling the Government attacks in the North.

It was through defence of the Tamil population in the north that many, including myself, are alive today. It is for this reason that the Tamil tigers are supported by many in the Tamil diaspora even after their defeat and their own culpable acts.

Still, as a naive child, I used to wonder why my mother had to give away her jewellery. Was giving up your economic freedom worth the gaining

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of some limited personal freedoms? The answer came the year following the bombing of our house, when we moved to Colombo. Our home was often, 'inspected' by the Sri Lankan military. I was told that young Tamil men often disappeared during the 'inspections' never to be seen again, while girls and women were raped.

As time passed by the situation in Sri Lanka deteriorated and our lives were increasingly at risk. Many Tamils were seeking to leave Sri Lanka. With the little money he had left my father sought an expatriate opportunity in Zambia. Although he was a qualified civil engineer, intelligent, brave and highly respected the thought of leaving his home and family was terrifying. Not knowing when he would see us again was an immense sacrifice and a courageous act. My uncle paid for my father's air ticket to Zambia. I still recall my father telling me that he borrowed money from my uncle (again not knowing how and when he would repay the debt). He lived penny-by-penny until his perseverance was rewarded with a job as a Civil Engineer for the Ministry of Water Board in neighbouring Zimbabwe.

During that time, I have fond memories of days with my mother. She struggled to find a teaching position. Opportunities for Tamils were restricted then as they are today. I still recall the song she sang to me - "Que sera sera, whatever will be, will be". It was so vivid in its sense of helplessness. Thankfully for us the "whatever will be" was that after many months my father saved enough to pay for our travel. In 1987 we started a peaceful life in Zimbabwe

Our hopes in Zimbabwe were fleeting. Under the stewardship of Robert Mugabe the political situation became unstable and after a few short years yet again we had to consider where our next home would lie. The situation in Sri Lanka was not looking promising so that was not an option. As a teenager it felt as though I had no home to return to, no sense of

belonging to this world.

My parents successfully lodged an application to migrate to New Zealand where my new life began. Today, having lived in Australia for almost seven years, I reflect on my nomadic refugee-like experience. It is this struggle that has led the little girl with a toy gun to become a psychologist, passionate to help other survivors of torture and trauma.

I am extremely proud to be an Australian and given my history would never take for granted the human rights that are central to our existence in this amazing country. And yet, I do sometimes wonder what it would be like to return to Sri Lanka. I still pray for peace, if only to keep the faith of that five year old girl alive.

FACTS ABOUT SRI LANKA

Area (sq km)	65,610
Population	2006 19,886,0001
GDP per capita (2006)	(US\$) 4,300
Life expectancy	male (years) 68.82
Life expectancy	female (years) 76.32
Adult literacy rate	(2000-2005) 91.3%
Ethnic/religious groups	Sinhalese 74% Tamils 18% Muslims 7%
Languages	Sinhalese speak Sinhala; Tamils and most Muslims speak Tamil
Religions	70% Buddhist, 15% Hindu, 7% Muslim and 7% Christian

