Recasting Caste: War, Displacement and Transformations

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Abstract

This article analyses the shifting fault lines of identity forged in the blood and sweat of everyday life under the different regimes of surveillance foregrounded in the civil war of Sri Lanka. This article explores the manner in which displacement, return, and the aftermath of the war, realigns networks into new webs of reciprocity, in which exchange, including prestige and respect, circulate differently, in the shadow of state and non-state actors. In the shadow of state and non-state actors, the spatial practices, networks and identities surrounding caste are transformed and recast.

The concept of caste is used not as a ‘primordial’ or pre-modern entity but as a lived social formation which assumes different trajectories at different historical moments. Illustrated here is the manner in which ascribed identities are embedded in networks that engage spatial structures, narratives of self and actualised practices, in the same manner as achieved identities, as for instance, social class.

Keywords: spatial practices, surveillance, caste, inversion, brokerage

Introduction

*We return home, but not to the same place.* (Bender & Winer, 2001:15)

I explore the transformation of caste identity that occurs when the social ties and spatial practices anchoring people to place and each
other are torn asunder by war. Achille Mbembe (2003) points out that, spatial relations on the ground are rewritten while occupations rage, territory is fought over and modes of control come into operation. The narratives collected in this study illustrate Mbembe’s insight into spatial relations. It traces the new history forged at the intersection of different modes of control—the State and the LTTE—by the subjects of this study.

My research\textsuperscript{1} was conducted in a Tamil village in the North East of Sri Lanka hitherto referred to as Ramyapuram. Caught in the middle of the Civil War between the Sri Lankan Government and the Rebel group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the village was affected from 1985 until the end of the war in 2009.

This article is based on interviews I conducted with the villagers over a period of three months in 2005. The people in the village had suffered during the war and were wary of an outsider. Building trust was not easy in a climate of fear and distrust, especially in a setting where informants had been used by both the State and LTTE to target the villagers. I interviewed 25 women during this three month period. These interviews were semi-formal conversations conducted over lunch, tea and the exchange of recipes in which fragments of narratives emerged over a period of time. These fragments repeatedly coalesced around the axis of caste, and I began to realise the importance of caste in the construction and transformation of identity in the experience of war. The destruction of lived spaces, being confined within refugee camps and the surveillance of the land spaces involved the transformation of spatial practices. This plays an important role in this study.

Since the women identified the period between 1985 and 1993 as one of devastation and change, this article is based on their experience during

\textsuperscript{1} The fieldwork for this research was enabled by a research grant from ICES. I wish to thank Prashanth Kuganathan for his insights on caste.
this period, and focuses on the narratives of women who consider themselves at the low end of the village hierarchy based on caste.

The Village before displacement had a particular structure and system. The major castes in Ramyapuram were the Vellalar and the Karaiyars. According to the villagers there were 350 Vellalar families and 75 Karaiyar families before the war, whilst there were only five Pallar families and two Vannar families. The Pallar families and one Vannar family did not return back after the period of displacement in 1990. All of the Karaiyar families and less than half of the Vellalar families returned. Caste and livelihood were generally interwoven in the village and upheld by socio-spatial boundaries. The boundary between castes was policed and maintained very carefully through the binary of purity and pollution, which was realised primarily through the exchange of food and touch. Thus social interaction was controlled very carefully by the Vellalars. The article therefore also focuses to a significant extent on the navigation of social ties and hierarchy between the Vellalars and Karaiyars, although the experience of the one Vannar family is also included.

**Everyday Spatial Practices**

The school and the temple reinforced caste relations. For instance, a young Vannar caste woman recalled that she was never allowed any ‘front spaces’ in school. Although she considered herself a good actress, she was not chosen for any roles in the school plays. She felt that her talents were pushed into the background until she felt herself clinging to the background, moving into some realm of invisibility. The principal was a Vellalar man who once punished her for standing up for another Vannar caste girl who was being bullied by a Vellalar student in the school bus. The teachers from the town (which was an hour away by a crowded, hot and dusty bus that arrived once every two hours) did not adhere to caste rules, but were too few in number,
and were in too much of a hurry to be on time for the afternoon bus. The women in my sample felt that even though the teachers from the town did not share the same caste ideas as the local teachers, the distance that they had to travel prevented them from participating in any extra-curricular activities that would have engaged and encouraged the children considered to be of a lower caste. The village teachers thus inevitably ran the school without any dissenting voices, were embedded in its structures, and reproduced these relationships in school.

The temple, moreover, replicated the caste relations within the village. For example, only those of the Vellalar caste could handle the food that would be communally cooked during any collective festival. This inevitably created a sharp divide between the Vellalars and the other castes. Even when the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) imprisoned the men of the village for the day, and the women sat outside cooking, the women gathered according to caste to do the cooking.

Though networks of reciprocity ran through the whole village it was factored through the prism of caste bound rules. Caste was a pivotal axis of identity and everyday life was organised in the village around it. These relations were also reflected in, reproduced through, and constituted by spatial sites such as homes, fields, beaches, schools and temple of the village. These specific spatial relations upheld power relations, and even the kitchens and chairs of the higher castes became props around which these hierarchies were played out.

**Interactions between the Vellalar and Karaiyar Castes**

The caste hierarchy, however, was not absolute and was subject to constant negotiation by all its participants. The Karaiyar caste was independent of the Vellalar caste, economically strong, and known to be vocal in their dissent, especially if they felt slighted. They also
emerged as the money lenders of the village whom the Vellalars turned to in time of need.

There was an extremely delicate balance in the social relations between the Karaiyars and the Vellalars with both parties constructing a charade of equality. The people of the Karaiyar caste ruptured this veil of pretence if the acts of caste pollution were overt and visible. Ruptures brought on loud arguments from those of the Karaiyar caste and since engaging in quarrel signified equality, the Vellalars avoided rupture, or withdrew from the interaction if an argument arose.

Therefore, although the taboo of food and touch were upheld by the Vellalars, these practices were negotiated and navigated to the extent that it did not cause rupture. An economically equal Karaiyar visitor may be offered a cup of tea, but in the veranda outside the home and not inside. The veranda is a transition point between the street and the home. Guests, even if they are same caste neighbours, especially if they are men who had dropped in for an informal chat, are often entertained on the veranda. However those of the Karaiyar caste were rarely invited inside and understood this to be a spatial demarcation that showed them their place. Those of the Karaiyar caste who are respected members of the community may be invited to a celebration and treated as honoured guests, but the Vellalars would not eat with them.

The interactions between the Vellalar and Karaiyar castes were therefore both complex and delicate, with both parties understanding the fragility of the situation and the potential for rupture. Although people of Karaiyar caste resented these social interactions they accepted them, and policed the boundaries carefully so that these acts of caste were not blatantly visible. The spatial practices of caste of the
Vellalars with the Pallars and the Vannar were, similarly, ones of blatant inequality.²

The War

From 1985, the presence of the Sinhala Nation began to be etched on the landscape of these villages. Barbed wire wrapped around familiar and beloved sites of the village such as the school or a communal building heralded new spaces and places of control over the Tamil population. Arbitrary shelling from the air, sea and ground, which targeted villages, bulldozing of homes by armoured vehicles, the presence of an ethnically segregated armed forces who could search and detain, torture and kill, the hooded man who was brought to identify terrorist sympathisers, the practices of disappearance and violence created a visual ensemble of spatial practices which highlighted and proclaimed the power of the Sinhala Nation upon the territory which was deemed Tamil. I use the words Sinhala State and Nation with caution. The word ‘Sinhala’ was rarely used when discussing the violence; it was always ‘the army’, or ‘navy’ or the ‘Sri Lankan Army’ juxtaposed with the ‘Indian Army’. Thus, rather than solely juxtaposing a Tamil Nation against a Sinhala one, what I illustrate in this article are the nuances of Tamil identity as it moves through new spatial territories, practices and social relations in displacement as existing networks and everyday spatial sites are ripped apart.

Achille Mbembe’s description of colonial occupation fits some aspect of this visual ensemble; “Colonial occupation was itself a matter of seizing, delimiting and asserting control over a physical geographical area, of writing on the ground new spatial relations”(2003: p.25). In this context, the army and refugee camps become containers of surveillance of the population.

² The Pallars and the Vannars would be offered tea in a coconut shell, or lesser cup, and would not be allowed into the veranda.
The attacks on Ramyapuram began in 1985. At first, gunboats began shelling, the stunned village residents had no idea how to protect themselves. Subsequently, the army arrived in the village and one woman told me that on that day she lost seven men in her life, her husband, brothers, father, cousin and a friend.

I was pregnant at that time. We ran into the undergrowth around our garden and hid, the men in front in a row, so that they could protect us, we were behind them. The army found the men first and shot them all. Their eyes were gone, they then brought us to the bodies to show us our dead men and then they burnt the bodies. It is to hide their deeds. In the evening when the army had gone we went to the government agent and brought him to the burnt bodies. He gave us a death certificate which said that they were murdered by unknown persons.

There were many more invasions of this village. People lived under the constant threat of torture and death. In 1987 the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) entered the village, taking over the cooperative store in the village, and every morning rounding up the men who were made to sit in the hot sun all day. The women would take the children and sit outside the IPKF camp. They would cook for their men and families, begging the peacekeepers to allow them to feed their men. The hot sun in this part of the country burns through the many layers of skin in just a few minutes like a hot iron and the fields lay barren as whole families spent their day at the IPKF camp.

People remember 1985-90 to be a period of invasions into their village through arbitrary bombings, army and IPKF occupations, round ups, disappearances and searches. However, the village was not forcefully emptied of its inhabitants. As two women told me:

We could not even eat, the shelling would start and we would have to crawl into hiding places. If you were out then you only had your luck to protect you. We would crawl under beds, and then come out when it was over to find all our livestock dead.
The Army\textsuperscript{3} would also bring a man sometimes half tortured to death that would sit inside the vehicle. The whole village would be rounded up and paraded in front of him and if he nodded his head the person right in front of him at the time would be taken away. The poor man would have been tortured so much that his head would nod all the time, because he may not be able to hold his head up, after they had beaten him.

People could not move around freely. The roads were closed, or manned and dangerous. Checkpoints were always unpredictable. The farmers could not transport more than the small allotted amount of kerosene, which was insufficient for their generators that operated water pumps for their fields. Fishermen could not fish due to intermittent bans on fishing. Thus, the known pathways of the everyday life began to break down, but these methods of surveillance did not reorganise the caste based networks of the village.

The year 1990 was a turning point for this village for it was completely destroyed by the Sri Lankan armed forces that engaged in a killing spree. The remaining villagers, mostly the women and children, were advised to go into refugee camps. One woman recounted her experience of counteracting this army order:

We lived very close to the Muslims of the adjacent village. So we thought we would be safe, that they would not bother us. They burst in on us and started beating all of us. One man picked up my little five year old and threw her against the barbed wire fence. I was beaten so much that I suffer still from excruciating back pains. My husband was taken away and killed that night. My children and I were all taken away and tied in some place, even the crying and terrified boy of eight, I kept the little girl with me. In the morning I realised that they were not coming back for us, and also that we could release ourselves. We then went to the refugee camp. My husband never came back.

\textsuperscript{3} According to the women in this study, round ups and the ‘hooded man’ who was an informer, were common to both the Sri Lankan and the Indian army. Therefore, in remembering these episodes the women did not distinguish between the Sri Lankan army and the Indian army.
Displacement ripped through these existing networks, dismantling everyday lived spaces, and forcing upon people new spatial ensembles such as the back streets and forests of their territory, refugee and army camps. With these new sites came new spatial practices, social boundaries and identities.

Displacement

Some of the narratives of the displaced women of Karaiyar caste are worth recounting here. One woman recalled fleeing with a mixed caste group from the village. The roads were too dangerous and they fled through the beach, walking all night long with only the clothes they were wearing. In the morning they were greeted by the Muslims and Christians of another village who brought them food. There were no other Tamils, all the Tamils seemed to have fled. They walked for a few more hours until they arrived into LTTE territory and were given food by the priest of the church there. The Tamils in that area were hostile to the displaced and identified them by their village name and proclaimed that since the village was predominantly of Karaiyar caste, all the refugees from that village were from the fisher caste. This identification of a whole village as one caste group—a non-Vellalar one—was then further followed by interactions that resonated with this recognition. The Vellalar caste people in this group were suddenly treated as the Karaiyar caste or lower in the caste hierarchy. This meant that the interactions in which they had been at the top of hierarchy were now reversed in their interactions with the host community.

Caste boundaries, as I illustrated before, were policed most virulently at the site of food exchanges. However, within the temporary structure which was the refugee camp there were only three pots in which to make rice and these pots circulated amongst many families. The exchange of rice pots and the sharing of cooking space made food taboos impossible to maintain.
The host villagers were hostile to the refugees and had little interaction with them, sometimes asking them to leave. Those displaced from Ramyapuram could not find an entry point into this community, which shut them out until an arbitrary incident provided an entry point. Kamala, a young newly-married woman of Karaiyar caste, was bathing in the lake with her husband wearing her only underskirt. She had only the clothes they had fled in, and she bathed in her underskirt whilst her washed clothes dried on the shore. To her dismay, her clothes had been stolen by someone, perhaps more desperate. Her husband gave her his shirt, and then tore part of his sarong so that she could cover her legs with it. Thus she was dressed in a man’s shirt and half a sarong, whilst he was dressed in only the other half of a sarong. As they walked through the streets to the camp in this strange and unfamiliar garb an older woman stopped to curiously inquire why they were dressed this way.

The older woman then took them to her house and asked her daughter to give Kamala a dress. The family of this woman owned a boat and belonged to the Karaiyar caste. The husband of the woman then invited the young husband to help him with his fishing nets and drying of the fish. This provided an entry point of the refugee villagers to work with the fishermen of the host community.

A few months before being displaced, whilst still in Ramyapuram, Kamala’s family had given an almsgiving for her father who had died the previous year. The food, after being blessed, and before being distributed as alms, was first distributed to the neighbours and friends in the reciprocal network of this household. They had also distributed the food to their Vellalar neighbour who had accepted it with due respect by sending them a small gift back. However, some members of Kamala’s household had witnessed this family throwing the food to their dog. The members of Kamala’s household felt that this was an insult to their father. “We asked them why they did not reject the food
instead of throwing it to their dog, and insulting a dead elder” said Kamala. This caused friction between the two households.

When we met this older lady (on the street) by chance and my husband got a job we started eating well. We could now have curry with our meals. My husband had the money to buy coconuts. We were all crammed together and the scent of our curry would fill the little place. On the first day that we cooked curry, the way we did back home, a little child in this (family [the Vellalar neighbouring family from the previous village], that gave my father’s almsgiving food to the dog) started crying, the scent of curry reminded him of home. To comfort him, his mother sent an older boy to me with a plate asking me if we could spare a little curry for the little child. We always gave him a little of our curry after that. Later my husband spoke to the man who had given him a job and others began to work at the beach too.

The men from the refugee community were incorporated only at the margins of the host community. Although among the refugees there were seasoned fishermen who would have sailed the boats for less, the reciprocal networks between the fishermen of the host community were very strong and the refugee men were only employed for work that older children could do, such as sorting the fish. The Vellalar and Karaiyar caste men both worked together on the beach. For the Vellalar man, such work of handling such impure products as dead fish for a livelihood would happen only when the boundaries upon which caste rests are artificially suspended by circumstance.

However, it would be wrong to assume that these prescriptions are rigid and static. For instance, fish is cooked and consumed in the homes of the Vellalars, and this fish would not be polluting when it is handled in the kitchen. Nevertheless it is polluting when it is handled on the beach as part of a livelihood. As the almsgiving of Kamala’s father illustrates there is an exchange of food between the Vellalar and Karaiyar caste according to context. By not accepting this food the Vellalar family had broken norms of acceptance and reciprocity. Thus,
caste prescriptions, as pointed out earlier, were delicate and negotiable.

A woman of Vannar caste described her journey, which moved along a different trajectory. The family fled to a refugee camp which was at a Methodist church. The church stood beside a school and a well, and the army conducted constant and regular search operations in the school.

All the refugees had to gather as soon as the army came, even if the women were in the middle of bathing. One day I was at the well, and could not come as quickly since I had to put on my clothes. The army man beat me terribly with a big branch of a coconut tree. My father who was there could not bear the sight, so we packed up as soon as possible and left for the town.

This family belonged to the Vannar caste in the village, and occupied one of the lowest rungs. They joined the family of this woman’s aunt (her father’s sister) where she continued her schooling. The family stayed awake all night as they were afraid to sleep as the front door was broken. Someone stayed guard:

We got videos from a burnt out video store and kept ourselves up by watching movies, but I got to go to school. In the village school they pushed me into the background because of our caste, but here, in town, the teachers respected hard work and intelligence, and I was able to make full use of whatever talent I had.

The social boundary of caste thus lost its impetus as spatial contexts changed. Caste is, therefore, precarious, for generally it had been moored within localised contexts; unmoored from this context, of village spatial practices, it floundered. This is also clear in the patterns of fleeing, as the first to leave were the Karaiyar caste. As soon as the shelling started in 1985 they began to organise and coordinate strategies for leaving by using the trade links they had, such as organising buses from the traders in town to take them to the ferry points when they
could cross over to India. Some told me that as soon as the first shelling stopped in 1985, they rushed into their boats and journeyed away. As one woman explained to me with sociological insight:

The fisher caste then was quite poor. They did not have their wealth tied up in land or homes. They could just pick up and leave. The landowning caste on the other hand, had their wealth tied up in lands and homes. They could not just leave. Also they were afraid that their caste would not be respected if they left the village to unknown lands in which they were strangers. Here, they are known and receive respect.

Thus those who participated in the lived relations of caste as a social boundary understood its village mooring, and its precariousness outside the village context. Those who were at the highest end and firmly entrenched in its structures were the last to leave, and paid a price for it, for most of the men who were massacred were from the Vellalar caste. The women estimate that 150 men from the 350 Vellalar families were massacred. People do not remember the men of the Karaiyar caste being murdered, although this information is merely based only on the memory of those interviewed. According to the women, all the displaced Karaiyar families returned.

Displacement ejected people into new spatial sites, opening networks to host communities in which social interaction was not underwritten by individual caste positions. These new host-refugee interactions, in turn, began shifting social boundaries and realigning existing hierarchies within those communities who were now refugees from Ramyapuram.

Kamala’s husband, a man of Karaiyar caste was the link between the Vellalars and the host community. At the same time as Kamala witnessed the social location of the Vellalars move down due to caste privilege being denied, the displaced Vellalar could see Kamala’s husband in a better bargaining position vis-a-vis the host community;
it was due to his links that many of them received jobs on the beach. Thus, social locations of prestige along the network were slowly being reworked as the man of Karaiyar caste connected the networks of the host community with those displaced from Ramyapuram.

**Coming Home—Reintegration**

Around the period from 1994 to 1995, financial aid was given through state funding to rebuild homes. The displaced people began to slowly make their way back home. As the residents began to rebuild their livelihoods and homes once again, Ramyapuram began to awaken cautiously again to the dynamics of its daily life, which though appearing to be the same as they were before the displacement, were, however, not the same.

The journey into displacement had begun with the residents of Ramyapuram continuing interactions with each other based on caste relations. As they had moved into the experiences of displacement together, the conditions upon which these interactions were premised collapsed, creating an inversion of caste relations in which those of the Vellalar caste were pushed to the bottom. The women of Karaiyar caste saw this inversion as a moment which opened up a window into reflexivity and empathy that was of paramount significance in these relations being overturned, even after the conditions of collapse were absent.

As Kamala described to me:

> After we came back I expected our relations with the higher caste household who threw away my father’s almsgiving food to the dog, and then asked for curry in the camp, to go back to the way it had been before. But it did not go back to the way it was. I remember the first time the lady of this household came to visit me after we had all returned. We spoke and then I did not offer her anything, knowing
Thus, it was not Kamala, the woman of Karaiyar caste, who shook the structure, though she was aware of the power implications of this structure as it surrounded her. She merely waited, and witnessed what she thought then, was its momentary collapse.

New spaces were slowly and quietly forged within the practices of the day as castes came together. The thresholds within homes, which higher and lower caste did not cross, were slowly being crossed. Another woman from the Vannar caste chipped in,

In [the] days before we had to go away, when my father went to a higher caste house, he was given a small bench outside to sit in, and a low quality cup, sometimes a coconut shell, to drink from. Last week he went to one of these homes and they brought out a chair for him to sit on, and they served him tea in a good china cup and saucer.

However, they also spoke of an older man of Vellalar caste who had come to a village meeting to discuss a village festival and had spoken of the preparation of food being the prerogative of the higher caste. “All the other people at the meeting silenced the man, telling him that it was not right to speak like this”, the women told me. They agreed that it was because this man had not experienced displacement in the same way.

We were displaced for years, but after two months he came back and lived in a corner of the village. The army left him alone since he was about fifty then, and had no one else with him. His sister and her family lived in the camp for a while and then went off to live in the town. They still live there, but he lives in their joint family home alone.

The women thus drew conclusion about the length of his displacement and his tenacity of holding onto caste.
Elsewhere in the village the fields slowly came to life again, but the labourers, generally considered lower caste, demanded tea breaks, and tea with something to eat. The relatives of the land owners, and the labourers sat down together during these breaks. These were new practices, new spaces being welded together.

The young woman of the Vannar caste accepted a job at an International non-governmental organisation after the tsunami. She was one of the very few women in the village to work at a job that required high school educational qualifications, and carried with it a certain prestige in the village. She explained to me that the Vellalars do not need education because they already have power, prestige and land. “So education is not a priority. It is we, one of the lowest castes, without power, land or prestige who need education”. This young woman became an important person as the whole village came to her for help with filling out forms, and advice on handling bureaucratic formalities. She also connected them to different people and organisations that could help them. The threshold of the home of the Vannar caste which those of the Vellalar caste did not usually cross was now a space to which the Vellalar caste came for help. As in the case of Kamala’s husband, this young woman of the Vannar caste now became a point of connection between the village and the wider bureaucratic world of State and non-State aid agencies, thus increasing her prestige within the networks of the village.4

These changes set in motion new negotiations between the different networks in the village, which had previously been based on caste

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4 Mixed marriage networks, though a valid aspect in such a study, proved to be problematic with different castes remembering the numbers of mixed marriages differently. A separate study would be required to understand the incongruity in memory and a system of verification of the number of mixed marriages. I have therefore excluded this aspect out of this study.
before the village had been torn asunder. These new spaces opened new reciprocal networks, realigning existing ones, thus reshaping old boundaries.

The LTTE and Modes of Control

When the ceasefire began in 2001, livelihoods sprang into life full of vigour. The armed forces of the Sri Lankan State pulled out, and life resumed normalcy. The LTTE office in the vicinity was the only visible indicator of outside power in the village. Foucault’s (1977) concept of ‘gaze’—a concept of surveillance and control—is useful to understand the functioning of the LTTE representative. The deep penetration into the village by the LTTE began as part of daily everyday life, and thus during the ceasefire a different kind of surveillance, power and violence was etched on the village—that of the LTTE quasi state. The visual ensemble of surveillance and violence was no longer carved on this landscape in the same way. The LTTE representative of the area formed a core of the LTTE state in the area. The LTTE played a role in the day to day lives of the people even though this was a government controlled area. The LTTE state was imagined through its court system with its feared and swift system of violence and punishment. This imagination was created through rumour which circulated around, and about the impersonal moral justice, discipline and violence of the LTTE quasi state within the enclaves of its court system.

The rumours painted a vibrant and colourful portrait of absolute discipline and rituals of violence, without placing them within any contexts and highlighting the absence of compassion. Some of the stories thus circulated were about drunken men who had to empty tubs full of water with little soda bottle tops, and about beatings, and the sheer amount of physical work one had to do in the process of being ‘rehabilitated’.
Though many people felt a deep loyalty to the LTTE, perceiving them as saviours acting against the army, the LTTE was now no longer affectionately ‘the boys’; they were spoken of in hushed tones, in a nexus of respect and fear. The power of violence, and the knowledge of intimate surveillance, gained a foothold in the everyday imagination of the villagers and entered the intimate spaces of their networks and interactions.

The new LTTE-based State was to be united along the axis of caste boundaries, welding Tamils together. Thus, caste relations became a site of extreme surveillance. The LTTE fused the existing boundaries between the different castes whilst causing fractures in the inter-relations between the Tamils and Muslims. A new history of a homogenous nation was being superimposed upon existing relations. The LTTE has expelled 70,000-80,000 Muslims from regions considered Tamil (Thiranagama, 2010). Since the LTTE quasi State was a nation premised on being born Tamil, women became gatekeepers of the nation. Their sexuality was carefully policed so that sexual intimacies across the fault lines of a homogenous nation could be prevented. Thus, Tamil women were encouraged only to marry Tamil men, not Sinhala or Muslim men. Caste discrimination became a crime, and any relatives who stood in the way of inter-caste marriages were punished under these laws.

People who were found guilty of discriminating on the basis of caste had received their punishment through an inversion of caste roles. A woman in another village who had discriminated against a woman she considered lower caste was kept in an LTTE prison whilst the LTTE paid the woman considered lower caste a daily wage to cook for the Vellalar caste woman, thus physically overturning caste rules on purity and pollution.

Stories also abounded of a moment during displacement when a group of mixed caste villagers of Ramyapuram, overcome by thirst, had
requested some water at a wayside home. The Vellalar residents had given the villagers of Ramyapuram water in coconut shells, the humblest of serving receptacles and reserved for the lowest castes. Since it was in an area controlled by the LTTE, the LTTE were visible and made the villagers of Ramyapuram serve the residents of the Vellalar home water in the same coconut shells. In this case there was no continuity in these relations since they were only passing through. However, such power on the side of one person or group in the realm of interpersonal interaction could have the negative effect of ending that interaction, with no possibility of continuity, or of distorting the relationship in unforeseen directions.

One of the young women who worked outside the village became the centre of circulating rumours about her return home in the late evening after work. She was one of the very few educated women in the village and her workplace was located in the city, separated from the village. She was, therefore, outside the protective and controlling gaze of the other villagers who did not understand her world. The networks of the other women overlapped within the village. She was told that even the LTTE would be told of her conduct. This young woman stated:

So far no one has asked me. This is because even if I don’t know our LTTE representative personally, he knows me. He knows everyone in the village and their conduct. If he thought that I was behaving inappropriately he would have spoken to me.

Even though this young woman had never spoken to the representative she knew that he knew her and her ways. People thus lived with the knowledge of the ‘gaze’ of the LTTE, and of their intimate interaction. Village life thus had its unruly elements ‘disciplined’ and people were chiselled to fit one model of ‘being Tamil’. People were constantly under surveillance. Many people welcomed the demolition of such informal and underground
economies as illicit liquor breweries and sex workers in their midst. The people who were disciplined, or who disagreed were silenced and the dense net of informants penetrated deep, and were efficient.

Policing interpersonal relations through violence can have unexpected results, or even stop the flow of the continuity of interactions amongst these specific actors in the future. During the aftermath of the tsunami, in the village of Ramyapuram, a young woman of the Vannar caste was distributing food from an NGO, when a higher caste young man raised objections. The other villagers protested against this young man’s objection and he subsequently received a message asking him to report to the LTTE office. The whole village was then awash with rumours of how he had been physically punished for bringing caste into village interactions. This young man left the village soon after, and did not return.

The interrelations that changed involved the subtle negotiations of those within it. As discussed earlier—the young woman Kamala, after they returned back from displacement, waited for the higher caste woman to make the first move towards interaction. Kamala waited, so that she could then respond to the gesture that the woman of Vellalar caste might make. This gesture may have been one of accommodation or resistance, which then would have involved a renegotiation between the two people in the interaction. In this case, the negotiations allowed the interaction to continue. When I asked the Vellalar caste women about caste relations they were emphatic that there were no caste taboos in their village. The non-Vellalar caste women had told me earlier that though the higher castes people now crossed their thresholds and had cups of tea, they would still not come in for a meal. However, in a situation where there were many LTTE informants, the non-Vellalar women protected the aspect that the Vellalars did not eat together, and thus did reproduce to some extent, the caste structure that was taboo under the LTTE ‘gaze’. Thus, the non-Vellalar women of Ramyapuram wished to safeguard the spaces of their own
interrelations, its continuity and reciprocity which may be irreparably damaged by forced inversions, even if the caste relations placed them at the lower end of a hierarchy. The villagers understood that such blatant power on the side of one person or a group in the realm of interpersonal interactions may cause a breakdown in the continuity of these delicate relations. Thus, even though the gaze of the LTTE reached deep into social relations people protected the realm of their negotiations with each other.\(^5\)

The non-*Vellalar* villagers felt that the LTTE discourse, policies and policing on caste have had an impact on the village. Although the residents protected their interrelations from being torn asunder by such policing, the new spaces of caste interrelations, wrought by displacement continued, under the shadow of the LTTE gaze, thus preventing caste-based relations from reverting back completely.

**Aftermath of the War**

The war ended in May 2009. A further wave of displacement took place during the end of the war. Many young men, some of them sons of the fathers who had been killed in 1990, had been imprisoned, whilst others had fled to India.

These fractured networks were just beginning to be collaged together again when I returned for a short while in 2011. Many changes had taken place between displacement and the end of the war. Both those of the *Vellalar* and *Karaiyar* caste had invested in education with an equal number of those of each caste entering the state and private sector employment. For those of the *Karaiyar* caste

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\(^5\) The implications of law and violence policing the realm of intimate, personal interactions need to be explored and understood further.
this meant a distancing of themselves from the caste-based occupation of fishing.

Such an education required a substantial financial investment since those who chose higher education were sent to private schools in the town, and had to be placed in boarding houses in the town. A Vellalar caste woman who had married a Karaiyar man after displacement pointed out that in the aftermath of the tsunami many foreign non-governmental organisations had provided aid to the tsunami-affected fishermen and this aid was one of the factors that had equalised economic disparity between those of the Vellalar and Karaiyar castes.

Prior to the end of the war in 2009, occasions for celebrations or gatherings such as rites of passage (reaching puberty) ceremonies, weddings, funerals and almsgivings had contained potential for separation and isolation since they were conducted in the homes where taboos were observed religiously. After the war, these celebrations were moved to rented spaces and communal halls. These neutral sites provided a liminal space for renegotiating caste taboos. The continuity of this renegotiation was less of a threat since these were occasions set outside everyday practices. According to the women I interviewed, these were the sites at which caste taboos were broken freely, and all castes intermingled.

These interviews were conducted with a group of Ramyapuram women drawn from the different caste groups. The Vannar caste woman who was displaced as a child and now works in a non-governmental organisation chipped in with great pride: “We are at the same level as Brahmins since only the Vannar caste is allowed into the inner sacred place of the temple, we are allowed to go in to change the linen that covers the sacred inner sanctum”.
As she confided to me later, her father would not have spoken thus, in front of those of Vellalar caste, implying that he was above them. He still respected the Vellalars. This young woman connected many of the villagers, including the Vellalars to international and state resources and therefore was able to garner a position of power for herself.

Maithri, woman of the Vellalar caste told me that caste is like a snake, waiting to rise again, though it may be invisible until it moves. Maithri identifies with the non-Vellalar caste since she is a Christian in an almost completely Hindu village, and is treated as a non-Vellalar. The women told me that the Vellalars did monitor each other, and upheld food taboos when they were with each other; though many broke food taboos when they were alone in a mixed caste group.

This short time of research, conducted two years after the conclusion of the war indicates that in the wake of structural, ideological and spatial practice changes there is a fierce renegotiation and equalisation between the castes. The short duration of this post-war research is only capable of providing a glimpse into changing caste relations after the war.

Conclusion

This article illustrates the lived nature of identity as it is formed within specific localised networks and moored in specific spatial sites within the shadow of various kinds of surveillance—be it by the State or by outside forces such as armed non-State actors. Illustrated here is the precariousness of identity as contexts change and networks break to realign and reform differently, distributing power at points different to before, moving boundaries. The concepts of inversion and brokerage emerge as important social processes of change.
War is about bombs, displacements, disappearances, informants, rumours and torture. It is also about the trajectories of different kinds of power as it travels through physical and cognitive landscapes. Such power indexes changing spatial practices, interactions and identity. This study is about the transformation of one such aspect of identity, that of caste.

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References


Recasting Caste: War, Displacement and Transformations


