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# **“Our Kith and Kin”? Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees and the Ethnonationalist Parties of Tamil Nadu**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This article explains the impact of substate nationalism on the political dynamic surrounding ethnic kin migration through a case study of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in the southern Indian State of Tamil Nadu. Examples drawn from the migration studies literature identify ethnic kinship between refugees and host as an indicator of favorable reception and assistance. While this expectation is borne out to an extent in the Tamil Nadu case, it is tempered by a period of hostility following the 1991 assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by an LTTE suicide bomber, when the refugees were figured as a disruptive and dangerous presence by Tamil Nadu’s political elites. A version of the “triadic nexus” model of kin state relations, reconfigured to accommodate the larger political unit within which the substate nationalism is incorporated, is proposed as a framework of analysis for these events. This can better account for Tamil Nadu’s substate ethnonationalist elite’s movement between expressions of coethnic solidarity with the refugees and the more hostile, security-focused response post assassination.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Separated from northern Sri Lanka by the narrow Palk Straits, the southern Indian State<sup>1</sup> of Tamil Nadu has been an important destination for refugees fleeing the long civil conflict between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Most arrived from Sri Lanka’s war-torn Northern and Eastern Provinces where Tamils form a local majority, but Tamils from Sri Lanka’s multiethnic capital city Colombo are also found amongst the refugees, as well as Tamils of Indian origin—the descendants of

Tamils from south India who migrated as laborers in the colonial era.<sup>2</sup> The refugees have arrived in Tamil Nadu since the outbreak of the Sri Lankan civil

conflict in 1983. Ebbs and flows in numbers have reflected escalations and lulls in hostilities, with the population reportedly reaching a peak of around 200,000 in the mid-1990s.<sup>3</sup> Many refugees have experienced repeated displacement, returning to Sri Lanka during ceasefire periods only to be uprooted again when violence has reescalated. Most have made the short but perilous journey in small boats under cover of darkness, coming ashore near the coastal town of Rameswaram, before being dispersed to refugee camps across Tamil Nadu. As of late 2010 (when the most recent statistics were provided to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] by the Government of India), there were almost 70,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees living in 112 refugee camps across Tamil Nadu, with an estimated further 30,000 living outside the camps amongst host communities.<sup>4</sup> Since the conclusion of the Sri Lankan conflict in May 2009 refugees have begun to return to the island from Tamil Nadu. UNHCR reports that around 3,500 refugees returned to Sri Lanka in 2010/2011, and at the time of writing, the agency is supporting ongoing voluntary repatriation of refugees.<sup>5</sup>

The majority of Tamil Nadu's 60 million-strong population shares a nominal ethnolinguistic identity with the Tamils of Sri Lanka. Examples presented in the refugee studies literature lead to an expectation that ethnic kinship between refugee and host results in favorable reception and assistance. Meanwhile, a corrective to generalized applications of this model is offered by literature highlighting states' concern with ethnic kin refugees as harbingers of instability, separatism, and conflict, sometimes resulting in a less than warm welcome. But how can we account for a scenario where both of these suggested outcomes of ethnic kinship between refugee and host are experienced? In such cases, neither of the stands of theorization drawn from the refugee studies literature can sufficiently explain empirical reality. In Tamil Nadu, the expectation of positive reception has been borne out to an extent but has been tempered by moments of hostility when refugees have been rhetorically positioned by political elites as a threat to security and stability. The positioning of ethnic kin refugees as a threat commonly emanates from elites drawn from an opposing or domineering ethnic group within the host state.<sup>6</sup> The Tamil Nadu case is striking, as this discourse has also emanated from the very co-ethnic elites whom one could reasonably expect to be the refugees' ardent supporters—Tamil Nadu's ethnonationalist parties. The aftermath of the assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by an LTTE suicide bomber during a visit to Tamil Nadu in May 1991 is treated in this article as a critical moment, resulting in a shift by Tamil Nadu's political elite from sympathetic consideration of the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees as co-ethnics, towards a hostile, security-focused response.

An alternative framework of understanding for these events than that offered by the refugee studies literature is found in sociological thinking around kin state nationalism and migration, in particular Brubaker's influential model of the "triadic nexus."<sup>7</sup> But the Tamil Nadu case contains an additional level of complexity. Unlike many examples from the ethnic kin migration literature, the destination kin state or, as Brubaker terms it, the "external national homeland,"<sup>8</sup> is not a nationalizing state in its own right. Rather, Tamil Nadu is a substate unit situated within the larger entity of India, which promotes its own, at times competing, brand of nationalism. Through exploration of the Tamil Nadu case, the purpose of this article is to explain how substate nationalism can affect the political landscape surrounding co-ethnic forced migration. External national homelands occupying a substate position are compelled to consider a nationalizing political context beyond the realm of their own ethnonationalist concerns, thus prompting responses at odds with the expectation set up by theorizations of ethnic kinship's impact on migrant reception by co-ethnic elites.

Methodologically, this research entailed examination of policy decisions and public pronouncements by the Tamil Nadu ethnonationalist parties concerning the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees. Secondary and media sources are examined alongside original empirical analysis of Indian parliamentary proceedings pertaining to the refugees. The source data encompassed proceedings of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha (the respective lower and upper houses of the Parliament of the Indian Union) dating from July 1995 to July 2010; the full extent of transcriptions are digitized and available online at the time of research.<sup>9</sup> The concern of this article lies with Tamil Nadu's position as a substate ethno-nation subsumed within the larger national and political unit of India, so analysis is focused on the political discourse of Tamil Nadu politicians in the central political sphere of the Indian parliament, which are transcribed and digitized in Hindi and English. Unfamiliarity with written Tamil precludes analysis by this author of discussions of the refugees within Tamil Nadu's State Assembly, although this may offer a fruitful avenue for other researchers.

#### "OUR TAMIL BRETHREN": TRANSBORDER ETHNIC KINSHIP AND THE SRI LANKAN CONFLICT

Transborder ethnic kinship between the Tamils of southern India and Sri Lanka has been evoked in both primordial terms of a common linguistic and religious heritage, and historical mythology,<sup>10</sup> and in the more instrumental sense of a shared political imperative of safeguarding Tamil identity from domineering external forces—in the case of Sri Lanka, from aggressive Sinhalese nationalism,

and in Tamil Nadu through opposition to a perceived Hindi-speaking national hegemony. The two main ethnonationalist parties in Tamil Nadu, the *Dravida Munetra Kazhagam* (DMK) and the *All India Dravida Munetra Kazhagam* (AIADMK), one or the other of which has governed at the State level since 1967, have been keen exponents of nationalist rhetoric in these veins. State Chief Ministers drawn from these parties have taken center stage at “World Tamil Conferences” celebrating a so-called golden age of Tamil civilization—the semi-mythologized *Sangam* era when culture flourished under the patronage of warrior kings whose lands encompassed present-day southern India and northern Sri Lanka.<sup>11</sup> As well as this evocation of cultural nationalism, the suffering of Sri Lankan Tamils under majoritarian governments and during civil conflict has functioned as an important rallying point for ethnonationalism in Tamil Nadu.<sup>12</sup>

The Indian state has faced numerous challenges of ethnoregional separatism, including in the Tamil-speaking regions of the south where, throughout the Freedom Struggle and the postcolonial period, the Dravidian movement agitated towards the creation of an independent state of *Dravida Nadu*.<sup>13</sup> One approach to these challenges by the Indian central state has been what Chadda terms “relational control”: the need for constant negotiation and accommodation between the “supranational state and its ethnonational units.”<sup>14</sup> Within this approach, measures such as the reorganization of States along linguistic lines in 1956, and the creation of new States or autonomous regions have aimed to appease separatists’ calls for increased political representation and to limit future demands. Prohibitive measures have been applied too though. A 1963 constitutional amendment granted the legislature power to “penalise any individual who questioned the sovereignty and territorial integrity of India,”<sup>15</sup> while military force has also been deployed, notably in Kashmir and against Sikh-separatists in the Punjab.<sup>16</sup> Separatist demands in Tamil south India have largely been negotiated through concessionary measures, such as the establishment of the Tamil-language State of Madras in 1956 (renamed Tamil Nadu in 1969).<sup>17</sup> It has been convincingly argued that India’s tacit support for the Sri Lankan Tamil separatist movement in the early years of the island’s conflict was motivated by a desire to maintain regional hegemony, but the Tamil issue, if nothing else, provided a useful facade for this endeavor and, later, enabled the Indian government to claim it was compelled to intervene in Sri Lanka in order to avoid a resurgence of separatism in Tamil Nadu, in line with the relational control model.<sup>18</sup> In a 1989 speech defending India’s deployment of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) to northern Sri Lanka, J. N. Dixit, Indian High Commissioner to Sri Lanka from 1985–1989, claims:

Tamil citizens of India felt that if we did not rise in support of the Tamil cause in Sri Lanka, we are not standing by our own Tamils, and if that is so then in the Tamil psyche the question arose, is there any relevance or validity of our being part of a large Indian political identity, if our very deeply held sentiments are not respected?<sup>19</sup>

Both the DMK and the AIADMK openly supported Sri Lankan Tamil separatist groups throughout the 1980s. M. G. Ramachandran, founder of the AIADMK and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister for three terms between 1977 and 1987, publicly backed the LTTE and formed close relationships with its leadership. Similar backing was extended by the DMK towards the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO), before switching support to the LTTE who had emerged as the dominant separatist force.<sup>20</sup> This support was relatively politically unproblematic for the Tamil Nadu ethnonationalist parties up until 1987, when Rajiv Gandhi's government and the J. R. Jayewardene-led Government of Sri Lanka signed the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, leading to the deployment of the IPKF. Despite their peacekeeping mission, the Indian forces were soon engaged in an aggressive counterinsurgency role. The forces' presence in northern Sri Lanka between 1987 and 1990 was marred by civilian massacres, rapes, disappearances, and torture of suspected LTTE cadres,<sup>21</sup> with Indian troops' failure to disarm the LTTE and the huge monetary cost of the intervention leading Gandhi's opponents to label the deployment "India's Vietnam."<sup>22</sup> In contrast to the early-mid 1980s, open support for the LTTE by the Tamil Nadu ethnonationalist parties was now unacceptable to New Delhi, and between 1988 and 1991, the DMK were twice dismissed from the Tamil Nadu State Assembly by central government, ostensibly as a consequence of their failure to control LTTE activity in the State.<sup>23</sup>

Political instrumentalism also came into play during this period in influencing the Tamil ethnonationalist parties' response to the ongoing violence in Sri Lanka. Since the late 1960s, these parties have engaged in a code-pendent relationship with national parties, in particular Congress, by trading cooperation in the Lok Sabha for support (or agreement not to stand in particular seats) in State elections. For much of the 1980s and early 1990s, Congress worked with the AIADMK, "divid[ing] the legislative and parliamentary seats in the State in such a way that the AIADMK won power in Tamil Nadu while the Congress took the majority of seats for Parliament,"<sup>24</sup> following similar deals between Congress and the DMK during the 1970s. With the prevalence of governance by a coalition in New Delhi throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the main Tamil Nadu parties have emerged as key players in central governments' survival, and their support was rewarded with

influential cabinet posts. Following the 2004 general election, for instance, the DMK and its alliance of smaller Dravidian parties formed the third largest party in the victorious Congress-led United Progressive Alliance, with members holding 6 of the 28 cabinet posts, including the portfolio for finance.<sup>25</sup> In the late 1980s, competition between the DMK and AIADMK for the lucrative position of favored Congress-partner mediated criticism of the IPKF deployment, despite the clear suffering of Tamil civilians under the occupation,<sup>26</sup> and when Congress allied with the AIADMK for the 1989 parliamentary election, Karunanidhi's past vocal support for the LTTE and criticism of the IPKF was used as a stick to beat him by both Congress and his local AIADMK opponents.<sup>27</sup> This schism between the Tamil Nadu ethnopolitical elite and the Sri Lankan Tamil separatist cause culminated in the aftermath of the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi by an LTTE suicide bomber in May 1991, during an election rally in the town of Sriperumbudur, near Chennai<sup>28</sup>—a direct retaliation to the IPKF deployment under Gandhi's premiership. The overt support for Sri Lankan Tamil militants that had proved disadvantageous to Tamil Nadu politicians in the IPKF era now became unthinkable. Again, the AIADMK-Congress alliance sought to blame Karunanidhi and his former administration's tolerance of LTTE activities in Tamil Nadu for the assassination, contributing to the DMK's resounding defeat to the AIADMK in the June 1991 State Assembly elections.<sup>29</sup>

Over the next two decades though, Tamil Nadu's ethnonationalist elites again rallied to the Sri Lankan Tamil cause and have robustly criticized Sri Lankan military actions. In 2006, Sri Lankan military air raids struck an orphanage and a school in a Tamil-majority region, drawing strong public condemnation of the Government of Sri Lanka from both the DMK and AIADMK. When publicly rebuffed by the Sri Lankan authorities, Karunanidhi stated; "if Tamils condemning the killing of their Tamil brethren was dubbed a mistake, then they [the DMK] would continue to commit it."<sup>30</sup> More recently, reports of abuses committed by the Sri Lankan military during their 2008/2009 offensive against the LTTE sparked protests across Tamil Nadu, and in June 2010, protestors took to the streets of Chennai in opposition to a three-day visit to India by the Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa.<sup>31</sup> Matching this public mood, the then 87-year-old Karunanidhi embarked on a hunger strike,<sup>32</sup> while the leaders of both main ethnonationalist parties sparked controversy with remarks interpreted as supportive of separatist militancy: Karunanidhi's description of the late LTTE commander, Vellupillai Prabhakaran, as "my good friend"<sup>33</sup> and AIADMK leader J. Jayalalithaa's 2009 election rally pledge that, if her alliance were to win power, it would lobby for the deployment of the Indian army to ensure the establishment of a Tamil homeland

in Sri Lanka—an endeavor she compared to Indira Gandhi’s military support for the secession of Bangladesh in 1971 and a strikingly bold assertion given the disastrous course of India’s previous military involvement in the island.<sup>34</sup>

Having provided some brief historical and political context on the relationship between the Tamil Nadu ethnonationalist parties and Sri Lankan Tamil nationalist movement, the remainder of this article turns its attention to the specific case of the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in the state. Beginning with an explanation of the two strands of theorization in the refugee studies literature commonly employed in accounts of ethnic kin refugee movement and settlement and relating these to the actualities of the Tamil Nadu case, I go on to suggest a modified version of the triadic nexus model as a more useful framework for analysis.

#### ETHNIC KINSHIP AS INDICATOR OF FAVORABLE REFUGEE RECEPTION

The common ethnicity between Tamils in India and Sri Lanka, and as such between the refugees and the Tamil Nadu host, is emblematic of a wider tendency within the Indian context for refugees to share ethnic kinship with sections of the host population. The majority of the approximately 400,000 refugees<sup>35</sup> within India originate in neighboring states and are concentrated in border areas where their nominal ethnic kin also reside.<sup>36</sup> The Chakma, an indigenous people of Bangladesh’s Chittagong Hill Tracts share a transborder “*Jumma*” (hill tribe) identity with indigenous peoples of the northeast Indian State of Tripura, where they have sought shelter from state-endorsed land alienation in their homeland since the 1970s. Similarly, the Lhotshampa (ethnic Nepalese) have fled Bhutan for the Indian States of Sikkim and northern West Bengal—areas that also have a substantial ethnic-Nepalese population, and Chin refugees from Burma share ethnolinguistic commonalities with indigenous peoples in the north-eastern Indian States of Mizoram and Manipur.<sup>37</sup> A major refugee group, and perhaps the best known internationally thanks to the location of the Dalai Lama’s Government in Exile at Dharamasala in Himachal Pradesh, are Tibetans. While these refugees are not the ethnic kin of the local host population in Himachal Pradesh where their numbers are greatest, there are strong linguistic and cultural links with peoples of India’s high Himalayan regions (for instance, in the Ladakh area of Jammu and Kashmir), and Tibetan refugees have historically been included in the ethnic kinship discourse, with Nehru describing Tibet as “culturally speaking... an offshoot of India” in a 1959 speech to the Lok Sabha intended to legitimize India’s admittance of the refugees.<sup>38</sup> As such, and as Oberoi notes, refugees in India are rarely the “uncomplicated ‘Other.’”<sup>39</sup>



Examples from the refugee studies literature identify ethnic kinship between refugees and hosts as a key indicator of positive receptivity. Milner argues that “the importance of ethnic affinity cannot be overstated. If a host population perceives the incoming refugees as “one of us,” positive and generous conceptions of distributive justice will apply,”<sup>40</sup> while Kunz contends that “perhaps no other factor has more influence on the satisfactory resettlement of the refugee than cultural compatibility between background and the society which is confronted.”<sup>41</sup> This argument is illustrated through a reference to the flight of Pashtun Afghans into northern Pakistan, Issaq Somali in Djibouti, Mozambicans in Malawi, and ethnic Turk Bulgarians in Turkey,<sup>42</sup> with further examples including Liberian Khran in Cote D’Ivoire, Kakwa Sudanese, Bantu Rwandan and Congolese refugees in Uganda, and Kosovan Albanians in Albania.<sup>43</sup> It must be noted, however, that a number of the studies cited above focus on receptivity to refugees by members of host communities themselves, often within a highly localized context, rather than responses at an official level. While refugees’ host population co-ethnics may exert pressure on governments to adopt a favorable response towards refugees, the suggestion that this is an inevitable process rests on the assumption that refugees’ co-ethnics possess sufficient social or political capital to be heard at the central government level. Milner’s observation that “if refugees are seen as members of an ‘out-group’, they are likely to receive a hostile reception”<sup>44</sup> and that leads to the possibility that such “out-groups” are not necessarily foreigners but may comprise members of the host citizenry itself. In multinational states, local majorities may also be national minorities, themselves marginalized or engaged in an antagonistic relationship with the central state, and as such their co-ethnicity with refugees may have no favorable bearing on official reception and may even engender hostile treatment.

Returning to the Indian context, this possibility is illustrated through examination of parliamentary references to the Chakma refugees, whose indigenous co-ethnics in Tripura are a small minority within India, themselves implicated in a separatist struggle with the central state. Reflecting this context, parliamentary references to the refugees within the sample data are concerned entirely with the refugees’ alleged role as conduits for funds and arms between cross-border insurgents in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Tripura. Members of Parliament describe how “Tripura is being used by the extremists in the northeast as a corridor for smuggling arms [and] ammunitions”<sup>45</sup> and employ evocative language in depicting those who “permeate, percolate strathily [*sic*]. They never inform the Government. They never inform anybody. They take any route and then they permeate into the regions where they find themselves secure ... anybody can

cross the borders any time, bring in arms.”<sup>46</sup> Kinship between refugees and the local host population is acknowledged by these parliamentarians but is presented as further evidence of the threat posed by the refugees’ presence: “they have to be segregated and they should not be allowed to mingle with the local population,”<sup>47</sup> while a representative of the Ministry of Home Affairs describes the challenge of monitoring the refugees’ movements; “[they] are able to mingle *[sic]* easily with the local population due to ethnic and linguistic similarities.”<sup>48</sup>

As is the general case with India’s indigenous peoples, the Chakma refugees’ *Jumma* co-ethnics reside mainly in remote rural areas, exercise neither significant electoral nor economic power and exist largely on the periphery of public life. In contrast, the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees’ Indian ethnic kin are both a local majority in the area of refugee settlement and a significant population body within the Indian state as a whole. As a large, populous, and relatively industrialized State, Tamil Nadu exerts substantial electoral and economic clout on the national stage, both in terms of the aforementioned role of the State’s ethnonationalist parties as central government coalition partners and through its major stake in India’s post-1991 economic development. Tamil Nadu possessed the second largest economy of any Indian State in 2011/2012 and records higher than average economic growth,<sup>49</sup> while its strong links with Singapore and Malaysia are crucial to the success of the Indian government’s “Look East” policy that promotes greater integration with the economies of East and Southeast Asia.<sup>50</sup>

Taking this context alongside the other empirical examples found in the refugee studies literature, it is fair to hypothesize that the attitude of Tamil Nadu’s ethnonationalist parties towards the refugees would be sympathetic. This expectation is borne out to an extent. India is a non-signatory to the United Nations Refugee Convention and has no national refugee law, leaving the government free to exhibit striking inconsistency in its dealings with different incoming groups.<sup>51</sup> Along with Tibetans, Sri Lankan Tamils are considered the refugee group in receipt of the most favorable treatment from the Indian authorities. They have been largely freely admitted to India, and once registered with the authorities, they have the option of living in government-run camps and receiving subsidized food, cooking fuel, and a cash dole.<sup>52</sup> In contrast, other groups of forced migrants, including the Bangladeshi Chakma, Burmese Chin, and Bhutanese Lhotshampa are considered illegal aliens and receive no official assistance.<sup>53</sup> Although some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have criticized conditions in Tamil Nadu’s refugee camps,<sup>54</sup> these criticisms are tempered by expressions of gratitude towards the Indian authorities, and an

acknowledgment that the bulk of camps are situated in depressed rural areas where local communities also face significant livelihood insecurity.<sup>55</sup> A representative of the Organisation for Eelam Refugees' Rehabilitation (OFERR), the primary NGO working in the Tamil Nadu camps, is quoted in the international media as saying; "We do not complain about the conditions because just next to us there are Indian citizens who don't get even what we get,"<sup>56</sup> while the Mission of the United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) has described India's response to the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees "as generous as for any group in Asia."<sup>57</sup> The repatriation from 1992 of around 30,000 refugees attracted accusations of coercion by international NGOs, but the program was suspended in 1995 and UNHCR was allowed to maintain a monitoring presence in Tamil Nadu, appearing satisfied that subsequent repatriations were voluntary and upheld the principle of *non-refoulement*,<sup>58</sup> although the agency continues to complain that it is forbidden from directly accessing the refugee camps, so must rely on local partners to monitor conditions inside.<sup>59</sup>

The relatively generous reception extended to the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees has been attributed by observers to the aforementioned co-ethnicity between the refugees and the Tamil Nadu host: Oberoi's assertion, for instance, that the "strong bond of kinship" has acted as an "important motivating factor in the formulation of a generous asylum policy," as within "the domestic politics of the Indian polity ... New Delhi cannot afford to alienate the vast population of Indian Tamils."<sup>60</sup> Parliamentary transcripts reveal that representatives of Tamil Nadu's main ethnonationalist parties (and their smaller affiliates) have regularly lobbied central government on the issue of the refugees. These Parliamentarians advocate an improvement in conditions in the refugee camps, calling on the government to increase food subsidies and the quota of places for refugee children in schools.<sup>61</sup> In a joint statement, representatives of the AIADMK and their affiliate party the *M. G. R. Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (MGR ADMK) argue:

The existing basic facilities like food, shelter and health need to be increased. A humanitarian approach is needed ... . Adequate financial allocation to provide basic amenities to these people is the foremost need of this hour ... . [We] urge upon Central Govt. [*sic*] to allocate more funds to help these people to have their decent life in refugee camps.<sup>62</sup>

This sympathetic attitude towards the refugees is also manifested through calls on the government to intervene in the Sri Lankan conflict, in order to alleviate the suffering of the Tamil civilians who are compelled to seek "solace, succor [*sic*] and

asylum”<sup>63</sup> in India. *Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (MDMK) leader Vaiko implores the House to consider the situation of Sri Lankan Tamils in terms of “universal human right [*sic*],” contesting that the situation is “worse than what has happened in Bosnia.” He recounts, “with a heavy heart and terrible agony,” the drowning of 47 refugees attempting to reach India by boat, who he alleges were bombarded by Sri Lankan military aircraft, and urges the government to “ask the Government of Sri Lanka to stop forthwith the genocidal attacks on these innocent Tamils.”<sup>64</sup> Speaking in the same debate, an AIADMK member states: “[T]here is no safety for the lives of the innocent Tamil people in Jaffna area. Some of them want to save themselves by coming to Tamil Nadu as refugees.” He goes on to advocate “some official measures to help those refugees who are all willing to come over to India ... some authorized vessel may be arranged and pathetic deaths may be prevented in the mid-sea.”<sup>65</sup> Ethnic kinship between the Tamils of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka is presented directly and evocatively in the parliamentary transcripts. For instance, description of the refugees as “our kith and kin” and paraphrasing of the exalted Tamil nationalist leader and DMK founder C. N. Annadurai in response to the aforementioned drowning incident: “the sea water is getting salty because of the tears of the Tamils.”<sup>66</sup> More recently, the former DMK-led State administration<sup>67</sup> petitioned central government to grant Indian citizenship to the refugees,<sup>68</sup> although a representative of the Ministry of Home Affairs states that “no such proposal is under consideration.”<sup>69</sup>

## REFUGEES AS A SECURITY THREAT

But such expressions of co-ethnic solidarity are not the whole story of Tamil Nadu’s ethnonationalist parties’ engagement with the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees. As described above, the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 marked a shift in the Tamil Nadu parties’ response to the LTTE. Sympathy for the LTTE and support for the separatist cause (or the *perception* of support) was no longer compatible with political participation at State or central levels, as the DMK found to its cost. The aftermath of the assassination also marked the nadir of relations between the Tamil Nadu authorities and the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees. It was alleged that refugees registered in Tamil Nadu were amongst the plotters of the assassination,<sup>70</sup> and the incoming AIADMK administration adopted a reactionary stance that effectively placed all refugees under suspicion of cooperation with the militants. Speaking in May 1991, the newly elected Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa said, “I appeal, rather demand, that the centre should take immediate action so that all Sri Lankan Tamils are sent back.”<sup>71</sup> Central government was left to speak as the voice of moderation, with Law Minister Subramanian Swamy

replying, “over ninety-nine percent of the Sri Lankans in India are refugees, and we are not in favour of any deportation. It is only the remaining one percent who should be nabbed.”<sup>72</sup> Under the AIADMK administration restrictive measures were imposed to negate the perceived threat posed by the refugees and to encourage their repatriation: Child refugees’ access to education was rescinded, international NGOs were barred from accessing the refugee camps, high-security “special camps” (de facto prisons where human rights abuses were allegedly rife) were introduced for those refugees suspected of militant involvement, and a large-scale repatriation program was initiated.<sup>73</sup>

Scholarship reports a global tendency towards the equation of refugees with disruption and insecurity; a shift from consideration of refugees as passive victims to “a sinister transnational threat to national security.”<sup>74</sup> The phenomenon of the refugee warrior is well documented in relation to Afghan *mujahidin* in Pakistan, Nicaraguan *contras* in Honduras and Rwandan *genocidaires* in the refugee camps of Eastern Congo, to give just a few examples.<sup>75</sup> As well as this role in the prolongation of conflict in the home state, refugees are constituted as a threat to stability in the host state through their potential to spread insurgency and conflict: “Refugees extend rebel social networks across space through their own geographic mobility, as well as by establishing links, sharing information, and providing resources to domestic actors with compatible aims.”<sup>76</sup> There are additional economic sources of conflict between refugees and host communities. Aid provision to refugees by states, supranational bodies, or NGOs can fuel resentment amongst struggling local populations, and refugees may depress local wages and increase competition for scarce resources, as in the arid Dadaab region of northern Kenya, where the settlement of huge numbers of Somali refugees has severely exacerbated existing shortages of water and firewood.<sup>77</sup> In cases where refugees originate in neighboring states and share kinship with sections of a multiethnic receiving state’s host population, their arrival may aggravate existing tensions between groups by disrupting established or precarious power balances.<sup>78</sup> Grievances of host-state ethnic kin may be consolidated or exacerbated through outrage at refugees’ mistreatment in the origin state, or in some cases their own government’s poor treatment of the refugees or inaction over the issues prompting their displacement.<sup>79</sup> Host governments may also fear refugees’ material involvement in conflicts and their potential to facilitate cross-border movements of militant cadres, arms, and funds. This fear is expressed by Indian Parliamentarians in relation to the aforementioned Chakma case, where the refugees’ Indian co-ethnics are

unquestionably members of Milner's "out-groups"<sup>80</sup> in the broader Indian national context.

But examination of the Tamil Nadu ethnonationalist parties' responses to the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees during their long period of exile in the State problematizes attempts to apply this securitization framework as explanation for the AIADMK's turn to hostility towards the refugees in the post-Rajiv Gandhi assassination period. The assassination was by no means the first instance of Sri Lankan Tamil separatist-associated violence rocking peace and security in the State. As early as 1982, LTTE leader Prabhakaran and Uma Maheswaran, head of the rival separatist movement the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), were involved in a shoot-out in the busy Pondy Bazaar area of Chennai, and in August 1984, an attempt by the Tamil Eelam Army (TEA) to blow up Colombo airport went awry, with the bomb instead detonating inside Chennai's international airport, killing 30 passengers and airport staff.<sup>81</sup> If the violence of the Rajiv Gandhi assassination prompted a shift towards hostile treatment of the refugees as proxy militants, why did the wounding of civilian bystanders on Chennai's streets and the death and destruction at the international airport not prompt a comparable response?

#### KIN STATES AND THE TRIADIC NEXUS

I have shown that neither of the possible outcomes of ethnic kin refugee situations outlined thus far can satisfactorily account for the complex realities of the Tamil Nadu case. The remainder of this article suggests an alternative framework of analysis, drawing on the sociological literature around kin state nationalism and kin migration. As well as shedding light on the particularities of the Tamil Nadu case, this application may also yield broader insights into the impact of substate nationalism on the political dynamics surrounding ethnic kin migration in the contexts of other multinational states.

Kin states whose citizenry's ethnic kin form a minority in another, usually neighboring, state have concerned scholars of nationalism, with Brubaker's influential conception of the triadic nexus providing a helpful visualization of the relationship between states and national minorities. Within this model, three "interlocking and interacting" modes of nationalism are defined. The first of these is the "nationalizing nationalism" or a state where a "core nation defined in ethno-cultural terms and sharply distinguished from the citizenry as a whole" is conceived as the "legitimate 'owner' of the state." In direct antagonism is the "external national homeland" or a second state engaging in transborder

nationalism by construing a minority excluded from the “core nation” of the first state as their ethnic kin and “fellow members of a transborder nation,” and, as such, claiming that “their rights and responsibilities *vis-a-vis* ethno-national kin transcend the boundaries of territory and citizenship. Thirdly, there are “national minorities” or a marginalized minority within the nationalizing state and the ethnic kin of citizens of the external national homeland.<sup>82</sup> The kin state phenomenon has been explored in particular depth in relation to the post-Soviet states of Eastern Europe and Central Asia<sup>83</sup> but has global salience, and it is straightforward to see how the triadic nexus model can be mapped onto the South Asian region that is the focus of this study. The majoritarian nationalism of Sri Lanka, whereby Sinhalese identity is construed as synonymous with national identity to the exclusion of the Sri Lankan Tamil national minority is viewable in terms of a nationalizing nationalism, while Tamil Nadu fulfils the role of the external national homeland through the Tamil Nadu ethnonationalist parties’ claim making *vis-a-vis* their marginalized Sri Lankan Tamil ethnic kin.

There are several points of alignment between the empirical examples drawn from the kin state literature and the Sri Lanka-Sri Lankan Tamil-Tamil Nadu nexus. Firstly, discussions of migration within this literature have generally centered on ethnic return migration; the return to a putative homeland by persons, or the descendants of persons, dispersed through migration or cut off from the homeland’s territory by the redrawing of borders—the migration of Jews to Israel and ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe to Germany being archetypal examples.<sup>84</sup> While the Tamils of Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu share a nominal ethnic identity, an application of the ethnic return model to the refugees’ situation is problematic, as the classic scenario of mismatch between citizenship and nationhood in the home state is disrupted by Sri Lankan Tamil nationalist claim making *vis-a-vis* the Sri Lankan state. The historical discourse of Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism strongly roots the Tamil people in the territory of present-day Sri Lanka. To suggest a homeland in Tamil Nadu undermines this and legitimizes opposing Sinhalese nationalist narratives that depict the Tamils as Indian invaders who subjugated the Sinhalese population. Rather, Sri Lankan Tamil nationalist discourse presents the northern Sri Lankan city of Jaffna as an important center of an ancient greater-Tamil kingdom, equal in heritage and riches to the historic Tamil cities of southern India; a claim hotly contested by Sinhalese nationalists.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, the group who could be more properly considered ethnic return migrants, Tamils of Indian origin, have historically been excluded from Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism despite being amongst the first victims of chauvinistic governance under the 1949 Citizenship Act that disenfranchised the community. Nonetheless,

at times of amicable relations between the Tamil Nadu authorities and the refugees, the latter (both Sri Lankan Tamils and the smaller number of Tamils of Indian origin) are positioned in terms reminiscent of ethnic return migrants, most notably in recent calls for conferral of Indian citizenship.

The observations that the nationalist agendas of kin states and transborder ethnic constituents do not necessarily converge, and that the positions of the actors in the triadic relationship are not fixed but are rather “arenas of struggle,”<sup>86</sup> are also salient to this article’s case. Conceptions of an essential Tamil ethnic identity and subsequent inevitability of “intimately related” transborder ethnonationalisms contradict a historical actuality of the distinct development of Tamil nationalist movements in Sri Lanka and India with minimal contact or intercooperation.<sup>87</sup> The early 20th-century Indian Tamil separatist vision of *Dravida Nadu* incorporated Ceylon<sup>88</sup> only so far as Tamils of Indian origin were concerned, and the Tamil ethnonationalist parties continued to focus solely on this group in their attention to events in Sri Lanka in the early postcolonial period. Meanwhile, Ceylonese Tamil nationalism asserted distinctiveness from the Tamil region of southern India by elevating a unique Jaffna culture.<sup>89</sup> It was only with the violent attacks on Sri Lankan Tamils from the 1970s and the outbreak of civil war in 1983 that a broader conception of transborder ethnic kinship was adopted.<sup>90</sup> Recently, the Tamil Nadu ethnonationalist parties’ pronouncements of support and sympathy for their beleaguered ethnic kin have been dismissed as “crocodile tears” by some Sri Lankan Tamil nationalists, who resent the political one-upmanship the issue appears to represent to Tamil Nadu’s rival politicians. The DMK’s demand for Indian citizenship for the refugees has been criticized by the same voices as undermining displaced Tamils’ right to reclaim their homes in Sri Lanka, instead encouraging them to “forsake them forever” through permanent settlement in India.<sup>91</sup>

#### SUBSTATE NATIONS AS KIN “STATES”

As indicated at this article’s outset, there are important distinctions between the Tamil Nadu case and other examples within the kin state literature. While in most cases the kin state or external national homeland is a sovereign state in its own right, Tamil Nadu is a substate actor within the larger political entity of India. The kin state literature acknowledges the potential for external influences to divert kin states from ethnopolitical concerns: Brubaker highlights how “ethnic co-nationals may be precipitously abandoned when geopolitical goals require this,”<sup>92</sup> while Smith proposes a transfiguration of the relational triad into a “quadratic nexus” through the addition of a fourth actor in the form of



supranational institutions such as the European Union or United Nation, who may influence or counter the ethno-political impulses of states.<sup>93</sup> Undoubtedly, bilateral and regional concerns have shaped Indian responses to the conflict in Sri Lanka, notably through fears that the now close relationship between Colombo and Beijing<sup>94</sup> threatens Indian regional hegemony. The desire to preempt the intervention of an alternative foreign power was a key factor in India's decision to deploy the IPKF in 1987,<sup>95</sup> while Indian intelligence agencies' cooperation with the Sri Lankan military during the 2008/2009 offensive and, postwar, New Delhi's initial reluctance to support calls for an international investigation into war crimes can be attributed to a desire to maintain positive relations with the Rajapaksa regime in the face of the perceived Chinese threat.<sup>96</sup> In a case like Tamil Nadu, where a substate nationalism operates in the role of proxy kin state or external national homeland, the impulse towards co-ethnic solidarity with transborder ethnic constituents must be negotiated in relation to the internal political dynamics of the broader state entity within which the substate unit is incorporated, with this broader entity's own nationalizing project and bilateral considerations thus shaping responses.

The Tamil Nadu ethnonationalist parties' response to their Sri Lankan Tamil ethnic kin is influenced then by the demands and priorities of the central Indian state, with which these parties have an interdependent political relationship. As such, an ethnonationalist agenda of support for Sri Lankan Tamil kin can only be followed unproblematically when this aligns with (or at the very least does not disrupt) the priorities of the central government—during the early-mid 1980s when both the Indian central government and the Tamil Nadu ethnonationalist parties supported Sri Lankan Tamil separatist groups, for example. But when these positions have diverged, ambitions for central government-endorsed State-level power and influential national coalition partnership have been prioritized over co-ethnic solidarity. The AIADMK's wholesale identification of the refugees as proxy militants and terrorists following Rajiv Gandhi's assassination represents a critical moment, when any lingering sympathies towards the LTTE in New Delhi shattered, and to maintain a purely ethnonationalist stance (conceivably viewed as supportive of the LTTE) represented political suicide for the Tamil Nadu parties. Jayalalithaa's attack on the refugees at this moment is situated within this shift and was motivated by the AIADMK's desire to consolidate its position as a loyal and dependable partner of Congress and to capitalize on the misfortunes of the DMK, whose failure to realign their position on Sri Lankan separatism to central priorities and sentiment during this period cost their leadership of the State Assembly. The observation that, for kin state elites, "kinship is as much a function of political

instrumentalism as cultural bonding”<sup>97</sup> is relevant here. Despite the passion and hyperbole with which it had been evoked in public pronouncements and parliamentary proceedings, transborder co-ethnic solidarity was readily dropped at a moment when its political expediency waned.

This shift was not permanent though. The parliamentary transcripts examined in this study (and encompassing the period from 1995 to 2010) do contain references to the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees as a security threat: A representative of the Ministry of Home Affairs states the need “to safeguard against the possible strain that Sri Lankan refugees can cause on [the] security scenario,” explaining how “central and State agencies keep watch over the activities in refugee camps,”<sup>98</sup> how questions are raised around the impact of the refugees’ presence in India on “social and political problems,”<sup>99</sup> and how the arrival of refugees from Sri Lanka is equated with “LTTE people coming into India.”<sup>100</sup> More recently, in April 2009, concerns are raised that LTTE cadres fleeing advancing government troops in northern Sri Lanka may be “infiltrating” India amongst refugees.<sup>101</sup> However, these remarks originate outside the Tamil Nadu political sphere, with the quoted examples emanating from Congress members representing the States of Rajasthan, Haryana, and Orissa. For Tamil Nadu politicians at the center, the discourse surrounding the refugees has returned to one of sympathy and co-ethnic solidarity (as shown in the quotations from parliamentary proceedings provided earlier in the article). While refugees suspected of LTTE affiliation have remained detained in special camps, more generalized associations of the refugees with militancy, as expressed by Jayalalithaa in 1991, are no longer found within the public discourse of Tamil Nadu’s ethnonational political elites.

## CONCLUSION

The concern of this article has been to question how theoretical models around ethnic kin migration and transborder ethnonationalisms may be employed in accounting for the responses of Tamil Nadu’s ethnonationalist parties to Sri Lankan Tamil refugees. Numerous cases presented in the refugee studies literature suggest that ethnic kinship between refugee and host indicates favorable reception and assistance. The particular circumstances of Tamil Nadu, where ethnonationalist elites have readily engaged in a public discourse of transborder ethnic solidarity, further strengthen the expectation of a sympathetic response towards these refugees. This expectation has been met to an extent: The refugees’ treatment has been favorable in comparison to other groups of forced migrants within India, parliamentary transcripts reveal lobbying of the central government by the Tamil Nadu ethnonationalist parties on the refugees’

behalf, and the refugees have been figured in terms of ethnic return migration through political advocacy towards the conferral of Indian citizenship. However, this has been tempered by a period of hostility in the aftermath of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, when the same co-ethnic elites figured the refugees as a dangerous and disruptive presence. Although a body of literature theorizes host states' perceptions of ethnic kin refugees as harbingers of war and instability, this cannot account for the unusual phenomenon represented by the Tamil Nadu case, whereby the securitization discourse has emanated not from members of an opposing or domineering group within the multiethnic host state but rather from the refugees' ethnic kin elite who have previously, and since, engaged in the apparently contradictory discourse of co-ethnic solidarity and support.

Moving to the kin state literature, the triadic nexus model is somewhat remolded by the Sri Lanka-Sri Lankan Tamil-Tamil Nadu case through the addition of the state of India that encircles the point of the triad occupied by the external national homeland—Tamil Nadu. Despite this reconfiguration, this model's recognition of ethnicity and ethnic kinship as a fluid concept, instrumentally evoked by elites in accordance with broader operational contexts and external influences, is revealing. In a case such as Tamil Nadu, where a substate nationalism occupies the kin state position, the source of external influence percolates from the bilateral or multilateral scale (as in Smith's "quadratic" model<sup>102</sup>) to the internal political dynamics of the state within which the substate unit is incorporated. As such, the impulse towards ethnopolitical solidarity suggested by the refugee studies literature is mediated by the demands of negotiating a relationship with the central state and developing or maintaining domestic political influence in accordance with the larger state unit's own national, bilateral, or multilateral concerns. This leads to the possibility of a periodic emergence of the securitization discourse more commonly evoked by opposing ethnic elites. An application of this framework to the Tamil Nadu case yields insights into how both of the apparently contradictory outcomes of ethnic kinship between refugee and host suggested by the refugee studies literature can coexist and accounts for the seemingly anomalous adoption of the securitization discourse by elites drawn from the refugees' own ethnic kin constituency in the post-Rajiv Gandhi assassination period and the subsequent return to a discourse of co-ethnic solidarity as this critical moment passed.

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87. Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities*, 59–60.

88. Colonial-era Sri Lanka.

89. Ibid. 59–100; Nira Wickramasinghe, *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History of Contested Identities* (London: Hurst and Company, 2006), 257–58.

90. Mayilvaganan, “The Re-emergence,” 944–45; Paus, *Strained Fraternity*, 39.

91. Pushpa Iyengar, “New Words to Keep: Karunanidhi’s Promise on Lankan Refugees in India Prompts a Debate,” *Outlook* (Oct. 2009), <http://www.outlookindia.com/printarticle.aspx?262064> (accessed 13 Sep. 2009); Rediff, “Indian Citizenship Won’t Help Lankan Tamils,” *Rediff News* (Sept. 2009), <http://news.rediff.com/report/2009/sep/30/indian-citizenship-wont-help-lankan-tamils.htm> (accessed 13 Sep. 2009); UK Tamil News, *Karunanithy and his Crocodile Tears for Sri Lankan Tamils* (Sept. 2010), [www.uktamilnews.com/index.php/2010/06/26/20126/](http://www.uktamilnews.com/index.php/2010/06/26/20126/) (accessed 15 Sept. 2010).

92. Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*, 6.

93. David J. Smith, “Framing the National Question in Central and Eastern Europe: A Quadratic Nexus?,” *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 2(1): 3–16 (2002).

94. China supplied massive quantities of arms to the Sri Lankan military in the latter stages of the campaign against the LTTE and is investing heavily in large-scale infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka, including the development of Hambantota harbor on Sri Lanka’s south-eastern coast as part of the “String of Pearls” project of ports rimming the Indian ocean. See Gordon Weiss, *The Cage: The Fight for Sri Lanka and the Last Days of the Tamil Tigers* (London: Vintage, 2011), 202–203.

95. George J. Gilboy and Eric Heginbotham, *Chinese and Indian Strategic Behaviour: Growing Power and Alarm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 61.

96. Weiss, *The Cage*, 250–51.

97. Walter Kemp, "The Triadic Nexus: Lessons Learned from the Status Law," in Osamu Ieda, ed., *Beyond Sovereignty: From Status Law to Transnational Citizenship?* (Sapporo: Slavic Research Centre at Hokkaido University, 2006), 112.
98. Lok Sabha (2001).
99. Rajya Sabha (1996).
100. Lok Sabha (1996).
101. Lok Sabha (2009).
102. Smith, "Framing the National Question."