

Image and Identity: Tamil Migration to the United States

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Introduction

During the year I was doing fieldwork in Madras, India, my husband and I would often stand on the front balcony around sunset talking with our Tamil landlord and landlady about life and politics in India, the United States, and the world at large. One evening after a lull in the conversation, our landlord, a former high-court judge educated in excellent English schools and colleges in India, asked in a pensive and perplexed tone of voice, "Is it true that in America there are no cows walking in the streets?" We replied, "No, there are no cows in the streets." He then asked, "And are there no water buffaloes?"

At first we thought he was joking, but after pursuing the subject we learned that he was completely serious. This conversation revealed dramatically to me that Indians find certain images of the United States as incredulous and bizarre as Americans often find descriptions of India to be. Until this moment it had seemed perfectly natural that Americans often ask with amazement if cows really do walk freely in the streets of India. I had never seriously considered the question in reverse. This incident, however, demonstrated that Tamils both in India and in the U.S. often view America as something wholly alien to much of their previous experience.

Images of "the States" or of the generic West are extremely widespread in south India. For example, in Tamil Nadu, the state of which Madras is the capital and Tamil the official language, Tamil movies are shown in every town, city, and village. These movies invariably portray themes which viewers define as American. Drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, dancing lasciviously, and carrying on romantic affairs are displayed as enticing, immoral, and essentially non-Tamil forms of behavior. These Western evils are often portrayed as tempting thrills which an innocent character embraces or is tricked into by a villain. After much singing, dancing, and romance (though no sexual activity more than holding hands or occasionally kissing is shown on the screen), the plot reaches a climax when the conflicting characters fight, the villain is vanquished, and good triumphs. The good, traditional Tamil family and lifestyle are reasserted over suspect Western ways.

While movies may caricature these stereotypes into simplistic morality plays, they are extraordinarily popular among Tamils, both poor and rich, rural and urban, educated and uneducated. They are exported to the U.S. along with other Indian language films and are just as popular among Tamils in the United States as in India. Tamil films represent one dramatized and important example of the kinds of imagery of the West that are widely prevalent among Tamils not only in India but also in the U.S. Other media tend to elaborate these stereotypes, and one readily learns these stereotypes in conversing with Tamils. Many Tamil people express disapproval of American society for other signs of immorality or weakness in American family relationships—notably, high divorce rates,

dating among unmarried young people, and the treatment of old people.

Since many of these stereotypes are for the most part negative evaluations of American life, we can ask why in the first place Tamils do migrate to the United States; it is, after all, a voluntary migration on their part. Second, we might ask how they develop strategies to translate and negotiate their cultural identities in a social context vastly different from the one they left.

Views on Who Migrates and Why

The majority of Tamils in the United States come from middle- to upper-income backgrounds and are well educated, often in English-medium schools in India. Among the 20,000 Asian Indians now migrating to the United States each year and currently numbering almost half a million, Tamil speakers are a small and distinctive minority. Not only do they see themselves as quite different from other South Asians, but the social composition of Tamils emigrating from India is unique. The vast majority of the Tamils in the U.S. are Brahmins, the community at the top of the Hindu hierarchy of castes as defined in terms of relative "purity" and "pollution." In Tamil Nadu, on the other hand, Brahmins are only two to three per cent of the population. The composition of the Tamil population in the United States, then, is the extreme reverse of what it is in India, in terms of Brahmins and non-Brahmins (the general terms which Tamils most often use when referring to distinctions of "caste" or "community"). Thus in the United States the Tamil population is considerably more homogeneous in terms of caste than it is in Tamil Nadu.

Why then are so many Brahmins leaving India for the United States? When one asks Tamils this question, they most frequently refer to the quota system instituted by the Tamil Nadu state government, which determines entry into all state-run colleges and jobs. The place reserved for Brahmins in this system is in proportion to their position in the population, around two to three percent. This policy is comparable to affirmative action policies elsewhere but is especially dramatic in Tamil Nadu because it has followed more than a half century of struggle by various non-Brahmin groups to oust Brahmins from their earlier hegemony. Many Brahmins expressed outrage at being victims of the new order and its sentiments. One man said, "So much anti-Brahmin feeling is there. Quotas, not marks, determine college entry now . . . so Brahmins get only one or two seats in a college class." The factor that makes this seem so unfair, he said, is that "Brahmins get 99%, the best marks." He also expressed his belief that "among other castes, Chettiars for example, only maybe six to eight per cent will be intelligent, but among Brahmins ninety per cent will be intelligent."

Brahmins relate this perception of their high intelligence to the occupations they have held in the past. One Brahmin man described this history as follows:

Lord William Benting, in 1819 or 1820, opened up education in English schools to "the natives" as we were then called . . . Brahmins are the most intellectual of all the communities, so we took the greatest advantage of the English education that was offered. Having been priests by occupation, we were accustomed to study, we were knowing Sanskrit. We took to that English education very easily. Then when government service positions were opened to Indians, naturally we were the best suited.

Now that government service positions are much less readily available to Brahmins in Tamil Nadu, due to the legislative and political changes that have taken place since the 1930s, many Brahmins have migrated to other parts of India, where they hold a large proportion of civil service jobs. Brahmins have also in the last fifty years gone into lines of work other than civil service or traditional priestly roles. Such occupations as engineering,

medicine, and other technical fields now attract them. One man described the changes in Brahmin occupations like this: "traditionally, Brahmin was priest, then accounting and vakil (attorney) . . . now engineering, but only civil engineering, not mechanical or other, because civil engineering takes brains. Building bridges and all that, it takes brains."

While sharing the emphasis on education and intelligence, not all the Brahmins I spoke to attributed their motivation for moving to the U.S. to anti-Brahmin sentiment and the quota system. One young man stated: "it's the Brahmin habit of looking for better opportunities, not liking to go into business, being well educated and flexible." Several reasons, then, are given by Brahmins to explain the disproportionately large percentage of Tamil Brahmins who seek their fortunes in the United States.

Non-Brahmins I spoke with did not attribute Brahmin migration to the United States to the quota system in Tamil Nadu or to the notion that Brahmins are currently being forced out economically. Instead, they claimed that Brahmins always take the best opportunities and have the knowledge and ability to take advantage of these. Moreover, several non-Brahmins described themselves and members of their communities as not having had access to such opportunities. They therefore see themselves as lacking the knowledge to achieve what they perceive Brahmins to have achieved. In one discussion in which I took part, several non-Brahmins debated among themselves whether or not they have an "inferiority complex." Some argued that this inferiority complex remains their problem and responsibility to overcome while others asserted that Brahmins' treatment of other castes as inferior is the significant issue. Though differing in emphasis, these non-Brahmins agreed that they had to overcome both internal and external constraints of subordination to Brahmins. Since work opportunities in the United States are relatively free of these historically and culturally specific problems of Brahmin/non-Brahmin patterns and perceptions of dominance and subordination, non-Brahmins with whom I spoke cited "freedom" as very important to their lives in the United States.

Economic pressures in Tamil Nadu are intense for both Brahmins and non-Brahmins even in the middle- and upper-income ranges, from which potential migrants to the United States come. Among the young men aspiring to professional careers, engineering is now the most popular and prestigious field all over India, so the competition is fierce in colleges not only in Tamil Nadu but also in other states. Similarly, competition is considerable in colleges run by the Central Government within the state of Tamil Nadu, in which these caste-based quotas do not apply. Yet even if one is admitted to college and completes a degree, the number of jobs in engineering, medicine, and other professions is very low in proportion to the number of graduates.

According to their own accounts, then, Tamils initially migrate from India to the United States for what they call the material advantages the United States has to offer. Many gain employment in well-paying jobs, and many manage after a few years to buy new tract homes and fill them with the latest gadgets. In houses that look exactly like their neighbors', though, many cook spicy curries in microwave ovens, watch the latest Tamil movies on home video machines, and perform Hindu rituals on their back patios.

Negotiation and Translation of Cultural Identities: Two Examples

Tamils in the San Francisco Bay Area, like other recent immigrants from India, maintain their ties to families and concerns back home and are concerned not to abandon what they perceive as an ancient cultural heritage. Tamils have thus organized language and regional associations based on their native language. They have arranged for south Indian dance performances and instruction, imported Tamil movies, and established Hindu temples. In this way, while arranging their work lives, many of which are in the high-

technology industries of Silicon Valley, they have in their home lives been trying to create a Tamil world as much as possible like the one they left in India.

Tamil immigrants have in the process come to question certain aspects of their traditions, even as they try to preserve other aspects. They are now actively engaged in renegotiating long-held cultural identifications. This renegotiation is symbolically expressed in various forms which demonstrate some of the situational and social variation that occurs in the process. Two examples of this renegotiation and translation of Tamil identity can be seen in the use of Tamil names and the practice of Indian dance.

In work and other settings in the U.S., Tamils often find that their names, usually multisyllabic, are difficult for Americans to remember or pronounce: for example, Balasubramaniam, Venkateshwaran, Radhakrishnan, Rajagopalachari, and so on. This difficulty can cause consternation and potential miscommunication among Tamils and Americans. One Tamil man in the Bay Area remarked that it is so difficult for Americans to understand his wife's name when he telephones her at work that he tries to avoid calling her there. To deal with such problems of communication with Americans, Tamils are developing a range of strategies they use to make their names manageable in American contexts. One such strategy is to shorten their names by using only one or two of the syllables, for example Ram from Ramamurthi or Venki from Venkatraman. This practice of shortening names into "nicknames" takes place in Tamil Nadu as well, but would not occur in the workplace, doctor's office, or over the telephone as in the U.S. Also, for purposes of interaction with Americans, some Tamils will anglicize their names, such that if someone's name is Ananda he might say his name is Andy. The anglicization of names is often a jointly produced product of interactions with Americans, who may suggest something like Roger for Rajagopalachari.

Tamils find, as they enter jobs, schools, and other arenas of American society, that their naming system does not fit into American categories. Though most Tamils are familiar with Western naming patterns before they come to the United States, the non-fit of their own patterns becomes evident only when it arises as an obstacle to smooth interaction in the U.S. In the Tamil system there are no family names, yet in the United States a family name is essential.

Tamils may even try to explain how their naming system functions, but Americans will insist on a "first," optionally "middle," and "last" name. Tamils readily explain that "we do not have a 'family' name like you do." As one man explained:

Our "last" name is not a family name but is our own personal name. It is not our father's name as your last name is. Neither is our first initial our first name. That is our father's initial but it is not used as a name, it is an initial only. So when we are asked to say what our first name is, that means our own name, in the United States, but that is our last name, for us.

For example, a man named P. Venkatraman might have a father named G. Perumal. The G. stands for his father's name, Ganapati. P. Venkatraman may have two sons and name them V. Ramasundaram and V. Gopalakrishnan. These sons would share their father's initial, V., in the first position of their name, and in the last position would be their personal name.

Tamil women have relatively less difficulty than Tamil men with the American naming system. The structure of women's names in urban Tamil Nadu, especially among the more educated and well-to-do, has reportedly changed over the last thirty or forty years to resemble Western naming practices. Traditionally, unmarried girls' names follow the same pattern as boys' names; for example, two daughters of P. Venkatraman might be named V. Lakshmi and V. Sita. In this system, if V. Lakshmi married A. Narayanan, her name would change to Mrs. N. Lakshmi. Similarly if her sister V. Sita married S.

Rajagopalachari, her name would change to R. Sita. This practice remains widespread, though among those Tamils more likely to migrate to the United States the newer system resembling Western patterns is more common. Thus among such people in Tamil Nadu now, unmarried girls' names consist of their personal name, for example, Lakshmi, followed by their father's name, P. Venkatraman, making the girl's name in this case Lakshmi Venkatraman. Upon marriage to A. Narayanan, for example, she becomes Mrs. Lakshmi Narayanan (never Mrs. A. Narayanan, which would be comparable to the American form, Mrs. Adam Smith/Mrs. A. Smith). In the United States, then, Tamil women who use their personal name first and their father's or husband's name last do not have to renegotiate the position of their names.

For the men, on the other hand, first and last names remain a problem they have to deal with in American society. One solution some Tamil men have developed is to use the first one or two syllables of their name like a first/proper/"Christian" name in the Western system and the last two or three syllables like a last/family name. For example, P. Venkatraman might change his name in the U.S. to Venkat Raman; V. Ramasundaram to Rama Sundaram, and V. Gopalakrishnan to Gopal Krishnan. This provides the requisite first and last name for the American context and makes the syllables themselves easier for Americans to pronounce. But it removes the father's initial, which is characteristic of all male names in Tamil.

To deal with this problem requires dealing with the issue posed by the American category of the "family name," which not only occurs in the final position but is the shared name of the father, sons, daughters, and potentially sons' wives. One Tamil man decided to use "his name" (that is, his personal name) which is "last" in the Tamil system, as his family name, and thereby begin a family name with his generation. His wife and children will also use that as their family/last name. His father's initial is only retained for himself, and will be lost in future generations. Others want to keep their father's name, but realize that the retention of it in the first initial, as in the Tamil system, cannot be maintained in American contexts. This opens the possibility of having a public and private system, or, alternatively, using the father's name as a family name. This also seems quite peculiar, they say, since the father's name is also the father's personal, own name, not a "family name."

Another example of naming usage among Tamils in the United States involves the ideological stance they take in relation to current political circumstances in Tamil Nadu. One family, for instance, a non-Brahmin family committed to the Dravidian ideology, decided to carry out one of its tenets. In practice, the nature of this ideology entails an attempt to eradicate Sanskrit-derived words from one's use of Tamil, since Sanskrit is the language associated with domination by Brahmins, in the first place, and by Hindi speakers from the North, in addition. The parents in this family, who had grown up in Tamil Nadu during the period when this stance was at its most intense, and who had lived in the U.S. for about five years, suggested to their children that they might like to change their names from Sanskrit-derived to pure Tamil names. The children, aged about eight and ten, agreed and went to court so as to change their names legally, thereby symbolizing to the Tamil community the family's ideological stance. One of the children, though, experienced difficulties with his new name when at school or among his American friends. To them it seemed that he had simply substituted one Indian name for another. As a result, he continued for the most part to use his Sanskrit-derived name with them.

For the parents in this family, the political conflicts of Tamil Nadu are highly significant in their dealings with other Tamils in the United States, making the noticeable act of a name change an important statement of their position. For the child, on the other hand, differences between Tamil ideologies were considerably less important than his daily

relationships in school and with Americans, and the name change became confusing and problematic.

Another form of symbolic expression important to Tamils in India and the United States is dance. In particular, Bharata Natyam, the "classical" dance of south India, is very popular for study and performance. The dance form, a revived and transformed style which derives from Hindu temple dancing, is now studied widely in India among elite urban girls ranging in age from about eight to twenty-five. The study of Bharata Natyam has in the last five to ten years also become popular in the U.S. among Tamil girls and young women. In India, Bharata Natyam concerts are performed in cities throughout the country, though the center for this dance form is Madras, where professional and amateur teachers and performers abound. Tamils who have migrated to the Bay Area organize frequent performances of Bharata Natyam. Usually these are solo performances done by female dancers.

Bharata Natyam is seen by many Tamils as an important symbol of an ancient tradition that originated in south India, yet the specifics of exactly what tradition it represents vary considerably. Many Tamils would agree that the dance style exemplifies their heritage yet disagree on whether this is a Hindu, Indian, Brahmin, or non-Brahmin heritage. Furthermore, there are different styles of Bharata Natyam which are practiced by dancers of different regions and castes. These variant styles have come to be seen as indexes of those regional and social differences. Accordingly, these styles are of symbolic significance in contributing to the choices Tamil parents make regarding the kinds of dance forms they will or will not encourage their daughters to pursue. In a Christian family, for example, the fourteen-year-old daughter begged her parents to be allowed to study Bharata Natyam, but they were against it because Bharata Natyam was traditionally a Hindu temple dance. She tried to persuade them of its value to her as a Tamil in America by defining it as an Indian dance which would help her to understand her Indian background, regardless of religious affiliation.

The choice of dance teachers by Tamils also demonstrates the social variation in their interpretations of the art form. Many Brahmin parents prefer to have their children study styles of Bharata Natyam offered by Brahmin teachers. Some non-Brahmins, on the other hand, prefer to avoid Brahmin teachers and state the view that they want their children to learn Tamil, not Sanskritic styles of dance. Social affiliation of the teacher and of the dance form are not necessarily contiguous, however.

Identity Negotiation in a New Context

Naming practices and conflicting interpretations of dance forms are but two examples of meaningful arenas in which Tamils define and negotiate their varied stances in relation to each other and to Americans. The above examples demonstrate some of the complexity involved in the process of Tamils' renegotiation of their identities in a new social context. In other areas of activity, such as marriage choices for the Tamil children now reaching marriageable age, eating and cooking preferences, and women's dress and bodily adornments, the often conflicting facets of identity negotiation are also problematic, since these areas have served in India as emblems of demarcation between social groups. While the nature and management of such demarcation continues to change rapidly in India, in the United States there is the additional dimension of Tamils' and other Indians' shared self-definition as Asian Indians. For Tamils, questions of protection from unwanted mixture with persons or actions seen as "other" arise dramatically in the attempt to define how they shall carry on and redefine their traditions: as either Brahmins, non-Brahmins, Indo-Americans, Tamil-Americans, or whatever other terms of cultural identification they

may create.

These questions and processes are demonstrably in operation in the everyday incidents of Tamils' lives in the U.S. Their concerns were clearly made evident to me when two Tamil families invited me to accompany them on a weekend camping trip. Going camping, they said, was unusual for Tamils. They were proud to show me their new camper and Sears Roebuck equipment. Our destination turned out to be a private KOA campground, which my friends explained was "less natural" but certainly more convenient with all of its amenities such as electrical hookups, hot showers, and a swimming pool. The women wore long dresses the night we arrived, then the next morning changed into blue jeans, yet retained their diamond nose rings and earrings, bangles, and gold and jewelled marriage *taalis* around their necks. In fact they wore their marriage necklaces out, over their blouses, which they rarely do when wearing saris, since that is considered immodest. Later in the day, when it was hotter, the women changed into shorts, and I asked with some surprise how recent an innovation this was, since I was so accustomed to the south Indian prohibition against women showing their legs in public. They said that they had just begun to wear shorts the previous summer, but that they would not allow themselves to be photographed in shorts because this should not be seen by the families back home.

We pursued all of our recreational activities as a group, which contrasted with the American families around us. This contrast was demonstrated to me when a young American boy shouted to his father as he headed off, "Dad, I'm going over to the baseball field; if you wanna come over there you can." Our group, on the other hand, stayed together the whole weekend, and no one even went to the bathroom alone. The weekend was enjoyed by my Tamil friends as an occasion to be together. While Americans might define such activities as running to the office for a garbage bag as practical, unimportant, and asocial, almost all of these activities were shared by the Tamil families as inherently social events which no one did alone.

Yet while these Tamil families had incorporated the Western activity of camping into their expanding social and cultural repertoire, there were certain features of it which they regarded as wholly alien. These features in large part involved the eating practices of Americans while camping. My Tamil hosts had their own views about camping cuisine. The food we ate, served in new, bright orange Tupperware-style containers, consisted of traditional Tamil vegetarian staples: yogurt rice, lemon rice, curried vegetables, and sour chutney. From the supermarket there were also potato chips, soft drinks, fruit, and cookies. My vegetarian hosts had been raised in a Hindu context where meat, especially beef, was considered offensive and off-limits. One of the children, raised primarily in the U.S., ate meat, but it was not served to him by his parents. At one point during the weekend, when his father bought him some meat from a delicatessen, the parents in the other family requested him not to let their very young child see what he was eating, because they wished their child to remain a vegetarian until she was old enough to decide for herself. The choice of one family member to become a non-vegetarian was accepted, but the family was cautious that others not be exposed to the unwelcome sight and smell of meat.

My hosts had decided not to cook while camping and had prepared the food in advance. This decision reflected one major aspect of American camping culture that remained foreign to them, and at one point during the weekend I was reminded of my Madras landlord's incredulity about the absence of cows in the streets of America. My Tamil fellow campers appeared equally incredulous as we sat, eating our evening meal, surrounded by Americans cooking hot dogs and hamburgers on grills. Well familiar with this stereotype of American outdoor culture, my Tamil friends nonetheless expressed how alien and bizarre it was for them to see by asking me a question reminiscent of the one my

Tamil landlord had asked in Madras. As these Tamil campers eyed their American counterparts not far away, I was asked, "Is it really true that Americans just eat the meat right off the fire?"