CASTE AND NATION-BUILDING

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To my beloved Father who had great confidence in me; and to my husband and sons who at times lacked a wife and mother because of my long preoccupation with this project

AN EPIGRAPH

In my analysis of the Vellalah caste identity imbedded in Tamil nationalism, I wish to emphasise that I have no intention of depreciating the intentions of any key figures of the Tamil nation project in Sri Lanka. Any critical orientations towards the roles they have played with respect to their cultures and communities are presented for the sake of critical analysis of contemporary social issues; they are undertaken in the spirit that there will always be multiple discourses in the discussion of any subject. My modest attempt here is to open up a space for self-critique so that history can be reoriented towards a rigorous account of our social failures so that they are not repeated in the future.

Abstract

This doctoral thesis explores the meanings and practices associated with Vellalah identity in the context of the Tamil nationalist project in Jaffna, Sri Lanka. Given that caste is a culturally sensitive identity and practice among Tamils, I investigate how the dominant caste identity was constructed, (re)negotiated and transformed. I do this via a case study on Vellalah identity by looking at the construction of Vellalah identity historically, as well as in contemporary Jaffna, with a main focus on the years 2004–2007. This study, in a sense, tries to unpack the Sri Lankan conflict with an inside account of the Vellalah Tamils who were one of the major protagonists of the ethno-national war which lasted more than three decades.

The Vellalah, being the hegemonic elite and intelligentsia of the region, monopolised the social, cultural, economic and political resources. An analysis of this study is imbedded in an interpretive constructive approach undertaken with narrative methodology. At a theoretical level, this study discusses the intersections of identity, caste and nationalism. It tries to account for how Vellalah identity is historically constituted, how major elements of caste relate to Vellalah identity, how the LTTE both influenced caste and Vellalah identity, and finally how war impacted caste and Vellalah identity. This study attempts to shed light on how the Vellalah articulations and (re)negotiations of caste identity shifted the Vellalah to always sustain themselves through power and the societal elite. It also discovers that the internalised caste identity is dynamic and durable. Moreover, it exposes that the axis extend from the Vellalah and the oppressed castes always entails a we-and-them perspective.

The central argument of this thesis is that while Vellalah identity evolved over time with certain stable markers of its identity and thus of caste identity, during the period of Tamil militancy such markers of caste identity were radically destabilised in the re-articulation of Tamil nationalism. It also explores the extent to which such destabilisation resulted in permanent shifts in caste-based practices and the identification arenas of the Vellalah, but found that despite some changes to caste practices during the LTTE period, caste-based identities did not dissolve but have rather returned in the post-war period. Importantly, this study contributes with the basis that these Vellalah negotiations of identity can provide insight into mechanisms through which dominance and oppression are (re)articulated and how collective identities are (re/de)constructed and renegotiated over time.

Key words: Vellalah identity, nation-building, Tamils, caste, negotiation, cultural schema, identification arena.

Abbreviations

ACTC	All Ceylon Tamil Congress
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CE	Common Era
CM	Chief Minister
CP	Communist Party
CYC	Ceylon Youth Congress
DS	Divisional Secretariat
EPDP	Eelam People's Democratic Party
EPRLF	Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front
EROS	Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students
FDCTL	Forum for Depressed Class Tamil Labours
GA	Government Agent
GO	Government Organisation
GTZ	German Technical Co-operation
HRW	Human Rights Watch
HSZ	High Security Zone
IDP	Internal Displaced Person/People
INGO	International Non-Government Organisation
ITAK/FP	Illankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi/Federal Party
JP	Justice of Peace
JUSTA	Jaffna University Science Teachers Association
JVP	Janatha Vimukkthi Peramuna
JYC/CYC	Jaffna Youth Congress/ Ceylon Youth Congress
LSSP	Lanka Sama Samaja Party
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MP	Member of Parliament
MSF	Medicines Sans Frontiers
MTA/MTM	Minority Tamil Association/Minority Tamil Mahasabha
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NPC	Northern Provincial Council
NSTMA	Northern Sri Lankan Tamil Minority Association
PLOTE	People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam
PWM	Progressive Writers Movement
SLFP	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
TC	Tamil Congress
TELO	Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation

TMVP	Tamil Makkal Viduthali Pulikal
TNA	Tamil National Alliance
TPM	Tamil Purist Movement
TUF	Tamil United Front
TULF	Tamil United Liberation Front
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
UNICEF	United Nations International Child Education Fund
UNP	United National Party
UTHR	University Teachers for Human Rights

Contents

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Finally, the responsibility for any misunderstanding or misinterpretations in this work is, of course, entirely my own.

Notes on Transliteration

Short Vowels

a	as in English *up*
i	as in English *kit*
u	as in English *put*
e	as in English *set*
o	as in English *book*

Long Vowels

aa	as in English *calm*
ee	as in English *lead*
oo	as in English *oval*
ea	as in English *angel*
ai	as in English *ice*

Consonants

k (initial position)	as in English *cake*
kk	as in English *bookkeeping*
c	as in English *sun*
ch	as in English *chair*
tt	as in English *better*
p (initial position)	as in English *pain*
p (other positions)	as in English *impress*
pp	as in English *cupcake*
cy	as in English *cheers*
r (initial position)	as in English *rat*
r (other positions)	as in English *butter*
n (initial position)	as in English *nut*
nn	as in English *win*
m	as in English *money*
l	as in English *little*
ll	as in English *lilly*

1
Introduction

"If anything, it is the very prohibition of discourse, with its secret commitments, initiatory ordeals, and calls for ineffable self-transcendence, which constitutes the problem" (Zulaika 1995: 206).

Referring to the context of political violence in the Basque community in Spain, the above quotation by Zulaika also succinctly corresponds to the study of caste in Jaffna in northern Sri Lanka. Importantly, caste among Tamils in Sri Lanka remains a riddle to be understood; it constitutes a highly forbidden area of discourse in Jaffna (where this study has its empirical base) and it is equally a proscribed issue for academic inquiry. Through broad-reaching secret commitments and networks, caste has extended from private life into public, national and transnational spaces. However, its dynamic is very discreet and well-hidden. For a long time this puzzle intrigued me and came to inspire me to delineate caste – its dynamics and interplay in life among Tamils in Jaffna. At base, this study concerns how *a caste identity is constructed, negotiated and transformed in the context of the Tamil nation-building project*, but the investigation is conducted through a case study of a single, dominant caste, the Vellalah. I look at the construction of Vellalah identity historically, as well as in contemporary Jaffna, mainly focusing on the years 2004–2007. This is a new field that has not previously been treated from a research perspective; thus the study is exploratory.

This project was undertaken while the Tamil national elite and leaders were intensely engaged in a project of nation state formation in Sri Lanka in the 2000s; they were stuck with people incessantly mobilising for an 'imagined' united identity while the 'other', the Sinhalese, was perceived as an outside community or outside the ethnic boundary. The proponents of the nation-building, who are either the elite of the intelligentsia or the activists of nationalism discourage discourse or research on the internal issues and contradictions which might reveal any facts or forces that can hamper the nation-building process. On the other hand, it is clear that internal frictions

and clashes – and their interpenetrations within the dynamics of the nation-building – should be explored and recorded contextually in the same way as the influence of external issues on nationalism. Many studies on nationalism have seen nationalism as the counter-product of nationalism within a state, and have primarily conceived peace as means to settle or address the demands of binary ethnic divisions (Eller, 1999; Schulz, 1993; Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2000). In Bosnia and Palestine, for example, nation projects emerged as defensive reactionary products of ethnic-based national homogeneity. Recent decades have been marked by scholarship on nation projects and their divergent paths at local, national and global levels, especially in the South (Eller, 1999; Kempny and Jawlowska, 2002; Hettne, 1999; Schulz, 1993; Lindholm Schulz, 2003; Orjuela, 2004).

Tamil nation-building is used here as a major reference point for the study of Vellalah identity for three reasons: First, caste identity is investigated during a time when Tamil nationalism is constantly articulated among Tamils. This will give a picture of how national identity intersects with an intra-cultural identity, the caste, and it will also shed light on how caste, as an intra-cultural identity, is articulated during the process of nation-building. Second, having noticed that there is a positive correlation between the pioneers of Tamil nation-building with Vellalah identity and the militant Tamil nationalistic project with the non-Vellalah, I also discover some internal patterns of caste politics as they are expressed in the hands of political players of the same caste. Finally, and most importantly, the cultural identities (such as Vellalah, caste, and Tamil nation) are intersectional, entwined and cannot be examined separately from one another.

As many in the twenty-first century are aware, Sri Lanka has only very recently ended its more than three decades of civil war between the Sri Lankan government and the separatist and nationalist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam[1] (hereafter LTTE) – officially in May 2009 through a military victory. Sri Lankan Tamils,[2] who are a minority (12 per cent of the population) and one

[1] LTTE was a guerrilla militant group which was dominant and powerful among Tamils in Sri Lanka and fought with the Sinhala majority government for a separate Tamil state from the late-1970s until May 2009. The Sri Lankan government decimated the LTTE in May 2009 through military means. The major conflict that existed between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government is now over, and reconstruction activities are being undertaken by the Sri Lankan government in Jaffna and the affected Tamil-dominated areas.

[2] The last all island-wide population census was taken only in 1981, according to which 73.95% of the population were Sinhalese, 12.71% were Tamils, 7.05% were Moors, 5.51% were Indian Tamils, 0.32% were Malays, 0.27% were Burgers and 0.19% composed others. The next population census was first taken in 2001 and it was only carried out in 18 out of 25 districts, and mainly excluded Northern and Eastern Provinces where the majority of Sri Lankan Tamils live. However, Census and Statistics Department in Sri Lanka estimates that the Tamils (Sri Lankan and Indian) of Sri Lanka account for 18% of the population. Indian Tamils were only classified as a separate ethnic group from the 1911 census onwards. Prior to this they were included with Sri Lankan Tamils.

of the major players in the ethno-national conflict, are here scrutinised, as this study provides an inside account of Tamil nationalism and how it is reflected in the cultural identity of caste. When a nation emphasises national homogeneity, parallel and non-homogenous cultural identities are disregarded or disenfranchised. Sometimes they are used and articulated for political purposes (Gellner, 1983; Lindholm Schulz, 2003; Hutchinson, 1987, 1992). According to Tamil culture, caste is an *identity* ascribed by birth; it is a vibrant identity although in public it remains concealed. Studying caste was not as easy a task as I believed it to be upon beginning my research. I was seen as a stranger by my own community when I delved into the subject; eyebrows were often raised as I was asked questions like: "for what?" and "why study this subject?" Reactions came from the academic community like bullets:

> "Why do you want to show our rubbish to others?" (Academic x, December 2005).
> "Don't take up politics, just go with culture" (Academic y, April 2006).
> "This is not the *right time* to talk about caste" (Academic z, April 2007).

As we see in the above anecdotes, the academic community in Jaffna expresses its scepticism towards the subject in several ways. In the first, caste is viewed as a repressive site of discourse among the Jaffna community; the second testimony depicts the perception that it is better not to mix politics with discourse on caste; and the third is related to the second concerning the time.[3] While LTTE held dominant power among Tamils, the study of caste was perceived to be unfavourable and tabooed. Despite the fact that caste was a site of political repression in the militant phase of Tamil nationalist politics, in this thesis I have tried to show how it continued to structure social practice and reality. Indeed, at the minimum it requires profound self-transcendence in order for one to be able to hold a dialogue or discourse on caste. At this juncture I should briefly bring attention to my field site which, I think, will give the reasons for why I had chosen Jaffna as my research site for this study. A detailed account of Jaffna concerning caste will appear in the background chapter.

Jaffna is situated in the extreme north of Sri Lanka. The total area of the peninsula is 1,129.9 square kilometers. In 2011, Jaffna had a population of 583,071 persons (Census and Statistics Department, 2011). More than 80 per cent are ethnically Sri Lankan Tamil and most Sri Lankan Tamils are Hindus, followed by Christians, Muslims and a small Buddhist minority. This study

[3] The fieldwork was conducted from September 2004 to January 2007, after the failure of all peace talks between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government. The LTTE had (re)acted aggressively against the Sri Lankan Sinhala-dominated governance. Political offices of LTTE were withdrawn from Jaffna in 2006. There was a widespread tension among the population which thought that a major war was on its way.

focuses on Jaffna district[4] and draws data by means of purposive and snowball sampling. Jaffna was chosen for this study for several reasons: First, Jaffna is the heartland of Tamils in Sri Lanka and is also the cultural and intellectual cradle of Tamils in Sri Lanka; second, it is the place where almost all the Tamil political leaders, especially the elite, have come from, and it is the place where all the militant movements have begun; and third, and importantly, it is the place where many caste clashes have taken place.

Caste is an accepted cultural practice among Tamils; its embodiments have an extended reach into multiple socio-cultural and politico-economic domains among Tamils of Sri Lanka as well as Hindus elsewhere. The Human Rights Watch report produced for the United Nations World Conference against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, held in South Africa in 2001, identified Nepal, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan in South Asia, and the Buraku people in Japan, the Osu of Nigeria's Igbo people, and certain people in Senegal and Mauritania, as the communities in which caste or caste-like practices exit (HRW report 2001). Caste is a cultural identity as well as a quality attributed to both individuals and collectives. Caste is operationally defined as a system of *endogamy, division of labour, purity-pollution, ranking, and interdependence* (Dumont, 1975; Bougle, 1971; Banks, 1960). These have been considered as the major elements of caste in Sri Lanka and in India (ibid.). Caste orders people on the basis of locally constructed ideas of purity and impurity, and in terms of power politics. Hindu religion also sets out provisions in terms of hierarchy among castes. Caste identity is supposed to remain until a person dies; it allocates the social duties for people, and thus people are treated differently according to the positions they were given by caste ordering.

Caste is referred colloquially, and even sometimes in papers, as 'high' and 'low' or 'upper' and 'lower'. The term 'low caste' is very much used in local parlance as equivalent to 'depressed castes'. The difference between these two terms is that the former is more a colloquial use, while the latter is more a written form. The term 'depressed' is not used here in order to mean 'illness', in the psychiatric sense, but rather to name an experience that was not pleasant, but was felt by human collectives through similar experiences in the name of their caste identity. This construction in terms of high and low was basically a religious (Hindu) construction, later it extended to the social space too. There was even a corresponding correlation between 'high' with 'purity' and 'low' with 'impurity/pollution', depending on what kind of work a particular

[4] The name "Jaffna" denotes multiple meanings: 1) One of the major districts of Sri Lanka's 25 districts is Jaffna District, which acts as an administrative division; 2) Jaffna Peninsula refers to the city along with several adjoining islands, such as Karaitivu, Nainativu, Eluvaitivu, Analaitivu, Velanai, Mandaitivu and Neduntivu; 3) the capital of Jaffna district is also called Jaffna city/town.

caste was supposed to do. Killing (animal slaughter), working outdoors with waste disposal, and so on, were considered impure tasks, thus they were ranked low in the caste ordering. This conception of low caste and high caste in Jaffna, and even other areas where Tamils live, is used by people without them necessarily being aware of who is higher and who is lower and why. However, Tamil literature has largely aligned caste issues with the binary division of high and low, through which Vellalah and Brahmin mean 'high', while the five castes of *Ampatter* (hairdressers), *Vannar* (washermen), *Nalavar* (toddy tappers and assistants in agriculture), *Pallar* (toddy tappers and assistants in agriculture) and *Paraiyar* (funeral drummers) mean ´low´. Each caste was designated specific places based on its degree of purity and pollution – a practice that was strictly maintained in the past. Concerning low and high, some think washermen (*Dhobi*) are higher than hairdressers (barbers), while others think vice versa. Many people in Jaffna and other areas where Tamil live have different opinions on which castes are the higher and which castes the lower and why. Yet everyone, however, will agree with the opinion that there is unequal status on the basis of caste. Caste, in this sense, is defined not as something you are, but something that is done to you (Visweswaran, 2010). For Bailey, caste is a sort of social stratification found in many societies, but "the true basis of the distinction between those of low and high caste was differential access to political and economic resources" (Bayly, 1999: 12).

In this thesis, the term 'Other' denotes the non-Vellalah on the whole; it is replaced by depressed castes in places where there was a clear caste conflict between Vellalah and depressed castes. In Jaffna, depressed castes are collectively named *Panchamar*– meaning 'fighting of the five' of *Vannar, Ampatter, Nalavar, Pallar* and *Paraiyar* – who agitated against Vellalah hegemony through organised forums and mass mobilisations in the 1960s and mid-1970s. Some castes are mentioned in the literature as intermediate castes, former *Kudimai* (those who performed customary services) castes like *Thattar* (goldsmiths), *Thachchar* (carpenters), *Kollar* (ironsmiths), *Vannar* (washermen), *Ampatter* (hairdressers) and *Paraiyar* (funeral drummers) were mentioned as *Kudimai* for Vellalah and *Nalavar* and *Pallar* were *Adimai* castes for the Vellalah (Sri Ramanathan, 1963: 15, 16). For the Vellalah, in terms of power, all non-Vellalah are inferior, including Brahmin who are the highest of all castes in India. The rest of all non-Vellalah are considered in this study context as 'low', although when referring to non-Vellalah they include Brahmin, *Kudimai* castes, intermediate castes and *Panchamar* castes. Vellalah, Brahmin and other intermediate castes have treated the depressed castes as lower in the social order.

India is perhaps the country that comes first to mind when people think of caste. In the globalised world, India is projected as a country that represents a sort of harmonious cultural diversity and plurality. Varieties of social col-

lective identities, such as caste, religion, clan, class and communities make up the social fabric of identities in India. The existence of caste in India is justified by the religious doctrines of Hinduism and is seen as the result of karma (Dumont, 1975; Quigley, 1999; Bayly, 1999; Srinivas, 1998). It defends differences in statuses, hence rationalising one's privileges as determined by one's deeds in the previous life. Although Jaffna and South India share caste as a common feature, the caste system in Jaffna is unique with variations and regional characteristics. Notably, caste is a shifting and elusive phenomenon, because its characteristics in each case depend upon the position and context it occupies in the whole societal system. Caste in India is more socio-political, while in Jaffna it is more socio-cultural (occupation based) (Sivathamby, 1995: 35). In India, caste is accepted and taken up by the 'official politics' via 'positive affirmation' in order to offer special seats and placements in cases ranging from school admission and job opportunities to so-called scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and backward classes; whereas in Jaffna caste is a forbidden discourse, despite the fact that it is a vibrant component of the socio-political and religio-cultural spaces. This study further unveils the subtle discriminations in the name of caste in Jaffna which occur covertly. A vast amount of historical and ethnographic research has touched upon caste in India and such studies also are on the rise (Dumont, 1975; Quigley, 1999; Bayly, 1999; Srinivas, 1998; Jeyaram, 1996; Gupta, 2000; Raman, 2009; Visweswaran, 2010; Jodhka, 2014). This ordering practice of social life and tasks, and thus positions, accommodates differential treatment of people, which has resulted in discrimination, inequality, injustice and prejudice. There were and are caste clashes – conflicts inherent to these caste dynamics with respect to the allocation of jobs, land, basic resources and services. Above all, caste in the postmodern world affects the exercise of basic human rights such as the right to worship, the right to choose a life partner, and so on. It is pointless to assume that caste is disappearing, since in reality none of the social systems related to caste have fallen away. Accordingly, the task should be to study what form of caste, or which of its legacies, are expressed in the contemporary world and how; or put to it another way, by focusing on a dominant caste identity and seeing how it is articulated and shifted, we can get a broader picture of the current dynamics of caste, its dominancy and also how the dominance-oppression dichotomy is articulated on the axis of caste in Jaffna. This will, in a way, open the spaces for policymakers to counter the existing subtle caste oppressions and discriminations.

The world is changing rapidly, and we live in an era of uncertainty due to a "widening, deepening and speeding up of global interconnectedness" (Held et al., 1999: 14, see also McLuhan, 1989: 93, Scholte, 2005). It is a two way process, "the intensification of world-wide social relations which link distant

localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (Giddens, 1990: 64). Global events heavily influence local cultures and local cultural events also shape the world. This study – though it focuses on the inside account of caste dynamics in Jaffna in the context of Tamil nation-building – emphasises that it is inevitable to have a small discussion on globalisation since caste and the data on caste in Jaffna have not been water-tightly excluded from all the unstoppable processes of post-national forces such as diaspora, migration and media, etc.

Most contemporary studies on caste naturally focus in India, and apply a global perspective by arguing that globalisation causes a new division of labour and replaces the traditional core-periphery structure based on caste by forging new identities and new hierarchies (Deshpande, 2000; Thorat and Newman, 2009). Another trend of contemporary caste study is to perceive caste as cultural capital. Cultural capital is "a set of accumulated conditions of life (primarily economic and educational) that, once articulated (i.e., 'invested'), position the subject in particular relation to others" (Palumbo-Liu, 1997: 5 see also Bourdieu, 1997, Gupta, 2000; Gorringe and Rafanell, 2007: 101). Culture in the post-modern view refuses such clearly bounded, separated and homogeneous entities. It devotes attention to internal disagreement and dispute, and sees cultures not so much in terms of sharedness but in terms of the organisation of diversity (Vermeulen and Govers, 1996: 5; see also Chatterjee, 1996; Appadurai, 1997; Bhabha, 1994). Many countries that are under conditions of internal war in the South often related to nation (state) projects, have their own complexities and features on the major fault line of identity conflicts (Eriksen, 1993; Hall, 1996; Melucci, 1995; Pieterse, 1997). Identity issues are intensely mingled in the dynamics of conflict of many contemporary nation state wars (Orjuela, 2004: 14).

Identity is here understood as something constructed which is simultaneously grounded in everyday life, historically conditioned and susceptible to change and (re)interpretation (Pemberton and Nijhawan, 2009). Investigating the Vellalah identity as an analytical construct, captures the complex process of (re)shifted, (re)signified, (re)situated and (re)negotiated positions and their politics over time. By incorporating integrative analysis into one broad category of Vellalah identity, I tried to take into account the multi-sited, historically and culturally shifting parameters of identity complexity.

1.1 Research Questions

This study centres on caste among Tamils in Sri Lanka during 2004 to 2007, particularly on the Vellalah, which is the superior caste in the Jaffna social ordering. By focusing on the top of the caste hierarchy among Tamils in Sri

Lanka, this study *aims to explore how Vellalah identity has been constructed, negotiated and transformed, especially in the context of Tamil nation-building.* As a sub-aim, it results in an understanding of how hegemony centred on caste is reproduced or (re/de)constructed. The perceptions of caste identity transformation[5] of Vellalah in socio-cultural and socio-political arenas are studied within the locus of Jaffna, in the context of Tamil nation-building project. The Tamil nation project is understood here as a political project[6] with a social base cum socio-cultural project supported by discursive practice (Hettne, 1993; Stern, 2005). The study also contributes to a reflective understanding of concepts and practices of identity in order to account for the distinct articulations of identity in the globalised world.

This research, perceives 'caste' and 'nation-building' as interactive processes and thus intersectional among Tamils of Sri Lanka. Further, it contributes to our understanding of the construction of caste in the social, political and historical spheres, in which caste identities and power interplay. The Vellalah is the subject of this research, and this group receives almost exclusive attention here. Before discussing further on the intersection of the Vellalah and the Tamil nation-building, it is better to provide some preliminary remarks on the Vellalah for outsiders. The Vellalah identity is not a very visible one among Tamils; the Vellalah, being a collective, neither live together nor exhibit their identification markers all-together in the same manner. The number of Vellalah has not been recorded officially anywhere because caste was not included in the population census, at least not in the post-independence period (Pfaff-Czarnecka and Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2000), and because caste was abolished by the government of Sri Lanka by the Prevention of Social Disabilities Act in 1957. It is however mentioned in some literature that the Vellalah constitute the majority and make up more than 50 per cent of the population (Banks 1960; Pfaffenberger 1982; Holmes 1980; David 1977). This ratio has now decreased due to emigration, war and several other socio-biological reasons. It is one of the reasons why a quantitative study on caste cannot be undertaken, besides the nature of its sensitivity in discourse. Importantly, it must be mentioned on the other hand, that any study on a single caste among Tamils is however entwined with the study of other castes, culturally, socially, economically and politically, since different castes are engaged in a web of relationships with each other in society. It is therefore, not possible to study the Vellalah without receiving data on the other castes during the research process. As Leach phrased it, "a caste can only be recognized in contrast to other castes

[5] 'Transformation' is here not conceptualised in any positive or negative connotation, but merely viewed as a reshaping, a reconstitution from the previous stage.

[6] For the definition of 'political project' see more on nation state projects by Hettne, 1993.

with which its members are closely involved in a network of economic, political and ritual relationships" (1960: 13). There are a number of reasons why the Vellalah were chosen as a case study in this project:

1. The Vellalah is the only caste among Tamils in Sri Lanka that has an embodied politico-social history that is available in print; other castes appear in these studies only as passing stories.
2. The Tamil nation-building project was initiated by Vellalah in 1950s under the influence of Indian politics and launched by the Vellalah in the 1970s. Later, during the militant phase in late 1970s, the Vellalah lost power in favour of the LTTE non-Vellalah militant youth. This shows how caste has been an intermittent factor in the literature on Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism.
3. Focusing on a dominant group which monopolised almost all resources in society will provide some clues about how hegemony has been (re) settled/(de)centred, and also how monopoly over politics, leadership, landownership, education, temple affiliation, lifestyles and related affairs[7] either are dismantled or have been sustained.
4. Looking through the lens of dominant collectivists will also tell us the story of the subversives (that is the non-Vellalah castes in this context) since identifying 'us' is often identifying who we are not. Self and other are underpinned and intertwined in multiple ways with the Vellalah and the non-Vellalah castes in Jaffna.
5. Most importantly, by interrogating Vellalah identity, I will contribute to the central academic debate on caste identity construction among Tamils in Sri Lanka.
6. This study will also show how a culture constructs its hegemonic humanisation over time by structures, actors and forces.

This study seeks to dismantle the Sri Lankan conflict by partly focusing on Tamils through an inside account, particularly based on Vellalah vested interests, their identity maintenance, and boundary safeguarding mechanisms. This is done by inquiring into where national thinking was evoked, who the main proponents of the Tamil nation-building project were, and the changes in terms of Vellalah identity that resulted, etc. This series of events is a political arena through which the Vellalah have personified their power, and has constituted the way in which they have negotiated their identity. Another major goal of this project is to focus on the socio-cultural arena of the Vellalah

[7] These are the major identification arenas of Vellalah identity which I mapped out from the literature survey and from the databank in the field work. I will discuss more in these later in my methodology.

in Jaffna, where the elements of caste such as *endogamy*, *division of labour*, *purity-pollution* and *interdependence* have changed and negotiated caste and Vellalah identity; and hence also the Vellalah's distinctive monopoly over the identification arenas of education, religion, leadership, landownership, lifestyles and dominancy over non-Vellalah was reproduced and (re)constructed. Both the socio-political and socio-cultural arenas of Vellalah identity are studied as each other's reflection. This case study penetrates, in a limited manner, these two arenas of socio-political and socio-cultural of Vellalah identity, and tries to analyse the politics of identity construction that existed in Jaffna during the period of Tamil nation-building up until 2007.[8]

Vellalah identity has in this case study been operationalised as consisting of 'identification arenas' such as *political involvement*, *political* and/or *social leadership*, *temple affiliation*, *lifestyles*, *having service castes*, *intra-Vellalah divides*, *landownership* and *education*. These are the dominant identification arenas or analytical themes for studying Vellalah identity, which has involved changes by accommodating Others. They are also the arenas where the Vellalah still want to articulate their identity in a distinctive way. These arenas were identified through a literature review cum immersion in the data collected for this study. In addition, these are the arenas where boundaries between the Vellalah and non-Vellalah shift, and the Vellalah identity is reframed and reconstituted. The differently articulated dimensions of Vellalah taken up in identity in this study were studied through the triangulation of various empirical sources. This is discussed further in the methodology chapter, chapter 2.

To explore how Vellalah identity was (re)negotiated, (re)constructed and positioned in contemporary Jaffna, the historical Vellalah identity is first scrutinised, keeping in mind the identification arenas listed earlier. This approach thus facilitates the understanding of the current dynamics of Vellalah identity and its reconstitution. The historical explorations also intend to show the reasons, platforms, benchmarks and effects of the possible shifts of Vellalah identity and its power dynamics in the future. The meanings articulated in respect to the above identification arenas of Vellalah identity help to distinguish between similarity and difference among the Vellalah and the differences between the Vellalah and non-Vellalah in Jaffna. The power of the marker of difference of each identification arena "usually lies in its being experienced and perceived as given, fixed, natural" (Stern, 2005: 33; see also Lindholm Schulz, 1999), but it in fact is in the process of changing. To frame the academic and practical significance of the abovementioned aim, and to afford structure to this exploration, the following research questions are addressed as the main areas of enquiry, by keeping an overarching question of *how Vellalah identity*

[8] I have, however, updated the study to include certain events up until early-August 2015.

has been constructed, negotiated, and transformed in the context of the Tamil nation-building:

1. *How has Vellalah identity been constituted historically?*
2. *How did Vellalah negotiate the meanings over the elements of caste and their lifestyles?*
3. *How did the militant Tamil nationalist struggle and the LTTE relate to caste in general and Vellalah in particular?*
4. *How did the war impact on (Vellalah) caste and the landownership and education as the central part of Vellalah Identity?*

The first question sets the base for the subsequent empirical part of the analysis in two specific ways: firstly, it traces the historical development of Vellalah identity to connect the larger theme of the relationship between the Vellalah as a caste and a dominant collective identity, and how this relates with the context of Tamil nation-building within the wider identity dynamics; secondly, it makes connections between past and contemporary identity dynamics. The second question captures the contemporary dynamics of caste, especially the elements of caste such as division of labour, endogamy and purity-pollution via the narratives of, predominantly, the Vellalah as well as the non-Vellalah in Jaffna; this question also deals with the lifestyle dimensions and changes to Vellalah identity. It is aimed at presenting the pattern, pace and direction of Vellalah identity, mostly perceived by the Vellalah and non-Vellalah in the context of Jaffna. This directs us to the third question which aims to grasp the pattern and challenges of caste and Vellalah identity in relation to the militant nationalist elite, LTTE. The final query maps out how war, as the major consequence of nationalist struggle, influenced caste, the Vellalah and the major identification arenas of Vellalah identity such as education and landownership.

By addressing these above questions, this research tries to provide an important contribution to the key issue of Vellalah identity (re)construction and practice in Jaffna. Hermeneutic analysis of Vellalah identity, first, takes into account the broader historical contextual and structural factors behind Vellalah caste and the contested norms of identity, and thus how they diffused the construction thereof, and moreover, reconstituted them over time. It also highlights the authors behind the dominant texts and the suppressed voices. By setting Vellalah identity in the context of Jaffna, this thesis will, secondly, contribute to the wider aspect of the field of research, to see how a cultural identity in the globalised world explicates its shifts in identity, and tries to perceive how this cultural identity still matters, interplays and affects the socio-cultural and socio-political issues locally. The Vellalah identity, as it is presented in this thesis, has resulted from structural and positional shifts in

Jaffna, where external markers of Vellalah identity seem difficult to maintain, but the transferred norms and certain core codes of Vellalah conduct (acting as implicit dimensions of identity) prove the continuity of Vellalah identity. This, in turn, reveals the unpredictable nature of Vellalah identity, since collective identity is moulded through individual identity changes and human beings are reflexive in relation to their circumstances. Moreover, it hints at a shift in the structure and meaning of Vellalah identity. Finally, this study will identify a number of changes in Vellalah identity during the Tamil nationalist project, in the hands of national elites (both Vellalah and non-Vellalah) and thus during war and other local and global forces such as migration and displacement to some extent. Although the new national elite, the LTTE, and its militant nationalist struggle in Jaffna appeared to represent a collapse of the institution of caste, the analysis reflects this as an indication of development, where caste identity, and especially Vellalah identity and its dominancy, illustrate continuity and thus a reconstitution in an altered, complex dynamic.

1.2 Exploring Vellalah Identity Narratives

The Sri Lankan Civil War broke out in the 1980s, and was characterised by widespread ethnicised division and clashes. Consequently, the literature on the Sri Lankan conflict has mostly focused on the binary polarisation between the Sinhalese and Tamils as separate divided collectives (Tambiah, 1986: 6; see also Wilson, 2000; Roberts, 1998; de Silva, 1981). But there are, of course, multi-faceted and multi-layered causes behind the emergence of the conflict, and also different versions and interpretations of how ethnic identity was stirred up and came to be the dominant identity in a country based on pluralistic identities. Sri Lanka is basically a pluralistic society, with multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-class, and multiple castes as well as regional and even racial identities (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2000). One of these above identities, and sometimes more than one, has always been caught up in the conflict trap of Sri Lanka's national history; for instance, religion, and at times region, but they were always intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989: 140; see also Spencer, 1990: 5).

Cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by society's intersectional systems. Sometimes one identity may be prioritised over another and that one identity may be more salient in particular situations than another. Caste practices facilitate oppression in varying configurations and in varying degrees of intensity. The colonial period witnessed identities around religion and caste becoming the dominant in the public discourse and conflict, then caste became the major oppressive force among Tamils in the 1960s and 1970s, and then, when in the 1980s ethnic and national identity became salient, caste was forced to become dor-

mant. These identities, such as caste and religion were further politicised by the elite, politicians and/or intelligentsia of the respective communities, and were recorded by historians from time to time. Politics and history-making are the tasks of the elite in societies (Reinhard, 1996; Roberts, 1974, 1995; Bottomore, 2001; Bangwanubusa, 2009). In this study's context, the Tamil elites are predominantly the Vellalah and later the non-Vellalah who engineered the militant nationalistic project with respect to caste. In a way, this study tries to discover the root causes of conflict among Tamils, the role of the Vellalah in history-making and the transition to the late militant phase of Tamil nation-building. Vellalah identity is investigated to understand the underlying logic of identity, as it has come to be understood in Tamil politics, Tamil culture and Tamil society in Jaffna and in Sri Lanka.

Since identity and the issues around identity are somehow connected to the contemporary conflicts, the connotation for conflict is highlighted as the way it relates to the Vellalah, especially the elite Vellalah and Tamil nation-building. Conflict is however an inherent part of human evolution (Boulding, 1987: 48; see also Greenhouse, 1987: 34; Galtung, 1987: 332). It is understood that "since wars begin in the minds of men; it is in the minds of men that the defences of the peace must be constructed" (Constitution of UNESCO preamble, 2000). If the Vellalah/non-Vellalah were found to be the major protagonists in the development of ethnic conflict, it is then among them, I argue, that the peace initiatives must begin. The issue(s) caught up in the conflict varies(y) from time to time, depending on the interests of the people and also towards their interests on identities. In ancient times, especially among the Tamils, ecological factors were part of conflict, because the landscape was divided into divisions and people, and thus different lands were used in different ways (Thaninayakam, 1966; Sivathamby, 1998; Cheran, 2007). Later, religious identity became vital, and became the focal point of conflict when a foreign religion – Christianity – was introduced by colonial powers in the sixteenth century. Tamil identity and Tamil-ness subsequently became more tied into religion and caste. Caste identity was a platform for clashes among Tamils during pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial times, but it mostly played a role under the major or dominant conflict. However, the identities which became caught up in the conflict were somewhat intersectional (Yuval-Davis, 1981; Collins, 2000). While religion became the cause for the dominant conflict, caste was oppressed or caste discriminations were not sufficiently taken care of by Tamils. When ethnic identity/national identity became the dominant force, caste as well as religious and regional identities were suppressed. Ethnocentric thinking – as pointed out by many scholars – was developed by colonial administrations with ethnic representation in the early-1900s, hence in coordination with the increasing state centralisation (Pfaff-Czarnecka and

Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2000: 14; see also de Silva, 1994; Russell, 1982; Roberts, 1979).

As seen above, all of these factors – such as religion, region, caste, class and ethnicity – engaged in the conflicts to varying degrees and played roles in the complex scenarios of the Sri Lankan conflicts, but in different regions at different times and in different intensity (Jayawardena, 1979; Roberts, 1979; Russell, 1982; Gunawardana, 1979; Senanayake, 2003; Nesiah, 2001). Protracted conflicts are not static; they evolve and change over time. The idea/seed of conflict naturally develops and flourishes in people's minds as fear, injustice, discrimination or oppression; it then generally incorporates some other issue[9] in the process (or it may not), which reshapes the conflict, making it more complex. Below I try to briefly shed light on how Tamil nationalism is more intertwined with Vellalah identity as the Vellalah are the major protagonist in the overall theatrical performance of the Sri Lankan ethno-nationalist conflict. Hence, light is shed on how the Vellalah, as part of the Tamil national community, played the prominent role in the local and national arenas.

The Sri Lankan conflict revolved around ethnicity. Originally the Sinhala elite had been threatened by the significance of the Tamil elite/educated who were mostly Vellalah, lived mainly in Jaffna, had connections in Colombo, and disproportionately dominated in the public and educational arenas (Tambiah, 1986; Spencer, 1990; Nissan and Stirrat, 1990; Pfaff-Czarnecka and Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2000; Orjuela, 2004; Bandarage, 2009, Hoole, 2015). These Vellalah educated elite were the middle class, and hoped for "state employment as an important economic niche" (Pfaff-Czarnecka and Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2000: 23). Tamils with mostly Vellalah identity, being the ethnic minority but with a superior status, appeared in politics and administration of (Ceylon's) post-independence Sri Lanka, and were therefore seen as a threat to the majority Sinhalese. We can see this parallel in Rwanda where the Tutsi, being a minority, were better off in respect to education and economy than Hutu, who as a majority perceived the Tutsi as a threat; we also see a similar situation among the Fenno-Swedish in the eighteenth century who acted hegemonic and ruled the country of Finland. This perceived threat was felt by the Sinhalese elite, and was resisted through laws and counter-measures. This resulted in Tamils being discriminated against or being put into increasingly insecure positions, although most importantly this feeling was not experienced by all Tamils in the 1960s or even the 1970s simultaneously (Tambiah, 1986; Stern, 2005). We can also see, at this juncture, how different ethnic socio-cultural

[9] Minority Muslims entered later in the process of the scenario of the Sri Lankan conflict, having felt dominated by Tamils, and wanting to have self-autonomy. The Muslim-Sinhala clashes added yet another development to the post-war scenario. http://www.irinnews.org/report/98213/rising-muslim-buddhist-tensions-in-sri-lanka.

identities are intertwined and intersectionalised, and also how they are used to marginalise others (cf. Crenshaw, 1989: 140). Simultaneously, and paradoxically, Tamils from the depressed castes, being those who are culturally and socially marginalised by the dominant Vellalah local elite, were mobilised, and resisted the Vellalah through public protests and collective actions in Jaffna. A few Vellalah joined and supported this collective action organised by depressed castes, but their participation was very minimal. Another way to put this is that Vellalah Tamils had discriminated against non-Vellalah caste Tamils throughout history and had constantly reinforced a 'we' against a 'them'. In the national arena where the Tamil ethnic identity was under political threat from the majority Sinhalese by the laws and policies like the Sinhala Only Act of 1956, state-sponsored colonisation and the 1973 policy of standardisation, Vellalah Tamils had to project an image of a united Tamil identity in order to keep dominating and securing their boundaries in the national arena, while locally they had to fight against the resistance made by the depressed castes. The Vellalah were in a critical position in the 1960s and 1970s in Sri Lanka, in that they had to constantly reconstruct their superior identity both locally from the depressed castes and nationally from the Sinhalese and faced different challenges from opposing directions. The Sri Lankan conflict then somehow culminated with the structural ethnic discrimination of Tamils by the Sinhalese majority in the 1980s, followed by the Vellalah internationalising the ethnic conflict in the 1980s, and then by non-Vellalah militant youth, the LTTE.

Undoubtedly, the multiple strengths and insecurities articulated in Vellalah narratives cannot be understood separately from their claims to political identity, and from what they considered as threats to who they were. On the other hand, while the Vellalah began to identify themselves as a political category with Tamil national (ethnic) identity, proving that Tamils have a unique culture and identity, a sudden transition in terms of identity and power came about within the Tamil group, and as a result, the non-Vellalah-dominated militant youth group grabbed leadership and power. The Vellalah were gradually forced to take a back seat locally and in the national arena, as the non-Vellalah depressed castes (who were subjugated by the Vellalah and nationally affected by Sinhalese majority), came to the surface with violent force as vigorous militant groups in the late 1970s. Then, in turn, Vellalah identity was repressed by the militant, non-Vellalah youth. In sum, Vellalah, as leaders of the Tamil minority against the majority Sinhalese, were a majority against the depressed castes. Thus the Vellalah were both superior and aware of the situation of being oppressed, they wanted to liberate themselves from the Sri Lankan Sinhala-dominated governance. But, on the other hand, the Vellalah – as a hegemonic caste, being oppressors over depressed castes, monopolising politics, education, landownership and religion in the local arena in Jaffna –

had to challenge, recreate and play multiple but conflicting roles to secure and sustain their supremacy. When the Tamil nation-building was articulated by the Vellalah in the early-1970s, depressed castes were made insecure, inferior, outsiders and powerless. Then, when the Tamil nation-building transferred into the hands of the mostly non-Vellalah militant youth in the late-1970s up until 2009, the Vellalah were insecure, outsiders and powerless. It is ironic that the logic behind these twin faces of Vellalah identity reveals how both faces were supported by the articulations of identity informed by the domination by the Sinhala governance, and the domination of the depressed castes. Central to this discussion here is accordingly an exploration of the logic embedded in the belief in cultural/caste (Vellalah) identity in the context of articulating of (Tamil) national identity.

1.3 Relevant Academic Research

The images of the Sri Lankan conflict carried out to outsiders by the media mainly focused on the vivid personalities, as "the ideology *was* clear cut, the opponents *were* obvious, and the fight *took* place among delineated factions that were politically recognizable" (Nordstrom and Martin, 1992: 4). This *was* the conflict that was explicit and known to everyone. On the contrary, Orjuela's study, which analysed the problems and possibilities for creating peace in the context of conflict by civil actors in Sri Lanka, has treated caste at a distance, though mentioned "Strong class, ethnic, caste and party political divides in society have made it difficult to draw together people around a common peace goal" (2004: 157). While she investigates the possibilities for peace at the macro-level, my study sees the origin of conflict and barriers for peace through the microscope. Biziouras (2012) argues that there is a positive connection between how the ways in which the religious practices are performed among Tamils, their caste divisions and a violent nationalist ideology where, according to him, caste took centre stage for the formation, institutionalisation and consolidation of the LTTE. He studies caste as one of the main bases for the formation of the LTTE. On the other hand, my study examines the dynamics of caste and especially Vellalah identity as it has been practiced, negotiated and transformed in the context of Tamil nation-building. In other words, using a rare approach, I try to understand the macro-socio-political change by studying the micro-events in the context of macro-local reality.

On the one hand, scholarly approaches to caste among Tamils in Sri Lanka are limited, especially in Jaffna, because caste has been and still is treated as a highly sensitive, personal, emotional and ordering area of study. This is seen even as a methodological problem as the taboo surrounding caste has made inquiries about caste divisions difficult (Orjuela, 2004: 223). All this has made

caste, in a sense, an 'unspeakable' subject in Jaffna. It is therefore not very surprising that most of the existing research on this subject had been done by foreigners such as, for instance, Banks (1960), Pfaffenberger (1982), Holmes (1980), David (1977) and Skjønsberg (1974). Except for the latter author, who is a Scandinavian sociologist, the other authors are all American scholars. Regarding their methodology, Banks, David, Pfaffenberger and Skjønsberg all conducted village studies, while Holmes conducted a general study, based on his observations of several aspects of Tamil society from his stay in Jaffna 1948–1960. These studies were conducted more than three decades ago. Furthermore, the focus of the village studies on caste was bound to a particular geographic region. Vellalah identity is a passing message in their studies, and none of them focused on one single caste. At that time caste was presented as something impossible to single out, but existing as a collective network in an interdependent system. There are a few studies on one single caste, but the main one (Michael Roberts [1995]), concerns the Karava community of the Sinhalese. This is not a dominant caste, but a fishing caste, yet the author maps out the causal factors which pave the way for the rise of Karava elite. This was another trend in the late-twentieth century, studying anything from below, or from the 'grassroots'. The book *Casteless or Caste-blind?* (Tudor Silva et al., 2009) included a collection of articles that studied caste among the Sinhalese, Tamils and Indian Tamils, focusing on the marginalised castes and how they are still discriminated against. There is an article in this book that studied one of the marginalised castes in Jaffna in the camp life[10] but which lacks a systematic methodological approach (Silva and Thanges, 2009).

There are some Tamil scholars, like Perinpanayakam (1982) and Sivathamby (1989), who have written socio-historical narratives on caste among Tamils in Sri Lanka. Perinpanayakam conducted a leading academic study of Jaffna society, wherein the self of a Jaffna person is portrayed as a result of combination of karma, mythology and astrology. The self is scrutinised within the parameters of ideological and mythological doctrines. It follows a one-dimensional approach to caste identity, since caste identity is treated as part of self and collective identity. But it is not a caste-study solely reflecting the ground realities in Jaffna based on a geographic region or on a single caste. Sivathamby has written numerous articles (1984, 1990, 1989) and books (1995, 2000) on Tamils in Sri Lanka, and especially on Tamil culture and ideology of Jaffna; in these writings caste is presented with a broad understanding but still

[10] "Camp" is a place and a word used in Jaffna to mean and denote the displaced settlements where especially depressed castes stay due to war. Coincidently, the people who are in the camps are still marginalised castes who before lived on the margin and peripheries of the villages, and who were forced to move to the centre of villages due to war. Since Jaffna is a peninsula, the margins are mostly near the sea; the soil is not fertile and hence these areas are at risk of attack.

has the same lacunae as mentioned above and a comprehensive methodology is missing. They represent well-projected historicity on caste, which are excellent secondary sources for researchers. Two other books in Tamil (Senthilvel, 2003; Vekujanen and Ravana, 1988), full of historical narratives, were written by members of the Communist Party of Sri Lanka. They provide information with authentic and ample sources by means of depicting a series of events that occurred in the history of caste in Jaffna, but they are not academic studies. However, they are rich data resources for caste study.

Some relatively recent studies on Tamil nationalism related to caste have been undertaken by so-called Tamil diaspora researchers, like Wilson (2000), and some non-Tamils, like Hellman-Rajanayakam (1990, 1994a, 1994b, 2004). Their main focus is on nationalism, not on societal transformation within nationalism. I try to scrutinise the Vellalah identity both in the political as well as the socio-cultural platforms in the context of Tamil nationalism. A paper read by Ravindiran (2004), a Tamil diasporian at the Tamil Nationalism Conference held in Colombo, highlighted the importance of caste dynamics in the context of the Tamil nation-building project. While it is mainly based on previous literature, it has opened up an area that is untouched by other research. However, as a partial outsider, he lacks the ground realities of the recent past and actual life in Tamil areas of Sri Lanka. The diasporian literature thus provides a somewhat dim light of the recent caste dynamics during the growth of the Tamil nationalist struggle. Reflecting and departing from the above contributions of caste scholarship of Tamils in Sri Lanka, it is obvious that there is a large gap, and an academic demand to fill the persisting lacuna in epistemology and ontology of caste during three decades of war with the evolution of the Tamil nationalist project. There is, therefore, a significant task to delve deeper into the internal side of each nation in Sri Lanka, to see how it was characterised and categorised, how the idea of nationalism was evolved and articulated, and so on. This angle of the conflict, self-introspection has been neglected and is less researched than is usual in many nationalist conflicts. It is also important to point out that "these intra-national ruptures based on cultural categorisation and groupings can have potentialities leaning towards either positive or negative peace efforts" (Lindholm Schulz, 1996: 13).

1.4 Contribution

This thesis makes six important, original contributes to knowledge; three in conceptual and three in empirical branches thereof.

Empirically, this thesis primarily contributes to how we, from the basis of Vellalah constructions of caste identity, can understand caste dynamic and change in Jaffna, both as an articulation of identity and for power and domi-

nance. Secondly, the Vellalah narratives also give evidence to the fact that the dominant constructions of identity in this cas(t)e study can provide insight into mechanisms through which dominance and oppression are (re)articulated and how peace and development of the collective identities are being (re/de) constructed and renegotiated over time. It also, in a sense, shows the complexity of caste identity in a context of nationalist projects and war. I contribute to the understanding of nationalism by adding a caste dimension. I also contribute to the understanding of caste by showing how it works/is transformed in a particular case and in a particular historical phase. And also I contribute to the studies of intersectionality of how different dominant identities such as Vellalah, caste and national identities interplay/make up each other by adding an in-depth understanding of a very interesting case of Vellalah identity.

Conceptually, this thesis principally contributes to exploring the elusive, complex and varying meaning of identity and its lack of fixed or fundamental status, but also its social embeddedness and its personal anchorage. The different chapters will explore the complexity of these embedded mechanisms of identity, and the complex and multiple attempts of the marginalised to enter into the identification of the subject, Vellalah identity. Furthermore, this study contributes to highlighting the implicit dimension of identity, which is both durable and difficult to deconstruct, as it is always shifting towards 'we'. On the other hand, this case study also helps in understanding the view of the flux of supremacy and contestation on the axis of caste, and thus the flow of resistance produced at different stages by different actors. It not only highlights how dominance is reproduced, how the oppressed marginalise themselves but also how people view each other. The study allows disclosing patterns in the ways in which collective identities are articulated and negotiated in times of social change, as well as their evolution and disagreement.

1.5 Delimitations

In this study it is necessary to commence the delimitations with the reservation that, since caste is studied partially through a case study of a particular caste among the Tamils of Jaffna in Sri Lanka, there will be no possibility of drawing any conclusion that would allow a total generalisation of the research results. Representation in the field study is not high enough to generalise the findings, and neither is it for the case study approach. The narratives on Vellalah identity emerged from a relatively low number of interviews and survey answers. Also, the lack of non-Vellalah, women and youths decreases the degree to which the study can be seen as representative. The research was conducted in Jaffna district, and excludes other Tamil areas of Sri Lanka. Thus, since the sampling was based on convenient and strategic approaches rather

than systematic, this also limited the degree to which the study can be seen as representative. It is not possible to provide more than a rather brief overview of the very large knowledge that exists on the history of the Tamil nationalist project, and the narratives of the Vellalah caste. The fact that I am a Vellalah myself made it possible to enter the 'we' of other Vellalah. However, it made it difficult to interact with non-Vellalah, and partly excluded others in the field study. Another delimitation of the study is that the interviews were mostly conducted among rural Vellalah. The result might have been different had the study been done in a Jaffna town population, and/or with other castes. However the Jaffna population is mostly rural. Regarding the validity and reliability of this project, it has to be mentioned that there were instances during the LTTE administration, between 1990 and 1995 in Jaffna, when people offending others by using their caste names were punished. This affected my databank and people's spontaneity with respect to opening up on the issue of caste due to fear. Due to this sensitivity, the target group was mainly tied to people affiliated with diversified socio-cultural sectors, rather than politicised power actors. The findings might be slightly different if they would have involved views of the political actors in addition to the political views of people. Further, during my study the LTTE was still indirectly an influential and often admired Tamil militant group.

1.6 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into nine chapters.

Chapter 1 puts forth the problem through a general introduction. This is followed by a presentation of the aim and the research questions, the motivation behind the project, and its limitations.

Chapter 2 discusses the methods I employ in this study. The main epistemological positioning of this case study method and its suitability in a study of single caste is explained. Then, the field conditions and the improvised methods of data collection are described, followed by how the data was scrutinised and analysed.

Chapter 3 is the theoretical framework for the study. This leads to a discussion of how the relationship of cultural identity (Vellalah) in the context of the Tamil nationalist project is understood, for a reader who is unfamiliar with the subject. It is sketched out through a synthesis of different sets of theoretical modules, such as identity, the nation-building, and caste via intersectionality.

Chapter 4 is a chapter on Sri Lanka's background, providing basic information on Sri Lanka in terms of Tamil identity formation, the Tamil nationalist project and the reaction of the social cleavages resting on caste.

Chapters 5 to 8 each answer one of the research questions outlined here.

Chapter 9 is the conclusion for the entire study where the limitations due to methodology and sensitivity of the issue are spelled out. It also summarises the overall findings of the Vellalah identity analysis. Finally, it reflects on some of the implications of the study and the ideas for future research.

2
Methodological Reflections

The purpose of this chapter is to present the philosophical assumptions underpinning this research as well as to introduce the research strategy and the empirical methods applied. In relation to the methodology, this research began with a set of questions that had to be answered: What to study? Caste. Who to study? Vellalah. Where to study it? Jaffna. Which research tradition to work within? Constructive and critical approaches. What knowledge to draw on? Empirical and interpretive knowledge.

This chapter is divided into six major sections. In the first, the epistemological positioning of this research is explained. The next section concerns the research strategy, the case study. It continues by discussing how the field conditions influenced data collection and then explains what types of methods were used and why, and hence the researcher's reflexive positioning. Finally, it explains how the analytical themes were chosen and structured into thesis chapters.

2.1 Epistemological Positioning

In social research, three fields – positivist, critical and constructivist research – have epistemologies that are philosophically distinct with different assumptions about knowledge and how it can be obtained. All three concern how to generate knowledge and how to study 'reality'. In this study, the focus is on Vellalah identity, but emphasis is placed upon its different manifestations. For positivists, Vellalah identity is given and measurable. For constructivists the access to Vellalah identity is only gained through social constructions such as language, consciousness and shared meanings. For critical researchers, Vellalah identity is historically constituted and produced and reproduced by the people; thus the focus for them is on conflicts and contradictions in contemporary societies which are socially, culturally and politically embedded. This study on the Vellalah embraces the latter 'constructivist' and 'critical' approaches, which I find suitable for understanding the complex scenario of Vellalah identity. Vel-

lalah identity, in both the epistemological and ontological understandings, is socially constructed, historicised and contextualised. However, this study of Vellalah identity predominantly focuses on the experiential dimension rather than the epistemological analysis of identity, since this research has mainly been conducted in order to understand a segment of empirical reality.

The philosophical assumptions underlying this research come from the interpretive tradition. This implies a subjective epistemology and the ontological belief that reality is socially constructed (Mertens, 2005: 12). Being a repressed and silenced subject of discourse in Jaffna, caste was impossible for me to study free of any values since I am an insider. I relied upon the "participants' views of the situation being studied" by learning to stand in their shoes and look through their eyes (Creswell, 2003: 8) and recognised how their own backgrounds and experiences impacted the research. Therefore, my analysis relies heavily on how the Vellalah and non-Vellalah people themselves describe their experiences of Vellalah caste and its transformations. By doing so I avoid presenting 'objective' indicators to prove that Vellalah caste has changed, but rather suggest that Vellalah caste transformation can be studied through studying the way that the Vellalah themselves experience their situation. My analysis takes a critical approach as I try to illuminate the hidden structures of power on the axis of caste, especially the Vellalah identity in articulating Tamil nation-building and the disempowerment of others (non-Vellalah or Vellalah). I thoroughly engaged with issues of caste, Vellalah identity and nationalism as separate issues but increasingly where they intersect.

Thus the underlying epistemology is inter-subjective knowledge construction, which uses ethnographic methods of informal interviewing, participant observation and establishing relationships with the Vellalah and some non-Vellalah. This paradigm enabled me to build rich local understandings of the experiences of the Vellalah. The adopted research strategy was to conduct a single case study (on Vellalah identity) in a system (caste) within the context of nation-building. The fieldwork was conducted in public places like at the university of Jaffna, temple premises, markets and private homes, during the period from August 2004 to January 2007; furthermore, regular, periodic correspondence has been maintained with the different informants. I also conducted some semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, focus group discussions, document analyses and a semi-structured survey. My analysis therefore relies on a combination of methods.

2.2 Case Study

A case study is the main approach used in this particular study. This case study deals with small amount of samples and follows a strict procedure "involv-

ing an in-depth, longitudinal examination of a single instance or event" (Yin, 2003: 10). Caste is a complex phenomenon to study. In it there is a network of castes which come together with different practices and identities, but they interrelate and have complex dynamics (Sivathamby, 1989: 57). Caste may give a common frame of reference for most people in the world, but in reality caste differs from region to region in terms of how it articulates elements such as endogamy, interdependency, purity-pollution, and ranking. Spatially restricted studies on caste, so-called 'village studies', cannot be generalised since these studies have been confined to areas for which it is not possible to infer the caste dynamics that exist in Jaffna as a whole. For instance, Banks' study was done in 1957 in a Jaffna village called Siruppitty, which falls under the Kopay Divisional Secretariat. According to Banks himself, inter-caste relations and caste ranking cannot be examined within the structure of a single village (Banks, 1960: 63). Pfaffenberger studied Thenmarachcy, the southern part of Jaffna, which also cannot be considered representative of the entirety caste relations/ordering, since his study did not include all castes. These further prove that caste study can be done through a case study but they cannot represent their entire society. None of the villages in Jaffna represents all castes. Additionally, different villages contain different castes in different ratios, but there is however no official record of caste in Jaffna or anywhere in Sri Lanka.

My initial plan was to choose two villages: one is the village (Irupalai) next to the village where Banks did his study three decades ago where I intended to see the changes that had occurred, focusing on the Vellalah; the other village was Karaveddy, where the LTTE had been heavily involved, in order to see how a deliberate attempt to change caste through their power had impacted Vellalah identity. This plan was not feasible for several reasons. Firstly, my pilot stay and attempts in these villages were not rewarding. That is, during the militant nationalistic project dominated by the LTTE, people were horrified about holding discourse or dialogue on caste. Secondly, the village population did not have a continuous history (except for a few residents), due to frequent displacements and emigration. In the second village, Karaveddy, the neighbour of the house I stayed in (my key informant) was a newcomer to the village and only had memories of the village that stretched two years back. The population in this area was tense during my field days there at the end of 2004 as a result of a terrible natural catastrophe, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. My husband and I were there the same day the tsunami hit the area (26 December 2004), but fortunately we were not on the coast. Thirdly, I found and realised in the pilot phase that people were very reluctant to talk about caste with a stranger, although I was as an insider. This total prohibition of discourse on caste almost makes caste studies difficult in Jaffna, and also among Tamils in Sri Lanka, whereas in India people talk publicly about caste by caste names.

There were stories at that time during the LTTE administration in Jaffna during 1990–1995, that the LTTE had earlier imprisoned persons who talked about or named other castes as well as those who committed injustices to others in the name of caste. People in the village suspected that I had been sent by the cultural wing of the LTTE to spy on them regarding the opinions they had on caste. One initial encounter in the pilot phase with a village headman went on for nearly one and a half hours, but he carefully avoided using the word 'caste' even one single time and instead used 'race', although he was probed several times and know that my study was on caste!

I was unable to gather data as was planned in these two locations but I found people with the assistance of key informants. One male Vellalah (age 52) in the first location and a female Vellalah (age 55) in the second location were chosen through strategic sampling. My interview guidelines were in a safe place in my bag for many days in the pilot phase. Both of my informants gave plenty of information about the village and about the changes to the caste system and they also recommended relatives and friends with whom I could talk about caste. These pilot experiences informed me of two facts which I could not avoid but had to take into consideration and which changed my approach to the research. One fact was the highly politically charged atmosphere in which caste is a totally taboo subject; people are afraid to talk about it because of the LTTE. The other fact was that people who had been displaced multiple times did not bear the knowledge of the villages they had settled into, which complicated village studies on caste in Jaffna. I then ended up making a case study focusing on the Vellalah, and finding interviewees through snowball and convenient sampling. I tried to cover many regions in Jaffna mentioned by Sivathamby. He marks out ten (10) sub-regions within Jaffna based on dominance and different caste relationships: 1) Vadamarachcy, 2) Tenmarachcy, 3) The islands, 4) Jaffna town, 5) Nallur-Kopay, 6) Manipay, 7) Tellippalai-Chunnakam, 8) Chulipuram-Pannakam, 9) Kankesanthurai-Pallali, 10) Vaddukkoddai-Araly (Sivathamby, 1989: 65). My informants at the initial field sites, two villages covering two regions mentioned above (Vadamarachcy and Nallur-Kopay) and the village where I was born and raised until 1990 lies in the Tellippalai region. Naturally, I drew much data from many people who lived in Tellippalai as well as the village to which I had been displaced, which is in the Chulipuram-Pannakam region, where I have been for more than fifteen years due to war. The village we moved to for half a year due to war in 1995 belongs to the Tenmarachcy region where I had friends with whom I (re)built relationships to get data on caste. Thus, I encountered a number of friends from the rest of the five regions, such as the islands, Jaffna town, Manipay, Kankesanthurai-Pallali and Vaddukkoddai-Araly. The representation of these regions, however, was covered in the data of this study; in terms of

quantity of the data, it was not collected equally representatively or systematically reflecting regions via a strict probability sampling method. Hence, this study is primarily based on people and their narrations on caste rather a representative study of places in Jaffna. With the absence of caste-based records anywhere in Jaffna or Sri Lanka, a systematic approach was not possible at all. The case study method, which is valuable in gathering data through loosely structured methodological processes, helped a lot in this study of caste.

One advantage of the case study approach is that the researcher may get a sharpened understanding of why something happened. In this study of how Vellalah identity has been constructed, negotiated and shifted in the context of the Tamil nation-building, it was useful to focus narrowly on Vellalah identity. Case study refers to "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, *especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident*" (Yin, 2003: 13). It is difficult to exactly delineate the boundaries between the Vellalah and caste and Tamil nation-building project as they were intersected to each other.

The approach of this study is to describe, understand and to interpret the narratives (oral and textual) of Vellalah identity in relation to the four lines of research questions. In order to carry out the project on how Vellalah identity was practised, negotiated and shifted the concept of Vellalah identity had to be operationalised. Below I justify how I arrive at the eight identification arenas to investigate Vellalah identity and, in other words, how I approach studying Vellalah identity. I used mainly three ways to map out the arenas/identification for Vellalah identity.

1. The first is by reading the materials on caste in Jaffna, where the historical counter resistance(s) made by the Vellalah against depressed castes resistances indicated/signalled the boundaries of Vellalah or the arenas where Vellalah wanted to have power, privileges and identification. The forbidden arenas for depressed castes were mostly identified here as the privileged spaces for Vellalah.
2. Second, my own observations in the field, including those I could make, while being a Vellalah myself, reinforced/reconfirmed my findings from the literature.
3. Third, my total and repeated immersion in the data further authorised and verified for me the ways in which the Vellalah still want to mark out their superior identity in Jaffna.

This research project consequently arrived at eight major identification arenas where Vellalah identity is primarily articulated: (1) politics, (2) leadership, (3) lifestyles, (4) education, (5) land ownership, (6) temple affiliation, (7) intra-

Vellalah divides and (8) inter-caste relationships. I briefly explain the eight identification arenas of Vellalah identity below regarding how it has been understood and associated with the (non)-Vellalah. For instance, the *politics* of the Vellalah involve how the Tamil nation project was engineered by the Vellalah and how it scrutinises the behaviour of the Vellalah within it. *Leadership* means the political and social leadership with regard to power in Jaffna. *Lifestyles* are a wider area where food habit, dress code, way of speech, and the vocabulary usage of the (non-)Vellalah are examined. *Education* encompasses the level of knowledge, positioning and the we-and-them divide on caste within bureaucracy. *Temple affiliation* includes power, uses of space, purity based identity treatment in the religious space, etc. *Landownership* is one of the major identification markers of the Vellalah, and I focus on how and why landownership of the Vellalah had changed. Finally, the intra-Vellalah divides project the internal divisions and also newcomers as well as the merging of castes into the Vellalah, and moreover, the inter-caste relationships indicate how castes are still interdepended on and independent at the same time. These are in fact arenas where most of the members of the society obviously share and interact. By holding privileged positions of power and ownership due to their shared history, the Vellalah supremacy is delineated in each of these arenas differently and uniquely. This brought them to prominence and thus proved them to be a special category. This, in a way, facilitated my study of Vellalah identity. Additionally, what complicated this is that the non-Vellalah also involves politics, education, lifestyles, leadership roles, land ownership, and temple affiliation. This leads to the question of how someone can distinguish Vellalah identity from non–Vellalah identity since both are articulated in the same (identification) arenas, perhaps even the same way? There we see changes are taking place and this study also witnesses that in the name of quality, the us–and-them distinction is still manipulated by the Vellalah who are shifting themselves towards the Other.

The carried memories and the codes for conduct of dominant Vellalah identity in Jaffna often came up during the data gatherings. The data analysis interprets these as one of the (perhaps only?) remaining deposits of caste identity in post-war context of Jaffna, which is abstract and difficult to define and cannot be understood as easily as the above-mentioned identification arenas. However, in Appadurai's (1997) terms, it is expressed as the spiritual domain of identity which holds together all the other eight in order to mark out a unique Vellalah identity in Jaffna. This idea of how Vellalah identity is configured is examined empirically in this research. Applying pragmatic understanding means that the framework of Vellalah identity is explored in relation to the Vellalah who recognise themselves as Vellalah in Jaffna. In the mean-

while, it exposes the structures of power and domination, and the relations of power by looking behind the appearances of the world of discourse and texts.

2.3 Field Conditions and Representation

I recognised myself in Zulaika's experience of studying political violence in his own community (Basque) as being in an "*unusual field work predicament of being utterly unsure of how to go about studying an almost unmentionable, yet heavily tabooed" issue* (my italics) (Zulaika, 1995: 209). I discuss the experiences of how the fieldwork affected me and how I affected the field during the process. It is often stated that native researchers can ensure some comfort and security in their own cultural identity by making use of personal and cultural symbols of meaning in their research (Winkler, 1995: 155). There are numerous ethical discussions about the pros and cons of being an insider and an outsider. Almost all the academic studies on caste in Jaffna have been done by outsiders. I am thus forced to discuss my positioning, since being a Jaffna Vellalah, objectivity or social distance from the subject is a serious, ethical concern. A fieldworker is, as always, a "positioned subject", and the key point here is to show how reflexivity was practiced by the researcher at various points with different tactics (Hastrup, 1992, Okely, 1992). This positioning is important in relation to both gathering and analysing data. While there is a constant academic pressure on the native researcher to stand outside the framework, one tactic is to remake Vellalah identity an 'other' yet at the same time I cannot avoid being 'familiar' with it. On the other hand, informants always took their own positions in the narratives about their lives and experiences of caste, and because of them I became an insider and an outsider, depending on the positioning of the informants. For instance, when one Vellalah stated that he no longer visits temples, he marked me out as an outsider, being that I am a Vellalah who does visit temples. When another Vellalah had an opinion that the power of the Vellalah in Jaffna has collapsed and weakened, he saw me as an insider who shared the same opinion. These events show that the boundaries between insider and outsider are fluid. Thus, I maintained subjective immersion in my informants" perspective at the field sites while I also distanced myself from them conducting analysis.

In the context of being Vellalah, my informants based their higher positions on one's level of education and mostly asserted in their narratives of political power that the power of Vellalah has been weakened during the militant nationalist project. Thus as a result they hid their identity from others. However, the Vellalah informants with minimal education, which is an intra-Vellalah order, stated that there are now difficulties identifying the differences between caste identities. Interestingly, I found there were many 'others'

within the Vellalah fold. In the non-Vellalah context, people were extensively concerned to claim identification with the Vellalah, via the process of imitation, along with building up links with the outside world but also by relying on their own caste identity. In these contrasting settings, the narratives become negotiations against different forms of otherness, where being an insider and an outsider are positions to be controlled. With respect to being a native researcher, reflexivity was defined as being impersonal and provided gainful scrutiny of the relationship between *fieldworker, the subject* and *the interpretation of the data* (Okely, 1992). Bourdieu calls for an engagement in the domain of performance, arguing that "objective understanding misses the essence of practice, which is an actor's understanding" (Bourdieu, 1977: 72). Tyler (1986: 126) refers to it as a mutual process of co-operation and collaboration whereby "mutual, dialogical production of a discourse, of a story of sorts" occurs. In the analytical data, textual narratives of Vellalah politics in the mid-sixties and seventies was not a familiar one for the researcher, but the narratives they produced on the day-to-day lifestyles of the Vellalah and their identity in Jaffna look somewhat familiar. Part of me was formed through the subject I study, so that positioning is in a state of shift.

My family commitments destined that the fieldwork for this thesis was broken into three periods of four to five months each, between August 2004–January 2007. From January 2007 to January 2009 while in Sweden, I maintained the contacts with my informants and also with relatives and friends who constantly updated me with information on the recent caste issues in Jaffna. From March 2010 to August 2015 I updated the data sporadically; being that I served as a senior lecturer at the University of Jaffna and was a member of the society I was residing in. However, the intervals between the periods of intensive fieldwork, brought the reward of detachment and reflection on data already gathered. Furthermore, it made cross-checking easy, i.e. reading between what was 'said', 'meant' and 'done' in the field (Geertz, 1993: 27). However when the field study involvement is totally troubled with constant threats of killings, disappearances and abductions of even 'moderates' and journalists, it was treacherous to study the internal 'taboo' of caste. I gave up my original field sketch focusing on two specific localities; the altered plan was not that much more feasible. After November 2005, the security situation gradually worsened in Jaffna until a full-scale war erupted in August 2006. Because of the war, the A9 highway linking the Jaffna Peninsula to the rest of Sri Lanka was cut off. This caused shortages of many items like fuel, electricity and telecommunications. Due to security considerations and limitations imposed by the Sri Lankan military, it was not possible to conduct a field study involving a lot of travelling beyond home and the place where I worked. Frequent curfews interrupted my fieldwork. I was in a situation that Nordström describes where

'the everydayness of war is a never ending stream of worries about the next meal, the next move, and the next assault (Nordström, 1995).

2.4 Methods of Data Collection

This study mainly relies on oral narration and textual narration – historical as well as contemporary narration – of how people of Jaffna have perceived the Vellalah identity and the caste changes. Since a mixture of descriptive and exploratory approach is used, the research design combined what was pre-planned with what spontaneously arose in the field. The case study method and the field study conditions forced me to adapt a strategy of gathering data by snowball sampling. I chose some sites like temples, working places, schools and public meetings to do participatory and non-participatory observation using accidental sampling. The aim was to record and interpret how Vellalah identity was practised, negotiated and shifted. As Vellalah is the unit of analysis, I chose some non-Vellalah through strategic sampling to know their perceptions towards Vellalah and caste transformation. I should say here that I received more useful narratives by having informal dialogues or, in my own words, 'casual talks' with people. These informal dialogues emerged in homes, in the places where people work, in markets, during social visits, and in other circumstances. One of my methodological objectives during fieldwork was to engage people from a variety of categorisations in Jaffna, as I wanted to capture information on how differently positioned players think on how Vellalah identity is (re)constructed and negotiated and also to reflect on the overall caste transformation. In the process of writing, I tried to strike a balance between commonalities and variations found in such a large number of opinions of the collected primary data.

2.4.1 Interviews and Observations

I carried out thirty-eight (38) semi-structured interviews, of which many were dialogical varieties, in the course of the fragmented fieldwork periods. Of these interviews, 24 were with men and 14 with women, and they were from different places in Jaffna district as already mentioned. I also had managed to interview twenty seven (27) Vellalah out of a total number of thirty eight interviews (38). The gradual creation of relationships with informants happened through processes that culminated in 'snowball samples'. Relationships with an initially small number of informants produced in great number through introductions to friends, neighbours, colleagues, kith and kin, co-workers, etc. These are narrative in character in the sense that their social life was storied through disconnected events revolving around caste. Through locating and

being located – we (Vellalah) vs. them (non-Vellalah) – people project their caste identity through their caste narratives. Some of them were members of the LTTE.

The interviews were conducted in Tamil and mostly at homes of the people being interviewed, at the premises of Jaffna University or in the places where I happened to meet them. Some of them I interviewed in my residence during the visits of guests and the labourers who unfortunately had to reconstruct the house I rented. The workers were all from the depressed castes. It gave me a chance to get the non-Vellalah opinion about the Vellalah and the overall caste dynamics in Jaffna from the perspective of depressed castes. There were two people who caste I was not originally sure about, but during the interviews I easily understood that the persons in question were non-Vellalah, because they did not express that they share their identification with the Vellalah. My caste background made it easy to interview other Vellalah, but I managed to also interview some non-Vellalah who were educated and worked at the university. I made encounters with non-Vellalah by visiting their camps (*Mukaam)*. War caused displacements regardless of caste; although the caste ordering and positioning in Jaffna is bound with localities. Depressed castes still mostly reside in welfare settlements, but the only difference now is that the settlement of the camp is placed within the center of the village, while before they lived in the periphery. Throughout the various stages of my fieldwork, I accepted offers of food and drink because caste identity in Jaffna is bound with food (who should eat with whom, who is allowed to offer such food, and who can eat, etc.). I used this as strategy to break down the barriers of differences between people. I also collected data on views and reactions of the non-Vellalah towards the Vellalah indirectly through observations, written questionnaires and narratives given by the Vellalah.

I have a considerable bias in the primary data collected regarding age. The somewhat older and often well-educated men dominate the sample. This is due to the fact that I did not manage to interview many women and younger people because of their reluctance. Sometimes I fixed appointments with women whom I was suggested to meet through snowball sampling, but when I was there at their homes, the husband would take over the discussion and the wife was 'muted' or participated only with short sentences and not in longer more narrative form. It was not strange for me, and I kept on trying to find some more women. My attempts to contact women at the university became vain. They would look at each other or at the floor when they came to know that I want to know the changes in caste had happened in Jaffna. They were silent and reluctant, so I had to give up the face-to-face encounters. However, the older educated men were more likely to give a better idea of the Jaffna caste dynamics and transformation than younger ones. Each encounter lasted nearly

one hour or more. The guideline for the interview is attached in the appendix. My questions covered wide-ranging issues of caste in Jaffna; concerning the research scope I predominantly included the narratives of Vellalah identity into my analysis. But hopefully my databank on caste in Jaffna will be helpful for future projects. An initial attempt for a focus group interview arranged by one of the key informants at his house was not successful in the sense that one person's (male) domination over others did not permit collecting the opinions of others in the group. Two educated women were subjugated, though I did notice that they had different opinions on caste transformation. Unfortunately, it was not possible to meet them individually later.

2.4.2 Structured Written Survey

I found a way to correct the bias and the imbalance in gender and age through my work as a lecturer at the University of Jaffna. I was in charge of a unit called Contemporary Social Issues, which is a course unit for third-year undergraduates who specialise in Sociology and are pursuing a general degree along with two other main subjects. It consisted of focus on the subjects of ethnicity, nationalism, globalisation, gender studies, aging and caste, etc. I gave a lecture on caste dynamics in Jaffna based on available literature on caste and then distributed a written questionnaire in 2005 with open-ended questions as a course assessment. I received back all assignments, but had to follow a troublesome path which even involved the LTTE. The assignment was cancelled by the head of the Department of Sociology after he was questioned by the president of the Student Union of Tamil Eelam. To solve this problem I had to approach the area's political officer of the LTTE explaining my goal and showing the letter I had received from the project leader at Gothenburg University. I had a meeting with top officials of the LTTE, including a female member, and fortunately received the green light from them to carry out my research. The political head of the LTTE in Jaffna was given my questionnaire and went through the questions one by one together with other members and approved them – except the last question which inquired about the personal experience of caste discrimination. I myself understood the sensitivity of that question and agreed to omit that in the survey. He further suggested one village in Jaffna that I should go to and study caste. I later came to know that he was from that particular village, which had non-Vellalah inhabitants. My intention with the written survey was to do follow-up interviews with some of these third-year undergraduates, but due to security problems this proved to be impossible as the university was closed during most of my field study.

Although this sort of data gathering involves ethical dilemmas, the feedback I received from the students after their assignments were completed was

very encouraging. They felt relieved to write about something which had been repressed for a long time. It was noticeable that many of the students were bound to have non-Vellalah background. There is a general tendency and hypothesis in Jaffna that the students who enter the arts faculty mostly coming from lower strata of society and from non-Vellalah background. From a total of ninety-three (93) returned questionnaires I chose sixty (60) based on clarity and originality, and the fact that many of the rest had copied each other in their answers. Compared with the interview guide, the topics of the questionnaire were slightly modified for an unfocused group, considering the fact the students are from diverse backgrounds when it comes to caste, region. The questions which were asked are attached in the appendix and covered general caste transformation, factors behind the changes in caste, caste and power, changes to the Vellalah, the LTTE, caste and the Vellalah, war and caste and the Vellalah, caste, the Vellalah and the public places, inter-caste relationships, caste and land, caste and nationalism. The responses for each question varied but mostly they were half a page or one page long, some were more than one or two pages long. The last question was accidently included and around twenty answered this. At the same time, this survey, after having been along a troubled path of interviews, re-motivated me by providing life stories from the vibrant youth of the population.

2.4.3 The Self as Informant

Another strategy I had in the field was to use myself as an informant. This is popular among anthropologists: being insiders, not only as mere recorder of culture but as interpreter of already constituted meaning (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 250). We should exercise "the subjectivity inherent in all observations as the royal road to an authentic, rather than fictitious, objectivity" (Devereux, 1967: xvii). According to Mascarenhas-Keyes, "we should incorporate the creative use of emotional reactions of Self and Other as methodological tools in the fieldwork" (Mascarenhas-Keyes, 2001). I was partly forced to recollect my memories of caste at times when I found some vacuum in the literature and also some ambiguity in the narratives of my informants. I relied on my memories and tried to put them into scientific scrutiny. The most noticeable areas in this context were my relations with the depressed castes being inappropriate behaviour of a married woman. The equal seating of a depressed caste at my home upset many Vellalah, and accepting drinks from a depressed caste was also looked at in the same way. It is normal in the fieldwork that female behaviour is more scrutinised than that of men. But I began to observe all comments about myself as valuable sources of information on caste in Jaffna. My readings on methodology helped me to ask myself why I was criticised for

this behaviour, while others were not. Why do some criticise my actions while others praise them? These questions added meaning to my study.

2.4.4 Text as Narrations

Another major source of data is the literature on identity, caste and Tamil nationalism. More specifically, Tamil nationalism, its textual production more specifically the *constructed actor*, *voicing* and the *sub-text*[11] were focused and analysed with reference to Vellalah identity in one sense. Sub-text focuses on whatever understandings or themes form the background or tacit dimensions of a text, inferable but not explicitly stated. Part of this study uses text as an object of study. Chapters 3 and 5 are based purely on textual analysis and we could see how text worked as an instrument operating on social reality. Especially in chapter 5 we can see how through the production and circulation of historical texts specific social facts Vellalah identity became reiterated and unquestionable. Texts can be a powerful mode of naturalising social reality and also socialising natural reality (Hanks, 1989: 102). Thus, text is understood as one expression of the dimension of power within social relations and the larger cultural system.

The material has been classified as either historical narratives or contemporary narratives on caste written by local the Tamil, Sinhala or Muslims who live in Sri Lanka, by Sri Lankan Diasporian or by non-Tamil authors. The literature written relating to caste during the Tamil nation-building was considered primary data. Survey responses are written text narratives, but they are primary data too. The authors behind each textual narrative were scrutinised as much as possible since this research concerns on caste identity. Especially if they were local authors, the tempo and the direction of their voice, and thus the narratives on caste hegemony in Jaffna or on Vellalah identity were noted. Hegemonic and subversive voices of caste could be noted in the texts; I focused on the identity of Vellalah and its changing nature, context, and actors behind. In addition the online news relating to caste, personal correspondence including e-mails, memoirs, newspapers and photographs are also used as data on caste especially Vellalah identity.

2.5 Researcher's Positioning

The major strength of a case study is said to be the opportunity to use many different sources to increase the validity of the result. In this study, data was gathered through a number of sources as above mentioned. In an analytical

[11] See for a fuller discussion on Text and Textuality by Hanks W. F., 1989.

process, all these sources were reviewed and analysed together. Regardless of the choice of strategies and techniques, a persistent challenge in the case study is "to produce high-quality analysis, which require the researcher to *attend to all the evidence display and present the evidence separate from any interpretation, and show adequate concern for exploring alternative interpretations"* (Yin, 2003: 109; my italics). The interplay of Vellalah identity in the context of Tamil nation-building on the political arena was interpreted based on the analysis of material available via primary and secondary sources. The construction and (re) negotiation of Vellalah identity is analysed through interpreting narratives to "deconstruct/decipher the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning and in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning" (Lieblich, 1998: 165).

It is said that "[a] person's interpretation of an object or event includes an identification of it and expectations regarding it, and often a feeling about it and motivation to respond it" (Strauss and Quinn, 1997: 6). I tried to adopt an inter-subjective interpretation rather than an objective one (Daniel, 1983: 288). Culture is not monologic, it is dialogic. In this sense:

> The dialectical tension between the object of interpretation and the interpreter is never completely neutralized, nor should it be. […] On the one hand, he must […] stop short of subjecting it to a total collapse of meaning—by pushing it in the direction of the interpretive object with the hope of apperceiving it in its near-pristine state. On the other hand, he must self-consciously hold tight to the reins of self-reflection and awareness of his own place and role as interpreter in the pragmatic equation of cultural meaning. […] (ibid., 1983:288).

The researcher as a representative of the subject in this study context could sense this tension while interpreting the cultural meaning of the narratives. I was also aware that I had to walk the blurred areas between epistemology and ontology as well as theory and practice during my analysis of identity. It was always a matter of positioning myself between being insider and outsider, depending on the view of an informant. The interpretation has been done through a procedure I, as already mentioned, call narrative analysis. Here are the ways in which narratives in this study were understood.

2.5.1 Narratives

The transformation of the 'field' into 'the text' is partly achieved by means of the narrative construction of everyday life (Richardson, 1990: 133). The narratives are an interface between self and society, constituting a resource for socialising emotions, attitudes, and identities, developing interpersonal relationships, and constituting membership in a community. Through all

these dynamics, narrative brings multiple, partial selves to life. The narratives I consider here are not used with distinctive face value; rather they also include visual representation, gesture, facial expression and physical activity. Caste identity in Jaffna is still bound to explicate external as well as internal self-identity of how everyone thinks who they are and how others are in terms of caste. I therefore articulate the verbalised, visualised data on Vellalah identity and caste transformation as narratives which implies caste dynamics in Jaffna through disconnected events, and which create continuity between past, present, and imagined worlds (cf. Ochs and Capps, 1996: 19). Conversational narratives involved problematic events from the past and present relating to caste (cf. Ochs and Capps, 1996: 20). In this perspective narratives are versions of reality, are expressions of one or more points of view rather than objective, well-informed accounts. On the other hand, through these narrative expressions, the central problem of Vellalah identity is related with the chosen historicity by the Vellalah, presenting wider and diversified issues and domains. One aspect of narrative studies is especially relevant to our understanding of how identities are constituted and shifted.

Vellalah experiences are expressed in multiple narratives in this study to make sense of what has happened and is happening to them in the context of Tamil nation-building. This is also done to recognise the way the narratives expressed by the Vellalah and non-Vellalah are the projections, memories and hopes which are socially, politically and culturally embedded in the private and public zones in Jaffna. In one way, I intend to see how Vellalah have perceived how their identity has been constructed, negotiated and shifted; in another way, as a critical researcher on caste, my duty is also to inquire into *how and why the Vellalah perceive their identity this way*. My narrative analysis will thus be both interpretive and critical.

The focus here is on the types of narratives through which the accounts are constituted; accounts are not simply the representations of the world, they are part of the world they describe and are thus shaped by the contexts in which they occur. Many of the narratives ended with short dialogues and sometimes became emotional. The narratives were sometimes short, but clearly had a start, evolved, and had a closure of the particular issue they articulated, and sometimes they were fragmented expression of the experiences. Many narratives contained prescriptions for (dis)ordering or (in) equality based on caste identity in the public space. The changes so far occurred drew potent moral lessons by making connections between narratives during Vellalah-led nation project and when it was dominated by the LTTE in the militant phase. Thus, it was concerned with the Vellalah and non-Vellalah, both in the past and the present. Moreover, they continually explored, reiterated and emphasised the

boundaries between the self and the other that is the Vellalah and especially the depressed castes.

Descriptions of personal experience are always fragmented by different but connected experiences. Each narrative situated in time and space engages only facets of a narrator's or listener's selfhood in that it evokes only certain memories, concerns and expectations. Narratives depict a temporal transition from one state of affairs to another. Narratives always have a linkage between the particular individual experiences and broader social structures. Concerning the Vellalah, narratives disclose how Vellalah identity has been understood and also how Vellalah wanted it to remain in the context of Tamil nation-building and in the socio-cultural life of Jaffna. It also expresses how supremacy has been reconstructed through the militant nationalistic project. In a way, it covers both the 'hegemonic tales' and the 'subversive stories' (Ewick and Silby, 1995: 220).

2.6 Practice of Analysis

The case study "describes the events in a framework within the environment, but the *problems are not always highlighted or even made clear; they emerge as the case material is subjected to analysis. A conclusion is not necessarily stated nor is the situation reached in the case irreversible"* (Rogers, 1978). The aim of this analysis is to understand and to account for Vellalah identity as it is captured by the data gathered for this study project. Already existing knowledge on Tamil culture forms an important part of the analysis. What was of interest here is to see the forms of narratives through which Vellalah accounts are constituted. In that way, Vellalah accounts are interpreted in terms of the context in which they were produced. The analysis based on the secondary sources are based on hermeneutic analysis whereby Vellalah identity, revolving around its identification arenas, is geared towards (re)capturing and (re)negotiating the meaning of Vellalah that was temporally and culturally distant, and thus disguised in history. As was stated before, clothes, gestures and manners also convey caste messages, and they especially indicate caste, gender, social status, occupational role, group membership, attitudes, etc. among the Vellalah. However, the expressive power of language provides the most important resource for accounts here.

The analysis began with careful readings – more than two – of the entire data in order to be thoroughly familiar with it and also to find out whether there are any interesting patterns that can be identified regarding the research focus. Then, the data was reconceptualised; this means that the entire data were reorganised into analytical themes. The interviews were originally in the form of translated narratives of each informant. I split them all into eight seg-

ments (de-contextualising) based on the major Vellalah identification arenas. This reorganisation of the entire data provides the important infrastructure for more researching or recovery. This process provided me with tentative overall themes for the empirical chapters, hence throwing light on the subordinate themes (re-contextualising) under the major theme. However, this arrangement of themes and even sub-themes generally underwent considerable changes over the course of the research. Then, I re-read the reorganised data under different themes and noted the homogeneous and divergent voices. I made comments on the side of each – either descriptive or analytical. Each theme (identification arena) was narrowed down so that although Vellalah identity remained the core focus, the sections sometimes started out more broadly and ended with a specific analysis of the Vellalah or Vellalah views on the aspects of caste. Narratives of caste emerged in almost all the narratives, and cannot be separated from the Vellalah, which is one reason for choosing this approach.

Although the analysis did not incorporate a pure psychoanalytical method, it was indeed based on an interpretive-constructivist approach; the data had overtones of the cognitive dimension of caste/Vellalah identity related to how persons feel and experience identity. To make sense of this, in my analysis I refer to the theory of cultural schema which allows for an understanding of identity that partly deals with cognition. The results of this study on identity are analysed through division into extra-personal and intra-personal identities, based on a belief that the identity of a person can be expressed in two ways: one is the external markers and the other is the internal self, (that is, how we think about who we are). Narratives of identity are constructed both discursively and materially by instigating processes of self-fashioning through reiterated bodily practices (Pemberton and Nijhawan, 2009). I had to accommodate this aspect of identity as my study of caste identity in Jaffna very much reiterated an implicit, intra-personal dimension of identity as the vibrant dynamic in contemporary caste Jaffna.

2.6.1 The Rationale of Thematic Representation

The research entirely rests on three major intersecting themes of representation. That is: caste, Tamil nationalism and Vellalah identity, whereby the Vellalah and non-Vellalah articulated Tamil nationalism and the Vellalah views on militant nationalism. The second theme is revolving around the elements of caste which include endogamy, division of labour, interdependency and purity-pollution. These are, in a way, the representations of Vellalah itself as Vellalah is one of the included castes. Moreover, the third but most important theme is the eight identification arenas of Vellalah identity which I arrived at via my methodology as already mentioned. But I will first begin by looking

at the elements of caste since Vellalah identity is being constructed and contextualised within caste. The identification arenas of Vellalah were derived at through the inter-mixing of the queries I posed in the field and the repetition of the narratives given by informants along reviewing the existing literatures on caste. In order to represent the collective voice in each identification arena, my strategy has been to first all divide the identification arenas into major themes in matters of time (past, present) and an actor-structure perspective. Under each theme, I deal with the past context of Jaffna, the present context (by which I mean between 2004 and 2007), the LTTE (the informal national elite) as a major actor, and the war as (an abnormal) structure. Each identification arena does not simply contain quotations or homogenous voices. However, I sometimes only capture one person's statements in one identification arena; at other times it may contain several persons' accounts under different sub-themes which form one identification arena.

This study focuses on how Vellalah identity has been constructed, negotiated and transformed by means of looking at these eight identification arenas (politics, education, lifestyles, leadership, land ownership, temple affiliation, intra-Vellalah divides, and inter-caste relationships). Notably, it was difficult to compartmentalise these eight into one chapter or less than one of the major themes (caste, the LTTE and war) as they intersect differently and not uniformly. Likewise the elements of caste (such as endogamy, division of labour, purity-pollution, and interdependency) are special arenas in terms of caste identity. However, both the identification arenas of Vellalah identity and the elements of caste do not crisscross in similar patterns, but differently. For instance, one of the elements of caste – interdependency – is relaxed on inter-caste relationships and intra-Vellalah divides, so that the elements of caste rest on or relate differently to the eight identification arenas of Vellalah identity. Similarly, endogamy is related to being pure and not polluted, whereas purity-pollution is very much related to ranking. Interdependency pertains to inter-caste relationship.

The narratives of Vellalah identity dominates or submerges in the arenas depending on the degree of Vellalah exposure to those arenas and also depending on how non-Vellalah share those arenas with them. Of the eight identification arenas, politics and leadership are primarily discussed in chapters 3, 5 and 7 – while chapter 3 sets up a background for the study, chapter 5 provides an in-depth analysis of the historical constitution of the Vellalah and how they evolved as leaders and politicians, and thus as pioneers in the nation-building project. Chapter 7 primarily focuses on how and when there was a transition of elite positions and power among Tamils in the late 1970s and how the LTTE articulated caste and deconstructed Vellalah dominance. Chapter 6 tries to cover the elements of caste, namely purity-pollution, endogamy, in-

terdependency and ranking, and the lifestyles of the Vellalah. War, education and landownership come under chapter 8. However, the above particularistic thematic representation will not produce the reliable and valid representativeness of Vellalah identity or in general caste transformation in Jaffna. By these thematic divides, this thesis wants to convey two messages to the reader.

1) It channels these themes to describe the particular construction of narrative and expression among the Jaffna Tamils in relation to caste/the Vellalah in the context of nation-building.
2) It is a way of representing all narratives into thematically connected forms.

The identification arenas listed already are closely interconnected and reinforce each other to such an extent that they are best-presented in the chapters in their relational configurations, under other major themes.

2.7 Concluding Discussion

I described how I designed the research methodology, including how the process of research can be understood and how I overcame the obstacles encountered during the process of my research. This study relied on constructive and critical approaches, because I believe that reality is socially constructed and also historically constituted and thus contextualised. Being a critical researcher I aim to expose the structures of power and domination, thus prove that knowledge is partial and serves the interests of certain groups. Then I discuss the research design of this study, including the sampling and also the sensitivity of the subject. This is followed by the field conditions where I discovered how I had to re-devise the strategy behind my research plan based on the unexpected problems encountered in the field. Objectivity and reflectiveness in interpreting the data are discussed too. The data collection consisted of informal interviews, a written survey, the self as informant, and text as narration to produce high-quality analysis and also to attend to all the evidence discovered. The narratives were classified into oral and historical categories. Thus narratives are viewed as versions of reality and interfaces between self and society; the role of narratives in the social construction of identity and reality are explained herein. Thereafter I explain the dialectical tension of my positioning in relation to the data analysis while interpreting it, which is followed by a presentation of the rationale behind the thematic categorisation and allocation into chapters.

3
Analytical Framework for Understanding Vellalah Identity

3.1 Introduction

The rationale behind this chapter is to present an analytical framework for understanding how Vellalah identity in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, is being constructed, negotiated and transformed in the context of the Tamil nation-building project. This is done through selected existing theoretical discussions on identity and caste and relating them briefly to ideas about nationalism and intersectionality. Caste and identity are each vast, well-theorised arenas, essential to understand if we wish to study South Asia. They are used here to understand a more complex account of Vellalah identity, which is entangled and intertwined with the nation-building project, caste dynamics, and politics of identity. Any serious historical or contemporary study necessitates a holistic view of the Vellalah, where it cannot be separated from the larger dynamics of caste and Tamil nationalism.

Theory has been defined as "the process of modelling real-world phenomena" (Torraco, 1997: 123). Theory emerges from experience in another sense; theory is seen in this thesis a way of understanding reality (Nordström, 1995: 4). Theory is used here to provide focus for the analysis of the Vellalah identity that is reflected in and emerged from the data, and also to interpret the data. In order to study the complex phenomena of Vellalah identity in this research I had to employ multiple research paradigms and also had to approach data from 'multiple perspectives' (Denzin, 1978).

This chapter first discusses identity, and how it is constructed, maintained and negotiated, and how it is intertwined with power. In the next section, the chapter focuses on caste, as a particular type of identity, and discusses how caste has been theorised and understood. Here, the more durable aspect of caste identity is also analysed, making use of the notions of cultural schema

and habitus. Thereafter, the chapter highlights the intersectional aspects of identity, and discusses the context of nationalism and nation-building and its influence on identification processes. This discussion is included because caste and Vellalah identity are inseparably intertwined with nation-building and also because the study of Vellalah identity was investigated during the intensive phase of nation-building. Finally, the chapter summarises the analytical framework which guides my analysis of Vellalah identity.

3.2 Dynamics of Identity

Studies on identity became an exhausted subject in the recent past (Hall, 1989; Giddens, 1991; Calhoun, 1994; Jabri, 1996; Yuval-Davis, 1981; Crenshaw, 1989, 1992; Collins, 2000; Cohen, 2000; Jenkins, 2008). Identity is such a key issue that it raises itself constantly in human life and cannot be avoided. Its emergence and dynamics are understood in different terms. In the globalised world, identities are mostly fragmented and fractured (Appadurai, 1997; Held, 1999). Identities are flexible, changeable and situationally adaptive (Verdery, 1996: 35). Identity is a social construction and in a manner not static, so that its reconstitution is a circulatory interplay through multiple dynamic and complex processes (Hall, 1989;, Giddens, 1991; Calhoun, 1994; Jabri, 1996; Cohen, 2000; Jenkins, 2008; Lindholm Schulz, 1999; Stern, 2005; Schulz, 1993; Orjuela, 2004; Todd, 2005).

Cultural dealings mostly revolve around the question of identities. In the new world order, Huntington claims that cultural identities determine the relations between countries (Huntington, 1996). This redirects the focus to *cultural politics* whenever the identity issue is involved in conflicts. Identity can be understood as a process, as being or becoming (Jenkins, 2008: 04). The essentialist view is that the identity common to members of a social group is stable and more or less unchanging, since it is based on the experiences they share. Postmodernists on the other hand, insist that identities are made-up and constructed rather than deduced from experience, since – they claim – experience cannot be a source of objective knowledge. My stance here is, first, that the relation between the narratives of experience and identity is a genuine philosophical/theoretical issue, and second, that there is another way of thinking about identity than might be suggested by the alternatives provided by essentialists and postmodernists. The dimension of identity mentioned above highlights its relatively rigid nature, which is linked to the cognitive (psychic) dimension of identity (D'Andrade, 1995; Butler, 1993: 23; Strauss and Quinn, 1997). According to this view, identity has a dimension that is implicit and stays in the cognitive schema (Strauss and Quinn, 1997). Schema is understood in this study as an organised abstract mental framework of ob-

jects and relations. It can be hierarchically structured. This theory, although presenting a cognitive approach to the question of how cultural identity is represented, still holds a constructivist view and reiterates that internalised dimension of identity can also be disposable and transferrable. However, identity change may not be as easily carried out as indicated in several works on identity construction (D'Andrade, 1995; Strauss and Quinn, 1997; Mohanty, 1997). Society is an interweaving and interworking of mental selves. The narrative remarks on the internal self of the Vellalah cannot be separated from my framework on Vellalah identity but weave together as a red thread on the continuity of Vellalah identity in this entire project. Identity carries with it an element of uniqueness. It carries with it certain inherent elements, which are cannot be easily deconstructed (Connolly 1991; Hekman, 1999; Strauss and Quinn, 1997; Stern, 2005).

For Hall, the dynamic dimensions of identity are never "singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions" (Hall, 1989: 04). They are indeed constantly in the process of change and transformation. The boundary lines between us and them are always blurry. The narratives of security in relation to identity struggles are about how to safeguard the security of the subject (Stern, 2005: 39). Cooley's looking-glass self-concept further supports the idea that constructing identity is confirming security. He adopted one of the meaningful platforms for understanding how a self-identity is articulated and constituted in a human's life (Cooley, 1998). Cooley talks on three levels of self-identity construction: first, how one thinks one appears to others; second, how one judges that identity; third, how one is perceived by others (Jacobs, 2006: 54). In addition to these three levels, it is also relevant to inquire about how one sees others. For that reason I added this as the fourth dimension of self-identity construction in this study which discloses how Vellalah still perceive Others, the non-Vellalah. It is important not only how we think about who we are, but also how we think of others. Vellalah collective identity is built around several identification markers such as the Vellalah being temple managers, village leaders, politicians, educators and landowners. These identification markers were constructed in different points in history and were also constructed via discourses, practices and positions on the Vellalah during different times. It is also important to note that "marginal identities are, in part, constructed for the Others by groups in power in order to secure their own dominance and legitimacy" (ibid.: 39). Vellalah identifications of depressed castes as impure, lower and dishonest were in a way constructed by the Vellalah to secure their dominance and legitimacy. Hall argues that identities derive their origin from the historical past with which they continue to correspond, but that the contemporary usage of identity is about how we have been represented rather

than who we are (Hall, 1989). In a way, identity is related to the place of social location; in other words, it is culture-contextual, because identity formation is a result of socialisation into a given society.

3.2.1 Collective Identity

Identities are formed through enculturation, so that they are culture-specific. Thus, a collective identity is always situated in a structural position, having codes for conduct, involving processes of inclusion and exclusion, and having a 'chosen past', and thus an ideological ground (David, 1977: 456). I intentionally use the notion of 'chosen past' here instead of 'past', essentially conceiving that the history of a 'culture' is being constructed predominantly by the elite or intellectuals who were dominant characters of society; in another words, because the textual production is done through a selective memory where the entries of dominant discourses are registered.

Collective identities are marked out by boundaries and seen to be different from each other in important respects. Individuals brought up in the same group inevitably have a large number of common identifications, which distinguish them from members of other collectives. This has led some scholars to talk of the collective identities of human communities (Jabri, 1996: 125; Kolstö, 1999: 15). Collective identity "is open to both internal subdivision and calls for its incorporation into some larger category of primary identity" (Calhoun, 1994: 27). Identity thus has at the same time common identifications to distinguish us from them, and internal subdivisions to delineate us and them within themselves. In a way this study of Vellalah identity is thus a study of "similarity among and between pluralities of persons" (Jenkins, 2008: 81). I will in this study of Vellalah identity, analyse how Vellalah construct dissimilarity both towards external others, that is non-Vellalah castes, but also within the collective identity of the Vellalah. Collective identity is the consciousness of groups and also the self-identity of groups (David, 1977; Cohen, 1994). Self-identity can be conceptualised as membership of a group, or as actualised through group identification (Jabri, 1996: 124).

There is a relationship between the construction of identity and the emergence of conflict (Jabri, 1996: 120). According to Jabri, the inter-group differences, "self and other become highly institutionalized and ideologically legitimized, so that discriminatory practices are ritualized and habitual" (ibid.: 127). The binary antagonism of self and other is important in understanding the situations where violence is legitimated in times of conflict. In this study I will particularly look into how the divisions between Vellalah and depressed castes were historically consolidated and legitimised via institutional and ideological measures. I also will discuss how the us-and-them divisions within

the caste system are still shifting. Furthermore, an identity is reconstructed pragmatically in relation to real events concerning productive relations, technology, ecology, power distribution, etc. There is a wide range of causes for identity transformation such as population growth, technological and occupational changes, economic and political shift (David, 1977).

3.2.2 Identification

Identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their ability to exclude (Hall, 1989: 5, 1991: 21). The concept of identification is tricky, as is identity. The self is made up of a collection of possible identifications (Orjuela, 2004). Identification is partial and contextual. It is perceived as a construction, always in process and never completed (Giddens, 1991: 2). It is always "the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image" (Bhabha, 1994: 44–5). Taking over the patterns of identification of the other reduces anxiety of those who aspire to replicate it because 'they' became 'us', but remains prone to tension as there is a constant negotiation of meanings between the meanings we construct for ourselves and to those we are expressed by others. This dialectical tension requires active negotiation of meaning. This is the juncture where theory of identity allies with the theories of schema and confirms that the identity construction has implicit dimension too. Identification may carry a variety of meanings since creation of meaning is not deterministic and unidirectional, and each individual may ascribe different and inconsistent cultural meanings to identification depending on the extent to which they share the collective imagination (Ritson, 1996; see also Giddens, 1991: 46). The demand of identification involves the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of otherness. Not only do we identify ourselves, but we also identify others, and are identified by them in return. That way identity is constructed dialectically both internally and externally (Jenkins, 2008: 22). In this thesis Vellalah identity is discussed via Vellalah narratives, looking at how the Vellalah perceive themselves, others that are non-Vellalah and also how they are perceived by the non-Vellalah. Identification is also a "continuous construction of the image of wholeness, of similarity on the 'inside', which gains presence through the erection of boundaries that distinguish the inside from the outside and, thus similarity from difference" (Stern, 2005: 9). It works both in relation to material conditions and discursively. The inside and the outside are also therefore, shifting. This study will particularly analyse how the Vellalah relate to the depressed castes who imitate the Vellalah. The thesis will also identify how meaning is constructed in the process of maintaining Vellalah identity.

3.2.3 Identity and Power

Although power is not a main focus in this study, the study of Vellalah identity inevitably demands a discussion of it, since the Vellalah, being the dominant caste and the dominant elite, have their power embedded in the socio-political and socio-cultural life in Jaffna. An identity complex involves the construction of different positions of power (Lilja, 2007: 21 see also Diggins, 2011). Vellalah identity has historically been constructed and thus positioned at the top in Jaffna and in Tamil culture. The Vellalah have since the beginning articulated power to legitimate actions and to mobilise people with the purpose of gaining social and political power. Furthermore, the Vellalah narratives present hierarchies, stereotyped knowledge about themselves and about others in relation to other narratives. The position offered to a particular identity is established by narratives, which are closely related to power (Laclau, 1990: 33). Dominant narratives extend social hierarchies. According to constructivists, identity can be deconstructed, disturbing the binary positions between Vellalah and depressed castes, and challenging the power positions they involve, by placing new meanings in a given identity, and opening up for the development of non-dominant narratives. This is possible because they are constructed (Orjuela, 2004: 68). Thus, the position given to an identity is maintained partly by narratives and this result in social ordering. In the thesis I will look into how the transition of power and the transformation of the elite during the shift in the nation project transferred the power from Vellalah to non-Vellalah and its impact on caste identity. I will also identify the rise of non-dominant narratives with new meanings attached to them. I will further show how the power positions of Vellalah were (re)negotiated in this new context.

For Smith, "power plays a role in the reproduction and possible transformation of social relations, for example, and in daily and longer term social practices" (Smith, 2006: 216). For Foucault, domination/hegemony is not internalised at an early age; instead there is an on-going process of power relationships that operate through bodies and minds (Foucault, 1991: 23). Although supremacy is not internalised at an early age as Foucault claims, since power relationships are maintained in the minds, dominancy is implicitly sustained by certain groups for decades and reproduced via narratives. For instance, Germans were once hegemonic, and many still have a perception that they are hegemonic and racist. In another example, the Roma are still viewed by many Europeans as filthy thieves. Likewise, Afro-Americans had a bitter history in the seventeenth century, but the stigmas and stereotypes attached to 'blacks' still pop up even in the twenty-first century. The Vellalah had a hegemony in Jaffna, and thus among Tamils in Sri Lanka, and after several decades there is still a perception that they have power, but in different forms.

The above aspect of power is crucial to caste identity which shapes individual and collective consciousness, the relationship with others, social ordering, and also the practices that these produce. This discussion of the power dimensions of Vellalah identity will provide the context for the reflections regarding the power transition and centrality of Vellalah in caste dynamics in Jaffna, and in the context of Tamil nation-building. I now move on to theorising caste.

3.3 Theorising Caste

Caste can be understood as a cultural practice or cultural identity, and it is both an individual and collective identity. Caste is operationally defined as a system of *endogamy, division of labour, purity-pollution, ranking, and interdependence* (Dumont, 1975, Bougle, 1971, Banks, 1960). Caste orders people on the basis of locally constructed ideas of purity and impurity, and in terms of power politics. This study centres on one single caste, the Vellalah, rather than caste in general, and it configures Vellalah as an identity. Therefore, I will not deal with theories of caste more in-depth and thus this thesis does not exclude any of the theories on caste as false or inapplicable; rather it perceives those as acontextual in relation to the specific context of the Vellalah cas(t)e study. Caste is practised in South Asia, but not all over the regions there. But the 'structural parallels' can be seen in many parts of the world. Therefore in a sense, defining characteristics of caste, or the identifications of caste identity, is not unique to Hindus or Tamils. For instance, the researcher being outside her home country (Sri Lanka) in Sweden, found that some Swedes still look upon Roma people as low; some vegetarians still look upon meat-eaters with disgust; some are still very church-oriented and think of themselves as more religious and high in society; in some contexts working-class people are not seen to have much education or good/humane values, etc. It is clear that good human values or better identification markers of a person/self in each culture are internalised, culturally schematised and reproduced (Quigley, 1994: 25). It is important for this study to find out why all of the identification markers associated with Vellalah are found together – how, since when and where? – or, if any group has all of these identifications together, why and how is that the case? It is essential to say that caste is not understood in this study as merely a 'stratified system or organisation', or as a mere 'homo hierarchicus', or as an 'essence of purity-pollution', or only as a 'colonial artefact'; but the contemporary dynamics through one case study of the Vellalah is linked with pertinent theories and is critically engaged by the researcher.

This study primarily understands that identities rotating around caste are constituted, internalised, personified on spatial-temporal relationality, and are thus contextualised. To explain the above point I present an example related

to how, for Tamils, land and caste are intertwined. Historical records mention five types of land, called *Tinais*,[12] where people lived, and these are seen as a reference point for the evolution of Tamil civilisation (Mahadevan, 2003; Hart, 1999; Zvelebil, 1973). The Tamil Lexicon defines *Tinai* as "place, region, and site", and the term *Tinai* has several meanings in the Tamil language; "classification, codification, landscape, *caste*/tribe, place, conduct or propriety, patterns of behaviour and earth" (Cheran, 2007: 4) (my italics), and one of these is 'caste'. This study concerning the origin of caste takes the above as a territorially bounded unit and thus one of the points of departure for theorising caste, from which the identity construction is being constituted over time and space. *Tinai* as a concept pointed out through a literary way of representation, different patterns of behaviour and in different regions and cultural sites that were at different stages of development (Thaninayakam, 1966; see also Sivathamby, 1998: 15; Cheran, 2007: 6). This further supports that *Tinais* is not only an eco-geographical region, but also a cultural-community region (Cheran, 2007). Cheran pointed out in his study that landscape can have agency,[13] as follows:

> Places can become key meaning-brokers not just because they under gird projects of social transformation, but also because they are often the foundation on which collective memory and 'the invented tradition' can be built and maintained (Cheran, 2007: 3).

Such perspective places focus on how caste as an identity developed through a history in which different developments were based on different eco-geo-cultural zones; and thus how these factors could have conditioned the life of Tamil people bringing them to distinguish between different castes. In this thesis, this understanding of the origin of caste helps to problematise the theory of caste with regard to Vellalah identity. Caste is the key to Tamil social formation, and it is seen as a root construction of Tamil culture, whereas national identity is a wider cultural identity or membership of people. Kapferer says, "The psychology of the nationalist person is present in the logic of those cultural artefacts that make up the traditions of the nation" (Kapferer, 1988: 20). This is because culture is fundamental, and its logic is integral to the very analysis and interpretation of the social and national worlds. Such a perspective on the culture-nation continuum, as in the preceding quotation, is central

[12] They were Kurinchi (mountains and surrounding areas), Mullai (forests), Marutham (agricultural lands), Neythal (sea and coastal landscape) and Paalai (deserts). Each *Tinai* has a characteristic flower, landscape, time, season, music, a bird, a beast, tree or plant, water (rivers, ponds, waterfalls, etc.), occupation, deities, and distinct people (Sivathamby, 1998; Cheran, 2001).

[13] For more detail see *The Poetics of Identity: Bakhtin's Chronotope and the Tamil Concept of Tinai*, by Cheran, 2007.

to this thesis as it makes possible to see the inter-linkages between caste and national identities. This will aid the process of analysing the narratives of the Vellalah in the context of Tamil nation-building. By bringing different parameters to map out what caste is and how it is evolved and understood, it is important that I try to find the appropriate understanding of caste that suits the contemporary dynamics of caste in Jaffna. David has defined the dimensions of collective identity in the context of South Asian caste as:

1) It is based on the practical interests of a social identity situated in a particular structural position;
2) It has the role performance of the identity, expected codes of conduct;
3) It is based on the inclusion and exclusion of persons in the identity category;
4) It is built upon the chosen past of structural position of the identity; and
5) It has the ideological grounding of the above dimensions of identity (David, 1977: 453).

This provides an idea of how caste as a collective identity articulated its functions through the particular structural position, expected codes of conduct, inclusion and exclusion of persons, the importance of a chosen past and also the ideological base. Moreover, through this discussion, I introduce a sense of how continuity/maintenance of caste features functions, in terms of how it expects people to act and react in order to maintain their identity. The main focus here is to define a workable definition on caste, and to understand the way in which caste in Jaffna has been articulated and personified via narratives. Caste is in a sense understood not by what one does, but what is done to you. Two further definitions of caste are quoted here, in order to use those as a point of departure for this study of what caste is. I begin with what Dumont used as an initial definition on caste. Dumont borrowed this definition from Bougle (1971: 15):

> The caste system divides the whole society into a large number of hereditary groups, distinguished from one another and connected together by three characteristics: *separation in matters of marriage and contact*, whether direct or indirect (food); *division of labour*, each group having, in theory or by tradition, a profession from which their members can depart only within certain limits; and finally *hierarchy*, which ranks the groups as relatively superior or inferior to one another (Dumont, 1975: 21).

The major identification markers of caste were, according to Dumont and Bougle, in Indian society in the 1970s, *the separation in marriage and contact*, *division of labour*, and *ranking*. In the context of Sri Lanka, Banks' studied caste in Jaffna the 1950s and portrayed the description of caste in Jaffna society in the following manner:

> There are a number of named *endogamous strata*, there is a *concept of pollution*, there is *formal system of interdependence* (ritual service) which links these strata together in economic, political and religious fields, the named strata are *ranked* and various forms of customary behaviour serve to symbolize the rank differences (Banks, 1960: 61–2) (my italics).

Banks defined caste as consisted of ranking, endogamy, pollution and a formal system of interdependency connecting other domains of society in Jaffna. In the context of Jaffna, formal systems of interdependence and pollution are two additional elements of caste that complement Dumont's definition of caste which defined the caste in the 1970s of India. In the essentialist view, caste is considered as something given by birth, and something that cannot be changed. Caste is seen as a "harmonious, integrated system" (Leach, 1960: 10), and "a structure of a community in which the opposite tendencies of mutual separateness and mutual dependence are united by a force that has a greater universal moral actuality" (Chatterjee, 1993: 197). Theoretically, Dumont and Bougle in the Indian context and Banks in the Sri Lankan context defined caste as a system of endogamy, division of labour, pollution, ranking, and interdependence. I define these as the elements of caste and accordingly this research tries to answer a question on how Vellalah identity can be understood with respect to the elements of caste, as these elements of caste were also in a sense constructed by the hegemonic Vellalah who held power since time immemorial. But the meaning of these elements has now shifted, and is not rigid or followed as in the past. But importantly these elements have not totally disappeared either. On the other hand, the above connotations for caste do not explain or describe why some of those elements of caste weakened and some remain intact, and also these theories did not explain why caste continues until now with all the agencies/structures who operated against caste discrimination. This is where I have to include one more theory of caste which was not developed by the author with caste in mind, but which I use to understand the contemporary dynamic of caste/Vellalah in Jaffna – Bourdieu's idea of habitus.

I am inclined to use Bourdieu's theory of practice for understanding caste as it corresponds well with the contemporary dynamics of caste in Jaffna. It is important that Bourdieu did not develop his theory of practice with caste in mind, or made reference to any major theoreticians on caste. In spite of this, Bourdieu's concept of habitus can very well be adapted to study caste and its dynamics in present day Jaffna. Bourdieu's major concepts are articulated in a way that leaves much room for interpretation. But the advantage is that they take a native point of view, and reflect the human practice and social reality, which I found useful for the context of caste in Jaffna. His classic definition of habitus is lengthy, but almost fits to caste dynamic:

> System of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends (Bourdieu, 1977: 72)

I infer from the above definition of habitus that caste is "social in origin, acquired in infancy, embodied, durable, transposable, hierarchical and reproductive of the social context within which they originated" (Gorringe and Rafanell 2007: 98). Habitus is useful for understanding identity as well as culture (Danahay, 2005: 156). The important emphasis here is that habitus is embedded in *the non-reflexive realm of individuals' activity,* thus it is *durable and reproducible*. It is also reflected as the internalisation of already existing structures (Bourdieu, 1977: 72). Physical characters like postures, accents, ways of walking, and even body shapes, preferred foods and sport activities too can be seen as the result of specific social conditioning (Gorringe and Rafanell, 2007: 100). This leads to an argument that there is so-called caste quality and caste behaviour. This is argued because certain practices exist and are performed on a day-to-day basis. The caste identities with their elements are internalised by individuals via the process of socialisation, so that they influence actions and a special manner of perceiving and viewing the world. Caste practices are once internalised, as structuring the *psychological* and bodily practices of individuals. The durability of caste in people, however, is seen as passive receptacles of social structure, but also as something transferrable (Gorringe and Rafanell, 2007: 101).

Therefore, in this thesis I use Bourdieu's notion of habitus as well as the concepts identity, identification and cultural schema in order to analyse how discourses on the Vellalah and caste in general, and the Tamil nation-building project in Jaffna in particular, construct mechanism of inclusion and exclusion in relation to caste; and furthermore, how such mechanisms are reproductive in terms of how the Vellalah in Jaffna view their own and others' lives. A theory of cultural schema is also incorporated here to give more meaning to the empirical findings, and to understand the cognitive dimension of identity, which relates to Bourdieu's habitus. Bernard (2000: 55) cited Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance, which is also quite similar to habitus and cultural schema.

3.3.1 Cultural Schemas

This theory leads to an understanding that when people have recurring and common experiences mediated by objects and learned practices this leads them

to develop a set of similar schemas. It will not be surprising in this understanding that people consequently share a culture. The cultural meaning is produced via the internal self that is called the intra-personal, or schemas, and the other refers to the world structure, or the extra-personal (Strauss and Quinn, 1997: 6). The stability and change of the cultural meaning is the outcome of this complex interaction of the two above elements, the intra-personal and the extra-personal.

These above assumptions leave another message on identity; that identity is a social construction which has a psychological dimension too. Cultural schemas are conceptual structures which enable an individual to store perceptual and conceptual information about his/her culture and make interpretations of cultural experiences. In other words, cultural schemas provide patterns that help guide our interpretation of cultural events. Cultural schema theory provides an interface where the interplay of language, culture, and cognition can be observed. Identity concerns what a person considers that he/she belongs to, both at the level of ideas and explanation, and also in terms of emotional experience and the expression of affect. Identity can then be understood as both an *individual mental representation and a cultural or collective representation* (Epstein, 1978: 101). It is also, as mentioned before, related with a sense of security (Eriksen, 1991; Stern, 2005).

This theory further suggests that learning can take place across national or ethnic borders, but the new forms do not rule out internalised schemas, but rather, that they are incorporated, rejected and remade in relation to previous schemas (Hannerz, 1992: 238; see also Strauss and Quinn, 1997: 26). What happens when caste is internalised is that it is deeply organised in the mental framework and the new external changes are sometimes integrated or compartmentalised by the internalised schema (Strauss and Quinn, 1997). Bourdieu's habitus is somewhat similar to the above claim. He argues that people are always confined by the dispositions learned from their experiences. But the habitual responses based on knowledge are not learned from or cognitively represented as hard and fast rules. Internalised knowledge is less specific than rules because it was laid down by our earliest upbringing. He also believes that the knowledge embodied in habitus cannot be assumed, because "schemas are able to pass from practice to practice without going through discourse or consciousness" (Bourdieu, 1977: 87). The embodiment of caste is rooted in complex, continuous processes of social conditioning. From this perspective, caste is understood neither as fixed nor non-negotiable, but dynamic through interactions. However, in order to operationalise caste in the contemporary Jaffna, I adapt these parameters around the ideas of division of labour, interdependence, purity-pollution, ranking and endogamy. The concepts of habitus and cultural schemas help highlight the durability in the construction of caste

identity, as mental structures maintain ideas of caste identity over time. I will now move on to discuss caste identity in relation to other identities, using the idea of intersectionality, and particularly in relation to the context of nation-building and national identity.

3.4 Intersectionality and the Context of Nation-Building

Identity is formed by a combination of ethnicity, nationality, race, religion, region, gender and caste, and thus should be understood as intersectional (Yuval-Davis, 1981; Crenshaw, 1989, Collins, 2000). Marginalisation, oppression or discrimination are intersectional and can be sensed in multiple ways among different identities in relation to politics, education and culture where one identity is privileged and the other is suppressed. In this study of Vellalah identity I will particularly look for how intersectional identities are dominant and marginalised in the different spheres and in the context of Tamil nation-building engineered by different agents. I will also identify how this reflected on the identification markers of Vellalah and discuss the impact on caste overall. Identity is reconstructed and re-negotiated in multiple ways.

Intersectional identity is the study of intersections between forms or systems of oppression, domination or discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991: 1245, 1989; Collins, 2000; Yuval-Davis, 2011). The matrix of domination or matrix of oppression is a sociological paradigm that explains issues of oppression that deal with multiple identities (Vellalah identity/caste and Tamil nationalism) which, though recognised as different social classifications, are all interconnected. Intersectionality is used here to study the interlocking identities of the Vellalah, caste and Tamil nationalism. People have multiple aspects to their social identities and therefore experience multiple and complex forms of oppression. People can be oppressed on some dimensions while being privileged on others. The various parts of our identities and the oppressions will interact in complex ways to create unique experiences of (in) justice.

My focus on the intersections of the Vellalah caste and Tamil nationalism highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the Tamil social world is constructed in Jaffna. Sometimes two co-existing, typically subordinated identities intersect (Collins, 2000: 299). I choose a conceptualisation of identity that captures the ways in which Vellalah caste and Tamil nationalism, among other categories, are produced through each other, encompassing both privilege and oppression simultaneously (Wing, 1990: 191). This approach recognises the ways in which positions of dominance and subordination work in complex and intersecting ways to constitute subjects' experiences of personhood and also the relationship between the 'matrix of domination' and the various forms of power that are inflicted

on all bodies, and the processes and articulations of identity (Collins, 2000: 299). I see how Vellalah caste and Tamil nationalism dominate, suppress and discriminate each other.

3.4.1 Nationalism and National Identity

The entry into nationalism in this research can be motivated in two ways. The main reason I bring it up is methodological, because caste is studied in the context of nation-building, and it is thus relevant to understand the context in which caste is (re)negotiated. Another reason, as pointed out in the first chapter, is that there is a major lacuna persisting in academic texts and a need to focus on other societal transformations while the nation is being built. In the discussion of nation-building below, I will introduce central ideas of relevance for how Vellalah caste is envisioned and plays a role in Tamil nation-building both engineered by national elite dominated by the Vellalah and by non-Vellalah. This is of central importance to this thesis as it provides me with theoretical tools to problematise the way in which the Vellalah and caste identity are perceived and articulated in the context of Tamil nation-building in Jaffna.

Nationalism has to react in two ways, because of the dynamics of external competition and the "internal divisions and contradictions which exist within all groups of people" (Brass, 1991: 47), and external threats. For Anderson, an imagined political community which dims the rubbings of others within by mobilising people towards a strong construction of 'we' against 'others' outside the community. Almost all nation-building projects try to unite people into a single 'imagined community', where already existing internal frictions on religious, regional, caste and class lines will be kept in dormancy or be invisible (Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1997; Verdery, 1996; Lindholm Schulz, 1996). In Anderson's words:

> It is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each … I believe that the beginnings of an answer lie in the *cultural roots of nationalism* (Anderson, 1983: 7; my italics).

The above reflections on nationalism can, particularly in this study, be related to caste acting as one of the Tamils' cultural roots. Caste is seen as an intra-cultural identity which intersects with nationalism. Relevant questions to understand caste identity are, for instance, who were the drivers of the Tamil nation-building? Was there any change of actors in the process of building the nation? Was there any transition of power in terms of caste in this nation-building? What are the social profiles of the actors of Tamil nation-building? Who were active participants and who were considered as 'outsiders' of the

nation-building? These and other questions could help to answer one of the research questions in this thesis which concerns how caste and Vellalah identity have been influenced by the militant nationalism, and also how these Tamil nationalist projects (re)negotiated, (re)articulated Vellalah identity which I address in chapter 7.

"Nationalism is quintessentially homogenizing, differentiating or classifying discourse" (Verdery, 1996: 227; see also Lindholm Schulz, 1996; Stern, 2005). Nationalism has multiple meanings; the very possibility of the choice of identity differs among different kinds of nation, and by the historians of nation-making, and the capacities of nation-builders in one place or another (Verdery, 1996: 227). Situationalism facilitates this insight. Nationhood is in a way an extended cultural community, and culture is seen "as a zone of shared meanings", or "as a zone of disagreement and contest" (Verdery, 1996: 42). National identity is mediated through the personal experiences and a circumstance of people, making the formulation of the nation a cultural matter (Cohen, 2000: 147) According to Verdery, "*national identity is a self-insight of an individual based on history, mythology, tradition, language and culture*" (ibid.: 134) (my italics). From the above claims, nationalism offers alternatives, and their control is competed for by different groups "manoeuvring to capture the 'sign'[14] and its legitimating effects" (Verdery, 1996; see also Lindholm Schulz, 1996; Stern, 2005). This approach places the nation in relation to actors constrained by social structures. The above conception of the nation implies that a nation is constructed; nationalism is human-made; thus national identity is an imagined construction. I now move on to inquiry into the *nation-building project* which is one of the key concepts in the context in which caste is shaped and researched.

3.4.2 The Nation-Building Project

The nation state is still the fundamental unit of global politics, and is seen as the hegemonic political project of the new world order (Hettne, 1993; Stern, 2005). The nation-building project in this thesis is understood by borrowing the notion of Hettne's nation state project, meaning that it acts "as a political programme carried forward by a group of individuals, *with a specific social base,* through certain strategies" (my italics). A project usually includes the actor (dominant/non-dominant elite), the design (modernity vs. tradition), the goal (homogeneity) and the barriers (other forces) during the process. This basic notion of nation-building as a project led to a series of questions: Who constructs the nation? I find 'national elite' (dominant/non-dominant) who, coincidently

[14] She means that nation predominantly as a symbol.

overlap with the Vellalah/non-Vellalah. What is the goal of the nation? It is to build up an 'imagined' homogeneity despite the internal cultural identities such as caste, religion and ethnicity. What is the nation? I interpret it as a product of 'modernity' whereby traditionally constructed identities are rearticulated. At last, can identity complexities be examined by only applying the national force? I had to include here some other force(s) by which some dynamics of Vellalah identity are captured, such as migration, globalisation and the technological revolution, etc.

Different versions of nation-building benefit different groups. Some benefit elites in the nation being built or rebuilt; some appear to benefit the oppressed, if the drivers of a nation-building are from non-dominant groups. I will particularly look into how Tamil nation-building dominated by Vellalah articulated caste and the nation-building project and how non-Vellalah dominated militant nation project articulated caste, Vellalah identity and the nation-building project. Of particular importance for how Vellalah identity is shaped and transformed in the context of nation-building is how elites shape nation-building projects as well as the project's strife towards homogeneity. I discuss these two issues below.

3.4.2.1 The Role of the Elite[15]

In many of the writings on nationalism, nation-building is identified as a movement of the intellectuals, or more broadly, the intelligentsia (Gellner 1983; Kedourie 1970; Smith 1995, 1996, 1998; Breuilly 1996; Brass 1991; Hutchinson 1992, 1987; Anderson 1983, 2006). A nation-building project can also be driven by a non-dominant group, but their task would mainly be focused on building a homogenous nation/imagined national identity. On one hand, it implies that someone or something is doing 'unification' intentionally. In most cases, the dominant elites mobilise the masses in order to achieve their own aims (Kedourie, 1970; Brass, 1991; Breuilly, 1996; Smith, 1991; Anderson, 2006). The crucial thing is to clarify the distinction between the 'intellectuals' and 'people', and it is further important to distinguish 'the nationalist intellectual'[16] from the rest of the intellectuals – what kind of ideology they hold and their social background.[17] This thesis explores the Vellalah as a primarily dominant caste, an elite, and thus also as an intelligentsia among

[15] By this I refer to the 'active partakers in the nation-building project'.

[16] There are varied terminologies used in the writings on nationalism for intelligentsia, like nationalist intelligentsia (Breuilly), nationalist elite (Brass), secular intellectual (Kedourie), historians (Smith), cultural nationalist (Hutchinson), nation-builders in different manners, etc. This thesis uses 'elite', who, as the runners of the nation project, can be intelligentsia or the non-dominant group.

[17] For a penetrating analysis on intellectuals see *The Intelligentsia and The Intellectuals-Theory, Method and Case Study*, ed. Aleksander Gella, 1976, USA: Sage Studies in International Sociology 5.

Tamils in Sri Lanka. It looks at how they mobilised the masses in order to construct cultural homogeneity, and also to achieve their own aims. I will in the thesis try to identify how Vellalah as national elite articulated the boundaries between us and them among Tamils.

The concept of 'elite' is multi-dimensional. Elite is contextualised in this study in two ways: one is that those who exercise political power and authority in the body of the governance are identified as 'national elite', and those who have, as Roberts classified it (1974: 550, 556), "a distinctive life-style and consumption pattern which attracts emulation from other persons … high social status – because of caste identity or the other criteria … high access to the valued intellectual and cultural activities" are seen as 'local elite'. The boundary between local elite and the masses is blurred, as was the boundary between national elite and local elite, until Tamil separatist militancy.

Smith agrees with the point that the elite are important, because they articulate and make possible the tapping of the deep sentiments and mind-sets that originate from *pre-existing symbols, memories, myths, values* and *traditions*. Hroch and Breuilly share the same view (Hroch, 1996: 81; Breuilly, 1996: 151). These are what the intellectuals use to draw up their ideologies of the nation (Smith, 1998: 116). It should be remembered that groups do not exist as self-conscious actors until they are mobilised or awakened by the elites. Instead, they ordinarily contain various sub-groups on the basis of caste, class, religion, region, kin, etc. It is of critical importance to realise that *"what we perceived as and what is perhaps being advanced as the 'will of the nation' may in fact be the will of a segment or faction of the nation or merely the will of the elite leadership"* (Eller, 1999: 46) (my italics). Each of these elites may have a different notion of what the group should be and what the group should do. They are rival elites, with perspectives and interests of their own, and who wish to see their particular version of ethnic history, culture, or identity prevail, and "to become the sole political representative of the community" (Brass, 1991: 46–7). These are as merely elite strategies of cultural manipulations against the power of underlying cultural cleavages (Smith, 1998: 157). I will look into how Tamil nation-building engineered by two socially different groups (re)articulated the memories, values and traditions of Tamils in chapter 7.

"S*ocial profile* and territorial distribution of leading patriots and activists" are the first significant markers for the identification of a national movement (Hroch, 1996: 81). As in all social movements, the leadership tends to be more educated and literate than the popular masses that mobilise around a nationalist goal. However, non-dominant groups might take the leading role in creating oppositional, and/or informal nation-building (Hroch, 1996: 86; Lindholm Schulz, 1996: 5). Sometimes nationalist movement may ignore nationalist intellectuals and draw instead upon mobilising mass support.

Nationalism is closely related to domination. Nationalism is necessarily "a *derivative discourse* outside Europe, by blocking the way for authentic, self-generated, autonomous development among communities which remained *dominated by self-seeking, ultimately collaborationist, 'nationalist' politicians, intellectuals, bureaucrats and capitalists"* (Chatterjee, 1996: 210) (My italics). Elite nationalism is a special feature to be understood within nationalism; hence in Asia and Africa nationalism rests more on difference rather than on identity (Chatterjee, 1996: 216). Historians have also been sharp critics and opponents of nationalism. Historians "have attributed to nationalism a variety of harmful consequences ranging from absurd social and cultural policies to totalitarian terror and global destabilization" (Smith, 1996: 175). I will investigate the social profile and the role of historians among Tamils, the content of their historical narratives, what is voiced in the texts, as well as dominant and subtexts in their writings in chapter 5.

3.4.2.2 Cultural Homogeneity

The dissolution of distinct cultural spaces within nation that the nation-building project encourages brings about cultural homogeneity. In this process, cultural spaces, including religion, region and caste are supposed to lose their authority and exclusivity. (Gupta, 2002: 99). The people of a nation should generally imagine that they share a common national identity, and part of the nation-building is the building of that common identity through the process of national integration (Stern, 2005: 29). Anderson sees cultural unification through 'print capitalism', and the aspects of administration (Anderson, 2006: 70; see also Hobsbawm, 1997; Gellner, 1983: 39). Homogeneity may serve a variety of ends. Violence is sometimes here legitimised:

> For the project of nation-building, nonconforming elements must be first rendered visible, then assimilated or *eliminated.* Some of this can occur quite physically, through violence but short of this are other, symbolic violence through which difference is highlighted and then obliterated. (Verdery, 1996: 230) (My italics).

Ethnicity, gender, religion, region, class, race and caste are seen as aspects of identity formation, at the same time they are social categorisations. All of these can interact in complex ways. But nation as the encompassing frame within which these bonds are established, fought over, striven for legitimacies or group relations. In order to do so, they try to minimise the dividing factors in the population. As Williams sees it, "the ideologies we call nationalism and the subordinated sub-national identities we call ethnicity result from the various plans and programs from the construction of myths of homogeneity *out of the realities of heterogeneity* that characterise all nation-building" (Williams,

1989: 429) (my italics). At the same time, the totalising process towards homogeneity is simultaneously a process of exclusion. "The different groups in which people resist, refute, re-define and rebuild nations in relation to state make universalized nation-state impossible. A dominant imaginary nation building continues and this underlines a certain measure of homogenization of the internal community in order to clearly define a unique 'we' which is the nation." (Stern, 2005: 29). But the "*intensity of homogenizing efforts depends partly on the function of power held by political elites and the resistances they encounter*" (Stern, 2005: 29) (my italics). Lindholm Schulz relates this to the Palestinian context:

> Nation-state projects may also contain mechanisms of exclusion internally, i.e. vis-à-vis its own citizens, depending on which ideology of homogenization that is used. Frequently, *elites define the 'nation' in hierarchical ways, placing the group of its own at the centre as those who are 'better' nationals, i.e. those who have the privilege of defining the nation. Homogenization process defined from an elite perspective may exclude other identities if they don't assimilate or adjust to the dominating discourse of definition. Other identity groups are subordinated to a superior definition* (Lindholm Schulz, 1996: 37) (Emphasis added).

There is an emphasis on cultural, rather than political, nationalism. Cultural nationalism "seeks a moral regeneration of the community" (Hutchinson, 1992: 113). Cultural nationalists emphasise culture, identity and the 'homeland'. I will look into how Vellalah elite and non-Vellalah elite nation-building projects had different mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion on the axis of caste, how power positioning was articulated and how they were ranked and on what basis, etc.

Although Vellalah identity construction and negotiations take place in relation to and intersect with many different other identities and processes, I have chosen to place emphasis on national identity and the nation-building process. Of particular relevance is the discussion of the role of elites in nation-building projects and in the definition of national identity, given that Vellalah as a caste identity is intimately linked with dominance in Jaffna society. The processes of and strife towards homogenisation within nation-building efforts are highlighted here as the study of caste identity within the Tamil nation puts focus on hierarchies and identifications that challenge this homogenous nation. I will now turn to a summary of the analytical framework used for the study of Vellalah identity.

3.5 Analytical Framework for the Thesis

As discussed at length above, this study understands identity as constructed and constantly shifting, and as something which is (re)negotiated and (re)articulated in relation to socio-political and socio-cultural change. Furthermore,

it is constructed around difference – the drawing and maintaining of boundaries between us and them. It is contextually produced and linked to power. The study of Vellalah as a caste identity in this study hence makes use of the constructivist view of identity. Caste, however, is a very particular type of identity, which is constructed in relation to the elements of endogamy, division of labour, ranking, purity-pollution and interdependence. I refer to these aspects as elements of caste and analyse how shifts and transformations in each of these elements relate to the changes in, articulations of and maintenance of Vellalah identity. To further understand caste – particularly Vellalah – identity I stress its durability. Using Bourdieu's concept of habitus I contend that caste can be seen as deeply internalised identity through which practices, habits and identity markers are reproduced. To further elucidate the durability of caste identity, I also make use of the theory of cultural schema, stating that identity is to be understood as a mental representation, in addition to being a collective cultural representation. The ideas of habitus and cultural schema help illustrate how caste identity has remained present in Jaffna in the minds of people, despite being transformed or suppressed on the surface.

The idea of intersectionality is useful for my analysis of Vellalah identity since it puts the focus on how caste identity intersects with a number of other identities, which together form the identities and power positions of individuals. Of particular relevance for this thesis is how caste identity is intertwined with and intersects with national identities in the context of Tamil nation-building project, i.e. both the political and militant strife towards Tamil self-determination. The nation-building project entails a process towards unity and homogenisation which insists that other identities should be subordinated to the nation. The tension between the project towards homogenisation – and in the case of Tamil nation-building, the struggle to eradicate caste – on the one hand, and the continued importance of caste and (re)articulation of Vellalah identity on the other is a central theme of this thesis. The shifts in power that have taken place throughout the history of Tamil nation-building have direct bearing on Vellalah identity, and relate both to the role of elites in nation-building (as discussed above) and to caste ranking and historical Vellalah dominancy on the other.

In my analysis I look at how Vellalah identity is articulated and transformed in relation to certain key identity markers and in certain arenas of particular importance. These are: landownership, temple affiliation, political and social leadership, education, lifestyles, the tradition of having service castes and intra-Vellalah divides. I call these identification arenas, and elaborate further on how these were identified in the methodology chapter. In each of these arenas, I look at how identity is constructed and boundaries drawn between us and them, but also at how caste identity is durable and internalised.

4

The Context: Sri Lankan Tamils and Caste in Jaffna

My intention in this chapter is to provide a brief account of the basic context of Jaffna, Sri Lanka, and of caste among the Tamils. I do this for two main reasons. First, I intend to present the reader with a basic contextual knowledge with which to better understand the Vellalah collectivists and their positioning among Tamils and more generally in Sri Lankan politics, culture and society. Second, because this study is about the identity of a caste in the context of nation-building, a discussion of the Tamil nation-building and caste history is necessary to understand and explain the reality on the ground, and the context upon which I have built my analysis. In analysing and deconstructing the history of Tamils of Sri Lanka, this chapter discusses how the dominant voices are heard and suppressed in different phases of the nation-building project which was articulated by two different groups – namely the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and LTTE – with different social compositions. By doing this, the chapter acts as a platform for understanding the empirical analysis that follows in the next chapters.

This chapter maps out caste in three different contexts of Sri Lanka. First, it begins with the overall context of Sri Lanka discussing caste as an identity situated along with other identities among Tamils and the Sinhalese. Thus, it also shows how caste as an issue was intersectional in conflicts in different times. Second, it moves through the emergence of Tamil nation-building, describing how Tamil identity was entwined with the Vellalah acting as national elite and also as the dominant caste among Tamils in Sri Lanka. Finally, it presents the background of the field site, Jaffna, where caste resistances, caste politics and politics of the Vellalah played out within Tamil culture and Jaffna society.

4.1 Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is marked by a diversity of ethnic, religious, linguistic, regional and caste identities. The ethnic factor has been an overriding constituent of collective identity, intersecting with religion, language, region and caste. The Sinhalese form the majority of the population (74.9 per cent[18]), and speak Sinhala as their main language. Their religion is mostly Buddhist, but there are some Christians and others too. There are intra-regional and caste identities among the Sinhalese, which were prominent during the British rule (de Silva, 1980; Roberts, 1995; Tambiah, 1986). Tamils, who constitute 15.4 per cent of the population, speak Tamil as their main language, but have separate identities depending on their region, religion and caste. For instance, Tamils who were brought from India to the plantation sector during British rule are called 'Indian Tamils' (4.2 per cent), whereas Tamils who came from India in the thirteenth century are called 'Sri Lankan Tamils' (11.2 per cent). Hence Indian Tamils are generally looked down upon by the Sri Lankan Tamils.[19] Muslims forms 9.2 per cent of Sri Lanka's population and many Muslims from the east of Sri Lanka speak Tamil. Additionally, many Muslims from the south speak Sinhala, but both groups claim a shared communal identity as Muslim, and want to be counted as a separate ethnic group based on their religion. The Sinhala and Tamil Christians are mostly Roman Catholics, but speak different languages. Other Christians are quite few, but are present among the Sinhalese and Tamils. Region has been also one of the main factors in categorising people in Sri Lanka. For instance, Jaffna Tamils assert their different identity in contrast to the Tamils from Batticaloa, Trincomalee, Colombo, and Indian Tamils, while the Kandian Sinhalese are considered better than Sinhalese from other regions (de Silva, 1980; Tambiah, 1986; Kailasapathy, 1984; Sivathamby, 1989; Daniel, 1996).[20]

Caste is one of the sensitive identities in both major ethnic communities, and it is articulated in politics, culture, religion, economy, and so on. Sri Lanka has however been known to be a pluralistic society with multiple identities. Frictions and clashes have arisen from time to time on the axes of religion (Christianity vs. Buddhism, Hinduism vs. Christianity, Buddhism vs. Islam), region (low country vs. up-country, north vs. south, Jaffna vs. east/Colombo), ethnicity (Muslim vs. Sinhalese, Sinhalese vs. Tamil, Tamil vs. Muslim) and

[18] Director of the Population Census and Demography Division of the Department of Census and Statistics, Indu Bandara, said that according to the 2011 census, the Muslim population was 9.2 per cent and the Sinhala population was 74.9 per cent. Sri Lankan Tamils and Indian Tamils were 11.2 and 4.2 per cent respectively. http://www.srilankabrief.org/2013/03/sri-lanka-population-ratio-sinhalese.html

[19] See more detail in *Charred Lullabies – Chapters on anthropography on Violence in Sri Lanka*, by Daniel 1996.

[20] See Daniel (1996) for further information regarding these internal divided identities among Tamils and Sinhalese.

caste (Goigama vs. Karava, Vellalah vs. depressed caste). Caste in Sri Lanka, is dynamic in both Sinhalese and Tamil communities, and there are even some parallels between these. For the Sinhalese, caste was not connected to religion – Buddhism is against it – as it is more socio-economic. For Tamils, the roots of caste stems from the Hindu religion where the Rig Veda classifies people according to *Varnastra dharma*[21], so that caste has a socio-religious base. Rig Veda – Sanskrit for the Knowledge of Verses – also spelled Rigveda, is Hinduism's oldest sacred book, composed in an ancient form of Sanskrit at around 1500 BCE. It consists of a collection of 1,028 poems grouped into 10 "circles" (*mandalas*). There is a famous verse from the Rig Veda entitled *Purusha Sukta*, which describes how this physical world emanates from the cosmic body of God, or according to another interpretation, how the physical world *is* the body of God. According to this hymn, human society is divided into four social grouping called *varnas*. The word *Varna* literally means "colour" or "hue". These four "colours" of men, therefore, represent universal psychological types of mankind. The divine head of this cosmic body becomes the priestly (*Brahmin*) caste; the arms of this body become the warrior (*Kshatriya*) caste; the stomach, or sometimes the thighs, becomes the agricultural or merchant (V*aishya*) segments of society; and finally, the feet of this cosmic form become the worker (S*utra*) segments of society. In this way, human society is directly related to the cosmic body of the universe/God. Maintaining the social order is maintaining the cosmic order. This is an act of dharma. For both the Sinhalese and Tamils, caste was imported from India. Muslims too have a kind of caste system, according to Hussein (2008: 9).

The European hegemony started with the Portuguese in Sri Lanka in 1505. At that time, there were three kingdoms, namely: Kandy in the central hills, Kotte on the western coast, and Yarlpanam – present day Jaffna – in the north (Pathmanathan, 1978: 42). The Dutch arrived in the seventeenth century. Later, from the eighteenth century, until Sri Lankan independence in 1948, the British ruled the island as part of their empire. Sri Lanka has thus been marked by an extended period of colonial occupation (Russell, 1982: 3). There is evidence of clashes between and within communities on the basis of caste, class, region and ethnicity during the colonial period; and those were mostly termed 'communal clashes' in the historical narratives, which I will discuss in chapter 5 (Russell, 1982; Jayawardena, 1984; Velluppillai, 1985; de Silva, 1981; Kearney, 1973). Then, the word caste was very imprecisely used in the census (Wickramasinghe, 2006). The first census of Ceylon was taken in 1789, by the order of Governor Vander Graff for taxation, but no complete census was taken until 1871. According to Wickramasinghe:

[21] More details: http://www.sanskrit.org/www/Hindu%20Primer/varnashramadharma.html

> When the British officials chose to delineate groups within the native population and refer to them, castes, nationalities, races or communal groups, the term used was never innocent or fortuitous; it reflected an understanding of the differences prevalent amongst the people of Ceylon. […] *Both 1814 and the 1824 censuses gave information on castes and religions in Ceylon* (Wickramasinghe 2006: 47) (my italics).

According to Rajasingham-Senanayake, caste at that time embraced divergent groups, including "recognised castes such as the Vellalas and Goigamas", but also meant regional groups (British, Portuguese and Malays), occupational groups (washers and potters) as well as nebulous groups (Moors and Malabars) (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2000: 111). In 1835, caste was no longer a major census category, and religion occupied its place (ibid.). However, class had also a role in conflicts and it sometimes reached even across ethnic lines. JVP[22] marked the Sri Lankan history with a major youth insurrection in the early-1970s. Some youths, mostly from rural areas, felt that their economic interests were neglected by the government and united to rebel. The initial recruitment was among members from the Karava and Durava, which are considered as low castes in the Sinhalese culture (de Silva, 1997; Warnapala, 1993; Goodhand, 2005: 32). This insurrection in the south among the Sinhalese and also in Sri Lankan politics in general is a landmark achievement in three ways. One, it is the pioneer movement and reaction of the socio-economic inequality reflected in post-independence Sri Lanka. Second, it was the first time radical youth had entered left politics with new approaches. Third, it established unions and networks beyond national or ethnic lines (Warnapala, 1993; Wickramasinghe, 2006). Two militant movements among Tamils, The People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (hereafter PLOTE) and The Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (hereafter EPRLF) whose detail account appears later in this chapter, established links with JVP.

The elite in both the Sinhalese and Tamil communities, who were from Goigama and Vellalah castes respectively, and also from the middle-class, had great privileges during the British period, and thus they could defend their customs and traditions (Jayawardena, 2000: 85; see also Russell, 1982; de Silva, 1981). The superior caste's opinion was the social order of that day, because of the positions its members held. They could easily influence the rest of society. 'Thesavazhamai' (meaning customs of the nation, customary law of the Malabar[23] inhabitants of Jaffna), which was codified during the Dutch

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[22] Marxist-based Sinhala Political Party, Janatha Vimukkthi Peramuna labelled as 'Sinhala national extremists'. See more detail in Warnapala, V.'s *The Sri Lankan political scene*, 1993; Alles, A.C. 1979, *Insurgency-1971: an account of the April insurrection in Sri Lanka.* Colombo: Colombo Apothecaries Co.

[23] The codification of the customary laws of Jaffna was done by the Dutch, who, when they arrived in Ceylon, found Tamils in Jaffna whose customs and religion were more-or-less similar to the Hindus of the Malabar coast of India, and designated them 'the Malabar inhabitants of the Province of Jaffna'. http://www.asiantribune.com/oldsite/show_news.php?id=15866

period, along with the 'Kandian Law', for the Sinhala, (including low and high country Sinhalese), are seen now as one of the manifestations of this hegemonic manipulation. The role of the superior caste, which was also a majority group in politics, was incontestable. Although there has been no census based on caste in Sri Lanka except in colonial times, some foreign scholars have gathered some regional statistics on caste during post-independence Sri Lanka, which has revealed that high caste people are in the majority. This was further confirmed by some other studies (Jayawardena, 1984, 2000). It should be noted here that during the colonial period the Goigama and Vellalah corresponded with higher education, political influence, major landownership and high income, therefore they had a high status in the society.[24]

This chapter draws connections between present day Sinhalese and Tamils, and those of ancient times, because the identity construction and construction of nationhood on both sides are unavoidably based partly on, or nurtured through, the writings of history. There are many narratives on the cultural heritage and history of the island. For instance, there are many stories about the origins of the island's first settlers (Siriweera, 1984; de Silva, 1972, 1981). Myths and legends on either side have played major roles from time to time in consolidating their different identities and also as historical sources for the building blocks of animosity between them (Bandaranayake, 1984; Gunawardena, 1984; Goonatilake, 1984). Myths have certain narratives that serve as a source for the polarisation between the Sinhalese and Tamils (Siriweera, 1984). There are ways to deconstruct these antagonistic identities. One way is to simply "illuminating the differences between the original texts message and *how those were manipulated and interpreted according to politics and time by historians*" (Tambiah, 1986: 6, my italics). I find it relevant here to emphasise that all of this history-making was constructed by prominent historians or social scientists, who were highly educated, thus held high prestige in both communities, especially among the Vellalah and Goigama castes. This emphasis is made to find the root causes of conflict since conflict begins in the minds of men, thus defences of peace should be initiated there. Now I shift my focus to the nation-building project, which evolved among Tamils, in order to spotlight the Vellalah as the pioneers of Tamil nation-building and also to highlight how exclusive and early alarm it was then.

4.2 Tamil Nation-building

The Tamil nation-building project has to be understood as being related to Tamils as primarily an ethnic group intersecting with caste, region, class, re-

[24] For studies of the Sinhalese caste system, see Warnapala, 1993.

ligion, and its relationship to the Sinhalese as the majority ethnic group in Sri Lanka. Tamil nationalism, like most other nationalisms – its emergence, evolution, and the present stance – is not a linear process. Of course there are "competing nationalist discourses" (Lindholm Schulz, 1996: 2; see also Cheran, 2000) within the 'imagined' Tamil community in relation to region and caste, on the basis of power, and conflicting views about the means to achieve a nation state, etc. Moreover, we have to understand that the national conflict itself is not static, but always reacts with internal as well as external forces, and is being reshaped and reconstituted. There were several dynamics involved in the complex scenario of the Sri Lankan conflict, as has already been noted. Caste is seen here as one of them, but in hidden forms; it is not explicit on the surface of society. If you probe below the surface it will show its engagement and dynamics. For instance, Tamil identity in Jaffna before the 1980s only referred to the Saivite-Vellalah, those who embraced denominations other than Saivaism were not considered as Tamils in that context (Daniel, 1996; Pfaffenberger, 1990; Sivathamby, 1995). Saivaism is a religious sect within Hinduism that worships the god Shiva as the main deity. It is the Hindu denomination practiced by the Tamils in Jaffna and other Sri Lankan Tamils. It further "considers Saiva Siddhanta as the philosophical sheet anchor of Tamil life", and this school implicitly legitimises the supremacy of the Vellalah as the guardian of the Saivite tradition (Sivathamby, 1990). Sivathamby further says that "Saiva-Tamil ideology is a social concept that was rooted in the intellectual and cultural conviction that Saivaism and Tamilness are essential to each other and determine each other's basic characteristics, and that it would be impossible to have one existence (either as a Tamil or a Saivite) without also being the other (Saivite Tamil)" (ibid.: 156). Arumuga Navalar who was born at Nallur, Jaffna in 1822 and who belonged to the (Karkatta) Vellalah caste is seen as the agent of this bounded identity. Vellalah identity was constructed as being high in the *secular* and *social* senses, and the Vellalah were considered to be the protectors of the Tamil tradition and Hindu religion.

Christianity, being a foreign religion, entered Jaffna in the sixteenth century through the arrival of the Portuguese. A prime contributor to the growth of political awareness amongst the Vellalah was laid down during this time when they had to confront Christianity which involved actively protecting Hinduism. Missionary activities later led by Protestant and Anglican churches brought about a revival amongst the Hindu Vellalah, who built their own schools, temples, societies and published literature to counter the missionary activities (Russell, 1982; Spencer, 1990). We can already see the resistant mentality of Vellalah in order to secure their identity against danger. The success of this effort led the Vellalah to confidently think of themselves as a community and prepared the way for self-consciousness as a cultural, religious

and linguistic community in the mid-nineteenth century (Spencer, 1990). The friction between Hindu and Christian, especially Protestant, intellectuals who emerged in the nineteenth century is still observable in the e-forums and print media, even in post-war Jaffna. During the war years, Tamil identity became something different and rested on the major ethnic lines; this continues in post-war Sri Lanka. I investigated the Tamil identity with undergraduates at the University of Jaffna, by asking when they feel that they are Tamil. After a minute of silence in the hall, there were some low voices:

> When we pass the military check points (Undergraduate, 2005, University of Jaffna).
> When we are involved in demonstrations (Undergraduate, 2005, University of Jaffna).
> When we receive news about Tamils being discriminated, arrested or killed somewhere. (Undergraduate, 2005, University of Jaffna).

Identity is culture-specific; thus it is also in flux and has multiple facets. Tamil identity and Tamilness – which in a sense a broader category and wherein a Tamil feels his or her very self-identity, which is primarily tied up by region, religion, class, caste, age or gender – is more intimate than ethnic or national identity. In circumstances of ethnic and national crisis, these above identities, which are dear, submerge into the broader context between ethnic or national identities which are projected as the dominant ones by the powerful elite. When the threat is suddenly focused on the broader level, then the internal identity frictions submerge and everyone is suddenly forced to attach to an identity which they were previously not so fond of. The silence in the lecture hall can be interpreted in two ways: one is that the nature of academic culture in Jaffna is to be silent and to behave like passive recipients; and the other is that Tamil identity or Tamilness is *not* strongly felt by Tamils; instead it is the internal divisions that are experienced vigorously. Tamil identity is sensed when Tamils see others, or struggle for their rights, or suffer or are suppressed by others. During the nation-building and war the Tamil identity in Sri Lanka was understood mainly as opposed to the Sinhalese, but in the 1970s Tamil identity was understood as being in opposition to the depressed castes. This is because identities are created in relation to others (cf. Helena Lindholm, 1993: 229).

In nation-building projects, the idea of nationalism emerges from the mind of elites/intellectuals. The case is the same in the Tamil nation-building project. On both sides, among the Sinhalese and Tamils, the political elite were not excluded from the privileged groups, who were of high caste, had good education and wealth. Another way to perceive the Sri Lankan conflict was that it had its roots in the Goigama and Vellalah elite amongst the Sinhalese and Tamils, respectively, who were intellectual. It transformed into

youth struggles only in the early seventies among the Sinhalese and in the late-seventies among Tamils. To elaborate this issue further, I move on to the language politics that have been taken up by almost all scholars who have studied the Sri Lankan conflict, but in which the background factors had not been fully disclosed. After independence in 1948, English remained the language of administration. The elite of the Sinhalese noticed that "Sri Lankan Tamils had access to a disproportionate share of power as a consequence of educational opportunities in the colonial period and were also disproportionately represented in the civil administration. Moreover, considerable mercantile interests were also controlled by non-Sinhalese groups" (Perera, 2008). The English-speaking Jaffna and Colombo Vellalah elite felt that indigenisation of the Sinhala Only Bill of 1956 would be a threat to their privileges and the power they had enjoyed (Russell, 1982; Young and Jebanesan, 1995). Due to well-funded missionary activities, the Tamil-dominated Northern Province had comparatively better facilities for English language and pre-university education (Perera, 2008). This was perceived as advantageous for the Tamil elite, who were predominantly Vellalah and thus were perceived as a threat to the Sinhalese majority (Young and Jebanesan, 1995; Russell, 1982; Pfaff-Czarnecka and Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2000). As a reaction, the Official Language -Sinhala Only- Act of No. 33 of 1956 provoked bitter resentment among the Tamil elite, who were Vellalah occupied by the civil administration (Russell, 1982: 35). This policy decided to follow the principle of having one national language rather than two. Riots broke out over this bill and the Federal Party, which was comprised of Vellalah was proactively forwarded Sinhala and Tamil as official languages in the 1950s (Wickramasinghe, 2006: 271). Mahindapala, a Sinhala senior journalist, has a view regarding the language outcry of the Tamils which also relate to this study: "[B]eneath the popular cry of linguistic discrimination the Vellalah hid their perennial political agenda of preserving their traditional power bases in the professions and public service".[25]We could see on the other hand, how the language identity was strongly polarised and identified along ethnic lines by the elite on both communities.

The other core cause for this ethno-national conflict was seen by many scholars as "standardisation"[26] which is said to be an affirmative policy to incorporate the geographical imbalance, implemented by the government in the university admission system since 1970 (Wilson, 2000; Spencer, 1990; de Silva, 1974, 1978; Wickramasinghe, 2006; Orjuela, 2004). The relative

[25] http://www.spur.asn.au/The_Hidden_History_of_Jaffna.htm

[26] For an analysis of the ethnic implications of standardization, see C. R. de Silva "The Politics of University Admissions: A Review of some aspects of the admissions policy in Sri Lanka 1971–1978", Sri Lanka Journal of Social Sciences, 1 (2), 1978 85–123. See also C. R. de Silva, "Weightage in University Admissions: Standardization and District Quotas in Sri Lanka 1970–1975", Modern Ceylon Studies, 5 (2) 1974 pp. 151–78.

over-representation of predominantly Vellalah Tamils in higher education, professions and the administration in comparison to their ratio in the general population was rectified by this policy[27]. This was (still is) seen as one of the focal points of the conflict between the Sinhala government and the Tamil political leaders, who were Vellalah at that time. As de Silva stated, this policy was biased against Tamil students. In his words:

> The qualifying mark for admission to the medical faculties was 250 (out of 400) for Tamil students, whereas it was only 229 for the Sinhalese. Worse still, this same pattern of a lower qualifying mark applied even when Sinhalese and Tamil students sat for the examination in English. In short, students sitting for examinations in the same language, but belonging to two ethnic groups, had different qualifying marks (de Silva, 1974).

This affected the students studying medicine, science and engineering; especially among Tamils who entered the universities more than the Sinhalese, protested against this policy. As a result, in 1974 a district quota was introduced. According to Sabaratnam:

> The district quota system, though detrimental to the students from the Jaffna district, benefited Tamils living in other Tamil districts. In 1974 Jaffna's share of university admission shrank to 7 percent, [...]. This system benefited students from Vanni, Batticaloa, Trincomalee, and Ampara. It was under the district quota systems that the first student from Kilinochchi entered the university (04-10-2012).

The important focus in this study context is the victimised students who were directly affected by this policy: those Tamils who were mostly Vellalah and who entered the fields of medicine, science and engineering. It is clear from the above historical narratives of the origination of the conflict that the cluster of Tamils, who were disputed by the Sinhalese majority governance, was the Tamil elite, thus the educated, who were Vellalah. As the Sinhalese-Buddhist nation-building evolved entwined with the fear and threat created by the Tamil elite, the moderate Tamil elite predominantly Vellalah (who were political leaders and local elite mostly centred in Jaffna and Colombo) began their political battle of nation-building and demanded a separate state, where Tamils constituted a majority, in the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka (Wilson, 2000; de Silva, 1974, 1978; Tambiah, 1986). This call for a separate state by the Vellalah Tamil elite marked as an 'early alarm call'; thus, it is important in signalling the way in which the Vellalah began to perform their real politics in Sri Lanka. This thus, shows how Vellalah Tamils, consisting of 12 per cent of the Sri Lankan population, were proactively securing their identity boundaries

[27] http://groundviews.org/2012/10/04/a-review-of-quotas-in-university-admissions/

in the early post-independence Sri Lanka. The Vellalah's mechanisms for securing their historical boundaries and their survival strategies which help sustaining their hegemony are reflected in politics. That is, it is in politics where they require autonomous territorial power, by showing their non-accommodating attitude in the early-1970s. Later, when the social composition of the political elite changed and became militarised by the non-Vellalah-dominated LTTE, many moderate Vellalah politicians or intellectuals adapted well to the changing trend of politics, and transformed their political aspirations to federalism or power sharing, when the LTTE were heading strongly towards a separate state. It is how the political identification of the Vellalah is being shifted and the new meanings are constructed always to be the Other[28].

On the other hand, the non-Vellalah youth (and some Vellalah youth) felt increasingly marginalised by Jaffna society dominated by Vellalah supremacy – and thus politically dominated by Colombo-based Vellalah political leadership – increasingly grouped, militarised, and headed towards national liberation via social liberation,[29] which was used as a lever platform for the militarised nation-building (Pfaffenberger, 1990; Hellmann-Rajananayakam, 1994; Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2000). When Tamil politics became strongly militarised in late-1970s by the youth, especially in the hands of the LTTE, who largely had non-Vellalah background, the social liberation and national liberation were merged, in contrast to the situation under the former TULF, which had been headed by the Vellalah elite. Here I briefly touch upon the development of major political parties among Tamils for increased understanding of the context.

The All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC) as the first Tamil political party was founded by G.G. Ponnambalam in 1944 before Ceylon achieved independence. Due to the cooperation of the ACTC with the United National Party (UNP), which was formed even after three years of ACTC, a group led by S.J.V. Chelvanayakam (hereafter AJV) broke away from the ACTC in 1949, forming the Federal Party (FP)/Illankai Tamil Arasu Kadchi (ITAK). This is where we see a faction of a Tamil political group consisting Vellalah wanted always to be non-accommodative with the Sri Lankan government and thus alienated those parties who were going to be accommodative with the united governance. We could also see until now majority of the Tamils support to the party who took non-accommodative stand with the Sri Lankan government and thus maintained a separate Tamil political identity. FP emerged as the major Tamil party in 1956. In 1972 the ACTC and the FP united and formed the Tamil United

[28] It means to be different by shifting the meaning Vellalah create on their stand on Tamil politics.

[29] The term 'social liberation' in this study means depressed castes overcoming Vellalah hegemony through both organised and non-organised means.

Front (TUF), after the adoption of the 'separate state' goal. It represented the older, conservative, educated Vellalah that felt independence could be achieved without violence but already demanded an autonomous separate region. Later in 1976, the TUF changed its name to TULF. In the 2001 elections, the ACTC joined the LTTE-backed Tamil National Alliance (TNA). The TNA, a non-militant alliance comprising the ACTC, EPRLF, Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (hereafter TELO) and TULF formed in 2001. The ACTC then left the TNA in 2010 and subsequently joined a new political alliance, the Tamil National People's Front (TNPF). These unions and breakaways among Tamil political parties have pivoted on the basis of different opinions concerning the Tamil issues and also the (non-)alliance with the government.

In the 1980s, when the LTTE began to feel that the TULF (being the sole representative of Tamils) were playing opportunistic politics with the government of Sri Lanka, they began to assassinate many of the TULF members. Many were labelled traitors and, pathetically, this labelling of traitor-ship still continues even up until the general parliamentary election held in 2015. Basically whoever cooperates with the government is perceived as traitor. It must be understood that the political leadership of TULF at that time did not want to be against the majority Vellalah who supported them socially and politically. In a way, the causes or fears behind the emergence of the Tamil nation-building indirectly indicate where the Vellalah elite politically wanted to set their privileges and what they thought of as their autonomous boundaries in the mid- and late-1970s in Jaffna. At the beginning of Tamil nation-building, Vellalah elite identity was to be bound with English education (of which the Vellalah elite had a high command) while the new Sinhala Only language policy was seen as a threat to their language, privileges and power. Second, as the result of English proficiency, education resulted in superior positions for the Vellalah in administrative and public spheres, where implementation of standardisation became a challenge primarily spearheaded by the Vellalah. According to a commentator on Tamil nationalism:

> *The main weakness of Tamil nationalism stemmed from the fact that it was based on the narrow interests of the educated middle class, high caste and was very much geared towards preserving the influence it has acquired, chiefly in the professions and in the public sector*[30] (My italics). It was when these were threatened that federalism and secession came to be advocated. This was the election politics with no active party organization to campaign on issues and mobilize people at grass-roots level. *It was literally conducted out of lawyers' chambers* (Italics in original). The Federal party for instance could at best reach gentlemen's agreements with

[30] The same point about the high-caste monopoly in the politics of Sinhala nationalism was taken up by Vishwa Warnapala (1993) in *Sri Lankan Political Scene*, by Jayawardena (2000) in *Nobodies to Somebodies: The Rise of Colonial Bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka*, and by Michael Roberts (1995) in *Caste Conflict and Elite Formation – The Rise of a Karava Elite in Sri Lanka, 1500–1931*.

> governments in power through its Tamil elite representatives in Colombo. But it could not, or would not, mobilize the people to mount a sustained protest to hold governments to their promises. Tamil Congress, the pioneer nationalist party, hardly had a base in the East which was largely rural (Hoole, 2007: 12).

As I have framed it in this thesis, Tamil nationalism had two major phases on the basis of different social compositions of the political elite who articulated it: the Vellalah-led nationalism in the early phase sought solutions by participating in formal politics through parliamentary non-violent means. In the militant phase, some youths found that the Tamil politicians who were Vellalah in the parliament were cooperating with the Sinhalese government and benefiting themselves, so these youth engaged in violent means to find a solution to the ethnic discrimination and to the social oppression they underwent by Vellalah supremacy in Jaffna. However, there are also different views in seeing this merger of social liberation with national liberation in the militarised nationalist struggle. This will be analysed in detail in chapter 7. The relevant point in this context is that the epitome of power, which centred on Vellalah locally and politically, was decentred in multiple ways in Jaffna, Sri Lanka after the militant nationalist project. It had certain repercussions in the local public spheres in Jaffna where Vellalah had a monopoly over landownership, social leadership, education, service castes, religion and rituals and thus over the entirety Vellalah-hood.

During the militant phase, around forty-two[31] Tamil militant youth movements emerged in Jaffna in the early 1980s (Hellman-Rajanayakam, 1994). However, thus far no research has been done to look at why there were 42 and on what basis, etc. Literature on Tamil nationalism had thus been criticised as there has been little effort to trace the background of the emergence of militancy (Sumathy, 2001: 15; see also Hellman-Rajanayakam, 1994: 32). As caste was the base of the Tamil social and cultural formation, it was naturally reflected in the emergence of militant nationalist project as well. Caste consciousness played an important role in the emergence and even identification of youth militants among Tamils. This was further confirmed by a columnist D.B.S. Jeyaraj, who he was extensively involved with the Tamil militant nation-building, comments on this:

> Reports from Jaffna indicate that while the TULF cater to the so called upper castes the EPDP under Devananda has focussed on these so called lower castes and worked for their upliftment. The Tamil National Alliance can make inroads into this caste based vote bank through TELO and EPRLF only. Historically these castes have been pro-LSSP[32] or

[31] Hellman-Rajanayakam, in *The Tamil Tigers Armed Struggle for Identity*, identified 42 militant movements.

[32] The Lanka Sama Samaja Party was founded in 1935 with the broad aims of independence and socialism, by a group of young people who had returned from abroad and who had been deeply influenced by the ideas of Marx and Lenin and who had gathered together for these aims.

> pro-Communist and very seldom voted for the Federal Party or later the TULF in bulk although representatives of these groupings have been active on their platforms. *The initial stages of Tamil militancy also saw casteism existing with much of the so-called lower castes going into the EPRLF, TELO and EROS as opposed to the LTTE or PLOTE* (my italics). Subsequently, the LTTE developed into a giant organization that embraced all castes and now a large number of Tiger cadres are from these castes (Jeyaraj, 2011, my italics).[33]

Sumathy (2001: 21) finds more about the identification of caste and militant groups:

> What were the social and support bases of the different militant groups? There is a host of issues one could raise. A critical study of the EPRLF would prove a valuable contribution to any study of the militants. EPRLF enjoyed considerable support in the east and in the north, *a large number of carders were from 'Minority Tamils'*[34] *'depressed castes' in the north*. Is that why the Jaffna public turned against the EPRLF called EP–'Eelathup Paraiyer' [...] [35] (My italics).

Although this study focuses on the background of the Tamil militancy in chapter 7, caste dynamics are one of the important underpinning features in the study of the Tamil nation project, and this has been neglected in the previous research. "The emergence of marginalised groups, both caste and class wise, and their dialectical encounter with the hegemonic thrust of middle class-high caste discourses of nationalism need to be studied in historical and anthropological detail" (ibid., 2001: 18). It is interesting to see that another identity category emerged among Tamils, when Saivaism was exclusively bound with the Vellalah, and the others belonging to depressed castes were categorised as 'minority Tamils'. There were competing politicised discourses between these Vellalah and the depressed castes.

Below, I briefly outline the information on major Tamil militant groups, which might reveal a number of issues, of which the most important for this study is whether caste makes it difficult to operate together or to have the same national interest. The EPRLF split into two in 1986, into the Varathar wing and the Suresh wing. The Eelam People's Democratic Party (hereafter EPDP) is another Tamil movement that began as militant, and then entered

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[33] http://www.sangam.org/ANALYSIS_ARCHIVES/Jeyaraj_11_22_01.htm

[34] Depressed castes who were not Vellalah or Brahmin were considered as 'minority Tamils' in the 1970s, and they were united politically under Thamilar Mahasabai (large association for Tamils); more detail is provided in chapter 5.

[35] *Paraiyer* are scavengers and considered impure and the lowest in rank; *eleathup paraiyer* means *paraiyer* who belong to Eelam, Sri Lanka, since there is a *paraiyer* caste in India too. There was an interesting, heated argument between the president of Sri Lanka in 2010 and the Member of Parliament and the president of the Indian Tamil Front. The president of Sri Lanka scolded the other, "you para Tamela" (you, Tamil Paraiyer) at the MP of the Indian party, which the media then took up as an instance of the president of Sri Lanka bringing up caste in parliament.

into the democratic stream in 1994, and is now a political party supporting the government. The EPDP is accused by the LTTE of being a paramilitary group, working with government forces against Tamils. In the local election held in Jaffna in August 2009, the EPDP won. The PLOTE is another militant movement and a minor political party that aligned with the TNA during the Northern Provincial Council elections held on 21 September 2013. The Tamil Eelam Peoples Liberation Tigers (hereafter TMVP) is another political party and paramilitary group formed in 2004 by the breakaway of the LTTE military head of the Batticaloa[36] district. This split had to do with the regional (northern-eastern) imbalance of power positions held in the LTTE, and the TMVP has claimed it exists for safeguarding the rights of eastern Tamils. This can be evidence for how regional identity among Tamils during Tamil nation-building is an issue and became a forceful one. This militant phase of development in the Tamil polity and its historical developments underpinning caste are dealt in detail in chapter 7.

Another dimension of this caste-nation continuum is that the Vellalah elite, who had a leading role in society, as well as in politics, could easily enter countries like the UK, USA and Australia, in the mid- to late-1970s, with war as one reason and higher education and internecine rivalries as another reason. There is a well-established transnational Tamil network in the Tamil diaspora[37], in the countries where they live, and they have contacts with Sri Lanka and contribute to nation-making by writing political texts, advocating causes, funding the LTTE, using media and stimulating political activism via e-media. As in colonial times, the elite, who are the Vellalah, continued playing a role in politics, even after they emigrated. By constructing politico-historical narratives and texts of the Sri Lankan conflict they interpret how the conflict is being mapped, and how Tamils should react, etc.; as in Benedict Anderson words, this is called 'print capitalism' (1983). The above mentioned Vellalah intelligentsia constructed and re-interpreted the ideological standpoints of the political situations in Sri Lanka from the transnational space, through texts and electronic media, which reached the so-called elite and educated Tamils who lived in Sri Lanka, especially in Colombo and Jaffna. They did not interact with the other/grassroots organisations, which were mainly non-Vellalah. The Vellalah indeed had a great role in internationalising the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Kapferer's view related to the nation-building, and the role and domination of former elite in the transnational space should be mentioned here. As he says:

[36] A predominantly Tamil area in Eastern Province.

[37] There are patterns of Sri Lankan Tamil migration which was studied by Daniel (1996: 154–93).

> *Within the colonial field there was a diasporization of elites into colonial centres and these often reproduced their local national domination through vital extra national links established in the colonial era and further propelled in postcolonial times*. Particular wars have been fuelled in the relatively abstract ideological commitments […] of persons exiled as an immediate consequence of civil war […] Local oligarchies formed in colonial times or systematically replaced in the formation of postcolonial revolutions and dictatorial coups often expanded their powers (and external involvements) in the inter-Imperium years. (Kapferer, 2004: 5) (My italics).

A small number of non-established, old Vellalah elites still maintain in-depth but modest contacts in all spheres, such as in 'finacescapes', 'technoscapes', 'ethnoscapes', 'mediascapes', and 'ideoscapes', at the local level and in diasporas, and also from the local arena to the diaspora (cf. Appadurai, 1997). At the same time, this thesis does not overlook the fact that the government of Sri Lanka played a major part in changing or determining the politics of Tamils as well as playing the major part in Tamil militant movement, the LTTE. I'll now move on to my field site, Jaffna, in order to showcase how caste became the issue both socially and politically.

4.3 Collective Identities in Jaffna

The fieldwork for this dissertation was carried out in Jaffna. Regarding religion, Jaffna is predominantly inhabited by Hindus (85 per cent), but there are some Christians, many being Roman Catholics.[38] Muslims came back after the end of war in 2009, after having been expelled by the LTTE in 1990. There were no Sinhalese residents, except in a few mixed marriages until the end of war in 2009, but in post-war 2013, many Sinhalese families (135 families) were brought to Jaffna and were permanently settled in the Nawatkuly border area adjoining Jaffna town.[39] The sex ratio is slightly in favour of females. Most people live in rural Jaffna, not in town.

Jaffna is a peninsula, connected to the rest of Sri Lanka by a narrow neck of land. The total area of the Jaffna peninsula, including inland water, is 1,030 square kilometres,[40] and Jaffna town is one of the major cities in Sri Lanka. Jaffna district is almost identical with Jaffna peninsula, administered by the district secretariat, headed by a government agent (GA), who represents the central government (Balasundrampillai, 2002). The district is divided into 15 sub-units called divisional secretariats (DS divisions). Water is derived from

[38] According to an all-island census held in 1981, there were Muslims (14,844), Buddhists (5,104), Catholics (95,613), other Christians (9,153), and others (133) (Department of Census and Statistics, 1981).

[39] http://onlineuthayan.com/english-news/uthayannews/x234x2z2h1h1r2p2

[40] (http://www.answers.com/topic/jaffna-peninsula)

open wells, and it is used for domestic and agricultural purposes. There are two things concerning wells that should be mentioned here. One is those who dig wells are mostly from non-Vellalah castes; specifically, this activity was previously carried out by one of the fishing castes, called *Thimilar*. However, some Vellalah still do not allow depressed castes to drive water from a well which contains drinking water (Tudor Silva and Thanges, 2009: 73). Furthermore, digging a well (depth 3–4 metres with a diameter of 1.5–2.5 metres) is used as a metaphor to explain a Jaffna man's constant perseverance. Almost every house will have its own well. Some have drinkable water while others are salty. Drinking water was/is an issue, and was entangled with caste identity in Jaffna, and it was further worsened by the idea of ownership and the privilege of having it.

Livelihood in Jaffna is mainly based on agriculture – which is the origin of Vellalah identity – and fisheries. More than 60 per cent of livelihood is based on agriculture, but due to war, HSZs, displacement, and the banning of fertilisers and other agro-inputs, there has been a heavy fall in production. Paddy production was heavily affected due to lack of rain and drought in post-war Jaffna in 2014. The peninsula was cut off many times from the rest of the island by the Sri Lankan government, as the government had initiated an economic embargo against the district, which affected the whole populace. Paddy is cultivated as a monocrop and chilli, onion, potato, tobacco and banana are major cash crops. The land that is used for agriculture is not all owned by farmers. According to the customary law of Jaffna, *Thesavazhamai*, land can be used in certain ways, which will be discussed later in chapter 8, under land tenure.

Jaffna is known as the 'cultural and intellectual cradle' of the Sri Lankan Tamils, and the heartland of the Tamil polity. Jaffna emerged as a separate and independent kingdom in the eleventh century. This is one of the main arenas of historicity, through which Tamil national thinking has been evoked and still articulated. There is still a statue of a last king called Changili standing in Nallur.[41] He ruled Jaffna when the Portuguese arrived in the north (Pathmanathan, 1978: 56). The Vellalah, who were the elite, the intelligentsia, and thus the historians, have continuously been making and constituting an identity of superiority by connecting their links to the Jaffna royalty. There is still a custom among the Vellalah and some other castes to trace the family tree in a small souvenir [42] of the deceased after the death of a family member. In this practice, the oldest ancestor they could know is traced down to the

[41] Nallur was the capital of ancient Jaffna.

[42] It is not done by all, only those who have the finances, education and willpower to show their pride in ancestry to others and to keep records.

most-recent ancestors, right up to the present generation.Tamils in northern Sri Lanka are inhabitants from pre-Christian times, and a distinctive politico-culture was established during the seventeenth century (Pathmanathan, 1978: 123). A significant change that occurred in Jaffna during British colonial times was the establishment of missionary education. As Russell noted, "under British rule, missionaries began setting up schools in Jaffna and the American missionaries were allowed to function *only in Jaffna* along with the British. The Jaffna Tamils especially Vellalah took education in a big way to gain upward mobility" (Russell, 1984: 35) (my italics). A tragic event in Jaffna occurred in 1981, when the public library was burned to the ground, along with the vast array of historical and cultural literature it contained. It was described as a major 'biblioclasm' executed by the government, with the help of Sinhalese thugs. Jaffna Library was considered as the largest in Asia at that time (Hellman-Rajanayakam, 1994: 12).

Another discourse on Sri Lankan Tamils is that they always carefully follow what happens in Tamil Nadu in southern India (Kailasapathy, 1984; Sivathamby, 1984; Kadirgamar, 2004). This connection has been compared to an 'umbilical cord'. The Jaffna Youth Congress was the first of Sri Lanka's Youth Leagues, founded in 1926, and influenced by the Indian Independence Movement. It claimed that it was secular, committed to complete self-rule (*Poorana Swaraj*), national unity and eradication of inequalities imposed by caste. After India became independent in 1947, Jaffna raised the cry for independence from the British in 1948, with the Jaffna Youth Congress inspired by the Indian National Congress demanding *Poorana Swaraj* (complete self-rule) (Russell, 1982: 76). This presents another message: that the Vellalah's educated youth in the 1920s in Ceylon were, on the one hand, far ahead in the quest/spirit for independence among the general Ceylon population, and on the other hand, that Jaffna followed what India did.

Post-independence conditions also show that almost all Tamil politicians who were Vellalah came from Jaffna, although some were Colombo-based. Another historical event that happened in Jaffna's political history is that the Vaddukkoddai Resolution, calling for 'Eelam', was passed by TULF in 1976. It is apparent that all the militant and non-militant groups of Tamil nationalism were founded in Jaffna, by men coming from Jaffna. It is important to mention that there were internecine rivalries that took place among the militant groups in the mid- and late-1980s, which affected the Tamil polity and the collective Tamil political psyche in different ways. During the militant phase of Tamil nation-building in the late-1970s and early-1980s, there was no unity, although most Tamil groups wanted to achieve a separate state. The rivalries of militant groups did not always result from ideological differences, but sometimes stemmed from personal disputes and prejudices. The

caste ordering of Jaffna perhaps played a minor role in capturing power and strength. Piratap said, "Ego problems prevented them from coming together, […]" (Piratap, 1985).

The LTTE however managed to become the dominant Tamil militant movement, and claimed itself as the sole representative of Tamils in Sri Lanka, even though it was opposed by some smaller groups. From 1990–1995 the Jaffna peninsula was under de facto administration of the LTTE. The incidents and the narratives of people, especially the Vellalah, during LTTE's administration are dealt with exhaustively in chapter 7.

Jaffna has been exposed to war since the late-1970s. Several historical events took place as mentioned above shaped up its unique collective landscape. Tamil nation-building, began in the mid-1950s in Jaffna, especially by the Vellalah political elite, and then in the late-1970s all of the Tamil militant groups – numbering 42 – flourished in Jaffna (Hellmann-Rajanayakam, 1994: 59). Places, people and properties were affected, until the conclusion of the war in 2009. There is one university for the region, called the University of Jaffna, which was established in 1974, and it has been used as a platform for Tamil politics and safeguarded Tamil culture and traditions.

Jaffna was open for international influences earlier than southern Sri Lanka; this was perhaps one of the reasons why the intelligentsia, the Vellalah, were previously always able to be at the cutting edge of developments in all spheres (when compared with the Sinhalese majority). This advantage is no longer as marked. International or foreign non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were active in Jaffna in the early 1980s, and there have been a number of foreign NGOs engaging in activities eradicating poverty and helping the victims of war and the tsunami internally displaced persons (IDPs) (*Iddam peyarntha sanangal* in Tamil). For example, FORUT is a Norwegian/Swedish-financed development agency, and has been working in Sri Lanka since 1981, aiming to help the poor, and promoting good health (Jeeweshwara, 1999). The UNHCR, UNDP, UNICEF, MSF[43], the (GTZ, and Caritas are some of them. Many of them, through their projects, try to facilitate and empower the beneficiaries who are mostly poor, although they do not identify their beneficiaries as depressed castes. Poverty is an overarching issue and is the targeted category of the NGOs or GOs. CBOs cater to the needs of their specific community, mostly at the village level (ibid.).

The worst impact of war and Tamil nation-building had been on demography. The total populace of Jaffna estimated in 2007 in the special enumeration published by the Department of Census and Statistics shows 559,619, and the last island-wide census held in 1981 marked the population at 738,788

[43] In English "Doctors without Borders"

(Department of Census and Statistics, 2001). This shows clearly a great fall in the growth rate, by 24.2 per cent, due to war and other factors. The Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora consists of some 700,000 people who have emigrated since 1980s. Tamils have left the country in very large numbers. Equally large numbers have moved to areas outside the north and east.

4.3.1 Caste in Jaffna

Caste had been more dynamic and vigorous among Tamils than among the Sinhalese, and the Tamil caste has a vivid socio-political history (Jayawardena, 2000). Caste positioned people in a given way, from which nobody could escape, tasks were determined, relationships were bound, boundaries were maintained, some issues were forbidden to depressed castes, feelings of superiority and inferiority were sensed, but it was all interdependent and centred on the Vellalah, the landowner caste/aristocratic caste. It evolved as a cultural practice; then it was institutionalised and further legalised during the Dutch administration from 1658 to 1796 in Jaffna. It was an accepted, established, valued network of social and cultural relationships among Tamils. In this sense, caste is a quality and an identity. The colonisers as protecting traditions and customs of the people re-institutionalised caste practices among Tamils. There were intra-communal clashes based on caste and class in both communities, even before Sri Lanka underwent colonialism and before the initial phase of nationalism (Jayawardena, 1984; Veluppillai, 1985). *Thesavazhamai* – the customary law of Jaffna – is still in practice, and is observed by the jurisdiction in Jaffna relating to issues of inheritance, marriage, adoption, landownership and property rights among the inhabitants of Jaffna. Caste appeared in this customary law, primarily in the sense of dividing people into categories, as either *Kudimai* or *Adimai.* Those who were slaves for the Vellalah were categorised as *Adimai* (slaves), and those who lived around the Vellalah and provided assistance the Vellalah's household matters were called *Kudimai.* This positioning stemming on injustice and discrimination was de-legalised in 1844 by the British. Caste is seen as a self-identity and a collective identity of Tamils, which is not now indicated in any official records, except in matrimonial announcements in the media. It is still treated as a highly sensitive and taboo subject of discourse among Tamils. As the intellectual community at the University of Jaffna hinted in chapter 1, many in contemporary Jaffna have the opinion that caste is not a subject to be discussed or studied as it has left a deep-seated, long, repressive hierarchy in people's minds.

According to Marriott and Inden (1977: 348), the word 'caste' (*castas*) was used by the Portuguese in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in India, to describe some sorts of groups. Since the intention of my study is not to

study why and how caste originated, it takes its departure from caste as one of the long-established sensitive cultural identity markers among Tamils. Hence caste was highly internalised in the Tamil culture in Jaffna. Jaffna society has been dominated by the Vellalah caste, which, like the Sinhala Goigama, formed around half the population in Sri Lanka. As Jayawardena commented:

> The Vellalah were not only the leading land owners but they also monopolized educational resources, enabling them to achieve economic success, access to professions, and political representation from the 19th century onwards. Jaffna caste system had an 'inverted pyramidal structure' with the Vellalah dominating (2000: 65).

Chapter 5, which is about Vellalah identity in a historical context, deals at length with how Vellalah identity was articulated in Jaffna over time, and why. Caste identities were prominent from the time of the immigration of Tamils from south India to Jaffna. The caste structure of India, with all functions, was replaced and re-contextualised in Jaffna (Brito, 1879; Rasanayakam, 1999; Arasaratnam, 1978). There were some regional variations,[44] and also there were clashes among people of Jaffna on the basis of caste ordering and caste interdependence. People were given tasks and certain ways of behaviour and manners (schemes) for each caste group, which were keenly observed, most importantly by the caste that was on top in the order, the Vellalah. This set of caste practices was continued and strengthened during colonial times, and these eased the burden of colonial administration (Arasaratnam, 1978; Rasanayakam, 1999, Pathmanathan, 1978). The clashes between castes aroused periodically and potentially whenever there were threats, contests or cross-overs of the boundaries marking ascribed tasks and behaviour characteristics (Shanmugalingan, 2013: 70; see also Rasanayakam, 1999; Velluppillai, 1985; Muttuthampipillai, 2002). The clashes were settled by the superior caste, the Vellalah, together with their assistants, mostly Koviar, to force those breaking the rules back to their positions and respecting the boundaries for the given behaviour. But as always, since the beginning of immigration, these conflicts over boundaries occurred, and from time to time challenges were awakened by the oppressed castes. At times it was passivised or de-activated vigorously by the Vellalah, with the help of Koviar (Vekujanen and Ravana, 1988; Senthilvel, 2003; Russell, 1982).

Caste, when it was imported from India to Sri Lanka in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries,[45] had a structure wherein the Vellalah had the central place, surrounded by numerous castes, each of which having its own given

[44] See more detail in *Sri Lankan Tamil Society and Politics*, by K. Sivathamby, New Delhi, 1989.

[45] Tamil immigration took place in Sri Lanka from India according to historical accounts, from the third century BC (de Silva, 1981).

tasks, but mostly they were interdependent on each other. There was a ranking order; castes were endogamous and built on a purity-polluted consciousness. Forty-two castes were recorded in Jaffna by Casie Chetti, but the main castes in Jaffna have been named and estimated in studies by Banks (1960) and by Pfaffenberger (1982: 47). These castes are, according their caste ratio in descending order: *Vellalah* (farmer) 50.0%, *Karaiyar* (deep-sea fisherman) 10.0%, *Nalavar* (praedial labourer) 9.0%, *Pallar* (praedial labourer) 9.0%, *Koviar* (domestic servant) 7.0%, *Paraiyar* (drummer) 2.7%, *Tachchar* (carpenter) 2.0%, *Vannar* (washer) 1.5%, *Ampatter* (barber/hairdresser) 0.9%, *Brahmin* (temple priest) 0.7%, and *Tattar* (goldsmith) 0.6%. Sivathamby (1995) also names eight more castes which are important and exist in Jaffna – in addition to the above-mentioned eleven castes. These are: *Saiva kurrukkal* (Vellalah who achieved the status of temple priest), *Kollar* (ironsmith), *Nattuvar* (temple drummers), *Kaikkular*, *Chettikai*/*Chiviar* (those who carried *pallakku*[46] for kings), *Mukkuvar* (fisherman), *Kucavar* (pot makers), and *Turumpar* (washers for *paraiyar*). I confirmed the existence of these castes in present day Jaffna, and I also found three more which were not mentioned here: *Chaandar* (oil makers), *Pandaram* (temple assistants) and *Thimilar* (fishermen). Altogether, 22 castes were identified and embodied in present day Jaffna by this study. The five castes, the *Panchamar* – *Nalavar*, *Pallar*, *Paraiyar, Vannar* (washers) and *Ampatter* (hairdresser) – were called depressed castes; and during 1960s and 1970s the Vellalah hegemony over these five castes was immense. Thus their services were directed only to the Vellalah, and in return they received materials or leftovers from the Vellalah, but were very rarely given money. This was in practice until the late-1970s, but agitations among the depressed castes took place in the 1920s and 1930s, up until the 1960s, in attempts to throw off these bonds (David, 1973: 30).

In the late-1920s, there were caste conflicts in Jaffna on issues of equal seating and common eating in schools and training colleges (Vekujanan and Ravana, 1992; Senthilvel, 2003; Russell, 1982). Depressed castes mobilised a political forum called 'Forum for Depressed Class Tamil Labourers' in July 1927, a quarter of a century earlier than the Vellalah-led nation-building project articulated in 1944 at the Tamil Congress. In 1943, five years before the independence for Ceylon another political forum emerged with the support of the Communist Party (CP), called Northern Sri Lankan Tamils Minority Association (MTA), in order to unite all depressed castes in Sri Lanka (Senthilvel, 2003). For the Soulbury Commission, in 1945, the MTA submitted a separate memorandum, which included issues of welfare of the depressed castes, par-

[46] A wooden cage, decoratively designed with patterns, with doors on either side, used for sitting for kings and queens in ancient times.

ticularly those concerning education, professional rights and the eradication of untouchability. Caste restrictions on depressed castes had been changing over time, when either the Vellalah could no longer protect their identity boundaries, or by the sheer resistance made by the associations of the depressed castes. Below, I list the arenas of caste-based discriminations which were practised and strictly observed in Jaffna by the Vellalah and which affected depressed castes until the late-1970s (Holmes, 1980: 232–5).

1) Low-caste people were prevented from living near temples. In the 1950s and 1960s they were forbidden from entering temples. In the 2000s they became the owner of their own temples and also were allowed to enter, especially into public temples, but some rites are tacitly not allowed for them in the temple premises.
2) The Vellalah with the assistance of the *Koviar* (the domestic servant of Vellalah) burned fences and houses of low castes who became Christians: The Vellalah then rewarded the Koviar for their work with money or goods. Vellalah identity throughout history was built up against Christianity, but attached to Hinduism.
3) Depressed castes were not permitted to draw water from a 'clean' well. The Vellalah required them to come to them to perform certain chores, and then the high caste person would draw water for him/her. This practice still continues in 2015 in certain parts of rural Jaffna. The good water resource was tied up with the Vellalah and hence the depressed castes were thought to be impure.
4) High caste reserved laundries, barbershops, cafés and taxis for themselves. This further proved the dominance of the Vellalah was alive in the public sphere and hence the caste interdependency was centred on the Vellalah.
5) The high caste prevented low caste persons from sitting on the bus. This was a sign of power and giving respect as sitting below the Vellalah.
6) High-caste men polluted the well of a low-caste family with oil, a dead dog or faecal matter as punishment for challenging caste oppression. The Vellalah were depicted as violence provocateurs.
7) High-caste members falsely entered names into the register of the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages so that the depressed castes would have trouble getting birth certificates; they also entered names with typical endings which would reveal that they are depressed caste. Here naming was treated as an external carrier of caste identity.

8) Renowned village schools excluded depressed castes children from enrolling, or prevented them from wearing any footwear, shorts or trousers (native costume only) or restricted them to live and eat separately in the case that they finally gained admission to a boarding school. This evidences the discrimination and dominance of the Vellalah in education of the depressed castes.

9) In Christian churches, depressed castes had to sit on the floor and to take communion separately from the other castes. Some pastors would not eat or drink at depressed castes homes. Caste practice continued in even churches.

10) Depressed castes students were not accepted to the ministry. They were reluctantly tolerated as teachers but not as principals. Jobs were caste-streamlined in bureaucracy.

11) Depressed castes were not allowed to enter the veranda of a high caste home. They were given tea in emptied milk tin, a bottle, a glass or a cup. This practice still continues in some rural Vellalah homes in Jaffna. By this practice, domestic space was meant pure and thus polluted by inviting depressed castes.

12) Depressed castes could not own a bicycle or a car.

13) Many ponds were closed to depressed caste, as were all cremation grounds and cemeteries except for their own kind. According to Vellalah, even dead bodies carried caste.

These are, in a way, the boundaries that the Vellalah drew up to dominate others and mark their own territory. These discriminations appeared in the novels and short stories of the Progressive Writers Movement (hereafter PWM), which began in 1954, with a substantial number of writers from depressed castes focusing on social injustices. They were credited with raising the social consciousness and the awareness of human rights. As was stated in the methodology chapter, these arenas facilitated me in mapping out to operationalise Vellalah identity.

Caste became a source of conflict, especially when depressed castes ignored the old caste restrictions, not only in eating and seating, but also in forms of dress, temple entry and political participation (Russell, 1982: 10). There were sources of caste fear, tension, violence, and even war among Tamils in Jaffna in the late-1960s (Vekujanan and Ravana, 1992; Senthilvel, 2003; Velluppillai, 1985). The CP, which began its movement in Jaffna in 1945, was active against caste oppression, and one of its members' writings reveal that there were incidents in Jaffna where people were killed, and weapons including guns

were used during caste clashes[47] (Senthilvel, 2003: 92; Sivasegaram,[48] 2008). "Mass mobilization and militant campaigns were launched to win access to public places and facilities that were denied to depressed communities. Expectedly, the reactionary elite took to criminal violence in the form of arson, murder and assault (Sivasegaram, 2008).

Also as we can see that depressed castes were treated as another community among Tamils. If we look carefully at the years of major historical incidents in Sri Lanka, they are somewhat entwined with caste resistances by depressed castes among Tamils in Jaffna. This can be related to how social liberation of the militant nationalist struggle of Tamils was underpinned with national liberation. The left movement began in Jaffna in 1937 and the MTA began in 1943. The CP started working in Jaffna in 1945. Both the left movement and the CP were working against caste oppression in Jaffna. When the Sinhala Only Act was enacted in 1956, this was the same year a Tamil communist was elected as Member of Parliament. Having introduced the Sinhala Only Act in 1956, the conflict focus and scenario of the country changed; hence the direction of the Tamil conflict was more outward, calling for abolition of the deprivation of their fundamental rights falling on ethnic lines. The MTA joined with the Vellalah-led nation-building, FP. The Sri Lankan Federal Party (SLFP) came to power and amended the Prevention of Social Disabilities Act[49] of 1957, just one year after the Sinhala Only Act, to make the caste issue more effective. The Prevention of Social Disabilities Act was introduced with the support of FP, stating that caste-based discrimination in public places is a crime, with a fine not exceeding SLR 100, with a jail term of six months. These laws were considered a weak protection for depressed castes. As a protest against this, the MTA called for 'tea shop entry' in 1958 (Russell, 1982; Vekujanan and Ravana, 1992; Senthilvel, 2003; Sivasegaram, 2008). Depressed castes were not allowed in the tea shops in Jaffna until 1969 (Vekujanan and Ravana, 1992: 100, 118). There were two organised protests made by the depressed castes; one in a place called Nitchamam in Chankanai divisional secretary, Valikamam west division in 1967, and then in Karaveddy in 1969 in Vaddamarachcy division. There were clashes both in Chankanai and Kara-

[47] There have been literary remarks on caste clashes from time to time since early settlement in Jaffna. The early history of the Vellalah reveals some of those in chapter 4, and it also shows how things were during colonial times. Later clashes were documented by a member of the Communist Party, C.K. Senthivel, in 2003.

[48] A Senior Professor of Engineering at the University of Peradeniya, who has written many articles on Tamil language and culture, one is on caste: http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article11979

[49] The Prevention of Social Disabilities Act was enacted in 1957, holding the: "Any person who imposes any social disability on any other person by reason of such other person's caste shall be guilty of an offence and shall, on conviction after summary trial before a Magistrate, be liable to imprisonment of either description for a term not exceeding six months or to a fine not exceeding one hundred rupees." http://www.commonlii.org/lk/legis/num_act/posda21o1957373/s2.html

veddy, then the police got involved to support the high castes. In 1960, by SLFP, all schools were nationalised. This loosened the grip of the Vellalah elite on schools and gave equal opportunities in education, which were earlier under the control of the Vellalah (Russell, 1982; Vekujanan and Ravana, 1992; Senthilvel, 2003; Sivasegaram, 2008). The CP further divided into two in 1964 to form the Peking wing and the Moscow wing. "The split in the CP in 1964 led to opposed approaches to caste oppression. While the revisionists retreated to a passive approach, the Marxist Leninists took the initiative to launch a mass demonstration against untouchability on 21st October 1967 [...]" (Sivasegaram, 2008). This became the famous Temple Entry Movement in 1968. "The return to power of the United National Party in 1965 in alliance with Vellalah led Tamil nationalist Federal Party and the Tamil Congress emboldened the upper caste elite to uphold casteism" (ibid.). When earlier pledges to open public wells, eating places and temples to all, irrespective of caste, were breached, the affected communities believed they had no choice but to launch a militant struggle. It is clear that there was a matching alliance identified among the major ruling political parties in the south with north as that the SLFP supported depressed castes and UNP was with Vellalah. Sivasegaram (2008) puts it: "What is particularly important is that a struggle against oppression of a section of a community enjoyed the support of a sizeable section of the community associated with oppression." These cross-ethnic political alliances crisscross caste politics in Jaffna and are also a contributing factor for the emergence of militant youth groups in the 1970s. This has not been raised or sufficiently highlighted by scholars.

An important remark is that the political mobilisations of the depressed castes in Jaffna began earlier than in India, but they did not continue for long in Jaffna as they did in India. In Jaffna they arose and then after the overt agitation on some issues, they then became inactive and submissive. In India, the movements of the oppressed castes are still vigorous, politicised and continue with the international support. The reasons I assume are, because the society was not ready for major change in the 1920s, and because the people of Jaffna had internalised caste and were stuck with their traditions and customs. Second, the majority of the legal positions were possessed by the Vellalah or intermediate castes, which meant that all legal approaches had weak protection when striving for justice for the depressed castes. Hence, depressed castes have not had enough financial support to seek justice officially. One Vellalah informant who knew some of the activists of depressed castes in the seventies said that when he met the same people in his office the next day and asked how the previous day had been, the response was just with a smile: "We did that protest only as a token expression, but we know nothing will change in Jaffna" (Male 65, interview 2005). In 1954, the PWM were mostly from

depressed castes[50] via short stories and novels focusing on caste injustice and oppression in Jaffna raised the awareness and social consciousness in the Jaffna psyche. Some Vellalah read and criticised them in a literary manner, but their messages[51] were not spread to others in society, nor did they change the views of Vellalah readers (Male 65, interview 2005). However, this movement raised some awareness of how human rights were linked with caste injustice in Jaffna.

The riots in 1983 in Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka, changed the politics of the country in a fundamental way, and the trend of the Vellalah-led Tamil nation-building and politics had to undermine and (re)consider all internal divisions in the interests of the overarching Tamil ethno-national unity under a single Tamil nationalism. The rise of the militant Tamil nation-building in the 1980s was further seen as a hurdle for such a democratic, independent, depressed caste movement. Hence those who activated the internal divisions were under threat, or seen as enemies or traitors of Tamil nationalism. The militant project, although it involved Vellalah youth at the beginning, was ultimately dominated by non-Vellalah, and drew the depressed castes into the circle of violence, while many Vellalah fled abroad. The changes that took place especially in the caste scenario of Jaffna by the LTTE are seen by the Vellalah as "merely pragmatic adaptations dictated by necessity" (Ravikumar, 2002). There are voices from the depressed castes that state that caste feelings came back to Jaffna once the war was over.

4.4 Concluding Remarks

In this background chapter I tried to put the dynamics of Vellalah caste into the context of Sri Lanka, Sri Lankan Tamils and Tamils living in Jaffna as well as within caste. I tried to show that Sri Lanka is a pluralistic society based on multiple identities and hence also that these identities are intersectional at times. While one identity of these identities is in a stage of friction with another identity or identities, the dominant identity in the context dominates or is repressed at times. As a movement, Tamil nation-building engineered by Tamils could not escape from caste, but these two identities, the caste and nation-building were intersectional. The Vellalah-pioneered project of nation-building undermined the non-Vellalah and the non-Vellalah-dominated militant project undermined the Vellalah. In this chapter I also showcase how the

[50] Daneil, Thenian, Dominic Jeeva, M.L. Subramaniam, K. Pasupathy.

[51] It is ironic that some of the Vellalah writers wrote in a way in which the caste clashes, through mixed marriages, were brought up, but the end of the stories supported the 'old set-up' wherein caste practices were keenly observed. For instance, a writer, Chokkan (a Vellalah) wrote a story in which a young Vellalah woman falls in love with a man who from a depressed caste, but the man refuses her love, explaining the dire consequences of the marriage.

background causes for the origin of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has primarily affected the Vellalah, not all the Tamils simultaneously. I also hint how both Sinhalese and Tamils –Goigama and Vellalah respectively – monopolised politics, education, leadership, religion and culture, etc. I also reveal that the frictions between Vellalah and the non-Vellalah arose whenever the non-Vellalah tried to follow or imitate the Vellalah. However, the non-Vellalah's resistances were short lived and did not follow during the war or the post-war periods.

My investigations further reveal that the affected depressed castes in Jaffna, by facing the socio-economic-political crisis from the old social order, had a loss of faith in tradition, and the old elite tried to group and mobilise others to fight against both the majoritarian government and against the old elite, particularly the Vellalah. The depressed castes made formal (political movements) and informal attempts to rearrange the social order along the axis of caste. The injustice within the premises of temples, schools, tea shops, etc. were protested by depressed castes similar to how Afro-Americans protested white Americans via Civil Rights Movement in the twentieth century USA. It was noted that this formal and organised mobilisation on the fringe of society was short-lived and could not be carried out although this resistance movement by the marginalised had the rationale for re-ordering the society. Protecting traditions and customs of Tamil culture and the dominant Vellalah elite nation-builders were the major cause of this. Resistance and protests emerged, and feelings were expressed, and then returned to order.

5

Vellalah Identity: A Historical Perspective

5.1 Introduction

This chapter is an attempt to investigate Vellalah identity from its early history up until Tamil nation-building which was embarked upon by the Vellalah elite in the mid-1970s. It is, however, difficult to distinguish between the Tamil nation(s)-building as led by the Vellalah elite and as driven by the non-Vellalah dominated militant youth LTTE, since the nation-building is deliberately imagined as a single project articulated by different political elites with different social background and aspirations. I focus on these groups separately in chapters 4, 5 and 7. Therefore I try in this chapter to answer my first research question on *how Vellalah identity has been constituted historically.* The methodology I use in this chapter is a hermeneutic analysis of Vellalah identity as presented in the available literature.

This chapter investigates the ways in which the literature projects Vellalah identity as a practice, construct and articulated negotiation in Tamil culture. I analyse a series of texts, focusing on how Vellalah identity was practiced and positioned in the past. In order to understand the dynamics of Vellalah identity in the context of Tamil (nationalist) history in Jaffna, it is necessary to examine the history of the Vellalah from the beginning of Tamil presence in Sri Lanka, and also to trace some of the history of the Vellalah in South India since most of the Vellalah who live in Jaffna emigrated from South India. Special attention is paid to how Vellalah identity evolved, and was articulated and politically manipulated in Jaffna. It is important to note that although the very name 'Vellalah' denotes a caste; it is configured and contextualised differently from region to region within Sri Lanka and between South India and Sri Lanka.

This chapter is divided into two major sections in which the first deals with the history and etymological connotation of Vellalah identity in South India where it originated, and the second discusses Vellalah identity in Jaffna under four sub-themes. The first sub-theme brings up how pre-colonial Vellalah identity was articulated in Jaffna and mostly centres on the writings in the colonial ethnography of caste. The memoirs and writings of colonial rulers and foreign visitors are analysed to investigate Vellalah identity. The second sub-theme deals with the proto-nationalistic phase of Vellalah identity, and the third sub-theme covers and locates the ways in which Vellalah identity was expressed by the Vellalah-led Tamil nationalist movement in Jaffna. This section deals with Vellalah's dominant identity in the social, political, economic and religious domains and how it is treated in the writings on Tamil history. I show how Vellalah identity has been reconstituted over time by different actors through textual practices. However, this is not a complete historical analysis of the Vellalah, but an overview of sources on the Vellalah, with the view of keying the reader into subsequent chapters.

The mapping-out of Vellalah identity in this study focuses on two aspects: an analysis of the Vellalah as a 'national elite' or as the major interlocutor within the Tamil nation-building project; and an analysis of Vellalah's active and overt participation in it. In the other aspect, the Vellalah are scrutinised as the local elite in the socio-cultural space of Jaffna, in terms of the differentiation among them, and the ways they manoeuvred in the arenas of religion, economy, politics, social leadership, land tenure, lifestyles, and their relationship with depressed castes.

5.2 History vs. Reality in Relation to the Vellalah

I need to explain at this point, how history is understood in this context. For Daniel, history is "a way of seeing the world" and that it is a theoretical discourse (Daniel, 1990: 227). In other words a social order is created or constituted by historians in the way they wanted to see the world. Since in this chapter I analyse the development of Vellalah identity through the writings on the history of Tamils in Sri Lanka, it is important to see how history-making constitutes an important part of particular realities. The basic concern is not what can be discovered in reality but *how the Vellalah and non-Vellalah come to terms with reality.* Most important in this study is *who is represented in history, by whom and how*. Vellalah history consists of detailed documentation of events, processes and relationships published in pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial texts in Jaffna, South India, and in the general literature on Sri Lankan Tamils. Vellalah identity construction was projected as the best personhood and also in opposition to the perspectives of the depressed castes of what was apparently

the same world, or the same past. The oppositional process of construction implied the creation of a collective past and collective identity in distinction to non-Vellalah pasts, which glorified the past of the Vellalah as 'a people' categorically distinct from non-Vellalah. History-making is not primarily concerned with what is made-up or what is truth, but with how the world is ordered. Ordering and reordering the Jaffna world on the basis of a caste paradox is the context in which Vellalah identity is constructed, in addition to the context where caste underpins and is interconnected to Tamil history in general and Tamil national history in particular.

The Vellalah acting as key interlocutors in making the Tamil nation's history in Sri Lanka is a corresponding theme in the literature. In the history of the Tamils in Sri Lanka, scholars emphasise how history was used and by whom (Ragupathy, 1987: 46; Hellmann-Rajanayakam, 1994: 57). It is also important to see, in these texts, whether there are any diverging discourses of different socio-political groups based on caste which are written into one history. The rereading and re-investigation of Tamil history and Tamil national history centred in Jaffna is carried out in great detail from another angle based on the identity (re)negotiation of the Vellalah caste.

There is a scholastic consensus on Tamil history in Sri Lanka – whatever disagreements exist about the content, form and period of history – that it is centred in Jaffna. Russell notes that "the Jaffna peninsula in particular was regarded by the Ceylon Tamils almost as sovereign Ceylon Tamil territory" (Russell, 1982: 06). According to Hellmann-Rajanayakam, there are no 'historical' (in the Western sense) sources to rely upon for the history of either Jaffna or Tamils in pre-nineteenth century Ceylon (Hellmann Rajanayakam, 1990: 108; see also 1996: 6). Furthermore, "the existing 'Tamil histories' or 'histories of Jaffna' are entirely and openly political" (ibid., 1990: 109). Within the existing histories there is a view that the histories constructed by the East are often seen as "religious and mythical", and the ones constructed by the West are seen as 'historical' (Hellmann Rajanayakam, 1990: 108). Objectivity perhaps played a part in defining what history is and what it is not. Regardless of the local construction of the Tamil past, the history of Jaffna Tamils is almost all written by the Vellalah and hence they can be seen as Vellalah reflections on the social order of Jaffna, Tamil identity and national order.

5.3 Vellalah Identity Narratives in South India

There are interesting divergent narratives on the Vellalah in South India. Some are religious and some are mythical. Raghavan took up many in his book *Tamil Culture* (Raghavan, 1971: 128–130). Among these, the writings of H.A. Stuart, W.B. Francis and E. Thurston are much noted. They are briefly brought

to the light in order to conceive how Vellalah identity was conceptualised and constituted through text narrations. Stuart (2009) depicts the Vellalah as the great *farmer caste* of the Tamils, strongly represented in every Tamil district. One suggested origin of the word *Vellalah* is the word *Vellalam* which is derived from *Vellanmai* (*Vellam* meaning 'water' and *Anmai* meaning 'management') connoting 'cultivation', 'tillage'. Srinivasa Aiyangar states, "the easy slope of the land in the margins of rivers taught the Vellalar, the rulers of the flood, the method of conveying water to the fields" (Srinivasa Aiyangar, 1929: 13). Vellalah representation in Tamil literature began with the identity of agriculture or farming. They were configured as the rulers of flood; or lords of water or harvest (Srinivasa Aiyangar, 1929; Perinpanayakam, 1982). Francis as quoted by Raghavan says about the Vellalah that "the caste is so widely diffused that it cannot protect itself against invasions. After a few generations, the origin of the new recruits is forgotten and has no difficulty in passing themselves as the genuine Vellalar" (Raghavan, 1971: 131). This therefore proves that caste diffusion had taken place in India before caste became an issue in Jaffna, Sri Lanka.

There are several myths surrounding the origin of the Vellalah. One says that once the world was under severe drought people were ignorant of agriculture and prayed to the earth goddess (Bhoomadevi) for help. The earth goddess produced from her body a man carrying a plough. The man showed them how to till the soil and support themselves. His offspring were the Vellalah (Raghavan, 1971). Another version of their origin found in the Baramahal records, that "as the result of the intervention of Viswakarma, the architect of the Devas into the privacy of God Siva and wife, he was cursed to be born in the mundane world. While he was close to the *Ganga*, one of the rivers in India waiting for an enemy, a crown appeared from the ground and became a figure holding in his hand a golden plough" (Raghavan, 1971: 129). From this myth a narrative was constructed that the cultivator is earth-born and the rest are submissive to him in the earth. The Vellalah in South India were, because of this myth, called *Gangakula* or *Gangavamsa*.[52] Thus, the Vellalah were singled out and told that they have no other calling than the cultivation of the soil. Another Vellalah myth found in "Sketches of Ceylonese history" that "A branch of Vellalas, the old *ruling caste* of Tamil land, claimed to have received grain and instruction on its cultivation from the Earth Goddess, Parvathi, hence Vellalas were called *pillais* [children of Parvathi]; kings also drove the plow" (Arunachalam, 1964) (My italics). According to this narrative, Vellalah who were kings would be honoured as *Kshatriyas* which encompassed royalty in Varna theory (Raghavan, 1971: 116). Thus this further proves that the

[52] Race or decent of river Ganga.

Vellalah were not only farmers, but also kings who ruled the land, so the Vellalah are placed in the Varnic scheme above the *Vaishyas* and *Sudras*, whereas Pfaffenberger placed the Vellalah in the Varna of the Sudras, which is the last in ranking of the four groups. Pfaffenberger classifies Vellalah as Sudras because "plowing land is a polluting activity since overturning the soil threatens the life within it" (Pfaffenberger, 1982). The *Sudamany Nikandu*,[53] the authoritative thesaurus, also called the *Tivakaram* and *Pinkalantai* (Tamil lexicons between sixth and eighth centuries) also refers to the Vellalah as 'Sudras'. The *Nikandu* by Arumuga Navalar also conforms to this usage.

The Kural is a poetic form of which there are 1,330 couplets organised into 133 chapters authored by Thiruvalluvar, a poet who is said to have lived sometime between the second century BCE and the fifth century CE. In his work he remarks on agriculture and refers to the Vellalah. One couplet says, "Irunthombi il Valvathellam Virunthombi Velanmai Seythatporuttu" (Verse 82). Meaning that they alone live who live by tilling the ground; all others only follow in their trail and eat only the bread of dependency. It discloses the combined noble identities of the Vellalah as being generous in their hospitality and of being descendants of Vel (*anmai*), as doing well for those who seek help as is sung in the Sangam poems. Another Tamil poet, Kambar, from the medieval period, and the author of the Tamil *Ramayanam*, praises the greatness of agriculture in his *Er Elupathu* (seventy songs on the plough), but this work does not necessarily refer to the Vellalah.

In 1923, another Vellalah, Maraimalai Adigal who was the founder of the Tamil Purist Movement (TPM) in South India, published a text entitled *Vellalar Naakarikam* or *Vellalar Civilization*, which describes the history, customs and admirable qualities of the Vellalah. He regards the virtues of the Vellalah as their refinement of feeling, their generosity and their sympathy for the suffering of all living creatures; all of these are purportedly the fruit of their agrarian labour. The identity of the Vellalah which up until that point bound to farming, cultivation and irrigation (external markers) shifted to describe the internal qualities of the Vellalah as the most decent people. For Adigal, the Vellalah were the vital Tamils, but he did not rule out that other castes could also be accepted as Vellalah. If non-Vellalah followed the same values as the Vellalah, such as vegetarianism and non-violence (*ahimsa*), every Tamil could become a Vellalah; thus Adigal did not believe that caste purity derived from biology. It should be noted this was a progressive stance at that time. The Vellalah have long been identified as the highest caste of settled cultivators in the Tamil areas of South India.

[53] *Nikandu* is a Sanskrit word; it is not a dictionary, but more like a thesaurus full of synonyms classified into groups and subjects (Rajalakshmi, 1982: 258). *Thivakaram* is sometimes written *Divakaram* in the texts "as it related in the earliest Tamil lexicon" (ibid.).

In their struggle to till the land, Adigal argues that they had also succeeded in cultivating within themselves an exemplary heart (Maraimalai Adigal, 1997: 156). He further says that the Tamil birth privilege has been identified solely with the imagined nature of the Vellalah-dominated community.

In nineteenth century, the Vellalah were regarded as the true heirs and protectors of the Tamil tradition. This came from the intellectual core of Saivism, a sect of Hinduism. In the expression of this discourse the reference to Vellalah is mostly not made explicit, but the context shows clearly that when Tamil Saivites spoke of 'Tamils', they had the Vellalah in mind above all. This can be illustrated well using a book very often cited in these circles. In Kanakasabhai's *The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago* (1904), it is explained that among those pure Tamils who in classical Tamil society did not live apart from society as ascetics, the Vellalah occupied the "highest position" and represented the "nobility, or the landed aristocracy" (Kanakasabhai, 1974: 113). Vellalah identity, according to Kanakasabhai has shifted in relation to religion and landownership. This further proves the situationally adaptive quality of Vellalah identity from farmer to landed aristocrats.

Pfaffenberger's account on Vellalah is a scholarly one, and contains contradictory facts which had not yet been taken up before. According him, the Vellalah claim to be pure, but in reality some of them have impure lifestyles like eating meat, drinking alcohol, having sexual relations with impure untouchable labourers, etc. Hence, according to Varnic ideology, he argues that the Vellalah should be ranked lower. They are ranked high in Tamil country and have public esteem, so that "the status of the Vellalah appears to be both irreligious and artificially inflated" (Pfaffenberger, 1982: 06). Another characteristic of the Vellalah, as he points out in his text, is that they believe that they possess "the right to claim the honour, respect, and services from subordinate castes" (Ibid., 1982: 08). Pfaffenberger cited Thurston's quote from the Madras Census Report on Vellalah as "a peace-loving, frugal, and industrious people" (Ibid., 1982: 12). Pfaffenberger also makes a remark concerning the landownership of the Vellalah, that by the nineteenth century, "rice and other lands were controlled by Vellalah who held hereditary rights to control agrarian production on particular plots of land" (Pfaffenberger, 1982: 22). Land was not allocated to individuals; only certain Vellalah groups who were linked with the government had access to land. Brahmins, in order to defend their privileges and position, perceived the Vellalah as a morally excellent and distinct caste. In temple rituals, the Vellalah were rewarded with honours indicating their high status and legitimate rights. This can be seen as a strategic move of Brahmins to be allied with the Vellalah since the Vellalah were numerous and powerful, hence were considered as the true heir and protectors of Tamil tradition. This further confirms that the narratives of security imple-

mented to safeguard the security of the subject were done by the Vellalah and non-Vellalah. This therefore consolidated and strengthened the positive image of the Vellalah among Tamils, which was then internalised and reproduced.

5.4 Vellalah Identity in Jaffna

It is obvious that the Vellalah identity was established and maintained even before the Tamils became nationally conscious and active. At the same time, an identity does not emerge in a vacuum; it is constructed and has a context and a history. The earliest systematic account regarding Tamils in Sri Lanka is rendered in the *Yalpana Vaipava Malai* (*The Garland of Jaffna Events*). This was written in the early-eighteenth century by a native Tamil poet from Jaffna, Maiyilvakana Pulavar (a Vellalah), at the request of a Dutch administrator, Maccara (Brito, 1879: 13). Although it is considered a legend by serious academic historians, in the text there are some traces of the origins of the Tamils and Vellalah in Sri Lanka. It is the earliest source on Jaffna history and scholars have, by and large, depended on it for an account of the political-social background of Jaffna peninsula. It does not contain the history of origins of the Vellalah. The translation of *Yalpana Vaipava Malai* into English, done by Brito in 1879, says that one Tamil Vellalah (in the literature, Velalen) called a 'colonist' and named Malavan from South India, remained in Langka (one of the ancient names for Sri Lanka) during the troubled times and successfully opposed the Sinhalese (Brito, 1879: 13). Then during the thirteenth century, the reign of *Kulang Kayan* (means 'defect in arm') "Visaya Kulang Kai Chakkaravarththi" wrote to the kings of South India requesting colonists to Jaffna (Brito, 1879: 15). Accordingly, a number of Vellalah families arrived with their slaves and dependants. The above anecdotal history of Jaffna provides three types of information on the Vellalah. First is Malavan, a Vellalah colonist who remained in Sri Lanka and successfully fought with Sinhalese. Second, the Vellalah, upon the request by a king, entered Sri Lanka during the thirteenth century and also with the colonist status. Third, when they came from South India they came with their slaves and dependants. The 11 principal settlements of colonists were listed in this book with their names; they registered their caste as Vellalah and the names of the places they settled at in Jaffna. But interestingly one colonist among the Vellalah is said to be 'higher' than the others which I find important since up until contemporary Jaffna the practice of this kind of internal division has been important within Vellalah identity. Although it is difficult to understand the reasoning for this higher ranking, it does give us a clue indicating that internal divisions among the Vellalah prevailed even at the time they emigrated from South India. Intra-Vellalah divisions as an identification arena will be discussed later in chapter 6.

The places that the Vellalah colonists settled in Jaffna during the thirteenth century are Thirunelveli (where the University of Jaffna is now), Mayiliddy (situated in the north part of Jaffna and still a HSZ, Tellippalai (north part of Jaffna), Inuvil (Valikamam South), Pachilaippalli (within Vanni region), Puloli (Vadamarachcy division), Tholpuram (the village where the researcher lived from 2010–2014 in Valikamam West), Koyilakkandi (Thenmarachcy division), Irupalai (Kopay division), Nedunthivu (one of the islands near Jaffna) and Pallavarayan-kaddu (Kilinochchi district).[54] The Irupalai Vellalah was denoted as a 'very high Vellalah family'. The question in this emigration of Tamil colonists from South India is why did these respectable, high-caste families want to move from their homes? According to Rasanayakam, another Vellalah, the answer is mostly because during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Malik Kafur and other Muslims (Muhammedans) invaded South India. Rasanayakam argues that "the proud Tamil Vellalah did not want to be under alien rule, so they left the country" (Rasanayakam, 1999: 226). There are however many reasons why people move; in the context of this study, such an historical aversion to rule by others constitutes one reason why many Vellalah who were once rulers and kings left when Sri Lanka increasingly came under Sinhala majoritarian rule, but unfortunately they are under "double victimhood" being immigrants, terrorists in diasporas (Cheran, 2007: 136). This is one way to point out how the Vellalah's dominant identity was constructed in the writings of Tamil history in Sri Lanka. Some of them settled in Jaffna and others sought refuge under the Sinhalese kings and, having accepted positions of honour and trust, became the most respectable Vellalah families of southern Sri Lanka. Later they may have become the 'Colombo Tamils'. There are many families in different parts of the Jaffna peninsula who trace their descent from these early colonists and later the Mudaliyar (Rasanayakam, 1999: 336). The highest revenue officer was called a 'Mudaliyar' and this title was later even given to non-Vellalah. Mudaliyar was both an official designation as well as a title of social status.

Rasanayakam stands out for another historical work on Jaffna, *History of Jaffna*. Rasanayakam's work covers the very early times up until the Portuguese period. He argues that the caste system was introduced by the northern Aryans during the early centuries of the Christian era (Rasanayakam, 1999: 149). He also claims that the caste classification was set up according to the nature of places people lived in and that people were already identified according to the concept of *Thinai.* He further says that "the Vellala priests (kurukkals), who are the remnants of the ancient Andaṇar, are still strict vegetarians; in their habits they are similar to the brahmans to whom only the terms

[54] This study covered almost all these areas.

Andaṇar and Párpár[55] are now applied. The fact that the vegetarians of a caste are, on account of their conservatism, considered higher than the meat-eating brethren […]" (ibid., 1999: 153). This historical account further reveals that vegetarian Vellalah could become priests like Brahmins and were higher in the ranking order than other Vellalah. As we noted vegetarianism is tied with Vellalah identity and then even combined with Vellalah as an internal (sect) division as vegetarian Vellalah compared to other Vellalah. As we also could see from the beginning of this chapter, Vellalah manoeuvring into the fields of eminence was desperate and facilitated them in keeping high positions, because power is reproduced in "possible transformation of social relations […] in daily and longer-term social practices" (Smith, 2006: 216). Rasanayakam further says that "the cultivators—who were much later called the Veḷḷaḷas —lived in houses thatched with cadjans or in high mansions which had cultivated gardens and spacious flower gardens all round. Their diet consisted of well-cooked rice, vegetables and fruits" (ibid., 1999: 155). The diet of Vellalah is an indication of their lifestyles and the doctrine of non-violence which stems from the Hindu, Buddhist and Jain religions. Lifestyles are one of the major identifications of Vellalah identity in this study which will be discussed in chapter 6.

Rasanayakam further says that the princes of Jaffna took their wives from Vellalah families and their daughters too often married Vellalah (ibid. 1999: 389). The royal connection of Vellalah has been noted frequently in the literature, but without clarity as to whether Vellalah were kings/could become kings or whether kings could only be drawn from the Kshatriyas, the second rank in the Varna system. The establishment of an independent Tamil kingdom in Jaffna in the thirteenth century has been seen as a landmark in the history of the Sri Lankan Tamils and also been a recurring claim for a separate Tamil separate later (Pathmanathan, 1978; Arasaratnam, 1980). It is said that the Tamil kingdom was Vellalah-controlled (Arasaratnam, 1978: 110). Yet, it is important to understand that the Vellalah identity that was involved with agriculture/farming in India was decontextualised when the Vellalah relocated to Jaffna and highlighted much of their royal links. It further confirms that an identity complex involves the construction of different positions of power and thus from time to time Vellalah, as we noted, carefully plotted the dominant field and marked out their eminence with the purpose of sustaining their social and political power.

During the Dutch period, according to what was written in a report from 1658, government, judicial and administrative jobs were given to the high castes. The Vellalah obtained more placements during the Dutch period than

[55] Both are traditional designations for Brahmin in Dravidian culture (David, 1976 : 203).

the Madapalli.[56] The census taken in 1760 shows that out of a total of 516 Mudaliyar, 317 were Vellalah and 127 were Madapalli; 37 were Chetty, 14 were Paradesi, 10 were Malayalee, 6 were Karaiyar, 93 were Chiviar and 2 were Thanakkar (Arasaratnam, 1994: 36). In 1694, according to Rasanayakam, the Vellalah (together with the Vanniyars) started to fight because these occupations were shared with other castes (1999: 175). The Dutch government, in order to reduce the influence of the Vellalah, created several new orders, for instance that one place should not have two Vellalah village headmen and the headmen should be changed every three years, etc. The Vellalah resisted this, and because of this resistance the government stopped the changes in the local customs and followed the old ones (ibid. 1999: 225). I decode the above incident that under the name of custom, power-sharing with others was seen as a threat to the security of the Vellalah identity maintenance and was resisted historically. When depressed castes started to grow their hair like the Vellalah, and stopped wearing earrings showing their totemic caste identity and status, the Vellalah complained to the government and Governor Lorenz File ordered the depressed castes not to change their customs (Rasanayakam, 1999: 227). According to the literature, of all the three colonial periods, the Vellalah prospered most during the Dutch period (Russell, 1982; Arasaratnam, 1994; Rasanayakam, 1999). Rasanayakam's narratives during the Dutch period show that the Vellalah began to draw boundaries by strictly reserving certain public tasks for them. Conflict began to emerge whenever non-Vellalah tried to imitate the Vellalah. In this sense, we can also see that Vellalah boundaries became more rigid during the Dutch period by their efforts to prevent others from claiming Vellalah identity and status.

Simon Casie Chitty[57] in his appendix to *The Ceylon Gazetteer* published in 1833, classified Vellalah as "Vaishyas, the third rank in the Varna ranking and more particularly as Pu Vaishyas who were commonly called Vellalah (Velaler) from the 'Velame' or cultivation, in which they were occupied. He further listed 15 of the Vellalah subdivisions: Karkartha Vellalah, Choliya Vellalah, Kodikal Vellalah, Tuluva Vellalah, Pandarattar, Nynar, Udyar, Kontaha Vellalah, Savala Vellalah, Retti, Nattampadi, Agampadiyar, Maraver, Kalter, Patli" (Simon Casie Chitty, 1834: 230). Some of these names denote places in South India, like Karkatu, Kodikal, Choliya, Kontaha, and Savala. Some indicate the names of officials like Udyar, Retti, Nattampadi, and Agampadiyar, and some even denote names of small clans like Tuluva, Pandarattar, Nynar, Maraver,

[56] Vaiyåpadal, other Tamil source says that Madapallies were too immigrants and colonists. 'Madapallies […] consider themselves equal to vellalas', Zwadecroon's Memoir p-114. There is no evidence of existence of this caste in present day Jaffna.

[57] He was the first Ceylonese Civil servant and was the elected member of the legislative council in 1815. He is credited with publishing the first *Ceylon Gazetteer*.

Kalter and Patli. The presence of these divisions of Vellalah perhaps can be seen in South India but not in contemporary Jaffna. Udyar was distorted into Udayar ('the one who possesses') and used to designate Vellalah landowners in Jaffna until the early-1980s. Nynar was a name given to Vellalah males by the depressed castes and especially by Pallar and Nalavar until 1970s. In 1912 another Vellalah, Muttuthampipillai, wrote a book called *Jaffna History*. According to him, during 952 CE there were four types of Vellalah: the *Chola*, *Pandi*, *Thondai* and *Thuluvam*. Only the Thondai[58] Vellalah were entitled to have the *kondai* (hairstyle)[59], but the rest could have only *kudumi* (Muttutampipillai, 2002: 34). Kollimazhavan, a Vellalah leader, requested the king to order these four Vellalah groups to intermingle and exchange women. Furthermore, the royal family also itself was to take women from these families (ibid.: 34). In South India, the internal divisions among the Vellalah were more prominent, in a similar way as between non-Vellalah and Vellalah in Jaffna.

According to Muttuthampipillai, who wrote about Vellalah temple management, the Thiruketheeswaram temple in Mannar[60] District was under Vellalah maintenance (ibid.: 56). He classified the Vellalah into two types (ibid.: 61): the *Uluvittunpör*, who had their lands ploughed by others, and the *Ulutunpör*, who were themselves cultivators of the soil. Since agriculture was seen as a noble occupation, possession of land was conferred a high status in society. Above all, those who had their lands ploughed by others were considered of higher status than the ones who ploughed themselves. Here we should take note on how one of the meanings of Vellalah identity shifts from being cultivators/agriculturists/farmers to becoming employers of higher status. Moving into temple spaces and acquiring temple privileges while giving up ploughing can be seen as a significant shift in the formation of modern Vellalah identity.

5.5 Vellalah Identity in Colonial Ethnography

The colonial experience of Vellalah identity is another aspect of the identity constitution of the Vellalah. There are memoirs by some governors, especially van Rhee, a Dutch Governor (1692–1697), and one text by the Rev. Phillips Baldaeus, a Dutch priest (1658–1665), that is still considered a reliable source on Vellalah identity during this period. Arasaratnam's general impression of caste among Tamils during colonial Sri Lanka is that "'units of family and caste remained entrenched in the traditional social system [...] it appears that

[58] Places all are in South India.

[59] Of the two types of hairstyles *kondai* means that all the hair is tied up, but *kudumi* means that all the hair is made into a knot at the back of the neck.

[60] One of the districts in northern Sri Lanka populated mainly by Tamils, but mostly today by Christian fishing castes like Karaiyar, etc.

agriculturalists, predominantly of the Vellalar caste and a variety of artisan and service castes, constituted the bulk of settlers [...]. However, the degree of authority the Vellalalar notables exercised in the community is not clear" (Arasaratnam, 1994: 28, 30). In the same book, Arasaratnam talks of the overall power and influence of Vellalah in the following manner:

> Vellalar syndicates emerged as revenue farmers, buying up tax collection rights to land taxes, transit dues, market dues, fishing rights and a variety of other taxes. Evidences from the end of the 18th century show that a larger number of vellalars who had access to capital to invest on a variety of enterprises emerged as speculators. They worked in partnership with local Chetty merchants and Muslims, both domiciled and of South Indian origin (Arasaratnam, 1994: 38).

There are some other writings showing that revenue and customs officer duties were held by wealthier landowning Vellalah and that these positions were hereditary. It is a remarkable entry of Vellalah into the economic sphere. The traditional power of the Mudaliyar, managers or those in charge of management, was enhanced under Portuguese rule and continued to be strong under the Dutch period (de Silva, 1972: 170–171). The colonial powers were unsuccessful in ousting Mudaliyars from their entrenched positions, and so the official positions connected to the village, district and provincial administration became hereditary. This is how Vellalah local elite gained high status; lifting them above that of the Vellalah farmers with their small holdings (Arasaratnam, 1994: 36). Though there were many attempts to control the power of the Vellalah elite during colonial rule, none of the colonial powers could break Vellalah domination.

One of the Portuguese records says that there was an attempt by a king of Jaffna to neutralise the power of Vellalah (Bellala) by bringing Badagas (Vadugar) from Madura and donating lands to them (Arasaratnam, 1980: 382). The arrival of the Portuguese and the demise of the kingdom of Jaffna had further implications for the caste dynamics of Jaffna. The introduction of commercial activities and the arrival of a new religion, Christianity, in Jaffna operated in complex ways. This altered the existing social customs and relationships in several ways. As Vellalah identity was strongly tied with Hinduism many conversions took place among the larger sections of Karaiyar, so they became the favoured caste of the Portuguese. Yet local power in the village/region and revenue collection stayed with the Vellalah (Ibid.: 383). Muttuthampipillai's account establishes that the 'Mudaliyar' title from the beginning remained with the Vellalah. When the Portuguese began to give this title to the Karaiyar, the Mudaliyar title was bound not to caste but to occupation (Muttuthampipillai, 2002: 79). One account says that in 1690,

the number of Vellalah was 10,170 and it rose it 15,796 in 1796 (Muththukumaraswamyppillai, 1982: 37). There is a note in 1615 given by the same author that poor Vellalah were afraid of government taxes for large wedding celebrations, and had secret weddings with humble rituals (ibid.: 109). Poor Vellalah were called the *Veelkudi-Ulavar*, meaning the fallen Vellalah, implying thereby that the rest of the Vellalah were wealthy landholders. This is one of the categories among the Vellalah which still exists today as one of the internal rankings of Vellalah. This kind of ranking according to wealth in each caste is still in practice in Jaffna.

During the Dutch period, the Vellalah regained their power which had been suppressed under Portuguese rule and Christianity. The Vellalah who nominally converted to Catholic Christianity during Portuguese times now turned to Protestantism and acknowledged the new masters. It is said that lawful and illegal acquisition of land had taken place, but no traces were found how it had taken place. This process implied in the formation of one of the dominant Vellalah identities as major landowners in Jaffna that are still bound to be Vellalah. Methods implemented to keep records of landholdings by the government were not successful (Arasaratnam, 1980: 383). There was suspicion that some of the ownership changes involved fraud, but there are no records found to get more information regarding this either (ibid.: 387). Bonded service castes who worked for the state seemed to have become dependent upon the Vellalah being the major landowners. The Vellalah were entitled to have *Adimai* (slaves) and *Kudimai* (persons who performed customary services) during the Dutch period (Tambiah, 2004: 87). Nalavar and Pallar were *Adimai* castes for Vellalah and *Thattar*, *Thachchar*, *Kollar*, *Vannar*, *Ampatter* and *Paraiyar* were mentioned as *Kudimai* (Sri Ramanathan, 1963: 15 and 16). The codification of laws and customs of Jaffna called *Thesavazhamai* were done in 1707, with the assistance of twelve 'Mudallies' who were most probably Vellalah. It reflected exactly the Vellalah view of social order which was Vellalah-centred. This law was Dutch in origin and was translated into Tamil with the help of twelve Mudallies. Furthermore, Tambiah, quoting the memoirs of van Rhee, shows that the most ancient Tamil work, the *Tholkappiam* (3500 BCE) "shows that at a time when all the people, except those who lived along the equatorial regions, were leading the life of nomads or hunters, these Vellalas attained perfection in the art of agriculture, built towers and strong forts and had an organised form of government" (Tambiah, 2004: 92).

Henrick Zwaardecroon, the commander of Jaffna, in his memoirs states that there were even civil riots between the Vellalah and Madapallies (Zwaardecroon, 1911: 25). The Dutch Governor van Rhee also confirmed that "I think it necessary to state that a bitter and irreconcilable hatred has always ex-

isted in Jaffna patanam between the caste of the Bellalas[61] and the Madapallies so that these may not be elevated in rank and the offices of honour one above the other. To prevent this clash the government appointed two civil servants of both castes so that one of them was Bellala and the other a Madapally" (ibid.: 390). The economy was Vellalah-centred with the networks of other castes in commerce, brokerage and entrepreneurial activities over land, rice, tobacco and palmyra. The association between caste identity, purity and religious rites was not very close according to Arasaratnam (1980: 386). According to Nithiyanandan during the Portuguese and Dutch eras, sea-related commerce which was exclusively operated by expatriate communities had to rely on Vellalah for provisions because of the local infrastructure (1987). The elephant and tobacco trades were brokered by Vellalah (Arasaratnam, 1994: 36). As we have noted, the Vellalah entry into the development of the economy stepped up with agriculture, landownership, temple management, revenue collectors, and rice and tobacco cultivators and thus as trading with expatriate communities. Whenever opportunity stood up for a new entrepreneurial activity in Jaffna we could see it was the Vellalah who seized it. The relative poverty of the Tamil community was more pervasive among non-Vellalah due to this institutional dynamics of castes.

Phillips Baldaeus, a Dutch priest who stayed in Jaffna during 1658–1665, visited several places in the peninsula and wrote a book on Jaffna people, their customs and religion. We can see this as a form of imperial ethnography. Chapter 46 in his book is on the character of the inhabitants of Jaffna and especially the Vellalah (Bellales) and their lifestyles. Since this study focuses on the lifestyles of Vellalah, the portion of a text which talks about the lifestyles of Vellalah is reproduced here:

> The first and foremost are the Bellale (especially so, when they have embraced Christianity), otherwise the Brahmins rank first. The costume of the Bellales is a cloth hanging down from above the navel and caught up round the legs, like a pair of trousers; they wear *seripous* (leather soles under their feet) neatly fastened with leather straps which leave the feet almost bare, to prevent sweating. They have in front of their waist a *maddi*, something like a pouch which is formed from the cloth they wear, in which they lodge their betel and areca nut. They generally carry about them one or two slips of *ole* which serve them for paper to write upon. There is attached to their right a small case in which there is a knife with an iron stile which is silvered at the top as is likewise its case, besides which there is a small piece of steel for whetting their knives. The flaps of their ears are extraordinarily long, they are bored from infancy, they are seen to reach their shoulders and adorned with gold rings. Husbandry is their chief vocation, and they possess plenty of cattle, such as cows, plough oxen, sheep, goats and buffaloes. They have good and neat dwellings, with

[61] Most of the Dutch records used 'Bellala' for 'Vellalah'.

> large compounds attached to them, in which there are many betel creepers. There are also good wells of water, for they water their plants twice a day in the drought or when there is no rain. They reap their harvest in January and February for in November and December there is heavy rain. [...] these Bellales are all along the wealthiest people, they marry within the circle of their own castes, which generally takes place during the spring, […]. The Bellales are prone to go to law for every trifle, and are jealous people, for jabbering and arguing and wrangling they have not their equal. (176–177).

This passage clearly illustrates the lifestyles of the Vellalah in Jaffna in the seventeenth century. Vellalah identity and power during the Dutch period were well-established and strengthened with the support of law. Saivism further strengthened the position of the Vellalah at the top of the social order. These twin forces, the law of Thesavazhamai and the Saivite religion rationalised what Vellalah did and were reinforced via individual socialisation as well as a wider enculturation process. However, Jaffna became a Vellalah domain only in the Dutch era when the coastal Karaiyar caste, many of whom became Catholic in the sixteenth century under the Portuguese, was dispossessed from positions of administrative power by Protestant and Hindu Vellalah (Young and Jebanesan, 1995: 104). According to Mahindapala,[62] Vellalah

> […] maintained a veneer of respectability by hiding behind the morality of their religion and the legalities of their customs as they manoeuvred their way into positions of power, and on the other, they never had any qualms about eliminating or marginalising the rival castes, fellow-Tamils or non-Tamils, that stood in their way.

The British seized Sri Lanka from the Dutch in 1796. The British created an administration with a single polity for a plural society. British officials, according to Arasaratnam, had to rely on village headmen and native advisers, who were mostly from the landowning Vellalah caste in Jaffna. Vellalah interests with land and agriculture became less attractive due to the sudden attraction presented by education (Arasaratnam, 1994: 46). Modernisation projects, such as urbanisation or industrialisation, did not creep into Jaffna in this period. English-language education became the substitute for agriculture and many gained white-collar jobs. In nineteenth century Jaffna, almost every village became the venue of a mission school (Arasaratnam, 1994; Young and Jebanesan, 1995). The Vellalah elite realised by the late-nineteenth century that agriculture alone did not provide a secure income, hence they emphasised English-language education. Vellalah became highly skilled in mathematics, engineering, medicine and public service during the British period (Arasaratnam, 1977; Pfaffenberger, 1994; Russell, 1982; Young and Jebanesan, 1995).

[62] For the detail article http://www.spur.asn.au/who_are_the_vellahlas.htm

The nature of caste practice was again the reason for the exclusion of non-Vellalah from the education in Jaffna. It thus says that "Vellala (students) were acquiring skills to consolidate their domination over other castes that were traditionally subordinated to them" (Young and Jebanesan, 1995: 104). When identity is entwined with power, these changes are experienced not simply as a change of focus, that is to say: "for the dominant Vellalah it was their privilege to grab them to stay in power" (ibid.: 105).

The openness to education contributed much to the formation of 'English-language educated Tamil elite', which is an internal division among the contemporary Vellalah in Jaffna. Obviously the educated elite came primarily from the Vellalah community, but not entirely. The Karaiyar had also a significant presence among the English educated elite. Later, English education would play a major role in the process of identity transformation of Vellalah power and influence. English education was the customary path for upward mobility including migration outside Jaffna to seek employment. But it was a fact that such education did not reach the lower stratum of society where the depressed castes were further marginalised by economic deprivation. The abolition of slavery was enacted by law in 1844 by the British, but caste practices were not changed much. Tambiah noted that "although slavery was abolished legally, many of the depressed classes remained as de facto slaves of their masters for economic reasons" (Tambiah, 2004: 85). As we could see in the historical account, that Vellalah were always at the cutting edge of societal development while mostly holding their feet on the ground of tradition and customs. Vellalah dominance during the British was also strong. But intense exposure to Christianity and its role as the agent of English education created uneasiness among Hindus. The historical accounts of three colonial transitions provide clues to how Vellalah identity at the apex of society was (re)constituted and (re)negotiated according to the situational needs and demands. Thus during British rule when education did not cater to their domination over non-Vellalah, they still had the temple space where their superiority was unquestioned. The Vellalah were therefore advantageously positioned to profit under British rule when the Dutch were deposed. One of the results of the colonisation was that the Catholic religion arrived with the Portuguese and later Protestant denominations entered from Britain and USA. When religious conversions took place there was a general pattern that most of the Catholic conversions took place in the coastal areas populated by fishing castes, while the Karaiyar and the Vellalah converted mostly to Protestantism (Young and Jebanesan, 1995: 42). On the other hand, Vellalah identity constitution during colonial times further proves from the above accounts that concurring power has been one of the features of Vellalah identity as opposed to non-Vellalah identity.

5.6 Vellalah in the Proto-Nationalistic Stage[63]

Proto-nationalism signifies in this context the stage when Tamil nationalism had no political organisation (cf. Lindholm Schulz, 1996: 57). Jaffna became known in the nineteenth century for its movement of indigenous, socio-religious revival against Christianity. This I would prefer to call the phase of cultural nationalism. It strove for a moral renaissance of the community, and put emphasise on culture and identity (cf.Hutchinson, 1992: 113). This, in another way, strengthened the relationship between Vellalah identity and Hinduism. When Christianity, a new religion, entered in Jaffna, the Vellalah wanted to monopolise Hinduism. This way religion became one of their identification arenas. Hindu revivalism in the north largely became an affair of the Vellalah, of which Navalar´ was a central religious activist. He is considered as a giant in modern Tamil history and a father of Tamil Eelam, the idea of a Tamil state in north-eastern Sri Lanka. He is a Vellalah who lived during 1822–1879, and was an agent of resistance against imperial rule and hence, is considered to be a champion reformer among Hindus. He has held the attention of Tamil scholars since his death. He is seen as a revivalist (Bate, 2005: 473).[64] Later he came to be viewed by many as an ardent defender of Vellalah interests and privileges by excluding non-Vellalah as an integral part of Saivite renewal (Young and Jebanesan, 1995; Wilson, 2000; Hellmann-Rajanayakam, 1989). Hindu revivalism in Jaffna did have distinctive features in relation to Vellalah hegemony in Jaffna. By restructuring the Saivite schools in Jaffna Navalar began "cultivating a strategic network of contacts with Vellalah monastic centres" (Hellmann- Rajanayakam, 1989: 41). Under his influence, the Vellalah Saivite of Jaffna reacted against the image of the Protestant Christian (ibid.:42). After the religious conversions there was a religious split between majority Hindu Vellalah and minority Protestant Vellalah. This friction still exists and plays a role in the internal divisions among Vellalah in Jaffna which I'll take up in chapter 6.

The Vellalah were advantageously positioned to profit under British rule when the Dutch were deposed. By 1853, the Vellalah had reaffirmed their privileges and were praised by the American Benjamin Meigs:

> But the Vellalas are emphatically our people; and notwithstanding the losses they have sustained by the freedom of their slaves, and by the introduction of the principles of liberty and equality in society, yet combining the advantages of Christian instruction and of a superior education with the advantages which they inherited from their fathers, they

[63] This is borrowed from Lindholm Schulz in her study context of Palestinian nation formation (Lindholm Schulz, 1996: 57).

[64] http://ier.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/42/4/469

> will long continue to be the most, thriving, energetic, intelligent and best behaved portion of the Tamil population (Meigs et al., 1853: 18).[65]

The Vellalah were well-behaved and intelligent people according to both British and Americans. Traditional education, which had been their strength, now came at a discount, although temple earnings were a source of steady income. It was clear from the textual analysis that during the British rule in Jaffna there were religious clashes between Catholics and Protestants, Hindus and Catholics, and Hindus and Protestants. New religions were gaining foothold in Jaffna and started to establish their religious schools. Many Vellalah founded Hindu schools during this period, which are now the most popular schools in Jaffna and which the government of Sri Lanka had taken over in 1960s, for instance, Ramanathan College in Chunnakam, Vaitheeswara College in Jaffna, Hindu College in Jaffna, Somaskanda in Puthoor and Victoria College in Chulipuram are some of those. But the Vellalah local elite placed its own group at the centre in schools and had harsh mechanisms of exclusion of depressed castes. Vellalah elite initiated many things which developed Tamil culture and society like founding schools, building temples, donating lands for temples, schools, libraries and hospitals. However, cultural homogeneity among Tamils was always difficult and thus the us-and-them divide remained along the axis of caste as one of those. Since caste became institutionalised in Jaffna, Vellalah as the dominant caste perpetuated discrimination themselves. The discrimination Vellalah engaged in operated over generations, and when individuals or groups tried to fight those practices, caste institutions typically defended their discriminatory practices as part of defending the institution itself. The individual or collective injustice is not taken care of, but the caste institution is maintained by the dominant group (cf. Pratto et al., 2006).

In 1960, the government of Sri Lanka assumed full responsibility for education of the children of the country, and began to nationalise private and religious schools. In 1961, the National Education Commission made free education compulsory for all children aged 6–14. Education was then religiously decentralised and that gave the opportunity for depressed castes to gain a new language and possess education which was not available for them before. The Vellalah, as a result of the foreign religions and the religious diversity upheld in Jaffna, were being forced to compete with new religions and had to defend Hinduism and also thus had to compete with social upstarts for scarce resources like schooling and jobs. Without the educational attainment that gave them careers in the colonial administration, their landholdings, as the basis of rural prestige, were at risk. When education became available for

[65] http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moa/AHZ5480.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext

many, the marked-out boundary or the identification arena of Vellalah on education shifted and was thus renegotiated. They in turn, reinforced their control over the Brahmins, whose neglect of modern education had become renowned in Jaffna. In late-nineteenth century Jaffna as we have seen, Vellalah identity formation shifted from agricultural husbandry to the educational space where Vellalah struggled to separate their identity through several mechanisms.

With missionary activity in Jaffna, the Vellalah had what Pfaffenberger called an adaptational culture where the English language was accepted, but Christianity was mostly rejected. This further supports that identity is situational. Some Vellalah even pretended to be Christian in public, but remained Hindu at home (Pfaffenberger, 1994: 22; see also Rasanayakam, 1999: 83). Perhaps in order to maintain their supremacy over the other castes the Vellalah used the English language to their benefit and thus maintained their status. This phase of Vellalah identity was tied to Saivism and dominated by religion and strong resistance to Christianity. This resistance to Christianity by Tamils Vellalah can be seen as a proto-nationalistic phase of Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism (Russell, 1982: 109; see also Young and Jebanesan, 1995; Cheran, 2001; Sivathamby, 1995). An imagined Tamil Hindu community was being constructed.

Post-Navalar Jaffna was still Vellalah based, but the center of attention was bifocal; the Vellalah elite were more focused on the political sphere despite the several caste-based cultural revolts in Jaffna. Russell noted that in the late-1920s, with the commencement of the colonial government's policy of equal opportunity in education, social emancipation was expedited. The Vellalah reaction to this policy caused multifaceted inter-caste frictions in Jaffna. Russell listed the different forms of Vellalah subversion of the educational policy in *The Morning Star*[66] newspaper (Russell, 1982: 11). "First, certain castes, the Paraiyar for example, were forbidden entry into a number of schools; secondly, the non-Vellala castes that were permitted to enter schools either sat on chairs a few inches lower than Vellalah children or sat on the floor; thirdly, commensality or inter-dining between Vellala and non-Vellala castes was considered taboo by Vellala Hindus" (ibid.: 11). This was the period when the Vellalah sent several petitions to the government whenever depressed castes tried to emulate Vellalah status. Several walkouts in schools occurred when depressed castes enrolled. By the late-nineteenth century, a certain amount of emancipation of low castes occurred with the aid of courts and the circulation of wealth diffused to non-Vellalah increased (Russell 1982: 09). This was noted by a GA of Jaffna in 1907 (ibid.: 09).

[66] A weekly Protestant paper started in the early-1870s.

According to Wilson, from 1920–1931, there was one more split among Sri Lankan Tamils as the division between Colombo Tamils and Jaffna Tamils appeared just before independence (Wilson, 1994: 127). This split separated Tamils, especially the Vellalah elite, in terms of political representation, but the Vellalah identity in politics and total hegemony remained unchallenged. This was the time when the Ponnampalam brothers (Ponnampalam Ramanathan and Ponnampalam Arunachalam) entered into the political as well as social scenes of the Tamils. Ramanathan started his political career as the elected representative for the all-island educated Ceylonese seat in the Legislative Council in 1912. He developed a political base in Jaffna and became an elected member for the Northern Province in the Legislative Council. The important thing is that his leadership was accepted by the Jaffna Tamils even though he was a Colombo Tamil.

During this period from 1920–1924, the Vellalah-educated youth joined and formed The Jaffna Students' Congress, the predecessor of Ceylon Youth Congress (CYC). Although it was not considered as a political party, it was deeply concerned and involved in politics (Kadirgamar, 2012). It is also said to be the first political movement shaped and rooted in Jaffna. Middle class, educated youth graduates of Jaffna from Indian universities formed this organisation and they were highly inspired by the Indian Independence Movement and some well-known Indian figures, like Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. Even though they said that they had an all-island perspective and were committed to national unity, political independence and the social, cultural and economic betterment of the whole of Lanka, from the very beginning their caste-based programmes were criticised as being meant only for others, not for themselves. During the Donoughmore[67] years (1931–1947), Jaffna had political power. Ramanathan and several other conservative Vellalah argued that giving voting rights to non-Vellalah would lead to 'mob rule'. Ramanathan in particular, suggested that this would be disgusting for the Hindu way of life (Russell, 1982: 16). This reaction of Ramanathan was later criticised by many CP members and by others as Ramanathan supported caste institution and caste injustice. Ramanathan's public campaign against inter-dining at Kopay Training College was a sign of the deep-seated revolt to caste mingling even among the most educated and westernised Jaffna Tamil Hindus. It is obvious from the above historical analysis that two prominent Vellalah figures arose in the history of Tamils, namely Navalar and Ramanathan, in order to protect the Vellalah identity and its boundaries. They were openly against caste equality, decentralising powers to non-Vellalah and inclusive Tamil identity instead

[67] This was a constitution created by the Donoughmore Commission, which was in place from 1931–1947. It was the only constitution in the British Empire that enabled general elections with universal adult suffrage.

supported caste institution as the customary practice of Tamils. Navalar, Ramanathan, SJV all are included here.

With the introduction of universal franchise in 1931 the political conflict became more intertwined with caste identities. This was reflected in the electoral politics too. Russell noted "the non-Vellala either did not bother to vote, as there were no non-Vellala candidates standing" (Russell, 1982: 76). Concerning democracy there were a number of non-Vellalah organisations founded in the 1930s like the Depressed Tamil Service League, and some labour unions, but their attempts were minimal and slim, focused on tea shop entry and temple entry. Apart from a few elite Vellalah Christians and liberals/socialists, democracy was considered to be a threat to the doctrine of caste Hinduism and to the dominant Vellalah. In 1933, *The Morning Star* wrote that "socialism aims at the impossible and undesirable ideal of suppressing all differences. The Hindu ideal has aimed at harmonising differences" (Ibid.:176).

From the end of the nineteenth century, religious clashes reverted into caste clashes and there were conflicts arising from various depressed castes demanding equal seating and dining arrangement, and access to religious rites, etc. In an attempt to resist such assertions, the Vellalah in some villages resorted to violence against the depressed castes. There were many incidents where the Vellalah were violent and intolerant when facing the depressed castes' demands for equal treatment (Vekujanen and Ravana, 1988; Senthilvel, 2003; Russell, 1982). Even guns were used in this conflict, and people were killed due to caste clashes (Vekujanen and Ravana, 1988: 106; see also Senthilvel, 2003: 92). In many of the violent acts, Vellalah received support from their domestic service caste, Koviar, or the police. In the literature it has been difficult to discover whether these violent acts perpetrated by the Vellalah were organised at the village level or whether they were independently carried out. Caste in this period became a source of conflict, especially when non-Vellalah ignored the old caste restrictions, not only on eating and seating, but also on forms of dress, temple entry and political participation (Russell, 1982: 9–12). We could see here that mobilised resistance was taking place on the side of depressed castes with the support of some political parties from the south.

By the end of 1944, G.G.Ponnambalam, another 'hyphenated Vellalah' (with roots in Jaffna, but living in Colombo), dominated the political scene. He was a successful legal practitioner from Jaffna, and thus had greater appeal to Jaffna Tamils. He led a political party, the ACTC which remained almost purely a first political organisation of the Jaffna Tamils and "was much stronger and more in line with the conservative caste perceptions" (Hellmann Rajanayakam, 2004: 107). His stand on the caste issue is also attacked in the literature as that:

> G. G. Ponnambalam rejected the demands of the Minority Tamils even in the face of the need to take joint action to submit the Tamil point of view to the Soulbury Commissioners He declined to include the demands made in the Memorandum of the Minority Tamil Mahasabha (MTM) to accept issues concerning education, professional rights and eradication of un-touchability which compelled the Minority Tamil Mahasabha to submit its own separate Memorandum to the Soulbury Commissioners[68] (de Silva, 1981).

In the mid- and late-1930s, the consolidation of Vellalah identity in terms of political power remained, but their interactions with and influence from Jaffna became less emphasised and explicit. Instead, a general Tamil ethnic identity was propagated to defend Tamils against Sinhala ethnic domination in Sri Lanka.

Another well-documented fact was the incorporation or absorption of non-Vellalah castes into the Vellalah (Arasaratnam, 1977; Pfaffenberger, 1994; Wilson, 2000; Sivathamby, 2000). According to Banks, from 1790–1950, the proportion of persons claiming to be Vellalah swelled from 30 to 50 per cent of Jaffna population (Banks, 1960: 411). This can be interpreted as the Vellalah identity having always been an ideal goal to be achieved by the non-Vellalah; many non-Vellalah intermediate castes claimed the Vellalah status. The Vellalah remained the role model for non-Vellalah Tamils. Hellmann Rajanayakam disagrees with this in her article and says that "low castes no longer 'slowly slowly become Vellalar, they do not want to be Vellalar any more" in the late-1970s (Hellmann-Rajanayakam, 2004: 111). As Raman perceives it, the Vellalah category "becomes first and foremost a *political category* constructed as a personification of 'the Tamil' removed from the substantiality of caste or region and located in an imaginary lost landscape of the Tamil people" (2009: 79) (my italics) .

5.7 Vellalah Identity in the Post-Independence Period

Independence for Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) was a smooth process unlike the freedom struggle in India. The negotiations ended with the Ceylon Independence Act of 1947, which formalised the transfer of power. On 4 February 1948, the new constitution went into effect making Sri Lanka a dominion. This period is seen by many as the formative period of Tamil nationalism in which many of the demands of Tamils emerged such as 'a traditional homeland of Tamils', the ideas of federalism and a separate state. In the 1947 general election, Ramanathan Arunachelams' family lost power and the political leadership of the Tamil political parties was transferred to G.G. Ponnambalam and SJV. In post-

[68] http://infolanka.com/org/srilanka/cult/29.htm

independence Sri Lanka, the emergence of SJV, a Protestant Christian Vellalah lawyer, was significant for Tamil politics and the Tamil intellectuals of Jaffna. G.G. Ponnambalam continued in Tamil politics but his "thinking was close to that of the Tamils in Colombo, but for SJV Jaffna and his village attachment was more emphatic" (Wilson, 1994: 03). The Federal Party (FP) led by SJV monopolised Tamil parliamentary politics from 1956 to 1983 (Wilson, 1994: 135). All members of parliament of the FP were from Jaffna's Vellalah elite.

Most of the depressed castes were previously not allowed into temples, but in 1968 there was the famous 'Temple entry issue' in Jaffna led by the 'Peking wing' of CP with the support of several hundred persons from depressed castes. The CP mobilised resistance of the depressed castes. Importantly, the local nickname for the CP was 'low castes party' (Senthilvel, 2003: 73). This event is one of the major incidents among Tamils in which the caste issue surfaced also outside Jaffna and it is still discussed when Tamil issues are researched, especially by leftist parties or scholars who support the downtrodden. From the beginning, the CP had a firm stand on caste issues and did not at all trust the Tamil Vellalah elite politicians, including SJV, and their political parties (Senthilvel, 2003: 16). For the CP, the dominant ideological thought in Jaffna was controlled by Vellalah. Depressed castes supported by the CP took the revolutionary path to a solution. According to Pfaffenberger, in 1967, out of 1,309 Hindu temples in Jaffna only 17 per cent were open to depressed castes (Pfaffenberger, 1994: 144). Further he says that the Mavidapuram conflict symbolised the inevitable confrontation of tradition with modernity and social reform though it looked like tradition and caste won (ibid.). Although SJV was a member of parliament (MP) at the time this incidence took place, he did not take any action. Senthilvel, a member of a CP, described his party's reaction thus: "their mouths were sealed during temple entry" (Senthilvel, 2003: 86). He further says that the "war against caste injustices was not against all high castes Vellalah but, only against caste fanatics and casteists" (Senthilvel, 2003: 89). Pfaffenberger's analysis of the FP is that instead of acting against the violent Vellalah elite

> The Federal party chose to direct the public attention away from the conflict by emphasising the Colombo government's insensitivity to Tamil Hindu concerns, an insensitivity that was made manifest by several untimely policy decisions that were made before and after the Mavidapuram conflict (Pfaffenberger, 1994: 145).

Pfaffenberger also relates this incident to the emergence of Tamil nationalism, especially with regard to his argument that the idea of a self-autonomous region for Tamils' and the separation policy came from the so called 'conservative section' of Vellalah. In his precise wordings:

> Indeed, it was C. Suntheralingam, the retired Vellalah politician who organised the 'Defenders of Saivism', who had issued an early call for the creation of a separate Tamil state in Sri Lanka. Vellalars had long considered the Jaffna peninsula to be a private preserve for their interests, which were widely felt to have been severely eroded under the brunt of liberalizations initiated by the British and pursed with the vengeance by the Sinhalese dominated Colombo government (Pfaffenberger, 1994: 144).

While Vellalah opposed temple entry, Sinhalese politicians were supporting, guiding and funding the depressed castes via the CP as another means of provoking caste clashes among Tamils in Jaffna. This view offers another image of Vellalah political identity and Vellalah positioning against Sinhala governance. The Vellalah were criticised in different ways depending on the context, time and by whom. They were criticised by the depressed castes for being 'responsive co-operators' promoting opportunistic politics with the government of Sri Lanka while they opposed the government in cases of new policies, such as the Sinhala Only Act and standardisation of university admissions (Russell, 1982; Wilson, 2000). This is one of the platforms that later paved the way for the transferred the Tamil nationalist struggle from the Vellalah elite to the non-Vellalah elite. The Vellalah national elite on the other hand, were suspicious of the threat from the depressed castes supported by the Sinhalese. Vellalah political identity was fluctuating and situational, since the issues often changed in the political arena. In a sense, the Vellalah political stance swayed from a federalist position to a separate state position during post-independence – first supporting a 'federal' setup and then later 'secession/separation' working through non-violent parliamentary means and then in the late-1980s to achieve separation through violence. At the same time, the Vellalah had to juggle two balls from internal as well as external directions; one ball was always thrown from inside by the depressed castes in order to get equality of treatment in tea shops, etc.; and the other ball came from outside by the Sinhala governance treating Tamils as secondary citizens in terms of franchise, language, education, land colonisation, etc. Here we find the Vellalah elite and Vellalah identity in a very critical position where there was need to tackle the pressures coming from different directions and focusing on different issues. The crisis management and the coping mechanism of the Vellalah elite played out during this time were crucial in terms of Vellalah identity maintenance in the Sri Lankan Tamil history and in the politics of Jaffna. Some literature commented on the Vellalah's reaction at this juncture saying that the Vellalah tactically, by highlighting the ethnic injustice instigated by the Colombo government, buried the depressed castes' caste-based demands.

With respect to the political ideological stance of Tamil nationalism, Vellalah identity took a turn showing a way to capture political power. In 1974,

Tamil political parties with different views agreed to form the TUF totally comprised of Vellalah. In 1976, the TUF adopted the resolution of secession of two Tamil provinces North and East at Vaddukkoddai which then would form the separate state called 'Tamil Eelam'. This is the final goal equivalent to 'separate state for Tamils' which the LTTE later fought for. According to Pfaffenberger, "the separate drive is animated not only by concerns about Ceylon Tamil prospects in the Sinhala-dominated state but also *by the profound pride that Ceylon Tamils take in their cultural tradition*" (Pfaffenberger, 1981: 1146) (My italics). I want to recall here the earliest settlement of Vellalah colonists from South India who came because of the invasion of Maliq Kafur. After SJV died in 1977, Amirthalingam, another Vellalah, became his successor. He was a lawyer by profession and "associated with people involved in violent acts, preparing for armed confrontation with the state" (Wilson, 1994: 135). There was a youth wing of the TULF which was violent[69]and had ties to other militant youth movements. Ramachandran[70] says that the TULF youth wing was pressuring TULF to deliver Tamil Eelam. TULF leaders described the Sri Lankan army as an "occupation force" and reiterated their commitment to Tamil Eelam. They never condemned assassinations or acts of sabotage by the militant youth during the late-1970s and early-1980s. The Vellalah national elite were inclusive in papers and lip service but in reality the nation-building was narrow and was bound to only upper castes. In the process, TULF provided legitimacy to the militants and their methods. It is clear that the Vellalah political elite supported violence several times through history, but this time the violence was directed at non-Tamils, while earlier it had been directed towards fellow Tamils, depressed castes. We also can see the twists in the image of Vellalah identity as peace-loving and non-violent qualities changed into violent when the acts were carried out by the youth wing for ethnic-national liberation. However, as the main party, they were constrained to act according to the constitution. Therefore, in practice, the TULF clung to parliamentary methods. The Vaddukkoddai Resolution that the Vellalah national elite made in 1976 says "this Convention calls upon the Tamil Nation in general and the *Tamil youth in particular to come forward to throw themselves fully into the sacred fight for freedom and to flinch not till the goal of a sovereign state of Tamil Eelam is reached*".[71] The idea of a homeland was supported by the new leadership of TULF. Wilson, another (Christian) Vellalah, and the son-in-law of SJV argues that:

[69] http://www.atimes.com/ind-pak/DD18Df01.html

[70] http://www.atimes.com/ind-pak/DD18Df01.html

[71] http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/shrilanka/document/papers/vaddukoddai_resolution.htm

> [...] the sum effect of *political indoctrination of the Ceylon Tamils* by radical and militant Ceylon Tamil parties and groupings and the impact of Sinhala majoritarianism on the Ceylon Tamils has been the creation of a Ceylon Tamil nationalism, a phenomenon that the island state must reckon with in its future progress (ibid.: 141) (My italics).

We could see that while the Vellalah national elite retained non-violence in the parliament, the Vellalah local elite in Jaffna were violent against the depressed castes. The Vellalah national elite wanted to project an image to outsiders that there were no internal frictions and Tamils were united in order to defend themselves against the Sinhala majoritarian government, but actually the Vellalah preserved their privileged domain through the continued exclusion of depressed castes in Jaffna. As we also noted, in post-independence Sri Lanka, since Vellalah supremacy was unchallengeable politically and locally in Jaffna, the oppression of injustice to non-Vellalah continued and the voiceless could not speak out against injustice in a space of total Vellalah dominance. We can see how the Vellalah national elite deployed their national strategies for Tamils manipulating the masses to achieve their goal. An emphasis on cultural homogeneity or inclusive nationalism by Vellalah national elite was interpreted as the "sinister motives of the Vellalah in order to dominate in the politics" (Mahindapala, 2004).[72]

If we turn our attention to the socio-cultural space of caste in Jaffna during 1960s and 1970s, we see that there are two scholarly studies done by foreign scholar, namely Michael Banks (USA) and Kenneth David (USA) in 1960 and 1976 respectively. In Banks article, Vellalah identity was more bound to the ritual and religious domains. He also claimed that the Vellalah had much more power than Brahmins in terms of religious authority. In the sacred space, Brahmins ranks higher than Vellalah but in the secular space Vellalah are higher than Brahmins (Banks, 1960: 67). But with Jaffna social relations becoming more independent, he saw "a sad decline from the golden age when the Vellalas ruled all" (Ibid.: 71). Banks concluded that although "there is a clear patron-client relationship between Vellalah and non-Vellalah, there was also local solidarity" (Ibid.: 77). David's analysis of caste proceeds through normative schemes like 'bound and unbound'. In terms of Vellalah identity, it confirmed that Jaffna was Vellalah-centred and the service castes were Vellalah-focused. But new light is shed on how Vellalah identity can also be perceived as being 'interdependent' and 'dependant' on others for their existence. According to David's analysis of ranking some independent castes like Karaiyar, who are not dependant on others, are 'unbound', free of obliga-

[72] H.L.D. Mahindapala, a Sinhala journalist and a former editor of newspaper *The Ceylon Observer* writes on Tamils divisions as one of the bases for this ethnic conflict. http://www.lankaweb.com/news/items04/050704-1.html

tion and thus can be high in social status (David, 1976: 193). David further identifies a set of normative schema for the aristocratic scheme that are *pattam* (titles); *urimai* (non-negotiable right of master and servant to service and remuneration); *kauravam* (honour); *mariyatai* (respect and limitation, that is, preserving honour); *varam* (command in the specific sense of the giving of a power to a subordinate); *anumati* (command in the sense of giving permission for action to take place); *atarm* (mutual support); and *varicai* (mutual definition of status) (David, 1973: 37). In the 1970s and 1980s, with the intensive mobilisation and protests by depressed castes against the Vellalah, the Vellalah elite increasingly felt that they could not uphold caste practices further and thus the privileges they enjoyed all collapsed and disappeared. This is one of the reasons for the mass scale emigration of Vellalah, in addition to the factors of war, education, employment and internecine rivalries. Nithiyanandan confirms that "it was the caste dominant social structure, more than any other, which remained at the centre of these developments" in Jaffna (Nithiyanandan, 2004: 12). He further states that this asymmetrical environment of caste had negative impacts.

5.8 Concluding Remarks

As we have seen in this chapter, although Vellalah identity has shifted in character and importance as the result of changes in society and polity, Vellalah have uniquely manoeuvred their supremacy in some important arenas such as leadership, good virtues, caste position, religious space, landownership, education and politics. This chapter also discovered that some non-Vellalah during the British and post-independence periods moved into the arenas where Vellalah held power, thus some non-Vellalah also merged into Vellalah to be considered Vellalah. A few Vellalah leaders gained prominence at times, especially during the colonial period and in the 1970s, and struggled to protect tradition or Tamil culture or Hinduism when alien culture/religion became dominant or when depressed castes were trying to ask for equal treatment. Vellalah at this juncture can be viewed as the leaders of Tamil culture; they were in a critical position to defend the local culture in Jaffna. On the other hand, they can also be seen as the elite of society, who always wants to sustain its power and privileges. It has been difficult, however, to come to a concrete assumption about the real motive of Vellalah elite at that time. Whenever the frictions came out between castes during colonial and post-independence periods, the Vellalah were always against sanskritising non-Vellalah because of the very basic fear that they would lose power and positions. This chapter further shows that Vellalah identity was not fixed or pre-given; rather it was constantly manipulated by individuals and groups within a historically given set of possi-

bilities. But this chapter also exposes how the constructed, reconstructed and reproduced memories of the Vellalah throughout the historical changes have given a(n) (un)common personified identity of the Vellalah which until now demonstrates that the caste is still relevant. This is the aspect of caste which is durable as it has been internalised in memories and feelings, but which can be transposable, and this is where the policy decision can be made to deconstruct caste.

6

The Elements of Caste and the Lifestyles of the Vellalah

6.1 Introduction

The historical construction of Vellalah identity has been outlined in the previous chapter. It is now possible to place these themes in the contemporary[73] socio-political context of Jaffna where Vellalah identity is being (re)produced, remembered and transformed. This chapter serves two important purposes: one focuses on Vellalah identity in relation to the concept of caste and looks at how it has been understood, evolved and constituted in Jaffna; the other focuses on the lifestyles of the Vellalah as an identification through which Vellalah identity still renegotiates its exclusive identity.

Studies on caste, whether at macro or micro level, will depend on and also depart from how caste is defined and also how the changes of the different elements of caste are perceived in different times and contexts. The discussions and stories of caste in the literature and also among the people in Jaffna mostly rotate around some elements of caste such as, division of labour, endogamy, purity-pollution, ranking/hierarchy and interdependency. It is therefore relevant to reflect upon the elements of caste in relation to Vellalah identity to see how the changes that happened and are happening to these elements will shift the meaning of Vellalah identity and thus transform caste in Jaffna overall. One of the elements, ranking, categorises people low and high and is for that reason a sensitive issue among the other four. I was told by the area leader of the LTTE to avoid it and I avoided it unless the informants spontaneously provided data about it without my probing. It is one of the reasons the power of (non-)Vellalah identity was analysed at the margin in the overall research.

[73] 'Contemporary' refers mainly to the time period (2004–2007) that the data was collected for this study, but some updates have also been made up until 2015.

Temple affiliation as one of the arenas for Vellalah identification is discussed under the element of caste called purity-pollution. In section two, the lifestyles of the Vellalah will be discussed in relation to intra-Vellalah divides, character, food, reproduction and talk, and how Vellalah view other castes. As a result, this chapter answers the research question of *how Vellalah have negotiated the meanings over the elements of caste and their lifestyles.*

The perceptions and narratives of the Vellalah on general caste transformation are brought into the light to see how the Vellalah view the social order based on caste in Jaffna. Thus Vellalah identity is in this chapter scrutinised in a less-politicised socio-cultural arena. In order to understand the reconstitution of Vellalah identity, it is necessary to explore other conceptual and practical processes that ordered people's lives. Through these, it is possible to see the competing constructions of order and identity shifts.

6.2 Jaffna Caste in Practice

Jaffna society especially during the militant nationalist struggle, was in a period of drastic societal transition. During this period society was dynamically reconstructing and thoroughly revising its material and symbolic structures of supremacy. Its patterns of activity and normative construction of reality were reconstituted. Jaffna is a society which is not completely exposed to external influences, but neither is it closed to them. Jaffna was influenced by internal conventional issues like poverty, inter-caste tensions, inter-ethnic tensions, war and the result of international intervention; hence by some newly emerged post-national issues like migration and globalisation, etc. The unique collective memory of Jaffna within the overall Sri Lankan ethno-national history and especially in Tamil's national thought is reflected upon and stems from caste as an internalised cultural identity of Tamils. Caste was almost completely mopped out of the local academic discourse on Sri Lankan conflict. I certainly do not want to show that Tamil nationalism is just a pure caste phenomenon – not even the LTTE period in Jaffna was totally caste-free – instead I want to capture the animated picture of caste dynamics between 2004 up until 2007 with caste being one of the intra-cultural identities among Tamils. It is in fact as Cheran states:

> There has been a general reluctance to discuss caste issues in public. The tendency is to assert that caste was a thing of the past and Tamil Eelam will be caste-free. Any open discussion on caste is seen as bringing the old divisiveness back and therefore not healthy for the Tamil liberation struggle. On the other hand, there is a tendency among western scholars to view Tamil nationalism and the rise of the Tigers purely as a caste phenomenon. These two extremes do not reflect the complex relationship and changing caste-nation interactions among Tamils (Cheran, 2001: 07).

It is not only Western scholars who see Tamil nationalism as a pure caste issue (Biziouras, 2012), but some scholars among the Sinhalese and a few local scholars also perceive it this way (Balasooriya, 2013; Mahindapala, 2002). It is the general opinion in the local discourse that it is only the Vellalah who have interest in maintaining the caste system (as they enjoy the ultimate power and privileges) and want to show that caste still exists. It is though partly true that the non-Vellalah also want to keep their caste identity intact as there is very limited inter-mingling in terms of caste in the public domain of post-war Jaffna. We can see this reflection even in e-social media like Twitter, blogs and Facebook, where anyone who writes something on caste will receive feedback in the form of a counter-attack condemning the other based on their caste identity, hoping that caste discourse will bring back the caste divisions, etc. I highlight one comment written in 2014 in an e-paper as a feedback for an article on caste.

> How sad is this? Untouchable people still exist in Jaffna. There are Apartheid Temples there. Toddy Tappers, Toilet Cleaners, Laundry personnel aren't allowed to carry their deities on the shoulder. One thing common among these different castes is they are all poor. They don't have proper houses, they are landless. They don't have the means to send the kids to school to get an education and break out of the poverty cycle and caste entrapment. Did Prabakaran liberate these people at least from this pathetic discrimination? Vellalas, who fell out with Prabakaran, over caste according to the Writer are now in control of the North. Their Vellala CM has been around for nearly a year now. Have they highlighted any of these issues and offered remedies? All they want is a Vellala Police and total control of the land as well. Will the untouchables get a better deal from the Vellalas once the TNA gets a Vellala Police and the Land Bank? Wonder whether the UNHR Commissioner knows about this caste system?
> *Xxxxxxxxxxxx*
> June 21, 2014 at 6:39 am
> Reply

This e-feedback on caste in the post-war context reveals many issues relating to caste in Jaffna. Reflecting upon the content, it discloses that the untouchability is not totally gone; temple issues are still divided along the us-and-them caste axis in the villages. Thus, the militant Tamil nationalist struggle led by

a non-Vellalah leader, Prabakaran, could not bring liberation from discrimination based on caste. The Vellalah who were against the LTTE have again gained control of the North. The chief minister (CM) of the NPC, a Vellalah, did not address many issues (one of these being that of caste-based poverty in Jaffna), but demand more power to have their own police and the power over land in the north and east. Moreover, in hindsight this feedback leaves us with two important issues. One is that this comment was probably made by a non-Vellalah or outsider. The second and most-important is that whether delivering power over police and land to the TNA, which is one of their demands, who will genuinely deal with downtrodden poor and low castes? It reveals how caste became an issue to be discussed even among well-educated circles in electronic media. I am not surprised by the level of hostility shown in some of the heated arguments which attack the commentators' personal caste backgrounds, regardless whether it is Sinhalese or Tamil. Another interesting narrative entwined with this is how Sinhala academics have wanted to paint the whole ethno-national conflict of the Tamils as a pure projection of intra-caste clashes or caste hegemony over the oppressed Tamils (Mahindapala,[74] de Silva, 2009). Several foreign researchers incorporate caste as a base of Tamil culture and accordingly claim that it is reflected in the national space and order (Kapferer, 1988, 2004; Hellmann Rajanayakam, 1989, 1994, 2004; Fuglerud, 1999; Pfaffenberger, 1994). Caste is a part of reality in Jaffna; it has continuity and influence extending into present day, post-war Jaffna.

The Vellalah's narratives on general caste transformation in Jaffna are brought up here in order to investigate how and why the Vellalah perceive as they do. As a researcher, I join in only to interpret the narratives to provide deeper cultural meaning to the reader. In short, this clustering of narratives traces the caste identity of the Vellalah collective in Jaffna on the themes of caste existence and the pace of transformation. It is possible to see over time how this caste identity has been (re)constituted in the course of everyday life, as standard versions about events and practices in Jaffna emerged. The overarching fact to be kept in mind is that the milieu behind this caste transformation of each narrative has produced the clear reflection of the asymmetrical stance between Vellalah and non-Vellalah. It also brings up, in relevant contexts, the data brought by survey among youth, observations and informal conversations.

[74] http://sinhale.wordpress.com/2009/08/06/the-revolt-of-the-privileged-vellahlas-part-ii/
http://sinhale.wordpress.com/2009/08/05/the-meaning-and-the-power-of-the-vadukoddai-resolution-part- 1/
http://www.lankaweb.com/news/items04/060504-2.html

6.2.1 The Definition and Persistence of Caste

It is interesting to begin discussing the meaning of caste-based on the testimonies of undergraduates at the Jaffna University in 2003. The responses were many in a total of 60 transcripts, but I try to bring up the diversities among these responses to do justice to the data I had gathered. The answers to question of what caste means to you were: (1) it is given by birth, we can't change it, (2) it is godly given according to our karma in the past, (3) it is a barrier for progress and cannot be changed (4) it exists only in marriage and social status, (5) it is related to privileges, inequality and denial of rights, (6) it is based on the occupation, (7) it is behaviour, language and personal culture, (8) it keeps society functional. It is an irony that majority (74%) of the respondents perceive caste as an essentialist paradigm and believe that that caste is given and cannot be changed in the twenty-first century. But many have of the opinion that caste should be eliminated and thus that it carries with it injustice. This perception of caste as given was indoctrinated and internalised via socialisation and the carried memories are reproduced regardless of education and age. On the other hand, the responses should be understood in relation to the fact that there is a perception that students who study science, engineering and management are mostly from the Vellalah and intermediate castes while those studying the humanities and social sciences (arts) predominantly come from depressed castes.[75] This survey was done among the students (third-year) who were in the arts stream and studied sociology for their honours degree. This means that the responses are more likely to reflect the views of the non-Vellalah. But in general, among the youth survey, there was unanimity that caste is still understood as something which cannot be changed easily.

Many of the transcripts produced strong case histories which prove that caste in Jaffna, even in urban areas, is still relevant in terms of accommodation, jobs, eating and networking, etc. These case histories also prove that caste is practised in Jaffna not only in marriages, but also in the very basic social networks, whether they are formal or informal. Thus the idea of purity still exists but relates to caste in general. It is important to highlight that the discourse on caste is very subtle in Jaffna and it does not always come up overtly as caste identity. Instead it is masked by something else which serves as a reason for the personal choice in question, and very rarely caste is brought up as an overt identity. Many things relating to new friendships, marriage proposals and job recruitment do not go well or lead to breakup because of caste identity, but on the surface they are covered up as with other genuine reasons. For instance, one

[75] This goes with the final entry marks which are decided by the Ministry of Education for the universities. These entry marks for arts stream is usually the lowest compared to medicine, science, engineering and management fields. Thus, it allows many more students to enter with low entry marks.

undergraduate girl presented a story in the written survey to prove this. When the Samurthi[76] project was introduced in the villages, it informed people that only four of them could be selected to benefit from each village, and one girl who presumably was not Vellalah was excluded from the selection although she met all of the project's qualifications. As this was a survey, the researcher could not follow up further on this to find out more about whether the caste was in fact behind this or there were some other reasons. As she felt the caste identity was the reason, her story shows that the caste-based thinking is reflected in most of the public choices among people in Jaffna.

There is another pattern of caste identity in the villages in Jaffna that can be observed. One village in Jaffna (village in this context means the Grama Niladhari division, which is the very small government administrative unit closest to people) can have one caste as its majority, and the other castes in varied ratios. Every village has its own mixture of castes and each village contains many *kurruchies* (a small portion of a village with the specific name which might relate to the name of the village) where different ratios of castes live and dominate. For instance, the Vellalah might be the majority in one village while another village might be dominated by Karaiyar or Mukkuvar, while yet other villages are dominated by washermen (Dhobi caste/Vannar) or hairdressers (barber caste/Ampatter). One *kurruchi* may be dominated by Ampatter and other *kurruchi* may be concentrated with Koviar. Here is a narrative depicts the overall picture of caste in Jaffna, but it shows that caste and occupation are still the basic units of society, in a similar way as family.

> Caste in Jaffna has not disappeared; it is in a kind of 'fire under the ash'. It only comes to the surface when issues matter for an individual, like in marriage proposals, etc. In Jaffna an insider will identify basic units of our society through family, caste and occupation (Male, 61, 2006).

In my databank, the majority of respondents present these recurring images of the residues of caste in Jaffna. This further facilitates me in my search to discover the relevant theory to support the durability that I find in cultural schema and habitus. I'll now move into the temporal nature of caste in change.

6.2.2 Temporal Accommodation

Under this sub-theme I highlight the temporal aspect of caste transformation. Everything is changed and reconstructed in time. I noted in the field that the perceptions of change in caste had gone along with one's background of

[76] It is a government-initiated programme financed partly by World Bank as social protection for the poor and the poorest in developing countries.

caste and also with one's age. Elderly persons tended to perceive the changes in caste as temporary while the youth mostly saw them as permanent. Also educated upper-caste persons perceived that caste had not change a lot, while educated lower castes mostly said that caste has disappeared. It should be understood clearly that those changes, whether temporary or permanent, cannot be reversed to the 'old' ways, exactly because transformation is not conceived through only a single factor. In addition to that, the structure of society, the roles taken by people, the needs of the people and the requirements of societies also change. Here is a narrative which captures the change of caste in time.

> You know *thear*[77] is outside with God, people said *arokera*,[78] *Iyar*[79] had shown *theepam*,[80] *kaddai*[81] has been taken out, but *thear* didn't move, just a shook in place. This is what I think about caste in Jaffna. Everybody thinks that there has been a major change in caste, but for me it has all been 'adjustments' for the time being and cannot be called changes. *Caste still lives very much in the minds of the people.* In the field of drama it is clear that almost all are from low castes, because 'drama' as a field came through *koothtthu*[82] in our Tamil culture and this was professionalised almost exclusively by the depressed castes. All the social controls that existed before with *pariyariyar*[83] and *udaiyar*[84] have changed. We can't blame anybody because we all are prisoners of a social structure. Are we ready to accept a lower caste partner for our daughter? No! This is the reason for seeing these changes as 'adjustments'. There are some new contacts in terms of friendship which is inevitable, because today there are plenty of chances for people to have contacts with lower castes (Male, 62, 2006) (my italics).

The passage above photographed the total transformation of caste in Jaffna through a metaphorical narrative which is familiar to Hindus in Jaffna. Thus, it perceives caste transformation as 'temporary adjustment' in the worldview of the people due to the unpredictable circumstances they face, but it is fully alive in the people's minds when it enters into their personal zones. Even the time when it comes to one's home does not matter at all; caste is fully practised and alive, but in conversation, it no longer exists.

This above narrative takes up a correlation of caste identity with the field of discipline students choose at university. 'Drama and Theatre' is a course at the

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[77] A holy wooden vehicle carrying God into Hindu temples, especially during festivals.

[78] Chorus of collective voices to inspire the persons who drag the holy vehicle; this word is used in temples premises instead of 'excuse me' if somebody is blocking the way.

[79] Priest does the rites.

[80] Holy light in a special copper tool for God.

[81] Made in wood as a break for the holy vehicle to stop in several places to do the outside rituals.

[82] It is an informal dance structure; the performances generally depict scenes from ancient epics like Ramayana, Mahabharatha and Tamil classical epics.

[83] A person does especially local treatment for people for any kind of illness in the village.

[84] A man who possess a lot of property and land.

University of Jaffna introduced in 1986 in the arts stream, but the students who choose it as a subject for specialisation were mostly from non-Vellalah backgrounds, since there is a stigma among Tamils that drama came from *koothtthu*, which was performed by depressed castes in ancient Tamil culture, although that subject has been modernised extensively. Although the subject is more westernised and scientific now, the opinion still persists and related by one of the lecturers who teaches 'Drama and Theatre'. One of the undergraduates wrote in the written survey that her parents (probably Vellalah) did not like when she expressed that she wanted to choose 'Drama and Theatre' as one of the subjects. We can learn from this that a temporal adaptation of the subject does not matter when the subject was originally internalised much stronger with caste identity long ago. Whatever happens in the socio-cultural space, means that the external world can only limitedly shake up the internalisations and also return to the root mentality in regard to caste transformation.

It further reveals that despite the fact that there have been constant attempts by actors and structures to eradicate caste in Sri Lanka, caste still continues to exist. In discursive practice, people who are oppressed or of lower caste standing repeat the statement that caste is no more and dead. This is the result of a strategy pursued by the Vellalah and the non-Vellalah to avoid evidence that is uncomfortable and challenges their worldviews.[85] It is where I capture the internalised caste and its durability with time. Depending on one's assumptions about the static or dynamic nature of the previously existing structure and the Vellalah identity, one tends to interpret recent changes either as disjunctions from the previous structure or as continuities and transformations of the previous structure. I now move on to one of the elements of caste, called division of labour.

6.3 Division of Labour

This division of labour as was mentioned in the background chapter as stemming from Thinai. It resulted in interdependency among castes and also ranking. Interdependency of castes is such that each caste group has in theory and tradition an occupation or responsibility from which its members can only depart in certain circumstances and within limits. Although inequality does exist in caste system, each caste's duty is essential to maintain the villages' way of life. Sivathamby mentions that "abolition of caste in Jaffna relies only on breaking up this occupational based caste identity continuum" (Sivathamby, 1984: 56). Many, including the Vellalah, nowadays do not pursue what they

[85] See more in detail the negative social schema in *A cognitive theory of cultural meaning* by Strauss and Quinn, 1997: 91.

once did and the needs of the society are different, hence many jobs have been institutionalised. Agriculture/farming, which was the core identity of Vellalah, became degraded and associated with less income and low status when there were plenty of opportunities for white-collar jobs like doctors, engineers, lawyers, clerks and teachers. Due to war, displacement and the forced migration of the Vellalah and non-Vellalah, it had an impact on the occupational caste-based identity carried in the past in two ways. One is when societies were reshuffled with new needs, occupations were mostly service centred, and thus the caste-based occupations faded away. The other was that when the economy became the prime source of survival in societies, caste prominence attached to occupation ended up in the back seat.

The occupations which were formerly caste-based have now been occupied with other castes that were expected to do other caste-based jobs. The occupations as a result are now largely de-caste-based. But the carried memories of caste identities linked to jobs in Jaffna still have a way of identifying the caste of the people by their occupations. This identification is done by tracing the residence of the person or the relative of that particular person who is presently doing a non-caste-based job. This confirms two things: one, there are mechanisms that can be used to trace the caste identity of a person who is engaged in non-caste-based occupation, and the other is, people are still keen to know the caste identity of a person. The change to the economic structure from agro-societies to service sector societies happened in many parts of the world; the contribution of the LTTE in releasing caste interdependency is considerable in Jaffna. It came up in chorus in the written questionnaire survey done among university youth. One of the questions was how the LTTE worked against caste as a social injustice in Jaffna, many quoted that the LTTE informed especially the washermen (Doby) and hairdressers (barbers) to continue their jobs through 'institutionalisation', but not to visit homes which were considered 'inferior' and demote their status. The idea behind this was, perhaps to decenter the Vellalah hegemony first in the process. On the other hand, it left us to think whether the LTTE then tried to eliminate caste in Jaffna or just to reverse the existing order which were centred on the Vellalah. Caste-based labour, as was seen above, has been rearranged to a notable extent in Jaffna. The older generation still linger in the legacies of caste-based labour; the second and third generations are relatively untied from the old bonds and links. A limited number of persons from the second and third generations follow what their grandparents did, but not exactly what they did. However, some services provided to the Vellalah are done by the intermediate and depressed castes in the villages in Jaffna where there is an absence of caste interdependency. For instance, the narrative given below, while noting a major breakdown of the

caste interdependency centred on the Vellalah, denies the fact that the LTTE's involvement in this caste transformation was successful.

> What was the base for the caste in Jaffna was the division of labour and this has collapsed. Services done for Vellalah by particular castes – like domestic work, carrying coffins, cremating body, drumming at the funeral, domestic visit by the washermen (*Doby)* and hairdressers (barbers) – have all stopped. The liberation struggle contributed to the change but was not successful in this (Male, 48, 2005).

This particular narrative is a good illustration that there are changes in the former caste-based division of labour, but the fact is that a few of the tasks are done mostly by the caste people who were meant to do them while the change is that the tasks are done for payment, so that they give the impression of having been professionalised and institutionalised, and that the status which carried the memory of inferiority has much faded away. David's perception on the caste-centred division of labour in Jaffna in 1970s is that "they are more than standard pattern of social relations, more that diacritical markers; since they relate directly to the caste's shared natural substance, they are a feature defining inclusion in or exclusion from caste categories" are no longer relevant to Jaffna (David, 1976: 183). Many depressed castes are now engaged with agriculture and fishing, hence most of the fishing castes have shifted into masonry work or some other service-oriented work like in automotive, electrical or computer technology services. On the other hand, many non-Vellalah have occupied jobs which were previously, mostly occupied by Vellalah; this included doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers and clerks. However, the important change here is that the inclusion in and exclusion from the division of labour is no longer caste-based, since the bounded relationship is broken into more contractual bonds whereby the social relationship is more official and short-term (it is finished when the service is completed), whereas in bounded labour one caste family delivered and continued their service unstopped. As the above narrator perceived, this transformation of caste-based division of labour has not happened all of a sudden or through a single force like the LTTE. It was a gradual process and also went with along the structural changes of the society.

> But today many Vellalah have low-caste people as maids at home because the caste that was traditionally accepted and expected to do the domestic work for Vellalah doesn't do this work anymore. The demand for domestic labour can today only be met by the low caste people (Male, 46, 2007).

Domestic service done by the Koviar to the Vellalah was an indication of Vellalah identity since caste was exercised as an acceptable custom among Tamils in Jaffna. It further confirmed how caste network functioned and how it was

Vellalah-centred. Even after the law of abolition of slavery in 1844, the depressed castes remained slaves to their masters owing to economic conditions. This practice continued in different manners as far as I experienced until the late-1980s. Except very few of them, the Koviar caste are no longer found in their traditional duties, but many are still occupied as cooks in restaurants, homes and schools. Other castes that were previously not supposed to enter into houses because of their lack of purity are now hired and work as maids in Vellalah houses, like those from the Nalavar and Pallar castes. Many university teachers stated during casual talk that many fisher folk castes, like the Karaiyar and Mukkuvar, are now working in Vellalah houses due to war and lack of alternatives. Youths from Pallar and Nalavar castes continue the service provided in some of the Vellalah houses their parents started in. Division of labour is there in Jaffna, but the imageries of caste-based identification behind the jobs are twisted and mostly based on need and economy-centred. Now I move on to the other element of caste, endogamy.

6.4 Endogamy

Endogamy is common in many cultures and ethnic groups. The endogamy means here the caste-based marriages and the exclusion of inter-caste marriages. This was practised among castes in Jaffna and in India. During colonial and post-colonial times Vellalah families have had intermarriages within their kith and kin, and did not go outside their relatives or *pakuthies*[86]. The reasons concerned purity, identity maintenance, and thus not letting properties go outside the Vellalah's 'circle' since they were the ones with lands and properties. This practice was observed even by other castes, but not in a strict manner. Reliable statistical information on the frequency of mixed-caste marriages is unavailable in Jaffna. However, I am sure to say that inter-caste marriages are not very common and not very acceptable yet in Jaffna.

There is a relative tendency of acceptance of people from outside the Tamil ethnicity without knowing the background, but there is no acceptance from inside in cases where everybody knows who the person is and where he/she from. Many of the marriages have been cancelled when the parents of either spouse came to know that the caste of one spouse is different and lower than their own. In cases of mixed-caste marriages, the couples are almost always supported by the relatives of the partner who is lower than Vellalah or lower than intermediate castes. Many people in the field told me that since we live

[86] Literal meaning is a division, or region. There are some regions where the Vellalah had and would like to have intermarriages. This practice is now on the decline.

in a caste-conscious society we have to follow caste practices. The reason was that mixed-caste marriages will affect the children and even the grandchildren. When I tried to crosscheck this information with some mixed couples who had children with a hybrid caste identity due to inter-caste marriage, their reasoning was that the caste identity of the child is a bit difficult and tends to be opportunistic depending on the circumstances. One person told me that the caste identity of the child is decided based on the caste identity of the male since Jaffna society is patriarchal. Biology opposes endogamy, which by insisting on caste identity and forcing people to marry within their own caste, causes inbreeding and results in children with birth defects. One elderly Vellalah man told me that based on his mixed-caste marriage that he is pessimistic towards mixed-caste marriages and did not think, from his experience, that laddering up in the caste order is possible through mixed-caste marriages. Because of these mixed-caste marriages the offspring are the products of different castes where one is lower and the other is higher. These marriages produce a hybrid caste offspring(s) so that the proposed marriages of this kind are even further delayed as the daughter or son belong to a mixture of caste where high and low are mixed up.

If we look closer at the Vellalah status in the context of intermarriage there are several reactions to marriages with non-Vellalah. The immediate and primary reaction is 'isolation' or cutting off the relationship by the Vellalah parents' family. The mixed couples who often already know the situation leave the village, region or even the district. The parents of the girl or boy who eloped with the person of lower caste are looked down upon by the society; they isolate themselves and do not mingle with relatives or visit ceremonies as they did before. We can see that the Vellalah status identity of the parents is devalued by the public because of the eloped son or daughter. Vellalah parents and the mixed couple adopt a sort of hidden lifestyle. One of the mixed couples I met stated that the woman who is Vellalah began to talk with her parents after seven years but hid from the parent's neighbours on the request made by parents. The link was re-established due to financial needs of the mixed couple. Yet the parents of the Vellalah told the daughter "not to come with the husband who is lower than Vellalah". According to law, the daughter, as the only child, will inherit all the belongings from her parents, but she is not wanted or accommodated by her parents. The parents are afraid of the social stigma, despite that they, according to her, want to associate with their only daughter.

Fuglerud's study on Tamil Diaspora further confirmed that caste is one of the main factors of concern for Tamils in Norway. As he noticed in the process of marriage negotiation there are:

> three mechanisms among Tamils structuring interpersonal relationships in hierarchical orders; gender, as male superior to female, age, as the older generation superior to younger, and caste, as higher rank superior to lower. The union, which is the outcome of this process, is tangible expression of these hierarchical relationships, set within and validated by a larger cosmological configuration, which is explicitly replicated in the institution of marriage (Fuglerud, 2001: 201).

I interviewed five inter-caste marriage couples in Jaffna where Vellalah are mixed in as one of the partners. Three Vellalah women married to Karaiyar men and one to a Pallar, and the third one a Tattar (carpenter). Then one Vellalah man married to a Chiviar (palanquin-bearer)[87], and another man tied up with a Koviar. It was difficult when doing fieldwork to see whether caste, age or gender has superiority among these couples. The men who were non-Vellalah in the first three cases acted strangely to avoid facing me, perhaps because of the gender difference, but that cannot be taken as a claim for the argument on caste. One man was inside until I left home, the other one was not at home the time I visited, and the third one was with his kids in order to signal his lack of interest in talking with me. In the families where men were Vellalah, the men dominated the talk and the women were passive. Among the some mixed-caste marriages with non-Vellalah combinations, caste superiority plays a certain role when it comes to issues like social networking, family gathering, rituals, etc. A middle-age Vellalah woman who had a relative married to a non-Vellalah told me that in inter-caste marriages there is a tendency that the high-caste person always, regardless of gender, is dominant. I have a case history which supports the above statement.

> In the seventies, especially after my marriage, my life became different and my views changed also. I could see the rapid changes in the society too […]. In my case, I am Vellalah but married to a Karaiyar caste man. This is not normal in our society as you know? My parents were strongly opposed, they even threatened that if we moved to Jaffna they would kill us. I had decided to marry him although everybody refused to do the parental rights for the marriage ceremony. It is a big story… It took about ten years for my parents to start to contact us. The first time I visited my in-laws I was warned by my husband that I should adjust and their house would be somehow unpleasant and it was! The house was fully disorganised and the smell of fish[88] was everywhere. I organised the house in a particular way and told them that they better follow how I arranged it. One thing I understood was that they respected me because of my education. A big change was that I started to eat meat after marriage but, now I am vegetarian again and so is my husband most of the time …because now we realise that being a vegetarian is good for one's health and mind (Female, 52, 2005).

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[87] "Chiviar means literally a palanquin-bearer, and is an occupational name applied to those employed in that capacity". https://archive.org/stream/CastesAndSouthernIndiaVol6/TXT/00000396.txt

[88] She was vegetarian by birth.

This story further supports the assertion that the person from the higher caste, regardless of their gender, is dominant in married life. But this is not true in all the cases of mixed-caste marriages. I know a Koviar woman married to a Pallar man in the village I live in, but she is subordinate to her husband in several ways. However, these inter-caste marriages provide another indication that the persons united by marriage from different caste identities still retain consciousness of caste identity in their relationships. The woman who provided the narrative above told me that she still blames her husband's caste whenever she finds some sort of disorder at home. This can however be understood as the result of caste centred internalisation; caste comes to mind first to justify for the actions. The testimonies regarding inter-caste marriages, which the researcher has so far encountered, prove that the incidents are accidental in the sense if a couple falls in love, they elope or marry against the societal order or expectation. The narrative below was expressed by a person who was born out of wedlock between a Vellalah and Koviar.

> There is a reduction of stigma to a certain amount in caste in Jaffna. People have developed tolerance in common matters. Because of these things, there is a phenomenon of merging of castes, for instance the Vellalah and Koviar are now marrying and are seen as one caste (Male, 40, 2005).

This narrative presents another reality of caste in Jaffna which was previously sustained. People were not allowed to travel equally; touching depressed castes was seen to be impure; inter-caste marriages were very rare and those who violated this were severely punished – either they were killed or isolated until the 1980s in Jaffna. This rigidity is now very much relaxed but has not disappeared for good. Inter-caste marriages occurred during the militant nationalistic struggle on three levels. One level arose from the multiple displacements of people who were forced to live in close proximity regardless of caste, so that all sorts of people mixed together out of necessity, especially the younger generation which was very free and liberal. Second, in the educated circles, particularly among students and workers, due to frequent association in public places, these people would fall in love with and marry people from other castes. Third, the LTTE's attempts at making a caste-free Tamil society mostly encouraged these inter-caste marriages among the cadres as the examples for others in society. As always, opposition has come from parents of the partner from the higher caste and at least two cases I encountered proved that economic factors dominated caste identity, and that the wealthier person would dominate in conflict situations, which does not correspond to the caste ordering according to my data in hand. It can also be understood from the above narrative that caste identity or the background of a person is identifiable through the narrative one produces.

When the Vellalah migrated from Jaffna, the demand for dowry went up. Dowry (*seethanam*) is a cultural gift which is given by the parents of the bride to the groom when they marry (Tambiah, 2004; Fuglerud, 2001; David, 1973). It can be any amount of property or money and can be given even after marriage. As has already been noted, the Vellalah reproductive rate was low compare to that of depressed castes, and their emigration left Jaffna with a low ratio rate of men in relation to women. Moreover, the men who left Jaffna have their own demands and economic needs, etc., which caused the dowry to be higher. As a result, the Vellalah could not find partners for their daughters who attained the marrying age, so the Vellalah temporarily lowered their high expectations and tried to mix with Vellalah who they previously considered to be inferior to them. This tendency of accepting life partners from lower levels of the same caste in proposed marriage is common, even among all other castes in Jaffna, but it is a new thing in that it is now motivated by a lack of men and money. This is a great flexibility in the rigidity of the caste system in Jaffna. There are two relevant narratives below. One relates to the time during the war and the other to the post-war era:

> When 'dowry' became a big thing in Jaffna, caste rigidity became more relaxed and was not very much spoken about. Women from "low caste" could "marry up" if the dowry was big enough. The internal high and low also started to disappear (Female, 52, 2006).

This can be interpreted to mean that when economy becomes a barrier for a family wishing to settle its daughter, internalised, hierarchical mentality could be moderated. However, this does not mean that all who thought that they are of a higher caste moderated their caste identity in relation to the person of lower caste. Instead, there was relaxation in observing the internal ranking in general during war and post-war Jaffna. One more change happened in Jaffna with regard to finding marriage partners: there is a system of advertising daughters and sons who are about to marry in the local tabloid. Some papers have a policy of advertising the caste identity of the person and some do not. *Uthayan* which is a Tamil-language Sri Lankan daily newspaper, run by a managing director who is a Tamil politician and MP do have a policy not to advertise the caste identity of the person in matrimonial advertisements. Many Vellalah resented that this best-selling newspaper has refused to state caste identity in the matrimonial advertisements and that it is one more reason for the delays to Vellalah marriages. One mother of two unmarried daughters said:

> I went to advertise for my daughter in *Uthayan* and they refused to put our caste in the paper. I agreed to advertise with the absence of caste identity. Then it appeared in the paper

> and people started to call us to check whether my daughter is still unmarried/interested to marry. We said yes, but then we shared our horoscopes by posts; the next question was to ask about their village and the occupation of the parents. They said they live in Manipay[89]. When we asked about their caste background from someone who is Vellalah and lives there, they said this family is not originally from this village and their father is Vellalah and the mother is not a Vellalah. Then we gave up on this proposal, but you know it took almost a month to find this out. I'm a widow and have two unmarried daughters, think if just finding who they are takes a month, I don't think that I'll be able to find partners for my daughters soon unless God helps me (Female, 60, 2012).

An interesting observation presented by Thanges with regard to finding partners in the second and third generation diasporas:

> The Tamil diaspora is not free of this traditional matrimonial practice. When they look for a partner for their child, parents from the so-called 'upper-caste' backgrounds take extra care in finding someone from the same caste group. Even though the second generation follows certain principles and practices of their parents, they seem to get confused as to how they would want to deal with caste in choosing their life partners. There are many examples of broken relationships among the second generation diaspora due to the barriers created by caste (Thanges, 2013).

One very recent testimony came out from the second-year undergraduates of the University of Jaffna in November 2014 reveals that a caste match is the foremost expectation with regard to their life partner. Now I move on to the other element of caste, the purity- pollution continuum.

6.5 Practice of Purity

Ideas of purity-pollution are a universal phenomenon found in all known societies in the world (Douglas, 1966; Turner, 1967; Malkki, 1995). Purity of mind, body and soul is believed to be essential to approach divinity. Pollution taboos due to birth, death, menstruation and puberty, etc., are commonly observed by people, including tribal people, Muslims and Christians in India. Notions of purity and pollution are extremely complex and vary greatly among different castes and different peoples around the world. Dougles argues that "notions of ritual pollution and supernatural danger both are associated with the boundaries of identity and pressures towards conformity" (1966: 36). According to her, every social group has a system of classification which focuses attention on boundaries of the group, of acceptable behaviour relating to purity and to humanity. However, broadly speaking, high status identity is associated with purity and low status identity with pollution.

[89] A small suburb in Jaffna.

Caste dynamics are bound to the axis of purity and pollution but are also connected to other elements such as the division of labour, ranking and interdependency, etc. Purity practice exists only in certain issues and places, but the caste consciousness of them is very marginal, and in some instances, purity is observed with the absence of caste but more concerned with hygiene. For instance, people after visiting hospital take showers or baths at home for hygienic reasons. In this context, the caste dimension of purity is totally absent. This is not practised by all castes, and this has to do with people's level of education and knowledge. Showering after attending a funeral is a custom and practice among Hindu Tamils, and caste has not to do with it. In terms of pollution, due to childbirth or puberty or death of a family member, the purification is counted differently according to your food habits. Brahmins can be purified by the sixteenth day, vegetarians by the twenty-first day, but the rest of those who eat meat can only be purified after the thirty-first day from these events at home. This practice, *thudakku kazhivu,*[90] which constitutes a purification of the house and people, is still observed by many Vellalah and non-Vellalah in Jaffna. The caste aspect is absence here too – only the food habits are associated with less purity and more purity in this context. On the other hand, there is job specialisation: one can become a doctor, lawyer or engineer if one has the necessary education, but to become a Hindu priest you have to be born as a Brahmin. Vellalah, by following certain religious rites, can become *Kurukkal*, who can perform rites like Brahmins. But they are not called Brahmins instead they are identified as Kurukkal. The *Pandaram* caste is also allowed to conduct the rites in smaller, non-prominent temples, because they are mostly owned by other castes.

Purity-pollution as an element of caste is strong in India and is part of social reality in Jaffna too. Untouchability is the outcome of this principle, where persons belong to the untouchable castes in Jaffna were Pallar, Nalavar, Paraiyar, Ampatter and Vannar, whereas in India it is the scheduled castes that are despised by the higher castes. In Jaffna, un-touchability is still observed by some Vellalah families and Brahmins, including the Kurukkal, but in different ways. The observations in this regard concern a diverse range of purity existed in practice. By touching depressed castes, one becomes polluted; by letting depressed castes enter one's house the house becomes polluted; by letting depressed castes enter into a temple the temple becomes polluted; by letting depressed castes use the same utensils as the Vellalah, the utensils become polluted, etc. An observation from many Vellalah houses in the villages is that there are still separate vessels for depressed castes which are kept outside and the depressed castes are still not allowed to enter the house or to sit on chairs

[90] It means eliminating pollution; it is done through certain rituals.

unless under dire circumstances. If, despite caste stigma, a person in a friendship is educated, these caste based manners and behaviours are not observed at Vellalah homes, but Vellalah avoid inviting them home. If heavy furniture is to be moved from inside out or from outside in, depressed castes are allowed entrance on the condition that there is none else who can help with that task. One Mukkuva woman who cooks for a Vellalah house said in a casual talk that she found it strange that the house owner let the Nalavar woman touch the wet cloths to dry them, but not after they had been dry. Pollution is here connected with caste and water. Depressed castes in some villages in Jaffna are still not allowed to fetch drinking water from the well. But the irony in these two above cases is that in the first, for Vellalah women, water does not carry pollution, instead cleans impurity. However, in the second case, pollution can occur through water, so that depressed castes are not supposed to fetch water from the well. Purity and pollution practices are not exercised in the same manner by all Vellalah and non-Vellalah. The caste dynamics of the Sinhalese are often similar in their villages; for instance, having separate vessels for people of lower castes and making them sit on the floor.[91] One lecturer at the University of Jaffna began emotionally when I interviewed him on caste:

> I am not from Jaffna but I have been living here for more than fifteen years. Caste will be alive until there is such a change that a non-Brahmin can also touch God. Religion causes oppression and poverty. Now the status of caste in Jaffna is in 'dormancy', it can become forcefully alive or can remain this for some more time. What is purity? Are all Brahmins pure? Is their behaviour acceptable? (Academic, 47, 2006).

For him, caste is still more tied up with purity-pollution, as Louis Dumont stated in the Indian context. Dumont placed purity at the center of caste distinctions which classify people as inferior or superior (Dumont, 1975). When Banks studied Jaffna, he too found purity to be one of the four major features of caste in Jaffna (Banks, 1960). Maintenance of purity is still associated with the intake of food and drink, not only in terms of the nature of the food itself, but also in terms of who has prepared it or touched it. This requirement is especially said to be true for Hindus. Earlier, the Vellalah risked pollution – and lowered his or her status – if he or she accepted beverages or cooked foods from depressed castes. His/her status will remain intact if he/she accepts food from people like the Vellalah or Brahmin. This practice of purity is not as rigid as it was before, but there are Vellalah and especially young Vellalah, who do not eat or drink outside the home. At the same time, many Vellalah buy cooked food from the shops and public places where the cook's caste is unknown.

[91] This information was given by an academic at the Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya in 2008.

Purity is accounted for in the religious sense according to your food habits. Vegetarianism was from the beginning more bound to religion, not to caste. But eventually the Vellalah, as the proponents of Tamil culture and Hindu religion, accommodated it as one of their identification markers. The narrative below accounts for this:

> The present state of caste in Jaffna is like a 'sleeping lion' which can wake up again or die; probably there is less chance of it waking up again. Caste remains in Jaffna but at a different consistency, not as before. Last year we went to Kilinochchi[92] to stage a drama. I went with twelve actors. We stayed in a house and they gave us food that we paid for. Four of us didn't eat! They are young and educated. I couldn't believe this... I know that caste practices still exist on the personal level, but in public!! (Male, 45, 2006).

The above narrative portrays caste as a sleeping lion with an aggressive face, and in a negative sense evidenced its dynamic of purity in the public sphere in the act of rejecting having food from depressed castes. When the Vellalah-led, Tamil nationalist project began, the depressed castes were mostly workers for the Vellalah and only in the militant nationalist project dominated by non-Vellalah depressed castes did they become 'people'. The transformations charted here serve to underscore that purity was not considered a categorically ascribed status but, ideally, a status achieved through the will and agency of the collectivists of the Vellalah and non-Vellalah.

6.5.1 Temple Sphere

This theme, though it mostly reflects upon the Vellalah, is to be understood as a subset of purity as they relate to each other. Since a temple is meant to be a place for the protection of holiness with purity regulations, purity and temples are interconnected. As already stated, the Jaffna populace is mostly rural and they are predominantly Hindu. The village temple is the most important religious institution of a village (Ramachandran, 2013). "it reflects the hierarchy, the power-balance between groups living within the village, and is an indicator of the type of social mobility that is taking place within that society" (Sivathamby, 1995: 56). An analysis of the functions and actors of a temple would reveal the internal dynamics of caste, culture and religion in Jaffna society. The social order of an individual in Jaffna could be judged from the place he or she occupies in temple affairs and the place where he or she is placed in temples. My visit to one of the famous temples Valikamam West in 2004 in a HSZ revealed how people were placed according to their caste background. The temple was still managed by a Vellalah man who, in local

[92] Nerve centre for the LTTE; it can be said that they ran a *de facto* government there 1995–2009.

parlance is called *muthalali* (manager), but there is now an administration under his leadership. While some were allowed to sit around *koditham bam*[93], the rest were sitting outside the *koditham bam*. But even a few were standing next to the *moolasthanam*[94]. As we saw in the Vellalah's proto-nationalistic stage during the pre-independence period in chapter 5, Vellalah identity was more tied to the Saivite religion. The temple, as an embodied religious institution, reflects society. The Vellalah own temples; the Vellalah donate money, manage and donate land to temples; they still dominate Brahmins in temples and thus have more ritual and religious authority in temples. In post-war Jaffna, there is sort of a Hindu religious revival on three fronts. One front is a counter to Buddhism, which began to pledge and revives its activities in Jaffna after the war ended. The second is a counter to Christianity, which began to spread and mushroom. The third is that most of the village temples in post–war Jaffna have been developed mostly from the diaspora's money and it seems that there is a competition among caste-based village temples in terms of expanding the temples, the way of celebration and communication with the people, etc. This sense of competition is found more among non-Vellalah than Vellalah, and especially in communicating with people non-Vellalah dominated temples and churches mostly plays loud music to disturb the neighbour while Vellalah dominated and Brahmin owned play music in speakers mostly following the regulation of noise. The above narratives show how caste has returned to its comfortable position in Jaffna, but that sitting in that position is slightly different in the post-war period.

As I discussed in the background chapter, temple entry was a major issue in the 1970s with regard to caste in Jaffna. Many temples were closed for depressed castes until the late-1980s. Temple restrictions are still observed in some interior villages but through certain invisible barriers. For instance, in one village I visited a temple still dominated by Vellalah and Koviar, and due to the war there was a welfare camp with depressed castes near it. Some of them tried to go to temple to perform religious rites, but the devotees, who are mostly Vellalah, would, in the outer hall, receive the 'holy tray' from the depressed caste person who is willing to participate in the daily ritual, thus preventing him or her from entering and handing it over to the priest. I met a young Pallar man in his twenties working for a Vellalah house. I quickly built up a rapport with him and asked whether he goes to temples. His answer was "yes", but then continued "only during festivals". Then I asked whether

[93] Some temples are built according to the *Agamam*, which is a set of scriptures regulating the temple cult. Agamic temples will have *koditham bam*, a tall thick wall carrying the flag indicating the honoured god or goddess.

[94] Mulattanam is the innermost room where the god or goddess is placed; it is called a *garpagraha*, meaning 'womb house'.

he went inside. "No". Why? I probed. "My parents told me the god will not bear our presence inside and we'll become sick or die". One undergraduate boy wrote something similar in the survey: that when he checked with a depressed caste boy about the issue, the depressed caste boy responded that a relative of his went inside a temple and later died as a result of sickness. All of them believed that she died because she had entered the temple. These above last two stories support how the marginalisation is not only being enforced by the dominant group, but is also sometimes enforced by the marginalised themselves. In another temple, which is in a village situated in Chankanai division, a non-Vellalah girl was singing devotional music to god, but the temple administrators noticed this and brought a Vellalah girl to do it. This is a sort of indirect identity monitoring by the Vellalah in contemporary Jaffna. On the one hand, the depressed castes themselves want to maintain their identity and are afraid of moving away from their boundaries. On the other hand, the Vellalah have invisible and tactful mechanisms for separating and keeping their identity intact through new means and mechanisms in the temple space. There are temples which are Vellalah-owned[95] and owned by other intermediate castes, like the Koviar, Karaiyar so on, and some are clearly owned by the depressed castes. One Vellalah summed up the changes that took place in the religious domain in Jaffna.

> In the religious sphere, most of the temples are private; Brahmins are only kind of employed there. A committee system takes care of temple administration. This means that power is decentralised because it is shared by the Brahmin with others who live in the same village. However, this is only true for some temples and to some extent. I, for instance, manage a temple in Araly where low-caste people have their share of festivals, but I don't let anyone dominate me, I still have decisive power. Another general observation is that temple festivals are done wonderfully by the depressed castes who also contribute a lot in money. On the other hand they build their own temples and hire priests for rites. When they show new statues, they get happy and feel 'high'. This is transformation as I see it, because in the past they were not allowed to do any of these things. For them, it is a new 'horizon' to be inside the temples and to be allowed to participate in this way. The traditional purity-pollution practices are no longer in place in the temples (Male, 48, 2006).

The above narrative confirms the informant's self-projection of Vellalah identity in the temple and that his power is unhindered, but observes some changes around temple. When I wanted to crosscheck this with a temple priest, his response affirmed what the above informant said:

[95] Some temples in Jaffna are privately owned, some are committee-run and a few are owned by Brahmins.

> In temples, we as priests do the rites to god, the rest is controlled by the committee.[96] Sometimes we are expected to do everything on time, sometimes we are asked to wait for some important person or people, even if the auspicious time will pass. The committee plays the loudspeaker during festivals at high volume, but society blames us. We have been told by the committee that if we want to leave the temple, they can hire another priest. I think that for them, the temple and publicity is more important than religiosity and belief. I feel that they want to show their power over us (Male, 41, 2007).

Most of the public temples are open for everyone in Jaffna and people from depressed castes are increasingly attending religious rites and festivals. Furthermore, the Brahmin above shared his long-time observation that "depressed castes are the ones who are now very pious and more ritualistic than any others". On the other hand, Vellalah are going to temples less often in order not to be polluted by touching people from the depressed castes. One Vellalah woman in her fifties expresses it so: "God is omnipotent, we stay at home and pray and worship. It is not necessary to go to the temple. The temple had been a space creating the environment for concentration from distractions from family chores". Another Vellalah said, "I don't want to lose my chain or jewels by going to temples. Nowadays there are a lot of robberies at temple festivals". The above narrations support how the articulation of religiosity among Vellalah has shifted since non-Vellalah also articulate the arena the same way. Another informant told me that in places like Karaveddy and Uduppity, where many LTTE cadres come from, they still do not allow depressed castes to enter some temples. He pointed out that especially in one temple in Uduppity persons from depressed castes cannot fetch water from the temple well. One undergraduate confirmed this practice. Many in the field said that temples may let depressed castes enter, but they are not allowed to carry *pillai thandu*[97] especially from *vasantha mandapam*[98]. One informant pointed out that the temple is not an issue to discuss with depressed castes now, since there are new temples started by each caste in the villages. My observations in post-war Jaffna further confirm the above statement; due to some of this mistreatment of depressed castes in village temples, there is a phenomenon that each caste instead owns or builds temples attended mostly by people from a particular caste. Some of the above case histories revealed that caste order and identity is not only maintained by the caste in power, namely the Vellalah, but by depressed castes as well. In these ways, self and society are connected in an order and, caste identi-

[96] Some of the religious Vellalah together with some intermediate caste men in the village form a committee for the development and management of the temple.

[97] Wooden thick sticks that are used to carry god. This one especially is the first special movement of god from a large holy room.

[98] Large holy room where gods are seated and only priests are allowed.

ties are preserved and kept alive in some villages in Jaffna. Separately allocated festival rites for each caste within Vellalah-dominated temples are also another way of maintaining caste segregation and identity in Jaffna. "The mobilizations and investment of oppressed castes in the religious domain have, on the one hand, supported their efforts to live with dignity and respect on the other hand, they have reproduced and/or re-strengthened old caste-based religious identities in a new modernized society" (Thanges, 2014).[99]

Informants also told me that religious conversion to Christianity is on the increase among persons from depressed castes. One informant told me that the new religion gives a new identity, so that they can break free from the old system. Some Christian sects pump a lot of money into conversions and promise to emancipate people from poverty and oppression. The economic status of the converted is elevated and indicated through external symbols like clothing and new patterns of consumption. But the social statuses of the new converts being still the religious minority, are not eminent while living in the same village and they mostly associate with the same people. One woman who converted was frank in this regard and expressed the following:

> Many say that the Catholic religion does not practice caste. Is this true in Jaffna? No! Old wine has strong smell in a new glass. In fact there are separate churches for different castes or separate seats inside the church for different castes.[100] Some of the low castes believe that their status might change if they converted to Christianity, but what is this in practice? Christian fathers are caste-concerned and their churches are not caste-free; in our colloquial term *vaika veendia iddaththil vaiththal* means keeping them in place where they should be in position (Female, 48, 2006).

As was noted before, where you sit in either the temple or church still matters and indirectly reveals your caste identity in present day Jaffna. War left a flexible space as everybody went through similar experiences and had the same shelter or refuge when fighting and shelling took place. But one undergraduate (Male, 23, 2005) wrote that he could see that one of the temples where he had sought shelter during the war had caste-based affiliations inside. And some temples, after depressed castes, displaced persons had entered into them, conducted *sangapichekam*, which is a religious purification ceremony done in temples by many Brahmins sitting together. What these above narratives reveal is that changing the identification of caste identity or religion will not even help while they live in the same location, and meet and associate with the same people. Next I move on to the lifestyles of the Vellalah as one of the identification arenas.

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[99] https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/will-it-disappear-if-you-stop-talking-about-it-a-question-on-caste-and-ethnicity-in-jaffna/

[100] The Catholics are mostly of depressed caste origin.

6.6 Lifestyles of the Vellalah

The notion of lifestyle has come to loom over the context since it includes everything and means nothing at the same time. Hetzel and McMichael have convinced others with their book called *The LS Factor: Lifestyle and Health*, that "lifestyle includes diet, alcohol consumption, cigarette smoking, physical activity, and sexuality and reproductive behaviour" (Hetzel and McMichael, 1989). It is however a highly debatable concept among social theorists. Giddens, as one of the leading contemporary social theorists, suggests that the notion of lifestyle "implies choice of within plurality of possible options, and is adopted rather than handed down" (Giddens, 1991: 84). According to him, "lifestyle is more than about how to act; it is also about *whom to be"* (my italics). In other words, lifestyle is about identity. This is an active, creative even inventive element to lifestyle. Rather than being obedient, passive followers of fashion or tradition, people are perceived as self-conscious of the artificiality of lifestyles and can choose to don or discard them.

Embodiment of caste identity and its identifications in society were maintained via intrapersonal and extra personal ways. Just like culture, caste identity too has recurring, common experiences mediated by human-made products, such as tools related to farming, fishing and writing; and thus also learned practices such as being obeyed and being served which led Tamils to develop a set of similar worldviews about culture and caste. The identified external markers of caste, such as way of dress, speech, consumption and behaviour, are given special attention here. Berreman talks about assignment of personal identity through nonverbal signs such as "speech, dress and adornment, manners, lifestyle, and physiognomy" (Berreman, 1981).Several dimensions of the informants' comments are of interest here because they suggest how Vellalahness or Vellalah identity was socially constituted and experienced through their unique lifestyles. It is also a paradox to see how, with the total absence of cooperative sentiment of Vellalah collectiveness, the Vellalah identity is still maintained and continued in Jaffna. Below I highlight the many divisions among the Vellalah as signs of lifestyle dictating who one is to be before others.

6.6.1 Intra-Vellalah Divisions

Caste identification from an outsider's view is not explicit to the naked eye. However, it is possible that an outsider might detect differences among Tamils in Jaffna since they are still to some extent practiced in the villages. Unfortunately class and caste in Jaffna are also still parallel at some extent. The type of house one lives in as well as dress code, ornaments, cleanliness, verbal

skill and education somehow still send messages of caste identity. But these embodiments of caste identity can be flimsy and deceptive since these external markers of caste identity can be easily followed by all. When others to act like Vellalah, the boundaries between Vellalah and non-Vellalah are redrawn and become blurred.

6.6.1.1 Inclusive Vellalah Identity

Identity is semantically reconstructed in the mutual accommodation of the several dimensions of the identifications to one another. In the case of Vellalah identity, the present structural position of the identity was not constructed in a void but in relation to the past structural positions and the pragmatic concerns, inclusion of persons in the identity category. For David, the definition of a person as included or excluded regarding the collective identity is based on criteria such as these: "whether a person knows and enacts the precise behaviour expected of someone in the category, and whether the person can adequately distinguish subcategories within the identity" (David, 1973: 455). In the context of Vellalah, can a depressed caste who carries most of the identification markers of Vellalah identity such as good education, being a temple manager, clean, a social leader and a landowner be considered a Vellalah or become Vellalah in Jaffna? Theoretically yes, and many castes in the past have merged with Vellalah, but many in the field said no (casual talks 2005, 2006 focus group discussion, 2006). How the Vellalah articulate their identification arenas has been viewed by many non-Vellalah as a role model for best personhood. This is the process of 'sanskritisation' according to Srinivas (1998). This was achieved historically in two ways. One way was that some non-Vellalah, by adopting Vellalah identifications, merged with Vellalah; for instance the *Madappalli* and *Agampadiyar* castes during colonial times and *Thanaththar* into Vellalah in the twentieth century (in Sivathamby's term this is called 'merging castes'); and the other way was remaining within their origin of caste and accommodating Vellalah identifications. The former was done during late-colonial and post-colonial times, and the latter is underway and active in contemporary Jaffna (Hellman Rajanayakam, 2004; field observations, casual talk, 2015). Merging of castes is not a new issue; it has happened since the time caste came into existence in Jaffna. A well-known Tamil proverb widely used in caste studies is about how a *kallan* (thief) may become a *maravan* (hero) and then through his respectability he develops into a member of the *Agampadiyar*[101] and by slow degrees become a Vellalah. The proverb expresses like this: *Kallar, Maravar, Kanatha akampadiyar mella mella vandu Vellalar avar*. There

[101] One of the castes existed during pre-colonial time in Sri Lanka and is now said to have merged with the Vellalah.

are notes on pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial writings regard this. This kind of differentiation within the premises of caste identification confirms one more finding: anyone can become a farmer, landowner, temple manager or politician, but to become a Vellalah, which had been collectively and uniquely constructed through external and internal cultural circumstances, takes time (cf. Strauss and Quinn, 1997: 96). According to Adigal, in theory anyone can become a Vellalah, if they elevate themselves through conduct which is intelligent, loving and gracious (Raman, 2009: 88). This argument further supports the local saying that caste is the result of character, not that character is the result of caste (*kunathalaveyakum kulam, not kulathalaveyakum kunam*). Vellalah mostly hold the latter position – that caste is the result of character, since certain chosen good virtues have been tied to and carried along with Vellalah identity. Bourdieu's discussion on habitus as how it is structuring structures reflects well in caste practice as caste takes shapes in new (post)modern social institutions.

Depressed castes are very keen to buy lands, build cemented houses, build their own temples and have *agamic*[102] rites in temples in Jaffna when Vellalah lose interest in these and their interests shift to other activities like buying computers, sending their children abroad, etc. (Male, 39, 2006). The development model of depressed castes is often a copy of and follows Vellalah since Vellalah are the better models in front of them. Srinivas, coined this process as Sanskritisation in the Indian context of caste transformation. Its relevancy is applicable in the Jaffna context and similarities can be seen between the development patterns of depressed castes and the lifestyles of the Vellalah. Sanskritisation is the process by which "castes placed lower in the ordering seek upward mobility by imitating the practices and rituals of the higher in ordering" (Srinivas, 1998: 54). It is a human tendency to follow fellow human beings which appear to be the best models ahead of them, rather than those that are afar or out of sight. This perspective purporting the lower castes' imitation of the higher castes has been criticised as it further propounds the existing Vellalah values and hegemony as followed by non-Vellalah (Visweswaran, 2010). This concept, sanskritisation addressed the fluidity of caste identity and thus castes' desires to constantly upgrade and improve themselves. It is a positive development that the external markers of identity which people carry and which is based on caste have much faded away in Jaffna, especially in the urban settings, but the consciousness of caste as the legacy is only alive in discursive practices. I will now move on to the intra-caste disparities which

[102] The *Agamas* are a collection of Sanskrit, Tamil and Grantha scriptures chiefly constituting the methods of temple construction and creation of idols, the means of worshiping deities, philosophical doctrines, meditative practices, attainment of six-fold desires and four kinds of yoga.

are one of the identification markers of Vellalah dynamics, not only among the Vellalah but also among other castes.

6.6.1.2 Exclusive Vellalah Identity

There are discourses about the Vellalah showing that they have internal divisions. The Vellalah live in several parts of Sri Lanka, such as Colombo, Vavuniya, Kilinochchi, Batticaloa, Trincomalee and Mannar, but the Jaffna Vellalah consider themselves as the most superior of all, perhaps since the history of Tamils in Sri Lanka began in Jaffna and Jaffna is the place that had historic contacts with South India where the Tamils, according to history, came from. Some villages and *pakuthies* in Jaffna where Vellalah live are graded according to the Likert Scaling as 'best', 'better', 'good', 'not so good' among the Vellalah themselves. Marriage alliances have been and are looked upon through this similar grade of network system. My first (and unsuccessful) focus group discussion gave some clues about how the Vellalah are ranked internally and on what basis. The basis for the ranking was given as: 1) based on their descendants, 2) wealth and properties, 3) purity level, 4) occupation,[103] 5) colonial links and jobs, 6) based on non-mixing with non-Vellalah castes/among their kith and kin. It is still observed that there are people among the Vellalah who uphold clear lines of separation by saying that they are higher because they have a good education, or that they have been well-off since historical times, or they have clear links with the ancient royalty, or they are vegetarians by birth, and/or they are temple managers, they have 'shares' (*upayam*) in popular temples, their family tree[104] did not have any mixture of 'other' castes, they are major landowners, etc.

Apart from these, one internal sect among the Vellalah is called the 'Christian Vellalah' which is Protestant and constitutes a very small percentage compared to the 'Saivite Vellalah', but they are more influential in many spheres such as in education and priesthood. All of them do not maintain vegetarianism. The Christian Vellalah, as a sub-group with good skills in English derived from the post-independence period, would prefer to call themselves 'creoles'. These were converted during colonial times and emerged as a vigorous counter-voice to Saivite Vellalah. There was a discourse in the early 1980s in Jaffna that these Protestant Christians, together with NGOs, were fuelling the Sri Lankan conflict and Tamil nation-building (Sivathamby, 1995). The Protestant Vellalah think that they are higher in the sense that they are more

[103] This occupation doesn't mean here the division of labour which stems from caste. Occupations which Vellalah hold or held have their ordering in postmodern Tamil culture. For instance, doctors, engineers, lawyers and teachers are respected jobs and hold high value in the social hierarchy.

[104] The Vellalah proudly explicate their family tree after the death of a family member; many other castes now also follow this custom.

cosmopolitan, while on the other hand, the Vellalah Hindu elite does not treat them as being of the same level as they are seen to have changed their religion and lost their roots in Tamil identity. When maintaining and shifting its boundaries, identity is a continuous exclusionary process of marking who is 'us' and who is 'them', even within groups (Barth, 1969). Catholic Tamil Christians are great in number compared to the Protestant ones, but they are mostly of non-Vellalah background.

Another division among the Vellalah is the 'poor Vellalah', who do not have strong personal finances or sound education like the other Vellalah, but who are relatives of the so-called influential Vellalah, which cut off contacts with them. There are two terms for high-Vellalah and low-Vellalah in the local parlance. The former is called *uyar kudi Vellalah* and the latter is called *Veelzh kudi Vellalah*. The testimony of an interviewee will serve as an example of the above type of Vellalah.

> But among the Vellalah, some are at the same level as before without having experienced economic progress. Their relatives might be well-to do, but they don't care or support this family thinking that they are a burden for them. This is another pathetic [situation]! If it is a social function they'll be invited as relatives, but they'll be like a poor relative in a rich man's wedding. Many of the 'original'[105] Vellalah left Jaffna a long time ago and the ones still living here are intermediaries and low-level Vellalah (Male, 45, 2005).

One observation was made in a house where a poor Vellalah woman works as a maid. As I was casually speaking with her, she revealed that most of her relatives do not have contact or want to communicate with her because of her work, thinking that it is a disgrace to their caste identity. Some relatives do not want to say she is their relative. She does not in any way feel scandalised by her job, and she said that she has more contacts with even depressed castes than her Vellalah relatives. We can see here that economic alliance is more dominant than the caste alliance.

We can see from the above narratives that the Vellalah on the one hand form more inclusive identities in many ways while on the other hand, there are divisions among them. One is carried out by disregarding internal ranking among themselves for the sake of something such as settling a matured girl (difficult to marry) for a groom who is lower in the caste order. Second, the other intermediate castes like Koviar, Madappalli, and Thanaththar began to adopt Vellalah identifications such as becoming vegetarian (all Vellalah are not vegetarians), more religious, etc. Third, the non-Vellalah are merging into the Vellalah without knowing who adopted Vellalah identifications as being

[105] This term is often used colloquially to mean 'best'.

Vellalah. Theoretically, when Vellalah began to give up some of their carried identification markers by eating meat and consuming alcohol, the face value of Vellalah identity (which had been high) deteriorated; and thus the Vellalah identity in the normative sense is more inclusive. In one sense, the number of Vellalah is on the increase or the collectivist of Vellalah has expanded, but it is clear that there is no "corporate sentiment of oneness among Vellalah regarding identity on the collective level" (cf.Geertz 1993: 114). Though they are seen as one category of people, there are still clear internal hierarchies as was noted above.

One woman from a depressed caste (Female, 34, 2006) told me that her family does not maintain relations with its neighbours who belong to the same caste, because they are not clean or religious. There are many Vellalah still in Jaffna who do not drink or eat from other Vellalah or pay visits due to this internal ordering. Now I move on to other lifestyle of the Vellalah.

6.6.2 Character, Food, Reproduction of Vellalah

The construction of the Vellalah mind and behaviour were considered as unique and associated as the good/natural qualities such as foresight (*nunnarivu*), compassion (*irakkam*), intelligence (*arivu*) and generosity (*ikai*) (Raman, 2009: 80). This has been compared with the notion of farm cultivation. Maraimalai Adigal compares the notion of culture from the root of 'cultivation' (the term 'culture' in Tamil is *panpaadu*, while to prepare the land for cultivation is *panpaduththal* in Tamil). One Vellalah, who gave up agriculture, said it like this, although the persons he described are very few nowadays in Jaffna and are considered inferior.

> A farmer has to prepare the land first before he plans to plant something. It has to be fertilised, seeds be sown, irrigation done in a timely manner, pesticides must be used, it must be protected from animals, you have to wait until the harvest, collect it, and market it. It is a long process; hence it consumes above all lot of patience. It is not the same for fisher folk as they go to the sea, make their catch and sell it ashore. The farmer, through his cultivation, cultivates his mind too. He'll not be in a hurry to do something. He plans, invests, works hard and gets the benefit with patience (Male, 53, 2005).

The above narrative further confirms the claim that the cultivated norm of the Vellalah, derived from the long process of agriculture, is carried on as the implicit identity of the Vellalah. Although the outer domain has changed a lot, there are an increasing number of non-Vellalah engaged in agriculture in Jaffna and who will adopt the qualities of the Vellalah and their own. As has been stated above, caste identity is sometimes not explicit, due to complicated, illusive external markers in the public space. However, the inher-

ent identity of Vellalah has continued in various places. Many Vellalah elders state that the Vellalah's implicit values are made explicit whenever there are interpersonal interactions between different castes in the public space. In the narratives from Vellalah elders, this is seen as the Vellalah's power to continue dominating others, and cannot be acquired easily by others (Male, 62, 2006). It is how the hegemony of Vellalah is reproduced and how it takes different shapes in the narratives.

Vellalah civilisation is both archaic and it is a community governed by reciprocal relationships by food and diet (Raman, 2009: 79). Baldaeus' (Dutch priest) notes that the Vellalah were mostly vegetarians and consumed dairy products. Rasanayakam further noted, religion had an inroad into this food identity and was one of its roots. It is important to note that vegetarianism does not necessarily relate to Vellalah identity, but that Vellalah, who are mostly Hindus and the dominant elite of the society, represent the best values for a person in Jaffna. Navalar has written several books, one of which is on how a real Saivite Hindu should live and was mostly adopted by the lifestyle of Vellalah and Brahmin. The rest of the castes were not considered as 'Tamils' within the institutionalised and even legitimised caste set-up of 1800s. This book emphasised vegetarianism, teetotalism, cleanliness and purity of Tamils. These were considered as referent points for the lifestyle of the Vellalah and, in one sense, as the markers of Vellalah identity. It was considered part of their identity and status. Most of the Vellalah began to eat meat and some remain 'Tuesday and Friday'[106] vegetarians. However the small portion of vegetarian Vellalah sees them and are seen by others as less-polluted and higher in the position. One informal talk I had with a science teacher, who is a vegetarian Vellalah and who moved from Jaffna to the capital, said this:

> I don't believe that caste carries characteristics but with some knowledge of psychology I strongly belief that parental characteristics are passed on to the child. For instance, if the parent is an alcoholic, he would have low self-esteem and it, of course, affects the self and psyche of the child. You know the man Nadesan[107], no? Don't you think that he drinks? Because I like the girl who studied at my school, and I thought that I could ask her parents for my son's sake. But I'm a bit afraid that if father drinks, I don't want to take a daughter for my son from a family where somebody drinks (Female, 48, 2006).

The above narrative in general does not confer an image that the Vellalah are expected not to drink, which they are, but nowadays many of them drink at least sometimes on social occasions, but they are rarely heavy drinkers. Drink-

[106] These days in a week are considered religious days and many Hindu Vellalah, or even non-Vellalah, maintain vegetarianism and are more religious.

[107] Name of a person.

ing moderately is considered as a well- mannered behaviour among the westernised[108] Vellalah[109]. University boys as student custom learn to drink inside the compound in almost every function, which is considered as an acceptable student social behaviour. It depends on each individual whether they continue this habit, or partake in it on occasion later in life. It came up in the informal talk that a Vellalah who has a good education, who has a good family background and who is religious, will not continue with this practice or even touch alcohol.

Vegetarianism is a kind of food habit which links Vellalah identity and their power via this unique habit of food identity. But this does not mean at the same time that vegetarianism is adhered to only by the Vellalah. Brahmins and some temple-related castes like Kurukkal, Pandaram[110] and Veerasaivar[111] remain vegetarians in Jaffna. Religion is mentioned here to function as a supportive interpretive stance. A Saivite Hindu is supposed to be a vegetarian as is expected according to Siva Siddhantha. The depressed castes were treated outside the temple, and not considered as Saivite Tamil; hence they ate meat and adopted local deities.

In villages, some Vellalah houses have a small place of worship on their outdoor property. Each house will also have a room called a *swamiarai*, which means 'room for god or worshiping'. Sometimes a tree will have been worshiped for a long time within the house's compound. Many Vellalah houses have a small deity called a *Bhairavar*/*Vairavar* within the compound of the house or near it. The Vellalah households living near the deity go and perform *pongal* on a special day of the year. Bhairavar is the fierce manifestation of Lord Shiva which associated with annihilation. This should serve as the base of another study of investigation into why many educated Vellalah started to worship this deity as their intimate and family God. According to Sivathamby, during Dutch rule, when public Hindu worship was forbidden, this kind of worshipping at private compounds might have started and then gradually become the basis of a new deity and a place for worship for more than one family (Sivathamby, 1995: 78). There are also caste-specific deities, such as Annamar,

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[108] 'Westernised' is articulated in the local sense that people who had been exposed to other than Tamil culture especially in European or American cultures and adopted the behaviour and manners from other cultures (Hoole, 1997: 324).

[109] They are mostly Christian Vellalah.

[110] According to Thurston, "Pandaram is in fact, a class name rather than the name of a caste, and it consists of priests and beggars" (Thurston, 2001: 49).

[111] Veerashaivism is an independent religious system derived from Saivism the worship of Lord Shiva. Veerashaivism is based on the concept that god resides within oneself. This god is to be worshipped not simply by any rituals, but through honest work, equality, social justice, sharing, respect for nature and compassion for all living beings. http://www.india9.com/i9show/Veerashaivism-80968.htm

the God of the Nalavar and Pallar; Mutalikal for the Karaiyar; Periyathampiran for the washermen; and Virumar for the smiths.

The core ethic of vegetarianism is based on *ahimsha* (non-violence). But in reality the history of Tamils in Sri Lanka, and especially in Jaffna, bestowed that the ones who maintained vegetarianism, Saivite Tamils, were not supposed to harm others, yet they were violent towards depressed castes and did most of the injustice to them under the cover of being prisoners of social structure and protectors of Tamil culture. Lately we have been able to see that the Vellalah tried to keep up a good image of themselves in society by adopting situational identities such as those attracted to modern education and the contemporary consumerist culture. In this respect, it is relevant to contextualise the notion of lifestyle as the strategic choice of the Vellalah in order to show who they are (Giddens, 1991: 84). The above-mentioned accommodated lifestyles, especially during the post-colonial and post-independence periods, renegotiated and shifted the Vellalah identity in multiple ways and desegmented the hegemony which the Vellalah had monopolised.

> Now in matters of marriage only the Vellalah try to be careful. This seems funny to me because I see some internal contradictions in them in terms of morality or purity. Having sex secretly with a person from a low caste was acceptable; when it comes to marriage they strictly observe the caste system. I can say it this way: as far as primary needs go, they don't care; only in respect to secondary needs is caste a concern. The Vellalah now lead an isolated life, their power has collapsed, but still they live in an illusion (Male, 43, 2005).

There were ambiguities and discussions rose over the way in which the Vellalah claim their Vellalah identity. For instance, in terms of their values over morality, it was questioned by even the Vellalah themselves. Moreover, this presents Vellalah identity as having a dual face: one for public and one for private. The value for each is different in the sense that value, which is shown publicly, weighs more than the one shown privately. Some caste practices such as that which is mentioned in the testimony above are no longer in existence, but they are deeply internalised by people. Such things also briefly trace the 'internal'[112] divisions within the Vellalah which cannot be seen alongside the internal ordering of the Vellalah because it is more implicit. The narrative given above is an example of how Vellalah perceive themselves in terms of morality towards sexuality. Considering sex primarily means that there was an indirectly accepted practice during colonial and even post-colonial that the male Vellalah, especially landowners, could have sex with women from depressed castes who came to perform domestic service in Vellalah homes. Many

[112] 'Internal' means here that the Vellalah's inexplicit internal values are not unanimous among the Vellalah.

women of depressed castes bore children of a secret Vellalah father. The novels and short stories that came out during the 1960s and 1970s took up this issue (Sokkan, 1974; Thenian, 1973; Daniel, 1995; Kanesalingan, 1994). This practice completely disappeared later on, especially after the militant nationalist struggle, because of the fear of the LTTE.

One more Vellalah lifestyle to comment on is their reproductive pattern. There is a wide range causes for the Vellalah's demographic identity transformation, such as population growth, technological and occupational changes, economic and political shift (David, 1977). For instance, Vellalah migration from Jaffna left space in public sectors, in leadership, in politics and in religious dominance for non-Vellalah to enter into. This sort of change arrived not only because of the Vellalah's emigration, but also due to the shrinking Vellalah population which resulted from their reproductive style. The narrative below further confirms this:

> You can see the birth rate is lower among the Vellalah than the non-Vellalah. On the other hand, low castes who contributed to war personally lost many of their family members, even though you still see the cultural pattern that low castes are very likely to have more than two or three children and the Vellalah stop at one or two, and very rarely more than three. My cousin, who had one child when I asked why she didn't want to have more, told me that she wanted to have one because she wanted to prove to society that she is fertile, that's all (Female, 39, 2006).

One of the common lifestyles of Vellalah identity was that many educated Vellalah[113] families remain childless, or only had one or two children, some had unmarried sons and daughters of adult age living at home. This is very common among educated Vellalah families, and the Vellalah families with little education also have a tendency to have less than four children. When I enquired this topic in the focus group discussion, women were quiet for some time and responded that they think that childbearing and child-rearing are major tasks and there are other things to be done in life. Another woman responded that Vellalah women set higher demands for themselves than women from other castes and expect these demands are met. The Vellalah, being seen as the highest in society, cannot deviate from the expectations society places upon them. This attitude leaves many Vellalah women and men unmarried. Continuous inbreeding has caused various kinds of genetic deformations in Vellalah families as well.

[113] It is still used by some Vellalah to point out to other Vellalah, who are educated and have wealth and property (land) but who have no children or only one, that 'God has given wealth and education but what they will do with those?'

Another way to explore this theme is by looking at the so-called 'decent' attitude mostly found among educated Vellalah on certain issues. Although they have opportunities to show most of the status identity markers of society, they negotiate their status identity as being 'modest and simple' so that it can survive societal trends, but the ones who have 'new money'[114] will show of their status identity as much as possible through the newly ascribed identities. It cannot however be generalised to the Vellalah only; it goes for both Vellalah and non-Vellalah. The field examples of this study supports that most of the Vellalah do not want to show their wealth, except through their 'education and modesty' or humbleness, but many of the depressed castes wish to show their new money through new jewels, clothing, housing and consumerism, etc. It is even supported by the local saying that "a pot with full of water never stumbles, less than that will stumble". One Vellalah teacher in post-war Jaffna told me that we should cleverly show that we do not have anything because of the frequent robberies in present day Jaffna. When I approached a depressed caste female she questioned whether anybody can find differences in terms of caste in public in cases when the depressed castes are well-dressed. The same day in the evening she herself expressed the contradictory story that she, based simply on a girl's appearance at hospital, could know that she belonged to *Periya Idathup pillai* – a high-caste family. The Vellalah used to show off jewels; now depressed castes who have all want to show them off. In a way, this shows how the Vellalah's external identifications have shifted as newcomers have entered into their lifestyle arena which was previously imagined to be exclusively the Vellalah's. This tendency of shifting the Vellalah's external identity markers is followed by the non-Vellalah tending to associate with the sanskritisation process as was stated above. Taking over the patterns of identification of the other decreases the unease of those who seek to copy it because 'they' became 'us', but the situation remains prone to tension as there is a constant negotiation of meanings between the meanings we construct for ourselves and those others construct for us. This dialectical tension requires active negotiation of meaning.

6.6.3 Vellalah View on Other Castes

This above-mentioned theme highlights how the Vellalah behave treat themselves and the non-Vellalah in Jaffna, since self-identity is not only the reflection of how we appear to others but also how we identify others. Many divergent and chorused voices of the Vellalah arise here in respect to how the

[114] This means the ones who became wealthy recently by going abroad or getting remittances from relatives abroad.

Vellalah view depressed castes. Identifying others is, in a way, a feature of identifying ourselves. It also reflects how caste identity along the us-and-them axis is (re)negotiated and continued in Jaffna. The Vellalah and certain intermediate castes have a frequent saying that whatever happens in society that is not good is blindly blamed on the depressed castes: *athukal appadithan*, which means 'they are like that'. In Tamil, *athukal* is used only for animals and objects (*akrinai*) and not for people (*uyarthinai*). Depressed castes are denoted by *avaiyyal*, which is another word for animals and objects. Yet *avaiyal* is better than *athukal*, although both are used for animals and objects. The following case in point clearly shows the antagonistic character of the Vellalah who programmed this image of depressed castes into reality.

> Earlier we noticed that 'low-caste' people mostly wore 'gaudy' colours. Psychologists say the children prefer 'gaudy' colours, because they are attractive. So I think in terms of mental maturity both are on the same level. Now in the globalised, world attractive colours have become more fashionable and especially youngsters like to wear them. So should we say now that the youngsters are turned to children because they choose colours like children? People are not perfect and everybody makes mistakes, but when they are done by lower castes we, knowing the background, blame the caste background and say that 'this is his caste character'. If we don't know his caste, we don't relate this (Male, 45, 2005).

This is one of the personifications of caste identity which was noticed by the Vellalah and realised by few. The preference of colours of cloths is one of the indicators identifying caste. In general, light colours are thought to be more decent and more modest than dark colours. Doctors wear white, religious priests wear white and school uniforms are white in Sri Lanka. Buttery colours, light blue, white and black are considered decent colours. In the Western context, colours that are very light are thought to be more decent. Crimson, parrot green, orange and yellow are considered 'gaudy' colours which were even labelled as 'low-caste colours' in Jaffna. For children, these colours are not an issue regardless of caste background. In terms of mental maturity, children and the depressed castes that wear gaudy colours are seen to be on the same level, but when adolescents wears the same colours, it is perceived to be fashionable. The identification of colours with caste identity is forgotten when the youth act in this way. Perhaps if it is continued by adults, it will be considered as a matter of mentality or a reflection of individual colour sense.

In addition to above reading of the behaviour, one's way of talking also can be an identification marker of caste identity. Public space is a common place where the Vellalah can scrutinise non-Vellalah and vice versa. The vocabulary usage and the manner of expression are still clear demarcations of caste identification in Jaffna. Just like there are regional dialects, there are caste dialects. The Vellalah argument in this regard is that intellectual refinement can be

achieved faster than the cultivated manners which are formed and founded since your early upbringing. Many Vellalah who work in the public sectors have expressed that depressed castes can sit and work with the Vellalah in public places, but their behaviour, vocabulary and caste inferiority reveal who they are and where they come from. In a daily life, depressed castes frequently use somewhat vulgar vocabulary, such as *sanian,* which is the name of planet Saturn in colloquial Tamil. It is a religious practice to worship all nine planets in Hindu temples. Saturn was supposed to be most harmful and black, so that in order to get rid of the sin bestowed by Saturn, especial rites are performed. Saturn is called *papakirakam*, which means 'sinful planet'. People are scolded by this sinful planet. *Moothesi* is another vulgar word. This is a Hindu term based on a goddess of bad luck. Usually used by mothers to scold their children, but it is most frequently used among depressed castes. There are goddesses for wealth, knowledge and bravery in Hinduism. If someone is envious of someone else's wealth, knowledge or bravery, the respective goddesses will leave the person and the goddess of sleep, Moothevi, colloquially Moothesi, will capture him or her according to Hindu belief. *Pundai* is a vulgar word for the female genitalia and *ozhkka*, meaning sexual intercourse is a vulgar term frequently used by alcoholics from depressed castes (Female, 48, 2007). These words are very rare or relatively absent in Vellalah homes.

> Low-caste people, when they have a government or even non-government work, have a dominating mentality. I think this is due to the long-term oppression by high castes. Vellalah are still in power, but in different way than before. Many of the high posts are held still by them, in education and economically they are at the top. Nobody can break this set-up, because they still own Jaffna's land. In the educational sectors, the high caste interacts with the low caste because of necessity, not because they honestly want to. Even now, we can identify the low caste, by their way of talking, colour of their dress and some other behaviour too. This becomes known to others when they are in public. During the election we can see many of the candidates are from low castes because the majority of the Vellalah have fled abroad (Male, 56, 2006).

The arguments above account for a strong superior-identical stance of the Vellalah in contemporary Jaffna, despite all the transformations which have occurred in the domains of economy, education and politics (external). Hence once can be sure that caste identity is open through external caste identifications. Another excerpt from a narrative confirms the Vellalah view about non-Vellalah – that Vellalah are civilised but the depressed castes are not; besides, it takes ages to change these structures. Some narratives given by the Vellalah on the non-Vellalah have been interpreted by labelling the inferiority complex as an inbuilt character trait of the depressed castes. Some stated that it was because of the wrong upbringing, while others state that depressed castes are

poor, unclean, have no manners, are less-educated in terms of politeness, that they are ingenuine, ungrateful, not duty-conscious, or do not respect laws. Some Vellalah expressed that some of the Vellalah stop going to temples since the presence of depressed castes is high in popular temples.

> I don't deny that some of them have got the awareness, education and money but at my working place I know or can guess the caste background of almost 90% of the people (Female, 41, 2007).

Identity maintenance is controlled within each caste group. Yet each caste's identity is heterogeneous and has intra-differences. For instance, my husband and I were in a depressed caste camp where the LTTE had organised a war film and propaganda speeches in 2007. The place of choice was a large issue in Jaffna among caste-conscious people. I had many doubts about the Vellalah's presence there, but a few came and stayed outside the camp from where they could watch the film. Much of the propaganda was chosen to be presented either in local libraries or schools where many could attend. It was targeted at the 'camp people' who were to be a recruitment base. The researcher, being from the same village, knew many of the people and their caste backgrounds, and even the public behaviour. It is a local custom to give tea or other drinks to the visitors, and since the event had been organised by the LTTE, this custom was even more important to upholding the past, the custom of not accepting drinks from depressed castes (for reasons of purity-pollution) was strictly maintained. It is still strictly observed in the villages. As far I know, in villages many houses still have separate containers for drinks and food which are kept for depressed castes outside the houses. Surprisingly, some of the depressed castes, out of dire poverty, come to Vellalah houses and accept these offerings. The audience attending this event was given tea and everyone had some. The irony is that the researcher very rarely drinks tea, but had to drink it due to caste sensitivity and accepting tea from depressed castes works as a barrier breaker. Some of the Vellalah who were outside of the compound were however curious about me since I was Vellalah. They wanted to know whether I had accepted the depressed castes' offer. It became an issue the day after in the village because a woman who had married a foreigner came and spoiled the Vellalah children. Furthermore, my behaviour causes me trouble in relation to my family's dignity; that is it affects my parents and my sisters, etc. It is also important to note how Vellalah are treated by the depressed in the village settings. While all were sitting on the floor for the speech and the film, we were offered chairs. This is also because my husband was a foreigner. But there are several things in this respect that require social judgement. The above testimony indicates further that marginalisation is not the result of being margin-

alised, but that the depressed castes marginalise themselves. The deep-seated internalised inferiority among some of the depressed castes does not override or re-register the new changes to the caste system, instead it is shown in the public places, for instance in the act of providing chairs for Vellalah and not for their fellow caste members; or for instance, when the depressed castes are invited to work inside a Vellalah home they are very hesitant to enter, hesitant to sit on chairs, to go to Vellalah houses for special ceremonies/festivals, to receive small favours and so on.

In social conflicts, particularly between the Vellalah and the depressed castes who work in the paddy fields, or at home when arguments arise, it is a local custom in Jaffna to use caste names, especially the depressed castes' names, in order to degrade people. This deeply hurts and humiliates the entire collective of the lower caste. In arguments, the person of higher rank always verbally abuses the lower caste person in order to silence them, even if the lower caste person is not offendable. In times of inter-caste conflicts, intra-caste frictions are forgotten and the whole caste collective can unite for confrontation. However, for unknown reasons, this collective sentiment is high among depressed castes and intermediate castes and not at all among the Vellalah (Female, 38, 2006).

6.7 Concluding Remarks

As a conclusion to this chapter, the narratives accounted by Vellalah in terms of general caste transformation in Jaffna produced through many metaphorical phrases like 'prisoners of social structure', caste is alive like 'fire under the ash', 'sleeping lion', '*thear* (the holy vehicle for God) didn't move' signified that caste is still alive in the minds and in discourse, yet accepting the fact that Vellalah external identification markers are blurred, and hence weak. Regardless of age and education, in Jaffna society there is a general opinion among people that caste is a given. It is still observed in friendships, networking, finding accommodations, providing jobs, attending ceremonies, marriages, etc. Though mostly having dislocated populations due to three decades of war and displacements, the villages in Jaffna have new mechanisms manipulated by the Vellalah and other upper-castes which serve to find out/identify people by caste. So far, depending on the informant's age and caste, the changes to the caste system are perceived as being either temporary or permanent. Caste-based occupation is mostly reshuffled according to the new needs and situation of society. But older caste structures remain in the villages due to institutionalisation. The meanings associated with depressed castes and Vellalah have shifted, but almost all the narratives circulate within the us-and-them dichotomy. At the margins of this, a few narratives bring up the perception

that marginalisation is the result of the marginalised themselves. Merging of castes has occurred, but in post-war Jaffna castes want to retain their identity even while caste imitation is taking place. There has been a certain relaxation in inter-caste marriages, but this relaxation is not found in proposed marriages. Thus marriages joined by inter-caste marriages always blame the partner from the lower caste for whatever problems arise. Purity based on caste is very rarely observed and practised, except in some houses in the villages. Caste-based identity and development is more focused and oriented in the religious organisations instead.

As my findings have shown, the Vellalah have at many times, shown their situational identity as a better survival strategy, or have acted as the societal elite exerting their power over others, or have used others for their intellectual articulations or mobilisation. What comes out clearly from the narratives on caste among people in Jaffna is that caste is not only related to the day-to-day life but is explicitly connected to how people perceive themselves and others. On the other hand, the identification premise concerning internal divisions within Vellalah identity demonstrates that along the lines of religion, wealth and education there are internal boundaries to Vellalah identity in present day Jaffna. With regard to the lifestyles of the Vellalah, many gave up vegetarianism and teetotalism, which were previously practised as typical markers of Vellalah identity. On the whole, the themes presented in chapter 6, outline the image of the moral community of the Vellalah in relation to the elements of caste at several different levels. These themes also describe a contemporary order of things, persons and relationships. It has also been proven by making history of Vellalah implied inevitably the unmaking of non-Vellalah history. In addition, this chapter, via the study of Vellalah caste identity, documents the social order in Jaffna and traces the overall (national) Tamil identity in the greater order of things.

7

Militant nationalist Struggle, Caste and the Vellalah Identity

7.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapter I analysed the major elements of caste such as division of labour, endogamy and purity-pollution in general, with a special focus on Vellalah and also especially on how the lifestyles of the Vellalah were (re) negotiated along with multiple factors within it. Vellalah identity is there scrutinised in a less-politicised power arena. My purpose in this chapter is to examine Vellalah identity in relation to the militant nationalist project, particularly the militant separatists struggle dominated by the LTTE. Vellalah narratives towards the LTTE have not yet been articulated in any research. I try to answer my third research question in this chapter on *how did the militant Tamil nationalist struggle and the LTTE relate to caste in general and the Vellalah in particular?*

The emergence of the LTTE from a non-dominant group, from below, is seen here as the emergence of a 'new elite'. The LTTE claimed to be the sole representative of the Tamil people at least for a short time between 2002–2004, but was never accepted as such by all Tamils in Sri Lanka. The LTTE's militant project was regional, temporary and covered, at different times, only Jaffna, Vanni, and part of eastern Sri Lanka. The LTTE, however, had *de facto* a political power in Jaffna from 1990–1995 and a state structure[115] which was parallel to the Sri Lankan government. Although there were other official and unofficial, political and apolitical bodies among the Tamils who exercised power and control, the LTTE became the most powerful and most influential

[115] The economic strength of the LTTE was not enough to cater to the needs of the people who were under their territory. The Sri Lankan government supported the people as their citizens, including the LTTE, but certain materials were banned in Jaffna because they could potentially be used for ammunition.

militant movement of all the militant groups and thus had the greatest effect on the collective memory of Tamils in Sri Lanka and Tamils living elsewhere. They were on the one hand famous and on the other hand notorious. This chapter focuses on the complex and intricate connections between the militant nationalist project of the LTTE and the internal caste dynamics of Tamil society. The chapter also discusses the idea of equality which was articulated by the LTTE in the context of the highly hierarchical Tamil society.

The first section of this chapter describes how the Vellalah-led nationalist project was replaced by the LTTE militant nationalist project. It considers the cultural and political shifts in age, class, education, generation and caste in the leadership of Tamils. Thereafter the chapter goes on to describe how the LTTE strove to form a caste-free society based on social justice, and how caste as a cultural practice of Tamils influenced the LTTE and was also articulated by it. The reflections on changes to caste-relations made by the LTTE, including the views of non-Vellalah, are interwoven into the themes and sub-themes of this chapter. Finally, the third section of the chapter discusses Vellalah positions in relation to the LTTE and describes how my informants formulated and debated the question of Vellalah identity and the LTTE's political programme of caste abolition.

7.2 Militant Youth and the Relocated Vellalah Leadership

I start off by highlighting some relevant points to relate this chapter to the current context in Sri Lanka since it has been six years since the war ended. One is that the government of Sri Lanka only in May 2009 shattered the militant network of the LTTE; the financial, cultural, political and propaganda networks are not yet totally identified, deactivated or dismantled by the government of Sri Lanka. Second, it is relevant to (re)examine how the relationship between the pioneers of Tamil nation-building with Vellalah identity and also the LTTE with non-Vellalah will rearticulate themselves in the post-war context. It should also be mentioned that what's unique to this study is putting the focus on how the LTTE – as an agent of change and as an informal new elite among Tamils – contributed to the changes in caste practice while many of the other writings on the subject focus on how caste has contributed to Tamil nationalism (Pfaffenberger, 1981, 1982, 1990; Hellmann-Rajanayakam, 1994a, 1994b, 2004; Sumathy, 2001; Ravikumar, 2002; Bandarage, 2009). Scholarship on Tamil nationalism has been criticised because there has been little effort to trace the background of the emergence of the militancy (Hellmann-Rajanayakam, 1990, 1994; Wilson, 2000; Sumathy, 2001: 15; Ravindran, 2004; Hoole, 1997; Daniel, 1996). When the militancy erupted, there was a dearth of scholarly studies on the origins of militant Tamil na-

tionalism due to mainly two reasons. One is fear of the gun culture and the other was the difficulty of finding reliable information about a rebel group like the LTTE. A few studies by Sinhalese, foreign scholars, or Tamil scholars who lived abroad are available (Hellmann-Rajanayakam, 1994, 1998; Bose, 1994; Daniel, 1996; Sumathy, 2000; Ravindran, 2004; Swamy, 2003; Hoole, 2001, 1992; Bandarage, 2009; Balasooriya, 2013; Biziouras, 2012). Under the rubric of an imagined Tamil identity, internal frictions and exclusions among Tamils in terms of region, caste, or religion were suppressed so that the vibrant ethnic bipolarity appeared to be between the Sinhalese and the Tamils. Ethno-national conflict became an academic 'hot theme'. A new phase began in the late-1970s when the Tamil nationalist project and its history was partly taken away from the hands of elite Vellalah nationalist intellectuals who were mostly upper-middle class and in their fifties and sixties. The elite Vellalah-led nationalist project was perceived both by the Tamil Vellalah and the depressed caste youth as opportunistic collaboration with the Sinhala-led government (Wilson, 2000; Hoole, 1992).

Youth groups emerging in the late-1970s were mainly centred in two places of different social backgrounds – one in Jaffna University and the other in Valvettithurai, a fishing village, well-known for smuggling from India in the northern part of Jaffna peninsula (Stokke, 2006). The youth – who were directly victimised by the standardisation policy in 1973 which ended Tamil domination in higher education – were mostly comprised of Vellalah mathematics and science students who felt that the Vellalah Tamil national elite in parliament did not do anything to protest this policy or the rising youth unemployment (Wilson, 2000; Wickramasinghe, 2006). The youth from Valvettithurai with very basic education were mainly affected by caste injustice in the socio-cultural space of Jaffna and were angry with the Vellalah Tamil national elite who upheld caste distinctions behind the scenes. They opposed the older generation of Vellalah and blamed the Sri Lankan government for unemployment. Relations between these two clusters of youth were violent. The Vellalah group was beaten back and a group centred in Valvettithurai became dominant. The Valvettithurai group emphasised radicalism, faith in violence, and vernacular-based leadership (Ravindran, 2004; Wickramasinghe, 2006; Stokke, 2006). This phase is a critical juncture in Tamil nationalism where we can see a new segment of society entering into the Tamil nationalist project with a different strategy and focus – rather than there being two sets of nationalisms (Stokke, 2000: 294). This youth nationalist project was militant in outlook, and still reflects and has repercussions in Jaffna's society and its people. On the other hand, this project was accompanied by several changes dissimilar to the previous nationalist project and unfamiliar to Tamil political culture which have to be mentioned here.

First, FP and the TULF were engineered by educated, conservative Vellalah, and the struggle was based on constitutional politics. Non-violence was to some extent a part of the Vellalah identity. They remained merely parliamentary politicians. The militant-led project was revolutionary and took to violent armed struggle. Karaiyar caste identity was equated with both the militant project and with violence. The majority of the cadres of the LTTE were from the Karaiyar and other castes connected with fishing. Warriorship was ideologically connected to Kshathriya status in the Varna hierarchy which represents power and violence.

Second, the old national Vellalah elites who were educated lawyers and businessmen were based in Jaffna and Colombo (Thambiah, 1986). Among the LTTE, all the top leaders were non-Vellalah high-school drop-outs from lower-middle class families based in Jaffna (Hellmann- Rajanayakam, 1990). The education, caste identity and class background of the Tamil political culture changed.

Third, as Bose (1994) mentions, there is a clear generational turnover in the composition of the Tamil political leadership. Young men in their twenties had partly replaced established politicians in their fifties and sixties as the popular representatives of Tamil politics and struggle. With regard to this shift, Fuglerud remarked that the idea that "older people have more superiority than the younger ones" was changed by the militant nationalist project (Fuglerud, 2001: 201).

Fourth, the Vellalah nationalist project was led by the parliamentarians who were a bilingual (English-Tamil) intelligentsia, whereas the militant youth were Tamil vernacular-centred (Ravindran, 2004). Thus, this transition to political power among Tamils is remarkable in terms of generational factors, caste identity, class, education and language. In addition, the quality and character of the nationalist project shifted to a radical and violent mode. Significantly, the Vellalah were equated with the old elite, and their values were challenged.

By highlighting what type of nationalism emerged as well as how and why, I wish to underline that there was a deep dissatisfaction with the political culture among the educated and ordinary young Tamils, and thus as a result there was a radical transformation of the elite and the transition of power in Tamil politics. I'll now shift my focus on how both the Vellalah-led nationalist project and the non-Vellalah-led militant project articulated caste in their party programmes differently.

7.2.1 Caste as an Agenda in Tamil Politics

Caste abolition had been a point of the platforms of all Tamil political parties

who were and are on Sri Lanka's political scene. There was a consensus, at least in official politics, that caste among Tamils should be eliminated. Caste had been politicised and used for electoral politics, though not as much as in India. I present a very recent narrative which comes from the general parliamentary election held in 2015. One of the former MPs from the TNA (Tamil National Alliance), who had much influence among Tamils, was mentioned in an e-paper in the following way:

> As for xxxxxxx, my former journalist friend told me that he will finish last on the last. He is considered an import from Colombo even though his parents were from Jaffna. My friend told me that a further issue is that with an entrenched caste-based politics of Jaffna, xxxxxxxx not being one from the Vellala caste will be a big issue for him.[116]

The FP and the JYC were dominated by Vellalah had caste abolition as one of their party planks. The LTTE also had this plank, and the EPDP, which won in local elections in Jaffna in August 2009 after the defeat of the LTTE, targeted internally displaced camp people (IDPs), who are non-Vellalah and depressed castes, as their voter base. The CP played a relatively major role in the 1950s and 1960s in trying to eradicate caste in Jaffna, but was not fully accepted by the people of Jaffna.

The JYC made some attempts[117] towards caste abolition and social justice in Jaffna, but this association was inspired by Indian nationalist politics[118] and followed India's lead (Kadirgamar, 2004; Hoole, 1992). Kadirgamar illustrated the bond between India and Jaffna as:

> The turbulent happenings in India filtered into Jaffna through the leading English language newspapers from India. The educated Jaffna youth of that day read, discussed and were deeply influenced by what was happening in India. The very proximity to India and ties of language, religion and culture between people of Jaffna and India, and especially South India, make the bonds between the two peoples strong, and travel across the Palk Straits for a variety of reasons—pilgrimage, education, employment and conferences (such as that of the Student Christian Movement and Young Mens' Christian Association) —exposed Jaffna youth to the rapidly growing Indian nationalist movement and the freedom struggle (2009: 211).

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[116] Read the comment by Naga on 13 August 2015 at 2:56 p.m. Reply at https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/immediately-rescind-sir-desmonds-appointment-sumanthiran-tells-govt-2/

[117] Attempts to introduce equal seating in schools in Jaffna were made by the JYC but the Hindu conservatives and the Veda Agama Sangam, a Hindu organisation was vehemently opposed these (Kadirgamar, 2004: 12).

[118] For more details on the Tamil Congress, see "Jaffna Youth Radicalism : the 1920's and 30's" 2004, by Santhasilan Kadirgamar, a conference paper on Sri Lankan Tamil Nationalism conducted by International Center for Ethnic Studies (ICES), Colombo, Sri Lanka.

This proves that even among the Vellalah youth leadership there were those with a liberal outlook and progressive attitude towards caste. But their genuine consciousness of the nature of caste oppression is unclear and thus they are interpreted within the same framing being the elite.

In 1976, the TULF adopted the so-called 'Vaddukkoddai Resolution'[119] in which one of the declarations states that "in the state of Tamil Eelam caste shall be abolished and the observance of the pernicious practice of untouchability or inequality of any type based on birth shall be totally eradicated and its observance in any form punished by law." This declaration was later adopted by the LTTE in the law of Tamil Eelam.[120] The TULF Vellalah-led nationalist project had also made some attempts to show how keen they were towards caste equality but this mostly remained a utopian ideal. There were but several reasons that prevented the Vellalah national elite from engaging genuinely with caste injustice in Jaffna. On the one hand there was a fear of losing support from the majority population (which was 50% Vellalah) if they acted against dominant caste norms. The elite themselves supported casteism as it benefited them in multiple ways and enabled them to be in power. On the other hand, the depressed castes were still not regarded as real 'Tamils' in Jaffna in the 1970s because they were mostly illiterate and considered impure. Tamil identity then had a restricted meaning and was only bound with Vellalah caste identity (Pfaffenberger, 1994).

After the LTTE's militant nationalist project entered the Tamil political scene, a change of political agents challenged caste dynamics and rigidity differently. Partly this was because of the LTTE's pragmatic aims. While the representation in the leadership changed, it automatically upgraded the social status of the depressed castes that were repressed by the Vellalah. A small comparison of the Tamil national consciousness is worth mentioning here. Nationalist consciousness among Tamils, when it was articulated by the Vellalah, was loosely bound to education, region and caste. An us-and-them dichotomy emerged via region, caste and different education levels between the Vellalah-led nationalist project and the LTTE among Tamils in Sri Lanka. The ideal is the united national identity, but in the LTTE's project, Tamil nationalist consciousness was more consolidated. It is also true that in the militant-led project, a certain number of educated Vellalah wanted to distance themselves from the project. The nationalist claims and the counter reactions expressed by the dominant Vellalah elite to the government of Sri Lanka were unsuccessful through non-violent means, so non-dominant, non-Vellalah youth without

[119] http://www.sangam.org/FB_HIST_DOCS/vaddukod.htm

[120] E. Pararasasingham, Head of LTTE judicial Division, Tamil net 30 October 2003 at http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=79&artid=10277

much education took a leading role over time and re-formulated and re-mobilised Tamil nationhood through radical means which was coupled with the counter-reactions coming from the Sinhala dominated government.

7.2.2 Leadership: Vellalah Descent and Karaiyar Ascendancy

Leadership is one of the identification markers of Vellalah identity. It has been pointed out that nearly all the militant groups which established themselves from 1972 onwards originated from youth organisations of the TUF, later renamed the TULF (Hellmann-Rajanayakam, 1994: 42). It is ironic that many of the militant nationalist projects are mostly non-Vellalah dominated, but all were nurtured by the TULF which consisted of Vellalah. Valvettithurai was at the centre of mobilisation for two reasons. First it had the tradition of resistance against the state, and second, it was dominated by the Karaiyar caste with which the Vellalah have had frequent clashes historically (Stokke, 2000). According to observers of caste in Jaffna, the Karaiyar were the only caste which could compete against Vellalah hegemony. It is undeniable that informal social networks which overlapped with caste identity in Jaffna helped the LTTE become the most powerful among all the militant movements (Stokke, 2000: 299). About thirty-seven[121] of the militant youth groups around the university were comprised of Vellalah (Wilson, 2000: 126; Hellmann Rajanayakam, 1994: 42). Later, when the government began harassing these groups, many became secretive or non-operational as some members were arrested. Because of the internecine clashes among these groups reflected in personal cleavages, the Vellalah national elite as well as Vellalah youth militants were assassinated by the LTTE, some emigrated, and the leadership dominated by Vellalah was transferred to non-Vellalah, particularly the Karaiyar. The LTTE emerged and survived as the most powerful and dominant militant group (Sumathy, 2001; Daniel, 1996; Hellmann Rajanayakam, 1996; Ravindran, 2004; Hoole, 1992; Swamy, 2003). It is evident that these two different political elites of the nation-building projects supported different groups among Tamils, and neither of them could unit Tamils.

With regard to Smith's, Bruielly's and Hroch's emphasis on the role of national intelligentsia/elite/historians, there were Vellalah intellectuals and historians who were shaping the history of Tamils during the militant nationalist project (cf. Bruielly, 1996; Hroch, 1996; Smith, 1996). Those narratives were politicised, used for political counter-dialogue and argument in multiple forums by the national and local elite who were mostly Vellalah. So

[121] Wilson records around thirty-seven militant groups among Tamils (Wilson, 2000: 126) and Hellmann-Rajanayakam records around forty-two (1998: 42).

while the political power transferred to non-Vellalah, the power of knowledge remained with Vellalah; thus the militant project by and large in the 1980s was mostly stimulated by Vellalah. Put another way, while the ideological current for the Tamil nationalist project was fed and strengthened by the Vellalah, those were activated and militarised by non-Vellalah, particularly in the LTTE. An important aspect of this militant nationalist project is that a few scholars with non-Vellalah backgrounds traced and linked a heroic Tamil history to justify violence for ideological as well as military purposes (Sivathamby, 1989; Schalk, 1997; Sivaram, 1992; Whitaker, 2007). History or Tamil heritage[122] was reinvented, and new ideological connections were constructed through these narratives. These narratives on the other hand, advanced the caste identity from Vellalah to non-Vellalah particularly those of the Karaiyar or Mukkuvar (fishing castes) and tied them up with the Kshatriya – kings and warriors with heroic Varnic roots. This in a way left a social impression upon Tamils in Sri Lanka that they were living in an age where the weapon was mightier than the pen. In the local elite understanding, the Vellalah who mastered the pen were replaced by those who mastered martial skills – the fishing castes and depressed castes. It left a feeling of animosity among Vellalah on the whole; it was particularly intense among local and national Vellalah elites who were educated and disempowered socially and politically. Wilson further supports this:

> This Karaiyar leadership presently enjoys the confidence of the majority of people in Jaffna, including the majority of the Vellalah, but a mediatory intervention by a foreign government would probably have checked their rising influence, not only in Jaffna but also in all other Tamil areas. A free election could result in a victory for the Vellalah (Wilson, 2000).

Wilson, being a Christian Vellalah, had internalised the Vellalah worldview and was not ready to accept the external reality which was against Vellalah hegemony. This can be generalised to most of the educated Vellalah, their familiarity towards the leadership of the LTTE and the embodied power exercised in their life-world. On the other hand, the Northern Provincial election held in 2013 proved that the majority acceptance of Vellalah leadership. Thanges' article further confirms this: "following the defeat of the LTTE in May 2009,

[122] Daniel claims through a semeiotic formulation that heritage constitutes a Tamil disposition toward the past, not the history. For him, "heritage is a sign of possibility that needs no actualisation to make it real and that no number of actualisations can exhaust. With history as a design, one begins with the idea that without a past to realise there would not be a consciousness of a past; with heritage as a scheme, one begins with the idea that without a consciousness of the past there would not be a past to be a consciousness of". According to this argument, for him the former describes a Sinhala disposition toward the past, the latter, that of the Tamils (Daniel, 1996: 28).

in a scenario where Tamil resistance shifted to non-violence, the Vellālar became dominant in electoral politics as they did before the emergence of Tamil militancy in Sri Lanka" (Thanges, 2014).[123]

The LTTE's success in mobilising the masses behind their struggle was due to the lower-middle class and depressed caste background of their leadership (Hellmann-Rajanayakam, 1994: 28; see also Wilson, 2000; Daniel, 1996; Sumathy, 2001; Stokke, 1998; 2000). It had very deep repercussions for Tamils, especially Jaffna Tamils, who had been following educated Vellalah leaders who were mostly lawyers, with wide-ranging political knowledge. Vellalah antipathy towards the social background of the LTTE has not yet been articulated in any research. The Tamil militant project suppressed all emerging factions and didn't acknowledge the value of the dissent among Tamils. The leadership transition to the LTTE resulted in factions among Vellalah themselves based on their political beliefs and personal attachments with the LTTE. As many of my informants noted, Vellalah who had already been in the parliament were marginalised or silenced; some later became 'puppets'[124] for the LTTE. Those who were politically active often left the country, some still continued to support the LTTE ideologically, but not with the same vigour. At the societal level, some sort of leadership vacuum was sensed by the local Vellalah elite who sustained their power, but understood the dilemma of their attachment to electoral politics. Some Vellalah supported the need for violence but it is unlikely that they welcomed the Karaiyar leadership. Many persons from the Vellalah national elite seated in parliament were assassinated by the LTTE, other paramilitary groups, or the government. There was also widespread talk among Vellalah that most of the LTTE's assassinations were either deliberate or *de facto* killings of Vellalah and not based on political differences or the wish to eliminate cleavages within the movement (casual talk, 2005, 2006). These assassinations began in 1975 with the ex-mayor of Jaffna, Alfred Duraippa, who was killed by the LTTE; continued in 1989, when TULF Member of Parliament (MP) Amirthalingam, was killed, and was followed by the killings of ex-TULF MP Yogeswaran in 1989, ex-TULF mayor Sarojini Yogeswaran in 1998, ex-TULF mayor Pon Sivapalan in 1998 and ex-TULF leader Dr Neelan Thruchelvam in 1999.[125] As a 50-year-old Vellalah informant put it, the generational clash was over the image of the Tamil leadership. Another Vellalah male in his sixties spelled this out:

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[123] For the full reading of "Will it disappear, if you stop talking about it? A question on caste and ethnicity in Jaffna" by Thanges, Colombo Telegraph, 21 June 2014 https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/will-it-disappear-if-you-stop-talking-about-it-a-question-on-caste-an d-ethnicity-in-jaffna/

[124] In its political connotation, 'puppet' means that the political voice is represented for somebody but not for the person or the party he/she represents.

[125] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_assassinations_of_the_Sri_Lankan_Civil_War

> Respect is a feeling which comes out when someone has admiration for someone because of their qualities. We had leaders who had been educated with sound political knowledge in the past. Thus, they were all middle-aged men and moderates. Now the 'boys' (with a smile) who lead the Tamil struggle are not educated and can't say what happened in the past to us, they just learnt how to handle guns and became skilled with them. My mind will not accept them as leaders (Male, 61, 2005).

Below I return to the theme of Karaiyar-Vellalah friction, however, this is seen as a dissident line of analysis within the literature on Tamil nationalism. It is also very important to point out that Vellalah-Karaiyar tensions are not experienced by ordinary people in villages where social space is still segregated.

7.2.2.1 Karaiyar-Vellalah Frictions

According to Thambiah, "Karaiyar-Vellala rivalries which were less acrimonious in the past because they did not directly compete during British times have ironically resurfaced at the time of the political mobilization of all Tamils" (Tambiah, 1986: 104). The budding animosity probably began during the British era, and stiffened in post-independence times. This theme emerged in several writings on Tamil nationalism regarding the denigration of the leadership of the LTTE. It is known among Tamil intellectual circles that there was a clear caste perspective behind each text. While Vellalah narratives downplayed the Karaiyar leadership[126] of the LTTE, scholars from the Karaiyar or other fishing related castes elevated the caste identity of the Karaiyar (or even the Maravars, an ancient Indian warrior caste). Hence, these modern constructions of leadership identity were boosted by connecting violence with heroism from the classical times of South India (Sivaram, 1992; Sivathamby, 1984).

The pattern of contemporary families of Karaiyar and other fishing related castes are of two types: one is where the parents still engage in fishing and the children are educated, another is where the family has totally given up fishing and engages in only education and other economic activities. It is because some have education and economic power that they can compete with Vellalah in administration and other activities like building temples, having land, etc. Another historical reason is that fishing communities who had/have their settlements mostly on the coast have been influenced and were easy capture by the colonial powers, especially the Portuguese who converted them to Catholicism; they also mastered English and could compete with the Vel-

[126] Michael Roberts has done a wonderful study among the Karava caste among the Sinhala showing the rising influence of Karava elite in a Goigama dominated structure (Roberts, M, 1995). In a response to a review of this study, Roberts explains that "The structural relations, within which the Karava lived, as they (the relations) altered over time, were central to the entrepreneurial successes of some Karava" (Roberts, M, 1995: 365). It would be interesting to study and compare the similar caste among Tamils called 'Karaiyar' and its solidarity, identity and development since quite a similar phenomenon flourished among them too.

lalah. Hellmann-Rajanayakam, a German who married a Tamil likely to be a Vellalah from the old elite, too, brings up the long-standing friction beneath the surface between the Karaiyar and the Vellalah within the modern militant struggle. For her, the militant movement gave the Karaiyar a chance to assert themselves against the Vellalah on their own terms.

It was specifically the war that forwarded a new elite and a new leadership from among the disadvantaged groups and thus the Karaiyar leadership was indeed seen as a war-time measure, not meant to be accepted into peace-time. According to Hellmann-Rajanayakam the "Jaffna Tamils might accept them [the LTTE] as their body guards, but not as their rulers. Vellalah leaders will not willingly give up their central role to a youthful Karaiyar thought to be inferior" (1996: 138). For the late political analyst Sivaram[127] who came from a fishing caste background, "Tamil history is a struggle between two opposing forces, one associated with Vellalah landowners and their claim for high caste status, and the other associated with fishing communities and their presumed Kshatryia ancestry" (Sivaram, 1992). This image of struggle is reflected in most of his writings as an ongoing ideological discussion about the Tamil militant project and Tamil national identity. The testimony below shows how this clash was ideologically expressed in an educated circle in Jaffna. The narrator is a Vellalah woman who works in higher education, who is married to a Karaiyar.

> You know, we say the Vellalah is the highest caste in the hierarchy, but only one-third of our island is land; two-thirds are sea which means that the area for fishing is larger than the area of agriculture. Thus many of the Vellalah have given up agriculture and turned to white-collar jobs. We had a belief that working night-time is bad and imagine all kinds of bad behaviour so that we did not value fishing or the related castes [...] also in terms of ritual purity they are considered impure because they kill fish and killing is a sin according to our Hinduism. Now everything is changing [...] most Vellalah eat meat and do night-time work, especially abroad. Do we consider them as 'low caste' because of that? (Female, 52, 2006).

This narrative highlights how Vellalah identity has been shifting. Apart from no longer engaging in agriculture, Vellalah also eat meat and do night-time work in hospitals and abroad. The last question in this narrative highlights despite the changes happened and caste stigma has shifted in many ways, the discursive power of Vellalah identity remain intact. It is one of the arenas of Vellalah identity indicating the inner mentality of the Vellalah. Yet though many external carriers of Vellalah identity have shifted, we must still ask why and how has the Vellalah (caste) identity endured?

[127] http://www.tamilnation.org/forum/sivaram/920901lg.htm

The social order of Jaffna centred on the Vellalah was marked by a monopoly on education, leadership, religion, economy and politics. The depressed castes were mostly dependent on the Vellalah and were mostly peripheral. The fishing castes stayed away from this network of interdependency owing no services to anyone, becoming economically independent, entitled to slaves, property and other privileges. Especially during the time of the Jaffna kingdom 1215–1624 CE, the fishing castes were the "indispensable adjuncts in the administration of the land" (Perinpanayakam, 1982: 27). David's categorisation of castes in Jaffna also counted the fisher folk as unbound in the sense of having only an independent and contractual relationship with other castes (David, 1976: 199). Hence, he accepts the classification of the Vellalah as Sudra and the Karaiyar as Kshatriyas in the Varnic scheme. Pfaffenberger claimed in his celebrated study on *Caste in Tamil Culture* that the Vellalah are Sudras and the Karaiyar are Kshatriyas (1982). This Varnic reordering of the Vellalah was contested and one Jaffna Vellalah scholar's reflection indirectly reveals how this placement in the social order was not well-received by the Vellalah:

> The caste identity of a person can diminish in the future because of these rapid changes but I doubt if this seriously will affect the profound feelings of the people. I want to say one more thing that is important. Pfaffenberger in his book, *Caste in Tamil Culture* stated that all warriors are from one caste called 'Kshatriya' and are treated even above 'Sudra'. But in ancient times there was a special, particular caste born to rule belonging to 'royal' castes and it could order all other castes during war to protect the territory or invade neighboring territories. They are the ones he meant by 'Kshatriya' but not all of the warriors who engage in war would be 'Kshatriyas'. I have an elderly male servant who is a Koviar. He accepts his place in the society and I like this (Academic, 54, 2006).

This narrative provides a sense that the Vellalah had not yet developed a mental shift towards a changing social order in which they were not at the 'centre' and didn't have hegemony as before. We should note that this account is from an adult who belongs to the first generation of those who were fully entrenched in Vellalah caste consciousness. It can be understood as the durability of schema (cf. Strauss and Quinn, 1997: 93) or in Bourdieu's notion of habitus where some values, norms and cultural practices endure for a long time, sometimes for one's whole life. Part of the reason is that "cultural understandings are durable in the individual and they rest on neuronal connections that are not easily undone" (Strauss and Quinn, 1997: 89). There are plenty of accounts and observations of Karaiyar or other fishing castes that now perform services for Vellalah, as well as of poor Vellalah who now engage in domestic service for other Vellalah for their livelihood. The Vellalah, though they realise the strengths of the Karaiyar, still feel that they are violent in the Christian or Hindu religious sense, and continue to consider them inferior. When the

Tsunami struck the Jaffna coast, mostly populated by the fishing castes, an old Vellalah-vegetarian woman (a small minority among Vellalah) who resides securely in the centre of the village happily expressed:

> This is a punishment given by God to them for killing fish. *Arasan andaruppan theivam ninddarukkum*[128] […]. You know they don't respect us now because they are becoming rich and have everything like us today (Female, 64, 2004).

The above two Vellalah narratives on Karaiyar can be seen as a Vellalah justification for avoidance of castes competing with themselves, and as also providing discomfiting evidence challenging the Vellalah worldview.[129] While cultural meanings are not fixed or static, neither are they constantly revised or contested; rather the internalisation of casteism is durable and not easily transposable (Strauss and Quinn, 1997). Vellalah social and political isolation in the latter stage of the Tamil militant project and their mass emigration can be seen in this context. It illustrates how the reconstituted social milieu was unfavourable for the Vellalah when they expected social respect based on caste position to continue as before. Sinhala columnist and journalist Mahindapala[130] blames the entire Tamil nationalist project for masking that Vellalah simply want to continue casteist practices and hegemony over others (Mahindapala, 2009).

7.3 Caste Identity as Background for Militant Groups

According to Wilson, no less than thirty-seven Tamil groups existed in early-1980s and their members fled to India for training under the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), India's external intelligence agency (Wilson, 2000: 126). A huge vacuum still exists in the research and scholarship on Tamil nationalist history about how and why the emergence of so many youth movements among Tamils in the late-1970s was possible. It is important to note that all groups were from Jaffna. Five, namely the LTTE, the PLOTE, the TELO, the EPRLF, and the EROS became significant, while some merged with other groups, and others fell apart due to internecine rivalries. Caste consciousness played an important role in the emergence and identification of youth militancy among Tamils (Daniel, 1996; Sumathy, 2001; Wilson, 2000; Hellmann Rajanayakam, 1994; Stokke, 1998). Though the militancy

[128] A colloquial proverb says the king will punish immediately, but God takes time.

[129] See more in detail on negative social schema in A Cognitive Theory of Cultural Meaning by Strauss and Quinn, 1997: 91.

[130] http://sinhale.wordpress.com/2009/08/06/the-revolt-of-the-privileged-vellahlas-part-ii/
http://sinhale.wordpress.com/2009/08/05/the-meaning-and-the-power-of-the-vadukoddai-resolution-part-1/
http://www.lankaweb.com/news/items04/060504-2.html

includes all castes, it is still generally understood by people that particular movements were dominated by a particular caste, as the LTTE had Karaiyar leadership (Wilson, 2000; Hellman-Rajanayakam, 1994; Daniel, 1996), while the PLOTE and TELO were distinctly Vellalah-oriented organisations (Wilson, 2000: 127). Another Vellalah informant expressed the view that at the beginning, the leader of the PLOTE, Umamakeswaran, maintained caste divisions and maintained Hindu Vellalah caste practices within the organisation. Although the EPRLF had Vellalah leadership and socialist ideas towards caste and gender, it was disparagingly called *Eelathup paraiyar* or *Paraiyar Eelam* (depressed caste homeland) by other Vellalah-led organisations (Sumathy, 2001). One informant described how the location of the offices of the militant groups sent a message about their caste affiliations. For instance, he related that the EPRLF and PLOTE had their offices in central Chulipuram where Vellalah families live. And the LTTE had their offices in the part of Chulipuram where mostly fishing castes live (Male, 37, 2006). Perhaps they also derived a sense of security from being around their respective communities.

Such caste orientation still exists at the local level, where the movements are known by the dominant caste group in them. Moreover there were conflicting ideas among them as to their goals and means. While some youth groups prioritised mobilisation, others emphasised violence (Hoole, 1992). More of the new conscripts came from the lowest classes and castes due to the exodus of Tamil youth, particularly from the middle and upper-middle classes/castes to India and to the West after 1983 (in the wake of a state-orchestrated anti-Tamil pogrom) (Daniel, 1996, Hoole, 2001). In this context it is likely that a majority of the LTTE cadres were drawn from the lower castes (Ravikumar[131], Ravindran, 2004; Daniel, 1996; Sumathy, 2001; Hellmann-Rajanayakam, 1994, 1998). In the mid-1980s "the most ruthless survivalist was seen to be connected to traditional deep-sea shipping, smuggling, and was thought to have come from the experience of the often violent anti-untouchability in the 1960s" (Ravindran, 2004: 16). A Vellalah who followed the youth movements of the times remarks of the caste basis of LTTE, that:

> At the beginning, the LTTE was not very flexible with caste, later with the shortage of manpower and with the necessity of expansion of the movement; they opened up to all people. Low-caste people joined, gained power and even took revenge against Vellalah wherever the possibilities arose (Male, 41, 2005).

As many outsiders who wrote on Tamil nationalism noted, there is a certain overlap between caste and political allegiance (Russell, 1982; Pfaffenberger,

[131] He is an Indian, Dalit activist, who wrote on the Tamil nation building project and caste in Sri Lanka, online article at http://www.ambedkar.org/News/News080802.htm.

1990; Hellmann-Rajanayakam, 1994). Fuglerud held a view that the "LTTE's national project is nothing but a clever strategy of caste-climbing" (1999: 88). He further states that "the LTTE's choice of violence is a result of inter-caste enmity, rather than a true revolutionary politics incorporating all members of the Tamil nation" (ibid.). It is clear that the Tamil nationalist project and caste interests stand as two competing paradigms of interpretation (Fuglerud, 1999, 139). While many Tamils want liberation from the oppression of the Sinhalese majority, the depressed castes among Tamils seek the same from Vellalah hegemony. This last issue was not raised by a few scholars or the LTTE for fear that the image of 'imagined Tamil community' would be seen as a mere projection of caste-based interests. This caste-based friction was shoved under the carpet. As Cheran puts it:

> There has been a general reluctance to discuss caste issues in public. The tendency is to assert that caste was a thing of the past and Tamil Eelam will be caste-free. Any open discussion on caste is seen as bringing the old divisiveness back and therefore not healthy for the Tamil liberation struggle. On the other hand, there is a tendency among western scholars to view Tamil nationalism and the rise of the Tigers purely as a caste phenomenon. These two extremes do not reflect the complex relationship and changing caste-nation interactions among Tamils (Cheran, 2001: 07).

Fuglerud argues that the Tamil militancy of the 1980s "can be understood as a direct continuation of inter-caste and intra-caste conflicts, that is, as conflicts of factionalism and segmentation. As inter-caste relationships were increasingly broken up by capitalism and state interruption, the intra-caste loyalty became more important in the competition over rights and resources" (Fuglerud, 1999: 35). His analysis was based on emerging new areas of economic activity, particularly the service sector which reordered the value of high and low status of caste ranking, and thus inter-caste dependency. The LTTE's institutionalisation of caste-based occupations moreover, broke the caste interdependency centred on the Vellalah (Pfaffenberger, 1994; Sivathamby, 1994; Jayawardena, 2000). Caste identity which carried ranking, division of labour, interdependency and purity-pollution in Jaffna (Banks, 1960) were shaken a bit when LTTE discouraged the depressed castes from going to Vellalah homes for their services, instead LTTE professionalised caste based services and also made these services available for all who were able to visit and pay for them.

The Tamil nationalist project further deepened caste divisions through the process of mobilisation by different militant groups. Electoral politics and public resource distribution by either government or foreign NGOs also resulted in caste centred solidarity. Since elections were based on representative democracy, and representation was also unavoidably along caste lines. Both the FP and the LTTE addressed caste elimination or maintaining caste equality

as one of the election policies and politics. This was understood by depressed castes only later as a self-serving elite strategy and gave a chance for them to enter into Tamil official politics only at a very minimal level. The inclusion of depressed castes in the Tamil political parties was also used by the FP and LTTE as a strategy to mobilise and unite Tamils. Since the 1980s, the NGOs and INGOs in Jaffna involved with poverty reduction programmes have always unavoidably targeting depressed castes, since (low) caste and (economic) class were seen to be one and the same.

7.3.1 Boost for Youth and Depressed

The rise of the LTTE, especially among the younger generation of Sri Lankan Tamils, has seen wide-ranging changes in traditional power relations within the Tamil social formation, where questions of social justice were reframed by gender and caste. The youth survey I conducted in 2005 among the undergraduates at the University of Jaffna evidenced strong support for, and attraction to, the LTTE. The students' remarks about the LTTE were always positive, including the attempts the LTTE made to change caste practices in Jaffna. I noted in their responses that the LTTE was seen as the 'hero' of Tamils, and as the one and only 'protector' of Tamils and their culture, traditions, and norms of justice. A few identified themselves with the LTTE by writing about the LTTE as 'us', rather than as 'they'. The responses to the questions explicitly captured how some of the Jaffna educated youth were intensively immersed in the militant Tamil nationalist project, leaving a very narrow space for dissent. But contrarily, in response to questions like the impact of war and displacement, the practice of purity-pollution or the present dynamics of caste in Jaffna, many case histories emerged describing how caste differences still mattered during displacements, how they had personal experiences of caste discrimination when they looked for accommodation near the university, and how their kin were treated when it came to filling job vacancies, etc. In their responses, I saw also clashing viewpoints: when youth were discriminated against personally because of caste background they were open in saying that caste in Jaffna was alive; on the other hand when the question was related to the LTTE, they praised the LTTE in chorus, saying that caste had been abolished in Jaffna by LTTE. This shows that the external changes related to caste in Jaffna enforced by the LTTE were not fully internalised by the youth.

The LTTE is an organisation that in many respects remains an enigma. But the movement had of course a liberating impact on certain traditionally oppressed and marginalised segments of Tamil society, such as women and depressed castes (Bose, 1994; Hellmann Rajanayakam, 1994, 2004). In particular, it was with the rise of the LTTE that a concern for progressive social

change was first explicitly embodied. The LTTE had to be significantly more broad-based in order to expand its capacity, strength, and unity so that as Hroch theorised, popular involvement of the masses was mobilised via caste in giving them credit for anti-casteism in contrast to the earlier Vellalah nationalistic project (Hroch, 1996: 81). This was unprecedented in the history of Tamil nationalist activism, as the depressed castes and women had been excluded from the previous nationalist project. The LTTE tried to create a common 'justice' which was tangible for everybody. My field data further supports the argument taken up by Sivathamby, Hellman-Rajanayakam, and Bose that the LTTE has employed, with considerable success, a strategic targeting of certain social groups within the Tamil population. These groups were traditionally considered insignificant and marginal to the power structure of Vellalah hegemony.

> The LTTE's main constituency was the youth, and among the youth they have especially concentrated on mobilising the depressed castes. Their campaigns and recruitment often targeted the places where depressed castes were settled due to war, 'welfare camps,' or resettlement villages (Male, 45, 2006).

The LTTE was eager to please the depressed castes because they were its main recruitment base, they made the major contribution to the LTTE, and they were the ones who sheltered LTTE cadres in the villages whenever they were threatened by government forces.

7.4 LTTE's Social Programme

The LTTE aimed to abolish caste as social injustice and to deconstruct Vellalah dominancy. How exactly did the LTTE express its concern for social liberation? In Hegelian terminology, national liberation and social revolt of the younger generation are parts that make up a composite whole (McDowell, 2009). The LTTE's focus on social (re)formation was relatively invisible but effective with regard to the central goal of national liberation. Their view of social liberation was, however, somewhat violent and it accepted militancy in its questioning of the assumptions of Sri Lankan Tamil society (Sivathamby, 1989: 250; Bose, 1994: 34). As Bose argues, if the LTTE had to prove that it was the vehicle for progressive social change within Tamil society, it also had to develop cohesion and solidarity among Tamils to unite the entire Tamil community. It was obvious that there were some Tamil political parties which were not controlled by the LTTE and supported by the government, such as the EPDP, TMVP, etc. For the LTTE, national liberation was the end, and social liberation was the means to achieve it. This is one of the reasons the LTTE seemed to be the

only group attempting to change Jaffna society, sometimes through doubtful and dreadful means. For the LTTE "social change flows like political power and redistributive justice, from the barrel of a gun. The established politicians (that is the Vellalah parliamentarians) were held responsible for the splits in society, which the LTTE undertook to bridge and close" (Hellmann-Rajanayakam, 2004: 109).

Narayan Swamy's work gives first-hand information on Tamil militant project. When a Jaffna academic wondered how the leader of the LTTE could lead 'Socialist Eelam' without any major grasp of ideology, the answer by Prabakaran was "I don't know all that, but I want all these caste differences to go" (Swamy, 1995 : 69). This comes from the leader of the dominant militant movement for liberation of the Tamils, showing that from the beginning one of its aims was to work against caste differences and to level internal injustice. Under the broad spectrum of the militant nationalist project, internal transformations have been instrumentalised by identifying and eliminating the Vellalah as long-time enemies calling them traitors and dissidents (Hoole, 1997; Hoole, 1992; Hellmann Rajanayakam, 1994). Regular assassinations of many English-educated Vellalah elite politicians by the LTTE left a message that the Vellalah's 'opportunistic politics' of working for the Sinhala majoritarian state would no longer be tolerated.

Sivathamby said that "the major social achievement of Tamil youth militancy is that it has been able to break the rigidities of the caste-system" (1989: 254). In this context, it might be instructive to quote from the LTTE's political programme which was designed by the LTTE's ideologist and key theoretician, the late Anton Balasingham, with non-Vellalah background:

> …the LTTE is committed to the abolition of all forms of social oppression […]. The caste system is another social evil that pervades inequality and inhumanity. It is an oppressive system inextricably linked to the class-structure and based on exploitative economic practice […]. The LTTE is committed to the total eradication of the caste-system. The institution of equalitarian socialist economy and the introduction of a revolutionary system of education will pave the way for the elimination of casteism (LTTE: Socialist Tamil Eelam: 11–12).

On the same page he continues to say that:

> National liberation and social revolution constitute the two basic political objectives of the LTTE. By national liberation, we mean the total liberation of our homeland, and the establishment of an independent State of Tamil Eelam. *By social revolution, we mean the socialist transformation of our social formation and creation of a radical new society free from all structures and forms of oppression and exploitation* (ibid.: 11) (My italics).

Caste practices were banned by the LTTE's own Penal Code of 1994 and offences were judged by the LTTE system instituted that year (Interview with the area leader of LTTE Jaffna in 2005). My effort to visit the region where the LTTE had a stronghold, Kilinochchi, to study their court system was futile due to the war. However, a survey I conducted of undergraduates at the University of Jaffna in 2005 revealed that in 1994, Tamil Eelam *Oruppu law* No. 4 emphasised punishment regarding the caste crime/discrimination and it also recommends the right to go to court in case of caste discrimination. It tried to eliminate oppression based on caste injustice.

> 432) a) All are equal by birth, it is a crime and should be punished if they are dishonored by the name of the caste they were born. Discriminating against someone based on caste or an act against his/her dignity, or by indicating his/her caste and hurting him/her are wrong according to caste elimination.
> 433) Penalty- if somebody has committed the above mentioned crimes, he/she can be either punished by imprisonment or fined for up to five years.
> 434) It is an offense if someone tries to disrupt a love marriage between different castes. The penalty for this crime would be either by imprisonment of seven years or fine.
> (Undergraduate third-year, 2005).

Many testimonies gathered during fieldwork confirmed the practice of this above mentioned law in different ways. According to Oppilan, the Chief Justice of Tamil Eelam of LTTE, they had around 23 court houses spread across the north and east.[132] The Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2008 also noted that:

> LTTE demanded that all the Tamil civilians stop using the government's judicial system and rely only on the LTTE's alternative legal system. Credible reports indicated that the LTTE used the threat of force to back its demands. The LTTE's legal system was composed of judges with little or no legal training. Their courts operated without codified or defined legal authority and essentially as the agents of the LTTE rather than as an independent judiciary (Bergner, 2008: 2453).

There was though, a general trend that the Vellalah-educated elite always criticised whatever the LTTE did; one non-Vellalah informant from Jaffna who had some lands in the Vanni said that the penalties by LTTE courts were severe

[132] The court system had District Courts, High Courts, Appeal Courts and the Supreme Court. One hundred and twenty lawyers have passed the LTTE "law college" since its inception in 1990. http://www.sundaytimes.lk/050227/news/20.html

(Male, 43, 2005). The LTTE kept an eye on politics, leadership, law, landownership, education, ritual, and religious power. These were the major premises of Vellalah hegemony. Before I shift the focus onto how the above mentioned premises of Vellalah identity were targeted by the LTTE covertly or incidentally, a brief exploration on how LTTE as an organised structure articulated and practiced caste equality is necessary here.

7.4.1 Caste within the LTTE

This section will discuss how the LTTE, as new elite embodied the concept of equality in relation to caste. It is based on my interview with the Jaffna leader of the LTTE in 2005, casual talks with ex-combatants of the LTTE, undergraduate survey responses and my own personal observations. The results of the survey are consistent with the interview with the area leader. Here I should mention that the younger generation, regardless of caste, was mostly positive about the LTTE, but older Vellalah were rather negative. To sustain equality and justice within the LTTE several different practices were used: all cadres were given different names (*nom de guerre*) than those given by their parents,[133] almost all were called "martyrs" after death, and all had the same uniforms, were given the same food, and were buried in the same place. These methods created unity and uniformity as in any other army, yet were listed by the undergraduates in response to a question about how the LTTE worked towards caste as a social injustice.

Yet it is a fact that the LTTE as an organisation had had its own ranking system, where different sections and tasks to be achieved had to be differentiated from each other. For instance, the intelligence wing and medical team had different uniforms than the cultural wing or the cadre group. Even among cadres, there were rankings based on their performances. Interestingly, we can see here how LTTE cadres or members sometimes re-inscribed caste identity and consciousness, even though equality was their aim.

I met a few ex-combatants who were Vellalah and had held high ranks in the LTTE, then quit the movement, and were looking for venues to move abroad. They gave some information regarding how the internal structure of the LTTE maintained caste equality. Since they were trusted by the LTTE, the matter of caste within the LTTE was perhaps not an issue for them to avoid, so that they opened up for my questions of caste in the LTTE. One ex-combatant revealed that the few remaining Vellalah in the LTTE were in the 'intelligence

[133] The names given by parents most often denote the caste background, like for instance 'Krishnan' which means somebody from a so-called depressed caste, but if the name is 'Krishnakumar' the name doesn't carry caste identity. However, today, the younger generations from depressed castes do not give names denoting the caste identity.

wing', 'medical unit' or 'educational sector including culture'. As he noted, even the educational disparity among the Vellalah reflected what kind of service they rendered within the LTTE. In his own words:

> Regarding caste consciousness in the LTTE, they treat everybody equally, same food, clothing, bed, etc. But some requirements to test the ability of everybody at the initial phase showed different levels of performance, and I think that this was caused by caste. As a result of the tests, high castes end up with more demanding tasks, while *avaiyal* would be with sound physical strength and thus more suitable for the battle front. In terms of numbers, as far as I know there are only a few Vellalah cadres, and the ones I know were looking for excuses to leave and were even ready to be punished because they wanted to start a normal life (Male, 25, 2006).[134]

This practice of equality within the movement was commented upon by another Vellalah ex-combatant: "we all were treated equally, but I observed that friendships relied unavoidably on caste and educational background" (Male, 27, 2006). Another example of caste identification I came across was when a Vellalah martyr's family pointed to a director of drama in the cultural wing of LTTE as 'Brahmin'.

7.5 *De facto* Administration in Jaffna and Vellalah Views

Below I account for the particular Vellalah narratives of how they perceived the LTTE and their programmes on caste equality. The LTTE had a *de facto* administration in Jaffna during 1990–1995. The changes introduced through the LTTE into Jaffna's caste-ridden society were not openly organised, yet there were laws to punish offences against them. My encounter with a former village head was an example of this. He intentionally avoided the word 'caste' out of fear and instead used 'race'. There were stories in Jaffna that people who deprecated depressed castes were forced to eat in their homes or were put into underground bunkers. This was a widespread rumour, which made people avoid talking about caste. However, according to Fuglerud, "in the middle of Jaffna town in the 1990–5 period there was what can only be called a concentration camp run by the LTTE, inside which unspeakable events were said to take place" (Fuglerud 1999: 53). What Fuglerud wrote on the effect of the LTTE's administration in Jaffna provides an important insight into the transformation of Vellalah identity including their views on the LTTE. But there were always dissident narratives against what the LTTE did with regard to caste and

[134] This interview was done before the road connecting Jaffna with the rest of Sri Lanka was closed. After 2009 the situation was totally different and there was a high risk for any person known to be an ex-combatant or supportive of the LTTE or other military movements.

in other realms. The opinions over the reforms and social formations which were led by the LTTE during this period offer a split perspective. While the depressed castes had a high opinion of LTTE efforts with regard to culture and society, the Vellalah, especially the educated, landowning ones, had a negative view, which was suppressed due to fear (Focus group discussion, 2006). The LTTE's strategy with respect to Vellalah supremacy was thus three-pronged. First, by mobilising traditionally degraded and peripheral depressed castes in the nationalist struggle, the depressed castes were empowered. As a result, the status given to Vellalah by the depressed caste was degraded and declined. Second, there was a conscious promotion of martyrdom as the best social status to achieve within the framework of revolutionary violence, so that local elite identity was reframed and the social leadership of Vellalah shrank, giving the appearance the caste order being re-positioned or collapsed. Thirdly, there was the conscious promotion of social programmes against the Vellalah hegemony and caste injustice.

One story I heard from people was that the houses of Vellalah who fled abroad were confiscated by the LTTE and were given to martyr's families. The Vellalah like most other castes live in clusters in Jaffna, mostly in the centre of the town or village. My observations further confirmed that these residential clusters mostly remain even today, but with some newcomers from the depressed castes. The residential patterns of the Vellalah were disturbed due to war and displacement. As a result of Vellalah emigration, their properties were often left abandoned. This presented a new opportunity for the depressed castes that had never experienced living in a cemented house; hence there was a sudden mobility from the periphery to the centre. For example, I met a Vellalah woman from abroad on vacation in Jaffna. She came to Jaffna to visit her house and relatives, but resented the current occupants of the house who she felt were not clean, and who were destroying it. Moreover when she asked them to leave, they refused since the key was given to them by an area leader of the LTTE. In Jaffna, many of the villages have new occupants who do not belong to that village, but who have moved and live there temporarily due to war. Major exoduses occurred in 1990, when the LTTE ordered Muslims to leave, and in 1995 when the army captured Jaffna, and the LTTE ordered all Tamils to leave the area. Lands and houses had to be given to the LTTE when the last member of a family left the peninsula. This also applied to the well-to-do Vellalah middle class in Jaffna, who were thus forced even in their vehemence to finance the movement (Hellmann-Rajanayakam, 1994: 73).

This social mixing of people from different caste backgrounds was not only done by the LTTE, but by some Vellalah who extended opportunities to some depressed castes who worked for them to protect and maintain their properties. In local parlance, however, the Vellalah understood this as 'keeping robbers for

the security of banks'. Metaphorically, the Vellalah are the banks, while the depressed castes are seen as robbers. The Vellalah who stayed in Jaffna didn't like the Vellalah who left their houses in the safe-keeping of non-Vellalah, nor did they approve of the LTTE's practice of social mixing. They were in a tight spot because they could not go abroad and were forced to adapt to sudden external changes which collided with their internalised cultural norms.

When the LTTE became the sole representative of the Tamils for Tamil rights, they vowed to fight for social justice, and the Vellalah were also the targets of their attacks on injustice. The importance of intra-caste loyalties was often brought up in Jaffna during political rivalries. One school teacher said that during local elections in Jaffna in 1998, he could see posters on the walls with caste names of the local candidates which had mud thrown on them. One of the posters questioned whether the Vellalah would support a non-Vellalah caste candidate. This is remarkable since it was after the 1990–1995 period when the LTTE had *de facto* administration in Jaffna. Caste consciousness was therefore tied to ethnic and therefore national consciousness. One case history reveals the LTTE's approach towards caste as crude:

> During the LTTE administration 1990–1995 in Jaffna I was in a cultural concert called *villupaddu*[135] where the main performer somehow had to use one of the caste names but the context was different. Suddenly somebody came from the back and said something and then the concert was stopped. The audience was told this was due to some unavoidable reasons. So the LTTE as far as I know, didn't have a clear programme of how to work, but it reacted in a crude way when several incidences occurred in terms of caste clashes within the society (Male, 44, 2005).

Some Vellalah informants noted that the superior recognition and highest place for 'martyrs' (heroes) and their families given in the social space of LTTE became a threat to the respect which was shown to them at the local level. One informant said that "although we don't go to the meetings or speeches given by LTTE, we hear that they (*athukal*-depressed castes) are the ones in front in the meetings and who are respected". Vellalah were adamant about not 'giving up' their place in society, considering Karaiyar dominance to be conditioned by and dependent upon the war and therefore of limited duration (Wilson, 2000: 112).

The LTTE's one of the achievements was that caste hierarchical consciousness had become "devalued or at least irrelevant" (Hellmann-Rajanayakam, 2004: 111). This was strongly supported by a youth survey I conducted in

[135] One of the cultural concerts during the temple festival where one man will tell the story with music interludes, and six or seven others follow the story and music with several instruments while all are sitting. The main instrument is shaped like an arrow. In Tamil the word for arrow is *villu* and the word music is *paddu*.

2005. Another major change to caste enacted by the LTTE, indicated in the youth survey, was the institutionalisation of jobs which carried caste stigma in Jaffna. Barbers and washermen were not going to Vellalah houses to perform their services for wages, rather those were replaced by professionalisation. In the case of Vellalah ceremonies like birth, puberty ceremonies, weddings, new house openings, or funerals, *Kudimai* castes or depressed castes do not provide any services as before, except in a few Vellalah houses; nowadays priests are mostly involved in officiation at these ceremonies. The wage-institutionalisation of caste-based jobs in Jaffna was initiated by the left movement and the CP in the late-sixties, but the LTTE re-emphasised the idea and gave form to it. There are some older generation washermen in Jaffna villages who kept going to Vellalah houses to pick up dirty clothes and bringing them back clean. When I met a washerman in one of the Vellalah houses, I asked why he didn't open a laundry shop, his response was convincing:

> You know if I open a shop I will get less income than now; people are not used to taking their dirty clothes to the laundry. They prefer washing themselves at home, so then I lose the income that I have now. If I come home to you, you are forced to give me some clothes, so then I get income (Male, 62, 2005).

The LTTE's approach towards caste in Jaffna was seen mostly by the Vellalah as good in terms of raising the dignity of depressed castes, but not viable in the economic terms of the caste interdependency which weakened as a result. The LTTE perhaps thought that breaking caste interdependency centred on the Vellalah in Jaffna meant that by institutionalising those occupations, the caste-based association became official and contractual rather traditionally 'bound'. Another washerman who likes to go to a Vellalah house told me that if he needs some money for buying a bicycle for his son he can borrow it from a Vellalah house, and they will loan it to him on trust. If he has to apply for a loan at the bank, it is a long process and takes time. It is again here that the inter-caste network remains alive and refuses to die at least among the older generation in rural settings. Many Tamils followed what LTTE tried to implement, but not those who wanted to retain their association with Vellalah. It is obvious that the psychological disposition of caste among Tamils was not dealt with carefully by the LTTE or any of the previous Vellalah-dominated Tamil political parties. Associations or forums formed in the past were all caste-centred and were not all-inclusive. As a result, caste animosity somehow continues and is reproduced in contemporary Jaffna. On the other hand, the Tamil militant nationalist project had to fiercely defend itself against the Sinhala governance and deliberately strengthen its power against it. This led to internal power issues in multiple and complicated ways:

The LTTE was the dominant militant group which tried to change the social profile of the politicians who had seats in the parliament. In the initial Tamil nation-building project, almost all the politicians were Vellalah. LTTE was the sole force behind the inclusion of some depressed castes in Tamil politics, and there are very few non-Vellalah who got the chance to be members of parliament. According local knowledge, those non-Vellalah who were chosen to stand for election had low popularity even among the Vellalah-dominated politicians.

There are interesting case studies revealing how the LTTE targeted wealth and education of Vellalah as the major points of entry for de-hegemonising the Vellalah. One Vellalah teacher revealed with a grudge that he had been in a detention camp because he failed to pay a debt of 3,000 LKR to his relative who made a complaint to the Tamil Eelam Police which was the unit dealing with such problems. My curiosity about what he said and the nature of his punishment led me to go deeper and to explore this with his relatives and neighbours. They told me his political stance was not favourable to the LTTE. His refusal to teach in the schools the LTTE had set up for cadres was behind his 'punishment' not the small debt of 3,000 LKR. Another Vellalah noted that because he didn't offer his children to the LTTE as cadres (he had three boys and one girl abroad) the LTTE demanded more money from him. It was a social norm in Jaffna during the LTTE period that each family had to contribute to the struggle by giving one of its members to fight. The ones who didn't have children or whose children were abroad were asked to pay more money. But at the same time, Vellalah antagonism toward the LTTE cannot be generalised to all Vellalah in Jaffna. These Vellalah narratives further show the boundaries around Vellalah identity shifting in time with a continuous (re)negotiation between Vellalah and Others on the axis of caste. Lower-class Vellalah with minimal education had some sort of link to the LTTE because one member of the family was in the LTTE. They may have joined in order to get power otherwise denied them as they were marginalised within the Vellalah collectivity because of their economic and educational status. They had a different stance on the LTTE than the mainstream, middle-class Vellalah who had good education, as the following case shows. I met a Vellalah family who had three children in the LTTE and all became martyrs. Their education was minimal and they were poor. The father had a shop in Jaffna, but having children in the LTTE; the entire family moved to the LTTE-controlled Vanni, where the LTTE had territorial power, a *de facto* state structure and informal authority over government structures. I met the father during one of the Black

Tiger days[136] in Jaffna, who, although sad because of loss of children, was still proud being a prominent member of a 'Martyrs family'. He was happy organising the memorial and receiving parents of other martyrs that day. He perhaps sensed the sort of power and status conferred on him because his children were martyrs.

I found another Vellalah family through my informant network that had lost their son to the LTTE, but the family didn't want to move to Vanni and remained in Jaffna. They openly refused to go despite the fact they were requested by the LTTE a few times to move to Vanni. It was early-2006 and there were frequent deaths and disappearances in Jaffna; the Cease Fire Agreement facilitated by Norway had begun to break unofficially. Late one evening, an 'unidentified' gunman shot the two daughters, and the father and son were severely wounded. The mother died on the spot as the result of a heart attack. Guns were not only carried officially in Jaffna by the government forces but by informal paramilitary groups such as EPDP, EPRLF as well as the LTTE, who had guns. Numerous killings and shootings done by unidentified gunmen on almost a daily basis appeared in the media. The identity of, or the link to the gun-man was probably known by the victim or relatives of victim; the gunman may well have been one of their neighbours. The local newspapers claimed that the shootings were done by the LTTE; the next day the LTTE denied their involvement and blamed the EPDP. The University Teachers Human Rights (UTHR) in its report claimed it was done by the EPDP paramilitary group as revenge for another attack done by the LTTE which happened with no connection to this family. It was a mystery why this family was targeted by the EPDP. There were suspicions that one of the daughters who had acted in one of the films the LTTE had released was perhaps the reason behind this killing. On the other hand, some suspected the LTTE because the family refused to move to Vanni. There was a difference between these two Vellalah martyrs families who were involved with LTTE: the first one was relatively poor, while the second was rich with a sophisticated lifestyle which was not viable in rural Vanni. Thus, the Vellalah relationship to the LTTE was not solely determined by caste; together their mode of lifestyle, level of education and wealth status further determined their relations to the LTTE.

When the LTTE agreed to be at the negotiation table with the Sri Lankan government in 2002, many, including the Vellalah who previously opposed

[136] It is said an elite force of the Tamil Tigers is the Black Tigers, whose primary function is to safeguard the nation by sacrifying their lives. The unit first launched when its leader, Captain Miller, drove his truck fully loaded with explosives into the Sri Lankan Army camp in Jaffna on 05 July 1987, which killed nearly 100 soldiers. This unit is called sometimes the 'suicide unit' and has caused massive destruction and carried out numerous assassinations up until 2009. This day, 5 July, is commemorated each year by Tamils, regardless of nation and by trans-nations, with spiritual ceremonies and public meetings, on the day Captain Miller died, in all parts of Thamil Eelam.

the LTTE, became supporters. However they disliked being checked by the Tamil Eelam police forces of the LTTE in Vanni on the way to or from Jaffna. Educated middle class Vellalah in particular had an aversion to the LTTE doing this. Many middle-age informants told me in casual conversations that they didn't like the LTTE, perhaps because they were Vellalah who had power and dominated non-Vellalah historically, and thus felt insulted when they were checked by non-Vellalah LTTE police forces. As a survival strategy, some of those Vellalah changed their stance towards the LTTE politics based on whether LTTE won or lost. Sometimes, however, it was the lack of knowledge that accounted for a change of position. My deliberate attempt to meet one of those cases who had changed their stance from anti-LTTE to pro-LTTE revealed that she had little knowledge of Tamil politics; but she felt sympathy towards the losses of the LTTE in military operations.

I here recount my memory of LTTE officially retuning from Kilinochchi to Jaffna in 2002 with the signing of ceasefire agreement which enabled the LTTE to have free movement in government controlled areas and their visit to Jaffna University. Jaffna fell into the hands of Sri Lankan government forces at the end of 1995,[137] and the LTTE were cornered and pulled out to the town of Kilinochchi until 2002[138]. When they came to Jaffna University, all the staff present that day at the university was asked to participate in the meeting. There were speeches by the LTTE praising the people behind their victories and return to power; some speeches made by university staff praised the heroes and welcomed them back to Jaffna. There was time allocated for questions from the staff. All kept quiet, except one Vellalah staff-member who stood up and said something which criticised the LTTE for not approaching any of the senior educated staff from the university who had knowledge of Tamil history, politics and geography to represent Tamils at the negotiation table in 2002. This sort of enmity of the educated Vellalah toward the LTTE together with the series of assassinations of Vellalah members of parliament from the TULF, and the LTTE's implementation of its anti-caste policy in Jaffna, led to repugnance towards the LTTE and left the Vellalah feeling marginalised. On the other hand, some Vellalah who didn't want to associate with the LTTE isolated themselves. Some who had the economic means left the country, and the ones left in Jaffna didn't want to be involved in the LTTE's politics. For example, during village performances of the LTTE, such as speeches, war films, and street dramas, the Vellalah did not want to participate, they stayed at their gates and followed the events from a distance.

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[137] http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/december/5/newsid_4618000/4618661.stm

[138] http://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?catid=13&artid=7545

The Tamil nationalist narrative articulated by some 'Vellalah think-tank' who had connections to the former Vellalah national elite moved to Colombo in the late-seventies and were actively influencing the Tamil nation-state making by writing, organising seminars and having discussions on politics in Jaffna and in the southern Sri Lanka. Their writings were considered significant in Tamil politics and were treated with great concern, especially by Southern Sinhala scholars and politicians. However, their views were not welcomed by the LTTE or others who had similar interests in Tamil nationalism. There was a line of argument that had been around since the British left the country, that the Vellalah educated colonial elite didn't care about the depressed castes minority among them even after independence. Instead they had engaged in "responsive cooperation" with the "progressive-minded Sinhalese" (Wilson, 2000: 4), and hence in two ways they were seen neither as real supporters of either Tamils living in the north-east nor of the idea of a Tamil separate state. A few Vellalah politicians were named 'traitors' within the LTTE's political vocabulary and its national interest against Tamils and secessionism. Other groups were unarmed and outside of the official politics but were seen as the 'Colombo-based Vellalah intelligentsia' and accused of supporting the Sinhala majority's ideas towards the solution of the conflict and for lacking knowledge about the actual situation in the North-East (discussions with an academic in Jaffna May 2005 as well in Colombo January 2007). The Vellalah on one hand felt that they were marginalised in the LTTE-dominated militant project; and on the other hand, they wanted to keep their distance from depressed castes ways of thinking networking, and integration. Many Vellalah had a negative view towards the LTTE promotion of social justice. Such was the case when one Vellalah claimed:

> I wouldn't see much more change in the caste. Because of fear there are some changes. Do you understand that by fear I mean the LTTE? But these changes are not permanent… there is a feeling among Vellalah that the approach by LTTE towards caste in Jaffna was not positive. They didn't care about the feelings caste left among people. As far as I observed the status of the lower caste that has nobody abroad is the same as before (Male, 44, 2007).

This is a Vellalah view in general, though some non-Vellalah also concur. It further indicates that the status of the depressed castes that don't have relatives abroad has not changed, but of those who have relatives abroad changed because of the remittances foreign relatives brought or the material assistance they received from NGOs or from the government. If we look at the economic and entrepreneurial activities of the LTTE, they targeted education and property which had granted power and identity to Vellalah (Hellmann-Rajanay-

akam, 1994). In her view, competition was directed as much against Vellalah as against Sinhalese. It is partly true that the difficulties of legitimation of this militant nationalist project stemmed from the concepts of caste and caste conflicts, and that the ways and means in which the conflict was fought were also tied to caste (Hellmann-Rajanayakam, 1994: 27; Fuglerud, 1999: 30). However, the perception coming from a few Vellalah states that united national identity (ethnic) should merge the living, divided, internal identities. As one university staff member puts it:

> The social sphere has now to a larger extent become a common platform for everybody and integration is taking place in the place of past segregation. Tamil nationalism brought the different elements in our society together in my opinion. This was a defensive reaction to the Sinhala domination in order to prevent a weak Tamil identity fragmented by caste. A united Tamil identity was proposed instead of the one split by caste differences (Male, 50, 2006).

A note on this Vellalah informant is needed here. He is from the old elite and holds views that Vellalah still rule in Jaffna. He is a temple manager and his conception of cultural norms about caste are deeply internalised.

Diverging narratives circulated around how Vellalah identified themselves with the militant project. One is that Vellalah preferred to identify themselves with the old elite who were pioneers of Tamil nationalism and not much with the LTTE. The leadership of the LTTE should have been educated when its youth entered into politics was another Vellalah view. When the LTTE became the dominant force in Tamil politics, Vellalah were alienated because many of the leaders were not educated or had little education. The leader of the LTTE never talked directly with any of the international delegations which visited him during peace processes and had always had someone to translate, according to an old Vellalah man. Secondly, local discourse still identifies depressed castes with violence, while Vellalah were seen as 'peace lovers'. A third narrative identifies the LTTE as dominated by the Karaiyar caste, which also resulted in Vellalah alienation from the LTTE. According to a fourth narrative, the Vellalah contributed more materially and the depressed castes contributed more on the battle front as cadres.

7.5.1 Vellalah Views of Depressed Castes in the LTTE

I discuss two narratives below which connect Vellalah identity with the LTTE on two different levels. One was given by an informant who is a Vellalah and the other was given by a Vellalah ex-combatant. These narratives impart how Vellalah see the depressed castes in society as well as within the LTTE.

> It is true that among LTTE, the so-called 'low-caste' is in a majority. In my opinion this is because people born in well-to-do families can't tolerate the hardships they have to undergo in a movement like the LTTE. Do you think we all would be happy if Prabakaran [the leader of the LTTE] became our leader for the nation now? No! I don't think even youngsters would be happy with that (Male, 56, 2006).

When it comes to why Vellalah don't participate much in the LTTE, divisive narratives emerge as the Vellalah didn't think that fighting is their task, "when they have professional groups who do their dirty work" (Hellmann-Rajanayakam 1996: 178). To put it another way: depressed castes were meant for hard work. This view is supported by the youth survey too. For a question concerning how caste in Jaffna contributed to the Tamil Eelam struggle, five students expressed that low castes contributed more than others since they were used to hard work.

Hellmann-Rajanayakam further points out that only out of necessity do the Vellalah accept depressed castes into their houses in Jaffna. Vellalah don't let their children join the rebels and are incurably afraid of encounters with the militants. Conscription of Vellalah children in the LTTE can be circumvented by either sending the children abroad or paying a sufficient sum of money to the LTTE. We can still see the collapsing of caste and class lines on this issue in Jaffna. Many Vellalah and intermediate caste families were looking for ways to pay for their sons' emigration, while a few depressed castes found ways to leave for the Middle East (or *sinna nadu* – 'small countries') for the short term as non-skilled labourers. Especially among the depressed castes, this terminological usage of *periya nadu* (big countries) – UK, the US, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, France – and *sinna nadu* (small countries) means that almost all Middle Eastern countries with Sri Lankan populations have a connotation of depressed caste and low-wealth status which is not yet broken in Jaffna.

7.5.2 Inter-caste Marriages

The LTTE, by the very nature of its membership and the allocation of its leadership, showed that social transformation was one of its agendas in the militant nationalist project. One informant said that he knew the senior members of LTTE had a meeting in the late-1970s in the house of a village called Siththangkeny (situated in the western part of Jaffna) and took an oath to demolish Vellalah hegemony in Jaffna and to promote mixed caste marriages (Male, 59, 2006). The late leader of the LTTE, Prabakaran, and the late political officer, Tamilchelvan, were both from non-Vellalah backgrounds, and by marrying Vellalah women they anticipated that inter-caste marriages would strike at caste identity and lead to a different treatment of caste.

The LTTE tried to promote inter-caste marriages. This is understandable because a mixed caste marriage will produce some kind of impure hybrid caste identity. As I learned from many informants and the youth survey results, there were several cases of mixed caste love affairs that during the administration of LTTE in Jaffna made use of the opportunity to go to a Tamil Eelam court to get married. Vellalah parents remained silent due to fear and tried to keep their children close[139] as much as possible. The youngsters from different castes who fell in love couldn't cheat the 'lower' as they did before the LTTE came to power due to fear of the LTTE's administration. One point that came up in a casual talk with an elderly Vellalah is meaningful in this context. He interpreted the leader of the LTTE, who is a Karaiyar married to a Vellalah, as an example of Karaiyar being violent even in marriage, because the LTTE leader married her without her consent while she was in one of the early, mass-scale protest fasts in the medical faculty compound of the Jaffna University. Inter-caste marriages occurred from time to time, but the parties who took the partner from the higher rank in the caste ordering were beaten, stabbed, or killed by a group from the higher caste or their properties were destroyed. This sort of violence stopped during the period of LTTE rule in Jaffna. The following narrative which is subtly opposes what the LTTE tried to do emerge from an informant who came across a mixed couple within the LTTE.

> The LTTE tried to have a caste-free system within the movement, but I know there are a number of cases of cadres or heroes that obey the caste rules …or even fear the power of caste in the society. I know a LTTE male member from low caste who fell in love with a Vellalah female cadre and got married while in the movement. Then, when he wanted to visit the parents of the wife, that means his in-laws, he even told me, that he was afraid of how they would react meeting him and his wife (Female, 37, 2007).

This testimony proves that the durable power of caste consciousness among LTTE was unavoidable and hence, the caste norm was alive even among cadres who were against caste distinctions. It further shows that intermarriage was still seen as a 'taboo'. It should be noted here that as a result of the war and the LTTE promotion of mixed-caste marriages that the numbers of them were on the increase in until the mid-2000s. This doesn't mean, however, that they

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[139] In the family set up of Jaffna, generally among Tamils in Sri Lanka unless children are married or separately settled they live together with their parents, no matter their age. Owing to studies and work some separate from the parents. Parents in this set-up always keep informed of all outdoor activities of the children. There are mainly four kinds of basic outdoor necessities for a son or daughter: school/ tuition, and visits to friends, temple/ church or play. The rest are sorts of special events. Parents know the time they left home and also know approximate time of arrival at home. If the time is longer they will be anxious or worried. Reactions depend on the past and the information they received regarding their son or daughter. The restrictions on children by parents during the LTTE period were high for reasons such as fear of losing them to the LTTE or that they may be caught in crossfire between the LTTE and government military forces, in curfew restrictions, etc.

are welcomed by society in general or by Vellalah and other upper-castes in particular. Another girl who had two sisters in the LTTE expressed in casual conversation that one sister was working in a shop and the other sister was a sea tiger. They wanted to marry and had received marriage proposals from other LTTE cadres. However, they were afraid to marry without knowing the caste of the men in the movement, as it was forbidden to talk about caste. This narrative also indicates that caste was considered important in LTTE when it comes to marriage.

7.6 Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the Tamil nation project, whether Vellalah-led or non-Vellalah-led, cannot be studied in isolation. Caste among Tamils, especially in Jaffna, where the Tamil nationalist project originated, is a cultural practice internalised from infancy. Caste has its own politics and is also used for politics in Jaffna. Political parties, whether Vellalah-led or non-Vellalah-led, always incorporate caste abolition as a part of their agenda. The militant nationalist project dominated by the new LTTE elite at least tried to vernacularise high culture which had been restricted to only the Vellalah, and at least presented it to a mass audience (cf. Eller, 1999: 26). Thus the LTTE embodied the changes at great length with the strength of gun-power, compared to previous political parties, and the receptiveness of society. But as I have illustrated with many Vellalah narratives, they did not change Vellalah feelings. Elite transformation on all levels created a huge vacuum for Vellalah privilege and thus in their stable forms of identification in politics, wealth, education, leadership, and inter-castes relationships, etc. On the other hand, Vellalah identity and its attachment or association to/with the LTTE was not united, but varied according to their level of education, wealth, and lifestyle. Vellalah attitudes in general, viewed changes made by the LTTE as ephemeral and thought they would be short-lived. As many Vellalah voiced in their narratives, changes that happened during the LTTE's time were not internalised by Vellalah, instead they were temporarily registered and disregarded when the power of the LTTE was over (cf. Strauss and Quinn, 1997). As Bose writes, the LTTE was seen as the 'leveller' of Tamil society for a period of time in Jaffna, creating an informal, new elite. Despite the fact that caste was a site of political repression during the LTTE period, in this study I have tried to show how it has continued to structure social practice and reality in Jaffna. It is moreover important to realise that the interests of Tamils in Sri Lanka have always been closely interlinked with the issue of caste, although caste affiliation lies just under the surface (Fuglerud, 1999: 30; see also Bose, 1994: 104).

8

Rearticulated Vellalah Identity in the Context of War

8.1 Introduction

This chapter takes its departure from how war and external forces such as emigration, diaspora and INGOs have impacted caste, Vellalah identity and key aspects of Vellalah identification such as landownership and education. The war as the product of nation-building made very radical changes in caste and in Vellalah identity. The LTTE, being an (un)desirable agent of change, brought a rude awakening for many Vellalah, but war was also undesirable and the Vellalah passively accepted the structural changes to caste precipated by the LTTE. The changes remained for a short time, but a radical transformation in terms of Vellalah identity occurred which I wanted to register separately. The argument is that it is not possible to separate a study of caste identity and conflict/war from the analysis of the political and economic structures in which caste identity practices are embedded. The social legacies of war that I address here are emigration, mass displacement, physical and material destruction, demographic change, the emergence of winners and losers, enemies and supporters. Of the different arenas encompassing Vellalah identity, landownership and education were more directly impacted by war than other identity arenas, and are analysed here. My central question in this chapter is: *"How did the war impact caste, education and landownership as the central part of Vellalah identity?"*

8.2 The Impact of War upon Caste

In anthropology, conflict has long been seen as a basic form of human interaction that occurs in all social systems since social life inevitably entails frustrations and incompatibilities between individuals and groups. Social conflicts are dynamic and inherent in all kinds of societies and in all sorts of human

collectivities (Boulding, 1987; Greenhouse, 1987; Galtung, 1987; Jeeweshwara, 1996). This means that war cannot only be studied as a social legacy but may also be a result of humans living in groups. Nationalism and war are interrelated because nationalism legitimises war and the choices made in wartime, since "war is a constitutive element of collective identity" (Jabri, 1996: 139–140). From another angle, this study understands that nationalist projects will not undertake a war on traditions, nor remove violence and prejudice existing in the society. "Nationalism does not make its members more intense or passionate, but only signifies that its membership exceeds that of existing cultural groupings, so that its effects can be felt over a much larger space" (Gupta, 2002: 91). The Sri Lankan war can be characterised in many ways, in the late-fifties it was purely seen as an ethnic war, while in the late-seventies, it became a war for a nation state; and after of 9/11 it came to be seen as a 'war on terror' by the Sinhalese and others, even as it remained a liberation struggle for Tamils. It is important to emphasise that I will not deal in this chapter with the causes of war, but instead with how war has disturbed caste practices and especially Vellalah identity. I will analyse the impact of war on Vellalah identity using narratives from ordinary people.

War as a social production reconstructs reality with a different system of knowledge, networks, and meanings (Nordstrom, 1992: 261). War entails migration, brain drain, denial of dissent, internal displacements, economic embargo, the loss of land, assassinations, disappearances, killings, abductions, violations of social-cultural norms and even internecine wars. These are considered widespread abnormalities within the grammar of war. Hence, most importantly, war most of the time involves a transition of power among social forces. In Sri Lanka, the war based on ethno-nationalist projects, though over in 2009, had far- and long-reaching effects on people. The experience of hardship and pain is deeply inscribed in group and individual memories. It is not manifested on a surface level, but suppressed. It is also perpetuated through the stories people narrate about those events, which keep the dichotomies us/them; friend/enemy alive. Caste-based frictions obstruct the path to a sustainable and peaceful future.

War created interests that favour continued violence and criminality. People's experiences of war depended on individual involvement in politics, their placement in already existing economic strata or their direct experience of direct firing or shelling. Such experiences reconstituted people's place in the social layering of war-torn society where the poor were beaten twice and the rich embraced wealth and influence. In Jaffna, the correlation of the poor with the depressed castes and of the rich with the Vellalah is not yet broken. As a result, the war left the depressed, as the recipients of violence, more vulnerable, and victimised. Tudor Silva and Thanges's study is an example of how war in

Jaffna made the depressed castes the double victim (Tudor Silva, et al., 2009: 65). The depressed castes became desperate for money, living hand-to-mouth, and began to steal or engage in other criminal activities. Vellalah phobias toward the depressed castes arose for two reasons. First, the transition of power to the LTTE dominated militant group meant that their protectors were the depressed castes, who were used for violence. Second, the empowerment of the depressed castes in the socio-cultural space of Jaffna was a threat to the Vellalah, their assets and their status identity.

While some changes had taken place in caste practices, "when the war will end, it remains to be seen whether caste society reasserts itself or is gone for good" (Hellmann-Rajanayakam, 1994: 138). For her, caste society had been shaken for a variety of reasons, yet solidarity among castes has not been broken down because of ethnic solidarity or imagined united Tamil identity. Instead, she thought caste would reassert itself in a different form, perhaps regaining the flexibility it had lost over the preceding two centuries. In looking at the depth of caste in Jaffna, it is clear that under the discourse of change, the old caste-based networks are still alive, "the landed middle class still holds onto their positions and privileges and it is not they who starve" (1994: 137). Here one narrative contrarily confirms that war has made some changes in the mindsets of people in Jaffna.

> Whatever emigration, ethnic conflict or war have done, I don't think they have abolished caste; they have only softened the rigidity. For me existence of caste is not a problem; only the oppression or injustice in the name of caste should be avoided. There are some slight changes in the mind-set of people in Jaffna on caste. I believe it is not because of any group or issue like ethnic conflict but because of war and its consequences. War especially disturbed the very basic identity of locality (home). Vellalah who had hundreds of acres of land by which they measured their self-esteem and identity were displaced like the other castes. They were forced to share common space. There was no point of talking about 'caste', 'profession', and 'prestige', etc. I saw many high-caste people suffer a lot during this time. They are sophisticated and not used to that hardship. This displacement gave a lesson to them on how hard life could be. Necessity and conditions due to war made some changes in the mind-set of people in Jaffna. We should agree here that in the seventies some social liberal movements, novels and literature also contributed, but only at the level of awareness. They gave a kind of warning to the 'oppressors'. But war was practical and it made people more experienced (Male, 42, 2006).

War as an embodied experience meant that everyone went through similar but not *the same* experience in an enforced war zone. This distinction has to be clear here as it was explicit in some of the narratives. Caste among Tamils operates through interlocking forms like family ties, marriages, religious practices, economic enterprises and political involvement. Though there is very little literature assessing the impact of war on caste transformation in Jaffna, Bose

(1994) takes up this subject in her study. She argues that "war and adversity has been a great leveller of Jaffna's stratified hierarchical society. Everyone, from the government servant down to the humblest labourer, stands in the same queue for kerosene and cooking oil and everyone, from the Government Agent downwards, travelled by bicycle" (Bose, 1994: 104). In my data however, I found a counter-narrative to this her view confirming a hidden maintenance of Vellalah identity and power even during the war which would not have been apparent to outsiders.

> My recent observation on caste in Jaffna just after the A9 was closed is that all people have to wait in line for things from the co-operative shops. Also, many managers are from the higher caste so that Vellalah get priority and are served first. When things are sold out when it is the turn of the low castes. Low castes are treated differently because of the economic hierarchy even today. Sometimes it looks funny when some high-caste family with a few members receives more things than a low-caste family with more members. Maybe, it relates to the economy as I said before. We at this point need to think that caste hierarchy and economical hierarchy might go together in practice (Female, 45, 2006).

This testimony further proves that Vellalah identity continues to be marked in significant ways. Vellalah still have lands and assets, while the war increased the poverty of the depressed castes, because of the embargo on materials from the south, a state ban on fishing, etc. This motivated the depressed castes to exploit social space to provide for their daily needs where the law and order of the society had been weakened. Many of the Vellalah houses and properties were under constant threat of robbery and Vellalah felt insecure without proper security guard or security dogs. In many of the cases I came across, the Vellalah were still successful in getting things back or claiming a fine from the depressed castes by approaching either the village headman or state police. I agree that the Sri Lankan conflict disallowed the depressed castes as a community from declaring themselves by throwing them into a war-time alliance of Tamils against Sinhalese (Hellmann-Rajanayakam, 2004). Though the depressed castes could not fight against caste injustice as a collective during war, the war did empowered depressed castes in several ways, as a result of LTTE's strategic soft corner toward them I want to emphasise that by joining the LTTE, they received special prestige as martyrs' families when their children were killed in the war. As poor people, they were also special targets for INGOs and foreign NGOs.

The war which directly impacted Vellalah identity had several dimensions, including material destruction and physical dislocation. Fear of death, threats and destruction resulted in a mass exodus of the Vellalah who earlier had represented almost half of the population of Jaffna; leaving only a small part of the

community behind. The countries to which the Vellalah migrated were primarily the European countries, the United States, Canada and Australia. The Vellalah who remained in Jaffna became internally displaced people (IDPs). Vellalah youth who were directly involved in other militant movements fled the country or became secretive when the LTTE was dominant or internecine rivalries erupted among militant groups. The sense of Vellalah identity derived from agriculture and the accumulated assets derived from being settled in one place, was for the first time shattered by war in Jaffna (Bremner, 2013). Vellalah emigration was expedited due to the war and as they chose to sell their lands and properties, this caused a collective phobia among the Vellalah who stayed behind in Jaffna.

8.2.1 Internal Displacement and Vellalah Identity

The war created camps in the centre of villages with many settlements of depressed caste communities. This forced the Vellalah to associate or at least intermingle with them in public places like shops and streets. Being neighbours with depressed castes caused frequent frictions in the public space; some Vellalah houses with fences made of coconut leaves were replaced with walls during this time to avoid problems with depressed castes. One Vellalah woman who fought with depressed caste (46, 2006) expressed, "that's why there is a saying: *chanthiranai parthu nai kulaithalum, chanthiran chanthiranthan, nai nai than*," meaning that if a dog barks at the moon, the moon is still the moon and the dog is still a dog. Here the moon metaphorically refers to Vellalah and the dog metaphorically represents the depressed castes. There was a general opinion that the degree of respect they received from non-Vellalah was lower than in the past due to the elevated status given to them by the LTTE.

Internal dislocations due to war forced Jaffna Tamils to be together physically in temples, schools and public places. This gave a space for all to go through similar experiences which led to what could be called a kind of 'temporal tolerance' in terms of inter-mixing of caste in Jaffna. These changes were perceived especially by some Vellalah to be superficial, not at a deep level, or in Appadurai's terms not on the spiritual level, but only on the material plane. The Vellalah had to sit with depressed castes, had to share the same place, the same food, perhaps even the same utensils. One Vellalah informant told me that he has a good relationship with one non-Vellalah family due to internal displacement, but keeps social distance and maintains his caste identity. Two major exoduses occurred in Jaffna, one due to the operation undertaken by the government troops in 1990 and another one in 1995 when LTTE ordered all to leave Jaffna when the government was about to capture Jaffna.

Dislocation was a major problem for Vellalah who traditionally lived stable lives in one place, often near the lands they cultivated with accumulated assets and properties, and who had built a sophisticated lifestyle, attained religious piety, and a sense of superiority, etc. It was the first time the Vellalah had been uprooted from their belongings which provided their identity and status. In some cases, the Vellalah resented that they had shared houses with depressed castes. There is a story about this related by a Vellalah retired teacher that the enforced mixing was being done on purpose by the LTTE as an attempt to break mono-caste hegemony and caste injustice. A Vellalah vegetarian disliked that his family had to share a kitchen where depressed castes cooked meat. One general observation was that many houses were provided for low-caste families especially for the martyrs' families. Some of my findings show that although the LTTE had no programme openly redressing caste injustices, indirectly they tried to do so when opportunities emerged. There is a general feeling among Vellalah that these deliberate attempts by the LTTE created some personal animosities between the Vellalah and LTTE. Rajasingham-Senanayake's article on displacement took the argument a step further forward in seeing the gender aspect intertwined with caste. She states that:

> [c]aste belonging often determines women's patterns of mobility, with restrictions on women's mobility being a sign of high status. In the camps – unlike in their home territory in the Jaffna peninsula where village settlement was caste and region based – it was difficult to maintain social and spatial segregation, caste hierarchies, and purity pollution taboos for a number of reasons, including poverty (2004: 157).

It is still a general view that the best compliment that can be given to a wife is that she is domestically inclined though working outside the home. It is moreover prestigious for high-caste woman if she hasn't eaten or drunk anything in other houses. Both of these gendered practices were shattered by the war, and impacted the Vellalah women's status.

The youth survey reveals that the Vellalah also responded to the intrusion of depressed castes by putting snakes in the wells of the temples to prevent non-Vellalah from having access to water. One youth said that when he was about to have a bath in the pond near a temple, three men demanded him to stop by saying that "this is only allowed for God, it is holy water, not for a common bath". As was discussed earlier, whenever the Vellalah felt there were attempts made to bring all castes together, they used several devices or barriers to maintain their unique identity. One undergraduate wrote in the survey that even in the common places that everybody had to share during displacements; there was a clustering of people of the same caste finding the same accommodation. Vellalah reasoning throughout their dislocation was that "caste was

ignored due to necessity", a male Vellalah clerical staff member responded. One young woman expressed that she could feel, during the displacements in the areas where they moved, that the original inhabitants treated the incoming people differently due to the caste or the places they had come from. Tudor Silva and et al. (2009) study confirms that caste identity is maintained in IDPs camps in Jaffna.

> There is an overwhelming representation of certain oppressed caste groups in the long-term IDP camps in Jaffna. More importantly, unlike spaces that cut across caste boundaries, long-term IDP camps emerged along caste lines. For example, the four IDP camps in Mallakam village, in Northern Jaffna, comprise only oppressed caste groups, namely Pallar (agricultural labours) and Nalavar (toddy tappers). Old geographies of caste get reproduced in new social settings produced by the war like the long-term IDP camps in Jaffna. It does not mean that caste is the only factor that shapes this new social setting. In fact, many factors including poverty, landlessness, limited social networks and capital and traditional caste-based segregation and spatial practices are at play in these settings (Silva and et al., 2009).

The above narratives show how Vellalah (caste) identity maintenance was articulated in Jaffna via new mechanisms during the war and post-war periods. Some Vellalah who monitored depressed caste behaviour during war-time felt depressed castes behaviour upheld double standards, and was immoral. According to one Vellalah, depressed castes were involved with the LTTE and/or government military personnel for the sake of their survival, but at the same time, this very basic need had taken many of their lives. Either they worked as secret agents of the government forces spying on the LTTE, or they worked for the LTTE spying on the movements of military personnel. In the local language they were called 'double agents'. Whenever they were discovered spying for the other party by either the LTTE or army personnel they were killed. A certain number of deaths of the civilian population in Jaffna occurred because of this. Yet it was seen by many Vellalah to prove the non-existence of moral principles among the depressed castes.

My observations in the field however, contrarily revealed that there was also a reciprocal economic relationship formed between Vellalah and non-Vellalah as a result of the war. Some depressed castes that had performed services for the Vellalah, and then stopped during LTTE administration 1990–1995, became dependant again on the Vellalah as a result of war and displacement. The Vellalah had stable income and/or foreign remittances and/or some foodstuffs like coconut, rice, vegetables and oil and were exchanging things with depressed castes who received larger rations of wheat flour, dhal, chilli, milk powder and sugar in the co-operatives shop due to their larger number of family members. Depressed castes that were in need of money sold things given

for ration by the government to the Vellalah to get money. Here we could see a kind of reciprocal economy among castes that the war caused, thus replacing the old Vellalah custom of caste service for food.

8.2.2 Emigration of the Vellalah

Migration was another theme that frequently came up in the discussion on caste transformation. As one informant noted elsewhere, the Vellalah played an important role in internationalising the Sri Lankan conflict as an ethno-national conflict. It is true in the sense that they were the pioneers of education, became intellectuals, and moved to other parts of Sri Lanka and abroad before other castes. The British provided educational and occupational opportunities for Tamils outside of Jaffna especially in Colombo and in Malaysia. This encouraged educated Vellalah landowners and their children to emigrate from Jaffna (David, 1977: 480). During the British period, Tamils, especially Vellalah, had a chance to work in Malaysia, and became Malayan pensioners. A book compiled by the Malaysian Tamils on their history *Legacy of the Pioneers: 125 years of Jaffna Tamils in Malaysia*, confirmed that Vellalah migration to Malaysia was common during the nineteenth century. The economic superiority deriving from Vellalah exposure outside Sri Lanka created an internal ordering that was used as one of the parameters for intra-Vellalah divisions. In the post-independence period, Tamils started migrating to find work when Sinhala politicians in the 1950s deliberately reduced the numbers of Tamils in the public sectors in Sri Lanka (Daniel and Thangaraja, 1995; Fuglerud, 2004). Daniel writes about the history of forming diasporas among Tamils in Europe. He divides the migration into three phases and states that the Vellalah were the first to move away from Jaffna to Europe (Daniel, 1996: 166). In the second phase, the Vellalah were accepted as international students in UK universities, in Australia and New Zealand. Later in the process, they took their families and relatives abroad. And in the third phase, due to war, or internal clashes among the militant movements, many Vellalah with families joined their relatives abroad, and Vellalah youth also fled the country. As a result of these three factors, there were mass Vellalah exoduses; hence the number of Vellalah left in Jaffna sharply declined. This recalls Jayawardena's analysis of the early- and mid-twentieth century that the number of "slaves were double the masters" (Jayawardena, 2000: 126).

The Vellalah feel that they were the ones who paved the way for the depressed castes to go abroad. The history of migration from Jaffna shows that Vellalah at the beginning of working in Malaysia and Singapore brought the caste culture of domestic service over there by inviting their *Kudimai* and *Adimai* servants and thus promoted the lifestyle and economy of the depressed

castes. It also shows that there were two different Vellalah attitudes towards depressed castes. There are those who are more supportive to elevate the depressed and do not believe 'character is the result of caste,' but rather that 'caste is the result of character'. The other attitude found among Vellalah who do not want to see depressed castes become well off and trust that caste is the result of character, and so cannot be changed. The contemporary practice of domestic service to Vellalah in Jaffna by non-Vellalah could be perceived as expressing the dual mind-set of Vellalah toward caste and character.

Changing practices, migration, and shifts in Vellalah identity involve the transformation of the identities of depressed castes, too. As one middle-aged Vellalah woman explained:

> It is good thing that caste is not so rigid anymore and I can say it is weaker. The main reason for this is the migration. Especially when low-caste people who are fit and capable for physical labour emigrated, they became wealthier and as a consequence Vellalah status became less special and prominent. You follow what I mean, for instance when 'they' too have money, they could buy land, build houses and buy things as the Vellalah did before (Female, 48, 2006).

As we can see, the testimony above highlights the disillusionment of Vellalah with external markers of upper caste identity now shifting to non-Vellalah. The external makers of Vellalah caste status – such as money, land, house, and certain patterns of consumerism – had mostly been adopted by depressed castes in Jaffna. However, the subjective behaviours of caste – such as speech, manners, and 'right-thinking' – still indicate that caste identity was less-easily adopted by non-Vellalah:

> But in the public we can still see the difference in behaviour patterns like that Vellalah are more cultured and 'others' are not very cultured even though they have nice dress and accessories. I think it takes generations to change. And also whatever changes happen among low–castes, they have an 'inferiority complex', that can be overcome, but it may take time. There are some characteristics that are inherited or learned through upbringing. This will reflect on our behavioural patterns, for instance, regarding genuine, gratitude and duty consciousness. I think that the caste identity will be continued in the future (Female, 35, 2005).

8.2.3 Diasporas, Caste and Vellalah

As has been pointed out earlier, Tamil culture was not completely closed off to exposures to the outside. These influences have increased, especially in post-war Jaffna. During the war years some modern social movements like feminism, global trends of resistance to domination, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) empowering the poor and vulnerable, and global forces

have to some extent influenced Tamil culture and cultural practices like caste. The social uses of Vellalah identity are shaped by many different nexuses of relations in a multitude of shifting contexts. The following passage brings up issues related to these external influences, and how they have shaped Vellalah identity and caste in Jaffna.

> Now people have contacts with different cultures so they have to adapt with modernisation whether they like it or not … Many people from Jaffna have emigrated and bring back some new ideas and things to their relatives in Jaffna. This will influence the minds of other people also. I am sure that people now in Jaffna who talk about caste are the ones who had no outside exposure. They are like 'frogs in the well'. Caste in Jaffna is now disappearing and exists only in villages and in marriage proposals (Male, 45, 2006).

It is clear in the above narrative that the external forces such as other cultural interactions such as media and diasporas have influenced Tamil culture in Jaffna to some extent but the ethno-national war and the related events shielded Jaffna from complete exposure. There are reasons behind this. First, due to war there was a barrier for those ones who left the country to come back and share their experiences effectively – they were limited to telephone and postal contacts. Second, the periodic economic embargos the government of Sri Lanka imposed on the Tamils and frequent closures of roads from the North to the Southern mainland was another reason for the restriction of mobility between people and the information flow to/from Jaffna. Third, the LTTE as the dominant force and new leadership for Tamils needed to protect the cultural identity of Tamils from external influence. Finally, since LTTE was banned as a 'terrorist organisation' internationally, northern Sri Lanka (and Jaffna particularly) was seen as the breeding ground of the LTTE; as a result the government of Sri Lanka restricted visitors from travelling to and from Jaffna, so it was even more difficult for locals to get in and out Jaffna. Global media did reach Jaffna in a limited manner, mostly through South Indian films and some very limited exposure to other cultures through electronic media. It must be noted that some of South Indian films were even censored by the LTTE since they were labelled as 'spoiling Tamil culture'. A very few of those who came back from abroad and modernised their lifestyles also brought to Jaffna part of their new culture and life ways. Of course, cultural mixing or intermingling will create new spaces of thought, but it is unclear whether it leads to either cultural assimilation or cultural diversity since Diaspora Studies has shown that cultural identities are reshaped and renegotiated in the 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994; Fuglerud, 2001).

Almost all educated Vellalah who left blew away with the wind and accommodated modern and postmodern trends into their identities, but others

who failed to catch the wind, were economically and educationally left behind, and stayed in Jaffna. The top layer or cream of Vellalah society is outside Jaffna, with only a small percentage of them living in Jaffna. They live with a sense of insecurity with regard to their properties, and lack of law and order almost six years after the end of the of war. They feel they are a minority in Jaffna and are powerless numerically (casual conversation, 2010).

The Vellalah experience as a 'new minority' leads them to emphasise caste distinctions more strongly, however, even though they have diasporic linkages. A local physician who is a Vellalah in Jaffna with relatives abroad explained how caste is reproduced also in the diaspora:

> Do you think people living abroad forget caste? Absolutely not, they follow but in a different way. They trace the background of others through relatives living in Jaffna. Then the relationships will be different. Some suddenly cut the relationship or alienate if the caste is different. I know one case, where somebody living in Canada sent a parcel through a friend to the relatives in Sri Lanka. The friend got the address and he found out who they are only when he went to hand over the parcel. Then he called and told the family in Canada that these people are from a low caste, and it is better we take distance from them (Male, 48, 2006).

One Vellalah academic, who made frequent visits abroad, also expressed that caste identity in the diaspora can be inferred from where they live and in which part of the country. In the UK, some places where Tamils live are identified by caste distinctions, and in Norway the majority population from Jaffna is said to be from the fishing community (interviews and informal conversation, 2006).

Marriage is another area was caste distinctions are observed. Caste is observed in the matrimonial practices of the Sri Lankan Tamil diasporas. Thanges says:

> The Tamil diaspora is not free of this traditional matrimonial practice. When they look for a partner for their child, parents from the so-called 'upper caste' background take extra care in finding someone from the same caste group. Even though the second generation follows certain principles and practices of their parents, they seem to get confused as to how they would want to deal with caste in choosing their life partners. There are many examples of broken relationships among the second generation diaspora due to the barriers created by caste (Thanges, 2014, 21 June 2014).

As one Vellalah woman confirmed, "As far as I know from my relatives living abroad, caste is observed even by diaspora community. Inter-caste marriages are taking place especially when it comes to love affair, then they separate for whatever reasons" (female, 48, 2005). Though obviously there are many rea-

sons for couples to separate or divorce, it is important that inter-caste unions are seen as one of the main reasons by some in Jaffna. The caste resistances articulated in the late-1960s and 1970s through CP platforms finds an extension in the UK with regular conferences and seminars on issues of the marginalised position of the Tamil castes in Jaffna society and Tamil nationalist politics.[140] Another reflection of in the extension of Tamil politics into the diaspora can be seen in the large demonstrations in May 2009, by Sri Lankan Tamils around the world in the US, the UK, Australia, Canada, France, Germany and India to stop the war and to pressure the international community to go for a temporary cease fire or negotiations. Hoole described the caste identity of the diaspora during this time of this conflict and the caste identity of the people who were trapped in the war zone.

> Major intersections in Canada, UK, US and Australia saw massive demonstrations. In just the way the Tigers forced school children to show up at demonstrations in Sri Lanka, school children chanted at demonstrations in the West, illegally cutting school. Northern Vellala women and children testified to gullible western reporters about that aunt and this cousin being decapitated in government bombings while coming out of trenches to mix milk for their baby or look for a wounded family member – such decapitations are real but not of relations of these well to do northern Vellala elite who have few connections in the Vanni where the battle is on; in fact they will not even marry there (Hoole, 2009).[141]

It is indeed a fact, as Hoole reports, that the Vellalah very rarely have marital ties in Vanni where the LTTE was based. Those who had marital ties in Vanni were considered of lower rank in Jaffna. Another diasporic influence on caste practices is in the village temples in Jaffna. The financial contribution by diasporas to the village temples strengthens caste identities. As Thanges relates:

> The traditional practice of building caste-based temples in the villages of Jaffna due to caste antagonisms in the religious domain has been further accelerated by diaspora remittances sent by members of different caste groups to their own communities in the homeland. Many oppressed caste temples in Jaffna have been renovated with the financial support provided by the diaspora. Many of these temples have been upgraded from temples that practiced multiple non-agamic traditions to temples that adhere to the agamic tradition. The mobilizations and investment of oppressed castes in the religious domain have, on the one hand, supported their efforts to live with dignity and respect; on the other hand, *they have reproduced and/or re-strengthened old caste-based religious identities in a newly modernized society* (Thanges, 21 June 2014, *Colombo Telegraph)(* my italics).

[140] http://www.thuuuu.canalblog.com/

[141] http://transcurrents.com/tc/2009/05/communalists_are_like_the_drop.html#more

8.2.4 Social Empowerment by (I)NGOs

As a result of the war, there were many foreign and international nongovernmental organisations in Jaffna who targeted the poor and those made economically vulnerable by the war. This has had some positive influence among the depressed castes. Organisations which adopted participatory bottom up approaches to poverty reduction and development, by targeting the poor who were mostly from low castes and war affected, empowered and developed leadership through small self-help groups. This yielded certain knowledge of the system for the depressed castes. INGO projects empowered the vulnerable by teaching them that that justice has the same value for everyone. This kind of empowerment among the depressed castes in Jaffna could sometimes be observed in public spaces and in social interactions. According to one informant, while government rations were distributed in front of the co-operative shops or in government administrative offices like Divisional Secretariats (DS), when a Vellalah was favoured or a depressed caste was discriminated against because of caste identity, protest was heard loudly in the public sector. One of my observations regarding this is that government food rationing categorised people according to their income. Since economic standing is still parallel with caste identity in Jaffna, the depressed castes got a different day for rations than the castes with higher income. These public incidents send the message that there is differential treatment on the basis of caste in Jaffna. On the other hand, the depressed castes are raising their voices against caste injustice on the spot – one of the results of (I)NGO and LTTE empowerment.

There are changes in terms of the economy of the depressed castes and that of the Vellalah is being transformed too. In this regard, one Vellalah puts it like this:

> Caste has not yet died in Jaffna, but some changes have occurred. Globalisation led into commercialisation and a dependency economy. As the result of this there is multi-range and levels of interactions between people. People whether they like it or not have to mix up with 'others'. Knowledge and capacity became important and play central role in the society. Many of the foreign NGOs working in Sri Lanka were not only trying to eradicate poverty but indirectly also trying to create a power-free society where all kinds of domination have ended. Another thing, war transformed the power from traditional elite weapon and also forced all to undergo same conditions of life. High-caste people could experience how low-caste life was. I am uncomfortable saying only one factor was the main influence in terms of transformation in caste (Male, 41, 2006).

The narrative above confirms that there are multiple of factors involved in terms of the transformation of caste in Jaffna. Now I move on to focus how land is related to Vellalah caste identity and how it was renegotiated due to war and other reasons.

8.3 Land, Space and Identity

The nationalist project and the social division of space are double-edged: both can be used to emancipate or oppress peripheral groups. The social and cultural division of space is central for understanding of group relations because it determines to a large degree the (re)production of social identities and inequalities (Olwig, 2005). Location obviously affects opportunities, levels of development, the quality of services, social networks and levels of conflict and cooperation with social 'others'. Caste identity in Jaffna stems from the identity of location. Peripheral parts of the village are still in 2015 allocated for depressed castes and the centre is dense with Vellalah and intermediate castes. Landscape is tied to collective human memory with invented tradition, and can thus constitute or break identity. The war dislocated and thus uprooted the Jaffna Vellalah from their known landscapes and collective memories.

An undergraduate revealed in the survey that in the area around the university there are people who still look at caste applicants' caste backgrounds when renting out rooms. This survey was done in 2005 just after several internal dislocations and a major ceasefire. Once, when an undergraduate girl was with three others looking for rooms, one man, probably a Vellalah said, "I hope that you all come from good backgrounds, last time I misjudged one by his appearance and gave him the room, then I found out later that he is a Karaiyar and eats meat. I told him that we do not rent to somebody who eats meat". This undergraduate wrote in the written survey that she left the place and had to look for another place, as she was hurt by this form of caste prejudice in a semi-urban centre. On the other hand, one foreigner's observation of the behaviour of Tamil National Alliance (TNA) politicians abroad have shown that caste consciousness and identity have not withered among Tamil politicians. A depressed caste politician sat separately during a common lunch in a foreign country (Foreigner, 40, 2007). Tamil Vellalah politicians especially are not ready to accommodate the transformation which was suddenly forced by the LTTE in the society as well among the movement.

8.3.1 Multiple Meanings of Land Tenure

Land tenure is a core building block of Vellalah identity. The best land resources in Jaffna were absorbed by the cream of the society, the Vellalah. Caste-dominant social structure remained at the centre of development in Jaffna. When we look at agriculture, the productive areas of land were subjected to social control by Vellalah, and it resulted in monopoly possession by the Vellalah. The historical process through which the Vellalah became major landowners and how they acquired land in Jaffna carry a series of assumptions. First,

from the beginning, the Vellalah have justified their acquisition of land due to their occupation being 'farmers/agriculturists'. Another explanation holds that Vellalah during colonial times became major economic entrepreneurs in tobacco cultivation and other cash crops; as revenue collectors they earned more money and received title deeds from the colonisers. Still another explanation suggests that during post-colonial times, due to Vellalah holding white-collar professional jobs as lawyers, Vithanaiyar (village headman) and JPs, they were able to make 'illegal deeds' for abandoned lands and those of 'doubtful ownership'. This was relayed to me by a non-Vellalah man in response to a query on how the land possessions of Vellalah had changed. Although we can trace the ownership of land through the land registry in Jaffna, it is difficult to connect the landownership to caste, since there is no record for caste identity. According to Nithiyanandan "if the most fertile soil in the North-East came under immediate occupation, it was the Vellalah, the upper caste among the Sri Lankan Tamils, who were leading this *nation quest*" (2004: 12) (my italics). One lawyer mentioned that a certain percentage of land during the war was transferred to non-Vellalah, but she held the view that the majority of landownership is still held by Vellalah in Jaffna (Female, 57, 2014).

Vellalah self-esteem connected to landownership was related to the amount of land, the type of land held and the location; donations to temples, schools or libraries; the inheritance of land given by ancestors; and current profitability. Despite the fact that there are many depressed castes in post-war Jaffna that do not have a single plot of land, the Vellalah continue to donate to temples, schools, or public libraries to establish and perpetuate their identities publicly and for the future.

One Vellalah woman resented that, "Coconuts are falling on the ground in our (Vellalah) lands due to lack of service castes that have done this work for ages in the past". It was and is still a custom in Jaffna that depressed castes, due to poverty and lack of other opportunities, go to Vellalah landowners with coconut trees to climb up to pick up the coconuts. This dependency is fading in Jaffna since the depressed castes are less interested in doing this work. Even some lands which were used for agricultural purposes, such as paddy cultivation, were sold or abandoned because of low profitability, lack of labour, or rising salaries and remained the unused possession of Vellalah. Therefore, the power and landownership bound to Vellalah identity changed in several ways: the income earned from land is on the decrease now due to inflation, lack of profit, lack of Vellalah interest in lands and the frequent bad weather; employing service castes in the lands became more demanding and declined; and finally, the face value of the land is the only thing that continues to confer Vellalah status through landownership.

Two more things which connect to landownership are the shrinking of the Vellalah population and the nature of land transactions in Jaffna. Historically the Vellalah as a wealthy elite emigrated as the pioneers of the Tamil diaspora. As explained earlier, land transactions in Jaffna occur according to the local law *Thesavazhamai*. This law specifies that land in Jaffna can be used in three ways, one is for ownership, the second is for *Otti* mortgage[142] and, the third is for lease (Tambiah, 2004: 206). Another law regarding purchasing land in Jaffna is called the 'law of pre-emption' which restricts the landownership to certain categories of people and was criticised by non-Tamils. According to this law, an outsider who is not a Tamil cannot purchase land even if he/she offers a high price. This law was defective and was amended in 1947. This law originally gave the right to sell land to only four classes of persons, such as heirs, partners, neighbours with nearby lands, and those who have the same mortgage. In 1947 it limited the right of pre-emption to two classes of persons, such as co-owners and co-heirs (ibid.: 223). Nithiyanandan comments that:

> When lands were locked in this fashion, it prevented optimum utility in terms of an equal distribution and blocked the growth of a free land market. Lands always changed hands within the Vellalah group, but not necessarily for agricultural purposes. Non-Vellalah with sufficient capital and a penchant for farming could not easily enter the fray (Nithiyanandan, 2004: 12).

A university lecturer who is Vellalah said that he had applied for a loan to buy a plot of land which is next to his house which was also going to be bought by a depressed caste (casual talk, Male, 45, 2015). There are, however, flexibilities in land transactions in contemporary Jaffna as a result of the war and other factors. For a number of reasons, the Vellalah sold, and are still willing to sell their lands in Jaffna. When I approached a lawyer regarding this, the response was that "many Vellalah who live abroad have sold and are selling their land. I would say 25–40% of Vellalah lands have been transferred to non-Vellalah whose ownership is on the increase; the Vellalah have become minority in Jaffna." In the field, one informant found this change to reflect a transformation of caste identity:

> Many middle and upper-middle class Vellalah have sold their lands and migrated either to Colombo or out of Sri Lanka. Low castes with money are now ready and very willing to buy land being sold by Vellalah because of its prime location in Jaffna; consequently

[142] It is "a form of usufruct by which the mortgage enjoyed the produce in lieu of the interest. The property was only redeemable at certain periods to ensure that the mortgager, who has sown the seed or cultivated crops, would get the benefit of such produce" (Tambiah, 2004: 206)

> today the residential patterns are changing from the former 'colonies'[143] and this is a major transformation (Female, 54, 2006).

This narrative further confirms that for the Vellalah, money became more important, but for depressed castes, the location in Jaffna was more significant. This is one more way to point to how Vellalah development becomes the role-model for depressed castes. I myself was involved in a land case through a power-of-attorney from a Vellalah landowner who had moved to Singapore. The land of 22 *lachams* was partially donated to a school, a small portion to a maid who is from the depressed castes, and the rest was still in the owner's name. This land was occupied by depressed castes displaced during the war and was classified as a 'welfare camp'. There were temporary shelters to be taken away. The school along with the owner had approached government officials with several requests to vacate the IDPs, but all were unsuccessful. The owners were told that the occupants would move as soon they could go back to their original places. In 2005, after foreign and international Tsunami aid was directed to government and especially to the areas where Tamils were affected, the LTTE, who then had power and influence with the local government officials, could sometimes direct funds as they preferred. The UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) had a project called 'semi-permanent structure shelters' for the Tsunami affected people that also covered the people who lived in the 'welfare camp'. The owner wanted to stop this project thinking it would lead to the IDPs being settled there permanently. The government official who was the highest authority in that administrative branch was himself from a depressed caste, and wrote false letters of consent in the name of the landowner to go ahead with the project. The attempts to stop this project by the school and the owners were somehow reported to the LTTE and they intervened in the issue. The owners out of fear due to the LTTE's intervention remained silent. Justice was renegotiated by the LTTE. This case study highlights at least three issues regarding caste in Jaffna. One is that though the Vellalah still had landownership in Jaffna, the power over land was sometimes handled by the LTTE. Second, it also illustrates the claim that Vellalah usually try to approach things through legal means, but not the depressed castes. Third, Vellalah do donate lands to temples, schools or hospitals out of pride, but the depressed castes do so rarely. Relating to land transactions, two types of narratives emerged which I could not generalise from since the cases were limited. One case concerns Vellalah who still dislike selling their lands to non-Vellalah. The other case contrarily suggests that the Vellalah do not care nowadays who buys their lands. I reproduce these opposing narratives.

[143] The areas where the low castes live as clusters were called 'colonies' in the past.

> *Narrative one: Thesavazhamai*,[144] the customary law of Jaffna says that when land is for sale it is preferable to inform first the neighbours to give them priority. I know of one case that was arranged by a land broker in which the Vellalah who sold land only found out that the buyer is low-caste when the deed had already been signed. At that time it was too late to do anything about the transaction. Many Vellalah want to sell land but are hesitant to sell if the buyer is from 'low caste' people even if the price is good. But the thing here is that after selling to low castes they are not respected any more by their fellow community members as before (Male, 46, 2005).

> *Narrative two*: 'Some of the high castes are in need of money and sell their land to low castes. This selling of land by Vellalah is reasonable because the majority of them have migrated and there is no point in holding 'unused' land. This means that there is less rigidity than before, and instead flexibility has increased. But the Vellalah are still in power holding the ownership of most lands in Jaffna. And they are dominating even from diaspora (Male, 60, 2006).

There is a hidden Vellalah identity transformation here because landowning Vellalah who gained esteem by claiming landownership, had to sell land in order to send their children abroad, or move away from Jaffna themselves due to war and the impact of globalisation. The land was a unit of wealth, and bestowed power when agriculture had a prominent place in the society. Land still means power, but the monetary value has been degraded since agriculture became less interesting and profitable. While Vellalah follow global developments depressed castes follow the Vellalah (Female, 43, 2012). One testimony takes up why Vellalah have lost status:

> Vellalah have less power because a lot of land that was owned by them has been sold and they have changed their lifestyle and given up vegetarianism and started to consume alcohol (Female, 48, 2006).

Very few Vellalah remain as farmers in present day Jaffna and many Vellalah landowners have given their land for 'lease'. The reasons the Vellalah sell land in Jaffna can be seen as follows: 1) They do not have enough capital to do anything with the land, 2) labour is now more expensive and in high demand, 3) the profit from the land was not considerable, 4) in order to go abroad, 5) in order to keep their social status as it was before, 6) economic embargo and being cut off from the main land connection between the capital and Jaffna meant a further barricade to reaching a larger market. As was taken up in chapter 4, the discursive identification of Vellalah with landownership is somehow still dynamic and powerful in contemporary Jaffna, since major landownership is still with the Vellalah. There were subtle attempts made by the LTTE via government sectors and NGOs to trace the real ownership of lands possessed

[144] This was codified during the Dutch period.

by the Vellalah, and to confiscate the lands of those who had left the country for so long. But the informal conversations I had with lawyers of Jaffna regarding land tenure, stipulated that there is no room for those kinds of acts under the law since war is considered an abnormal situation. Diasporic Vellalah and educated Vellalah became disinterested in holding the landownership without any use for it, on the other hand, local non-Vellalah are showing an interest in buying lands with very low purchasing power except for those who have someone abroad to help financially. Lands are relatively available in free market in post-war Jaffna.

Vellalah power derived from landownership arose for two reasons. One is that land was the unit of production and wealth. Second, land was used as a unit for services and a calling for depressed castes. As it stands now, due to war and other reasons, many of the Vellalah have left Jaffna; thus land as the unit of production and of wealth has been devalued. Vellalah ceased being agriculturists long ago, the ones still in farming have been forced to leave their lands and much of the fertile area has been declared as a HSZ. From another angle, the depressed castes (or service castes) have been empowered, modernised and no longer remain in traditional jobs. Some of the service castes now own land and engage in agriculture. But the war forced some of them to be dependent upon Vellalah again to some extent. Fishing was forbidden in many parts of the sea due to suspicion that the LTTE might be masquerading as fishermen; in 2009 after the war, restrictions have been relaxed to some extent. The transport of building materials that was stopped from Colombo to Jaffna during war, has now resumed. Many of the depressed castes who relied on daily wages as 'masons' and 'coolies/assistants' were paralysed and had to look for daily wages in Vellalah homes. Finally, with regard to the legality of land acquisition during war being prohibited since war was not normal condition, this too, has a caste dimension. There is a provision in the law that if land is being used by a person for ten years continuously without any interruption of the owner, the person who has lived there for ten years is entitled to possess that land. This provision of the law was nullified owing to war being an abnormal condition even though there were several cases by depressed castes based on such claims. As an extension to this issue, the Vellalah, being the major landowners and intelligentsia in Jaffna, are behind the major mobilisation against the land colonisation by the Sri Lankan government. I now move the focus to education as one of the major arenas of identification for Vellalah.

8.4 Education

Vellalah identity was bound to education from the beginning and the Vellalah were considered to be the cream of the society, and hence the elite. If we

recall to the pre-colonial and colonial social structure in Jaffna, the Vellalah had land, wealth, health and education. This superiority of the Vellalah was extended to employment in the government and non-government sectors too. These, as we have seen, have been transformed with the changing tendencies of the society and its situational needs. Education was opened up for all in 1941 through free education; depressed castes were able to benefit the system of education and gained the power of knowledge which was forbidden during most of the colonial times. As a result many depressed castes are in better positions now in Jaffna society as doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers and civil servants. Non-Vellalah were not however denied opportunities, rather "Vellalah had a more marked representation in public sector employment, mainly due to their *ideal status fulfilling the necessary preconditions*" (Nithiyanandan, 2004: 20) (my italics). The Vellalah exodus is one of the reasons that made room for the depressed castes to gain access in the public sector in Jaffna. There is new caste-based leadership formed in post-war Jaffna where many lower networks of leadership have been occupied by many intermediate or depressed castes, at the top of that network, is mostly a Vellalah stronghold. When Vellalah encounter problems with the immediate leadership, they (Vellalah) find the highest in the network and complain or obtain some remedy from them.

Education is considered by many a major factor behind all caste transformation, but people are treated differently according to caste identities as the survey of the undergraduate revealed. In schools, universities, and government offices, the customer or student affiliations are caste bound. Education is gained at home, schools, tuition centres, and universities and it is then measured and utilised in the public sector where according to the level of achievement of a person, he/she is placed in a working environment, which carries a division of labour, hierarchy of authority, formal selection, career managers and formal rules.[145] It was interesting to see and hear in this formal official working environment how caste dominated the scenes many times.

It is a fact that for an outsider these interior and sensitive identities will not appear on the surface and even for an insider it is a taboo subject. Many narratives explicitly spell out how the inner dynamic of caste structures are masked or invisible. One teacher observed in her classroom that some depressed castes students, when asked to bring food for everyone from home, refused and looked at her with a strange expression. (In the past other teachers did not allow them to prepare food for some school functions.[146]) Then she was told by some other students that if depressed caste students bring food from home, certain high castes in Jaffna would not eat in the class. In the

[145] (http://bizcovering.com/business-and-society/what-is-bureaucracy/).

[146] The belief of ritual purity forbids receiving food from depressed castes.

past, depressed caste students were not allowed to study in schools; later they were allowed but had to sit on the floor. In the twentieth century, separate caste schools emerged but they were not officially recognised. War created an opportunity for depressed castes to study in schools which had excluded them before in the centre of the villages. It is not a surprise that in schools, and even in university, friendships are based on caste, region and religion. And there are cliques of people from the same caste or regional background in all the public sectors in Jaffna.

A Vellalah woman who works in a government office told me that she knows the caste background of everybody in her office. She behaves equally with everybody in the office, but if somebody from a depressed caste invites her for a function at home, she finds an excuse not to attend. In my observations, and as some informants said, there are public halls and buildings where anybody can arrange weddings, puberty ceremonies or even funerals, so that everybody irrespective of caste differences attends and receives food in a common place. One Vellalah doctor expressed that the Vellalah in offices have one non-Vellalah as personal labour in case there are needed to be used against rough behaviour. This is a kind of extension of the caste system into the public sectors with Vellalah having service castes in their offices. The workers who do menial jobs like cleaning, and serving as peons, are mostly from the depressed castes and expected by their Vellalah superiors to do extra jobs like picking up children from schools, going to shops, working as body guards, etc., in exchange for extra payment or care by the Vellalah superior. The above anecdote supports how Vellalah identity is connected to non-violence and the depressed castes are still used for tough work.

The university is a place where multiple castes from different regions study and work together. I had an opportunity to meet the area leader of LTTE in Jaffna in his office to let him know of my research on caste. His response was:

> Jaffna University was for a very long time one of the last institutions to keep caste system alive until we interfered. We have tried to change the system to some extent. I think that mixed marriages will change the still existing caste identity (LTTE area leader, Male, 39, 2006)

The University of Jaffna cannot escape from reflecting society since it has evolved from Tamil culture and society. At the university, Vellalah had and have superiority in almost all fields. One lecturer said that he can still see that some Vellalah men behave as the protectors of caste. As far as he knows, besides politics, caste is still in practice behind the scene in appointments and in obtaining posts. A statement released on 1 August 2014 by the Jaffna Science Teachers' Association (JUSTA) on 'Discriminating against Excellence'

reports that caste-based discrimination still exists in the recruitment practices at the university.[147] Especially when it comes to coveted or high posts, they are given to Vellalah. One of the vice-chancellor's appointments was welcomed by some and rejected by others because of his religious background. Among the supporters, one of the reasons was that the nominated vice-chancellor was a Vellalah and comes from the C.Y. Thamotharampillai family tree.[148] One Vellalah clerk in his fifties noted that among the university's non-academic staff, the depressed castes dominate. Another note was offered by a Vellalah lecturer with thirty years of experience, claiming that depressed castes are not afraid of misusing the law, rules and other things. He added that they also turn easily to violent means for solving simple problems. Here we can see how actor-oriented, structural or even educational changes do not dislocate or overthrow the positional views of caste which were once internalised.

8.5 Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the war created a temporal transition and adjustments in some premises of Vellalah caste identification such as landownership, marriage and levels of education. Vellalah had never before experienced multiple dislocations, and being uprooted from their residences. The Vellalah, although having undergone a depressed caste lifestyle due to war-time displacement, nevertheless internalised the main features of Vellalah identity, which were maintained. Vellalahhood is still marked through a series of hidden mechanisms in Jaffna. Three decades of war however, meant that the sources of Vellalah identity with respect to absolute power over land and leadership shifted. Vellalah identity structures deteriorated without immediate consolidation of a new structure, although caste sensibilities never disappeared and continued to reassert themselves even with Vellalah becoming a numerical minority in Jaffna. Vellalah dominance has not disappeared, they still own much of the land, and control local politics, but the arenas that formerly demarcated their identities have eroded with massive Vellalah emigration from Jaffna. On the other hand, the narratives offered by non-Vellalah in general convey that 'everything changed'. Depressed castes are more likely now to protest discrimination publicly, they have moved into public sector employment, and as a result of INGO empowerment and higher incomes, they are able to purchase lands

[147] See this link for the full report https://1.hidemyass.com/ip-1/encoded/czovL3d3dy5jb2xvbWJvdGVsZWdyYXBoLmNvbS9pbmRleC5waHAvamFmZm5hLXVuaS1hY2FkZW1pY3MtY2FsbC1mb3ItdW5pdmVyc2l0eS1vcGVyYXRpb25zLXRvLWNvbW1lbmNlLW9uLWEtZnJlc2gtc2xhdGUtb3Zlci1hYnVzZXMtaW4tcmVjcnVpdG1lbnQtcHJhY3RpY2VzLw%3D%3D

[148] It is one of the characteristics of Vellalah to trace their kinship. It will be placed at the end page of a memorial manual.

once owned by the Vellalah. However, resettlement policy in the post-war era sent the depressed castes mostly to their original places and thus brought back the landscape identity based on caste as a centre for high and periphery for low.

9

Concluding Discussion

9.1 Introduction

The focus of this study has been the articulations and negotiations of Vellalah identity in the context of Tamil nation-building among Jaffna Tamils in Sri Lanka. In a sense, this study offers an important message: that introspection both at the community and individual levels is necessary before judging others, and thus it is also used as an 'icebreaker' approach, especially in the issues of conflict where a particular group views the enemy as always being outside of their group. The overarching research question – *how Vellalah identity has been practiced, negotiated and transformed in the context of Tamil nation-building project* – has been approached through an interpretive constructive methodology based on narratives and drawing on theories of intersectionality, identity politics, caste, nationalism and the theory of schema.

The particular location chosen, Jaffna, was not random. Jaffna is the heartland of Tamil culture and intellectualism, and thus of politics among Sri Lankan Tamils. Therefore, the Jaffna people's perspectives on caste and especially on Vellalah identity, as provided in this thesis, are not just of interest to Jaffna Tamils, but are significant to the whole of Sri Lanka and of South Asia.

Through the accounts of Vellalah caste identity, I have explored how caste can be understood as a social phenomenon that has continuity, which is intersectional, reproduces hegemonies and constructs orders in individuals and collectives in Sri Lankan Tamil society. These accounts, which express the fact that caste/Vellalah identities are not only reconstituted and reflected in the socio-cultural and politico-economic spheres, but also important for the way people view themselves and others, in relation to their progress and lifestyles. On the one hand, Vellalah identity intersects with the narratives of nation-building; on the other hand, it illustrates the fact that the Vellalah caste identity has (re)shaped the socio-cultural and political order and meaning of Jaffna

Tamils at different times. Identity is understood here as something that is simultaneously grounded in everyday life, historically conditioned but susceptible to change and (re)interpretation, yet also durable to some extent as it has been internalised from infancy (Bourdieu, 1977; Hall, 1989; Gorringe and Rafanell, 2007; Strauss and Quinn, 1997).

In this concluding chapter I discuss the Vellalah in relation to the four main research questions of this thesis: *How has Vellalah identity been constituted historically? How did the Vellalah negotiate the meanings of the key elements of caste and their lifestyles? How did the militant Tamil nationalist struggle and the LTTE relate to caste in general and the Vellalah in particular?* and *How did the war impact caste and landownership and education, as a central part of Vellalah identity?* This final chapter is divided into three sections, the first of which recapitulates and develops the main findings of this enquiry in relation to the four research questions. The second part will briefly discuss the contributions of the thesis towards our understanding of caste in general and the final part will discuss ideas for future research.

9.1.1 How has Vellalah Identity Been Constituted Historically?

It is helpful to think about Vellalah identity as a continuation of the past, before Tamil nationalism became a reference point. I thus have wanted to explore closely how Vellalah identity operates. This approach is relevant to show how Vellalah identity connects with issues of Sri Lankan politics, Tamil nation-building in a broader perspective, and it is relevant being that it allows the researcher to draw connections between past, present, actors and structures of Tamils in Jaffna.

Through the historical narratives we have learnt how Vellalah identity distinctions have been constructed, negotiated and interpreted according to politics and time by historians concerning productive relations, technology, power distributions and ecology (cf. David, 1977). We have also learnt that histories, as political tools, represent a social order where only the privileged persons appear as 'the people' and the historians, as eulogisers, have at times added absurd social and cultural polemics to their descriptions of past events (Smith, 1996:175). Through several collected narrative accounts, we have come to understand that Vellalah identity from the beginning of history was carefully manoeuvred through certain stable identification markers which were prominent in various times, such as *leadership, landownership, temple affiliation, lifestyle, education, politics, intra-Vellalah divides* and *inter-caste relationships.* These identification arenas were meant and imagined as the privileged zones for the Vellalah serving to confirm their security and to construct different positions of power that were forbidden for other castes (cf. Cooley, 1998; Stern, 2005:

39). This, on the one hand, has helped the Vellalah to sustain their power and privileges, and on the other hand has marginalised the depressed castes and denied them their fundamental rights. Boundary maintenance of Vellalah identity was justified by them being 'prisoners of social structure' or 'protectors of Tamil culture'.

Vellalah strategy in identity mobilisation has, however, not been static or linear, but has always adapted in order to gain access to power and resources and as such the Vellalah have also been resistant to other castes imitating them. They have however been open to both internal subdivisions within their own grouping and have also incorporated Others into the larger Vellalah identity (cf.Calhoun, 1994: 27; Jenkins, 2008: 81; Bhabha, 1994: 44). Thus, the supposed positive internal qualities of the Vellalah, such as 'refinement of feeling', 'generous giving', 'sympathy for all living creatures', 'peace loving', 'frugal', 'morally excellent' and 'industrious people' have been reiterated by both local Vellalah historians and by foreign scholars (Maraimalai Adigal, 1958: 156; Pfaffenberger, 1982; Kanakasabhai, 1904: 113; Raman, 2009: 80). At the same time however, we could see that Vellalah leadership during the early colonial period was crucially placed to wrestle with the pressures coming from different directions on different issues. For instance, in order to protect Hinduism from the invasion of Christianity, the Vellalah elite had to uphold Hinduism and Tamil tradition where caste practice was an accepted custom. Then, when depressed castes were politically mobilised to challenge and resist Vellalah hegemony from 1950s to 1970s, the Vellalah redirected their focus to the ethnic discrimination taking place against Tamils in Sri Lanka. These strategies legitimised and consolidated the binary opposition between the Vellalah and the depressed castes (cf. Jabri, 1996:124).

We have also learnt that the Vellalah, being the ruling, dominant caste in early South India and in Sri Lanka, had their own kingdom in Jaffna and hence also left South India during the invasion of Malik Kafur; they have thus had an aversion towards being ruled by others. Preventing others from imitating them is one of the means which the Vellalah use to keep caste divisions and differences alive. The depressed castes attempt to take over the Vellalah's patterns of identification, but due to constant negotiation of meanings between 'us' and 'them' there are always shifting orders of differentiation (cf. Giddens, 1991: 2; Hall, 1989:5, 1991: 21, 46; Ritson et al., 1996). Protecting the customs and the traditions of Tamil culture has been the only reason for Vellalah to justify what they did at any time.

In nineteenth century Jaffna, in the arenas of education and politics the Vellalah marked out their supremacy by using similar mechanisms of exclusion of the non-Vellalah. Policies in education by the government of Sri Lanka – such as free education in 1944 and the nationalising of private schools in the

1960s as well as the formation of political parties such as the CP which fought against caste hegemony – were challenges the Vellalah faced in the latter part of the twentieth century. These policies have also paved the way for the Vellalah's gradual loss of their grip on supremacy in the arenas where they had dominated.

In sum, this thesis does not claim to have provided an exhaustive answer to the question of what Vellalah identity means or how it has shifted in the past. In addressing the first question, it has demonstrated how the Vellalah identity negotiation has been, and continues to be, complex and shifting, within changing identification arenas. However, the behaviour of the Vellalah is still marked by superiority in status, power and positions in Jaffna. We have also been able to see how, via these unique articulations of the identification arenas, the Vellalah became the local elite and consolidated distinct lifestyles which other persons tried to imitate (cf. Roberts, 1974:550). But by focusing on the 'constructing actor' and voicing of the historical narratives, we could also perceive how historical narratives are a powerful mode of naturalising social reality and also socialising natural reality (cf. Hanks, 1989: 102).

9.1.2 How Did the Vellalah Negotiate the Meanings of the Elements of Caste and on Their Lifestyles?

This thesis also covers the changes in the elements of caste where Vellalah identity intersected, evolved, was (re)constituted and exercised. As we have learnt, the Vellalah and Tamil national identity are intertwined. Jaffna society underwent a drastic transition during the period of Tamil nationalist struggle during which the discourse on caste was forbidden for many reasons.

The majority of the university students surveyed for this study believe that caste is a given and cannot be changed, but they also tend to agree that it carries with it injustice. They further reveal how education stratifies caste and thus in rural and urban settings caste is relevant to jobs, kinship, social and formal networking and marriages. The narratives from my interviews further demonstrate that there are different caste compositions in *kuruchies*, i.e. small parts within villages and village settings where one caste dominates and others exists in small numbers. We have also learnt that the alliance of caste identity with the place of residence has changed a lot due to war and multiple displacements. The study has also revealed that the original connection between Vellalah identity and farming has changed, although it is not possible to discern whether the power dimension has similarly changed.

With regard to the perspectives on the changes in caste, the views held varied between those of high-caste and those of low-caste backgrounds. High-caste interviewees did not talk about much change, because it upset them to see a loss of power or privileges in the "world structure/extra-personal world"

(cf.Strauss & Quinn, 1997:6). Low-caste interviewees argue that caste has disappeared, as a strategy to release from disconformities that had given negative stigmas in the past (cf.Festinger, 1957; Strauss and Quinn, 1997). The views expressed in the interviews and informal conversations were different according to the interviewees' age too. Those from older generations were of the opinion that caste had not changed, but those from the younger generation believed that it had changed a lot. The results of this study indicate that although many things have been modernised and changed in the world structure, when they are deeply internalised as in the case of caste identity, they are difficult to override. This is where I captured the internalised aspect of caste and its durability and thus gained support of the concepts of schema and habitus. According to schema, when people have repetitive and public experiences mediated by learned practices, it develops a set of similar schemas and thus it is registered in the cognitive side of memory (Bourdieu, 1977; Gorringe and Rafanell, 2007; Strauss and Quinn, 1997). Hence, it is relatively durable, but transposable. In terms of transformation of caste, there were two views expressed, one as the total disjunction from the previous structure and the other, as continuity and transformation of the past.

The major elements of caste, such as the division of labour, endogamy, purity-pollution and ranking by which the caste was operationalised have been under focus herein (Banks, 1960; Bougle, 1971; Dumont, 1975). The ranking element was excluded from my study as it was a cause of psychological pain to the affected people and thus the LTTE's political officer demanded that I disregard it. Interdependency as one element of caste is much related with **division of labour** and thus has roots in *Thinai,* the eco-geographical and cultural community zones divided along five types of lands for five types of professions (Thaninayakam, 1966; Sivathamby, 1998; Cheran, 2007). The abolition of caste in Jaffna is believed to have relied upon the breaking up of the division of labour centred on caste. The accounts show that although the occupational caste identity has largely been dismantled for a number of reasons, the Vellalah still have mechanisms to identify the caste of the person who presently does a non-caste job in Jaffna. This further proves that although the elements of caste are gradually disappearing and shifted in meaning, the discursive practice of caste is dynamic. Also, Vellalah narratives about power constantly present stereotyped knowledge about the non-Vellalah and themselves (cf. Laclau, 1990; Lilja, 2007). When it comes to division of labour, bonded labour was transformed to contractual bonds and the source of relations became official and thus caste-based identity faded away. But this has occurred through a gradual process with structural changes in society. Purity-pollution attached to caste based division of labour has shifted to non-caste socio-cultural issues like educational achievements and knowledge about hygiene, etc.

The practice of **endogamy** meant that caste groups should choose their life-partners only based on their caste identity. Although biology refuses kith and kin, marriages carried out for the sake of protecting caste identity have encouraged inbreeding and led to birth defects due to the desire to protect caste identity, caste purity, and the family property endogamy was encouraged anyway. In Jaffna there is a trend that people will accept life-partners from outside their ethnicity, but not from outside of their caste. The narratives recount several inter-caste marriages as having ended up in broken alliances, isolation, separation, killings, cutting off of relationships, living lives in hiding, etc. Some narratives bring up the consequences of inter-caste marriage, arguing that it affects children and grandchildren, and also puts a stigma on the parents of higher caste in the normal process of socialising with relatives and society. The child born out of an inter-caste marriage will carry a 'hybrid caste identity' which is difficult in terms of his/her own marriage. A few narratives have evidenced how in mixed caste marriages caste disparity has become a source of family conflict, even though it was not the real cause. Laddering up via inter-caste marriages proved that caste-climbing is not possible. In post-war Jaffna, wealth at times overrides caste, so that a person who is lower, but wealthy, becomes the dominant partner in the relationship. The poor economy and the reduced number of men has relaxed the caste rules to some extent, and people who once refused to have marriages with those considered lower (but still within the Vellalah group) are now ready to marry them. This is a new relaxation among Vellalah in terms of marriage alliances and as a result the internal divisions are fading away. However, knowing the caste identity of a person in Jaffna is becoming difficult for multiple reasons, but ironically the diaspora still counts on caste for marriages of their children. This supports the theoretical ideas I develop in chapter 3 on the finding that education can be taken across national borders, but the new forms do not overrule the internalised schemas. Instead, caste is remade or rejected in relation to the previous schemas (cf. Hannerz, 1992: 238; Strauss and Quinn, 1997: 26).

When looking at **purity**, my study reveals some unexpected changes in comparison with the past. What I have learnt is that purity is articulated in new spaces such as in the areas of health, hygiene and religion, in addition to its relation to caste. There have been different practices of pollution. As the Vellalah narratives has shown, for some, water purifies caste pollution while for others it can mediate pollution. This variation can be explained with the concept that identity is flexible, changeable and situationally fabricated (cf. Verdery, 1996: 35). Cooked food that is known to be cooked by persons from a certain caste is polluted for some Vellalah, whereas food can be accepted by others if they do not know the caste of the cook. Vegetarianism rooted in re-

ligion was adopted by mostly Brahmins, Veerasaivar, Pandaram and Vellalah, and has been also linked to purity and status.

Connection with the **temples** is one of the identification arenas of Vellalah where Vellalah identity is marked via owning temples, donating land for temples, building temples and having special rites in temples. Temples are one of the arenas where the Vellalah still have indirect mechanisms for holding power. A few accounts showed that depressed castes have internalised some misconceptions of Hindu religion and marginalised themselves in addition to the Vellalah marginalising them. This supports my theory that marginalisation at times is not the result of oppression, but due to internalised notions of inferiority (Lipsky, 1987; Crenshaw, 1991; Yuval-Davis, 2011). As we have learnt from the narratives, the Vellalah detach themselves from temples during war, in order to avoid proximity with depressed castes who have begun to show up in temples increasingly and frequently. Accounts further show that depressed castes still experience the dominance of the Vellalah in mixed-caste temples. Also, the depressed castes have begun to upgrade and build their own temples. This in a way re-strengthens caste identities in post-war Jaffna. Christian conversion serving to elevate one's societal status and to free one of caste has not happened to any great extent, since the people still live in the same society and associated with the same people as before. This further supports that social locations have collective memory which is built and maintained (Olwig, 2005; Cheran, 2007:3).

Lifestyle can be understood as an identity based on choices and preferences about how to act and *whom to be* (Giddens, 1991:84). Caste identity in this thesis is denoted by intra-personal as well as extra-personal markers. 'Internal' has been used to refer to the nonverbal qualities of the Vellalah and the extra-personal has referred to visible ones such as how the caste jobs are done by the given castes, how the marriage alliances go along with caste identity as well as how dresscode, vocabulary, type of ornaments, manners, etc., function (Strauss and Quinn, 1997: 6). Ironically, this study has found that although caste-based qualities (such as in dresscode, vocabulary usage, food habits, etc., among the Vellalah) are maintained, multiple intra-caste variations are also maintained and continued (David, 1977: 453).

The process of exclusion and inclusion in relation to Vellalah identity has been articulated in two ways in Jaffna. First, some intermediate castes adopted Vellalah identifications historically and merged into the Vellalah. Second, some persons from other castes adopted Vellalah identifications but remained within their caste identities (David, 1973:455). Theoretically, if anyone who promotes themselves through the conduct of Vellalah identity can become Vellalah, then Vellalah identity will expand to include others and gradually caste identity may disappear. But what is actually happening on the ground

is that when the non-Vellalah take part in the process of sanskritisation, the Vellalah shift their boundaries of meanings to separate their identity from Others. This is because identity is multiple facets and is constructed to strive to safeguard the security and power of the subject (Hall, 1989; Stern, 2005). The more the depressed castes were able to imitate the Vellalah, the greater needs the Vellalah expressed to preserve their spiritual values (cf. Laclau, 1990: 33; Lilja, 2007: 21). Many Vellalah narratives also express that the development model of depressed castes has copied the lifestyle of the Vellalah. A few narratives express that the poor Vellalah have more contacts with non-Vellalah than Vellalah, as the Vellalah marginalise them due to poverty. This is another instance which shows that economic alliance can override caste alliance as we have already seen in relation to inter-caste marriages.

The subjective behaviour of the Vellalah was reiterated as the cultivated manners which had been internalised by the people in Jaffna. According to the Vellalah, whenever there are interpersonal interactions in the public discourse, the issue of good and bad manners (such as receiving with gratitude and receiving without gratitude, using the proper channels to achieve things and using illegal means to achieve things) pops up. The assumption is that depressed castes cannot easily acquire these manners. The narratives on the margin account for the negative qualities of the Vellalah and also the double morality in relation to sexuality. It is also pointed out that the Vellalah, being vegetarians (only a few are vegetarian now) and believing in *ahimsa*, did the most injustice to depressed castes in the 1960s and 1970s, justifying themselves as prisoners of Tamil culture/structure. Already the lifestyle encompassing a low reproductive rate among the Vellalah is coupled with high societal expectations towards them, and thus the high hopes of the Vellalah affect their marriage life in the match making process.

Identity is understood as how we identify others too. There are many narratives which capture the views of the Vellalah towards non-Vellalah, especially the depressed castes. The result of long internalisation of dominance and suppression along the axis of caste lines has stigmatised both the Vellalah and non-Vellalah (cf. Crenshaw, 1991, 1989; Collins, 2000; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Good people/bad people, good mind/bad mind, good behaviour/bad behaviour, good activities/bad activities and good things/bad things are all dichotomised among the Vellalah and non-Vellalah, regardless of realities and exceptions. This has played out for instance in dresscode colours, sexual behaviour, associations with government forces, etc. It has been believed that intellectual cultivation can be achieved by anyone but not cultivated manners (Strauss and Quinn, 1997; Gorringe and Rafanell, 2007).

In sum, this thesis does not claim to have provided a complete answer to the question of how the Vellalah have negotiated their meanings of the ele-

ments of caste nor their lifestyles. However, it does claim to have pointed to the limitations which the Jaffna Vellalah have felt in articulating their power and privileges (status) as they did before. It also pointed out that the discursive dynamic of caste identity has overruled the material elements of caste. Though it is a fact that there have been some changes to the status and identity of depressed castes in Jaffna such as economic wellbeing, knowledge possession, land acquisition, temple affiliation, and lifestyles changes as well as positional changes, none of the accounts articulated by the Vellalah express that the non-Vellalah are treated with the same status and identity as the Vellalah.

9.1.3 How Did the Militant Tamil Nationalist Struggle and the LTTE Relate to Caste in General and Vellalah in Particular?

The Tamil nation-building project and its elites attempted to establish a Tamil state for a homogenous Tamil nation in specific territories in the north and east of Sri Lanka. In this context, the special interests of elites, their social profile, identity positions, etc., and the competition between the Vellalah national elite and the (mostly) non-Vellalah LTTE who engaged in Tamil nation-building have been scrutinised. Very minimal scholarly attention has been paid to this intellectual and political threat in the caste perspective. As we have learnt, this study spells out that the Tamil nation-building was politically engineered by two different groups who were dissimilar in relation to age/generation, class, education, language proficiency and caste. This transition came about through complicated manoeuvres, but two are related to caste. One was the increased realisation that the social order in Jaffna, which had been created by the Vellalah hegemony over depressed castes, was unjust. The other was the Vellalah national elite's long-term neglect towards the affected minorities, the depressed castes and thus the Vellalah national elite's responsive cooperation with the government of Sri Lanka (Pfaffenberger, 1981, 1990; Sivathamby, 1989; Wilson, 2000; Wickramasinghe, 2006; Sivasegaram, 2008). Numerous militant groups emerged in the late-1970s but the LTTE became the dominant and most ruthless movement among them. The LTTE is seen here as a new elite and the force behind the inclusion of some depressed castes into Tamil politics. As we have learnt, there were caste identifications behind every militant group that emerged (Hellmann-Rajanayakam, 1994, 1998; Daniel, 1996; Stokke, 1998; Wilson, 2000; Hoole, 2001; Sumathy, 2001; RaviKumar, 2002; Ravindran, 2004). Some narratives confirmed that the militant projects were motivated by caste frictions.

The LTTE implemented for itself de facto political power and a state structure in Jaffna during 1990–1995 and were pioneers when it came to the inclusion of women and low-caste people in Tamil politics (Hellmann-Rajanayakam,

1994:28-29; see also Wilson, 2000; Daniel, 1996; Sumathy, 2001; Stokke, 1998, 2000). The LTTE's actions proved that they wanted to fight against the Vellalah hegemony and Vellalah monopoly over resources, but they continued to blame the government of Sri Lanka for unemployment. Vellalah elites who were totally opposed to the development of depressed castes, perceived the depressed castes as a threat to their identity maintenance. As the accounts collected reveals, caste has been politicised by both the Vellalah national elite and the LTTE differently. Both elites held the opinion that caste had to be abolished, but they disagreed on how it ought to be abolished. The JYC, which consisted of Vellalah intellectuals and the societal elite, made some attempts to eradicate caste as we have learnt, but their genuine consciousness for the nature of oppression was not clear. Vellalah total hegemony was unquestioned in the early nationalist project, but Vellalah values came to be increasingly questioned by the depressed castes when the Vellalah developed cooperation with the government. The national claims, memories and myths were almost the same as those continued from the TULF through to the LTTE, but with regard to programmes, more values and traditions were re-invented by the LTTE to give meaning for 'heroism' which was not the political practice of the Vellalah. That the overall changes which occurred in relation to caste and Vellalah identity in Jaffna during the reign of the LTTE was due to 'fear of the gun', which was repeatedly echoed in the narratives of Jaffna Vellalah.

Leadership is the central role of Vellalah identity; we could see that in the 1980s it transferred from the Vellalah to the non-Vellalah and especially to the Karaiyar caste. The frictions between the Vellalah and the Karaiyar surfaced only during the political mobility of all Tamils (Tambiah, 1984: 104). The educated Vellalah viewed Karaiyar leadership as an ideological denigration and thus counted it as nothing but a war time measure. A few narratives reveal that although Vellalah lost the formal leadership of Tamils in Sri Lanka during the LTTE period, their informal leadership, especially in the political narratives, was vibrant. Political power was lost to the hands of the LTTE, but intellectual power was retained by the Vellalah. Ideological platforms for nation-building were originated, fed and strengthened by Vellalah, but these were activated, revolutionised and materialised by the non-Vellalah dominated LTTE. Moreover, some accounts prove that there were a few scholars with non-Vellalah background at that time who tried to connect the militant heroism with Kshatriya-Varnic roots, re-mythologising and reorienting Tamil history (Sivaram, 1992: 17; Schalk, 1997: 39). These are seen as merely elite strategies of cultural manipulations against the power of underlying cultural cleavages (cf. Smith, 1998:157). The LTTE's version of the militant project benefitted the oppressed; the will of the Tamil nation was the will of the LTTE's leadership (cf. Eller, 1999). The LTTE, in order to deconstruct caste, attempted through

several means to disturb the binary positions between the Vellalah and non-Vellalah. They challenged the power positions which the Vellalah invoked, by attaching new meanings to a given identity, and they opened up spheres for the development of non-dominant narratives. In most cases the LTTE, acting as a new dominant elite, mobilised the masses in order to achieve their own aim the same way Vellalah national elite did in previous instances; both were not inclusive. On the other hand, the Vellalah's relationship with the militant LTTE did not remain static, but varied according to people's individual stands on politics, education, lifestyles, and personal dichotomies. Some moderate politicians and educationists from the Vellalah were perceived by LTTE as acting against their interests, especially in cooperating with the government, and were assassinated by them. The LTTE assassinated many Vellalah politicians and intellectuals for being dissidents, traitors and opportunists. There was always an 'us' and 'them' in both articulations of nationalism, but caste was obviously one of the dividing lines between them.

The LTTE intervened in the practice of caste in Jaffna via multiple means. One focused on the division of labour to have an impact on the interdependency element centred on the Vellalah. In order to eliminate Vellalah dominance, the LTTE forced all the service castes to continue the jobs via institutional centres, not by visiting Vellalah homes. This effected subtle shifts in the rest of the elements of caste as bonded labour became service-oriented, but as a few recounted it was not economically viable as the social redistributive relationship was replaced via 'official' relations. While depressed castes in Jaffna were positive to LTTE's efforts to eradicate caste, the Vellalah held negative views. The LTTE, as we have learnt in Chapter 7, targeted the education and property of the Vellalah by grabbing the lands and houses of those who emigrated and also those who did not contribute to the war by providing one child to the LTTE. Many Vellalah said in chorus that it was a crude approach as they were against the politics of the LTTE.

With regard to the **politics** of the Vellalah, the concept of homeland/Tamil Eelam was foremost forwarded by the Vellalah and even the idea of a 'separate state of Tamil Eelam' was put forward by a Christian Vellalah in the mid-1970s (Wilson, 2000). The historical pleading for minority rights privileges has been criticised for being exaggerated and a case of being "self-interested progress and of a march toward self-government of the Vellalah" (Tambiah, 1986:109; see also Mahindapala, 2001, 2004). The narratives of the resolution for the Tamil conflict were further negotiated and renegotiated by Vellalah from the parameters of the politics of accommodation (post-independence), federalism (in the mid-1960s and late-twentieth century), then radicalism plus communalism (in mid-1970s and beginning of 1980s), and finally in the twenty-first century, again for federalism and some form of self-rule. The evidence shows

us to see how the historians and the national elite have at times instrumentalised some absurd nationalist, social and cultural policies which ultimately led to total destabilisation and injustice for the Tamil people. It is clear that this nationalist project, like all the other nationalist projects, could not unite the entire populace which was divided up along regional, class, religious and caste lines (cf. Connor, 1972: 341; see also Lindholm, 1993:227). It is a fact, as is discussed in chapter 3, that homogenising efforts also partly functioned based on power held by the elites. Without being exceptional, (both) nationalist elites catered to their own interests and their interest groups (Williams, 1989: 429; Lindholm Schulz, 1996: 37; Verdery, 1996: 230).

To recapitulate, during the reign of militant nationalism, the Vellalah sensed that there were changes in national and local leadership and status; there was a relaxed interdependency forced not to centre on the Vellalah, there was a grab for Vellalah assets and properties by the LTTE, and there was a somewhat organised residential mixing of depressed castes in the centres. These changes were experienced by Vellalah not simply as a change of regime, but as an overturning of the moral order, an insult to their own integrity and identity, a placing of the undeserving above the serving (cf. Todd, 2005; Hall, 1989). It is a particularly sharp form of dissonance, where the world is not ordered as they had come to expect. But many Vellalah, through their discursive narratives which represents their power, have recounted that the stereotyped positions and knowledge of them are still dynamic on the ground.

9.1.4 How Did the War Impact Caste and the Landownership and Education as the Central Part of Vellalah Identity?

This question came about through a realisation that the war as the product of nation-building which effected very radical changes in caste and on Vellalah identity. LTTE's approach was a rude shock for many Vellalah and was seen by them as an undesirable agent of change in caste whereas, war on its own, too, left some undesirable impacts on Vellalah identity as a structural change which the Vellalah passively accommodated at least temporarily. This is one of the reasons I have wanted to keep this chapter separate. War was major structural game changer, at least for a short time by which Vellalah identity and caste had been disturbed a lot.

War, as a social construction, imbued the existing system with new meanings, knowledge and networks. People experienced war differently depending on the region, politics, economy and their involvement in it, etc. Many narratives recounted that the changes in caste remain to be seen when the war is over and also many agreed ethnicity or nation-building has not shattered the caste cohesion in Jaffna. We have also discovered that the landed middle

class held the discursive power and privileges even during war but that the depressed castes became the double victims in many ways.

War disturbed the very basic identity of the Vellalah; landlords became landless and the multiple displacements gave lessons to Vellalah on how hard living life like depressed castes could be. Necessity and conditions forced the Vellalah to experience and share the life of depressed castes. These enforced dislocations shook the Vellalah and their identity on issues of land, economy, properties and the concept of home, etc., but as the narratives show, they were registered and adapted as merely temporal adjustments and thus tolerated. As we have learnt, the camp life and displacements shook the elements of caste and thus, the restricted mobility of Vellalah women, at least for a short time. On the other end, some stories reveal that the Vellalah kept their distance from depressed castes through several measures, such as by caste-based grouping during dislocations, receiving food rations given by the government of Sri Lanka, etc.

The Vellalah, as we learnt, were the first to move out from Jaffna to Europe and other western countries and they are the ones who internationalised the ethnic conflict. The Vellalah who could not go abroad stayed in Jaffna and became a 'new minority' with a lifestyle marked by low reproductive rates. Their properties and security thus became threatened by the depressed castes whose socio-economic status has not much changed due to war.

Narratives of Vellalah mentality towards the progress of depressed castes have been dichotomised; for instance, when Vellalah help the depressed castes in return for the help which they received from them, the help by Vellalah is generously done to them and the other category those who don't want to see the progress of depressed castes at all. Although the Vellalah agreed via accounts that there is a disillusion of the external markers of caste due to emigration and remittances received by some of the depressed castes families, they keep saying that the subjective behaviours in public encounters are distinct and difficult to follow by depressed castes. Post-war Jaffna village development and the homeland network of diasporas constitute another prism through which to see how caste identities are reproduced and strengthened in Jaffna (Cheran, 2007; Fuglerud, 2001; Thanges, 2014). The ban of taking certain materials to the North during the war victimised the depressed castes further and thus the war prevented them to a large extent from asserting themselves; instead they became firmly bound to the alliance of Tamils against the Sinhalese (Bose, 1994; Hellmann-Rajanayakam, 2004). War also gave a renewed social status and empowerment to depressed castes in the short-term. The Vellalah often have an adverse view of depressed castes and this comes out in many narratives. Depressed castes on the other hand, were the targets of aid agencies and thus have been empowered against injustice and discrimination

through forming small self-help groups. But according to the Vellalah, their internalised inferiority complex and lack of honesty, gratitude and duty consciousness are difficult to overcome.

As the major **landowners**, the Vellalah have absorbed the best land resources, which has had an impact on the development of the depressed castes. By dislocating, uprooting and confiscating the Vellalah's lands and houses, the LTTE tried to change the patterns of Vellalah power over land, at least temporarily. However, the Vellalah still hold the power over the landownership in post-war Jaffna. A few stories reveal that Vellalah are more interested in money than land, but the depressed castes are more interested in buying lands. This tendency too has changed in post-war Jaffna.

Concerning **education**, as the accounts show, it has become more inclusive, but in the public sectors the lower networks are mostly filled with different castes, but in higher echelons the entry of depressed castes is still heavily restricted. War and the emigration of the Vellalah have however opened up spaces for depressed castes to enter into the public sector more freely. War thus enabled chances for the depressed castes to study in popular village schools with the Vellalah, although the friendship networks in schools, universities, and in public sectors are primarily based on caste. The Vellalah's caste service extends into public sectors, where they use the depressed castes to do the menial jobs. A few persons have said that in recruitment and positions in Jaffna University, caste is secretly observed.

In the course of this enquiry I have shown how Tamil nation-building has overtly and covertly interpenetrated caste, and particularly how Vellalah hegemonic identity in Jaffna was challenged and renegotiated in this process. The study has also shown how Vellalah identity was influenced by the LTTE, the war and some external forces like diasporas. It has further been argued in this thesis that caste is an identity with a twin mode of expression; extra-personal and intra-personal. The extra-personal aspects of caste identity have changed significantly, but internalised caste identity, which also can be deconstructed, has been durable and reproduced (cf. Bourdieu, 1977; Strauss and Quinn, 1997; Gorringe and Rafanell, 2007). Through such an approach, Vellalah identity in Jaffna appears as a constant (re)making and renegotiating through which they attempt to (re)construct their superiority. Thus a contemporary dynamics of caste identity in Jaffna exists mostly in the mind via discursive practices rather than in external aspects in appearances, localities and status symbols. This is a positive sign of change in caste and is highly promising with respect to the deconstruction of caste in Jaffna. What is happening in post-war Jaffna is that the previously privileged Vellalah, through a

series of narratives, have attempted to manipulate the situation so as to avoid recognition of any decline, while those previously disadvantaged, depressed castes are attempting to better their positions without immediately confronting the Vellalah. Many Vellalah narratives in Jaffna have expressed their beliefs that what ought to be does not match their perceptions of how things really are, such as depressed castes becoming wealthy, having material possessions similar to the Vellalah, entering into temples, building temples, and moving into the centres. This causes an uncomfortable feeling among the Vellalah in Jaffna and can be understood as 'cognitive dissonance' (cf. Bernard, 2000: 55). The Vellalah have a choice then between living with the dissonance and being uncomfortable; they can attempt to change the external reality (which has proved to be impossible) or they can change their beliefs. The latter is usually the path of least resistance, but not necessarily an easy way out.

9.2 Contributions

Examining Vellalah identity has been a significant research attempt – both since it provides the understanding of contemporary caste dynamic and also lessons about identity politics in general. Below I'll briefly discuss how we can assess the theoretical, methodological and empirical contributions of this thesis.

This thesis has highlighted how we, from the basis of Vellalah constructions of caste identity, can understand the caste dynamic and change in Jaffna both as an articulation of identity for power and dominance. Concurrently however, the Vellalah narratives also give testimony to the fact that the dominant constructions of identity discussed in this case study are worthy of attention because such oppression found root in not only Jaffna, Sri Lanka, but also many other parts of the world. These constructions of identity can provide insight into mechanisms through which dominance and oppression are (re) articulated and how peace and development of the collective identities are being (re/de)constructed and renegotiated over time. These narratives, however, are not merely dominant narratives, they also reflect marginalised perspectives, which challenge and establish resistance, and they are simultaneously inferior and a threat to the dominant identity. We can see the binary struggle of the Vellalah, at times against the Sri Lankan government countering Sinhala nationalism, and at times against the depressed castes and their attempt at breaking up the boundaries of caste identities. The Vellalah have throughout history experienced the pressure to wrestle against both in order to maintain their identity boundaries. Lessons from the Vellalah and non-Vellalah narratives urge us to see that Jaffna caste identity is intertwined with a transformation of the way that society perceives and articulates caste discourse.

This thesis has explored the complex and varying meaning of identity and its lack of fixed or fundamental status, but it has also explored its social embeddedness and its personal anchorage. The different chapters have explored the complexity of these embedded mechanisms of identity as well as the complex and multiple attempts of depressed castes to enter into the identification of the subject, the Vellalah identity. Despite the anticipated antagonism of such discursive manoeuvres, Vellalah identity in this case study presents a platform to view the flux of supremacy and contestation, and thus the flow of resistance produced at different stages. The most important line that is drawn in this context is the line drawn between the Vellalah and the depressed castes. This is a basic conclusion we can draw from the insights developed above in terms of the importance of Vellalah identity, not only for how dominance is reproduced, but also for how people view each other. Although Vellalah narratives may not provide conclusive answers to the riddle I posed in the beginning of this case study, they may be able to shed some necessary light for those working in the field of identity politics.

What the methodological approach developed in this thesis places in focus is that identity change is complex to recognise and explain. The study has allowed us to discover patterns in the ways in which collective identities are used and reshuffled in times of social change, as well as their evolution and dissonances (Todd, 2005). It is also of political importance to recognise patterns of identity negotiations and conditions that favour/disfavour particular direction of change while change is on-going. Nonetheless, through a methodology of both formal and informal interviews, observations and a study of my own experiences, I have, in line with Bourdieu's habitus, placed emphasis on both negotiations and the durability of identity.

I now move on to some recent studies where the caste dynamic as captured among Tamils in Sri Lanka was seen to be critical. Herath (2008: 192) in his study, "Rural Development through Social Capital? An inquest into the linkages between social capital and development in war-torn villages in Sri Lanka", noted that old power structures based on 'patron-client' relations, which caused deprivation, had receded in Vavuniya, another part of the north of Sri Lanka (Herath, 2008: 192). But my findings have exposed in Jaffna that hidden patron-client relationships along the axis of caste exist in the villages with the relative absence of deprivation. Jayawardena (2000: xxii), as a Marxist, understands society based on power, land and status, as being broken apart by capitalism, thus leading to caste-ordering. For her, "colonialism did not eradicate the identities grounded on earlier socio-economic terms, but capitalism reshaped caste to suit to the new context, thus transforming the ranking order". My study also proves to some extent that the ownership of wealth and consumerist lifestyles are no longer fully coincident with caste divisions in

Jaffna. But the boundaries of difference negotiated by the Vellalah are distinguished in relation to depressed castes when we account for how wealth is used, how life is lived, and how work is done. For some, a new Vellalah identity has been reconstituted, but for the non-Vellalah caste identity has mostly been broken. For Jayawardena, caste, with the spread of capitalism, escaped from the public sphere to the private domain. Yet, the narratives I collected reveal clearly that caste identity is rearticulated though 'coded language' even in public spheres (cf. Kannagara 1998:28). Fuglerud's study, for instance, supports my claim that an influx of money did not break the structure of society, but for him, "the process of assimilation for Vellalah and the internal mobility within this caste, represents an incorporation of capitalist principles into the mechanics of culture through the lifting of internal 'trade barriers' between families of corresponding ritual purity" (Fuglerud, 1999:149). Marriage alliances are renegotiated and lifted, and rituals are also modernised in families. He further notes that the loosening of the caste ordering was deeply resented among the traditional elite who partly defined themselves by the adoption of a European lifestyle (ibid.1999: 152). This thus supports how age is an issue when it comes to the view of caste change in Jaffna.

9.3 Implications for Future Research

In this global age of uncertainty, situations change fast and so did the Sri Lankan conflict. Three decades of Sri Lankan war, which underwent an intensive phase during this research, came to an end while I was in the writing process in 2009. The local elections held in mid-2009 transferred the power to a former militant group, the EPDP who have a non-Vellalah identity (a political party). The LTTE became history and the cadres who came from mostly non-Vellalah backgrounds are dead, and the families who lost their kith and kin are vulnerable. The lives of rehabilitated ex-combatants who are mostly of non-Vellalah backgrounds are in danger. The provincial election held in the north in September 2013 further proved that Vellalah leadership is back in politics and the politics run by them encompass several internal disagreements based on party politics, region and caste, etc. Then, during the 8th parliamentary general election held on 17 August 2015, there was a sudden unexpected turn in the number of nominations and the basis of nominations in the Tamil representational politics. After the TNA had captured the people's support at the NPC election for proceeding further in a direction towards the demand for power-sharing in the governance within a united Sri Lanka, instead of strengthening the negotiation power of the TNA by their concentrated votes, there were 15 political parties and six independent groups contested for just 7 seats. But the results confirmed that more than half of the population in the

north still supported the TNA and they got five seats out of seven[149]. Despite the internal conflicts still within the TNA, there are good signs indicating the accommodative politics with the new government rather than the confrontational politics they played in the past.

As a concluding remark about future research and about the on-going reconstruction effort in Jaffna, I have some reservations based on the knowledge I gained from this case study of Vellalah identity. A culturally sensitive and contextual understanding of Jaffna society and of Tamils that reflects an understanding of caste dynamics, identities, and collectivists needs to be carefully addressed in any reconstruction efforts undertaken in post-war Jaffna now. War no longer affects the region or people in the same way or at the same scale that it did before. As this study has shown, it is known that though Vellalah were marginalised politically during the militant phase of the nationalist struggle, yet in economic and cultural terms, the major victims are the ones who were on the battle front and sacrificed their lives, limbs and families. The depressed castes are the most hard-hit victims of the war, though they enjoyed interim benefits and privileges while the LTTE held power. They are the multiple victims also due to poverty caused by war. This study, through the case study on Vellalah caste, discloses in many ways where and how Vellalah identity for power and dominance are reproduced/renegotiated and what sort of mechanisms the Vellalah play out to exclude or marginalise depressed castes. Future research and policy decisions can be followed up accordingly. This study of caste has made it possible to see that more was at issue than just Vellalah identity. As we can also recall from the introductory chapter, caste is a covert yet obvious subject among Tamils making us realise a host of issues revolving around caste including personal, local, national and trans-national levels have yet to be resolved. Also through this case study on Vellalah identity as a dominant caste among Tamils in Sri Lanka, one begins to understand the cultural construction of the humanisation and thus personification of Jaffna Tamils.

[149] See Hoole (2015) for more recent issues on caste in post-war Jaffna.

Swedish summary

Samhällskast och nationsbygge: Att skapa vellala-identitet i Jaffna

Den här avhandlingen utforskar de betydelser och praktiker som förknippas med kastidentitet hos *vellala* i Sri Lanka, framför allt utifrån tamilernas nationalistiska projekt i Jaffna. Samhällskast är en kulturellt känslig identitet och praktik för tamiler. Jag undersöker hur denna förhärskande kastidentitet skapats, (om)förhandlats och skiftats. Jag gör det genom en fallstudie om vellala-identitet som tittar på hur identiteten skapats i Jaffna både historiskt och i samtiden. Undersökningens huvudfokus ligger på åren 2004–2007 men jag kommer också med enstaka exempel från åren fram till 2015.

Den här studien försöker på ett sätt att förklara inbördeskriget i Sri Lanka genom att ge ett inifrånperspektiv på gruppen vellala-tamiler, en av huvudparterna i det etnonationella krig som pågick i mer än trettio år. Studien har också ett viktigt budskap: för att kunna undvika att göra de *andra* till syndabockar måste man vara eftertänksam på både gruppnivå och individnivå i samhället. Denna eftertänksamhet tjänar också som isbrytare, särskilt vad gäller konflikter där en grupp alltid betraktar fienden som den som står utanför gruppen. Projektet pågick samtidigt som den tamilska eliten i Sri Lanka och landets ledare var upptagna med ett intensivt nationsbyggande under 2000-talet.

Det tamilska nationsbygget används som huvudreferenspunkt i den här studien om vellala-identitet av tre anledningar. För det första undersöks hur kastidentitet artikulerades under den tamilska nationalismen. Det här ger en bild av hur nationell identitet kan sammanfalla med intrakulturell identitet, eller kast. För det andra har jag märkt att det finns ett positivt samband mellan å ena sidan det tamilska nationsbyggets förelöpare och vellala-identitet, och å andra sidan mellan det militanta tamilska nationsprojektet och icke-vellala. Det leder i sin tur till upptäckten av ett antal inbördes kastpolitiska mönster så som de uttrycks i händerna på politiska aktörer från samma kast. Den tredje och viktigaste anledningen är att de kulturellt dominanta identiteterna (som vellala, kast och den tamilska nationen) är sammanflätade och därför inte kan granskas som företeelser skilda från varandra.

Bland tamilerna i Sri Lanka är kast ett tabubelagt ämne. Trots det har kastsystemet med hjälp av vidsträckande, hemliga relationer och nätverk spritt sig från den privata sfären till det offentliga, nationella och transnationella rummet. Dess dynamik är emellertid mycket diskret och väl dold. De som tillhör vellala-kasten, vilket är den hegemoniska kasten och därmed regionens

elit och intelligentsia, har monopol på Jaffnas sociala, kulturella, ekonomiska och politiska resurser. Det har lett till att de *andras* – de nedtryckta kasternas – grundläggande rättigheter förnekas och marginaliseras. Den här studien handlar om vellala-identitet, men betoningen ligger på de olika former denna tar sig. Forskningsprojektet formulerar följaktligen åtta huvudsakliga identifikationsområden där vellala-identitet i första hand artikuleras: (1) politik, (2) ledarskap, (3) livsstil, (4) utbildning, (5) markägande, (6) tempeltillhörighet, (7) intravellala-splittringar och (8) interkastförhållanden. Platsmässigt ligger fokus i studien på Jaffnadistriktet och hämtar sina data genom metoderna som kallas strategiskt urval (*purposive sampling*) och snöbollsurval (*snowball sampling*). Jaffna valdes för den här studien eftersom det är tamilernas kärnområde i Sri Lanka, och landets politiska och intellektuella vagga för tamiler. Det är därifrån nästan alla tamilska politiska ledare, särskilt eliten, kommer, och det är också det ställe där alla militanta tamilrörelser har börjat. Det är dessutom viktigt att påpeka är att det är just i Jaffna som många kastsammandrabbningar har utspelat sig.

Studiens analys utgår ifrån ett tolkande, konstruktivt tillvägagångssätt som grundar sig på narrativ metodologi. På den teoretiska nivån tar studien upp hur identitet, kast och nationalism korsar varandra. Studien försöker även besvara fyra frågor: *Hur har vellala-identitet skapats historiskt? Hur kan huvudelement i kastsystemet relateras till vellala-identitet? Hur har de tamilska befrielsetigrarna (LTTE), som informell nationell elit, påverkat både kastsystemet och vellala-identiteten? Vilken inverkan har kriget haft på kastsystemet och vellala-identiteten?* Den här studien om vellala-folket anammar *konstruktivistiska* och *kritiska* tillvägagångssätt, vilka jag tycker är väl lämpade för att förstå den invecklade situation som vellala-identiteten utgör. Såväl epistemologiskt som ontologiskt måste vellala-identitet förstås som en social konstruktion i en viss historisk och samhällelig kontext. För att kunna få djupare förståelse för vellala-identitetens kontinuitet betonar jag identitetens beständighet. Med ledning av Bourdieus begrepp *habitus* hävdar jag att kast kan betraktas som en djupt internaliserad identitet genom vilken praktiker, vanor och identitetsmarkörer reproduceras över tid. För att vidare kunna belysa kastidentitetens beständighet, tillämpar jag också teorin om kulturschema (*cultural schema theory*), som menar att identitet, förutom att vara en kollektiv representation av kultur, också skall förstås som en mental representation.

Studien hämtar sina huvudsakliga uppgifter ifrån muntliga och textbaserade berättelser om hur människor i Jaffna har upplevt förändringar i kastsystemet och vellala-identiteten. Eftersom en blandning av deskriptiva och förklarande metoder används här, kombinerar forskningsupplägget sådant som var planerat i förväg med sådant som skedde spontant under själva fältarbetet. Jag har utfört trettioåtta (38) semistrukturerade intervjuer. Från sammanlagt nit-

tiotre (93) frågeformulär som fylldes i av universitetsstudenter valde jag sextio (60) utifrån deras tydlighet och originalitet. En del av den här studien utgår ifrån text som ett studieföremål i sig. De konstruerade aktörerna, rösterna och underliggande betydelserna i texterna har därför belysts och analyserats i förhållande till vellala-identitet.

I den här studien behandlas *kast* och *nationsbygge* som interaktiva processer och därmed som intersektionella företeelser hos Sri Lankas tamiler. Studien bidrar till att förbättra vår förståelse för hur kast skapas i sociala, politiska och historiska sfärer, där olika kastidentiteter och makt samverkar. Studien försöker även belysa hur vellala-yttringar och olika (om)förhandlingar av kastidentiteten har gjort att vellala ständigt behållit sin makt och plats i samhällseliten. Studien upptäcker också att den internaliserade kastidentiteten är dynamisk och beständig. Dessutom avslöjar den att axeln som sträcker sig från vellala till de nedtryckta kasterna alltid medför ett vi-och-dem-perspektiv.

I avhandlingen påvisas hur tamilernas nationsbygge både öppet och förtäckt har genomträngt frågan om kast, och i synnerhet hur vellala-kastens hegemoniska identitet i Jaffna utmanades och omförhandlades under projektet. Studien visar också hur vellala-identiteten påverkades av LTTE, kriget och externa diaspora-krafter. I avhandlingen argumenteras utöver detta att kast är en identitet med en tvåfaldig uttrycksmodalitet: en extrapersonlig och intrapersonlig. Medan extrapersonliga kastaspekter kan ha förändrats betydligt, förblir den internaliserade kastidentiteten, som också kan dekonstrueras, beständig och fortsätter att reproduceras. På så sätt verkar vellala-identitet i Jaffna innebära ett ständigt (om)skapande och en ständig omförhandling genom vilka vellala försöker (om)konstruera sin överlägsenhet. Den samtida dynamiken hos kastidentiteten i Jaffna inpräntas därmed snarare i folks medvetanden genom diskursiva praktiker än genom externa aspekter som utseende, lokalitet eller statussymboler. Det här är ett positivt tecken på förändring när det gäller kast och bådar gott för dekonstruktionen av kast i Jaffna. Å andra sidan uttrycker många vellalaer i Jaffna en övertygelse om hur saker och ting borde vara som inte går ihop med hur de faktiskt är, till exempel att nedtryckta kaster blir förmögnare, att de innehar liknande materiella ägodelar som vellalaerna, att de har tillträde till templen, att de får bygga tempel och att de får flytta in till centrum. Det här ger upphov till en obekväm känsla hos vellalaerna i Jaffna och kan förstås som *kognitiv dissonans*. Vellalaerna står således inför valet mellan att leva med den obekväma dissonansen, eller att försöka förändra den externa verkligheten/sina orimliga övertygelser. Det senare innebär vanligtvis minsta motståndets väg men är inte nödvändigtvis en enkel utväg. Det som hänt i Jaffna under efterkrigstiden är att de tidigare privilegierade vellalaerna genom en serie av narrativ har försökt att manipulera läget för att undvika att behöva erkänna sin egen förminskade makt, medan de som tidigare varit i

underläge – de nedtryckta kasterna – försöker att förbättra sina positioner utan att direkt konfrontera vellalaerna.

Ytterligare ett av avhandlingens huvudargument är att, även om vellala-identiteten utvecklats över tid med vissa stabila markörer för den egna identiteten och därmed kastidentiteten, så destabiliserades dessa markörer radikalt under perioden av tamilskt militärt agerande (drivande för förändringen) i och med omartikuleringen av tamilsk nationalism. Avhandlingen utforskar också i vilken utsträckning denna destabilisering har lett till permanenta skiftningar i kastbaserade praktiker och vellalaernas identifikationsarenor, men kommer ändå fram till att de kastbaserade identiteterna, trots vissa förändringar i praktiker under LTTE-perioden, inte har upplösts utan snarare återvänt under efterkrigstiden. Studien bidrar på ett viktigt sätt till forskningsfältet genom grundsatsen att vellala-kastens förhandlingar om identitet kan ge insikt i mekanismerna genom vilka dominans och nedtryckning (om)artikuleras, samt hur fred och utveckling av kollektiva identiteter (om/de)konstrueras och omförhandlas över tid. Genom att fokusera på en enskild, dominerande kast i ett nätverk av kaster, bidrar studien till fördjupad förståelse för makro-sociopolitisk förändring genom att undersöka mikro-händelser i ett makro-lokalt sammanhang.

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List of Interviews

1. Professor Emeritus, 66 (Male) 2006-06-13 , University of Jaffna.
2. University Academic staff, Department of Political Science, 58 (Male), 2006-04-21.
3. University Academic Staff, Department of Political Science, 42 (Male), 2004-06-12.
4. University Academic Staff (Retired), Department of Fine Arts, 61 (Male), 2006-02-15.
5. University Academic Staff (Professor), Department of Geography, 56 (Male), 2006-06-01.
6. University Academic Staff (Professor), Department of History, 58 (Male), 2007-01-08.
7. University Academic Staff (Professor), Department of History, 55 (Male), 2006-06-22.
8. University Academic Staff (Professor), Department of Tamil, 52 (Female), 2005-05-23.
9. University Academic Staff (Professor), Department of Tamil, 47 (Male), 2006-03-14.
10. University Academic Staff, Department of Tamil, 48 (Female), 2006-04- 18.
11. University Academic Staff, Department of Fine Arts, 47 (Male), 2005-07-12.
12. Teacher in Science/ Retired, 50 (Female),2006-07-21.
13. Teacher in Civics, 42 (Female),2006-06-18.
14. Teacher in English, 37 (Female), 2005-12-18.
15. Assistant Director of Planning/ Divisional Secretariat, 40 (Female), 2006-08-09.
16. Veterinary Officer, 45 (Male), 2007-01-15.
17. Doctor, 39 (Female), 2006-11-25.
18. Lawyer, 55 (Female), 2005-08-16.
19. Lawyer, 58 (Male), 2006-04-04.
20. Station Master, 56 (Male), 2006-09-19.
21. Director of a women's NGO, 52 (Female), 2006-07-09.

22. Research Fellow (ICES), 48 (Female), 2006-5-18.
23. Non-academic staff/ University of Jaffna, (Male), 2006-05-17.
24. Non-academic staff/ University of Jaffna, (Male), 2007-01-13.
25. House wife, 42 (female), 2007-01-24.
26. House wife, no age (Female), 2005-12-19.
27. House wife, 54 (female), 2005-12-24.
28. Farmer, 41 (Male), 2006-03-17.
29. Farmer, 49 (Male), 2006-05-28.
30. Farmer, 38 (Male), 2007-01-18.
31. Ex-combatant, 23 (Male), 2006-04-15.
32. Ex-combatant, 26 (Male), 2006-08-22.
33. House maid, 36 (Female), 2007-03-24.
34. LTTE Area Leader, 45 (Male), 2006-07-15.
35. LTTE cadre, 25 (Female), 2006-07-15.
36. House wife, 39 (Female), 2006-02-12.
37. House wife, 46 (Female), 2007-01-24.
38. Elderly person, 76 (Male), 2006-04-05.