

INTERNAL MIGRATION AND ETHNIC IDENTITY: A CASE STUDY OF JAFFNA TAMIL MIGRANTS TO COLOMBO SINCE 1990

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Tamils have been migrating to Colombo from other parts of Sri Lanka since pre-Independence times. This paper is limited to the study of the migration of Tamils from Jaffna to Colombo during the decade commencing 1990, during which time much large-scale displacement took place.

By studying this process of migration and the way in which these migrants perceive themselves, one could discern how a community constructs its identities and preserves them, or assimilates into a different setting. The transfer from a mono-ethnic setting into a multi-ethnic one poses several different challenges for the migrant community. The manner in which the migrants cope with their new environment and the effects and changes in attitude that have occurred due to their exposure to other ethnic groups is a particular focus of this study. I have selected to focus on the Jaffna Tamil community because they comprise the majority of the new migrant community in Colombo, and because they construct their identity and express it in a different manner from the Tamils born and raised in the South and the East.

The twin theses of this paper are as follows:

- Internal migration of Tamils from Jaffna to Colombo has led to the formulation of a more significant and self-conscious ethnic identity;
- Whilst Tamil migrants become more conscious of their identity, they conceal this and simulate assimilation into the Sinhala urban culture.

This paper argues that the way members of an ethnic group conceive of their identity may change as a result of interactions between neighboring ethnic groups. On the basis of case studies within migrant communities, the paper concludes that in the Sri Lankan context, amongst Tamil migrants the ideologically constructed ethnic identity is justified and supported by situational factors such as the hardships faced by Tamil migrants in Colombo at the hands of governmental structures and security forces. Their shared experiences of suffering and loss pave the way for the development of a close network amongst members of the migrant community, and strengthen their collective identity.

The study also shows how migrant Tamils conceal their ethnic identity portraying a misleading picture to the outsider, one which depicts that the Tamil migrants are assimilating with the urban Sinhala culture. The irony is that in reality they are faced with the dilemma of dealing with a strong sense of ethnic identity within, but placed in a position where they dare not display their identity outside and feel compelled to conceal it.