

## Caste and Social Exclusion of IDPs in Jaffna Society<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This study provides an empirical case study of caste and social exclusion of war-affected Jaffna society. Initial part of this study developed through secondary and historical information on caste-based exclusion and all other parts present the contemporary caste-based exclusion with special reference to the selected camps of Internally Displaced People / Persons (IDPs) in Jaffna society. One of the key issues examined in this study was overrepresentation of certain -low-casteø status öPanchamarö (five so-called low caste groups) in the IDP population remaining in Welfare centers. Although the war affected all inhabitants of Jaffna irrespective of their caste and class backgrounds, many of the long-term IDPs emerge from the traditionally underprivileged caste groups to the exclusion of people from the numerically large and dominant Vell lar caste. All remaining IDPs in the four welfare centers in Mallakam belonged to the Nalavar and Pallar caste. Access to village Hindu temples controlled by öupper casteö Hindus, access to drinking water from wells owned by öhigh casteö families and discriminations experienced by the öPanchamarsö in the land market are some examples of caste-based exclusion in contemporary Jaffna society. Even though caste is not explicitly recognized in many matters and there is a public denial of the importance of caste by most parties, the educated middle classes in particular, the actual social reality is much more complex and multilayered and demands an understanding that goes beyond the superficial level and official truths whether coming from the state and non-state actors who are eager to consider every thing to meta-narratives such as terrorism, nationalism and liberation struggle.

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## Background

Social exclusion and discrimination due to caste in contemporary Jaffna society is much more subtle than earlier forms of social exclusion and discrimination. At the same time, the present social exclusion of Internally Displaced People / Persons (IDPs) due to caste is not an entirely new phenomenon. They come from the early roots of caste consciousness and take new formation within entirely different social contexts. Social exclusion and discrimination based on caste takes place according to new social settings of war-affected Jaffna society. The rigid hierarchical order of caste system (re)produces or (re)constructs social divisions, exclusions and discriminations in a society that has been struggling for political freedom against the Sinhala dominant state. In fact, certain practices of social exclusion, which can be imagined as part of a traditional framework of increasing irrelevance in the circumstances of conflict, are actually produced in such circumstances. This shows that cultural practices of caste have been more or less continuous in Jaffna society despite recent social disruption. It is academically important to analyze that even though a society like Jaffna has suffered several historical painful experiences of conflict and violence as a result of external forces, it is also internally divided, fractured by discrimination and exclusion on the basis of caste and various other factors such as class, gender, region and so on. In many cases, the continuity of divisions and the maintenance of discriminatory attitudes within a society can be understood as an inevitable part of cultural processes leading to the differentiation of group identities or desire to distinguish themselves from others. If that is the case, there is no point trying to understand the social exclusion and discrimination of a society. Social exclusion and discrimination arises because one group in a society becomes disadvantaged due to its socio-cultural practice. This leads to another type of academic and research interest: focusing on the social and cultural practices of exclusion and discrimination in a society. As my research objectives are more focused on caste-based social exclusion and discrimination in Jaffna society, this paper identifies the different forms of caste based exclusion and discrimination in early and contemporary Jaffna and analyses the reasons for this practice.

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Caste has been an important organizing principle in Jaffna society throughout its known history. The caste system among Jaffna Tamil Hindu society is extremely rigid and has clearly defined patterns of inequality, discrimination and social exclusion driven by a religiously defined notion of untouchability. Jaffna caste system reveals that the notion of ritual purity is far more important in the day-to-day Hindu practice and the social and economic hierarchy with the land-owning Vell lar caste having a hegemonic control over many of the Hindu rituals and the laboring castes in Jaffna society being identified and treated as ritually unclean castes as well. Traditionally this gave land-owning Vell lar caste a powerful position in society, agricultural economy as well as in the ritual order, consigning the dependent “lower castes” to a predicament of disadvantage and servitude. During the colonial period whatever new opportunities opened up for advancement (such as education, business, commercial farming and government employment) were grabbed by the Vell lar families who were already privileged with a resulting intensification of caste disparities and a solidification of the caste system. The literature on Jaffna society in the colonial era written mostly by Vell lar authors or European authors informed mostly by the Vell lar voices is more or less silent regarding the plight of the untouchable caste groups.

The bottom layer of the Jaffna caste system is collectively referred to as “Panchamarō”, consisting of Vannar (dhoby), Ampattar (barber), Pallar (agricultural labourer), Nalavar (toddy tapper) and Parayar (funeral drummer) castes. Traditionally, this “Panchamarō” group was accorded an untouchable status; its member being strictly prohibited from participating in and performing various religious and other social activities. Through the twentieth century, many of the customary and social prohibitions imposed on “Panchamars” gradually disappeared due to a combination of factors, including agitations on the part of Panchamars, state and civil society interventions, spread of free education and, since the 1980s, a ban imposed on caste discrimination by the LTTE.

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This study mainly focuses on caste based discrimination, exclusion and caste dynamics in war affected Jaffna society. In order to examine these processes in the different contexts of disasters in the Jaffna peninsula, a rapid ethnographic research was conducted in one small region (Mallakam) with a significant IDP population living in welfare centres. In order to identify and assess the nature and extent of caste-based exclusion and discrimination in Jaffna society in this complex scenario, this article begins with an analysis of the caste profile in Jaffna, examines the situation of underprivileged caste groups in the context of war, population displacement. The later part of this paper focuses on caste-based exclusion and discrimination of IDPs with special reference to four Mallakam IDP camps. In addressing the issue of caste-based exclusion in contemporary Jaffna society we have serious information gaps due to the inability of conducting any kind of serious ethnographic research in the affected populations within the current security environment. What is attempted here is to make sense of the available information complimented by first hand information gathered in rapid field surveys.

### Caste Composition of Jaffna Society

There are several specificities in the Jaffna caste system. First of all, we should clearly understand that the hierachal order and features of the Jaffna caste system are somewhat different from those in South India. Brahmins are at the highest position in the Indian caste order, whereas Vell lars are at the upper level in Jaffna society. The Brahmins were brought from India by the Vell lars to perform ritual and ceremonial functions in their temples. As Vell lars employed Brahmins in their temples and Brahmins worked for Vell lar landlords, Brahmins in Jaffna were considered in some sense to be lower than Vell lars who as a whole constituted the numerical majority in the population.

There was a tradition of ‘caste’ within caste in Jaffna society. In other words, there was a hierarchical difference/order within a single caste group. Each caste group contained a few hierarchical divisions within it. For example, the sub-castes such as Akampadiyar, Madappalli, Thanakrar, local Chettimrar, small farmers and Chemped Vell lar were identified within the Vell lar caste in terms of social status. The sub-castes such as Thimirar, Mukkuvar were

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identified within the Karaiyār caste. Maramerikal, Cheruppukkaddikal and Verkkuthippallar were identified within the Pallar caste. Including the sub castes, the number of castes was thus quite large among Sri Lankan Tamils in Jaffna. Simon Casie Chetty (1934) lists more than 65 Sri Lankan Tamil castes in his book, *'Castes, Customs, Manners and Literature of the Tamils'*. The castes groups declined in number due to formation of mega caste groups (Sivathamby, 2000). Studies by David (1974) and Pfaffenberger (1982) indicated twenty major castes in Jaffna society. They are Vellalar, Brahman, Saiva Kurukkal, Pantaram, Cipacari, Kaviyar, Thattar, Karaiyār, Thachchar, Kollar, Nattuvar, Kaikular, Cantar, Kucuvar (Kuyavar), Mukkuwar, Vannar, Ampattar, Pallar, Nalavar, and Parayar. These caste groups, their traditional occupations, and their Atimai-Kutimai (respectively Domestic Servant and Slave) status are indicated in Table 1.

**Table 1: The Castes in Jaffna Society**

	Tamil Name Status	English Name	Traditional Occupation	Adimai- Kudimai
Touchable Castes	Piraman	Brahman	Temple priest	-
	Saiva Kurukkal	Saiva priest	Temple priest for non-Brahmin shrines	-
	Vellalar	-	Landholder, Farmer	-
	Pantaram	Garland maker	Temple helper	-
	Cipacari	-	Temple sculptor	-
	Kaviyar	-	Domestic servant	Adimai
	Thattar	Goldsmith	Goldsmith	Kudimai
	Karaiyār	-	Deep sea fisher	-
	Thachchar	Carpenter	Carpenter	Kudimai
	Kollar	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Kudimai
	Nattuvar	Musician	Auspicious music	-
	Kaikular	Weaver	Weaver	-
	Cantar	Oil monger	Sesame oil maker	-
	Kukkuvar/Kuyavar	Potter	Potter	Kudimai
	Mukkuvar	-	Lagoon fisher	-
	Vannar	Dhoby	Washer man	Kudimai

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Untouchables	Ampattar Pallar Nalavar Parayar	Barber -	Barber Praedial labour Praedial labour Drummer	Kudimai Adimai Adimai Kudimai
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Source: Kenneth David, 1974:47. (quoted by Bryan Pfaffenberger 1982: 39)

As elsewhere in Sri Lanka there is no accurate information about size of population in each caste in Jaffna. The ñhighestö caste Vell lars were estimated to be 50% of the total population within the Jaffna Peninsula in the mid-twentieth century research conducted by two anthropologists (Kenneth David and Michael Banks). As for other castes, the Karaiy r were computed at 10%, the K viyar at 7%, Pallar at 9% and Nalavar at 9%. Thirteen other castes are named, but none made up over 3% of the population in the Peninsula.

Scholars of Jaffna society such as David (1974), Pfaffenberger (1982), Banks (1960), Arumainayakam (1979) and Sivathamby (2000) have classified castes in different ways. For example, David (1973:36) identifies three categories, namely ñHigh Casteö, ñGood Casteö and ñLow Casteö. Sivathamby (2000:10) differentiates ñHigh Caste, ñNon-High Casteö (intermediate caste) and Kudimakkal (domestic servant). David includes Vell lar, Brahmin, Saiva Kurukkal, K viyar and Saiva Chetty in the category of ñhigh casteö, whereas Sivathamby (2000:10) treats only Vell lar and Brahmin as ñhigh casteö. Another important distinction in Jaffna caste hierarchy is between ñKudimakkalö (domestic servant) and ñAdimaikalö (Slave) with several scholars classifying particular castes as either ñKudimakkalö or ñAdimaikalö albeit using different criteria and perhaps as a result being inconsistent with each other. For example, Sivathamby points out that according to the assessment of the Dutch government, castes such as K viyar, Nallavar, Pallar, C ntar and Ch viar were included under the term ñKudimakkalö. On the other hand, according to David (1974) and Pfaffenberger (1982), K viyar, Pallar and Nallavar are ñAdimaikalö and several other castes, including Thattr, Thachchar, Kollar, Kucuvar, Vann r, Ampattar, and Parayar were included under the ñKudimakkalö group.

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Critically, the variations in these classifications highlight the different sources scholars have used. More than this, however, the variations highlight the fact that caste status is hotly contested in Jaffna and has a long history of such contestation. This is no better shown than in the distinction favored by some between “Touchable and Untouchable” castes. It is generally argued that the notion of untouchability does not exist in contemporary Jaffna society. While the notion is neither strong nor openly practiced, it does circulate with some people. According to Table 3.1, Ampattar, Pallar, Nalavar and Parayar were considered as untouchable. Vannar are considered a touchable caste, as this caste was traditionally permitted to enter temples. Banks (1960: 65) points out that while the Vannar were treated as touchable as they were permitted to enter the temples, the barbers (Ampattars) were excluded from temple entry since they were treated as “untouchable”. This reverses the normal South Indian pattern, as clearly recognized by the people of Jaffna.

Caste in Jaffna society has undergone many changes over the past several decades due to war, large scale population displacement and an LTTE imposed ban on practice of or even an open discussion about caste in Tamil society in general. At the same time, caste is continuously practiced in one way or another in the social, cultural and economic life of the people.

### **Notions and Practices of Untouchability in Early Jaffna**

Among the Sri Lankan Tamils, a religiously sanctioned notion of untouchability has prevailed. The bottom layer of the Jaffna caste system is collectively referred to as “Panchamaro”, traditionally accorded untouchable status. According to Banks (1957) and David (1974), they comprised about 18% of the total population in Jaffna. Ragunathan (2004: 22-23) listed a series of 24 customary prohibitions enforced by the “upper caste” elite on “Panchamars” during the 1950s. These prohibitions were as follows:

1. Males should not wear an upper garment
2. Vertigo should be tied in a such a way that it does not hang below the ankle level
3. Men should not wear the “Shalvei” on the shoulder

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4. Females should not wear an upper garment
5. Females should not wear the ōthaavaniō (sari ōpottaō)
6. ōPanchamarō should not travel unnecessarily on roads and in public places. When proceeding on permitted paths, they must announce their coming by dragging a ōkaavoleiō (dried Palmyrah leaf) behind them.
7. ōPanchamarō must not wear any jewelry
8. ōPanchamarō can not tie the ōthaliō (wedding necklace) at weddings
9. ōPanchamarō must not wear white for higher rituals
10. ōPanchamarō must not wear white for important/ special rituals
11. They must bury the dead without cremation
12. They should not use any musical instruments to rejoice or mourn
13. They should not play music at auspicious or inauspicious functions
14. They should not use the ponds of the ōhighō castes.
15. They must not use umbrellas.
16. They must not wear footwear
17. They must not study
18. They must not keep any gods belonging to the ōhighō caste in their temples
19. They cannot enter the ōhighō caste temples
20. They must not enter tea-shops
21. They must not draw water from public wells
22. They cannot either drive or travel in cycles, cars etc
23. They cannot sit when traveling in buses
24. Even after permission was granted to study in schools, they were not allowed to sit on chairs.

Thus prohibitions imposed on ōPanchamarō in Jaffna were quite extensive. They ranged from dress code, denial of access to drinking water and denial of access to public spaces and services. Other caste-based constraints too obtained in specific situations. For instance, though there was a tradition that women would cry together at a funeral house by hugging each other, ōlow casteō women could not join ōhigh casteō women in this expressive moment. At a ōhigh casteō funeral,

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a separate place was allocated for ñlow casteö women to cry together. Many of the prohibitions which are listed above have been eliminated today through continuous struggles against untouchability, while some are still practiced in the new social arrangement.

### Struggles against Untouchability in Jaffna Society

The changes to the Jaffna social formation became significant in the nineteenth century as serious caste dispute erupted throughout Jaffna peninsulaø (Bastin 1997: 425). According to the available data, the ñPanchamarö resistance against these prohibitions dates back to 1920s. The Forum for ñDepressed Class Tamil Labourersö formed in Jaffna in 1927 was the first organized effort to defy the deprivations imposed on ñPanchamarsö. In 1928 this forum launched a campaign for ñequality in seating and equality in eatingø in protest against caste discrimination against the children of ñPanchamarö in schools. Due to sustained efforts over a two year period, an administrative order was issued in government aided schools for allowing ñlow casteö children to sit on benches along with other students instead of sitting on the floor as required previously. The ñhigh casteö Hindus retaliated by burning down some 13 schools that implemented the new regulation. In 1930 the political elite of ñhigh castesö petitioned the school authorities to withdraw the order for equal seating arrangement but they were not successful in turning back the tide.

When universal franchise was introduced in 1931 under the Donoughmore Constitution, key political leaders representing ñupper casteö Vell lar interests such as S. Natesan agitated against granting of franchise to underprivileged caste groups. The former went to the extent of giving up their own voting rights in order to prevent granting of voting rights to the subordinate castes, claiming that universal franchise would lead to transfer of power to wrong hands. Once the universal franchise was established rejecting the demands of Vell lar leaders, the latter retaliated by introducing even more strict prohibitions against the ñPanchamarsö. Such anti-ñPanchamarö measures, in turn, led to the formation of the Northern Sri Lanka Minority Tamils Mahasaba in 1943. This organization launched a number of campaigns for advancing the rights of outcastes, including a demand for reservations for ñlow castesö in legislature (Vegujanan & Ravana1988).

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Given the tight grip the Vellars had on the Jaffna society, their economic, political, ritual and ideological control it was not easy for the Panchamars to assert themselves. By 1950s, many of the Panchamars had joined Tamilarasu Party, which opposed the Tamil Congress controlled by the more conservative high castes. Tamilarasu was instrumental in having the Prevention of Social Disabilities Act passed in 1957 which made caste-based discrimination in public institutions a punishable offence. In October 1958 the Minority Tamil Mahasaba launched a Teashop Entry Movement in collaboration with the Tamilarasu Party. By November 1958 they had some success in getting certain Muslim tea shop owners to admit Panchamars and many other tea shops too followed suit in time to come.

Supported by the Communist Party of Sri Lanka, the temple entry movement among the Panchamars gained momentum in 1968 (Vegujanan & Ravana 1988). This, in turn, led to a split between Tamilarasu and Panchamars as many of the upper caste leaders in Tamilarasu did not support the temple entry campaign. This campaign as well as upper caste reaction against it turned violent leading to physical aggression, arson and even assassinations on the part of rival groups. As Pfaffenberger (1990) has convincingly argued, it is at this point, Tamil nationalism gradually took the shape of a defensive nationalism seeking to heal caste wounds within the Tamil community and, at the same time, address the greater threat from Sinhala-dominated state. The temple entry campaign only had partial success in that while in response to this campaign, major Hindu temples such as M viddapuram gradually allowed the Panchamars to enter the outer chambers of these temples for their religious practices, the inner chambers remained forbidden for them due to concerns about preserving the purity of these institutions.

Many of the customary prohibitions imposed on Panchamars gradually disappeared due to a combination of factors, including agitations on the part of Panchamars, state and civil society interventions and spread of education. A ban imposed on caste discrimination by the LTTE since the 1980s further eliminated explicit acts of caste discrimination particularly in LTTE controlled areas.

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The civil war that broke out in Northeast Sri Lanka since the 1980s has had multiple impacts on the Tamil caste system in general and caste-based discrimination in particular. First, a unified ethnic consciousness among all groups of Tamils irrespective of caste has increased due to campaigns by Tamil militants as well as due to state oppression and military actions by the state targeting all Tamils. Second, due to mass displacement of people as in the long March from Valik mam to Thenmar chchi, Vadamar chchi and Vanni in 1995 people of different castes had to intermingle and interact with each other in emergency situations of all kinds, making it difficult to sustain untouchability and caste-based social distance on a systematic footing (long march). Third, while the LTTE more or less eliminated the traditional Vell lar political leadership in Jaffna through its campaigns of terror, there were many waves of selective out-migration of ôhigh casteö and ôhigh classö Vell lar families from Jaffna leaving a political and social vacuum in Jaffna society and enabling the downtrodden to assert themselves like never before. Finally, with the rise of the LTTE with many of its leaders and cadres drawn from ôlower and intermediate castesö in society, explicit disregard for caste in mobilization and training of LTTE troops and campaigns and explicit ban on caste, caste hierarchy has ceased to be a powerful force in society. There is however lack of evidence as to how far these developments have led to actual disregard of caste in the minds of people and in practices such as marriage, rituals and permanent social unions. In the current atmosphere in Jaffna society it is difficult to undertake any empirical research on caste due to politically imposed silence on caste and the tendency to sweep it under the carpet due to social and political pressures. During the period of data collection, the researcher came across an -unwritten consensusø that is prevalent among certain academics and students in the University of Jaffna which discourages any research or publication on caste in Jaffna society. This practice reflects the widespread trend towards denying the existence of caste in Jaffna and ignoring it in the interest of upholding Tamil nationalism. There is a rumour that prevails among certain members of faculty in the University of Jaffna, which claims that caste still becomes an obscure, yet an important factor in staff recruitment. However, it must be noted here that these consensus and claims were not empirically tested or proven in this study.

## War, Population Displacement and Caste

Recent social change in Jaffna society has been heavily influenced by the war and related processes. From time to time, according to different contexts of war, large scale population migration occurred within the peninsula, from Jaffna to elsewhere in Sri Lanka and a massive exodus of people from Jaffna to overseas destinations took place either as legal or illegal migration. Escalation of conflicts during Eelam war 1(1983-1989), Eelam war 2 (1989-1993), Eelam war 3 (1995-2002) and Eelam war 4 (Since 2006) produced waves of displacement that in turn affected the size and distribution of population within Jaffna. The population displacements have led to some mingling of people from different caste backgrounds in temporary camps established for the IDPs. Over 1 million people have left Jaffna and other areas in Northern Province since the outbreak of war in the 1980s. People from different caste backgrounds have left Jaffna under these population movements, but a disproportionate number of persons from Vellalar backgrounds have successfully moved to Colombo and overseas due to their existing social networks extending beyond the peninsula. The oppressive nature of the caste system of Jaffna may have been weakened by the rapid of exodus of many Vellalar landlords and the availability of some of their land for sale to those from other castes as well as the ban on caste imposed by the LTTE. There is however no evidence that the social distance between the Vellalar and the lower castes and the discriminatory practices of the former have necessarily decreased due to recent developments. One feature of recent changes is that caste has become more of a hidden phenomenon in Jaffna society.

## IDPs and Social Exclusion in Jaffna Society

Population displacement due to war and tsunami of December 2004 has affected many people in Jaffna Peninsula. Tsunami has largely affected the people in coastal areas and war still affects all Jaffna people in numerous ways irrespective of caste, class and gender. However the specific impact on different population groups has been different. There is no accurate information about the size and composition of the present day population in Jaffna peninsula due to inability to conduct any population census since 1981. The estimated total civilian population in the

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peninsula as of 2006 ranged from 300,000 to 500,000. Of these a significant proportion (1/3 to 1/5 depending on the estimated total population) consisted of IDPs living in welfare centres or living with their friends and relatives (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in Jaffna District by Category and DS Division, as at 31-10-2007**

DS Division	IDPs in Welfare Centres			IDPs living with relatives and friends		Total	
	Welfare Centres	No of families	Total Population	No of families	Total Population	No of families	Total Population
Delft	0	0	0	58	181	58	181
Velanai	0	0	0	500	1,383	500	1,383
Kayts	0	0	0	1,913	5,754	1,913	5,762
Karainagar	0	0	0	410	1,464	415	1,484
Jaffna	2	115	412	1,684	6,290	1,799	6,702
Nallur	2	15	52	3,417	12,242	3,432	12,294
Sandilipay	11	226	846	1,927	7,226	2,153	8,072
Chankanai	11	381	1365	1,485	5,057	1,866	6,422
Uduvil	15	517	1960	2,841	10,176	3,358	12,136
Telleipalai	11	527	1910	1,430	5,192	1,957	7,102
Kopay	5	244	1001	2,997	9,430	3,241	10,431
Chavakachcheri	4	17	58	5194	18,390	5,211	18,448
Karaveddy	6	120	463	1,392	2,173	1,512	5,636
Point Pedro	11	590	2,122	3,206	11,291	3,796	13,413
Maruthankerny	3	268	980	425	1,507	693	2,487
Total	81	3,020	11,169	28,885	100,784	31,905	111,953

Source: Jaffna District Secretariat, 2007

Thus of the remaining IDPs in Jaffna District, a vast majority (100,748), lives with their relatives and friends. The others (11,169) live in Welfare Centres supported by the NGOs and government. Those who remain IDPs are unable to return to their original places due to designated as high security zones by the government security forces or continuing insecurity in their places of origin. They are generally people with limited resources and insufficient means to move elsewhere and rebuild their lives. Of the IDPs those remaining in Welfare Centres are the

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poorest of the poor with limited resources, limited social contacts and limited avenues for improving their condition. The total number of Welfare Centers (Muk m) for IDPs in Jaffna District was 81 as of 31-10-2007. There is no accurate information about the caste background of all IDPs in the Jaffna District, but the available information indicates that there is a disproportionate presence of ඕPanchamarō caste people in the IDP camps. This itself was a significant finding, given the fact that war and tsunami affected all people irrespective of caste and ඕPanchamarsō were a minority in the total population in Jaffna District. Moreover, IDPs in Welfare Centres faced many socioeconomic and livelihood problems, including caste-based exclusion and discrimination in some instances. As is becoming evident in the emerging literature on disasters in South Asia, those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy are often silent victims of disasters (Gill 2007).

In order to examine caste dynamics in the context of disasters in Jaffna peninsula, rapid ethnographic research was conducted in one small region with a significant IDP population living in Welfare Centres. The area covered by this study is a multi-caste area that is called Mallakam, located in the Tellippalai (formerly Valik mam North) Divisional Secretariat area. This area includes three Grama Sevakar divisions, which are Mallakam Central (J/213), Mallakam North (J/214), and Mallakam South (J/212). The total population of this area was 5695. This number included original inhabitants of this area and IDPs who were in Welfare Centers. The total number of permanent inhabitants was 4787 as of 2005 as against 908 IDPs.

### Caste Composition in Mallakam

As caste is not an official census category in Sri Lanka and as caste is a prohibited subject in areas under as well as areas influenced by the LTTE, it is difficult to determine the population in each caste group, following major shifts that have taken place in Jaffna society during the past two to three decades. In this work, I managed to secure basic information about cotemporary caste composition in Mallakam area (see Table 3) with a significant IDP population.

**Table 3: The Caste Composition of Mallakam in 2005**

Tamil Name	English Name	Traditional Occupation	Population (%)
Vell lar	--	Landholder, Farmer	31.0
Piraman	Brahman	Temple priest	0.3
Pant ri	Garland maker	Temple helper	1.2
K viyar	--	Domestic servant	4.0
Thachchar	Carpenter	Carpenter	5.0
Nattuvar	Musician	Auspicious music	0.2
Vann r	Dhoby	Washer man	2.0
Ampattar	Barber	Barber	1.0
Pallar*	--	Agricultural laborer, Toddy tappers	28.5
Nalavar*	--	Toddy tappers	26.6
Parayar	--	Drummer	0.2
<b>Total</b>			100.0

Source: Field Notebook, December 2005

In Mallakam, ‘High Caste’ Vell lar comprises about 31% of the population, whereas ‘low castes’ Panchamars, namely Vann r, Ampattar, Pallar, Nalavar and Parayar altogether comprise the majority (58.3%) of the population. In this ‘low caste’ category, Nalavar (26.6%) and Pallar (28.5%) form significant segments of the total population. When we consider population of each caste group in Mallakam separately, Vell lar (31%) remained a majority. This must be understood in the light of the finding that Vell lar constituted over 50% of the total population in Jaffna peninsula during the 1950s (Banks 1960: 67).

There are 11 castes in this area: the Vell lar, Piramanar [Brahmin], Pand ri, K viyar, Thachchar, Nattuvar, Vann r, Ampattar, Pallar, Nalavar, and Parayar. Among these castes, Vell lar and

\* People displaced to four IDP camps of Mallakam from Mailiddy, rani, Vas vil n, K nkesanthurai and some other villages (these villages are under the High Security Zone) belong to Nalavar and Pallar. They were also counted in this table.

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Brahman are considered ōhigh castesö. K̄ viyar, Pand̄ ri, Thachchar and Nattuvar are considered ōmiddle or intermediate castesö. Vann̄ r, Ampattar, Pallar, Nalavar, and Parayar are considered ōlow castesö. As I already mentioned, these five ōlow castesö are collectively referred to as ōPanchamarö in Tamil.

A considerable number of people who were displaced by war from Mailiddy, rani, Vas vil n, K̄ nkesanthurai and some other villages towards the north of Jaffna peninsula currently under the High Security Zones were living in four Welfare Centres located in Mallakam. They are Coir Industry Centre, Neethav n Welfare Centre, Konappulam Welfare Centre, and rani Welfare Centre. The Coir Industry Centre is located in Mallakam south division. The Neethav n Welfare Centre is located in the Mallakam central division. The Konappulam and the rani Welfare Centres are located in the Mallakam north division. As shown in Table 4, the entire population of all four IDP camps was found to be from Nalavar and Pallar identified as two caste groups of the ōPanchamarsö.

**Table 4: Distribution of IDP Population in Welfare Centres in Mallakam by Caste, as of 31-10-2007**

Name of Welfare Centre	Caste	Number of Families	Population
Coir industry centre	Nalavar and Pallar	16	71
Neethav n welfare centre	Nalavar	79	274
rani welfare centre	Nalavar	30	114
Konappulam welfare centre	Nalavar	122	415
Total		247	874

Source: Field Notebook, December 2007

### IDPs and Caste Identity

One of the key issues examined in this study was overrepresentation of certain low-caste status ōPanchamarö in the IDP population remaining in Welfare centers. If the war affected all inhabitants of Jaffna irrespective of their caste and class backgrounds, how is it possible that many of the long-term IDPs come from the traditionally underprivileged caste groups to the

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exclusion of people from the numerically (over 50% of whole population) dominant Vellalar caste (Banks 1960).

The investigations revealed that remaining IDPs in many welfare centers in Jaffna as of 2006 were from ôPanchamarö background. Members of these depressed caste groups particularly the Nalavar and Pallar were clearly present in large numbers in these IDP camps. All remaining IDPs in the four welfare centers in Mallakam belonged to the Nalavar and Pallar caste. In this investigation of the various welfare centres in Jaffna we came across only one welfare centre with a significant population of those from outside the ôPanchamerö social layer. This was Katkovalam Welfare Centre located in Vadamar chchi East where nearly all inhabitants came from the Karaiyir (fisher) caste. It is significant that the IDPs in the Katkovalam centre had been displaced by tsunami that affected the coastal communities with a majority of fishermen.

There are several reasons for the preponderance of ôPanchamarö people in the remaining IDP camps. 1) Traditionally ôlow casteö people did not own much land other than their ancestral landholdings of minuscule size. As a result, once displaced they become absolutely landless having nowhere else to go except Welfare Centres maintained by the state and NGOs for IDPs. The IDPs displaced from high security zones occupied by the Sri Lanka security forces are particularly vulnerable as they cannot return to their original villages due to restrictions imposed by the security forces. 2) These persons from ôlow casteö background do not have enough social networks outside their own communities restricting their capacity to move out of the Welfare Centres, where they are dependent on subsidies of state and NGOs. 3) Most of them do not have enough resources to purchase new land or build separate shelter on their own. 4) Even if they have enough savings, they may find it difficult to purchase land from those of other castes due to continuing practices of caste discrimination and unwillingness on the part of other castes to accept ôPanchamarsö as their immediate neighbours. 5) For a variety of reasons such as security and mutual support mechanisms people themselves may prefer to live together in their own caste communities in or outside the IDP camps.

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It is important to point out that Vell lar and other high status people from the area too have been displaced by war from time to time, but often they were able to move to greener pastures in Colombo or overseas using their educational and professional qualifications and social capital. Where they remain in Jaffna District they are more likely to stay with their relatives and friends outside the camps or they manage to create own shelter outside the camps, rather than in the camps themselves with minimum facilities, limited privacy and low status bordering on stigma attached to them.

### **Caste-Based Exclusion of IDPs in Welfare Centres**

The IDPs are in any case socially looked down upon and the ග්‍රෑට්‍ය casteö status of many IDPs simply adds to their marginal position vis-à-vis the surrounding communities. The pejorative word, ග්‍රෑමuk m kkal / Muk m Sanagalö (camp people) is often used to identify IDPs. This label contains several pejorative implications (not necessarily literal meaning), including ග්‍රෑට්‍ය casteö, ග්‍රෑpoorö, and ග්‍රෑbad behavedö and ග්‍රෑaggressiveö.

Many of the inhabitants of IDP camps, who are disparagingly referred to as ග්‍රෑMuk m Sanagalö are not only victims of war and/or natural disasters, but their situation has been further aggravated by their untouchable status combined with extreme poverty. Access to village Hindu temples controlled by ග්‍රෑupper casteö Hindus, access to drinking water from wells owned by ග්‍රෑhigh casteö families, discriminations experienced by the ග්‍රෑPanchamarsö in the land market are some examples of caste discrimination in contemporary Jaffna society.

### **Caste-Based Exclusion in Hindu Temples**

As already discussed, the temple entry struggles have a long history in social movements against caste in Jaffna society. The most famous temple entry struggle took place in M viddapuram temple, which is situated a few miles south of Kankesanthurai. In this temple entry struggle in 1968, the Communist Party and a large number of people from oppressed caste backgrounds participated. In the following period, the other leading regional and local level temples which were being managed by the Vell lars did not want their temples dragged into the politics of

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temple entry. A nominal and an extremely formal entry was permitted in many instances. The temple entry movement had only a limited success. Sivathamby (2000) rightly pointed out that the temple entry movement only had a symbolic success.

It is important to note here that village temples were not affected by this temple entry campaign. Even today, the ōlow casteö people are not allowed to enter most village level temples, which are owned and managed by the ōhigh castesö. Most ōlow casteö people avoid entering these temples. Those who have money established their own gamic temples but this did not put an end to the temple issue. ōLow casteö people still face difficulty in the recruitment of qualified priests from Brahmin caste and N thaswaram-Thavil players from Nattuvar caste. They are only able to secure the services of priests who are considered to be from an inferior layer of the Brahmin caste.

The IDPs in Mallakam had many difficulties concerning access to Hindu temples. They were not welcome in the local Hindu temples under the control of Vell lar landlords. On the other hand, they could not go back to their own temples in original villages now under the control of security forces. Often they limited themselves to domestic rituals as a means of addressing their religious needs. The prohibition of active access of ōhigh casteö village temples is not only identified with the IDPs but it is a general prohibition to ōPanchamarö imposed by ōhigh casteö observable in whole Jaffna Peninsula. Although ōPanchamarö collectively organized several campaigns against the prohibition of participation in some important temples in Jaffna, there was no notable agitation of ōPanchamarö against the prohibition of participating in the rituals of village level Hindu temples. Instead of participating in the rituals of village level ōhigh casteö Hindu temples, the ōlow casteö Panchamar built their own temples or developed their existing temples. Bastin (1997: 426) points out this process as follow; ōcaste antagonisms in the religious domain led to depressed castes building their own temples, rather than to winning access to other templesö. The remittance of Jaffna Tamil diaspora has motivated further the habit of building own temples and developing infrastructure facilities of existing temples, which are contemporarily practiced by both depressed as well as ōhighö caste people in Jaffna.

### Caste-Based Exclusion in Access to Water

Ground water is the major natural water resource in Jaffna peninsula. Literally each house in Jaffna has its own well. Their daily needs of water are largely obtained from these wells. According to the notion of pure and impure, the water is considered pure. As ōlow casteō people were traditionally considered untouchables except Vannar (David 1974: 47 and Banks 1960:65), they were strictly prohibited to draw water from ōhigh casteō wells. A ōlow casteō person who was working for a ōhigh casteō household was given water and food in cups and plates, which were kept for the usage of particular ōlow casteō persons. He was not given meals in a plate that was used by the ōhigh casteō. Although this notion of impurity changed to some extent, this oppression is seen in Jaffna among most of the ōhigh casteō families. This is a paradoxical situation. Often the ōlow casteō people dig the wells for high caste people. First they touch the water and work hard to make the water clean and pure. After finishing their job in digging a well, they are not allowed to draw water from the wells that are made by them.

The ōlow casteō inhabitants of Welfare Centres have special difficulties. Each Welfare Centre contains one or two small wells for the daily usage of a large number of families. For example, there is only one small common hand pump well for 79 families in Neethavu Welfare Centre in Mallakam. This common well is not enough to fulfill the daily needs for water among the IDPs. Therefore, they need to get water from other houses, which are situated near the camp. The wells in surrounding communities are owned by high caste families. The IDPs face difficulties in drawing water from ōhigh casteō wells. They are not allowed by the high caste well owners to draw water directly from their wells. They should wait till the owner of the house provides water (head of Neethavu welfare centre, Pers. Comm., 22 December). Therefore, these ōlow casteō IDPs are at the mercy of ōhigh casteō households in the vicinity of these camps.

### Caste-Based Exclusion in Land Market

Land is one of the most valuable assets in densely populated Jaffna peninsula. The wealth and status of people are dependent on the amount of land they control. Traditionally, the Vellalar

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owned a large amount of land in Jaffna. The land that is located in or near a ōhigh casteö hamlet or owned by a ōhigh casteö is normally not sold to the ūPanchamarō in Jaffna. If a ōhigh casteö person wanted to sell his land, first he would inform his own relatives or fellow caste members and offer them a chance to purchase the land. Under these circumstances it is really difficult for ūPanchamarō people to purchase land as much of the land is owned by those of ūhigher castesū. Because of this reason land ownership pattern has not changed much in spite of war-induced population movements and a vast chunk of land not being accessible to civilians due to high security zones.

There is however some change brought about by the out-migration of many Jaffna people over the past three decades. Some members of ūPanchamarō castes, whose family members successfully migrated to western countries, receive remittances from their relatives abroad and with this money they are able to offer above market price of land prices to ōhigh casteö landowners, including the absentee owners, who have left their original villages, and are willing sell their land to these new rich in spite of their caste. The extra amount the ūlow casteö buyers have to pay to acquire land from ūhigh castesū itself indicates a degree of discrimination they encounter in the land market. On the other hand, a vast majority of the ūPanchamarsū living in IDP camps is poor and they simply cannot benefit from this land market closed to them for ever because of their poverty and underprivileged caste background.

### A Case Study Illustrating Caste-Based Exclusion of “Low Caste” IDPs

Seelan is a 42 years old IDP in Konappulam Welfare Centre in Mallakam. A member of Nalavar caste, at one time he was involved in toddy tapping in his original village in Mailiddy. He has experienced three Eelam wars. He first became displaced in 1987 during the Eelam war I involving IPKF and LTTE. In this first displacement, he moved to Karavamp nai, which is situated about eight kilometers from Myliddy village in Thellippalai. He stayed there for nearly three months. Then he returned to his original home. Again, he was displaced to Mallakam village in 1990 due to the war between Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE during the Eelam war II. With the Eelam war III (particularly during the Operation Rivirasa I), he was displaced to

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Kodik mam, which is situated in Thenmar chchi. When Sri Lankan forces captured the entire Jaffna Peninsula in the wake of the Operation Rivirasa II, he went back to the Konappulam Welfare Centre in Mallakam. Thus, he has been displaced repeatedly during most of his life.

When interviewed about caste-related problems, he initially expressed hesitation to talk about the issue. In the course of discussion, he started speaking openly and expressed his dissatisfaction over the caste problems and oppressions that he faced during different phases of displacement and narrated his life in the welfare centres.

He stated that he had only stayed with the Vell lars in the temporary welfare Centres such as temples and schools and that too was for a few days only. However, the land on which the camp is located is owned by a Vell lar. He further added that since most of the Vell lar are economically strong and have adequate social networks or contacts with other parts of Jaffna, they are able to settle down anywhere they like and they can build their own shelter in a suitable location. ¤As we do not have adequate contacts with other parts of Jaffna and have less assistance from other caste people, whether we like or not, we have to stay in a land or in a welfare centre with our own caste community¤.

He moved to Kalviyank du, which is located near the Jaffna city, before moving to Kodik mam in Thenmar chchi following the Operation Rivirasa I. He continued to stay in a land owned by a Vell lar person. During this displacement, his brother -Sriharan¤fell in love with the daughter of the landowner and got married on their own without the consent of the wife¤s father (land owner). As a result of this inter-caste marriage, the land owner forced them to evacuate his land. For Seelan, it made his displaced life even more miserable. In the meantime, he moved to Kodik mam, where he did not face any caste-related difficulties except the difficulty of regional differences. But this difficulty was not as serious as the caste issue.

Now, he is temporarily resettled in the Mallakam Konappulam Welfare Centre, only to face caste-related problems arising out of water and temple entry. As only one hand pump well is available in the Konappulam Welfare Centre, they have to depend on a well owned by a -high caste¤family. He mentioned that it is a daunting task to draw water from the wells of -high caste¤

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people. To get water from the well of a *high caste* person, they should wait till the owner of the well provides him with water because the so-called *high caste* people feel that if water is touched by them it gets polluted.

He also said that in his day-to-day life, he often has quarrels with others. This is because they all live close to each other and facilities for them are limited. Many people, who live in vicinity of IDP camps, saw them as inherently aggressive, but he felt that the real reason for this situation is the difficulties they face in life as IDPs.

There is a Hindu temple situated near Konappulam Welfare Centre called *oKonappulam Vairavar Templeo*, which is owned by a *high caste* person. He said that people from this Welfare Centre are not allowed to enter this temple and the gates of the temple are always locked except during ritual times. Although he requested the owner of the temple several times to perform a religious ritual on behalf of IDPs in this temple, this request was not granted giving one reason or another. He believes that the *high caste* temple owner refused to comply with his request because of the *low caste* background of those living in the Welfare Centre.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, most severe forms of untouchability and caste-based exclusion and discrimination in Sri Lankan context have been reported in Jaffna society. This was accompanied by convergence of economic domination, ritual superiority and political power in the hands of the Vellalar caste, which was also the numerically largest caste in Jaffna society. *oLow casteo* resistance against the caste system, which gathered momentum since the 1920s, population displacement, outward migration and the general social breakdown brought about by the war and the ban imposed by the LTTE on caste-based exclusion and discrimination have led to considerable erosion of caste-based exclusive and discriminative social settings at various levels.

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However, the preponderance of Panchamar groups among the long-term IDPs remaining in camps and the kind of exclusion and discrimination they experience from the settled high caste communities in the vicinity of these camps indicate a degree of continuity in caste-based exclusion irrespective of the ongoing changes noted above and the LTTE ban on exclusion and discrimination of caste. These patterns of exclusions and discriminations also indicate the greater vulnerability of the underprivileged caste groups during all kind of emergencies and disasters, including war (Gill 2007, Goonesekere 2001). Both government and NGO programmes for IDPs have been caste-blind and this too may be partly responsible for the total neglect of caste-based discrimination in the post-war and post-tsunami context. It is important to note that the social movement against caste discrimination which in some ways paved the way for the current developments in Jaffna society, has been co-opted and more or less silenced by the LTTE in its militant programme of Tamil nationalism where caste is seen as at best an unnecessary diversion and, at worst, a threat to political and social unification of the desired Tamil nation. This policy, however, has failed to prevent or even recognize that some forms of caste-based exclusion and discrimination have evolved in the relationship between IDPs and the surrounding communities.

It is, however, wrong to assume that organized resistance against caste discrimination in Jaffna society has disappeared completely. In recent years two fairly active caste organizations namely Sikai Alangarip lar Sangam (barber movement), Salavaith Tholil lar Vennira Aadaich Sangam (dhoby movement) have emerged respectively among Ampattar (barbers) and Vannar (dhobies) in Jaffna society. Perhaps with the tacit support and approval of the LTTE, they have banned customary practices such as house visits by barbers and dhobies to Vellalar houses within the caste idiom increasingly seen by these organizations to be demeaning and unacceptable. Further, these organizations have tried to professionalize these occupations stipulating a standard fee structure and making it necessary for all clients irrespective of their caste to visit the business establishments and secure these services in an impersonal and business like manner rather than in the customary hierarchical idiom. How far this has actually eliminated caste discrimination is yet to be ascertained but it shows that in Jaffna society struggle against caste has by no means

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ended in spite of the war, an official ban on the caste system by the LTTE and a growing sense of an overarching Tamil consciousness.

It is important to point out that in contemporary Jaffna society continuing notions of untouchability often operate in combination with poverty and other inherited disadvantages to aggravate the adverse impact of war and other disasters on the affected people. While caste is only one aspect of a complex web of class, caste, ethnic, and gender related disadvantages and deprivations and one cannot single out caste as the only dynamic operating in these war and tsunami affected and displaced populations. Among other factors caste continues to be important in a variety of settings, including political groupings, who remains in IDP camps over a long period in spite of the poor living conditions and the exclusions and discriminations they experience, who has managed to escape the hardship of conflict and violence, who has access to social capital and who is without access to many support mechanisms and therefore more inclined to seek the help of one benefactor or another or yield to the pressure of one armed group or another. Even though caste is not explicitly recognized in many matters and there is a public denial of the importance of caste by most parties, the educated middle classes in particular, the actual social reality is much more complex and multilayered and demands an understanding that goes beyond the superficial level and official truths whether coming from the state and non-state actors who are eager to reduce every thing to meta-narratives such as terrorism, nationalism and liberation struggle.

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