





Gift of a temple: socio-economic and cultural changes around diasporic engagement in Jaffna Peninsula, Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Jaffna District, Sri Lanka, has faced enormous socio-economic difficulties since the civil war ended in May 2009. But in contrast to the visible and apparent infrastructural destruction that characterises much of the District, there is a striking number of newly built Hindu temples. The majority of these new temple constructions are linked to diasporic engagement, philanthropy and giving. Through a Maussian lens, this article provides insights into how the gift of a temple enables people in the diaspora to give something back to local socio-cultural structures, in order to reposition them in relation to their places of origin. However, the Maussian 'gift' not only serves the giver; it also impacts on the receiver. The article therefore asks: How does the receiver use these temples? What impact do the temples have on the socio-economic and cultural environment? How are they commodified? Three in-depth case studies will help to provide answers to these questions and to better understand the long-term impact of the gift of temples in post-war Jaffna.

KEYWORDS

Temple; gift; Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora; Jaffna Peninsula

Introduction

Everywhere you look: new Hindu temples

In June 2017, we travelled to Jaffna Peninsula to conduct fieldwork for a new project titled 'The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Switzerland and its post-war forms of engagement in Sri Lanka' to learn about the sectors in which the Tamil diaspora engages and invests. We were utterly astonished at the immense number of newly built Hindu temples, shrines and religious facades that we discovered all over the Peninsula. We discovered them even in the most northern keys and in almost-abandoned villages and wondered why other infrastructure such as streets, houses or public buildings such as schools or health clinics seemed not to emerge in the same manner. Moreover, some of these temples were located in the middle of nowhere; others seemed to compete with each other in size, design and grandeur. It felt partially like some of the temples were disproportionate to their locations in terms of size, quality, mode of execution, presentation and also to which gods they were devoted to. We asked ourselves: 'Who is building all these temples? How are they financed? Who will use them in the future? And why temples and not infrastructural investment?'

Since the 27-year long war ended in 2009 with the victory of the Sri Lankan army against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Jaffna, one out of five districts of the Northern Province and known as a LTTE stronghold that was heavily affected during the war, continues to face huge socio-political, infrastructural and economic adversities. Before extensive damage started in the 1980s and before the mass exodus of people to find security in other parts of Sri Lanka or abroad,