

Rearticulated caste identity in the context of war

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With the end of the nearly three-decade long Sri Lankan civil war in 2009, the socio-cultural consequences of war require a critical introspection on caste and its hegemonic construction. In this research I examine how war has impacted caste and especially the hegemonic *Vellalah* identity construction. 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.

The data for this study focuses on the Jaffna district and is drawn from purposive and snowball sampling. My analysis relies heavily on how *Vellalah* and depressed castes describe their experiences of the war. I also conducted several semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis over a period of three years from 2006-2009.

War as an embodied experience meant that everyone went through similar but not the same experience in an enforced war zone. I argue that people's experiences of war depend on individual involvement in politics, their placement in already existing socio-economic strata and their direct experience under firing or shelling. The *Vellalah* identity evolves from agriculture and the accumulated assets being settled in one place for the first time shattered by the war. Internal dislocations forced Jaffna Tamils to be together physically in temples, camps, schools and public places. This gave a space for all to go through similar experiences. The war created a temporal transition and adjustments in caste practices and in *Vellalah* identity. The changes remained for a short time, but a radical transformation in terms of caste (*Vellalah*) identity occurred. *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.

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