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You can do anything with a temple

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TITLE: "You Can Do Anything with a Temple": Religion, Philanthropy, and Politics in South London and Sri Lanka

SHORT TITLE: "You Can Do Anything With a Temple"

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Abstract

Our title quote is taken from an interview with the chief trustee of a leading Hindu temple in south London, and captures the curious mixture of philanthropy, politics, and individual ambition that has emerged around Sri Lankan Tamil temples in the diaspora. During the long years of civil war, temples became centres of mobilization for the growing Tamil diaspora, and were often accused of channelling funds to the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) and its various front organisations. Since the end of the war in 2009, the same temples now support orphanages and other good works in Sri Lanka, and their efforts are starting to be emulated by temples in Sri Lanka itself. At the heart of our paper is a dispute between the UK Charity Commission and the chief trustee of a London temple, accused of misuse of temple funds and "failure to dissociate" the temple from a terrorist organization. A close reading of the case, and its unexpected denouement, reveals the difficulties of bounding the zone of philanthropy.

Introduction

Our title quote is taken from an interview with the chief trustee of a leading Hindu temple in south London, and captures the curious mixture of philanthropy, politics, and individual ambition that has emerged around Sri Lankan Tamil temples in the diaspora. The trustee was telling us about his decision to found a temple in South London, and the particular goddess he decided to build the temple around, a choice apparently as much dictated by real estate options as by his own devotional preferences: South London Tamils were keener on Amman than on, say, Pillayar, a site became available in south London, so Amman it was. The temple, he told us, was faced with eviction from its current premises, but he was confident of building a new, much bigger temple on a site down the road. We asked about potential planning issues for a venture on this scale in a relatively crowded urban area, and he assured us he had excellent relations with the Labour group on the local council. He did not anticipate a problem in that direction. As he put it, "You can do anything with a temple."

During the long years of civil war, many diaspora Tamil temples channelled funds to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and its various front organisations. Since the end of the war in 2009, the same temples now support orphanages and other good works in Sri Lanka, and their efforts are starting to be emulated by temples in Sri Lanka itself. What we present in this paper is one episode in a longer story, as diaspora activists responded to the disastrous defeat of the LTTE in May 2009: even as the end of the war made Sri Lanka, and the families they had left behind, far more accessible, activists experimented with new organizational structures and political forms in efforts to come to terms with the scale of defeat (Brun and Van Hear 2012).

This is not simply a story of diaspora Hinduism and diaspora philanthropy. From the start, we have been interpreting our material in two different comparative dimensions. One is between Tamil temples in London (and elsewhere in the diaspora) and apparently similar temples in Sri Lanka itself. The second comparison, which provided our original point of departure, is between Tamil Hindu temples and other equivalent institutions from other religious traditions in Sri Lanka (Buddhist temples, churches, mosques) as sites for social action. Between

2006 and 2009, Spencer led a team project in Batticaloa and Ampara Districts in Sri Lanka's Eastern Province. The area in question is a densely populated and ethnically tangled mix of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim settlements, with a substantial presence of Catholics, as well as newer Pentecostal churches. It is also an area that was severely damaged by the tsunami of December 2004, itself followed by a flood of international agencies, scrambling to ensure a visible presence in the disaster zone (Stirrat 2006). When we started on our project we therefore assumed that a fair bit of our attention would be devoted to the work of faith-based NGOs such as World Vision and Islamic Relief, both of whom had been quite active in the area.

The story that emerged from our first project was somewhat different to our expectations. By the time we arrived, the humanitarian caravan had moved on, with only a few of the big INGOs still busy in the area. Our research ended up concentrating far more on, as it were, 'regular' religious institutions – churches, temples and mosques – than it did on religious NGOs. And it focused much more on leaders, and what we could call, the institutional preconditions for the emergence of religious leaders, than we had anticipated. What we discovered was that certain new institutional structures, notably new mosque federations organized at town and district level in Muslim areas, had emerged in the context of the war. The mosque federation leaders would intervene and try to mediate in flashpoint situations on behalf of the Muslim population. Christian clergy - especially Catholics, especially Jesuits - played a similar role on behalf of the Tamil population, as did Buddhist priests, and as the occasion demanded, officers from the police and security forces, and from the splintering Tamil paramilitary groups in the area (Spencer, et al 2014).

Two religious groups were conspicuously absent in the stories we heard about religious management of conflict situations: Hindus and Pentecostals. Mosque Federation leaders in the Muslim town of Kattankudy complained of the difficulty they had in establishing contact with equivalent religious representatives from the Hindu community. In their absence, Christian priests, especially Jesuits, stepped in to act as brokers, mediators and go-betweens for the broader Tamil community. But Hindu temples had flourished, as had the new Pentecostal churches, through the years of war, albeit as spaces people retreated into for solace and healing, rather than as institutions from which leaders could emerge. But the *kovils* were not simply sites of healing (as documented in Patricia Lawrence's [1997] extraordinary ethnography from the 1990s); they were also places where a rather different kind of politics, the jostling for honour, continued to play out in the shadow of war (Whitaker 1997a). Most importantly the *kovils*, which are by some measure the biggest and most spectacular corporate institutions in local Tamil life in Eastern Sri Lanka, somehow managed to position themselves "outside" the war, and for most of the time, equally "outside" the hegemonic project of the LTTE, which sought to control all other aspects of Tamil life. Comparison with other religious traditions in Sri Lanka itself, provided examples of Hindu temples somehow bounding themselves and their activities off from the political dangers of the war, and failing to act as an institutional platform for the emergence of powerful community leaders.

But if the LTTE usually kept the *kovils* at arm's length in Sri Lanka itself, in the diaspora the newly established *kovils* often seemed to operate as more or less direct extensions of the LTTE apparatus. This rather stark contrast, in the political capacities of what might otherwise seem to be the same institutions in rather different settings, was the point of departure for the project we started in early 2012, and this is the frame for the particular reflections on the politics of charity which we develop in the final section of this paper. In setting the problem up in this way, we must also acknowledge two possible interpretations of our initial point of departure. On

the one hand, the absence of wartime religious leaders emerging from the Sri Lankan *kovils* to take on roles equivalent to those taken on by *bhikkhus* and Jesuits, could be a product of the institutional structure of the *kovils* themselves, where priests are servants rather than leaders, and which are often bound up with exactly the divisions – of caste, family, gender, age – which the LTTE sought to transcend in its pursuit of the chimera of a unitary Tamil nation. The central figure in what follows is not, however, a priest but a trustee, occupying the familiar role of the Tamil “big man”: in their seminal article on the figure of the Tamil “big man”, Mines and Gourishankar stress that the concept is deeply embedded in vernacular terms like *periyavar* or *periyar*, and the big men of their discussion rely on the framework provided by control of charitable institutions like temples and monasteries to enact their “bigness” (Mines and Gourishankar 1990: 762). Of course similar figures exist in Sri Lanka as well as the diaspora, so the reticence of the Hindu religious leadership in Sri Lanka itself in a time of war may be no more than a common sense reaction to a political context in which anyone who sought to speak on behalf of the Tamil community was very likely to be shot by one or other of the warring parties. This point is cogent enough; it is, though, undermined by our earlier examples – especially the high visibility of Tamil Catholic priests as community spokespersons in war-affected areas (cf. Johnson 2012, 2016).

In what follows we examine one story from the final years of the war. It is a story of a London temple, accused of over-close relations with the LTTE, and therefore of transgressing the proper limits of charitable activity. The accusers included the Government of Sri Lanka, through its London High Commission, and then officers of the Charity Commission for England and Wales, who instituted proceedings to remove the temple’s flamboyant chief trustee.¹ Those proceedings ultimately and unexpectedly failed, and that failure offers us an unexpected perspective on the relation between philanthropy and the political, an issue to which we return in the conclusion. What animates our story is in part a shadow game between the idea of charity and the spectre of the political. During the war, some diaspora temples were accused of deviating from their legal position as charities by supporting political, or more specifically, terrorist organisations. Then after the war, as political space closed down in Sri Lanka itself, philanthropy might have seemed to provide an alternative mode of engagement for politically excluded minorities across the island, while the cloak of “religion” would seem to provide a degree of protection from the intrusive attentions of a hostile state apparatus. Comparison between South London and Sri Lanka reveals very different stories in terms of emergent leadership, although something of a common thread is provided in the attempts to bound off temple life from the unruly claims of the political.

A temple in Tooting

The *Muthumari Amman* temple (*kovil*) was established in Tooting in South London in 1995 by a man called Seevaratnam. The temple occupies the second floor of a leased property in a two-storey building. The temple is devoted to the Amman goddess. The contrast between its nondescript exterior and the religious richness of the interior is well captured in Joanne Waghorne’s account of a visit in 2003:

¹ The Charity Commission for England and Wales is a government agency which registers and regulates the activity of all UK charities. It was established in the mid nineteenth century, and its responsibilities and functions have been subsequently adjusted through a series of legislative acts, most recently the 2006 Charities Act (which is most relevant for the case discussed in this paper).

To find the Sri Muththumari Amman Temple, I relied on a companion who had already located the temple with considerable trouble. The entrance to a large, seemingly deserted, building was through a side door and up two flights of wooden stairs. Suddenly inside, we saw a large open room with all the features of a proper temple ingeniously recreated. A bronze flag pole and the goddess's lion vahana stood in front of the central vimana with facsimile stone pillars with two alcoves towards the front for bronze images of Ganesh and Murugan with his two consorts . . . Smaller shrines containing bronze images edged the walls. On the left wall was a small stone Ganesha, then Rama with Sita and his brother, next to Ardhanarishvara (the form of Shiva as half man and half woman). Around the corner an image of Guruvayurappan (a form of Krishna popular in Kerala), then Shiva Nataraja next to the three popular goddesses Lakshmi, Saraswathi, and Durga. (Waghorne 2004: 215).

Waghorne then recounts an interview with Seevaratnam, in which he talks of the broadly therapeutic work the temple performs for the displaced Tamils of the London diaspora, and its commitment to supporting the needy left behind in Sri Lanka (cf. Whitaker 2015). Her account of Seevaratnam strongly emphasizes his religious commitment to the temple, and the roots of that commitment in his childhood experience in Sri Lanka. Politics is barely mentioned. Any surplus income raised at the temple is sent back to Sri Lanka for "aid to projects": "He must take care that too much money is not given to any one group because as soon as the various guerrilla bands find out that there are a lot of resources, they will simply confiscate the money" (Waghorne 2004: 218).

There are estimated to be around 150,000 Sri Lankan Tamils living in the UK.² The Tamil population in London is concentrated in areas like Newham in the East, Wembley in the Northwest, and Tooting and Mitcham in the South. Most writers on the Tamil diaspora in Britain have built on the chronological typology provided by Daniel and Thangaraj in 1995: Phase One migrants were predominantly professionals who came to Britain in the years immediately after Independence in 1948; Phase Two in the 1960s and 1970s were more mixed in terms of education and class background, and came in increased numbers as ethnic politics deteriorated in Sri Lanka itself; Phase Three migrants were those driven out by the war between the government and the LTTE which escalated in the 1980s (Daniel and Thangaraj 1995). After 2000 the flow of asylum-seekers has slowed, but overall numbers of Tamils have been further swelled by those moving to the UK from other EU states where they had initially settled after leaving Sri Lanka, and by marriages between those in the diaspora and spouses in Sri Lanka itself (Maunaguru and Van Hear 2012; Van Hear 2013). Seevaratnam himself came to the UK in the 1980s, having worked in West Africa and Papua New Guinea as a public sector accountant, a position he occupied in his early years in London before devoting his attention to the temple (and, according to his enemies, the LTTE). The other worshippers at the temple were a cross-section of the South London Tamil community – predominantly Phase 2 and Phase 3 (and later) migrants in the Daniel and Thangaraja's terms – some coming individually to worship, others coming in family groups to sponsor particular ceremonies.

Devotees mostly visit the temples during important festival days such as Pongal, Maha Sivarathri, and Tamil New Year. During these festivals, most devotees come to the temple with their family members. Visitors are frequent on Fridays and Saturdays as they are considered auspicious (as well as Saturday being a day off for most workers). The temples provide free lunch and dinner for devotees so there is a concentration of visits around meal times. Both

² There are no reliable figures for the Sri Lankan Tamil population in the UK; the figure of 150,000 was provided as a "community estimate" in a 2008 BBC report: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7742134.stm>, accessed February 22, 2017.

Families and individuals visit the temples on special occasions such as birthdays, deaths and marriages. Most of the devotees and frequent visitors to the temples are in their 40s or older, often accompanied by pre-teen children. The younger age group tend to come with their family during festival seasons. In other words, the first generation of Tamil migrants are the most frequent visitors to the temples. As well as Sri Lankan Tamil there are a few non-Sri Lankan devotees, especially from India, who visit the temple (the temple also houses deities that are famous in India such as Ayappan or Anuman). Temples organize special pujas and other events in the evening or over the weekend to facilitate visit from busy city-based workers. Sometimes events are timed to chime with the start of festivals at major temples like the Nallur Kandaswamy temple in Jaffna. For these socially heterogeneous congregants, the temple provides some sense of linkage to a Sri Lanka which otherwise threatens to slip from memory. As Whitaker puts it, writing of equivalent temples in Toronto, temples stand against a threatened “erosion of identity” as places of reassuring “Tamilness,” and also as places in which those who aspire to prominence within the community might expect to be “known”, and thus recognized (Whitaker 2015: 1372).

Currently, there are around 30 Tamil Hindu temples in London, mostly located in a suburban arc which follows the course of the old North and South Circular Roads. Apart from the Tooting *kovil*, only two other Sri Lankan temples were founded in London between the 1980s and the 1990s; the rest were established between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s. This reflects the increase in Tamil refugee migration, and later marriage-related migration to the UK since the 1990s. The temples were the home not merely to various deities, but also to language and dance classes, book launches and political meetings. The early temples were often mobile, shifting from site to site until a permanent home for the deities could be established.

In the Tooting temple, apart from Amman, many other gods and goddesses are worshipped. Priests perform *pujas* every day and the temple provides free meals to people who come to the *kovil*. Numbers of weddings take place in the wedding hall which is set up below the temple proper on the first floor of the building. Every year the *kovil*'s chariot festival (*tēr tiruvilā*) transforms the surrounding streets of Tooting. At the end of the festival, the temple conducts a cultural festival where money is collected both for the development of the temple and for its charity works. Stories circulate around the mystical power of the goddess Amman. The most popular supplication is for success in school examinations, testimony to the huge investment London Tamils put in their children's education.

In a long interview in 2012, Seevaratnam explained how and why he decided to found the temple in the 1990s, why he chose the location in Tooting and the particular goddess, and what the temple enabled him to do within the Tamil community in London. His memorable conclusion to the interview provides us with the first part of our title today. The *kovil* has flourished through large numbers of donations from devotees and well-wishers. Seevaratnam has a history of open support for the LTTE dating from the early days of the civil war in the 1980s. He also runs a charity in the name of the temple called the Sivayogam Trust, which supports a number of initiatives in Sri Lanka, such as orphanages, elders' homes and women's centres.

A temple at the end of a war

From 2000 onwards, the temples had to deal with a rapidly changing and often incoherent political landscape. From the late 1990s, the Norwegian government had been working behind the scenes to create the conditions for the ceasefire agreement between the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE, which was signed in early 2002. The Norwegian-brokered peace was accompanied by an influx of aid from all directions, much of it channelled through Sri Lankan

NGOs and intended to sweeten the deal and make it palatable to hardliners on both sides of the conflict (Goodhand, Klem and Sørbo 2011). In this context the Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO), which was in effect the NGO wing of the LTTE, played an important role distributing aid in the LTTE-controlled north and east of the island. But even as the Norwegian mediators were working to nudge the LTTE away from the path of secessionist violence, other governments seemed to be pushing in the opposite direction. The LTTE were included in the first batch of named organizations to be proscribed under the 2000 Terrorism Act in the UK. In 2005 the Charity Commissioners in the UK removed the TRO from its list of approved organizations, and in 2006 the European Union formally added the LTTE to their list of terrorist organizations, by which point the peace process in Sri Lanka itself had been unravelling for some time. War broke out again in the island's north-east in July 2006. Within a year the LTTE had been cleared from the territory they held in the East. Within three years, they had been comprehensively defeated in a final battle in which the leadership, and several thousand civilians, were trapped on a narrow strip of beach just north of the town of Mullaitivu.

In 2006, as the war entered its final phase, Human Rights Watch published a widely-cited report on LTTE activity across the global Tamil diaspora (Human Rights Watch 2006). It described the LTTE's aggressive fund-raising campaign in late 2005 and early 2006 for what the LTTE itself described as "the final war," and located this within a broader context of near-total LTTE control of Tamil organizations in the diaspora. One chapter of the report was titled "LTTE Control of Temples in the West". Among accounts of LTTE involvement with temples in Australia and Canada, the report contained a long account of the bizarre case of the Eelapatheeswarar Aalayam temple in Wembley. The chief trustee of the temple was a man called Jayadevan, a high-profile supporter of the LTTE who had challenged the 2001 proscription in the UK courts. In late 2004 he and a companion had travelled to meet the LTTE leadership in Sri Lanka in an attempt to resolve an attempt by Seevaratnam's Sivayogam trust to take control of his Wembley temple. Rather than the sympathetic hearing they expected, they were detained for several months, and only released after the intervention of various MPs and the UK High Commission in Colombo, by which time the temple had been formally transferred to Seevaratnam's organization. The transfer was immediately challenged in the courts, and control was returned to Jayadevan and his faction, at which point Jayadevan went public with his bitter criticisms of the LTTE leadership, criticisms which were gleefully reported in the Sri Lankan press

By the time of our visit in 2012, the war was over and the Tooting Amman Temple continued to carry out charity campaigns targeting its devotees. A 65-inch TV, mounted on the wall within the temple, constantly broadcasts the details of money collected, of the donations and their distribution. Devotees are sometimes encouraged to provide monthly standing orders towards the bank account of the temple for its functioning and its charity work. The amount varies between £10 and £100. Further, the trustees ask some devotees to obtain bank loans in their own name, or to borrow money by remortgaging their houses, in order to give the money to the temple. The trustees promise to undertake to repay the amount in instalments to the respective banks from which the loans were obtained by their devotees. Sometimes donors are encouraged, when they visit Sri Lanka, to go and see for themselves that the money is really going back to those people in need. This kind of social audit further personalizes the work of charity. When we questioned the devotees about their donations for the temple's charity work, they always answered that they gave in the name of Amman. They are doing well here and – like the Londonis in Gardner's paper in this volume - their people back home are suffering. It is their

duty to give money to the temple for the charity works. When asked about possible misuse of the money, or their satisfaction over the proper use of their donation, they simply said Amman will watch over the money. She is a mother god and she will protect the children (Maunaguru 2015).

Charity and suspicion

Temples in London have received substantial amounts of money for their charity work. However rumours and allegations of misuse of money are widespread. In a separate analysis, Maunaguru has argued that in effect the temple's goddess serves as guarantor of the probity of its internal affairs, while the possibilities of external audit render even the goddess herself open to allegations of corruption (Maunaguru 2015). Meanwhile, links to the LTTE were also widely alleged, albeit less widely documented. One anonymous "Western expert" was quoted in the HRW report on the LTTE's role in the diaspora:

Ordinary Tamils have learned to keep their heads down [in Sri Lanka], do exactly what their neighbors do, and not make waves. These lessons travelled with them to Toronto and London and Paris—where the LTTE and its supporters continued to take over and monopolize social structures, from refugee relief in the 1980s to newspapers, shops and temples. (HRW 2006: 14)

A temple trustee in the same report expands on this: "Temples are money-making places. If they take control, they have control of the money, they can control the surplus, they can control the people coming there" (HRW 2006: 21). Although the Norwegian-mediated peace process, and the need to encourage the LTTE to move to the political centre ground, might have encouraged regulatory bodies to turn a blind eye to pro-LTTE activity in the diaspora, other circumstances intervened. The 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and other targets, and the ensuing "War on Terror", raised the stakes for all groups that might be identified as "terrorist," while the Sri Lankan government exploited the opportunity this presented to push back against perceived LTTE successes in the fight for the humanitarian high ground outside Sri Lanka.

In early 2006, responding to the fallout from the detention of Jayadevan in Sri Lanka, as well as pressure from the Sri Lankan High Commission in London, the Charity Commission wrote to the trustees of the Tooting temple to outline a number of concerns and to request a meeting. As a result of the Commission's investigation, Seevaratnam was first suspended from his position as chief trustee in 2007, then removed altogether in 2008. Seevaratnam launched an appeal against this decision, which was heard by an independent tribunal. The tribunal found in Seevaratnam's favour in late 2009 and ordered his reinstatement. By then the war was over in Sri Lanka, and the LTTE no longer existed as an organization. In what follows, we rely in part on the tribunal's 50-page judgement (Tribunal 2009). In addition, Seevaratnam has collected and published hundreds of pages of his correspondence with the Commission in a volume entitled *The devils chase the Hindu gods* (Nagendram 2008). Finally, the Commission published its own inquiry report into Sivayogam in 2010 – a document surprisingly different in tone and conclusions from the previous year's tribunal judgement (Commission 2010).

Throughout this long process, the Charity Commission focused on Seevaratnam himself, rather than the temple or the Sivayogam trust. He was accused of holding an over-dominant position in the charity's organization, of recklessly squandering funds in legal pursuit of the Wembley temple, of irregularities to do with the use of interest-free loans, of failing to evaluate the status of recipient organizations in Sri Lanka, and failing to monitor the work funded there. But over-shadowing all this was one, much bigger, charge, which was his alleged support of the LTTE and the consequences of that support for the trust's charitable status. The wording of the Commission's rationale on this final point bears some reflection: Seevaratnam was specifically

accused of “failure to discharge his duty of care as a trustee and duty to act in the best interests of the Charity by failing to dissociate the Charity from the LTTE and supporting its cause to the Charity’s beneficiaries” (Tribunal 2009: 3.10).

How did Seevaratnam respond to these charges? In an 18-page submission in December 2007 he denied the charges and demanded the right to appeal against a ruling he insisted had been decided before any evidence was collected to support it. On the charge of dominance, he found himself in a somewhat odd position. Seevaratnam’s self-presentation is grounded in his role as a quintessential Tamil big man (Mines and Gourishankar 1990; Mines 1994), a leader who has set up his temple as a resource for his community. But the Commission’s charge required him to reverse the standard rhetoric of the big man, emphasizing his role as a servant rather than a leader, someone thrust into leadership by circumstances, but always looking to delegate and spread any power he might have:

I was the founder and leader. I had responsibilities in addition to those of a trustee. I had all the time in the world without any other responsibilities as explained in my earlier submissions. As the founder, I had the urge to ensure that everything went on well. I was at the Temple for more than twelve hours a day, seven days a week. As I progressed on the spiritual side I enjoyed my work more and more . . . I became a resident spiritual leader. However, I will not accept that I was dominant. In fact, I started delegating my responsibilities as I succeeded in training the priests in non-pastoral duties.³

The appeal was convinced by the arguments presented on Seevaratnam’s behalf, noting that the Commission had failed to acknowledge (or consider) representations made on his behalf from others associated with the temple, no attempt had been made to translate key documents from Tamil to English, and there might have been cultural insensitivity in the Commission’s interpretation of the deference displayed towards Seevaratnam in his role as a Guru.⁴ In short, while Seevaratnam was “a dominant presence” in the charity, this did not in itself extend to misconduct or mismanagement (Tribunal 2009: 6.4-6.20).

There were more evidential shortcomings in other aspects of the case. The Charity Commission’s original complaints included allegations of “inadequate internal financial controls,” specifically an over-reliance on cash transactions and the use at times of interest-free loans as a way to raise money quickly. These issues were already procedurally resolved by the time the tribunal reported, and the judgement devotes little space to them. A more substantive issue seemed to be the oversight – or lack of it - of projects funded by Sivayogam in Sri Lanka itself. The Commission claimed that there were no proper records of money spent in Sri Lanka, and evidence of monitoring seemed to consist mostly of photographs of personal visits by Seevaratnam to the charities concerned. But a further concern was the fact that amongst the organizations supported by Sivayogam were “an organisation named in memory of an LTTE commander” and “organisations bombed by the government of Sri Lanka for alleged links to the LTTE.”⁵ The latter organizations were orphanages, the one named after an LTTE commander was a rehabilitation centre for war victims. Here the Charity Commission case crumbled very

³ Seevaratnam to Charity Commission, 5 February 2008 (Nagendram 2008).

⁴ A good example of this insensitivity might be the way in which the Commission seized on a reference in a letter from the trustees of Seevaratnam’s “power of Sakthy,” which they gloss in passing as “intuition.” A great deal of the initial case for Seevaratnam’s removal is built around the alleged shortcomings of “intuition” as the basis for rational decision-making. Whether a more standard translation of the term would have fared better is unclear. Charity Commission to Seevaratnam, 31 December 2007 (Nagendram 2008).

⁵ Charity Commission to Seevaratnam, 31 December 2007 (Nagendram 2008).

quickly. The compliance officer assigned to the case had asked the Sri Lankan High Commission for comments on the organizations, receiving back some not entirely helpful information, including new allegations that Sivayogam was funding suicide bombers. She had made no attempt to contact the organizations themselves and was unaware of the regulatory framework for organizations of this sort in Sri Lanka. The Commission's case on this point was finally torpedoed by a witness statement from an unnamed Sri Lankan MP, who described a robust and fully functioning regulatory framework operating in Sri Lanka, including in LTTE-controlled areas, and added: "I have never heard of the LTTE appropriating money from such organizations" (Tribunal 2009: 6.70).⁶

Support for the LTTE was the one issue that overshadowed all else in the case, and it seems highly unlikely that any of the other alleged failings would have attracted the Charity Commission's attention without this. In their letter notifying him of his removal, the Commission alleged that "Mr Seevaratnam has actively supported the cause of the LTTE to the Charity's beneficiaries, in particular to the devotees attending the temples." It then went on to specify two key pieces of evidence: Seevaratnam's public statements of support for the LTTE, and the display of LTTE propaganda at the temple, specifically a picture of a man in uniform, believed to be the LTTE leader Prabhakaran, seen by a Commission officer on a visit in 2006. The first allegation, Seevaratnam's support for the LTTE, was qualified in the following passage:

The LTTE is aware that Mr Seevaratnam ceased being an officer of the LTTE (involved in its finances) in 1991 but he continues to promote his association and support of this proscribed organisation within the Charity. Mr Seevaratnam informed Commission officers that he was approached at the temple by an individual from the local community who had heard of his links to the LTTE. Mr Seevaratnam informed Commission officers that he was "honest" about these links and confirmed them to the individual. Mr Seevaratnam has shown Commission officers that he considers these links to be of merit: as he has a letter handwritten by the leader of the LTTE which he keeps with his academic and professional qualifications. In a meeting on 16 March 2007, in the presence of Commission officers, he encouraged a temple priest to view the letter.⁷

In addition, Seevaratnam's involvement in the abortive take-over of the Wembley temple was cited as evidence that he had "publicly involved the Charity in events connected to the LTTE and supported its cause by taking decisions in the administration of the Charity which were directly linked to the LTTE's aim."

Most of the evidence cited in support of these claims came from Seevaratnam's own communications to the Commission, both in writing and in meetings at the temple. His defence in the tribunal again exposed the limitations of the Commission's investigatory capacities. Much of their case rested on visits by Commission officials to the temple in September 2006 and March 2007. The "LTTE propaganda" on display apparently consisted of a photograph of Prabhakaran – a "fairly identifiable chap" in the official's words – spotted on a visit to the Ladies' toilet. Seevaratnam denied that the photograph had ever been displayed, and he was supported by several other witnesses, including a local councillor who asserted that "I know what Prabhakaran looks like and the LTTE flag and insignia and I have never seen any of them there in 8 years" (Tribunal 2009: 6.38). The Tribunal concluded that there was no evidence that

⁶ See Klem 2012 for a fascinating account of the ways in which the everyday state bureaucracy continued on its steady way despite the presence of the LTTE during the years of war.

⁷ Charity Commission to Seevaratnam, 31 December 2007, para 9 (Nagendram 2008).

specifically linked Seevaratnam to the disputed photograph and no obvious reason to assume, if it did indeed exist, it was his responsibility.

The interpretation of the March 2007 meeting also hinged on a disputed piece of evidence, a letter from Prabhakaran to Seevaratnam notifying him of his suspension from the LTTE many years earlier. He had referred to that in passing during the meeting, and asked one of the temple priests to go off and look at it. The Commission took this as evidence of his active support for the LTTE. Seevaratnam's version of this exchange was rather different. The point of the letter was to demonstrate the severing of any formal links with the LTTE many years before the LTTE itself was proscribed under the Terrorism Act. He did not have the letter to hand – indeed it seemed to be lost – and he had asked one of the temple priests to go and look *for* the letter (rather than look *at* the letter). Parts of the conversation between Seevaratnam and the priest were in Tamil, and the Commission officer on this occasion admitted that Seevaratnam was not always easy to understand. Crucially, a less contentious account of this part of the meeting, recorded in the note taken on the day, was subsequently embellished, in a formal minute not shared with Seevaratnam at the time, to claim that “he appeared proud that the letter was signed by Prabhakaran himself” (Tribunal 2009: 6.44).

The Tribunal, perhaps not surprisingly, was not impressed by a case based on a letter no one had actually seen, a conversation that was admitted to be difficult to understand, and a photograph that no one apart from the Commission officer involved would admit to having ever seen. It also criticised the failure to make clear to Seevaratnam that anything he said in his meetings might be treated as evidence in a case against him. It noted that Seevaratnam had made “a number of unwise and unguarded statements” in his engagements with the Commission. It then came to a judgement on the bigger case against him: this was that, in light of rumours about his involvement with the LTTE, and possible evidence of his personal support for the LTTE, he had “failed to take steps to dissociate the Charity from any alleged links to the LTTE.” The Tribunal found in Seevaratnam's favour on this point, not least because the Commission had never explained to him what exactly he was accused of, nor advised him on how he could definitively demonstrate the required act of dissociation. It cited Seevaratnam's words to a local newspaper: “When you say disassociate yourself, there is a presumption that I was already associated . . . Now if I am not associated, how can I disassociate?” (Tribunal 2009: 6.32). It went on to describe the Commission's interpretation of Seevaratnam asking for the letter in order to prove that he had broken with the LTTE, as instead providing evidence of his continued *association*, as “Kafka-esque” (Tribunal 2009: 6.56).

Then there is the question of the Wembley temple take-over. The Charity Commission charged: “There is no evidence that Mr Seevaratnam conducted an assessment of whether this action was in the Charity's interests, and Mr Seevaratnam knew or ought to have known that it was unreasonable to take action at the request of a proscribed organization.”⁸ The legal defeat in the courts had cost the trust a great deal of money, so Seevaratnam's action might be seen to combine financial indiscipline with terrorist links. The only evidence for the LTTE connection brought before the tribunal was Seevaratnam's own admission, but he insisted they were playing the role of a “facilitator” seeking to bring harmony to a dispute within the diaspora community. On this, the Tribunal took the view that contact from the LTTE was “unsolicited,” had not been repeated, and was only known about because Seevaratnam had volunteered the information. The Tribunal did conclude that the spiralling costs of this, and an unrelated legal case, constituted a failure of the trustees, but as most of the costs occurred after Seevaratnam's suspension, he could

⁸ Ibid, para 4a.

not be held entirely responsible for them (Tribunal 2009: 6.100). It did, however, take a dim view of the appeal to *sakthi* as a motive for his actions, and thought this amounted to possible misconduct, though not severe enough to justify his removal from his position.

Charity and terror: things you can't do with a temple

What can we learn from Seevaratnam's story and what new lines of enquiry might it open up? We might approach this from three (at least) different points of view. One is Seevaratnam's own account of himself and his actions, captured in our interviews, but also abundantly displayed in the pages of letters and emails faithfully reproduced in his self-published volume detailing his fight with the Charity Commission. Second, of course, is the Charity Commission itself, as revealed in their communications to Seevaratnam, and in their evidence to the Tribunal. Third, most intriguing but clearly most challenging, is the LTTE itself. Intriguing, because if we can get a better sense of the different stance the LTTE took towards the *kovils* in Sri Lanka and in the diaspora, we might also illuminate some of the murky dynamics of that organization and its bigger political project. Challenging, because the organization is no more, its leadership destroyed, its monuments to the martyrs long since bulldozed away by the Sri Lankan army. Discussion of the LTTE also serves to bring the argument back to the two comparative dimensions introduced at the start of this paper: between Hindu religious institutions and other religious groups in Sri Lanka itself, and between temples in the diaspora and in Sri Lanka.

We start with the Charity Commission because there seems to be a touching self-evidence about their actions and the motives behind those actions. Indeed, the salient question is not so much why they followed the path they did, but why were they so bad at it. Policing the shifting boundaries between "charity" and "politics" was nothing new to them but, post-9/11, "terrorism" seemed to give them a wonderfully clear and unambiguous target. Under UK law, registered charities are not allowed to include "political activity" in their purposes, but they are allowed under certain circumstances to engage in such activity in pursuit of their purposes. Political activity is rather narrowly defined as activity aimed at "securing or opposing, any change in the law or in the policy or decisions of central government, local authorities or other public bodies, whether in this country or abroad" (Charity Commission 2008: 5). Although campaigning NGOs like Amnesty International have, until recently, been unable to claim charitable status, in practice this restriction posed no major threat to Seevaratnam and his organization, whose purposes included advance the Hindu (Saiva) religion, education about Saiva religion, the provision of facilities for youth, the old and the the disabled, and "the relief of poverty, hardship and distress."

The 2000 Terrorism Act, and the fall-out from the 9/11 attacks, changed all this. The Act starts, as might be expected, with a broad definition of terrorism that combines the use or threat of serious violence to persons, or damage to property, with the advancing of a political, religious or ideological cause. The definition is broad enough, especially because of the reference to property, to include – potentially at least – all manner of otherwise non-violent direct action by campaigners. Its breadth is tempered by a crucial addition to this introductory definition: "In this Act a reference to action taken for the purposes of terrorism includes a reference to action taken for the benefit of a proscribed organisation" (Terrorism Act 2000 s.1(5)). Proscribed organizations are listed in a schedule to the Act, and the Home Secretary is empowered to add (or remove) organizations from that list. The architecture of the Act is, then, a rather striking example of Schmittian sovereignty, with the Home Secretary the one who "decides on the exception," within a definition otherwise broad enough to encompass a range of peaceful campaigning and protest tactics (Schmitt 1988: 5). The LTTE was on the first list of proscribed

organizations issued in March 2001, and remains there despite no sign of organizational life (outside the propaganda campaigns of the Sri Lankan government in the post-war years) since the defeat of May 2009.⁹

At first glance, the invocation of “terrorism” eliminates the room for manoeuvre which allows charities to engage in “political” *activity* so long as it can be shown to be in furtherance of some non-political, or possibly pre-political, *purpose*. The tribunal judgement cites the Charity Commission’s wonderfully named, “Risk and Proportionality Framework Document” which ‘describes links to “terrorism” and support for proscribed organizations as “zero-tolerance” issues’ (Tribunal 2009: 6.27). The LTTE was a multiply proscribed organization, and it had been proscribed because it was deemed to be a “terrorist” organization. But, reviewing the extant guidance issued by the Commission, the Tribunal immediately opened a new zone of ambiguity. The guidance cited contained the following bullet point:

- Where a charity’s activities may give, or appear to give, support or succour to any terrorist activity, we expect the charity’s trustees to take all necessary steps immediately to disassociate the charity from the activity. (Tribunal 2009: 6.29)

Identifying this as the key justification for the tortuous argument about Seevaratnam’s “failure to disassociate” from the LTTE, the Tribunal drew attention to the emphasis in the guidance on the charity’s “activities” and on “terrorist activity.” This allowed them to detect a distinction between “privately held beliefs and active support for terrorism” (Tribunal 2009: 6.30), freeing Seevaratnam from the full force of the Charity Commission charge by placing his convictions about the LTTE - which he was unable, and probably unwilling, to conceal – on the “right” side of a double distinction between public and private, and between belief and action. There may be further exceptions to the apparently intractable logic of exception after all.

In pursuing Seevaratnam, however, The Commission and its officers seem to have over-invested in Seevaratnam’s own self-descriptions. In particular, they accused him of exerting too much influence in the life of the charity. The tribunal heard evidence of fierce arguments among the trustees, and took that to show that Seevaratnam’s own claims notwithstanding, he was not the biggest of Big Men after all. There is an irony here, for if Seevaratnam presented himself to the ethnographers as a South Asian Big Man *par excellence* – “you can do anything with a temple” – his successful defence depended on evidence that he was no such thing, that rather he was just one among many servants of the temple and squabbling trustees of the charity. Meanwhile, the key claim – the failure to dissociate from the LTTE – was a strange double negative to put before a legal body. The resolution of this double negative came to rest, appropriately enough, on a doubly negative piece of evidence: the alleged letter from the LTTE formally “suspending” Seevaratnam in 1991, which the Commission claimed he was evidently “proud” to have in his possession, but which no one ever managed to find when the time came to produce it. Other aspects of his relationship to the LTTE seemed harder to wish away: he freely

⁹ Writing midway through the Norwegian attempt to mediate the civil war, Nadarajah and Sriskandarajah (2005) review the history of the LTTE’s relationship with the label ‘terrorist,’ and the ‘pragmatic’ way in which Western actors found ways to engage with them as required, even while proscribing the organization in their domestic legislation. The most recent list of proscribed organizations contains many additions since 2000, but mentions only two cases in which organizations have been “de-proscribed”. It continues to speak of the LTTE and its fight in Sri Lanka in the present tense. Home Office, *Proscribed Terrorist Organisations*, available at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/578385/201612_Proscription.pdf, accessed 28 February 2017.

acknowledged receiving a call from the LTTE, instructing him to take over the management of the Wembley temple.

In his interview with us, Seevaratnam seemed the very epitome of such a Big Man, enacting his own leadership “through a variety of institutions that he controls or creates” (Mines and Gourishankar 1990: 763). Mines cites Emerson in his evocation of what it is to be a big man in South India: “Bala is a social architect each of whose institutions is the “lengthened shadow” of himself. Attracting his constituents to the institutions that he controls, he organizes a following, making himself the center of his community” (Mines 1994: 200). Or, as the man himself told us, “You can do anything with a temple.” Seevaratnam’s description of his relation to the temple seemed unusually instrumental in its rationale. The community needed him and he needed a temple. Real estate opportunities dictated the choice of site, and the site dictated the deity to be honoured. The temple’s relation to the community is not segmentary but solidary: people come there as Tamils first and foremost, rather than as representatives of castes, villages or families. With their multiple deities and ancillary community events – dance classes, weddings – they are closest to the new urban middle class temples Waghorne (2004) describes as ‘eclectic’ and ‘all-community.’ But the pressure of the accusations from the Charity Commission forced Seevaratnam to temper his self-image. A passing cloud caused the lengthened shadow to fade, so he and the temple were no longer indivisible, he was a servant rather than a master of the institution, and others in the community he had gathered were allowed equal voices.

Nevertheless, with a great deal of apparently damning evidence stacked against him, Seevaratnam’s legal victory requires a little more explanation. This may be quite simple. On one side there was the Clouseau-esque bumbling of the Charity Commission officers, who failed to keep adequate notes of the pictures they saw on their way to the lavatory: “The Tribunal notes that the [Charity Commission] did not have a systematised investigative process” (Tribunal 2009: 6.59). On the other side, and after a considerable delay while Seevaratnam applied for and was refused legal aid, there were Birnberg Peirce, Britain’s most fearless and successful human rights lawyers, who represented Seevaratnam on a pro bono basis with what looks in retrospect like embarrassing ease.

In late 2013 and early 2014, the Amman temple was finally forced to shift its location. The temple’s lease had expired and the owner asked the trustee to leave his property. Although Seevaratnam contested this in the courts, he was finally ordered to leave. As a result, Seevaratnam took all the belongings and deities of the *kovil* and shifted them to a small place in 2013. He was still hoping to find a larger property where he could build a bigger and stronger Amman temple. During our interview, he mentioned the dispute over the lease. When we asked about what would happen if the owner asked him to leave, he replied that “Amman will decide. If Amman wants to go she will leave otherwise she will stay.” Once more the big man reverts to the role of servant of the sovereign deity.

Conclusion: shadow games

Of course, the silent presence through the argument so far is the temple itself. Is it really quite such a passive player, a vehicle for Seevaratnam’s community-building projects? If the run-in with the Charity Commission obliged Seevaratnam to perform – for a time at least - the role of a kind of anti-big man, the engagement with temples may have had a similar fragmenting effect for the LTTE. Their role in the various disputes can be interpreted in terms of classic arguments about temples and sovereignty. Sovereignty is central to Appadurai and Breckenridge’s (1976) analysis of the ideal-typical South Indian temple. They start with the observation that the deity of a temple “is conceived of as a sovereign,” around whose figure individuals and groups

participate in an elaborate, and sometimes contentious, redistributive choreography. The choreography is organized within the legal framework of temple endowments, but this framework requires the active intervention of some external agency to resolve the inevitable disputes that will arise (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1976: 190). So, in Seevaratnam's story, the deity should be sovereign, she is the leading participant in the dance of honour, but when problems arise and require resolution, the LTTE appears from outside, apparently exercising its duty as a source of external resolution for the otherwise intractable problems internal to the religious community. This comes in the form of a commandment to take over the Wembley temple from its allegedly unsatisfactory custodians. But far from resolving anything, Seevaratnam's take-over is an embarrassing failure. Thousands of pounds are lost in a futile legal battle for control of the temple, and his brother-in-law's response to being detained by the LTTE (for whom he had been a major fundraiser for years), is to wash his dirty laundry in as public a way as possible, not least in some unusually candid interviews with a gleeful Sri Lankan press.¹⁰

Stories we have gleaned from Sri Lanka repeat this pattern in a somewhat more low-key way. It's not that the LTTE voluntarily kept clear of the *kovils*. There were, not surprisingly, occasional attempts to extract funds from them; our informants (usually trustees of very big temples) claimed these were unsuccessful. There were also attempts to intervene on behalf of low-caste groups denied entry to particular temples (a continuation of the Temple Entry movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which some have seen as an important precursor to the rise of the LTTE and other militant groups in the second half of the 1970s (Pfaffenberger 1990)). Again these seem to have been often unsuccessful, or counter-productive - in terms of loss of authority and standing for the LTTE - in the cases we have managed to trace (Maunaguru, in press). As an organization, the LTTE developed a tight repertoire of representational strategies, focusing on the figure of the leader, Prabhakaran, the cult of the martyred cadres (celebrated annually in the form of *Maaveerar Naal*, Heroes' Day, on 27 November), and the powerful symbol of the cyanide capsule, worn around the neck of every fighter, to be used in the event of capture or betrayal. These were supplemented by a strong emphasis on the performance of state-like activities, to emphasize the legitimacy of LTTE claims to recognition, and by endless iterations of the claim to be the sole voice of the Tamil people. A sole voice by definition does not engage in unseemly argumentation, and the LTTE's stance was explicitly presented in contrast to the bickering and self-serving activity of more conventional politicians.

But when it went public, Jayadevan's tale of deceit and detention at the Wembley temple revealed a very different image of the LTTE and its diaspora supporters, one of an organization as embedded in, and tainted by, the everyday politicking of temple life as any other humdrum political party. With the benefit of considerable hindsight, we can now place that incident in the same interpretive frame as other coeval developments. In 2004, the Eastern leadership of the LTTE split away from Prabhakaran and, after a few weeks of confusion, aligned itself on the government side. In Wembley as in Sri Lanka, an organization that prided itself on its discipline and unity had started to crack and divide, and in so doing revealed the ordinariness of the political machinations hitherto hidden away behind a veneer of well-policed and implacable unity.

The unseemly outcome of engagement in temple politics for an organization like the LTTE may explain why it tried to keep temple affairs at arms length in general. It does not,

¹⁰ Here we should acknowledge unpublished research by Nick Van Hear and Cathrine Brun which first drew this story to Spencer's attention in 2006.

however, explain why it did this in Sri Lanka, but not in London, or elsewhere in the diaspora. For this we need to invoke two further explanatory factors. One is the internal structure of the diaspora temples. Tamil temples in London differ in important ways from equivalent institutions in Sri Lanka. Their locations are determined by real estate considerations and the vagaries of immigrant settlement patterns rather than by miraculous manifestations of divine presence (Whitaker calls this ‘retail logic’ in the Toronto case (2015: 1373)). Many are effectively the property, or at least the vehicle, of the people who founded them - ‘religious entrepreneurs’ in Whitaker’s terms (2015: 1379) - who may be priests or, as in the case of Seevaratnam, trustees. Whoever the entrepreneurs might be, they represent a more singular locus of authority than in the segmentary complexities of the big temples in Sri Lanka itself. As such they may also appear more straightforward to control from outside. Nevertheless, they are by no means immune from the internal politicking found in Sri Lankan temples, so the internal explanation can only tell part of the story. It must be supplemented by some understanding of the different *modus operandi* at work in the LTTE quest for hegemony in the diaspora. For whatever reason, the LTTE could afford to ignore the *kovils* much of the time in Sri Lanka, but could not ignore their counterparts in the diaspora.

To understand this part of the dynamic, we need to reflect on what could be called the world-making properties of temples in both locations. Patricia Lawrence, writing at the height of the civil war, has provided gripping descriptions of the ways in which female religious specialists were able to rework space to create enclaves in which the unspoken losses of the war could be safely articulated (Lawrence 1997, 2000). Whitaker, in his article on temples in Toronto, talks of Sri Lankan temples during the war as “at once, centres of local, moral landscapes, and . . . alternative public spheres where critiques and enquiries otherwise dangerous might be given and asked with relative impunity” (Whitaker 2015: 1363). He links this to his earlier analysis of the fate of one major temple in eastern Sri Lanka under colonial rule, and to Lawrence’s work on enclaves of religiously inflected safety in the midst of power. Institutionally temples had the capacity to endure both colonial efforts at administrative reform, and a counter-insurgency of extreme brutality.

In London, the temples obviously retain a strong sense of the enclave - but this is as an enclave for the Tamil community in an unfamiliar and sometimes unfriendly new country. It is not in any plausible sense an enclave against local politics. Seevaratnam told us of his warm relations with the local council and local Labour Party MPs. One local councillor provided crucial evidence in his support at the Tribunal. The Wembley Temple is even more striking, because it is housed in the ground floor of the local Labour party offices: portraits of worthy party figures of the recent past adorn the walls, looking down on the shrines of the deities dotted around the main chamber. To function as an autonomous entity in this context, the temple requires charitable status and all that that implies in terms of the regulatory oversight of British charity law. An enclave is a bounded space, and charity law in the UK is above all concerned to mark and protect boundaries, not least the boundary between charity and politics. In Dirks’ well-known analysis of a South Indian little kingdom, the effect of colonial law is to hollow out the political component of institutions which were, in the old regime, at once both political and ritual organizations (Dirks 1987: 261). Whitaker’s monograph on temple politics in Mandur is the only study of comparable depth from Sri Lanka. In his account, internal disputes within temples thrived during the colonial era, not least because the colonial authorities failed to recognize the political component of what were seen as ‘mere’ ritual contests (Whitaker 1997a, 1997b). The temple became, in his terms, a kind of “non-modern” enclave in a world of growing colonial

governmentality, and it is this lingering property that allowed temples, and to some extent temple politics, to flourish despite the destruction of the civil war. For Whitaker, unlike Dirks, the forms of life that were colonial temple politics were just as much ‘real’ politics as anything associated more directly with the state. They were just different politics, non-modern rather than “modern”.

What then of our temple in Tooting. Does Seevaratnam’s unexpected victory over the “devils” of the Charity Commission demonstrate a similar capacity to keep apart different forms of political life? Up to a point and at a cost. In order to protect the temple from the consequences of his expressed opinions on the LTTE, he had to reverse the terms of his trusteeship – no longer the author and navigator of the temple project, he became instead its servant. His Tamil patriotism was necessarily relegated to an issue of private conscience, tidily separate from his public position of trustee. Our quintessential Big Man, apparently indivisible from the temple that was his project and his vehicle, fragmented, for a time at least, into a man of parts.¹¹ Interestingly, though, the Charity Commission officers never saw any of this as a problem of politics. Terrorism, it seems, is something qualitatively different from the political, and nowhere in the proceedings against Seevaratnam is there any suggestion that if the accusations of terrorism could not be supported, he might be guilty instead of diverting a charitable institution to political ends. That misapprehension is not so different from the older misapprehension that allowed temple politics to thrive through the years of colonial rule.

However, Hindu temples in London are very much associated with charity work and charity funding, unlike most of the temples in Sri Lanka. Charity and charity laws may seem to fall outside ‘politics’, but, charitable activity created a condition of possibility for the new Hindu temples. It gave cause and purpose in a new country where the old idiom of the politics of honour (based on caste, kinship, and lineage) could no longer serve as the logic of temple politics. Instead, charity became the new idiom of honour for temples and their trustees, in which temples compete in their claims of how much money they send for rehabilitation efforts in Sri Lanka. This also shows the ability of the diaspora Hindu temples to absorb modern charity forms into their enclaved temple politics, in other words, the ability of temple politics to absorb both ‘modern’ and ‘non-modern’ forms of politics, from philanthropy, and British charity regulation, to LTTE machinations.

The Terrorism Act fundamentally disturbed the possibilities and flexibilities of Hindu temple politics. Until the LTTE was proscribed as a terrorist organization, temples were not questioned on the destination of their charitable money, nor was charity read as a political tool to support the LTTE. After the adoption of the Act, temples came under scrutiny and questions were raised about the destination of the money. In other words, the idiom of “terrorism” seems to be qualitatively different from other political forms, apparently possessing the capacity to erase other forms of politics, whether modern, or non-modern. Under the shadow of the Act, temples and their trustees wanted to clear their names, and thus mark a clear distinction between terrorism and their charity work. Thus, many Hindu temples now showcase publicly where the charity money is going by taking pictures of the gift-giving processes and the homes they run in Sri Lanka. If charity provided a language for temple-based ‘idioms of honour’ to be recreated in the diaspora temples, accusations of funding terrorism seemed to threaten such possibilities. Now, with the LTTE entirely wiped out in Sri Lanka itself, it would be reasonable to expect the shadow cast by the Act to lift from the London temples. But the keepers of the Home Office list of exceptions seem to have difficulty acknowledging even the possibility of organizations once

¹¹ Our interviews with temple trustees in Sri Lanka often revealed similar ingenuity in self-presentation as they negotiated the difficult space between the LTTE and state security forces.

listed ceasing to pose a threat. What you can do with a temple, in London or Sri Lanka, remains an open question.

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