

The resistance won't be televised - the role of the Tamil Academic in Times of Academic Resistance



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Abstract

In times of populism, rising xenophobia and racism, it will be the duty of an academic to become political and an academic organiser willing to pave the way for resistance if oppression becomes the norm. This applies more so to Tamil academics in order for them to engage in debate, to inform, to educate and enlighten the intellectual substratum of the society. As will be outlined later, such activism is enabled by academic freedom, which helps in setting free those needed capacities for academic activism. Academic freedoms, however, are facing a populist onslaught worldwide, which limit such freedoms and the ideas that trigger activism. Tamil academics have had a long history of organising resistance, from the time of Rev. Dr. Xavier Stanislaus Thani Nayagam (1948-1970), who fired up young academics in the fight against Sinhala governmental oppression and their ban on import of Tamil literature from Tamil Nadu to Sri Lanka. The organisation of (Tamil) academic resistance by Dr. Thani Nayagam provided the fertile ground for an academic playground that ushered in notable doctoral dissertations of K Indrapala and S. Pathmatahan and different spaces of academic resistance, such as the International Conferences on Tamil Research.

To this end, this article concerns the following overarching questions: how does a Tamil academic devise strategy, stimulate change and accumulate sufficient native resistance to global inequalities? Flowing from this first question, how can the Tamil academic capitalise upon learnt experiences from Sri Lanka? In consequence, the article will pursue the last question: how can the Tamil academic make use of these learnt narratives which have shaped so many biographies in Sri Lanka/ diaspora communities and assist in a global fight for global justice, also assisting other academics of non-Tamil descent in similar situations of oppression?

Key words

academic freedom; resistance; counter-hegemony, colonialism; authoritarianism; nationalism; freedom; socio-economic rights

I. Introduction

Authoritarianism, racism and fascism are the constant companions under the reign of capitalism.¹ Fascism, to this end, is a certain type of class dictatorship with the vested idea of defending the interest of the capitalist reign in times of crises - when socialist revolutions loom, capitalism can only turn into a violent ideology.² Against this background, the differing opinions of academics and activists have troubled their relationship and heightened their divisions to encounter fascism, as 'a common theme in their words is the difficult process of defining and balancing the worlds of academia and activism as if each world is on a different side of a chasm that can't be breached.'³ In this vein, the division between academics and activists, whether real or perceived, serves as a distraction to the ways in which these groups can work together in service to social justice. As James suggested, academics and activists 'are interdependent' and are 'hybrids in effecting peace and social change.'⁴ And they are not isolated in the ivory tower of their existence; they are instrumental in contributing to resistance: in Turkey, academics who join and trigger change are arrested on a large scale.⁵ In Brazil, academics are facing increasing threats since the election of the far-right presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro as the country's president in October 2018. Here,

[i]n an unprecedented development since the country regained democracy in 1985, scientists and academics who work in Brazil feel less safe, and some have even started to leave the country. Female researchers especially appear to be targeted. In Nicaragua, onslaught on academic freedom becomes a fashionable tool to silence critical thought.⁶

In Hungary, prime minister Viktor Orban's government has severely curtailed the operations of the Central European University (CEU).⁷ In the Covid-19 pandemic, the shrinking space for freedoms is becoming more evident.⁸ In this light, the fight is

[a]bout the defense of democracy, open inquiry, and the pursuit of knowledge. These are at the heart of what a university can contribute to society, and why the academic freedom of CEU matters and must be defended.⁹

¹ MR Online. (2018). Racism and the logic of capitalism, A Fanonion reconsideration [online] available from <https://mronline.org/2018/08/02/racism-and-the-logic-of-capitalism/> [accessed 26 April 2020].

² Traverso, E. (2019), *The New Faces of Fascism*, 1st ed., London and New York: Verso Publishers.

³ Rose, B. (2017) Moving from Chasm to Convergence: Benefits and Barriers to Academic Activism for Social Justice and Equity, *Brock Education Journal*, 27(1), pp. 67-78.

⁴ James, J. (2003). Academia, Activism, and Imprisoned Intellectuals. *Social. Justice*, 30 (2), pp 3-7.

⁵ Deutsche Welle. (2019) *Turkey's Academics for Peace punished for anti-war protest* [online]. Available from: <https://www.dw.com/en/turkeys-academics-for-peace-punished-for-anti-war-protest/a-48540809> [accessed 13 June 2019].

⁶ Chemistry World. (2019) *Fears for academic freedom as Brazil's political climate deteriorate*. [online]. Available from: <https://www.chemistryworld.com/news/fears-for-academic-freedom-as-brazils-political-climate-deteriorates/3010315.article> [accessed 13 June 2019].

⁷ Die Zeit. (2019), *Hungary Is Lost* [online]. Available from: <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2019-04/european-union-hungary-democracy-viktor-orban-english>, [accessed 13 June 2019].

⁸ Irish Times. (2020) . *Orban wins power to rule by decree as Hungary fights Covid-19*, [online]. Available from: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/orban-wins-power-to-rule-by-decree-as-hungary-fights-covid-19-1.4216128>, [accessed 13 June 2019].

⁹ Boston Globe. (2017). *Hungary's attack on academic freedom*, [online]. Available from: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2017/04/03/hungary-attack-academic-freedom/sSYNAizjeoevcfqxZV176K/story.html>, [accessed 13 June 2019].

This is why this article argues that academic freedoms inform and actualise academic activism to a great extent, as examples from Palestine and Russia amplify as well.¹⁰ This threat which comes from authoritarian policymakers and their strategists, entail an attack -not only on the area of discipline as such but also an attack on their space which they have created for themselves through their academic positions for political agency. The University and College Union in the UK holds in a recent announcement:

[A]cademic freedom is also bound up with broader civil liberties and human rights. Higher and further education staff have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, opinion, expression, association and assembly. Staff must not be hindered or impeded in exercising their civil rights as citizens, including the right to contribute to social change through free expression of opinion on matters of public interest. We recognise that this may touch upon sensitive or controversial issues.¹¹

At this juncture, it is instrumental to turn to the experiences of Tamil academics, who are occupying various positions and are active in manifold disciplines in Sri Lanka and the diaspora communities, be it Germany, Canada or Singapore or wherever they are. The article wants to interrogate the strategies of Tamil academics and how they take part in the resistance and fend off the obvious problem for which innovative strategies are needed: governmental practices and policies which infringe upon academic freedom, freedom of thought and pursuit of truth. To be even more precise: the problem is ideological repression which does not accept the truth-seeking of academics as it contravenes the ideology. Academics have, in consequence, to devise counter-strategies which are flowing from their research, their teaching, their interdisciplinary collaborations, which need to extend to transnational collegiality and solidarity, exemplified by a statement of the City University of New York in light of the aggression against the students of the Jawaharlal Nehru University in 2020:

PSC-CUNY stands in solidarity with the students, faculty and staff of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi, India, in their struggle against state repression of political speech. We believe that the targeting of politically active youth at public universities reveals the broader program of the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) to push its neoliberal attack on the poor, its discriminatory agenda against minorities, its promotion of a hawkish foreign policy, and its squelching of political dissent.¹²

¹⁰ see also: Shwaikh, M. and Gould, R.R. (2019). The Palestine Exception to Academic Freedom: Intertwined Stories from the Frontlines of UK-Based Palestine Activism, *University of Hawai'i Press*, 42:4, pp.752-773. ; Meduza, *Academic Freedom: The fight over political activism inside Moscow's Higher School of Economics*, [online]. Available from: <https://meduza.io/en/episodes/2020/02/14/academic-freedom-the-fight-over-political-activism-inside-moscow-s-higher-school-of-economics> [accessed 05 September 2020].

¹¹ UCU. (2020). *UCU statement on academic freedom*, [online]. Available from: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/academicfreedom>, [accessed 05 September 2020].

¹² Statement of Solidarity with Jawaharlal Nehru University, India – by the Professional Staff Congress, the City University of New York faculty and staff union (PSC-CUNY), online at: https://www.psc-cuny.org/sites/default/files/Statement%20of%20Solidarity%20with%20Jawaharlal%20Nehru%20University_linenumbers.pdf, last visited 06.03.2021; against this background, look at the developments in Sri Lanka: '*[A]cademic freedom is generally respected, but there are occasional reports of politicization in universities, and a lack of tolerance for dissenting views by both*

In order to create and devise strategies, generate resistance from the academic truth-seeking process, this article will engage in a qualitative methodology and employ case studies and text analysis: by doing so, the article will gain insights on academic resistance on a global scale, but will identify the areas in which the 'Tamil experience' can contribute to for a more resilient aggregation of intellectual action.

Let us travel back in time and location: one may remember Tamil academic Dr. Rajani Thiranagama, who operated in a narrow space of tolerance, yet echoing her dissent.¹³ Dr. Rajani Thiranagama was not only a Tamil academic and feminist, but more so a symbol of the academic activist that this article envisages: she interconnected her academic position with human rights activism, leading to being one of the founders of University Teachers for Human Rights at the University of Jaffna.¹⁴ Her activism was informed by academic freedom: Thiranagama was eventually killed by a Tamil Tiger cadre, as she became critical and vocal of the narrow nationalism, the flagrant violations of human rights and the brutal elimination of dissidents.¹⁵ Shortly before her violent death in September 1989, she wrote the following lines in a letter:

[I] have lost count of the days I don't know the day or the date I know that it's more than a month. You want events, numbers case histories? Not now, my mind is strangled. I know it's strange, but that is what I feel. That is what we live. Pain, agony and fear – always fear.¹⁶

Her struggle for human rights and truth was remarkable on every level, as it was a yardstick to aspire for any young, particularly Tamil academics across the disciplines who are interested in the struggles involved in the proper exercise of justice, equality and truth-seeking. Academia has provided the fertile ground to discuss and inquire beyond its borders. Researchers in different disciplines engaged extensively in the pursuit of knowledge in others' communities and jurisdictions. Nowadays, '[m]illions of researchers and students move across the globe in the quest for knowledge acquisition and production. academic by informed is Activism¹⁷ freedom. To this end, UNESCO affirms that

professors and students, particularly for academics who study issues related to the Tamil minority.' online at: Freedom House. (2018). *Freedom in the World 2018 - Sri Lanka*, [online]. Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5ad85789a.html>, [accessed 13 June 2019].

¹³ Daily Mirror. (2018). *In memory of Rajani: the mother, the wife and the revolutionary Keeping memories alive*, [online]. Available at: <http://www.dailymirror.lk/article/in-memory-of-Rajani-the-mother-the-wife-and-the-revolutionary-Keeping-memories-alive-146484.html>, [accessed 05 September 2020].

¹⁴ PBS. (2002). *A lonely warrior for human rights*, [online]. Available from: <https://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/srilanka/profile.html> [accessed 05 September 2020]. See also: Thiranagama, S. (2011), *In my Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka*, 1st ed., Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The Island. (2009). *The Legacy of A Courageous Woman, NOTEBOOK OF A NOBODY*, [online]. Available from: <http://www.island.lk/2009/10/03/features1.html> [accessed 05 September 2020].

¹⁷ University World Views. (2018). *In defence of critical enquiry by academics and others* [online]. Available from: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20181025104558513> [accessed 05 September 2020].

[t]he right to education, teaching and research can only be fully enjoyed in an atmosphere of academic freedom and autonomy for institutions of higher education and that the open communication of findings, hypotheses and opinions lies at the very heart of higher education and provides the strongest guarantee of the accuracy and objectivity of scholarship and research.¹⁸

The desire of academics to collectivise themselves to social and political issues is frequently seen as being at odds with academic notions of objectivity. While advocating for activism by university staff means discarding positivistic notions of research, it does not mean discarding a commitment to rigorous research. As noted by Jones and others 'the dissemination of knowledge requires academic freedom, and this in turn demands the highest standard of integrity. The requirement of integrity is crucial whether the dissemination of knowledge is within one's own discipline or into the public realm more broadly. of views radical ¹⁹ democracy may justify activism by those who teach and research in universities, but can social movements embrace these institutional actors? Social movements 'are defined as networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organisations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts, on the basis of shared collective identities.'²⁰ Traditional approaches to collective action and politicisation suggest that empowerment is an important catalyst in politicisation and continuation of collective political engagement.²¹

Academic freedom is needed to create agency, advocacy and stir changes brought about by social movements, with academic activism as a vehicle for those movements. To this end, this article will consider these questions in sequence: how can the Tamil academic devise strategies, stimulate change and accumulate sufficient native resistance to global inequalities? Flowing from this first question, how can the Tamil academic capitalise upon learnt experiences from Sri Lanka? In consequence, the article will pursue the last question: how can the Tamil academic make use of these learnt narratives which have shaped so many biographies in Sri Lanka/ diaspora communities and assist in a global fight for global justice, also assisting other academics of non-Tamil descent in similar situations of oppression? In the following, the empirical analysis from various case studies will help to situate the role of the Tamil academic in global academic coherency.

II. Increasing populist climate

Recent popular votes, elections and authoritarian shifts were a long process in the making that has, now, resulted in feasible governance of the right-wing. Whether it is the FPÖ in Austria, the Lega in Italy, the Fidesz in Hungary or the AfD in Germany, the rise of Bolsonaro in Brazil or

¹⁸ UNESCO. (1997). *Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel* [online]. Available from: http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13144&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html [accessed 05 September 2020].

¹⁹ Jones, D.G., Galvin, K. & Woodhouse, D. (2000). Universities as Critic and Conscience of Society: the role of academic freedom. *NZ Universities Academic Audit Unit*, 6, pp. 1-27

²⁰ see also: Diani, M. (1992). The Concept of Social Movement, *The Sociological Review*, 40:1, pp. 1-25.

²¹ Gülsem Acar, Y. and Coskan, C. (2020). Academic activism and its impact on individual-level mobilization, sources of learning, and the future of academia in Turkey, *Journal of Community and Applied Psychology*, 30:4, pp. 388-404.

Trump in the USA, the emergence of Modi in India or the popularity of Duterte in the Philippines: the far-right has highlighted the threats posed by immigration and globalisation, the Unbehagen towards international organs that promote internationalism and capitalism. Viktor Orban, the most prominent figure of the far-right in Europe, holds that:

[E]urope's shift to the right has continued: it has become clear that this is not just a Central European process. Let us think back to the results of the German federal election – or the Austrian and Italian elections, for that matter.²²

In fact, he attacks the “open society” when he argues that:

[I]n today's open-society Europe there are no borders; European people can be readily replaced with immigrants; the family has been transformed into an optional, fluid form of cohabitation; the nation, national identity and national pride are seen as negative and obsolete notions; and the state no longer guarantees security in Europe. In fact, in liberal Europe being European means nothing at all: it has no direction, and it is simply form devoid of content.²³

In fact, nationalist movements recruit their base, not from the active resources but the politically inactive, the disenfranchised who feel (mostly not incorrectly) to have no voice in the political establishment.²⁴ Once people feel that they are not included in a political debate, they become conducive to slogans, symbols and sensations like those of Trump, Salvini, Le Pen, Wilders and others: meanwhile, facts and arguments appear irrelevant.²⁵ When debate is absent, but only authority and obedience exist, the only connecting force is state power. It is in this vein that the United Nations Committee against Racial Discrimination (CERD) issued a scathing statement in the climate of nationalist rise in the United States of America by using its early warning procedure:

[A]larmed by the racist demonstrations, with overtly racist slogans, chants and salutes by individuals belonging to groups of white nationalists, neo-Nazis, and the Ku Klux Klan, promoting white supremacy and inciting racial discrimination and hatred; (...) ²⁶

And, therefore:

²² The Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. (2018). *Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's speech at the 29th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp*, [online]. Available from: <http://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-29th-balvanyos-summer-open-university-and-student-camp>, [accessed 05 September 2020].

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ The Guardian *Neoliberalism – the ideology at the root of all our problems*, [online]. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot>, [accessed 05 September 2020].

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ CERD: Ninety-third session 31 July - 25 August 2017, Decision 1 (93) United States of America.

[C]alls upon the Government of the United States of America, including the high-level politicians and public officials, not only to unequivocally and unconditionally reject and condemn racist hate speech and racist crimes in Charlottesville and throughout the country, but also to actively contribute to the promotion of understanding, tolerance, and diversity between ethnic groups, and acknowledge their contribution to the history and diversity of the United States of America;²⁷

It is the former Senior Advisor to Donald Trump, Steve Bannon, who had masterminded the nationalist dimension in the election campaign of Trump who, now, strives for an alliance with the far-right in Europe.²⁸ This is no coincidence, and it is not merely a marriage of convenience, but it finds its justification in a deeply entrenched nationalist ideology. His plan to unite the far-right movement to encounter international law and institutions is shaped by his world view that only strong nation-states can face the threats caused by globalisation.²⁹ In particular, he said at the Party Congress of the Front National that:

[W]hat I've learned [visiting Europe] is that you're part of a worldwide movement that is bigger than France, bigger than Italy, bigger than Hungary, bigger than all of it. (...) And history is on our side. The tide of history is with us and will compel us to victory after victory after victory! (...) Let them call you racist, let them call you xenophobes, let them call you nativists. Wear it like a badge of honour. Because every day we get stronger and they get weaker. (...) God Bless America. And vive la France.³⁰

Academic enquiry is based on the premise to search for knowledge and, produce truth/s. By doing so, this enquiry is resistance in nature: it challenges existing interests dogmas in every aspect that touches upon a society: be it culture, politics, economy, religion. A prominent academic objector who challenged the norms and dogmas was Galileo Galilei, with the allegedly famous last words 'Eppure si muove' - yet, it moves.³¹ Today, there are many others like Galileo Galilei, facing repression from the superior forces for their divergent views: in Turkey, academics are facing removal from universities and even arrest. In countries like China, visiting scholars have been denounced as potential spies. In light of the novel Covid-19 pandemic, they have been evicted and chastised, reduced in their 'otherness'.³² In Egypt, opposition and hostile environment for academics had translated to the death of a young

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Monthly Review. (2017). *Neofascism in the White House*, [online]. Available from: <https://monthlyreview.org/2017/04/01/neofascism-in-the-white-house/>, [accessed 05 September 2020].

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ France24. (2018). *Wear 'racist' like a badge of honour, Bannon tells French far-right summit*, [online]. Available from: <https://www.france24.com/en/20180311-france-usa-bannon-le-pen-national-front-racist-badge-honour-populist-pep-talk-lille-trump>, [accessed 05 September 2020].

³¹ Baretta, G. (1757). *The Italian Library. Containing An Account of the Lives and Works of the Most Valuable Authors of Italy. With a Preface, Exhibiting The Changes of the Tuscan Language, from the barbarous Ages to the present Time*. London: Strand.

³² Brookings. (2020). *COVID-19, Africans' hardships in China, and the future of Africa-China relations*, [online]. Available from: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2020/04/17/covid-19-africans-hardships-in-china-and-the-future-of-africa-china-relations/> [accessed 05 September 2020]; Al Jazeera. (2020). *African nationals 'mistreated, evicted' in China over coronavirus* [online]. Available from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/african-students-mistreated-evicted-china-coronavirus-200412100315200.html> [accessed 05 September 2020].

Italian academic with the name of Giulio Regeni, as he had spent his time in Egypt for this fieldwork.³³ Repression is the tool of the defiant ruler in times of diminishing sovereignty. In India, a fascist government sends its rioters, as mentioned briefly earlier in this article, to the famed Jawarahal Nehru University, an academic institution with a long and vibrant history of inclusiveness and defying the societal odds, amid the controversies around the Citizenship Amendment Act.³⁴ Against this background, it is necessary to understand the following comment:

[T]he Hindutva project currently under way in India is a modern, indigenised version of fascism, not yet complete or able to reject electoral democracy, but with an alertness to the West's current fetishisation of Muslims as a worthy enemy and an ability to de-democratise and subvert democratic processes under the guise of democracy. Hindutva fascism's various actors are not united by any means: but they are both shrewd and patient, and have been far more effective in fusing violent othering with an acceptable facade of participation, modernisation and democracy than religious nationalists in neighbouring nations.³⁵

The violence that is involved extends to the present, with all socio-political consequences. The leaders of the Third World refer to their validation points of boundaries and nation, the increasing 'racialisation of criminality in North and South, and in the troubling rise of nationhood as a mooring for identity on both the left and the right. sovereign, the ruler, The³⁶ resorts to means that justify his appeals for national interest and national security.³⁷ Fascism and racism, to this end, are not solely a trend that is prevalent in the Global North but also in the Global South. Rose Parfitt writes against this background that: 'Its ideological 'anti-globalism' notwithstanding, the far-right of the twenty-first century is, undeniably and self-consciously, a global phenomenon. were visions imperial the that is fact the of matter The³⁸ and are global visions, coming along with competitions and new creations.³⁹ The competition induced radicalisation and also strengthened the ties between old fascist empires, but ultimately new ones- which allowed them to commonly question the 'dominant 'liberal world order.⁴⁰ The fact is that in light of rising competition, the academic has to engage in

³³ Al Jazeera. (2017). *Giulio Regeni murder: 'It's not yet the time to grieve*, [online]. Available from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/01/killed-giulio-regeni-170129080239822.html> [accessed 05 September 2020].

³⁴ The Conversation. (2020). *JNU violence: Indian university's radical history has long scared country's rulers*, [online]. Available from: <https://theconversation.com/jnu-violence-indian-universitys-radical-history-has-long-scared-countrys-rulers-129488> [accessed 05 September 2020].

³⁵ Banaji, S. (2018). Vigilante publics: orientalism, modernity and Hindutva fascism in India. *Javnost - The Public Journal of the European Institute for Communication and Culture*, 25:4, pp.333-350.

³⁶ Patel R. and McMichael, P. (2004). Third Worldism and the lineages of global fascism: the regrouping of the global South in the neoliberal era, *Third World Quarterly*, 25:1, pp. 231-254.

³⁷ see also: Amnesty International. (2014). *Silenced, Expelled, Imprisoned*, Amnesty International. [online]. Available from: <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/8000/mde130152014en.pdf> , [accessed 05 September 2020].

³⁸ TWAIRL,. (2019). Series Introduction – Fascism and the International: The Global South, the Far-Right and the International Legal Order, [online]. Available from: <https://twairl.com/series-introduction-fascism-and-the-international-the-global-south-the-far-right-and-the-international-legal-order/> [accessed 05 September 2020].

³⁹ Salvati, G. (2016). Axis Empires. Toward a Global History of Fascist Imperialism. *Fascism*, 5, pp. 89-94.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

[r]elentless delivery of cutting-edge research and innovative research products. One important criterion of assessment for career progression and grant application success is 'impact'. Scholars are hence encouraged to not just engage with academic outlets and peers, but also to publish in public and social media and to seek engagement with policymakers. This has led to a blurring of the lines between professions.⁴¹

Academics are entering the area of arts, photography, media, policy et al. to influence the intellectual substratum. But is this enough to be potential catalysts? We need to place universities in the context of imperialism, its colonial role and the reduction of freedom of thought and marketplace of ideas when the neoliberal pacing dictates the values of those thoughts. Indeed, academics could be the generators of innovation, cross-fertilising different sectors to trigger change in society. But a need for critical self-reflection is advised. Universities have been for too long ivory towers, detached from struggles on the ground. As Anan Kattarh writes:

Indeed, the university is an ivory tower in this sense. It is one of the institutions of class society and is instrumental in keeping up class divisions. It helps to select a future elite of managers, politicians, law makers and enforcers, lawyers, civil servants, educators, doctors, engineers, journalists, writers and media producers etc.—members of society with influence and money, the ruling class. As such, the ivory tower is an integral part of a society which is, as a whole, structured by many 'exclusive' spaces, from large entities like nation states with their border politics to class-based spaces of difference where access is regulated more indirectly but not less strictly. In this sense, the ivory tower and its inhabitants, its staff, as well as those who pass through it, its students, are an integral part of society, not removed from it. The division between academics and 'the general public' is rather a division between upper and lower classes, and this division, of course, characterises society at large.⁴²

To this end, then, what is the role of the Tamil academic?

III. The role of the Tamil academic

Rev. Father Xavier Thani Nayagam is a valiant example of Tamil academic resistance.⁴³ Not only did he organise a network of fellow Tamil academics and forge alliances for the enhancement of the Tamil language, but he also aimed to stir up the resistance of Tamils against oppression which they met in the areas of culture, education, labour and religion.⁴⁴ Access to these areas

⁴¹ *Supra* note 17, University World News.

⁴² Isles of the Left. (2018). *University—the Ivory Tower is Part of Society, Not Removed from It* [online]. Available from: <https://www.islesoftheleft.org/university-the-ivory-tower-is-part-of-society-not-removed-from-it/> [accessed 05 September 2020].

⁴³ The Island. (2010). *Making Tamil a classical language*, [online]. Available from: <http://pdfs.island.lk/2010/06/21/p12.pdf>, [accessed 05 September 2020].

⁴⁴ To this end, read: Pfaffenberger, B. (1984). Fourth world colonialism, indigenous minorities and Tamil Separatism in Sri Lanka, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 16:1, pp. 15-22; Lecamwasam, N.O., (2015). United we stand, divided we fall': a case

was limited, as majoritarian politics marginalised minorities, in particular, Tamils, to attain higher education employment and discriminated against their cultural identity in the public spaces.⁴⁵ Eelam Tamils, by our own descriptive and prescriptive historiography, have lived for the duration of postcolonial rule in an inferior condition. We, as Eelam Tamils, have never been truly free; we wanted to challenge the prescriptive parameters in which Tamils were navigating. Prior to postcolonial rule, Tamils were subjugated to colonial rule.⁴⁶ Education, however, has always been the catalyst for social enhancement, empowerment and enrichment.⁴⁷ “Tamilness”, then, is

[I]linked to a de-territorialised diaspora that is cemented and constantly recreated through artefacts, popular culture, and a shared imagery. With this moral, transnational Tamil identity, there are different levels of identification and it will have different implications, according to the national, social, economic or cultural differences, and to individual spirit. There are Tamils who proudly identify with this transnational Tamilness and others for whom instead national allegiances prevail.⁴⁸

The repressive forms of cultural and linguistic oppression have only metamorphosed from coloniality to post-coloniality.⁴⁹ In the case of Sri Lanka, the external coloniser has been replaced by an internal coloniser.⁵⁰ Eelam Tamils have been subjugated to oppression for far too long. The processes and impacts of British counterinsurgency tactics, geo-politics of imperialism, and structures of neoliberalisation have gravely marked the postcolonial fate of the Tamils. The British colonial techniques of oppression through emergency laws, laws of identity and division and elitist policy-crafting slowly metamorphosed into the postcolonial tools used by the Sinhala, resulting in state-aided colonisation, militarisation, and constitutional means of legalising violence against a target population through Executive Presidency and Emergency Regulations.⁵¹ The British aided in enhancing the Sri Lankan state’s military capacities in pursuing a military solution to the Tamil national question.⁵² Colonialism and its effects were at the centre of critical analysis well before postcolonialism, and de-coloniality became the focus of attention. Against this background, Sobande writes:

study of Sri Lankan youth in citizenship development, *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 20:4, pp. 442-456; Ananthavinayagan, T.V. (2018). Dum Vivimus Vivamus. The Tamils in Sri Lanka: a Right to External Self-determination?, *Peace Human Rights Governance*, 2(1), pp., 23-50. UNCERD, Concluding observations on the combined tenth to seventeenth periodic reports of Sri Lanka, CERD/C/LKA/CO/10-17.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ratnapalan, M. (2017). Another British World? Tamils, Empire and Mobility, *Britain and the World*. 10:1. p. 74-87.

⁴⁷ Somalingam, T. (2012). Tamil Diaspora Schools—Ethnic-National Education in a Transnational Space, *Transnational Social Review, A Social Work Journal*, 2:2, pp.33-39.

⁴⁸ Buergio, G. (2016). When Interculturality faces a Diaspora. The Transnational Tamil Identity, *Encyclopaedia*, XX (44), pp. 106-128.

⁴⁹ Nithiyandam, V.N. (2002), The Transformation of Tamilian Nationalism in Colonial Sri Lanka: A Socioeconomic Analysis, *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs*, 15:1, pp. 95-96.

⁵⁰ see also: Kuruppu, LP (1983), Colonialism and social change in Sri Lanka: implications of socio-economic differentiation for strategies of national development', PhD thesis, University of Tasmania.

⁵¹ see also: Ananthavinayagan, T.V. (2019). *Sri Lanka, Human Rights and the United Nations. A Scrutiny into the International Human Rights Engagement with a Third World State*, Singapore: Springer.

⁵² The Guardian. (2014). *Britain allowed ex-SAS officers to train Sri Lankans as Tamil Tigers rebelled*, [online]. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/16/former-sas-officers-training-sri-lanka>, [accessed 05 September 2020].

[T]ensions thrown into relief by pairing the words ‘accidental’ and ‘activism’, mirror friction regarding perceptions of educational institutions as being politically passive, versus beliefs they are a hotbed of power and politics, which informs who teaches what, to whom, and with what intention. Activism in academia can, and does, take many different forms. It may be in the design of a curriculum foregrounding scholars and critical thinkers, often overlooked. It may also be in an individual’s self-presentation in academic spaces, or their choice to participate in strike action.⁵³

The most common justification for university academics to be engaged in public debate is the legislated ‘critic and conscience’ function of universities. But fulfilling the role of critic and conscience is not the same as being an activist in a social movement. Activism involves deliberately and consciously dissenting against the conditioned parameters, against hegemonic discourses. It is a role centred on engendering substantive democracy in all spheres of society: ‘This asserts that in a free society a university has a moral purpose, combining an intellectual purpose of free and open inquiry and a social purpose as a source of social criticism independent of political authority and economic power’.⁵⁴ As it is written by Gills and Gray:

[T]he world is changing. One world order is passing away, imploding, declining, while another, yet inchoate, is inexorably emerging, making its forces felt across the social landscape of the world. History stops for no one, and for no empire or ideology. It is certainly therefore no coincidence that the ‘spirit of 1968’, the spirit of rebellion and liberation, is renewing itself globally today in acts of resistance around the world. This is happening in the time of ‘the crisis of globalisation’, which is a crisis of globalised, financialised and oligarchic capitalism and, at the same time, a profound world-historical and civilisational crisis, in which the environmental limits of ‘limitless growth’ are fast approaching. A new mode of life and a new philosophy to propel it are now arguably matters of historical necessity and urgency. The paradox of neoliberal economic globalisation is indeed that it both weakens and simultaneously activates the social forces of resistance.⁵⁵

An academic must be one of the pillars of that larger civil society, even go that far to undergo a process of mediatisation under the public call for resistance and being part of a counter-hegemonic approach. The great Italian intellectual Antonio Gramsci discussed the role of the academic with the society. He elaborated that intellectual guidance is sterile and pedantic unless it is embedded in the concerns and ‘worldview’ of the popular classes. He stated: ‘The popular element’, he writes, “‘feels” but does not always know or understand; the intellectual element “knows” but does not always understand and in particular does not always feel’.

⁵³ Sobande, F. (2018). Accidental Academic Activism – Intersectional And (Un)Intentional Feminist Resistance, 1:2 Journal of Applied Social Theory.

⁵⁴ Bridgman, T. (2007). Reconstituting Relevance: Exploring Possibilities for Management Educators' Critical Engagement with the Public. *Management Learning*. 38:4, pp. 425-439.

⁵⁵ Gills, B.K. & Gray, K. (2012). People Power in the Era of Global Crisis: rebellion, resistance, and liberation, *Third World Quarterly*, 33:2, pp.205-224.

To this end, creative political imagination can be seen as an ability to remodel world power, to conceptualise reality in new and original ways and to reformulate the structure of the public agent and the accepted form of governance. Consequently, creative imagination is an indispensable ingredient for a successful commitment in the public arena, and through it, intellectuals contribute to the democratic project with the creation in their specific fields and with their democratic sensibility and their imagination, thus stimulating their knowledge of a given area and also their democratic values. The engagement of academics with community issues depends upon their civic concern with justice and other matters of human importance and upon their democratic imagination, which filters new information about politics and the social world around them and increases their repertoire of strategies and their respective political judgment. Their specialised knowledge endorses their involvement in the public sphere as concerned citizens as well as their decisions to get implicated, and on what side, choosing the risk and uncertainty of the public arena over the security and safety of their professional fields.

IV. Conclusion

Academic activism and resistance is a vital currency in times of rising authoritarianism. Despite an inferior position, Tamils have lost a physical battle, but not the intellectual war. In fact, the Tamil diaspora community turned their anger of forced migration into a virtue by building and investing into the education of future generations, as Antony Jeevarathnam Mayuran holds: '(...) education is paramount. They see education as fundamental to efforts to rehabilitate and empower the refugee community, and believe that an educated community will be better prepared to rebuild a peaceful and prosperous society upon return to Sri Lanka.'⁵⁶

Education becomes a powerful tool and feeds their resilience. Eelam Tamils are striving for universal ideals of humanity and the material and human interlinkages between oppressed peoples and nations and the moral legitimacy of the struggle for equality, self-determination, and sovereignty. Martin Niemoeller, a German resistance fighter against the Nazi regime, coined once that:

[F]irst they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.⁵⁷

It is true that oppression and resistance are an outcome of complex processes. An oppressing force of sovereign people is taken into account the geopolitical, strategic, military or economic factors for the sustainability of oppressive tactics. The White Rose, a group of young students and academics during the Third Reich in Germany, brought into action what academic

⁵⁶ Forced Migration Review. (2017). The power of education in refugees 'lives: Sri Lankan refugees in India [online]. Available from: <https://www.fmreview.org/shelter/mayuran>, [accessed 05 September 2020].

⁵⁷ Gerlach, W. (2000). *And the Witnesses were Silent: The Confessing Church and the Jews*. Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press.

resistance is: disseminating the vigour and passion among the society. In their Third Leaflet, they famously wrote:

Many, perhaps most, of the readers of these leaflets do not see clearly how they can practice an effective opposition. They do not see any avenues open to them. We want to try to show them that everyone is in a position to contribute to the overthrow of this system. It is not possible through solitary withdrawal, in the manner of embittered hermits, to prepare the ground for the overturn of this "government" or bring about the revolution at the earliest possible moment. No, it can be done only by the cooperation of many convinced, energetic people - people who are agreed as to the means they must use to attain their goal. We have no great number of choices as to these means. The only one available is *passive resistance*. The meaning and the goal of passive resistance is to topple National Socialism, and in this struggle we must not recoil from any course, any action, whatever its nature.⁵⁸

The realms of the oppressed should be tied together by a conscious act of solidarity, so the wretched of the earth no longer shall face their respective destiny in isolation from the struggles and comradeship of the oppressed people and progressive forces of the world. In the end, Tamil academic resistance is about speaking truth to power but also empowering the global community.

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⁵⁸ The White Rose, Third Leaflet, [online]. Available from: http://www.whiterosesociety.org/WRS_pamphets_third.html, [accessed 05 September 2020].