Premier’s HTA History Scholarship

The Migration Difference

The changing nature of political and economic migrant experiences since Post World War II (Focus on Sri Lanka)

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In 2014, I was awarded the NSW Premiers History Award with the intention of creating a historical source document that links to Topic 5C: Migration Experiences. I focussed on Sri Lankan migrant experiences to Australia over time as a direct result of Sri Lanka’s civil war. Migration is a deeply rooted part of Australian history and culture, although the debate on migration policy is often divisive. My research linked to the key inquiry question:

* + How was Australian society affected by other significant global events and changes in this period?

My [blog](https://renukasenthevadivel.wordpress.com/) is a historical source document outlining the experiences of migrants, the impact of Australian policies on migration and perspectives of migration from within and outside Australia. I also created a corresponding e-book to supplement my blog and to address the key outcomes from the syllabus directly. My research within Australia included interviewing Sri Lankan migrants and high school students as well as teachers of students from a Sri Lankan background.

Whilst in Malaysia I interviewed Sri Lankan refugees and refugee organisations, including the UN Human Rights Commission (UNHCR) to document the various experiences of Sri Lankan refugees trying to arrive into Australia. Through this, I now understand the complexities in gaining refugee status and why Australia is their chosen final destination. In Sri Lanka, I visited various schools and organisations, including the UNHCR and the International Organization of Migration to interview aid workers, refugee returnees, teachers and students about their perceptions of migration to Australia and the values they believe Sri Lankan migrants living in Australia embody.

The rationale and purpose of both my blog and e-book was to:

* + promote the understanding of a different migrant experience (Sri Lankan) to Australia
	+ help students develop an understanding of how a significant event (Sri Lanka’s civil war) can affect people and countries around the world
	+ assess the historical forces and factors that have shaped Australia’s changing identity as a nation through migration

Immigration Perspectives from Within Australia

*Homebush Boys High School*

On Monday the 16th of May 2016, I embarked on the first part of my scholarship study. I had chosen Homebush Boys High School because it had a large number of both Sri Lankan migrants and Australian-born students of Sri Lankan descent. The principal, Mr John Kennedy, was very generous with his time and outlined his view on the shared values of Sri Lankan migrants as well as their experiences. It was very interesting when interviewing students at this school to discover how their background was a cornerstone of their identity, but that they also had a deeply rooted loyalty to Australia and understood that they needed to contribute back into Australian society in a productive and meaningful manner.

*Sydney Boys High School*

Visiting Sydney Boys High School was a contrast to Homebush Boys High School. These boys were second generation migrants, born in Australia. They hold many of the common Australian values as their own, including mateship, having a go and being sport fanatics. Yet, they were all able to connect to and identify with the Sri Lankan heritage they were brought up with and continue to hold dear in some parts of their lives. These boys are contributing to Australia socially, culturally and economically through a number of means, but they also balance the hopes and aspirations of their parents with their own dreams and ambitions. The common thread to date with all Sri Lankan migrants has been a sense of work ethic and a desire to succeed. I asked these boys if they knew much about Sri Lanka’s civil war, which was the reason many of them are in Australia, but their knowledge of it is not as extensive as I had expected it to be. I explored this subject more throughout my study.

*Refugee Council of Australia*

The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) is the national umbrella body for refugees and the organisations and individuals who support them. It has more than 200 organisational and more than 900 individual members. RCOA’s own work is centred around five key areas:

* + policy
	+ support for refugees
	+ support for its members
	+ community education
	+ administration

In addition, RCOA seeks funding for specific projects that relate directly to their objectives and enhance their capacity to serve the refugee community. I was fortunate to meet with Sahar Okhovat, a policy officer with the RCOA. She was able to guide me about the impact of various Australian policy changes on Sri Lankan forced migrants. Her knowledge was invaluable as she also provided me with a range of news articles that I used in my e-book.

We also discussed the various values of refugees and how having a safe place, free from violence and conflict, is something that makes Australia a popular destination for persecuted individuals. In my blog, I included a range of news articles that Sahar shared with me. Australia has introduced enhanced screening, boat turn-backs and prolonged detention as the result of adverse security assessment – all with an adverse impact on Sri Lankan migrants. Sahar also brought my attention to the Sri Lankan asylum seekers who were turned back and returned to Sri Lanka without access to any legal representation or processing.

[*Jaffna Hindu College & Jaffna College*](https://renukasenthevadivel.wordpress.com/2016/05/20/wednesday-1852016-visiting-old-boys-from-jaffna-hindu-college-jaffna-college/) *Old Boys*

I conducted interviews with old boys from two of the schools I intended to visit in Jaffna, Sri Lanka. My intention was to trace the values of Sri Lankan migrants in Sydney back to their schooling and heritage. Many first generation migrants have a strong sense of identity and connection to the school they studied in. The purpose of my interview was to identify the values these migrants have brought with them as well as their contribution economically, socially and culturally to the wider Australian society and community. Some of the key values that both Mr Shan Rathinam and Mr Gunaratnam Partheepam identified include being hardworking, conscientious and education-focussed.

Immigration Perspectives from the UNHCR Malaysia and Sri Lankan Refugees in Malaysia

*UNHCR Malaysia*

The UNHCR has been protecting the rights and wellbeing of refugees all over the world. They work to ensure that everyone has the right to seek asylum and find safe refuge after fleeing violence, persecution, war or disaster at home. In context, Malaysia as a country practices an integration of refugees. Once refugees have registered at the UNHCR office in Malaysia and had their initial asylum claim processed, they live alongside other Malaysians until a decision is reached. This process could take from five to eight years.

Although these refugees receive little to no government assistance and are not able to gain official work due to a lack of accurate paperwork, they still need to find a way to survive. Many often get by through working minimum wage, cash-in-hand jobs. Some examples include working in takeaway shops, at petrol stations, in smaller grocery stores and in the construction industry.

My area of interest there was education for refugee children. Currently 22,431 refugees between the ages of 3 and 17 are living in Malaysia. They are denied access to formal government funded education, so they must rely on NGOs, with the support of the UNHCR Education Unit, to provide them with an education. Annora Ong, Senior Education Assistant in the Education Unit, highlighted the following about Sri Lankan refugee students:

* + They are very focussed on their education.
	+ They are vocal and do not hesitate in a classroom setting.
	+ They are opinionated and will stand up for their beliefs.

Having that background information prior to meeting the teachers and students in my upcoming visit to a UNHCR associated school was invaluable.

[*Tamil Forum Malaysia Community Learning Center*](https://renukasenthevadivel.wordpress.com/2016/06/16/tamil-forum-malaysia-community-learning-center/)

This was by far the most eye-opening and heart-tugging visit. The Tamil Forum of Malaysia is an NGO who have established a community learning center with the assistance of the UNHCR. The purpose of the centre is to provide free education for refugee children. Initially this CLC was focussed on Sri Lankan refugees, but it now includes many Myanmar Rohingya students as well.

Dr Kuna Iynkaran, the founder of the centre, highlighted some of the issues facing refugee children in Malaysia, including a lack of access to government funded public education and also a lack of support and resources. In my discussions with the teachers and students at this school, one thing clearly stood out: This school is driven by dedicated and motivated teachers who strive to provide their students with an opportunity to gain a quality education. Many of these children have endured heart wrenching traumas while trying to flee their home country and the Tamil Forum Community Learning Center provides them with an education to enable them to be independent.

Many students there are waiting for the UNHCR to process their asylum claims. They want to move to a country where they have legitimate status and study at schools that legally recognise them.

Immigration Perspectives from within Sri Lanka

 [*UNHCR Colombo & Jaffna*](https://renukasenthevadivel.wordpress.com/2016/06/16/unhcr-colombo-jaffna/)

The UNHCR plays a vital role in ensuring that internally displaced persons in Sri Lanka are accounted for and will eventually be able to return to their home. More than 40,000 internally displaced Sri Lankans live in Jaffna alone. Some stay with relatives, while others stay in welfare centres in the various districts to the north. Dushanti Fernando in the UNHCR Colombo Office and Sivanantham Satkunarasa in the Jaffna Office provided me with a wealth of knowledge and contacts in terms of refugee returnees and internally displaced persons.

[*Jaffna District Secretariat*](https://renukasenthevadivel.wordpress.com/2016/06/16/tuesday-3152016-jaffna-district-secretariat/)

A government agent within the Jaffna District Secretariat is in charge of running the district. Jaffna is the largest district in Northern Sri Lanka, with a large number of staff working at its district secretariat office. My visit to that office was to gain permission to visit welfare centres where internally displaced persons are currently residing. However, despite my official request to the government agent, my request was denied. In my blog, I included a picture of the building as well as the board featuring the names of previous secretaries to draw attention to Sri Lanka’s British Colonial history.

[*St John’s College, Jaffna*](https://renukasenthevadivel.wordpress.com/2016/06/17/wednesday-162016-st-johns-college-jaffna/)

St John’s College in Jaffna is a leading school with an Anglican background focussing on boys’ education. The school caters for students from K to 12 and has an expansive history dating from 1823 when it was first founded by an early missionary. For more than 190 years, the institution has remained at the forefront of providing a quality private education to all students.

Due to Sri Lanka’s civil war, many Johnians (this is how the Old Boys refer to themselves) have now migrated to other countries. They regularly visit their school, keep in touch with one another and also donate to their school as a sign of their gratitude for the quality of education they received. I was truly blessed with the good fortune of interviewing the principal, Father N.J. Gnanaponrajah, who has been with the school for more than 30 years. He believes that the Sri Lankan Tamils have three core values: education, family and a strong work ethic. Most Sri Lankan migrants take this with them and contribute to their new society while holding true to these values.

*Chundikuli Girls’ College, Jaffna*

Chundikuli Girls’ College, Jaffna, has a long and illustrious history of empowering girls through education since 1896. I was very grateful that the principal, Mrs Dushy Thuseetharan, was able to talk to me about the school values and how those then translated into migrants who come from Chundikuli and Jaffna. From her perspective, the main values of a Sri Lankan migrant, particularly from Jaffna, include a strong sense of familial duty and connection, hard work and a respect for education. The school has a range of values that they continue to adhere to, including respect for education and elders, and a commitment to excellence.

*Jaffna College, Vaddukoddai*

This visit was particularly memorable because three young gentlemen had a very interesting discussion with me. We were talking about where I was from and why I was in Jaffna visiting. They wanted to know what I taught in Sydney and had a very clear idea of school and migration. These three boys were very happy in Jaffna and, although they each had relatives’ overseas, they wanted to stay in Jaffna where they can be close to their family and friends. Some of the values they believed Sri Lankans have were a strong work ethic, a desire to be educated and a strong sense of self and identity.

*Jaffna Hindu College*

Jaffna Hindu College was established to cater to the large Hindu population in Jaffna. Like many schools in Jaffna and Sri Lanka, this school has a history of more than 100 years, having been established in 1890. On the day I visited the school was having a Clean Up the School morning as part of environmental week. All teachers and students were actively participating in various activities around the school to create a clean and tidy environment.

I was very privileged to have a fellow teacher, Mrs Meera, be my personal guide for the day. We compared notes on teaching, marking and report writing, and we realised that teaching anywhere in the world is a vocation for individuals who care about the whole student. Also, kids are kids are kids; they are the same wherever you go.

*Visiting Returning Refugees, Jaffna*

Mr Carolts Srisena fled to India with his wife and three children at the height of Sri Lanka’s civil war. While living in a refugee camp in India, they were provided with a monthly subsidy
of 3,500 rupees, as well as some basic provisions. Mr Srisena developed kidney stones and was no longer able to work in India due to the strenuous nature of his work. Due to his poor health, he also wanted to return so his family would not be left stranded in India without him as a breadwinner and with no extended family support.

The sad thing about Mr Srisena’s story is that upon his return to Jaffna, he is not receiving any government support, is unable to work as a mason, lacks the skill to find any other job and is also battling an eviction notice from their home. There were no words. I became very upset when I realised that there is no assistance for some returning refugees.