

Climate change brings a new emergency to the Tamil homeland in Sri Lanka

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Tamil nationalism faces a new challenge as the climate emergency spreads in Sri Lanka's Northern Province and other Tamil-dominated areas, where the ravages of war and systemic discrimination have left the population especially vulnerable

"It is in this soil that the identity of your race is deeply rooted," Velupillai Prabhakaran, the head of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), said in 1998, addressing the Tamil diaspora. He was referring to land in Sri Lanka's North and East, from Kalpitiya on the island's western shore to Trincomalee on the eastern one, that was the territory of the Jaffna Kingdom between the 14th and 17th centuries. It was for this soil, and the ability to govern it, that countless men and women would fight and die in a 26-year armed struggle between the Sri Lankan government and separatist Tamil forces. Sivagnanam Shriritharan, the head of the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK), a major Tamil nationalist party, told me, "Even after the war, we are struggling to regain our sovereignty and freedom." While that crisis festers unresolved, another has arrived: the soil that Tamils defended with their lives, and in which their identity is supposedly rooted, faces a new and different type of threat.

"It is not climate change anymore," Nadarajah Sriskandarajah, a professor at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, told me. "It is a climate emergency." Like many small island developing countries, Sri Lanka is a paragon of climate injustice: it is not a major carbon emitter, yet it consistently ranks among the ten most at-risk countries according to the Global Climate Risk Index. Within Sri Lanka, a 2018 World Bank study identified the Northern and Northwestern Provinces as the top climate hotspots. Jaffna, Puttalam, Mannar and Kilinochchi, all considered part of the Tamil homeland, are the four districts most likely to be impacted by the climate crisis. And these war-affected regions - the sites of long-standing ethnic discrimination and state violence - are perhaps the least well-equipped to confront it.

Interviews with impacted communities, combined with a review of climate-science studies, expose the shocking vitality of the climate emergency in the Tamil homeland. Rising sea levels, soil salinisation, floods, droughts, coastal erosion, coral bleaching, weather volatility and extreme heat - these processes are *already* wrecking the livelihoods of farming and fishing communities, and changing the nature and generative capacity of the land. But much-abused Tamils in Sri Lanka, and the Tamil nationalist movement that claims leadership of them, are barely awake to this new threat, let alone prepared to defend against it.

Waters and tides

"In June or July, when there are no rains, you can find salt crystals in the paddy land," Edison

Marynathan, an environmentalist from Vidataltivu, in Mannar district, told me. Salinisation, where the levels of salt in soil and groundwater increase, has already resulted in the permanent abandonment of 43 percent of the paddy land in the Jaffna Peninsula over two decades, and threatens crop irrigation and drinking-water supplies across the area. One 2020 study, which calls for the urgent management of groundwater resources, found that nearly 59 percent of wells in the Jaffna Peninsula had salinity levels unsuitable for irrigating crops that year. This is no minor problem in the Northern Province, which is known for persistent water insecurity.

Salinisation is partly due to over-extraction, the climate scientist Tharani Gopalakrishnan explained. As the population grows, people keep drilling new wells. Over-extraction of water for irrigation and domestic use can disturb the balance of sea and freshwater within Jaffna's limestone bedrock, which acts as an aquifer, causing the water in wells to become brackish. But salinisation is also due to climate-change induced sea-level rise, and increased sea-water intrusion above ground.

Hundreds of acres of land and hundreds of wells have been abandoned due to salt-water intrusion. According to Gopalakrishnan, soil salinity has also increased threefold or fourfold in many places compared to 20 years ago. "If you go to some of these abandoned paddy lands in Poonakary or Ariyalai," she told me, "the soil looks like beach sand and you can sometimes even find seashells."

In the flat Jaffna Peninsula, where most people live along the coast, sea-level rise will also cause increased coastal erosion and inundation. Climate scientists say that up to 35 percent of all land and 52 percent of paddy land in the area may be lost by 2100. A third of all households in Jaffna are involved in agriculture, and falls in rice production are estimated to cost as much as USD 1 million every year by 2050, directly impacting a quarter of Jaffna's working population. Climate scientists predict that drops in rice production, together with population increase, will threaten food security and increase poverty in the peninsula.

In Arippu East, along Sri Lanka's northwestern coast, a two-storied brick mansion by the water has been steadily decaying due to extreme weather and sea erosion. This building was once the residence of Frederick North, the first British governor of Ceylon, and was built in the early part of the 19th century. It is now in a state of ruin. Just a few meters away, waves lap at a large cylindrical well, gradually exposing more and more of its brickwork shaft. According to T M Cruz, a 71-year-old villager, coastal erosion consumed the soil around the well in just the last three or four years. S A Fernando, a local fisher, used to drink fresh water from the well when hauling fish onto shore. Now, he said, it is filled with salt water and cannot be used. Fernando was not sure why the erosion and salinisation had occurred.

Sea-level rise induced by climate change is expected to exacerbate coastal erosion, but such erosion can also result from human activities like coastal construction and natural changes in the environment. Land has been steadily eaten away by erosion along much of the northwestern coast - for example, in areas between Muthariputhurai village and Silavathurai. "Places where people used to walk have now disappeared into the sea," Cruz said. "What may happen in the future and how, only God knows."

The prospect of an inundated Tamil homeland finds resonance in Tamil mytho-history. Sangam-era literature refers to Kumari Kandam - an ancient landmass from which the Tamils long ago migrated to the lands they now inhabit. It faced natural disaster - a great deluge or a series of deluges -

before being completely submerged in the sea. This mytho-history appears fatidic: islands off Kalpitiya in the western Puttalam district, and other lands, are actually sinking today. Climate scientists predict that most of the islands surrounding the Jaffna Peninsula and the Poonakary division of Kilinochchi district will be completely submerged by 2100.

The deluges of the mythical past are eerily prophetic given recent floods. Flooding is the largest contributor to Sri Lanka's annual losses from natural disasters, costing the country some USD 140 million per year on average – a figure expected to rise to USD 338 million by the 2030s. Floods also amplify the risk of other hazards such as landslides and infectious disease, threatening lives, livelihoods and infrastructure.

Sebastianpillai Sathiyaseharan, from the fifth generation of a farming family in the coastal town of Vidaltivu, said he does not remember hearing of much flooding after the 1964 Rameswaram cyclone, which killed over a thousand people in the North. But Cyclone Burevi, when it struck the North in December 2020, left numerous areas flooded and impacted over 70,000 people. Water completely submerged Sathiyaseharan's field, he said, and his elder brother "gave up farming with the big flood that year. He didn't farm the next year either because he thought the ground would be salty."

Although floods have affected more than 10 million people in Sri Lanka over the last 30 years, the increasing frequency of flood events has not entirely registered among the public. Sebastianpillai Sathyatheepan, a property valuator on the island of Mannar, knows that land values depend on the likelihood of natural disasters as well as criteria such as location and topography. But he is still building a house on a plot of land that flooded in just the second year of construction. "After the flooding stopped, the water dried up," he said. "It's not such a big problem."

The environmental activists Qunson and Edison Marynathan, however, worry that Mannar's residents are not taking the climate crisis seriously enough. Qunson keeps track of the water level on the road connecting Mannar island to the mainland during heavy rains. He warned that the road will soon be submerged, which could cut Mannar off from vital supplies and force its population to move.

Heat and harvests

Climate change is expected to increase the frequency and intensity of droughts as well as floods in Sri Lanka. Between 2008 and 2018, droughts affected nearly eight million people in the country. In the droughts of 2014, 2016-17 and 2019 the Northern Province, a dry zone, was disproportionately impacted. In August 2023, drought-like conditions left people across ten districts in Sri Lanka without safe drinking water. Jaffna, Ampara and Batticaloa districts were the hardest hit, accounting for 85 percent of the nearly 150,000 people affected.

Sriskandarajah, of the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, claimed that Sri Lanka receives a decent amount of rainfall, even in its dry zones. The more pressing issue, he said, is poor water "management" in a climate-stressed environment and the need for holistic governance of resources. Criticising the national policy to produce more maize, "a thirsty crop", he argued that it is important to revisit crops with histories of local cultivation as they may be better suited to the terrain, climate

and available resources.

He recalled his grandfather's stories of surviving on millet, a climate-resistant crop that thrives on lower amounts of water and which was a part of Tamil food culture before it was displaced by high-yielding varieties of rice and other crops during the Green Revolution era. "I remember millet being served in the *prasadam* of the Murugan temple in Kataragama," Sriskandarajah said, pointing out that, in mythology, Murugan's wife Valli was a guardian of millet-fields.

Rising temperatures from climate change exacerbate droughts and also have several other adverse impacts. Heatwaves are becoming more frequent across South Asia, and Sri Lanka's North is particularly vulnerable - by some projections, by the end of the century it will experience mean temperatures approaching 35 degrees Celsius (considered the upper limit of human survivability or the wet-bulb temperature). Just this year, heatwaves killed at least seven people in the Northern Province. Extreme heat especially impacts the health and living standards of outdoor agricultural workers, who number in the tens of thousands in the North, as well as workers in urban areas without access to good cooling systems.

Higher temperatures will also impact agricultural yields. Rice, a staple across Sri Lanka, is particularly sensitive. Yield losses will impact both national and household food security and are expected to increase poverty rates significantly - according to one estimate, in the range of 12 to 26 percent higher than the alternative without climate change. In some areas, agricultural losses due to heat are already debilitating. War widows engaged in seaweed farming in Valaipadu, in Kilinochchi district, lost about 80 percent of their crop during the 2024 heatwaves.

Higher temperatures also accelerate the feeding and metabolic rates, and hence population sizes, of certain pests, leading to higher rates of crop destruction. Increased heat combined with increased rainfall can lead to outbreaks of the brown planthopper, one of Asia's most destructive rice pests. Higher temperatures also impact livestock - farmers across the North have lost cattle during periods of intense heat - and can be accompanied by ruinous unpredictable temperature fluctuations. In December 2022, cold shock killed over a thousand cattle in the Northern and Eastern Provinces during the cyclonic storm Mandous.

Even if the weather were to be more moderate, its unpredictability would remain a threat to farmers and fishers. "When we expect the wind, it does not blow," Mahadevi, a farmer's wife from Illupaikadavai, in Mannar district, complained. "When we expect the rain, it does not rain. ... We can no longer achieve our previous yields." Such unpredictability also impacts fishers. "Earlier, if our ancestors said it would rain on a particular day, it would happen," Kanakasabai Kukasiri, a fisher from the coastal village of Anthoniyarpuram, said. "That is not the case now." Although Kukasiri can now get weather information from youths armed with mobile phones, he knows that the meteorological predictions are not always accurate. "They said it would be windy today," Kukasiri complained. "But it wasn't."

Apart from the unpredictable weather, fishers rarely complain about the effects of the climate crisis. The impacts on marine ecosystems are not easy to see, measure or understand. To confound matters further, overfishing and destructive practices like dynamite fishing, bottom trawling and the use of bottom-set nets can also have adverse impacts similar to those from climate change, such as the decline of certain species in local waters. In Gurunagar in Jaffna city, fishers have noted that their

waters have less fish than before, from fewer varieties, and that some species have completely disappeared – like the black tiger prawns that were once a popular export. Those I spoke to attributed the changes to overfishing and bottom trawling, although they know the reproductive habits of aquatic animals can be impacted by changes in water temperature or salinity – changes made increasingly probable by climate change. M S Miranda, the retired assistant director of Fisheries and Aquatics Resources for Mannar district, pointed out a decline in the mud crabs, another highly profitable export. But, he said, “we just don’t have enough research to know why.”

Although fishers find it difficult to isolate the impacts of climate change, Nishan Perera, a coral reef ecologist and the co-founder of a local marine research and conservation non-profit, insisted they “are quite severe”. Perera said increased sea-surface temperatures, especially during El Niño and La Niña periods, can lead to increased coral bleaching and coral mortality. Major coral bleaching events occurred off Sri Lanka’s coasts in 1998 and 2016, while the eastern coast experienced a smaller bleaching event in 2019. Bleaching events can kill reef habitats, destroying certain fish species as well the organisms that feed on them further down the food chain. After heatwaves in 2023, researchers witnessed coral bleaching near Trincomalee and authorities feared bleaching events off Mannar too.

Muhammed Sathath, who has been catching ornamental fish for 25 years, said he has noticed signs of coral bleaching. He travels from his home in Trincomalee along the northern and eastern coasts to Batticaloa, Kalpitiya and Mannar to catch a range of marine organisms for export. Sathath described noticing that when coral dies and turns white, as it does from bleaching, there are fewer butterflyfish – a colourful species whose behavior can be a barometer of reef health, and provide an early warning that fish populations are at risk. Sathath attributes the dead coral he is seeing to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, as well as industrial fishing and climate-change-induced temperature increases. Ornamental fishers like Sathath are among the small number I met who attribute altered fish populations to temperature change. “I don’t think that most other fishers seem to be connecting the dots,” Perera said.

Worst hit, least prepared

The fallout from Sri Lanka’s ongoing economic crisis, which peaked in 2022, has lowered the country’s capacity to respond to the climate emergency. While the Northwestern Province is relatively well-off, five of the 10 regions most vulnerable to climate change lie in the less prosperous Northern Province. Districts like Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi, which are within the top 10 most vulnerable districts to climate change, are also among the poorest in the country. Regions inhabited predominantly by Tamil-speakers, including Trincomalee in the Eastern Province, are recovering from heavy fighting during the 26-year civil war, which ended in 2009 with mass atrocities and, some argue, genocide. Today, war-fatigued Tamils face ongoing violence and persistent human-rights violations. The economy never recovered from the damage of the war, and the lack of local resources is compounded by extractive, opportunistic and environmentally destructive economic activity that burgeoned after the conflict. All of this has only been made worse by the economic crisis.

After the war, mechanised bottom-trawlers from India dragged their nets across the seabed off the northern coast, destroying the reefs and ecosystems as well as the livelihoods of traditional Tamil fishers restricted to rudimentary boats. Despite a ban on bottom-trawling in Sri Lankan waters after 2017, this practice, and other harmful practices like dynamite fishing, continue. Similarly extractive

“development” occurs in Mullaitivu and Mannar districts, where private sand-mining companies threaten to irreversibly alter the local terrain. Despite concerns about biodiversity and coastal livelihoods pointed out by environmentalists, the Adani Group, an Indian conglomerate, also received approval to develop multi-million dollar wind-power plants in Poonakary and Mannar last year. Analysing its pricing structure and touted economic benefits, the policy analyst Rohan Pethiyagoda called the project a “wasteful scam” that would “reduce this country to destitution.”

“It’s all about money,” Edison Marynathan, the environmentalist from Vidataltivu, said. Marynathan often takes his young sons to the local mangroves to learn about nature. The government recently de-gazetted portions of the Vidataltivu Nature Reserve so its rich mangroves could be exploited by private aquaculture businesses. The reserve is a critical carbon sink, and also protects the coast while supporting numerous species. Livid environmental activists claimed the move would lead to the destruction of Sri Lanka’s third-largest marine protected area, and set a bad precedent for other such areas too. The Pearl Protectors, a youth-led marine conservation organisation, called out the “climate action hypocrisy” of the president, Ranil Wickremesinghe, who had pledged to protect wetlands and carbon sinks. “This contradiction is something that the entire environmental and conservation community is pointing out,” Vinod Malwatte, of the Lanka Environment Fund, said. “It permeates through the bulk of developmental decisions made by the government.”

Given the immediacy of the existing political and developmental challenges in the Tamil homeland, and the financial constraints of the working-class communities facing the brunt of climate-related changes, there is very little capacity to reckon with the climate crisis. In Anthoniyapuram, where fishing huts and walking trails have already been swallowed up by the ocean, fishers just do not have the time or the emotional resources to pay heed. “It takes at least six months to erode away a foot or two,” Kukasiri, for whom daily wages are a far more pressing concern, said. “Only future generations will have to think about this.”

Journalists do not tend to do much more than basic reporting either. A study of water security in three popular Tamil language dailies, found that 80 percent of newspaper coverage informed readers instead of agenda setting, framing discourse, or motivating environmental activism. The problem is compounded by insufficient research. “University researchers only conduct research over short, six-month periods instead of over, for example, a 25-year span,” Uthayan, the deputy provincial director of agriculture in Mannar, said. “Data collected over longer durations is necessary to make long-term projections.”

Nishan Perera, the reef ecologist, echoed this concern. To monitor gradual climate-change impacts such as shifting fish migration patterns or spawning habits, he explained, we need long-term time-series data instead of just baseline surveys and short-term project-based research. But the necessary data collection is hampered by a lack of equipment and resources.

“The basic instruments like rain gauges are only available in one or two towns,” Uthayan said, “but they’re not in every area.” Perera said that the Department of Wildlife Conservation “has to manage large areas without adequate resources, and some small beat offices even lack basic furniture. Fisheries inspectors from the department of fisheries may have motorbikes that are broken or may have no budget for petrol, so it’s a real problem for them to carry out their duties.”

This data poverty is compounded by poor institutional capacity, a lack of coordination and weak

feedback mechanisms. Uthayan noted that there is little collaboration between meteorological and agricultural departments across Sri Lanka. Language barriers and a history of conflict between Tamil-speaking areas and the central government, where the working language is mostly Sinhala, impedes communication. Funding for climate-change mitigation initiatives must be distributed to the provinces from the central government, but the district-level officials most attuned to climate-related changes depend on weak bottom-up feedback mechanisms to communicate local needs and secure funding. At the same time, as Sriskandarajah noted, “What gets talked about at the top, if anything is talked about at all, doesn’t necessarily get translated in the same way right down to the people on the ground.”

The absence of international environmental organisations in Sri Lanka also limits resources. “We’re one of 36 biodiversity hotspots, but there is no WWF, no Conservation International, no Nature Conservancy,” Malwatte said. “It’s like there is a black hole.” Malwatte attributed the black hole to the war, the difficulty of setting up organisations in Sri Lanka, and the government’s long-standing aversion to having international eyes in Sri Lanka.

Nature and nation

“To me Tamil nationalism is *mainly* the relationship Tamils have with their land,” Mahendran Thiruvarangan, an English lecturer at Jaffna University, said. He cited the popular nationalist poem ‘பூமி’ - “Land” or “Soil” - by the Tamil poet Puthuvai Ratnathurai:

பூமி
பூமிப்பூமிப்பூமி பூமிப்பூமி,
பூமிப்பூமிப்பூமி பூமிப்பூமி.
பூமிப்பூமிப்பூமி பூமிப்பூமி,
பூமி பூமிப்பூமி பூமிப்பூமி.
பூமிப்பூமி பூமிப்பூமி!
பூமிப்பூமிப்பூமிப்பூமி பூமிப்பூமிப்பூமி
பூமிப்பூமி பூமி!

Land

If you lose your land,

Then you will lose your strength.

If you lose your strength,

Then your race will be destroyed.

Therefore fellow human beings,

Learn to love your motherland!

In the past, the bond between Tamils and this soil was openly celebrated through popular LTTE slogans such as “The Tiger’s hunger is Tamil Eelam Homeland” and nationalist songs such as ‘This Land is our Land’ and ‘Fields of Green’, which pay homage to the trees, flowers, pastures, lakes and palm-fringed seas of the North and East.

“Our homeland is one with our life, our blood, our bodies,” Shritharan, the leader of the ITAK, told me. But despite the bond between Tamils and their homeland, the climate crisis is not part of the Tamil political landscape.

“People use phrases like ‘We have to preserve the environment’, ‘We have to plant more trees’, ‘We have to find ways to reduce pollution’,” Thiruvarangan said. “I don’t know if people use the discourse of climate change.” M A Sumanthiran, the ITAK spokesman and parliamentarian, said that while his party has regularly discussed livelihoods and job creation, he cannot recall a time when it specifically referred to climate change. While land is central to the Tamil political project, and agriculture and fisheries are critical industries for his electorate, Sumanthiran told me that he does not see climate change influencing the dominant articulations of Tamil nationalism anytime soon.

The founder of Sri Lanka’s first green party, the Tamil National Green Organisation, has a different view. P Ayngaranesan said he believes that environmental concerns have always been embedded in Tamil nationalism. The LTTE had an environmental unit, he claimed, and its leader, Prabhakaran, used to refer to nature as his friend. “Language, culture and the environment - Tamil nationalism is a combination of all these things.” While people in other countries eat wheat as their staple, Ayngaranesan said, Tamils eat rice because it grows naturally in our climate. Like food, he argued, language is also influenced by one’s surroundings. Sangam-era Tamil literature uniquely distinguishes between five different landscapes

- *Kurinci* (mountains), *Mullai* (forests), *Neytal* (seashore), *Palai* (desert) and *Marutam* (cropland). Each is associated with distinct features and refers to different emotional states - union, waiting, pining, separation and quarreling respectively. For Ayngaranesan, this kind of symbolism is an example of how the environment is a critical part of Tamil language and culture.

But politicians like Ayngaranesan, who received a master’s degree in botany and anatomy from Jaffna University, are still rare in Tamil politics. While recognising that many countries across the world now have green parties, Shritharan, the ITAK leader, acknowledged that green politics is not very popular with his constituents. Others are more direct: Sriskandarajah, for example, said that at the political level, when it comes to the climate crisis, “they’re blissfully ignorant about it.”

Mahadevi, the farmer’s wife from Illupaikadavai, said that there is no history of politicians “coming and talking about these issues here.” Ahilan Kadirgamar, a researcher who works with cooperatives in the Northern Province, argued that Tamil politics and the upper echelons of the Tamil professional classes are filled by dominant-caste communities, and there is very little representation from oppressed-caste groups - even after elite out-migration over the years and shifting demographics. He cited destructive fishing practices and rural indebtedness as examples of major issues of the rural economy that have been disregarded by the Tamil polity. “The intellectual classes and academics have also done very little to address the concerns of fisherfolk and farmers,” he said.

Structural racism, violence and the absence of justice remain salient features of the Tamil condition even 15 years after the end of the civil war. Long-standing Tamil political demands like the full implementation of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution of Sri Lanka, which would give greater power to provincial governments, remain unaddressed. “In Mannar, Kilinochchi, Jaffna, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Ampara, our lands are being taken away daily,” Shrivitharan said, describing urgent present-day challenges. In this context, an under-resourced and institutionally weakened Tamil leadership may well find it difficult to expend political capital on fighting a new, poorly understood and abstract “enemy” in climate change.

Another complication is how the displacement, violence and economic loss of the climate crisis has largely been instigated by the actions of advanced industrialised nations in the West, many of them once thought of as allies in the Tamil community’s fight for human rights. Path dependency and the difficulty of reimagining traditional political allies as foes may also help explain the invisibility of the climate crisis in Tamil public discourse.

With some creativity, however, there may be space to accommodate the new crisis within the framework of traditional Tamil politics. Language barriers and fiscal centralisation are recognised impediments to addressing the climate emergency, and resolving these problems through increased self-determination and autonomy for Tamil-speaking regions is compatible with historical Tamil demands. Climate scientists often argue that regional familiarity – an intimate understanding of local terrain, climate, resource availability, food cultures, preferences and needs – is essential for proposing and implementing sustainable agricultural and fisheries policies. Ayngaranesan insisted that it is familiarity with the region that makes Tamils best-suited to develop and govern the North. “If you are from the South, you may know of the *kabaragoya*” – the Asian water monitor. “But we do not have that animal here. The South has the *kithul* tree, but we are familiar with the palmyrah tree. They have the Sinharaja rainforest, but we have only dry forests.”

Finally, it is the Tamil connection to land – evident in poetry, song, political rhetoric, writing and art – that may provide the greatest incentive for Tamils to champion climate adaptation efforts and environmental activism. If Tamil identity is indeed rooted in the land and Tamil nationalism is mainly Tamil’s relationship to the land, then changes to the land should incentivise Tamil politicians to be more vocal about the climate emergency.

And it is not *just* Tamil nationalists or Tamil-identifying communities who have a stake in the climate crisis, Thiruvarangan pointed out – there are also both Muslim and Sinhalese communities that have historically lived in the regions considered Tamil homelands. “It’s important to avoid having the climate crisis become part of a hegemonic narrative that excludes communities,” he warned, describing some of the exclusionary tendencies of Tamil nationalism. “We need to be attentive to contradictions along lines of class, caste and ethnicity, and other war-inflicted contradictions.”

Over time, the climate emergency will only become more difficult to ignore or dismiss. While the rhetoric of climate change has not yet been incorporated into mainstream political discourse in the Tamil-dominated regions of Sri Lanka, there is some hope. “Anything is small in the beginning,” Shrivitharan said, referring to the growth of green politics in the Tamil homeland. “But that will come. I believe it will happen over time.”

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