

Priya Nadesalingam: A Tamil freedom fighter to celebrate on International Women's Day

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"All my experience left me no choice. I had to fight."

—Kokilapathmapriya (Priya) Nadesalingam



The story of one Tamil refugee family, abducted from their Queensland home by Border Force agents three years ago and forced into detention, is now well known. The wilful disregard of their rights and wellbeing by a government determined to deport them has generated sympathy for the family and rage toward the home affairs and immigration ministers in equal measure. And the movement to free Priya, Nades and their two daughters, Kopika and Tharunicaa—who have endured three years of neglect and several deportation attempts—is perhaps the most prominent individual campaign for refugee rights since mandatory detention was first introduced by the Labor Party in the 1990s.

Most coverage of the family's plight understandably focuses on them being victims of Australia's world-leading, institutionalised cruelty against asylum seekers. Much also focuses on the groundswell #HometoBilo campaign emanating from their hometown, Biloela. There's less written about the fact that, if it weren't for one woman's determined resolve to fight, there would be no campaign, no court challenges and no trace of the family, at least in Australia.

Kokilapathmapriya Nadesalingam—Priya, as her friends know her—is not just a loving mother, but a woman tried, tested and found to be as resilient and determined as they come. The number of people who have given up hope, relented to the government's bullying and coercion and been "voluntarily" forced back to the place from which they fled perhaps stretches into the thousands in the last two decades. But Priya and her family are not counted in that cohort.

"When they abducted us from Biloela at 5:30 in the morning, the way they handled us gave me the courage to fight back", she says via video link from Christmas Island, where she has been imprisoned for more than a year. "We struggled a lot to come to this country; why can't I stand up and fight for my rights. I have been forced to fight back. We didn't happily come [into custody], they forcefully took my two kids, my husband and myself."

As with other refugees, by definition, her life has been marked by a need to escape. So there was no guarantee that the will to remain would become a determinate feature of her character. In Tamil Eelam, the majority-Tamil homelands in the north and east of Sri Lanka, she and her family continuously moved from one place to another as the national liberation war raged between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Sri Lankan military, directed by the chauvinist Colombo

government.

“Because we are an oppressed community, when we grew up, we had not had any chance to express ourselves or fight back”, she says. Her home in Batticaloa, in the eastern province, was an area of particularly heavy conflict. “They were unforgettable days. The government was killing so many people and there were bomb blasts everywhere. I was wounded and still have shrapnel wounds from a bomb attack.”

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The security forces burned her fiancé alive with six other men. When the soldiers came, villagers tried to chase them away. But more soldiers arrived. The men’s hands were tied, truck tyres were placed around them and the villagers were made to helplessly watch as they burned to death. Her mother at one point was also sexually assaulted in a military camp. And her family was threatened because of its links to the Tigers. (The LTTE formed a de facto administration over most of Tamil Eelam, so many families were in some way involved in the liberation movement and therefore considered suspect and targeted, to varying degrees, by the authorities.)

Like hundreds of thousands of others, they eventually sought refuge in India’s southernmost state, Tamil Nadu. They arrived in 2001, but for the next twelve years, Priya was mostly confined to the home. In 2013, she made the decision to flee again, this time by herself. The situation in Tamil Eelam had deteriorated considerably—a genocidal offensive by the Sri Lankan military in 2009 wiped out the Tigers, killed tens of thousands of civilians and left hundreds of thousands internally displaced. The military now was in complete control, occupying the homelands, setting up checkpoints and establishing barracks on Tamil land.

In India, they lived as refugees, and her fears of deportation were growing. The intelligence wing of the Tamil Nadu police, the notorious Q Branch, visited them every three months. Fearing greater harassment, the family restricted its movements. “I have three siblings and I had to look after eight people in my family”, Priya says. “I was not allowed to go out and I had lot of household work and responsibilities, which would take up my whole day. It was a difficult time. So I wanted to be free from my family as well. For those reasons I came to Australia.”

Getting here didn’t end the ordeal. The federal Labor government in 2012 had introduced “enhanced screening” to make it more difficult for Tamils to gain asylum. So her struggle for freedom continued, but with governments stacking the odds against a successful claim for protection. Then, in the early morning of 5 March 2018, they came in white vans—like those used by the dreaded Sri Lankan security forces who kidnap activists in Tamil Eelam—for Priya and her family:

“I will not forget those incidents until my death. When they raided our house, I was breastfeeding my eight-month-old daughter. First, they took me in my night dress. Police had surrounded us, and they came inside the bathroom and stood there until we finished. My house was full of police and they took us out and handed us to [private security]. They asked me to raise my hands and told us to sit in the hall. Second, they separated our kids from us, and my daughter continuously cried for fifteen hours. I can still hear Tharunicaa crying that day.

“Next, they separated my husband from us and took us to the airport. Only after that did I come to know that we were going to fly to Melbourne. We reached the detention centre around 7:30pm, but they didn’t allow us to rest or put the kids to bed until 2:30am. No refugees should go through this—that’s what I am thinking now. They did not allow me to take my daughter’s milk bottle, and

they provided her milk only after reaching Melbourne. They didn't provide us any food until the evening. I won't forget that—my three-year-old and eight-month-old daughters left to starve a whole day. Even in a war zone we would not have experienced this."

Detention was a struggle enough: trying to comfort her distraught eldest, who couldn't understand why they were imprisoned; trying to calm and feed her youngest in terrible conditions; watching as their physical and mental health deteriorated; unable to prepare food properly; and lacking proper access to the outside with its sunshine and fresh air. But still she fought. In one incident, the Serco guards, she says, wouldn't bring medication for Tharunicaa, who was vomiting, running a fever and passing out. "At one point, she was unconscious, and I tried to call Serco, but they didn't come. I didn't know what to do so I started throwing things. I smashed the computer and the phone. They heard the noise and opened the door. Only after I put up the fight did they take my daughter to see the nurse."

She fought again when they tried to send the family to Sri Lanka. "The first time they tried to deport us from Melbourne, they separated us, and it was only me—too many guards were holding me so I couldn't resist much", Priya says. "The second time, they were dragging me. Because I can't go back to that country and I had no choice but to fight, I wanted to stop the deportation in any way possible. So I tried very hard, and they were very rough. I had lots of wounds and scratches on my hands and body ... When they pulled me, I would use all my strength to resist or pull back. I wouldn't allow them to take me easily. Sometimes they would lift me, but I would push my body to the ground."

Since the second deportation attempt, which was prevented by a court order, Priya, Nades, Kopika and Tharunicaa have been isolated on Christmas Island, which Priya describes as "extreme detention or maximum-security prison". "Even in jail, there would be other prisoners. But here it is just me and Nades. We don't have anyone to talk to", she says. Yet her fight for freedom continues. For Priya, it is not only a fight for herself and her family, not only a small moment in the struggle for Tamil people's rights, and not only a question of the treatment of refugees. She views her campaign as part of the broader struggle of people everywhere fighting for freedom:

"Kids should be free and happy. They should breathe freedom and live like birds. I would like to thank the First Nations people who allowed us to stay in their country; it is their land and they allowed us to live here. Everyone should continue to fight for their rights with a hope that we will win one day."

On International Women's Day, *Red Flag* pays tribute to Kokilapathmapriya Nadesalingam—a tenacious fighter for freedom. If she and her family are rightfully returned to their home in Biloela, it will be because of her determined resistance and the solidarity of thousands of people, which has materialised as a result of her intransigence. The world needs more people like Priya.

Ben Hillier

P.S.

- Red Flag. 07 March 2021:
<https://redflag.org.au/article/freedom-fighter-celebrate-international-womens-day>
- Tamil Refugee Council member Lavanya Thavaraja translated and transcribed this interview.

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