

Dilemma Over Repatriation - Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees in The Camps Of Tamil Nadu, India

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Abstract:

A large number of Tamils had fled from Sri Lanka during the prolonged devastating ethnic war. According to a report of the ministry of Home Affairs, more than 3 lakhs Sri Lankan Tamil refugees entered India in different phases between 1983 and 2012. At present about one lakh refugees belonging to over 18,000 families are living in the state of Tamil Nadu, of whom 68,606 Sri Lankan Tamils are in 114 refugee camps. While 79,773 refugees were repatriated to Sri Lanka till 1995, some left to other countries on their own. After 1995, there is no organized repatriation. Indian government is reluctant to integrate the refugees into society. In the recent past, the delegations of India and Sri Lanka begin to discuss about the steps to be taken for the voluntary repatriation of refugees. Those who want to end their refugee status in India are willing to return home. Others want to remain in India. And many are unable to even decide whether to go back to Sri Lanka or to stay in India.

Keywords: Refugees, Sri Lankan Tamils, Repatriation

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

This study is an inductive approach based on historical facts. The sources for this study are both primary and secondary. The primary sources are extensive field survey based on observation, interviews, interactions, discussions and case studies. The secondary sources include various published articles and books related to this topic.

INTRODUCTION:

The ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka has persisted from the time when independence of that country was achieved in 1948. Since 1983 the influx of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees is alarming from Sri Lanka to India. Tamil Nadu is deeply affected by this problem due to geographical proximity. Those who arrived are kept in different camps of Tamil Nadu. Those who want to end their refugee status in India are willing to return home. Others want to remain in India. And many are unable to even decide whether to go back to Sri Lanka or to stay in India.

DISSCUSSION:

Sri Lanka, formerly called as “Ceylon” is an island country lies in the Indian Ocean, South East of India. The thirty three miles wide Palk Strait divides South Eastern and North Western tips of India and Sri Lanka respectively. Due to the eruption of ethnic violence in Sri Lanka in 1983, the influx of Sri

Lankan Tamil Refugees began in India. The refugees found Tamil Nadu as peaceful destination than all other regions.

Tamil Nadu was severely affected by the influx of refugees. Since 1983 they came in waves at different period. Indian authorities received them and made arrangements for their registration at Mandapam. After enquiry they were sent to different camps. Those who were suspected to have links with militants were kept in special camps. At present there are 114 refugee camps in 26 districts of Tamil Nadu. In essence, the issue of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in Tamil Nadu is a complex and

The refugees from Sri Lanka to India came in three waves. The first wave began with the ethnic violence unleashed in 1983. A mass exodus of refugees began on 24 July 1983 and it continued till 29 July 1987, until the Indo- Sri Lankan Accord. 134,053 Sri Lankan Tamils came to India as refugees during that period. Between 24 December 1987 and 31 August 1989, 25,585 refugees were repatriated to Sri Lanka. The second wave began when the war resumed in Sri Lanka in June 1990 and 122,000 Sri Lankan Tamils came as refugees to Tamil Nadu. The people of Tamil Nadu welcomed the refugees due to ethnic affinity. But the tendency of natural hatred arouse among the public and government authorities against the Sri Lankan refugees with the assassination of Mr. Rajiv Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India in May 1991. Another phase of repatriation of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees from camps in Tamil Nadu to Sri Lanka has begun. 54,188 refugees were repatriated from 20 January 1992 to 20 March 1995. Between April 1995 and February 2002 another wave of 22,331 refugees came to India.

By 2001, an estimated 6.57 lakh people in Sri Lanka have been uprooted from their homes owing to the ongoing ethnic conflict. Sri Lanka has become one of the world’s principal sources of refugees and displaced persons. It has become a “land of the displaced.” Between 2003 and 2005 around 15,000 refugees including 5,444 returned to Sri Lanka as the situation in the Tamil areas seemed normal following the ceasefire agreement of February 2001. On January 12, 2006 a new group of refugees arrived. The violence and fear of another war led to this flow of refugees. Between January 12 and June 28, 2006, 3,673 persons registered themselves as refugees in Tamil Nadu. Among them, 1,636 persons were those who had returned to Sri Lanka after the ceasefire agreement. At Thalaimannar, the accommodation facilities made for the stateless persons to send back to India under the Shastri - Srimavo and Indira Gandhi - Simavo pacts were utilized for the return refugees from South India. Then the flow of refugees gradually decreased due to heavy transport fees and military control.

There are four categories of refugees in Tamil Nadu. They are as follows: those who live in camps, live outside the camps, Sri Lankan nationals and Tamil militants. By January 2002, 63,941 refugees were admitted in 111 camps of Tamil Nadu. As on 1 June, 2011 there are 68,606 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees accommodated in 114 camps in 26 districts with the exception of Thiruvarur, Nagappattinam, Tanjore and Nilgiri districts of Tamil Nadu. Out of the grand total 34, 893 are males and 33,713 females.

SRI LANKAN TAMIL REFUGEES IN TAMIL NADU CAMPS

District	Camp	Minor		Major		Total inmates		Total
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
		Coimbatore	4	1,175	1,066	717	423	
Cuddalore	4	306	251	486	455	792	706	1,498

Dharmapurai	8	671	648	580	579	1,251	1,227	2,478
Dindigul	7	879	934	882	715	1,761	1,649	3,410
Erode	3	1,218	1,113	1,315	1,227	2,533	2,340	4,873
Kanyakumari	4	250	279	458	475	708	754	1,462
Karur	2	465	444	623	664	1,088	1,108	2,196
Krishnakiri	3	272	248	317	319	589	567	1,156
Madurai	3	1,803	1,661	1,195	1,316	2,998	2,977	5,975
Nammakkal	3	633	583	632	646	1,265	1,229	2,494
Perambalur	1	55	61	71	79	132	140	272
Pudukottai	3	841	840	921	887	1,762	1,727	3,498
Ramanathapuram	1	757	704	458	538	1215	1,242	2,457
Salem	8	1,037	992	783	686	1,820	1,678	3,498
Sivaganga	6	781	808	972	965	1,753	1,773	3,526
Theni	2	7	8	5	8	12	16	28
Tiruvallur	2	1,413	1,128	1,020	1,333	2,433	2,461	4,894
Trichy	2	580	564	972	1,016	1,552	1,580	3,132
Tirunelveli	0	589	650	805	733	1,394	1,383	2,777
Tiruppur	5	194	161	336	309	530	470	1,000
Tiruvannamalai	13	845	927	1,051	882	1,896	1,809	3,705
Tuticorin	3	386	382	489	498	875	880	1,755
Vellore	6	995	1,004	869	883	1,864	1,887	3,751
Villupuram	2	390	397	465	549	855	946	1,801
Virudhunagar	7	863	821	1,015	854	1,878	1,675	3,553
Special Camps Kancheepuram	1	----	----	41	---	41	---	41
Tiruvallur	1	----	----	4	---	4	---	4
GRAND TOTAL	114	17,405	16,674	17,488	17,039	34,893	33,713	68,606

Source: as on June 1, 2011, Hindu 4 September, 2011.

Those who do not want to stay in the refugee camps live outside the camp. They register themselves in the nearby police station and in the office of the District Collector. The non-camp refugees in the state is around 34,000. They are not eligible to get the benefits like the camp people. The Sri Lankan nationals are comparatively well off section of the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in Tamil society. The last categories are the Tamil militants detained in special camps. Militants are those persons who are suspected to have involved in offensive activities. At present there are 45 of such suspected Sri Lankans refugees in 2 special camps at Kancheepuram (41 males) and Thiruvallur (4 males).

The government of Tamil Nadu under the direction of the government of India is managing the refugees by providing assistance for their livelihood. The government is providing housing and essential items for their daily life free of cost while entering India. The expenditure is initially met by the government of Tamil Nadu and then government of India reimbursed the entire expenditure to the government of Tamil Nadu

DILEMMA OVER REPATRIATION

The protracted ethnic clash between the Sri Lankan army and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) came to an end in 2009, when the Sri Lankan military declared the murder of Vellupillai Prabhakaran, the leader of LTTE. Since the war was over some of the refugees wanted to go back to Sri Lanka. Most of the elders wanted to return to their birthplace after normalcy. They were longing to see their original homeland and at the same time they remembered their sufferings met out at the time of war. Others wanted to stay back because their children have been settled here. The youth wanted to continue their education in India. Some of the refugees hesitated to go to Sri Lanka for several reasons. Their relatives were displaced in Sri Lanka. The refugees in India had doubts about the situation in their home country. Factor like improper rehabilitation of those who have gone back dissuading them from returning. The re-arrests and unannounced detention of Tamil youths who had been released from IDP camps in Sri Lanka had added to their worry.

The presidential election was held in Sri Lanka on 8 January 2015, two years ahead of schedule. Maithripala Sirisena was declared the winner. The new government in the island nation has promised to implement the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution and to devolve more rights to the Tamils in the North. Recently the delegations of India and Sri Lanka begin to discuss about the steps to be taken for the voluntary repatriation of refugees. Those who want to end their refugee status in India are willing to return home. Others want to remain in India. The overwhelming feeling among the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India is to return home, but the repatriation process should be well-structured with the backing of a Memorandum of Understanding among India, Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. And many are unable to even decide whether to go back to Sri Lanka or to stay in India.

An important need of an hour is resettlement. Repatriation should be transparent and voluntary in nature. They were compelled to return sometimes. At the time of the assassination of the past Prime Minister Rajeev Gandhi, the refugees were forced to return to Sri Lanka. And after repatriation they were kept in Sri Lankan transit camps. Such instances should not occur in future. And both the home country and the host country should create feasible situations for the refugees to live and repatriate. Some voluntary agencies and NGOs should be allowed to get their willingness during repatriation. Hence, necessary steps should be taken to provide the refugees in India with knowledge of the current situations in Sri Lanka.

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