

Refugee resources: Sri Lankan Tamils in India

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A Sri Lankan refugee community provides spontaneous and sustained assistance to its Indian host community in their hour of need.

The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami caused devastation in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, with over 6,000 people and thousands of livestock dead, and hundreds of acres of cultivable land wiped

out. Moved by the plight of their hosts – and motivated by gratitude for years of asylum – a Sri Lankan Tamil refugee group known as the Organization for Eelam Refugee Rehabilitation (OfERR) mobilised

its staff and volunteers to assist with relief and recovery in the battered coastal communities.

Sri Lankan Tamils, who arrived in Tamil Nadu in several phases, are among the oldest refugee groups in the world. Many of them began their exodus after the 1983 pogroms that killed over 3,000 Tamils in

Colombo and elsewhere; subsequent batches of refugees have fled violent attacks by the government or the LTTE. Tamil Nadu is also home to stateless Indian-origin Tamils who were disenfranchised by the 1948 Ceylon Citizenship Act.

Intended as a resource for refugees run by refugees, OfERR¹ was established in 1984 by a prominent Sri Lankan human rights lawyer. Today it has an established presence in each of the 117 refugee camps across Tamil Nadu, running counselling services and programmes on leadership development, gender empowerment,

gratitude'. This struck a chord with the host government, and OfERR was granted access to the relief process.

In this way, refugee men and women became invaluable resource persons, empowering their host communities and themselves in the process. Former asylum seekers now assisted those displaced by the floods, and the tsunami survivors in turn acquired lessons in leadership from refugees and passed them on to others struggling on the path to recovery. Five years on, only a handful of NGOs remains working with those affected by the tsunami, and in some

services, such as the building of one-room community centres.

OfERR's non-material services – such as rights awareness, gender training, and counselling – will have a deep impact over the long term. Counselling was a specialisation the refugees had developed in order to cope with life in camps. During the first few weeks after the tsunami, OfERR counsellors visited practically every family living in the shelters, and then continued the process with them as they moved into permanent housing.

OfERR consciously chose to work within marginalised areas and to engage with historically marginalised communities such as Dalits and members of indigenous tribes such as the Irulas. Its approach emphasises building better relations between parts of the government and the public. It has made it a priority to educate the villages it serves on the full range of government services available to them. The refugees have thus assumed the rather unusual position of serving as an information conduit between the host government and the local population.

OfERR's institutional journey is significant for the obvious reason that it highlights the tremendous potential held by refugees as individuals and as a community. No doubt, the unique combination of political circumstances and social access that currently exists in Tamil Nadu may be unavailable to refugees in other parts of the world. Judging by the impact the refugees have had in India's post-tsunami reconstruction – particularly their successful 'camp-to-village' transfer of programmes – they should be able to play a crucial role in post-conflict Sri Lanka. The refugees continue to view their stay in India as temporary, and they aspire for a permanent and honourable return to Sri Lanka, and for the ability to participate as full citizens in the rebuilding of their war-torn country.

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1. www.oferr.org



OfERR staff with Indian volunteers outside a community centre in Nagapatinam district.

disaster management, first-aid training, and legal and human rights awareness, among others.

Unable to assist with relief work in their original homeland after the tsunami hit, they wanted to help the affected Indian communities. The Tamil Nadu state government was initially hesitant to accept the services of refugees, who were already struggling with resource shortages themselves. OfERR leaders explained that the refugees deserved a chance to express their gratitude at this critical moment to the communities of Tamil Nadu which had provided asylum and hosted them for over two decades. They were motivated by the concept of *senchottukadan* – long celebrated in Tamil literature and tradition – which can be roughly translated as 'debt of

villages OfERR is the only NGO with a continued presence. OfERR volunteers are greeted with affection and respect in these tsunami recovery areas, and this interaction has enabled people in the host community to overcome any apprehensions towards 'refugees' or 'foreigners'.

Initially, OfERR had dispatched medical and public health units to the tsunami shelters. Simultaneously, counselling services were begun for individuals and small groups. After assessing long-term needs and gaps in relief, the organisation took a conscious decision to implement models of the refugee camp programmes in the tsunami-affected villages.

Over the intervening years OfERR has also taken on more material