

Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India: return or integration?

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For Tamil refugees, considerations of sustainability affect their decision to remain in India or return to Sri Lanka. Their views and aspirations must inform planning for both integration and repatriation.

Sri Lankan Tamil refugees have arrived in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu at various times. Some arrived 30 years ago, others at the peak of the Sri Lankan civil war in the mid-2000s. Currently more than 62,000 Tamil refugees live in 107 camps spread throughout Tamil Nadu, and just under 37,000 refugees live outside the camps. Although refugees are entitled to residence visas and work permits, prolonged life in the camps does not lead to resilience and empowerment, and these refugees consider themselves in limbo, belonging neither to Sri Lanka nor to India and unable to get on with their lives. Tamil refugees – especially youth – wish to be disassociated with the label of ‘refugee’, which they feel would improve quality of life for them, their families and their communities.

There are two sustainable long-term options available to Tamil refugees in India: repatriation or local integration. Resettlement is no longer an option since the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) appears now to prioritise other groups of refugees with greater protection needs. Some refugees wish to stay in India in order to try to secure citizenship there; others express the desire to return to Sri Lanka – but only when conditions improve. In Sri Lanka, divisions and resentment between the two main ethnic communities have their roots in discrimination and some of these discriminatory practices are still prevalent. Tamil refugees express uncertainty and fear regarding their ability to earn a living, access land and find security if they return to Sri Lanka.

Since 2014, in the absence of a tripartite agreement between UNHCR and the governments of India and Sri Lanka, and at the request of the refugees, UNHCR has been facilitating – but not actively encouraging – the voluntary repatriation of refugees from Tamil Nadu to Sri Lanka.¹ The

decision about whether to return or remain, however, depends on a number of factors.

Access to information: It is vital that return decisions are well-informed. At present the Indian government shies away from informing refugees about the situation in Sri Lanka. Meanwhile, however, some Sri Lankan organisations put forward excessively optimistic information for their own political purposes. The most accurate information for refugees may come from their relatives who remain in Sri Lanka. One refugee described how: “We are connected to our relatives; some are internally displaced persons. My son is telling me to come back but not now, after some time.”²

There is also a paucity of credible research on the aspirations of the different populations who live in the camps. For example, it is thought that the so-called Plantation Tamils – descendants of tea plantation labourers in the central hill areas of Sri Lanka – would mostly like to stay in India, although more research is needed on this topic. A survey of the different populations, who were displaced at different times, combined with more consultation with refugee leaders in the camps, would enhance researchers’ understanding of the aspirations and intentions of these different groups.

Return of belongings: Currently, the repatriation offered by UNHCR is by air and includes a baggage allowance of only 60kg. For some, this alone is a reason not to return since they have accumulated many belongings after years in exile. Many refugees would be ready to return to Sri Lanka if a ship could be provided to carry their belongings as part of the repatriation process.

Access to land: Some refugees find upon their return that their land has been



UNHCR/Gemunu Amarasinghe

Sri Lankan Tamil returnee clears the plot of land that she received from the government on her return.

occupied by others, including by the Sri Lankan government and military, as in Mullaitivu where returnees from India as well as internally displaced people are struggling to reclaim their land from armed forces, and in 2017 protested for three months against this occupation.

Access to livelihoods: Refugees who have undertaken skills trainings programmes while in displacement recount how this has helped them to become self-reliant, courageous, confident and collaborative, and some indicate that these trainings motivate them to help others. Many refugee women report that skills training has enabled them to escape the cultural expectation that women will remain in the home. One woman explains how she broke with this tradition:

"I borrowed 200 rupees from my neighbour and started a small shop with four glasses and a block of stone which served as a table. In one day I earned 400 rupees, and so I started re-investing. I now have a grocery shop at the entrance of the camp, which is worth 80,000 rupees. The greatest challenge for me has been to become, and to be accepted as, an independent woman."

But refugees also share their fears about returning with no prospects for earning a livelihood. They have been warned by other

returnees that unless they have sufficient capital and the capacity to start a business, it would be better to delay their return.

Access to education: Another concern is the uncertainty refugees have about the prospects for their children's education. For example, refugees would like their children to finish their education in India, since opportunities for access to higher education in Sri Lanka seem unfavourable for Tamils. There are three universities in the north of Sri Lanka, which are far away from the homes of many returnees and, while many Sinhalese Sri Lankans are admitted, Tamils face ethnic discrimination. Only those Tamil returnees who can secure support from abroad are able to access higher education for their children in private institutions.

Security and the monitoring of safety conditions: According to UNHCR, every refugee who returns through facilitated repatriation, as well as those who go back spontaneously but who register with UNHCR, should receive one year of protection monitoring.³ Despite this, returning refugees – particularly those who fled the atrocities towards the end of the war in 2009 – have expressed fear for their safety, including fear of being seen as having connections to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Recommendations

There are many subtleties that need to be considered in either a repatriation or an integration plan. For these to be understood, the actors involved must listen more closely to the refugees' hopes, fears and aspirations which, alongside international standards governing return, can then help shape a framework of response and principles of action. Only then will the refugees be able to return in dignity and safety. The following recommendations summarise some of the actions that would contribute to this.

UNHCR should act as a consultant to the Indian government to assist it in formulating a strategic plan to grant citizenship to those refugees who wish to remain and integrate in India. Many of the refugees, particularly the Plantation refugees, wish to become Indian citizens in order to avoid becoming stateless. By granting citizenship, the Indian central and state governments could close the refugee camps in Tamil Nadu, saving the government US\$17 million annually – money that could be invested in helping refugees to set up small businesses in order to facilitate their integration, and these development schemes could also benefit local Indian communities.

In collaboration with the Sri Lankan government and the NGO community, UNHCR should also create a responsible repatriation plan that addresses physical security and access to land and livelihoods opportunities, and facilitates reintegration into and continuity of education (including higher education). This would include the recognition of qualifications and accreditation of teachers and students who have been educated in India. Skills training opportunities for youth, including boys, need to be increased. Young refugees need information on employment opportunities in Sri Lanka, and skills training programmes need to be reoriented from traditional skills to build competency in computing, health, education and other such sectors. And those refugees who are planning to return should be helped to identify where they can access good training opportunities in Sri Lanka.

The need for reconciliation should be integrated into all programmes and activities undertaken in Sri Lanka through peace

education in formal or informal settings. Local and international organisations, in collaboration with religious and community leaders, can build trust and promote reconciliation not only between Tamil and Sinhalese communities but also between returnees and host communities. The issue of land ownership should also be given priority. A supranational body – bringing together donors and UN agencies – needs to persuade the Sri Lankan government to give land back to returnees in order to avoid tension and potential conflict.⁴

The security situation for Tamils in Sri Lanka has certainly improved but the Indian government and donor governments should encourage the Sri Lankan government to further improve security conditions and reduce discriminatory practices. UNHCR should systematically monitor the protection of returnees, including their access to land and livelihoods – which if unaddressed can be a source of potential tension and yet has the potential to be the basis for a real and sustainable solution. It should also ensure that the rights of returnees are respected and that safety and non-discrimination are assured when accessing social services.

If coordination is made a priority and these multiple viewpoints are considered, then refugees will be able to build a better life for themselves and their families, whether they choose to remain in India or opt to return.

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1. UNHCR (2016) *Sri Lankan Refugee Returnees in 2015* www.unhcr.org/en-lk/5bbb31064.pdf

2. All quotes come from interviews conducted by the author with refugees (not named, for security reasons).

3. UNHCR (2016) *Sri Lankan Refugee Returnees in 2015* www.unhcr.org/en-lk/5bbb31064.pdf

4. As was done in Rwanda. See Bruce J (2007) *Drawing a line under the crisis: Reconciling returnee land access and security in postconflict Rwanda*, HPG bit.ly/ODI-Bruce-2007



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