

The forgotten people: on Sri Lankan refugees

In recent months, the focus of the media has been on the Rohingya refugees in India. But the plight of Sri Lankan refugees, who have been here for nearly 35 years, appears to have gone out of the public consciousness.

The pathetic condition of shelters, restrictions on movement, and limited scope of livelihood opportunities affect the community of one lakh-odd Sri Lankan refugees, who have been living in Tamil Nadu ever since the anti-Tamil pogrom in Sri Lanka in July 1983. Besides, statelessness is a major problem for a section of refugees whose roots are from central parts of Sri Lanka, generally called hill country.

The refugees also suffer from social and psychological problems as reports of suicides, school dropouts and child marriage show. Many middle-aged refugees worry about their children's future, given the fact that 40% of camp refugees are below 18 years. As 28,500 refugees are said to be stateless, the Sri Lankan government, in 2003 and 2009, amended its laws to enable easier repatriation. Tamil political parties on the other side of the Palk Strait would love the refugees to return so that the strength of elected representatives from the Tamil-majority Northern Province will go up in the Sri Lankan Parliament.

Time to go home, maybe, but is home Lanka or T.N.?

Yet, the voluntary reverse flow of refugees has happened only incrementally. Even the end of the Eelam War in May 2009 and the decision of Indian authorities in January 2016 to waive visa fees and overstay penalty on a case by case basis for willing persons have not made a huge difference. In the last eight and a half years, hardly 10% of the refugee population (9,238 people) went back through a scheme implemented by Indian officials along with the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). There is perhaps good reason for the refugees' reluctance to return.

Improvement in lifestyle

Around 62,000 refugees, living in 107 camps across Tamil Nadu, have been receiving various relief measures of the Central and State governments. In addition, in recent years, the Tamil Nadu government has taken steps for scores of young boys and girls of the refugee community to join professional courses, particularly engineering. This has benefitted eligible candidates among 36,800 non-camp refugees in the State too.

Repatriation of Sri Lankan refugees on the increase

Regardless of the quality of housing and the nature of their jobs, several camp refugees have experienced a perceptible improvement in their lifestyle. Besides, a new generation has been raised completely in Tamil Nadu and it would not be a surprise for many among them to regard Sri Lanka as an alien country, however nostalgic their parents may be for Jaffna or Mullaitivu.

The refugees know well that if they go back to Sri Lanka, they will not get many of the benefits they have been enjoying in Tamil Nadu. What especially bothers them is "lack of or no livelihood opportunities", as found in a survey of refugee returnees by the UNHCR, Colombo, in 2015. This situation may not improve in the near future given the state of the Sri Lankan economy.

The refugees from the hill country are landless. Unless they are given some quantum of land, they will be not be inclined to go back. One has to keep in mind the current situation in the hill country

region too where the Tamils are no longer interested in working on tea plantations.

Change in status quo

At present, for both India and Sri Lanka, the repatriation of refugees does not seem to be a priority. But they cannot afford continuing with the status quo either, as Tamil Nadu holds the distinction of hosting the largest number of refugees in India. It would be in the interests of the two countries to thrash out the issue sooner than later. While for India a long-standing problem would be resolved, for Sri Lanka it would be a step towards ethnic reconciliation.

In fact, political changes in Tamil Nadu in the last year provide a window of opportunity for India to revive talks with Sri Lanka. The two governments can come out with a comprehensive package on voluntary repatriation, after involving representatives of the refugee community, the Tamil Nadu government and Sri Lanka's Northern Provincial Council.

For refugees who want to stay back, India can consider providing them citizenship, as it did for refugees from Pakistan and Afghanistan. Of course, it has the right not to grant citizenship to trouble-makers. If everything goes off smoothly, authorities can finally close down camps in Tamil Nadu, bringing an end to an episode that has lasted longer than the civil war of Sri Lanka.

The definition of harassment needs to be constantly updated, and the process for justice made more robust

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