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To return or stay?

John Giammatteo

The views of Sri Lankan refugees in India challenge some of the assumptions inherent in promoting repatriation as the most desirable durable solution to protracted displacement.

Voluntary repatriation has long been seen as the foremost durable solution to forced displacement and the solution that would benefit the greatest number of refugees. This perspective assumes that, once the original cause of flight is redressed, refugees will not only still identify with their homeland but also want to return. These assumptions are challenged, however, by many of the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees living in Tamil Nadu, India.

Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict has resulted in waves of migration, with some of the earliest refugees arriving on Indian shores after violence in 1983 and throughout subsequent years of fighting between the Government of Sri Lanka and Tamil militants. Today, over 125,000 Sri Lankan Tamils live in India, 75,000 of whom live in camps in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. This population has been forced to adapt to new lives away from their home country and new generations have been born in exile – generations who may or may not identify with their parents' native place.

In November 2009 a one-month research project, undertaken with

the help of the Organization for Eelam Refugee Rehabilitation (OfERR),¹ investigated the reactions and opinions of Tamil refugees regarding the possibility of repatriation following the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009.

Interviewees were drawn from the three main waves of refugees: in 1984, 1990 and 2006. One third had suffered more than one displacement and had returned to Sri Lanka only to leave again a few years later and one third were either born in India or came to India for the last time before the age of ten.

Of the 30 interviewees² surveyed in this project, 15 said they would stay in India and 15 said they would go back to Sri Lanka. There was no strong divide along gender lines. People who came from the Mannar and Trincomalee regions of Sri Lanka were more likely to say they would return to Sri Lanka, while those from Jaffna and Mullaitivu were more likely to say they would stay in India. Likewise, those who last arrived in 2006 were more likely to say they would return to Sri Lanka than those who last arrived in 1990.

Changing expectations

None of the interviewees had expected to stay in India this long. Laxsman, a 22-year-old man who came from Sri Lanka at the age of three, explained that his mother "felt [that on] arriving in India in 1990, we would definitely return in three months to Sri Lanka. But 19 years have passed." Similar sentiments were repeated over and over, even by those who had arrived comparatively recently, in 2006.

The focus on return, and the hope that it would come soon, created a sense of anticipation among the refugees in Tamil Nadu. Security was first and foremost in their minds. Refugees felt that it was only to safeguard their lives that they were in India. Everything else – such as a comfortable (and permanent) living space – was a secondary priority. As pointed out by Murugan, who arrived in Tamil Nadu in 2007:

"Actually, when I came here ... all my expectation was to keep my life. That's all. Then, after coming here there are some restrictions – we can't go out of the camp without permission and we cannot go out of the camp for work for two or three days. Everyday we have to sign at the gate as we leave... So these types of restrictions are here... Some tightened freedom is there..."

The underlying assumption for him was that some restrictions might not be ideal but they are manageable, provided his life is safe. Even the physical settings of some camps reflected a similar reality, with family residences divided for years only by sheets.

For some of the interviewees, this attitude of anticipation has shifted in significant ways within the past few years. For Ganesh, a 66-year-old man who first came to India in 1990, events experienced in exile have changed his expectations:

[interpreter] *"He's not returning to Sri Lanka because his family, his wealth and all have been destroyed in Sri Lanka... After the tsunami, he feels Sri Lanka is no better... [in] the nearby houses, nearly 122 people died in the tsunami... relatives and neighbours also, so he feels that [if he has] no relatives and neighbours in Sri Lanka, why settle back in Sri Lanka?"*

For Ganesh, the 2004 tsunami had made him rethink his expectations of returning home. Interviewees cited how other specific events like the cessation of the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement forced them to reconsider any return to Sri Lanka. For others, the process was more mundane – a gradual understanding over the last few years that return would not be immediate, if at all. Illness, age, a child's birth, education or lack of knowledge of the homeland all influenced expectations about returning home for different people.

These attitudes have found parallels at official levels as well. OfERR and other agencies had recently completed a project to update some camps with permanent wooden dividers between individual spaces. One such camp is located at Arni, a camp to the west of Chennai which was established in 1990 in an old warehouse.

The government originally provided spaces inside for each family, divided by cloth walls, and only within the last year has the cloth been replaced by plywood sheets. Similarly, Tamil Nadu's chief minister said in October 2009 that he would make a plea to India's central government to confer Indian citizenship on the Sri Lankan refugees. A month and a half later, Tamil Nadu announced Rs 1 billion

of aid for the refugees, including them in various government schemes and setting money aside to improve camp facilities and amenities.

The younger generation

As in many refugee situations, a whole generation has been born in exile – or left their home country at a very young age. In the case of Sri Lankan Tamils in India, asylum is not a path to citizenship and refugee children born in India are not Indian citizens. Instead, their births are registered with the Sri Lankan Deputy High Commission in Chennai, and registration then leads to citizenship in Sri Lanka. However, for many in this generation a return to Sri Lanka may not be their first choice.

This generation still see themselves as Sri Lankan Tamils, follow news about Sri Lanka and have views on both the conflict and Sri Lankan politics. Secondhand news is filtered through parents, people in camp, relatives in Sri Lanka and newspapers and other media sources.

Unlike for their parents, however, camp life for the younger generation is routine and seen as 'normal' or comfortable. Nimal, a 25-year-old man who arrived in India at the age of five, described his everyday camp life, saying, "So when you talk of my schooldays, we go to school, we come back, we worship, we go to the evening tuition centre, we study, we come back, we go to sleep, and again we get up and go." Another interviewee said that, growing up in India, his habits, culture and even style of dress were Indian and not Sri Lankan. Likewise, Laxsman said:

"I was only three years old when I arrived in India. India gives me education, shelter and other things. I love Sri Lanka because it is my motherland but I love India more, because it gives me my life."

In interviews and informal conversations, people from the younger generation would often say that they wanted to stay in India as they did not 'know' Sri Lanka. The younger generation's future can also be an important push or pull factor for parents, some of whom felt that their children's education might be jeopardised by returning, others believing

that their children would receive a better education in Sri Lanka.

Family in Sri Lanka

News and information collected from relatives and friends in Sri Lanka played an important role. If relatives said that it was safe and encouraged them to come back, some interviewees expressed a desire not only to return and to do so quickly. Kalyani, who had already submitted a letter to UNHCR asking to return, had originally left Mannar following government restrictions placed on fishing. Through her brother who was still in Mannar, she had heard that the fishing ban had been lifted and the district was now safe. She was eager to return to Sri Lanka, especially as her husband was sick and one of his legs was paralysed. Her brother was encouraging her to come back to Sri Lanka, asking why she continued to suffer in India when all her family could help her and look after her husband if they returned.

Similarly, those who did not have regular communication with family in Sri Lanka, or whose family did not feel safe, were less likely to say they would return. Anand – a 29-year-old man who came to India in 1990 – said he had regular contact with his relatives but they were moving from place to place without "security for their life" and advising Anand not to return: "You have to give some more time. We will let you know when the time is right." He had no immediate plan to return – barring what he saw as a permanent solution – and planned to stay in India, availing himself of Indian citizenship if it were offered to him.

For any voluntary repatriation programme to be successful among the Sri Lankan Tamil population in India, it must acknowledge the nuanced and individualised nature of the factors affecting the desire or possibility of return – and address the expectations aroused by presenting repatriation as the most favoured solution.

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1. <http://www.oferr.org>

2. Via 30 semi-structured formal interviews with camp residents and OfERR volunteers, as well as informal conversations and observations. All names are pseudonyms.