

ETHNIC CONFLICT AND MIGRATION: AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF TAMIL MIGRATION FROM SRI LANKA

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INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka is a small, multi-ethnic, low-income country located at the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent. It was engulfed in an ‘unwinnable war’ for almost three decades. The Sri Lankan armed forces and the Liberation of Tamil Tigers Eelam (LTTE) fought with all their might until the war came to an end on May 19, 2009. The long civil war cost more than 100,000 lives and billions of rupees.¹ The conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE or Tamil Tigers, is still regarded as one of the longest civil wars in Asia. The ethnic conflict between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils, which has shaped the internal hostility, has plagued the country since its independence from British rule on February 4, 1948.²

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1. Channa Wickremesekera, *The Tamil Separatist War in Sri Lanka* (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), p. 1.
2. Jayshree Bajoria, “The Sri Lankan Conflict,” Council on Foreign Relations, New York, May 2009, <https://www.cfr.org/background/sri-lankan-conflict>. Accessed on August 20, 2024.

The issue of language or “linguistic nationalism” was at the core of the ethnic problems of the post independent Sri Lanka.³ The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), under the leadership of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike campaigned on the “Sinhala Only” language policy to appease the Sinhala nationalists, for whom Sinhala culture and religion were heavily linked to the language, and promised to make Sinhala the official language.⁴

The Tamils, however, found the policy to be profoundly offensive and demeaning as it devalued their language, was against the existing pluralistic, inclusive linguistic set-up, and would lead to significant economic and educational disadvantage to the Tamil community.⁵

The Sinhalese Only Act of 1956 caused a rift between the Sinhalese and Tamils. It led to the first anti-Tamil riots, which were followed by other riots in 1958, resulting in the rise of policies that promoted the Sinhalese-Buddhist hegemony.⁶ The Act was opposed by the Tamils, as it forced them to learn Sinhalese to be eligible for government jobs. The Tamils, who were in the majority in the north and east, voiced their concerns about the threat of marginalisation. Their insecurities multiplied with the failure of the negotiated settlement with the government. To redress the Tamil grievances, the Sri Lankan government tried to work through power sharing measures in 1958 and 1965, but they were stymied by the rapidly strengthening lobby of Sinhala nationalists and Buddhist monks.⁷ The Sinhalese changed the country’s name to Sri Lanka from Ceylon in 1972 and Buddhism was made the nation’s official religion.⁸

The Tamils living in Sri Lanka struggled to find an equal footing within the economic and socio-political set-up of the now independent, Sinhala-dominated nation. One description of the

3. K. M. De Silva, *Managing Ethnic Tensions in Multi-ethnic Societies: Sri Lanka, 1980-1985* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1986), p. 197.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 216.

5. Reggie Siriwardena, “National Identity in Sri Lanka: Problems in Communication and Education,” in *Sri Lanka: The Ethnic Conflict: Myths, Realities and Perspectives* (New Delhi: Navrang, 1984), p. 218.

6. David Little, *Sri Lanka: The Invention of Enmity* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 1994), pp. 68-72.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 72-74.

8. Bajoria, n. 2.

condition of the Tamil people living in Sri Lanka in the early 1980s is given below:

A match box cost me 15 Rupees, ... one litre of kerosene costs 400 Rupees, ... no electricity, no hospital, my house and my beautiful village were burnt down to the ground by the military forces and militants of Sri Lanka ... there is no guarantee that I can spend another day with my children..... my wife says to our two-year-old daughter "eat soon otherwise the military bombing will destroy our shelter and you won't have food for days."⁹

The lives of the Tamils were in a constant state of flux with the start of the civil war in 1983, and its continuous impact on their livelihoods and basic ways of functioning became a significant reason why many decided to leave their homes and migrate to other places for a safer future.

TAMILS AND MIGRATION

Sri Lanka has lured many migration researchers with its unique features. It has produced various types of migration, ranging from highly skilled to non-skilled migrants, including students, refugees, economic migrants, political migrants, legal migrants, and irregular migrants.¹⁰ Approximately one in twenty Sri Lankans is permanently settled outside.¹¹

The forced migration in the 1980s, with the civil war, and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) insurrection, forced mostly Tamil Sri Lankans to leave the island nation. These Tamils came to India, seeking humanitarian assistance and relief from conflict. However,

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9. Himanshi Raizada, "Sri Lankan Refugees in India: The Problem and the Uncertainty, Personal Interview," *International Journal of Peace and Development*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2013, p. 3.
 10. Pavitha Jayawardena, "Sri Lankan Out-Migration: Five Key Waves Since Independence," *University of Colombo Review*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2020, pp. 103-104.
 11. Central Bank of Sri Lanka, "Annual Report 2019," 2019, <https://www.cbsl.gov.lk/en/publications/economic-and-financial-reports/annual-reports/annual-report-2019>. Accessed on September 1, 2024.

sometimes they used it as a stepping stone before migrating to the West.¹²

Geographical proximity and historical connection to neighbouring India have made it the most obvious choice of migration for most Sri Lankan Tamils. India has hosted many individuals from neighbouring countries like Tibet, Bangladesh, and even Sri Lanka. However, India is not a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the matter of refugees or its 1967 Protocol. The 1951 Act aims at protecting the social and economic rights of a refugee as agreed upon by international laws. As per India's Foreigners Act, 1946, the term "refugee" is covered under "foreigner", and is used broadly for all aliens living in the country, either temporarily or permanently.¹³ India has seen a steady influx of Tamil migrants since the start of the conflict in 1983. Most of these refugees found themselves settling in refugee camps in the southern Tamil-speaking state of India, with linguistic familiarity, geographical proximity, and overall support from the state government.¹⁴ The migration resulted in the refugees landing at Dhanushkodi Island in the Ramanathapuram district of Tamil Nadu. The process of identification from there was pretty straightforward, albeit a little basic. Upon arrival, the refugees were questioned by the local police to ensure that they were genuine refugees, escaping a war and affected by the ethnic troubles of Sri Lanka. After the initial inquiry, the refugees were screened by the "Q" branch and the Intelligence Bureau to ensure that they were not members of the LTTE, and to separate them if they were. If, during the verification process, the individuals were identified as members of the LTTE or smugglers, they were separated and put in special camps to restrict their movements and safeguard the security of the state, under the U/s 3(2)e of India's Foreigners Act, 1946. The individuals were also checked for identification documents, school records, or other such

12. M. Dias and R. Jayasundera, "Sri Lanka: The Anxieties and Opportunities of Out-Migration," in P. S. Ahn, ed., *Migrant Workers and Human Rights: Out-Migration from South Asia* (Geneva: International Labour Organisation, 2004), pp. 160-163.

13. Arjun Nair, "National Refugee Law for India: Benefits and Roadblocks," Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies. 2007, New Delhi, pp. 2-14.

14. E.T.B. Sivapriyan, "A Case for Refugee Policy, Protection: Tamil Nadu," *Deccan Herald*, September 2, 2023, *Deccan Herald*, <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/tamil-nadu/a-case-for-refugee-policy-protection-tamil-nadu-2670821>. Accessed on August 20, 2024.

paperwork. Following this, the individuals were registered in refugee admission registers and were given refugee identity cards with their photos affixed. After that, the refugees were sent to the Mandapam transit camp in Ramanathapuram district. The stay of the refugees in this camp was short, following which they were sent to other refugee camps across Tamil Nadu.¹⁵

Tamil refugees poured steadily into India in the 1980s and 1990s, and can be categorised into groups ranging from camp refugees, non-camp refugees, and special camp refugees. A sizeable number of refugees also entered India under the garb of tourists, patients, students, etc., and then did not leave after their visas expired. The Indian government, as well as the Tamil Nadu state government were inefficient in sending these refugees back, as monitoring them constantly and building accountability was quite tricky.¹⁶

Upon arrival in the asylum country, just like other refugees, the Sri Lankan Tamils also needed basic facilities to set up their lives again. The local government, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and international agencies met these basic needs and provided other humanitarian assistance. The Tamil Nadu government extended a lot of the facilities enjoyed by Indian civilians to the refugees in the camps, including basic housing assistance, monetary assistance, free rations, assistance with education, medical facilities, and in getting daily wage jobs. The children were provided free education, and over time, the camps were supplied with 24-hour electricity. With all the initiatives taken by the central and state governments, a total of INR 500 crore was spent on the Sri Lankan Refugee Relief Programme during the war (1983-2009).¹⁷

At the peak of the conflict in Sri Lanka, India hosted over 300,000 refugees, which by January 2024 had come down to around 98,000 of whom 57,975 lived in 105 government-run camps across Tamil Nadu,

15. Valatheeswaran Chinnakkannu and Irudaya Rajan Sebastian, "Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees in India: Rehabilitation Mechanism, Livelihood Strategies, and Lasting Solutions," *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2011, p. 32. 10.1093/rsq/hdr005. Accessed on August 23, 2024.

16. R. Sankar, "Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees in Tamil Nadu: An Overview," *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2019, p. 550.

17. Chinnakkannu, and Sebastian, n. 15, pp. 33-34.

while 40,000 lived outside the camps.¹⁸ The decrease in numbers over the years was because a substantial number of Tamil refugees had returned to their home country, especially during the Norway facilitated ceasefire years between 2002-06 and then again after the civil war ended in May 2009.¹⁹ As per the reports submitted by the Tamil Nadu state in 2023, over 45 per cent of the Sri Lankan Tamils living in rehabilitation camps in the state were born in India. Of these numbers, around 79 per cent had lived in India for more than 30 years, 7 per cent had been in India anywhere between 21 and 30 years, and 14 per cent had spent 11 to 20 years in India. Furthermore, 8 per cent of the Sri Lankan Tamils were married to Indian citizens.²⁰

Over the years, the Government of India and Tamil Nadu government have launched various initiatives to provide some relief to the Tamil refugees living in the camps. They have been allowed to live as families, educate their children, and earn wages as daily workers. The Indian government has done all this on humanitarian grounds, as India is not a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention. The Tamil Nadu government has often gone beyond what the Indian government has offered to these refugees. One particular example of this is seen when the Tamil refugees are compared to the 63,170 Tibetan refugees living across India. The union government, in 2014, had formulated the Tibetan Rehabilitation Policy (TRP), but the Tamil Nadu government adopted it for the Sri Lankan Tamils living in the state, and has used it to provide welfare schemes to the community.²¹

18. S.C. Chandrasaran, "A Story of Displacement to one of Empowerment," *The Hindu*, June 20, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/a-story-of-displacement-to-one-of-empowerment/article68308770.ece>. Accessed on August 24, 2024.

19. N. Sahitya Moorthy, "A State of Statelessness: The Fate of Tamil Peoples from Sri Lanka in India," Observer Research Foundation, April 3, 2024, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/a-state-of-statelessness-the-fate-of-tamil-peoples-from-sri-lanka-in-india>. Accessed on August 24, 2024.

20. "45% of Sri Lankan Tamils Living in Camps were Born in India: Report," *The Hindu*, November 23, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/45-of-sri-lankan-tamils-living-in-camps-were-born-in-india-report/article67566485.ece#:~:text=About%208%25%20of%20the%20Sri,are%20living%20outside%20the%20camps>. Accessed on August 27, 2024.

21. T. Ramakrishnan, "Exiting Refugee Status, Getting Back Dignity," *The Hindu*, June 30, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/exiting-refugee-status-getting-back-dignity/article69714272.ece>. Accessed on July 10, 2025.

Till 2021, the refugee influx had been quite persistent, with a few years of lull. These refugees who came to India could be categorised into a few groups: Tamils living in camps, Tamils living outside camps, and special camp Tamils. Though there are basic facilities provided, a significant number of refugees fall in the category of these living in camps, who came to India at the peak of the war; the second category of refugees, who live outside the camps are those Tamils who are relatively well-off and have connections in the Tamil society in India, but are, however, required to register themselves and their families at local police stations. The state government often takes out circulars asking them to register themselves at the nearest police station in an attempt to keep them in check; however, many refugees who fall in this category prefer to be anonymous and are able to mingle with the Tamil society in India. The special camp category comprises the ex-LTTE members who were kept in prison camps initially. As of now, of the three special camps, two have been shut down. At the same time, one still holds ex-LTTE members.²² Since the economic crisis in 2022, the migration from Sri Lanka has been primarily for financial reasons, and that has also impacted how the Indian state perceives the Tamil refugees. India has repeatedly mentioned its security concerns, as well as the bilateral relations between India and Sri Lanka, and the persistent proximity of the Sri Lankan government to China.²³

Another issue that has emerged in recent times has been India's Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019, which lists various categories of asylum seekers from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh, but not the Tamils from Sri Lanka.²⁴ The Act was particularly shocking for the Tamils living in the camps, considering the large number of individuals who were born in the refugee camps

22. Raizada, n. 9, pp. 3-4.

23. Sreedevi Jayarajan, "As Distressed Sri Lankans Trickle in, India's Lack of Refugee Policy Poses Problems", *The News Minute*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.thenewsminute.com/tamil-nadu/distressed-sri-lankans-trickle-indias-lack-refugee-policy-poses-problems-162251>. Accessed on September 10, 2024.

24. Kaushik Deka, "Everything You Want to Know About the CAA and NRC," *India Today*, December 23, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/everything-you-wanted-to-know-about-the-cao-and-nrc-1630771-2019-12-23>. Accessed on September 10, 2024.

in Tamil Nadu to Sri Lankan parents and who did not have a claim to any citizenship.²⁵

However, despite the Act and the general anxiety among the refugees, the Tamil Nadu government has continued to provide facilities to the people in the camps. The Indian government's general policy when it comes to refugees is to favour voluntary repatriation and the principle of non-refoulement, a practice that does not force refugees or asylum seekers to return to the country in which they are liable to be persecuted.²⁶

Another major issue for the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees is the treatment of the Sri Lankan government towards the Tamils. Multiple governments have come to power in Sri Lanka since the end of the war in 2009. They have all discussed issues of reconciliation, resettlement, and rehabilitation. However, different governments have had different representation and reintegration plans, which have continued to cause problems with issues like land, safety, rehabilitation, housing, and livelihood.²⁷

In recent times, since the onset of the economic crisis in Sri Lanka, the Sri Lankan refugees have been docking their boats on the Indian coast, not because they are fleeing a war, but because they are seeking economic stability while fighting hunger. Since March 2022, many individuals have migrated from Sri Lanka seeking stability in India. However, the Indian government's stance has been much harder on such refugees, especially in view of national security.²⁸

With regard to the case of Sri Lankan Tamils living here for decades, various instances have resulted in varying outcomes. A

25. Aditi Phadnis, "Lankan Tamil Refugees in Tamil Nadu: The Nowhere People," *India Today*, February 23, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/sri-lankan-tamil-refugees-in-tamil-nadu-citizenship-amendment-act-1771984-2021-02-22>. Accessed on September 10, 2024.

26. T. Ramakrishnan, "Sri Lankan Refugees: The Long Wait for Indian Citizenship," *The Hindu*, January 13, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/the-long-wait-for-indian-citizenship/article67734873.ece>. Accessed on September 11, 2024.

27. Nethmi Rajawasam, "President, Tamil MPs Discuss Sri Lankan Refugees in India," *Economy Next*, December 22, 2023, <https://economynext.com/president-tamil-mps-discuss-sri-lankan-refugees-in-india-144685/>. Accessed on September 11, 2024.

28. Prathana Sen, "Concern for Sri Lankans Fleeing to India Amid Economic Crisis," *The Interpreter*, September 18, 2022, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/concern-sri-lankans-fleeing-india-amid-economic-crisis>. Accessed on September 11, 2024.

judge of the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court, in his verdict about the fate of the Hindu Tamil refugees with regards to the CAA, observed that they were eligible for applying for Indian citizenship, even if Sri Lanka was not mentioned in the CAA.²⁹ K. Nalini, the petitioner, a Sri Lankan Tamil born in India had cast her vote in the Lok Sabha election on April 19, 2024, after she became the first naturalised Indian national.³⁰ In contrast to this, in 2025, the Supreme Court of India refused to interfere with the 2022 verdict of the Madras High Court which reduced the sentence of a refugee from 10 years to seven years—he had been convicted under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act—after he gave an undertaking that he would leave India once the term of his sentence was over. However, he moved the Supreme Court, seeking permission to stay in India. The Supreme Court observed that India was not a *dharamshala* (free shelter), and refused to change the verdict of the Madras High Court.³¹

TAMIL REFUGEES IN TAMIL NADU

The first massive batch of Tamils refugees came to Tamil Nadu in 1983. Table 1 shows the four stages in which the refugees came to India between 1983 and 2010.³²

Table 1: Stages of Migration of Tamil Sri Lankans to Tamil Nadu

Stages	Years	Number of Migrants
1 st Stage	1983-1987	134,053
2 nd Stage	1989-1991	122,078
3 rd Stage	1996-2002	22,418
4 th Stage	2006-2010	24,257

Source: ETB Sivapriyan “A Case for Refugee Policy, Protection: Tamil Nadu”, *Deccan Herald*, September 2, 2023.

29. “Principles of CAA Apply to Sri Lankan Hindu Tamils, says Madras High Court,” *The Hindu*, October 18, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/principles-of-caa-apply-to-sl-hindu-tamils-says-hc/article66022691.ece>. Accessed on September 11, 2024.

30. Nahla Nainar, “K. Nalini, Resident of Sri Lankan Refugee Camp in Tiruchi, Becomes First From her Community to Vote,” *The Hindu*, April 19, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Tiruchirapalli/k-nalini-resident-of-sri-lankan-refugee-camp-in-tiruchi-becomes-first-from-her-community-to-vote/article68083439.ece>. Accessed on September 11, 2024.

31. Ramakrishnan, n. 21.

32. Sankar, n. 16, p. 551.

The Tamil Nadu government in recent years has been particularly forthcoming in making the refugees comfortable by extending facilities to the refugee camps that were meant for Indian citizens, including driving licences and employment as drivers. They have also received maternal benefits, medical health insurance, first graduate concession, and even yearly Pongal gifts. The families in the camp are provided free rice under the Public Distribution Scheme and monetary assistance from the government, with the head of the family receiving INR 1,500 each month and other members above the age of 12 receiving a monthly sum of INR 1,000.³³

As per the report published by the Tamil Nadu government in 2023 regarding civilian documentation in the camps, 95 per cent of the refugees have Aadhar cards, 78 per cent have bank accounts, one per cent have a Sri Lankan passport, and approximately three per cent have a Sri Lankan national identification (ID) card. Of the total population in camps, 51 per cent are females, 49 per cent are males, and 25 per cent are children. Fifty-nine per cent have either primary or secondary education, and 10 per cent have tertiary education. The percentage of employed individuals is at 31 per cent, and 18 per cent are homemakers. Forty-nine per cent are either students or currently unemployed, and among the employed, 79 per cent are males and 22 per cent are females.³⁴

The Tamil Nadu government has also brought in projects to improve the lives of the refugees such as the construction of new homes for them. In view of the deteriorating conditions of many dwellings within the 104 camps across Tamil Nadu, the Commissionerate of Rehabilitation and the Welfare of Non-Resident Tamils has decided to build new houses in some of the oldest camps.³⁵ In 2022, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Stalin, in the State Assembly, announced a project to rebuild 7,469 worn out houses across the 104 camps. The construction of 3,510 houses began

33. Sivapriyan, n. 14.

34. n. 20.

35. The Hindu Bureau, "Tamil Nadu CM Stalin Inaugurates 30 New Houses for Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees at Vazhavanthankottai," *The Hindu*, September 17, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Tiruchirapalli/cm-inaugurates-30-new-houses-for-sri-lankan-tamil-refugees-at-vazhavanthankottai/article67318452.ece>. Accessed on September 13, 2024.

shortly after that. Then, in 2023, he inaugurated 1,591 new houses for Sri Lankan Tamil refugees across 13 districts in Tamil Nadu as part of the completion of Phase 1 of the project.³⁶

The camps were built in the late 1980s, and had shabby infrastructure. Leaves, asbestos, cement, and iron sheets, with small windows and doors, were used to make these shelters. The camps were crowded, especially considering the influx of the number of refugees during the first two waves, so the sanitation in the camps was never up to standard. Dirty water, overflowing septic tanks, sewage overflow, and a shortage of functioning toilets were common problems in the camps, and these issues constantly gave the camps a foul stench and left people at the camps ill. The government did set up medical insurance schemes for the refugees, however to avail of these facilities, they needed documents to establish that they were camp residents. These certificates were issued by the camp administrative officer, who the camp leader could approach; however, the refugees were often faced with the demand of cash as a bribe to get the documents which would help them in accessing free medical facilities.³⁷

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has very little mandate in India. The Government of India does not accept funds from UNHCR, and it also does not provide it access to the camps in Tamil Nadu. Foreign-funded NGOs also do not get access to these refugees. Then, there is India's stance on refugees with the new Citizenship Amendment Act, its national security concerns and specific foreign policy agendas. Organisations that do have access to these camps include the Organisation for Eelam Refugee Rehabilitation (OfERR), which is run by the refugees themselves and is headed by S. C. Chandrahasan.³⁸ It was started as an organisation to help students secure admission in colleges and

36. Express News Service, "Tamil Nadu: 1,591 Houses for Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees in 13 Districts Inaugurated," *The Indian Express*, September 18, 2023, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2023/Sep/18/tamil-nadu1591-houses-for-sri-lankan-tamil-refugees-in-13-districts-inaugurated-2615947.html>. Accessed on September 13, 2024.

37. Chinnakkannu, and Sebastian, n. 15, pp. 34-5.

38. Organisation for Eelam Refugee Rehabilitation, <https://oferrindia.org/aboutus/>. Accessed on September 14, 2024.

institutions. Over the years, it has diversified to look into the issues of health, vocational guidance, psychological counselling, etc. The organisation has been able to help students get a quota; however, it has no access to the special camps. Another organisation that works with the refugees is the Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS). It looks into a variety of issues, including putting up sheds, providing water and mats, and helping in the fields of education and vocational training. JRS has also helped in setting up schools within the camps.³⁹

The Indian government's stance is clear: it doesn't insist on forcible repatriation of refugees, even if the conditions in their home country have improved. The central government has a consistent approach to citizenship. Any foreigner can acquire citizenship by registration under Section 5 of the Citizenship Act 1995, or by naturalisation under Section 6 of the Act. However, an illegal migrant doesn't qualify for citizenship by either process.⁴⁰

With the change of guard in Sri Lanka, there has been some hope, and the new Sri Lankan President Aruna Kumar Dissanayake did manage to gain the trust of the Tamils in Sri Lanka with promises of return of the land owned by the Tamils, regular local elections, and smooth administrative functioning.⁴¹ However, the Sri Lankan refugees are not particularly hopeful about him, which, combined with the financial hardships in the aftermath of the 2022 economic crisis, has not made a strong case for the Sri Lankan government among the refugees in the camps in Tamil Nadu.⁴² An instance of the reality of their fear was the incident of a Sri Lankan Tamil in his

39. Raizada, n. 9, p. 17.

40. T. Ramakrishnan, "No Data on Sri Lankan Refugees Willing to Return or those who have Sought Indian Citizenship, says RTI Reply," *The Hindu*, July 31, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/no-data-on-sri-lankan-refugees-willing-to-return-or-those-who-have-sought-indian-citizenship-says-rti-reply/article69874231.ece>. Accessed on July 31, 2025.

41. Meera Srinivasan, "Sri Lanka President Aruna Dissanayake Promises Return of Tamils' Land Grabbed by State Agencies," *The Hindu*, November 10, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/sri-lanka-president-anura-dissanayake-promises-return-of-tamils-land-grabbed-by-state-agencies/article68852893.ece>. Accessed on December 10, 2024.

42. Harini M, "Change in SL Guard Fails to Inspire Confidence in Refugees to Return," *The New Indian Express*, November 18, 2024, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2024/Nov/18/change-in-sl-guard-fails-to-inspire-confidence-in-refugees-to-return>. Accessed on December 10, 2024.

seventies who returned to Sri Lanka on his own, after having spent decades in India. His repatriation was facilitated by the UNHCR in Chennai, and he had the appropriate papers. Still, when he reached Palaly airport, in Jaffna, he was detained by the authorities for lack of proper documentation. The current Sri Lankan government, which has been trying to portray itself as welcoming back of the Tamil refugees, tried to course correct by categorising the incident as an “automatic application” of the law to persons who had emigrated illegally.⁴³

CONCLUSION

The case of Sri Lankan Tamil migration points to the intersection of protracted conflict, displacement, and politics of asylum in South Asia. India, despite no formal induction, has provided sustained humanitarian relief to the Tibetan and Sri Lankan Tamil refugees, among various other groups. However, India’s Citizenship Amendment Act, its constantly shifting diplomatic relations with Sri Lanka and the enduring insecurity in Sri Lanka have impacted freedom and accessibility for the refugees living in Tamil Nadu. The financial challenge of sustaining themselves in the camps is also a bleak reality for the families living in camps, considering that they survive mostly on Indian government money schemes and menial, unskilled, low-paying labour.

The Sri Lankan government’s lack of commitment in terms of a proper functional plan to rehabilitate these refugees in Sri Lanka and ensure social and economic security also adds to their state of helplessness. A sustainable resolution not only depends on India’s continued support but also Sri Lanka’s genuine commitment to reconciliation, rights protection, and durable reintegration strategies for the displaced Tamil communities.

The struggle of the Tamil refugees highlights the limitations of *ad hoc* humanitarianism, contradictions of selective inclusion, and the pitfalls of unresolved displacement. An abiding solution needs more than humanitarian aid: it requires substantial reforms in Sri Lanka, policy innovations in India, and international engagement. With the

43. Sivapriyan, n. 14.

ever-changing dynamics in the neighbourhood and India's inward shifting focus, it is crucial for the current Sri Lankan government to focus on a multi-layer approach to ensure a future for the displaced Tamils that is secure and dignified.