

Shattered Lives Of Srilankan Women Refugees – A Reality Check

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Abstract

A woman in the twentieth century has achieved everything. They have made their presence felt in all fields and have even stepped on the moon and glitter in all fields like a star. But when we look back into history, once women were considered as homemakers and regarded as a lust commodity. Nevertheless, having come up in society from such a situation, are they really free and liberated from the clutches of social evils? Probably not - Nirbhaya case is a classic example for this in the contemporary world. If a woman in our country is treated like this then what would be the situation of a woman who got asylum in India and stays in refugee camps? Let us explore.

In India in ancient and medieval period women couldn't get any equal status with men. During freedom struggle movement we can see proud women warriors who stood against the British rule and raised their voice against them. As Mahatma Gandhi said the part the women of India played will be written in letters of gold. But in reality, from the time of the birth of a female child, she is considered as a burden and many of them even aborted the female bud from their womb. This reveals female infanticide is prevalent in many parts of India. If the bud is escaped from that, most of the parents don't give priority for their education. In their mind-set, she belongs to some other family. Most of them dislike female children because they have to pay huge sum of money and wealth as dowry. Isn't this true even today? Even after marriage the groom's family harasses, expects and demands such things which leads to suicide and self-immolation by many women. The government and many social reformists implemented various Acts to prevent the above mentioned atrocities against women. But still these evils exist and spread like a contagious disease in our society. In India women are considered as Shakthi (Goddess). But they don't expect such honour and want merely to be considered as a human being.

Dependence has played an important role in each woman from her birth to death. Once each woman had to depend on their father, husband, and children. But now this has changed and many woman stand independently even though there is guarantee for their safety lives. When we compare the woman in stateless condition and getting asylum in another country it's so despairing and downhearted.

Status of women refugees:

The southern part of India shares few unique features with Srilanka. Most of the Tamils in Srilanka were once migrated and brought by the Britishers for estate work. So the language and culture of Tamils in Srilanka is almost similar to that of people of Tamilnadu in India. This emotional bond is the reason behind the Rehabilitation of Srilankan refugees mainly in Tamilnadu and the Indian government permitted establishment of refugee camps in Srilanka.

How is a refugee woman from another country treated in India? They are people who fled the country of their origin leaving back everything like their own customs, beliefs, culture and belongings to save their own and children's life. Most of the Srilankan refugees are women who are ill-treated, raped and faced unexplained difficulties from the native country and who just want a peaceful life in a quiet atmosphere without sounds of gunshots etc. Will they be happy in the country where they are provided asylum? Hopeless situation, poverty and poor economic condition are the main factors faced by the women refugees in India. Most of them had become orphans because, the war in their own country made them scattered and their closed ones would be in some other camps or may have lost their lives. In this condition they have to face all problems and mentally become ill. Their lives in camps is also not a comfortable one because they have to obey rules and restrictions of the government and are treated like a prisoner. They also don't have any right to work in public sector and no right to buy any property. If they get any job opportunity to work in other sector they are cheated by many by not paying the salary. Most of them won't recruit them because they are refugees and a soft corner with them disappeared in 1991 after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. Many refugee women work as daily wagers in shops, fields, factories and road construction projects etc. This led many to flee to some other country to seek better opportunities. So many fall in the hands of fake intermediates who promised help them to go abroad. The government, NGOS and other organizations give assistance to the refugees especially for women empowerment. Is it sufficient for them? In this article, we explore the schemes that are available for the Srilankan refugee women and whether these aids will be sufficient for them or not.

Reason behind refugee flow in India:

The main reason for the ethnic crisis is the conflict between the Tamil militant groups and the Srilankan government for creation of a separate Tamil Eelam. Both sides showed little regard for the safety and wellbeing of civilians and violated international humanitarian law by indiscriminately firing on civilian areas and unnecessarily preventing the delivery of humanitarian need. After the ceasefire was violated since the mid of 2006 and the resultant increased military operations, scores of civilians have been killed and more than 208000 people displaced.

Between January 2006 and June 2007, a report of more than 1100 new abductions or disappearance were reported in Tamil majority provinces. The LTTE is stated to be the main reason behind this. Many of them lost their loved ones from children to elders. Recruitment of children for militant operations (child soldiers) was also prevalent. Many Tamil women were forced to abort their wombs. Due to these miserable conditions, most of the Tamils abandoned their homeland and came to India as refugees. The 25 years old civil war in

Srilanka came to an end in 2009 but still why the inflow of refugees towards India continued still?

Influx of Refugees:

Thousands of Tamils from Srilanka due to hunger and even the denial of basic necessities of life and their life has become a burden for them and since their life is endangered, migrated to India. In the wake of ethnic violence in Srilanka, 1,34,053 refugees crossed over to India between July, 1983 and November, 1987. Of these, 46,101 refugees returned to Sri Lanka. In the second phase of ethnic violence, 1,22,241 refugees arrived in India between August, 1989 and April, 1991. Thus the total number of Srilanka refugees in India as on Jan 19, 1992 was 2,10,193. Of these, 1,13,772 refugees were staying in the camps in Tamil Nadu and Orissa. 96,421 refugees were granted temporary stay facilities with the hope that once ground conditions in Srilanka improved, they would return to their homeland. With the improvement in the ground conditions in Srilanka, the process of repatriation of refugees commenced with effect from January, 20, 1992 by utilising ships belonging to the Shipping Corporation of India, Andaman and Nicobar Administration and aircrafts from the Indian Airlines. 54,187 refugees were repatriated between January 20, 1992 and March 20, 1995. As on November 30, 1999, about 66,000 Srilankan refugees were staying in 113 refugee camps in Tamilnadu. The majority of the refugees who have fled to Taminadu belong to Killinochi, Triconamalaee, Batticaloa and Jaffna. These refugees sell all their valuables including land and also jewellery to find the necessary money to embark on the journey which costs appropriately Rs.8000/- per adult and Rs.4000/- per child from Srilanka to Tamilnadu by boat.

Influx of Refugees in Phased Manner to India:

Period	Inflow
Phase – I(24.07.83 to 31.12.1987)	1,34,053
Phase – II (25.08.89 to 30.04.1991)	1,22,078
Phase – III (31.07.96 to 31.08.2003)	22,418
Phase – IV (12.01.06 to 04.01.2010)	24,527
Total	3,03,076

In India there is no separate law governing refugees and their legal status is regulated by the Foreigner's Act 1946 and India's Citizenship Act 1955. This Act defines all non-citizens who enter the country without visas as illegal migrants and there is no differentiation between refugees / asylum seekers and others. The fundamental rights of India under part (iii) guarantees certain fundamental rights to all persons. These rights are applicable to the refugees also. Sri Lankans who are suspected to be a threat to national security are considered as militants and detained in special camps in Chenglepet or Vellore. However, under normal circumstances, the Indian government recognises Sri Lankan nationals fleeing their country fearing violence and terrorism as refugees and protects them. They are lodged in various camps located across the state.

Total No. of Refugees in Tamil Nadu as on 04.01.2010

Category	Families	Persons
Camp Refugees	19,916	73,251
Non Camp Tamils	11,478	32,242
Total No of Ordinary Camps (in 26 districts)		113
Total No of Special Camps (Sub- Jail)		2

Who is a Refugee?

A refugee is a person seeking asylum in a foreign country in order to escape persecution, war, terrorism, extreme poverty, famine and natural disaster. Most of them moved from their home country due to fear of being prosecuted due to one of the following reasons – race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular group or political organisation etc. the main reason for their migration is for protection from persecution. A person can be a political refugee but he shouldn't be economic refugee. If a person migrates from one country to another, he will be a migrant and not a refugee. They mainly take asylum in other countries due to government hostilities, armed conflicts, insecurities, tension, lack of basic needs and protection and legal impartiality. The main characteristics of a refugee are, their origin should be another country having unwillingness to go back to their own country. The International agency coordinating refugee protection is the office of the United Nations coordinating refugees which counted 8.4 million refugees worldwide at the beginning of 2006. World Refugee Day is observed on June 20 every year. The day was declared in 2000 by a special United Nations General Assembly resolution.

Classification of Refugees:-

Srilankan refugees can be broadly classified into two groups (a) camp refugees or those who are living in 115 camps spread over 26 districts in Tamilnadu and (b) non camp refugees or those who have been living in cities and small towns, either in rented houses or with friends and relatives. There is a third smaller group which consists of those who are now living in special camps under the strict surveillance of the local police belonging to the 'Q' branch. They have been sent to special camps because of their alleged links with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). At one time there were over 1000 such people today there are about 150 young Tamil refugees languishing in these special camps.

The following categories of Srilankan Tamils are lodged in the special camps. (1) Those involved in the criminal cases (2) those with other adverse reports such as involvement in smuggling and criminal activities and (3) members of families of those who fall under these categories. As their movement is restricted, cooked food has been supplied to them instead of cash doles.

Refugee camps in Tamil Nadu:-

Main refugee camps in Tamil Nadu are located in Coimbatore, Cuddalore, Dharmapuri, Dindigul, Erode, Kanyakumari, Karur, Krishnagiri, Madurai, Namakkal,

Perambalur, Pudukkottai, Ramanathapuram, Salem, Sivaganga, Theni, Thiruvallur, Thoothukudi, Tiruchirappalli, Tirunelveli, Tiruvannamalai, Tiruppur, Vellore, Villupuram, Virudhunagar and two other special camps.

Role of UNHCR and a convention on status of refugees:

UNHCR for refugees is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland and was established on December 14th, 1950. It performs social and non-political activities that are humanitarian in nature. Its main role is to safeguard the refugees' interests as per the High Commissioner's mandate. Initially preference was given to refugees and displaced persons. Later they were also involved in resolving the problems and resettling the refugees who were war victims, suffering from political prosecution and other natural disasters. On 22nd April 1954, a convention on status of refugees was implemented and later in 2000, it was signed by 136 nations. This was mainly focussed on welfare of refugees and stressed that all human beings had the rights to enjoy the fundamental rights and freedom as provided in UN Charter and Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Some of the salient features of this convention are: host country should provide the minimum rights to the refugees like, right to work, education, social security, freedom of religion, right to access in court without any discrimination. The host country should not eliminate a refugee legally, unless on a public order or on the grounds of national security and also consider them as their own nationals. They should also issue travel documents for travelling outside their territory, on humanitarian grounds. Refugees should follow the laws and regulations of their host country to maintain law and order and peace. Refoulement of refugees to their country of origin is not permitted. India also adopted the rules laid down in UNHCR for voluntary repatriation of refugees, local integration and resettlement to a third country. It also assures the security of refugees by registering their names and thereafter they conduct an interview with each individual to assess their claim to International protection as a refugee. India doesn't have any sustainable order to follow the refugee case but with the help of UNHCR it handles it better.

In case of refugee protection, the constitution of India guarantees certain fundamental rights which are applicable to all non-citizens, namely the right to equality (Article 14) the right to life and personal liberty (Article 21) and freedom to practice and propagate their own religion (Article 25) Any violation of these rights can be remedied through recourse to the judiciary, as the Indian supreme court has held that refugees or asylum seekers cannot be discriminated against because of their non-citizen status. The National Human Rights Commission (NHCR) has functioned effectively as a watchdog for the protection of refugees.

Condition of Women refugees:

When we compare the culture of the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees it is far away from Tamil culture. For e.g., the dressing sense of Sri Lankan refugees was western whereas in India, it is traditional. The condition of women in Sri Lanka and in India is similar because, there also they have faced psychological and physical tensions. In the camps, they are forced to live in an enclosed environment. Many of the women would have lost their husband and children in the civil war and become desperate, separated from their spouses and their condition is pathetic. The children grow without the knowledge of who their father or parents are and lead a life of depression. Due to language barriers, they cannot migrate to other states / cities for their daily bread. Bearing all these difficulties, the women living in various camps have to

take up the responsibility of the household. The aid given by the government is not sufficient to make their both ends meet.

Although there is no gender biased discrimination in the refugee camps, various structures of power exist in the camps. The gender biased power relation that existed in Sri Lanka, continues in the camp. Apart from this, the official refugee administration in the camps also extends the male-dominated structure into the camps. Sufferings and violence made them to cross the Palk Strait and to lead a peaceful life here but now how is their condition? India the country which gives more importance to hospitality and a host country to protect the asylum seekers should maintain a sustainable policy towards refugee problem. As an emerging International power India has to adopt many welfare schemes and to create a good atmospheric living condition for the refugees. More importance should be given for the women refugees and make quality schemes for their empowerment. The following are some of the schemes to improve the life style of women refugees in India.

Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy Maternity Relief Scheme:

A Maternity Benefit Scheme was announced by the Government of Tamilnadu in the budget 2006-2007 for the wellbeing of pregnant women known as “Dr.Muthulakshmi Reddy Maternity Relief Scheme.” It has been implemented from 15-09-2006. This has been extended to the Srilankan pregnant women with an aim to compensate the wage loss of women during their pregnancy. The beneficiaries should be from Below Poverty Line and should deliver only in Government hospitals or Local body institutions to be eligible to receive the assistance and is restricted for first two babies. The scheme offers Rs.6000/- to each pregnant women. They will get the first instalment aid of Rs.2000/- from their 7 month of pregnancy and second instalment of Rs.2000/- is given at the time of delivery. The third instalment is for the new born’s immunisation purpose mainly for the third dose of OPT, Hepatitis-B and Polio/ Pentavalent vaccine for the child. The assistance is provided to the beneficiaries on the recommendation of Village Health Nurse and there is no necessity to produce Income Certificate from the Village Administrative officer.

Apart from the above scheme, if a family has one daughter and they decide to undergo family planning, Rs.22,200/- will be credited to their account and a family with two female children and undergo family planning government will get Rs.15,200/- to each child. Aid is also available to female children under the Chief Minister’s Protection of Female child Act. To eradicate female infanticide Tamilnadu government offers Rs.50,000 for a family with one female child and Rs.25,000 for a family with two female children.

Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyar Memorial Marriage Assistance Scheme:

This scheme executed by the government of Tamil Nadu has helped to improve the condition of females in refugee camps to a great extent. The females at the age of 18 with minimum educational qualification of 10th standard are eligible to receive the marriage assistance. Those who have finished their degree are eligible to receive 4 gm gold for “Thirumangalyam” and Rs.50,000/- for their marriage expenditure. Others are eligible for 4 gm gold and Rs.25,000/- for their marriage expenses.

Free Education:

Basic Education enlightens the minds of every individual and it is the right of every child to receive basic education. Likewise, the children of refugees also have the right to receive education. Without any gender discrimination both male and female children get benefited through this scheme. The government of Tamilnadu assists such children and provides free education up to 12th standard, free text books, noon meal, note books, uniforms, bus concessions and bicycle for 11th standard students etc.

Laptops are provided to the higher secondary students (12th standard) who study in government and aided schools.

Concessions to college students:

Refugee students who go to colleges are provided with bus passes at concessional rates. They are admitted to engineering courses through Single window admissions under general category. Financial assistance is also provided for undergoing technical education, to such refugee students who hail from a family without any degree holder. The students who are interested in arts and science education, are admitted in colleges under general category. Qualified student who wish to join in B.E/B.Tech and MBA/MCA/MEM.Tech are permitted through lateral entry under general or single window system

Tamilnadu government not only provides free education and scholarships to refugee students but also ensures free hostel facilities to them. There is a reservation of 5 seats each in hostels run by AdiDravidar / Tribals / BC / MBC / minorities welfare departments. There they provide food also in addition to accommodation facilities. If a refugee student likes to stay in any one of the above mentioned hostels, they have to submit an application to the concerned department through the Tahsildhar.

Apart from this they are allowed to go any other state for education purpose and their name will not be removed from the register and their aids will be given to their parents.

Sewing machines:

Refugee women who complete their training in sewing from certified government approved training centres are eligible to receive free sewing machines.

There are 416 Self-help groups in Tamilnadu Srilankan refugee camps. Each self-help group receives Rs.10,000/- as a Revolving Fund. Further training and bank loan will be arranged for the satisfactorily performing groups.

Refugees are not having the right to work in public sector but they have the right to work in the following non-core sector jobs. Employment in Tamil Nadu Co-operative Spinning Mills, Employment in private concerns through Repatriates' Co-operative Finance and Development Banks Industrial Schemes, Employment in Tamil Nadu Tea Plantation Corporation and Arasu Rubber Corporation, Employment in Chinchona Plantations. Loans for self-employment schemes in Dairy Farming, Powered Cycle-Rickshaw and Match Industries, Agricultural Schemes. The government also pays cashdoles, supplies rice at subsidized rates, electricity, and medical facilities. Pension scheme is available for widows, orphaned women and women who are left by their husbands, disabled women. They also have theright to

receive housing loans but this scheme is applicable only for the refugees who owns house and desire for permanent settlement in India.

Monthly Allowance Scheme:

The refugees in camps get monthly allowance from the Government. The amount of allowances provided by the government to the refugees is given below:

Head of the family	Rs.1000
From 12 years and above	Rs.750
Children below 12 years	Rs.400

The money is given in the hands of a female member of the family with husband, wife and children and in other families it is given in the hands of the elder female member by receiving their signature. In case of absence of these members, the officials keep it and pay in the subsequent days in their presence after obtaining their signature.

Provision of free clothes:

The refugees from Srilanka are provided free clothes once in a year through coupons of Co-optex as per details below:

Female (elder person)	Saree	2
	Blouse	1
	Inner skirt	1
Female – children (up to 12 years old)	Skirt	1
	Blouse	1
	Gown	1

NGO's role for the empowerment of women refugees:

Jesuit Refugee Service and Organization for Eelam Refugee Rehabilitation is a Non-Governmental Catholic Organization and it was founded on 14 November 1980 by Pedro Arrupe headquarter at Rome with an aim to help, support and uplift the status of refugees and displaced persons in all over the world. It offers meritorious services like medical assistance, educational facilities and supply various articles like food, utensils, cloths etc. to the refugees. JRS service exists in 47 countries and 10 Regional Offices of these countries are helping 950,000 individuals. Over the years JRS had served an estimated 40 million refugees. In India also the contribution of JRS for the development of Srilankan Refugees is valuable and begin their service in Tamilnadu in the mid of 1990. They have helped the early school girls by providing them a 6 month life skill training course. Women and young refugees participate in a tailoring course vocational training, English courses, and computer classes and a workshop on community organization respectively.

OfERR:

In 1984 OfERR (Organization for Eelam Refugees Rehabilitation), an NGO was established in Chennai with a motive to support the Srilankan refugees to lead a peaceful life in India. It assisted refugees in various ways and it supports women refugees by motivating them to

engage in income generation programmes like tailoring, spirulina cultivation, home gardening, personality development etc. Through this empowerment training the refugees make many products and this NGO helps promote sales of their products. It also ensures the protection of children against gender biased violence.

Conclusion:

The livelihood of women refugees can be improved by implementing new projects with the help of UNHCR. Afghan women refugees began a livelihood project named ILHAM, a catering service programme with the help of Access Development Services - an NGO partnered with UNHCR. The lives of many single mothers got improved through this effort. Srilankan refugees can take this as an example and can invest their knowledge by starting mini projects in the field of tailoring, small scale cottage industries, catering etc. This will provide an opportunity to the women refugees - who lead an isolated life in the camps due to lack of education - to come out of the small circled life.

Government has implemented various schemes in order to upgrade the status of women but there are still some drawbacks to achieve empowerment. Most of the women get opportunities to work but working area and time is a constraint for them. There is a restriction that they have to reach the camp by 6 pm every day. If their working area is far away from the camp they won't be able to reach the camp before the stipulated time. They have to sign exit and entry registry otherwise they will be mentioned as absent.

Sanitation and cleanliness are important in the case of women's health. So in order to improve their condition, government should ensure that sufficient toilet facilities are provided in each camps. Strict laws should be formulated by the government for the protection of women refugees. Importance should be given to reduce the gender bias inside the camps. Government and NGOs should take more steps to ensure sustainability of lives of widows, single mothers, divorced women, handicapped persons etc. by providing them with opportunities for income generation. More number of SHGs should be promoted for encouraging self-reliance among the refugee women. The financial assistance and other aids given by the government should be periodically increased to be commensurate with contemporary standards. Awareness should be created among women refugees about fraudulent agents who lure them with lucrative opportunities in overseas countries just for the purpose of swindling money from them.

Above all, "all of our humanity is dependent on recognizing the humanity in others". Keeping this in mind, all human beings including refugees should be treated with dignity and equality.

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