

SRI LANKAN REFUGEES IN TAMIL NADU

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ABSTRACT

This article deals that the Tamils from South India settled in Sri Lanka in the early stage and lived with the Sinhalese. The Tamils enjoyed many privileges during the British period. They lost the privileges, one by one, after Sri Lanka became independent country in 1948. The Sri Lankan administration transferred to the hands of Sinhalese from British. The Tamil youngsters without job, education and other rights took arms and protested the government. In the clashes during 1983, many Tamils migrated to India as refugees. Many settled in Tamil Nadu and the Tamil Nadu government is taking care of them.

Key words: Legislative Council, Sinhalese, Acts, Militant organisations, Refugee camps.

INTRODUCTION

People become refugees when the rule of law in their home countries breaks down. They depend on the rule of law to find protection in their countries. They hope for restoration of the rule of law in their own countries, enabling them to return home.¹ More than 66 million people have displaced from their homes due to conflict, violence and persecution, of whom one third have fled across borders as refugees, in the world.² Till date, the people are crossing borders from their own countries for various reasons. The position of Tamils in Sri Lanka was also a miserable one during the ethnic period.

North Indians in Sri Lanka

The Indo-Aryans from north India came to the island and settled in early times. They called themselves as Sinhalese and their religion is Buddhism. The Mahavamsa is the holy book of Buddhism.³ Their population is higher than that of other ethnic groups in Sri Lanka.

South Indians in Sri Lanka

The South Indians also settled in the early times. The south Indian kings made expedition over Sri Lanka and captured the places and ruled the island for many years. Many people settled in the island. But their numerical strength is nearly twenty percent in the island and as on date they are treated as minorities in the island. Hinduism is their religion and they constructed temples as per hinduculture.

Other settlers in Sri Lanka

The Veddahs were the original ethnic group in the island.⁴ Chinese emperor Cheng Tsu invaded the island and imprisoned the ruler Vira Alakeswara, and took him to China, in 1411.⁵ The Arabs visited in the island between the seventh and the fifteenth century for trade purposes.⁶ The Muslims married Sri Lankan women and converted them into Islam and many were settled in the island.⁷ The Malays from Java came as mercenaries.⁸ Cambodians, Egyptians and Greeks (Yavanas) arrived to the island for trade purposes and settled earlier.⁹ The Dutch and Portuguese people came to the island for trade purposes and married the Sri Lankan women. The children from the intermarried people were called as Dutch Burghers and Portuguese Burghers.¹⁰ Americans were also visited the island and took steps to develop the island. The Dutch, Portuguese and the Americans started education and schools. Including the trade work, they committed the Christian religious works.¹¹

Sri Lanka under the British

The Britishers captured Trincomalee in 1782¹² and Kandy in 1815.¹³ After capturing the entire island the British administered the island till its independence in 1948. The British introduced English as official language and parliamentary democracy.¹⁴ They started schools and paid salaries to Buddha and Tamil schools to develop education.¹⁵ The Sri Lankan Tamils utilised this opportunity and studied the English language and entered government services. The Britishers brought south Indian Tamils to work in the estates. The Colonial government gave protection to the Indian Tamils who worked in the estates. The Sinhalese envied on the Indian Tamils.¹⁶

Colebrook Commission

The Crown appointed Colebrook commission in 1833 to analyse the situations in the island. Among other things the Commission recommended legislative council with a small number of English education elite. Through this, the Christians benefitted, but the Buddhists felt betrayed.¹⁷ The English educated Tamils even though minority enjoyed many concessions in the British Government. The Sinhalese, though majority, could not get sufficient concessions from the British. The Sinhalese formed associations, Sinhala Mahajana Sabha, the Youth Lanka League for their favour to getting a self - government.¹⁸

Ordinance for Indian workers

In 1923, the Colonial government in Sri Lanka passed Minimum wage ordinances for the welfare of Estate Tamils. As per this, the estate owners should provide rice to the estate workers in subsidiary rates. The Sinhala working class were neglected.¹⁹

Economic Recession

The world economic recession of 1929 to 1931 affected Ceylon also. There was unemployment problem all over the world. The Sinhalese passed a resolution in the state council to repatriate the Indian workers, from the island.²⁰

Donoughmore Commission

The Crown appointed Donoughmore Commissioners to the island. The Commissioners recommended (1931-1947) franchise rights in the island.¹⁹ The Sinhalese supported this because they were majority in the island and the Tamils were minority. The Tamils requested the commissioners to grant 50:50 representation in the Assembly. It was not considered by the Commission.²¹

Soulbury Commission

The Soulbury Commission was appointed by the Crown to grant independence to Sri Lanka, in 1944. The Commission appointed Sinhala members in the constitution framing committee. The Tamils gave a representation for franchise, citizenship, representation, re-entry and immigration. There requests were not considered by the Commission.²²

1947 Elections

In the elections held in 1947, the United National Party (a Sinhala Party) won 42 seats in the 101 seats. The Indian Tamils won 7 seats and with the support of Tamils another 14 members were elected to the parliament. Sri Lanka got independence on 4th February 1948.

The UNP government decided to withdraw the franchise of Indian Tamils. The government passed Citizenship Act of 1948 by which all the Indian Tamils lost their franchise and they were treated as stateless people in the country.²³

Acts against minorities

The Sinhala only language Act was passed in June 5, 1956. All the other languages were not given importance as official language.²⁴ Because of this Act without knowing Sinhala language no one could work in the government services. So, many Tamilians lost their jobs from the government and Sinhalese got positions;²⁵ As per the section 18 (i) (d) of the Sri Lankan Act, Sinhala was made as national language. Sri Lanka ceased to be a secular state;²⁶ The Standardization policy was implemented in 1971. As per this policy, the Tamils have to score more marks than the Sinhalese to get admissions for the University education.²⁷

The island became a country for Sinhalese without considering any requests the other ethnic groups like, Tamils and the Muslims.

The Tamil associations took steps to get their rights. Youngsters without job and education prepared themselves to fight against the government. There was formation of many militant groups. Some major groups are Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation, The Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam, and the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front.²⁸ The Sinhala political leaders developed religious and national feelings among the Sinhalese. The militant groups had links with India, Lebanon, Russia, Palestine, and Zimbabwe for getting arms and training.²⁹ To get superiority in the island, the LTTE leadership wiped out the leadership and cadres of other militant organisations.³⁰ Many well trained militants lost their lives in the infights. The LTTE became the superior militant group in the island. In the fight conducted between Indian Peace Keeping Force many militants were also killed. The Sri Lankan government contacted Malaysia, Britain, South Africa and US through private arms agents, and received arms for their defence against the militants.³¹

The fierce fight started in 1983 and ended on May 18, 2009, killing the LTTE supremo Prabhakaran and his top aides including his son Charles Anthony. The last bastion of LTTE was captured by the Sri Lankan forces.³²

During the last phase of Eelam war more than 90000 people were killed including many LTTE cadres. Many LTTE cadres and civilians escaped from the island to other foreign countries, including India. Many were in the government camps, in Sri Lanka, without any facilities where they were tortured, raped, and killed by the security forces without any enquiry because there was no law and order in the island.³³

No one had come to the rescue of the innocent civilians.

A Guide to International Refugee Protection and Building State Asylum Systems reiterates that 'States are responsible for protecting the rights of their citizens. When governments are unable or unwilling to do this, people may face such serious threats that they are forced to leave their country and seek safety elsewhere.'³⁴

From 1983 to 2009, till the end of the Eelam war, 3,05,000 people from Sri Lanka entered India as refugees. About two lakhs people returned to Sri Lanka. As per the November 2020 Tamil Nadu report, 58900 refugees are staying in 106 camps all over Tamil Nadu and about 34000 refugees are staying outside the camps.³⁵ The Government of Tamil Nadu is taking care of the refugees.

The country of host is responsible for the safety and security of refugees on its territory, and for maintaining law and order.³⁶

The Government of Tamil Nadu has given accommodation in camps for their living. The Government made arrangements for drinking water, health and medical facilities for the refugees in the camps.³⁷

The Refugees are being given monthly cash of Rs. 1000/- to the family head and Rs. 750/- per head above 12 years and Rs. 400/- to the persons below 12 years.³⁸ This amount is being disbursed to the Refugees every month through banking correspondences. Roll call is conducted in the first and third week of every month to verify their attendance. Refugees failing to attend the main roll call and absence without informing to the officers within 60 days their names will be deleted from the camp. Their regular attendance or absence with permission is required to get cash dole every month.³⁹

Dresses are given to the refugees.⁴⁰ Household articles also provided to the refugees for their day to day use.⁴¹ If a refugee died in the camp the government provides Rs. 5000/- for the funeral expenses.⁴² Rs. 25,000/- is sanctioned to the refugees if death happened due to natural calamities, accident or sexual harassment. Rs. 15,000 for major operations in hospitals and Rs. 10,000/- or actual expenses for damages by fire or water.⁴³

Pregnant refugee women are given financial support under Dr. Muthulekshmi Reddy Maternity Benefit Scheme.⁴⁴

To improve the female education, to eradicate female child infanticide and to control the mentality to like male child only and to encourage the small size family in 1992 the female child protection scheme was introduced to the people of Tamil Nadu. This welfare scheme was extended to the Sri Lankan Refugees living in the camps. As per the scheme, if a family had only one female child a sum of Rs. 22000/- would be deposited in fixed. If a family has two female child a sum of Rs. 15200/- would be given to each female child and deposited in the girl child's name in fixed. This amount is increased to Rs. 50000/- for one female child and if two female children in a family a sum Rs. 25000/- each would be deposited, on the expectation that this will discourage the female child infanticide.⁴⁵

Exit permits have also been issued to the refugees staying in the camps to go to Sri Lanka voluntarily.⁴⁶

Periodical house maintenance and basic facilities development works also undertaken by the government in the refugee camps.⁴⁷ The government constructed new houses replacing the present house for refugees.⁴⁸

The Chief Ministers' Comprehensive Health Insurance Scheme also extended to the non-camp refugees.⁴⁹

The Government supplies 20 kg rice to a family as free of cost. Also provides essential commodities such as sugar, wheat, maida, sooji, etc, in subsidiary rates through Public Distribution System outlets.⁵⁰

Every refugee has duties to the country of his or her. The refugee must comply with the existing law and regulations as well as measure taken by the authorities to maintain public order. They are not immune from prosecution.⁵¹ The Government of Tamil Nadu have set up special camps in two places i.e. Cheyyar in Thiruvannamalai District and Trichy in Tiruchirappalli District. Presently, there is only one special camp in Tiruchirappalli district. The Special Camp is arranged to accommodate the Sri Lankan Tamils who have come to the adverse notice of the Police and therefore, cannot be allowed to move freely in the State. As their movements are restricted, they are provided with cooked food at the rate of Rs. 100/- per day.⁵²

The Government of India has waived the visa fees and overstay penalty for the refugees who came to India on or before 9th January 2015.⁵³

The government of Tamil Nadu sanctioned a monthly pension of Rs. 1000/- (One thousand only) to the differently abled persons. To obtain the benefit the percentage of Disability had been fixed as 60. The percentage of disability has been reduced to 40%⁵⁴

As educational assistance to the Sri Lankan Tamil children studying in Government and Government aided Schools are provided free education upto 12th standard. Further they are provided with uniforms, noon-meals, note books, text books, bus passes and lap top computers free of cost as in the case of other student of Tamil Nadu.⁵⁵

The students who are staying in the refugee camps have to apply for admission into the Engineering colleges along with the identification certificate from the Tahsildar of the Headquarters and the Refugees staying outside the refugee camps have to apply with their visa and passport. The Commissioner of Technical Education has to consider the admission of the Refugee Students in the self-financing colleges in the General quota seats, if there is any vacant within the sanctioned strength, after completing the general admission.⁵⁶

The Government of Tamil Nadu has implemented that in the Government and private engineering colleges, medical colleges, dental colleges, agricultural college, veterinary college and law colleges, that if a student is admitting through counselling, and if there is no graduate and the admitted student is the first graduate, to encourage the students to study professional courses without considering caste, and income the tuition fees will be paid by the government.⁵⁷

The polytechnic qualified students are permitted into second year engineering colleges under lateral entry scheme.⁵⁸ The Government after considered the letter of the Commissioner of Technical Education⁵⁹ issued

orders that from the academic year 2011-2012 the students from the refugee camps may be permitted to join in Engineering colleges in second year under later entry in BE/B.Tech courses and PG course like MBA/MCA/ME/M.Tech and M.Arch. under counselling after producing required documents.⁶⁰

The Commissioner of Refugees Rehabilitation and Non-Resident Tamils wrote a letter to the government⁶¹ and stated that the Refugee camp students are studying far away schools from their camp and if hostel is provided in their place of study, it will be helpful for them to complete their education without hindrance. The government considered the proposal of the Commissioner and issued orders to accommodate 5 students in each in the hostel coming under the control of BC, MBC and Minority welfare department and immediately the government sanctioned a sum of Rs. 2,98,50,000/- at the rate of Rs. 450/- per head for school students and Rs. 550/- per head for college students.⁶²

Educational scholarships are also sanctioned to the student belonging to the families of Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees for studying Polytechnic (Rs. 2,500/-) UG Arts and Science Courses (Rs. 3,000) P.G. Arts and Science Courses (Rs. 4,000) UG Professional Courses (Rs. 5,000/-) and P.G. Professional courses (Rs. 6,000)⁶³

The Government of Tamil Nadu have been extended all the welfare schemes implemented to the people of Tamil Nadu to the Sri Lankan Refugees from 2012.⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

The Indian Tamils and the Sri Lankan Tamils were stayed a long period in the island and committed themselves for the improvement of the island in many ways. Through the hard work of the Tamils the economic situation of the island was improved. After the independence in 1948, the Tamils were discarded by the Sinhalese, due to the reason that the Tamils are minority in the island. The Sinhalese treated the Tamils as alien. All the concessions already enjoyed by the Tamils during the British period were denied by the Sinhalese. So, the Tamils turned against the Sinhala government. Though the Tamils returned to India from 1964, major portion of the Tamils returned from 1983, because of the ethnic wars. The Government of India took steps to accommodate the refugees here. Many persons settled in Refugee Camps in Tamil Nadu. And many have staying outside the refugee camps, by registering their names in police department. The Government of Tamil Nadu has taken steps to improve the life status of refugees in the camps. The Government is also providing assistance to the refugees almost on par with the people of Tamil Nadu.

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