

# Women Refugees in Kanyakumari District

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**Abstract :** *In any refugee crisis the most affected and vulnerable are women and children. The Srilankan civil war lashed for three decades, forced lakhs of people to flee from their homeland, and they settled in Tamilnadu. The Indian government and the non-government organization rendered many helps to the refugees by extending schemes like Self-help groups, empowering women, counseling, advocacy and the like. The refugees living in camps across Tamil Nadu, have been receiving various relief measures of the Central and State Governments.*

**Key Words:** *Asylum, Refugees, Tamils, Conflict, War, Redressal.*

## Introduction

Refugees are extremely displaced people who have a well founded fear of persecution in their countries of origin and hence cannot return. Migrants on the other hand, cross international borders in search of better socio-economic conditions and so do not possess a well founded fear of persecution upon return.

Refugees are people who have fled from their motherland because of war, ethnic conflict and personal danger. They are extremely displaced people with a well founded fear of persecution in their countries on the basis of race; religion, nationality, political beliefs and unable to return to their own countries.

Sri Lanka, is described as a tear dropped from the Indian face. Today the land, awash with unending violence epitomizes this description. The devastated island and its bond to India lingers unbroken by the existence of Sri Lankan refugees in India.

Likewise Ceylon Tamils, from time immemorial, were the original inhabitants of Ceylon and India. Britishers also brought the Indian Tamils to Sri Lanka from the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu to work in rubber, tea and coffee plantation mainly as labourers. At that time Indian Tamils had enjoyed all civil rights including voting rights. But Sinhalese formed the majority in the Ceylon Society. They feared the Tamils may overcome the Sinhalese in their own soil.

In the meanwhile, the government enacted New Citizenship Act No.18 of 1948 and No.3 of 1962 designed to deny citizenships and voting right to the Indian Tamils. As a result of citizenship Act, the Tamil Women had lost their earlier voting right. The Lankan Tamils were in better position than Sinhalese in the field of Employment and university education before and after independence. During the election of 1956, Sinhalese majority people began to complain to the then government and discriminated against the minority Tamils in their own country in the field of higher education and in the government employment sector. The question of Sinhalese as official language Act also made many Ceylon Tamils including women to quit the job. The serious problems mounted the pressure and created the civil war. So they created unnecessary problems to start the civil war in 1983. This paved the way for the Tamil women to migrate to India as refugees.

The year 1983 was one of the most tragic years in the history of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. The LTTE under Velupillai Prabhakaran has spared its wings in other parts of the world apart from India. It was a frontal challenge to the participation of the Tamil United Liberation front in the election. Violence had gripped the north. The police and polling station were attacked and killed many Sinhalese. The Sinhalese press reporting these incidents called upon the government to deploy larger units of the security forces in the North Tamil areas like Jaffna and eliminated the Tamil terrorist menace.

The LTTE killed 13 Sinhalese soldiers. As a result military involved and killed about 2000 Tamils in Colombo area. The Sinhalese prisoners massacred 53 Tamils in welikade prison. The riots continued for 4 days, from 23<sup>rd</sup> July to 27<sup>th</sup> July. Then curfew was implemented. There had been growing tension between the Sinhalese and the Tamil People for about 35 to 40 years.

Many Tamils women also joined in the militancy movements to fight for a national cause, as well as to get away from social oppression. In the conflict the Tamil Women were attached as the spoils of war and suffered the worst form of cruelty and indignity.

The Tamils suffered worst during the civil war conflict of 1983, so many fled the country and seeking refugee mainly in neighbouring Tamilnadu, in south India. The Tamilnadu state government of India receives information through the west guards that some 3,000 Tamils were waiting on the seashores of Sri Lanka to cross over India. So they arranged to settle them in Mandapam camp. The arrival of Ceylon Tamil refugees to Tamilnadu happened in 1983, 1937, 1996 and 2006.

Nearly 74,219 refugees were accommodated in 117 refugee camps located in 25 districts of Tamil Nadu out of 32 districts. These people settled in camps and non camps. A large number of camps were opened throughout Taminadu. The four Refugee camps in

Kanyakumari District are Perumalpuram Refugee Camp, Pazhavilai Refugee Camp, Gnaranvillai Refugee Camp and Kolivilai Refugee Camp. Basic facilities were provided to refugees.

Women refugees in the camp received free clothing material, utensils, Dinning plates, Rice boiling utensils, free cash doles, housing facilities, medicines etc.

The Sri Lankan refugee women who arrived in Tamilnadu were under a dual burden physical and psychological in nature. Many had been physically abused and had to face problems. They were now faced with new challenges in a nation though ethnically the same. The Sri Lankan Tamil is a fun-loving person, used to an open lifestyle. This is very unlike the life led by Tamil Women in Tamil Nadu who lives in a closed environment suppressed by family and society. The Sri Lankan women's open lifestyle caused misunderstandings and they were compelled to choose the lifestyle of the host community.

In the camps, no discrimination in terms of sex is noticeable. Women and frequently a single woman, takes over the role of camp spokes person. At the same time, it cannot be overlooked that various structures of power exist in camps. The gender-biased power relation of the refugees as it existed in Sri Lanka continues in the camps. In addition, the institution of refugee was brought into the camps. Women have to cope with families and societal patriarchal norms, the new male domination, and policies where refugees are stereotyped and programs are gender blind. Men continue to retain their dominant hierarchical position in refugee. This is despite their new economic roles where they have lost their economic value. This loss has resulted in social problems, for example, they can lose control over their children. In all camps, the major burden of managing the family falls on the women. Decision making still rests with the men. Some women work outside the camps. The majority of refugees belonged to the agricultural and finishing sector. In recent years, although the use of women in refugee-organized welfare activities has increased and has given women an added advantage of meeting and discussing their problems, the final decision making does not rest with them.

Teenage pregnancy has been among other issues worrying the refugees. Teenage pregnancy is common problem in the camps and support is provided again only through the health workers. No special program is run for it. Due to lack of privacy in the camps children grow up earlier than normal. Stress among adolescents has also contributed to the increase.

Prostitution, which does exist, is frowned upon and hidden, but does not meet as much disapprobation as would otherwise be the case.

Stress is caused by lack of the conditions, or whereabouts of those left behind, complicated by a guilt complex that they themselves are in safe conditions, while other members continue to live in daily danger. This situation has contributed to rise in violence in the camps. The women have been most affected by it. Many have left behind their husbands and sons. The grief of those left behind and the loss of support from the extended families which they are used to, makes them extremely vulnerable to psychological stress. It has also used an increase in wife battering. Some refugee families have been divided among camps in India. According to a Sri Lankan doctor, separation result in women becoming excessively possessive in nature creating further stress in the family.

Lack of social privacy has become a major problem for women in camps. Lack of bathrooms is a common feature. Even birth of children in some camps becomes an open visual affair. It affects the adolescent women especially who reach the state of puberty in the camps. The puberty rituals, combined with lack of privacy in even washing sanitary cloth has escalated anxiety levels. Sanitary napkins are not supplied by the government.

During marriages, matching of horoscopes continues. The inability of the refugee to paw dowry has created a social upheaval. Caste does not play a major role among the refugees.

Until 1990, Sri Lankan Tamil refugee students did not face any problem in educational matters. After the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in May 1991, however the situation changed. The infiltration of militants into the refugee population was a matter of concern. Refugee students were not able to gain admission to colleges and the places once reserved for them in various courses were abolished. Admissions to the general Arts and Science courses were denied to them. The refugees were denied to be admitted to MBBS course in India.

To redress the grievances of the refugee women, government and non-government departments took various steps. Higher officials of various departments are directed by the government to carry out welfare measures for the sake of refugees. The important officials are village Administrative Officer, Special Revenue Inspector, Taluk Tahsildar, Special Tahsildar, Personal Assistant (General) to District Collector, District Collector, Department of civil supplies and consumer protection, Department of Registration, Department of Medical, health and family welfare, Department of Education, Department of Public works, Department of Treasuries and Accounts, Tamil Nadu Electricity Board. Department of Police and Coast Guard with the important officials the four Refugee camps in Kanyakumari district are functioning well.

They visit the camp then and there to supervise and execute the beneficiary measures to the refugees. Non-government organizations like OFERR (Organisation for Eelan Refugee Rehabilitation) J.R.S., (Jesuit Refugee Service give rehabilitation measures to refugee women through self help groups. women empowerment is offered through OFERR Advocacy, Counseling, Health and Nutrition, Training program, improving Education skill and Tailoring are promoted through them.

In July 1992 India signed a memorandum of understanding with the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). This made the UNHCR to get involved in repatriating Sri Lankan refugees. The recognition of Refugees, Right to Refugee on constitutional Issue,

Right to Refugee Women, Right to Family Reunification, Right to Non-Discrimination Right to Religion, Right to Courts, Right to Enjoy Asylum, Right to Public Religion to Non-Discrimination, Right to personal status, Right to access courts, Right to wage Earning Employment, Right to self employment, Right to Rationing, Right to Housing, Right to Public Education etc.

Despite the fact that the Indian government has not signed the “Refugee Convention”, the Indian Judiciary has given protection to refugees that “No Person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty according to procedure established by law”.

Though the Tamil Nadu government has taken many steps to give asylum to the refugees it could not meet the needs and real aspirations of the refugee women. Their lives were protected but their problems still persist and it is an unending process.

Refugees have three alternatives for the future. One, they can go home; two, they can remain in the countries, where they now are; and three, they can migrate to other countries.

### Conclusion

Through the measures rendered by the government and the non-government organization to help the women refugees, their standard of living has improved a lot. Though many concessions are granted by the government, the Ceylon people can't feel happy in India as they really desire to go back to their homeland.

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