CHAPTER VI
PERCEPTIONS OF TAMIL REFUGEES IN INDIA

Over the last three decades or so, the Indian Subcontinent has had to play host to many and varied groups of refugees from strife torn nations around it. One of these neighbouring nations, and a major source of masses of refugees over the last few decades, is Sri Lanka. With the nation caught in long term ethnic conflict, and the Tamil portion of the population in mortal fear of persecution by the majority Sinhalese chauvinists and the Sri Lankan government, several thousands of the Sri Lankan Tamils fled the nation. Most of them headed for South India, and arrived in waves, mainly in the Southern Indian State of Tamil Nadu. In spite of the fact India has not officially ratified the International Convention on Refugees dated 1951, or the Protocol of 1967, it has continuously accepted and accommodated the successive waves of Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees over the years.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF SRI LANKAN REFUGEES

The Sri Lankan Tamils have always been seen as brethren. In India, they are the co-inheritors of the great Tamil legacy of culture and tradition, who have become “Victims” of ethnic war in their land. Their current status as residents of the state of Tamil Nadu is seen as almost a natural progression of events, like seeking shelter from a storm in a relative’s home. Tamil Nadu has been a natural choice of location to seek refuge for migrating Sri Lanka Tamils. There is a common heritage, the comfort of a common language and habits, geographical contiguity, and ethnic affinities. Add to this the easy availability of boats on the Island nation, and destination South India becomes almost a foregone conclusion.

As of now, there are as many as 85,999 Sri Lankan Refugees living in about 115 refugee camps in Tamil Nadu alone. Situated in 24 out of 29 districts, within the state, (Table 6.1) some of these camps are quite large, and can accommodate more than 1000 families. Such large camps, with a capacity of housing over 1000
families, are located in the following six districts of Tamil Nadu: Tiruvalur, Vellore, Tiruvannamalai, Erode, Madurai and Shivaganga Mandapam. Each of these six districts has absorbed and accommodated 3,500 or more refugees over the years.\(^1\) This statewide distribution is a well planned initiative. During the 1983 exodus, when the arrival of Sri Lankan Refugees was at a peak, the incumbent Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Mr M. G. Ramachandran had the foresight to draw up a plan that sent batches of arriving refugees to as many different districts as possible. This would ensure that they were not all confined in a few places, and no particular district bore the entire financial and social burden. Under the plan, the various District Collectors of all the districts in the state were directed to allot land and resources for the rehabilitation of refugees. This policy of dispersal has managed to give the refugees a number of advantages as well. It allowed them to have more living space, and ensured better job opportunities – especially for the people who managed to reach a shelter near one of the District Headquarters or one of the small towns.\(^2\)

Large scale influx of Tamil Refugees into India occurred in four different phases. The first phase of influx began in 1983 and continued until 1987, and resulted in the arrival of as many as 1,40,000 refugees in Tamil Nadu, all trying to escape the ethnic strife and violence in Sri Lanka. Some 43,000 of these first wave refugees were repatriated between 1987 and 1989, when a peace accord was signed between India and Sri Lanka. The second wave of refugees arrived in India in 1989, when the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) were withdrawn from the war torn areas of Sri Lanka. Most of these second wave refugees were repatriated during 1991-92, after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. The third wave of refugee influx began in April 1995, coinciding with the declaration of Elam War III. This pitched battle was the direct combat between the Sri Lankan army and the Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Elam (LTTE). The Fourth and final historical wave of refugee influx began in January 2006 and continued till July of 2008, also during direct battles between Sri Lankan Army and the Liberation Tigers (LTTE).\(^4\)
Table 6.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No.</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>No. of Camps</th>
<th>No. of Families</th>
<th>Total No. of Persons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Kancheepuram</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Tiruvallur</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1031</td>
<td>4148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Vellore</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1109</td>
<td>4210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Tiruvannamalai</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1095</td>
<td>4158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Tuticurin</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>397</td>
<td>1534</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Villupuram</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>372</td>
<td>1482</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Dharmapuri</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>988</td>
<td>3810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Salem</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>813</td>
<td>3181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Namakkal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>424</td>
<td>1540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Coimbatore</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>990</td>
<td>3788</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Erode</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1254</td>
<td>4835</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Trichy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>804</td>
<td>3017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Karur</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>552</td>
<td>2128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Perambalur</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Pudukottai</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>840</td>
<td>2997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Dindigul</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>831</td>
<td>3160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Madurai</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1382</td>
<td>5177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Sivaganga</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1035</td>
<td>3339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Virunagar</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>902</td>
<td>3341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Ramanathapuram</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>523</td>
<td>1578</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>Tirunelveli</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>753</td>
<td>2778</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Triptnukudi</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>373</td>
<td>1553</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>Kanniyakumari</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>4308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>Mandapam</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7104</td>
<td>22058</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**GRAND TOTAL**  115  24059  85999

*Source: Report of the Government of Tamil Nadu 2008*
The four phases of refugee influx are illustrated and enumerated in (Table 6.2). In short, the rotation, large scale displacements, rehabilitation, and repatriation of Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees came in four waves of influx, and there were two batches of repatriations.

Table 6.2

INFLUX OF TAMIL REFUGEES (APPROXIMATELY)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>No. of Refugees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>1983-1989</td>
<td>1,34,053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>1989-1991</td>
<td>1,22,078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>1996-2001</td>
<td>21,940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>2006-2008</td>
<td>22058</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Various Categories of Sri Lankan Refugees in Tamil Nadu

The Sri Lankan Refugees currently in residence in Tamil Nadu can be broadly divided into three categories, based on where they have finally been accommodated, or where they live. The first group may be called the “camp refugees”. These are the refugees who have been given space in one of the camps established for them, most of which are located in the rural areas of the state. The second group may be called the “non camp refugees”. These are the people who are currently residing in homes, usually rented, with the help of relatives or friends, and without any kind of cash or kind assistance from the Indian government. The refugees in this category, those staying outside the camps, currently number close to fifty thousand, live mostly in the larger cities and usually belong to the better off sections of society. The third group consists of an entirely different segment from the first two. These were refugees who where
considered to be a security threat to the nation, because of their past involvement in subversive activities back home in Sri Lanka. The people seen to belong to this category have been housed in ‘special camps’ – which came into existence in 1991 – where they are required to live under constant security and surveillance. There are currently two special camps in Tamil Nadu:

(a) Kamchi Puram (Chengal Pattu)
(b) Tiruvannamalai (Cheyyar).

However, in spite of the creation of these ‘special camps’ and the obvious need for them to combat a certain kind of refugee related security threat, the overall security implications of the refugee influx has never been adequately explored by the government or any of the agencies. All refugees are displaced people, and displacement is a product of conflict within a nation and a state of insecurity. The Sri Lankan refugees in India are no exception, and their very presence in India creates, or exacerbates internal conflict, tension and a state of insecurity in the nation receiving them. It is a matter of concern, therefore, that the national security implications, of the refugee problem, have never been an issue of focus for the authorities.

**Refugees and Security Issues**

The arrival and assimilation of a huge influx of refugees, on the host country, are likely to be far reaching as well as multi dimensional. The implications touch on all aspects of national security, both internal and external. The state of origin opens itself to censure and embarrassment in driving the refugees out, and exposes itself to international criticism, pressures and sanctions, and even intervention, for what the world sees as atrocities being committed on its own people.

The host state, on the other hand, has to deal with security implications raised by the sudden and massive influx of external populations within its territory.
The implications are applicable in relation to both the internal and external national security fronts. With respect to internal security, for example, the sudden arrival and presence of thousands, hundreds of thousands, even millions of refugees within its sovereign territory can give rise to conditions of destabilisation and can disrupt the Political, Economic and Social Systems that are in place in the host country. The extent and intensity level of this internal security threat depends, naturally, on two related factors. The number of refugees and what their demands and expectations are, from the host state, on one hand; and the size, the nature, and the capabilities of the host state, on the other hand. The host nation, obviously, ends up bearing much of the financial and other burden, regardless of the extent of international support available.

The social, political and economic challenges that the influx of Sri Lankan Refugees has created in Tamil Nadu tend to range from:

**Refugees and Social Challenges** – There are conflicts among various refugees stemming from their various respective socio-economic strata, as well as factors like regional and clan loyalties, and political and ideological predilections. Not only do the various groups of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees not only have myriad undercurrents of tension, but often actually engage in open fights and street wars. The various armed militant groups that exist among these refugees are also in a state of constant tussle with each other to establish a dominant status. In addition, a portion of the refugees tend to become a part of the local underworld, and become absorbed into the local crime scene. Beginning with petty crimes, it is common for some to indulge in the trafficking of drugs arms and women.

There is also a major destabilising impact in Tamil Nadu caused by the various tensions and conflicts that develop over time between refugees and local people.

**Refugees and Economic Challenges** – Sri Lankan Refugees also pose an economic challenge to the host state. Refugees constitute a huge economic responsibility for
Tamil Nadu, and have done so for many years now. The depth and scope of the responsibility is directly related to:

- The size of the refugee population
- The ability of the host state to provide food and shelter to these refugees
- The level and volume of international economic aid

Most of the economic problems caused by refugee influx emerge as a direct result of the resulting competition for common resources that now have to be shared between local citizens and refugees. Resources in areas such as essential supplies and services, health, water, sanitation, facilities, power, transport, infrastructure and so on. Given a large enough body of arriving refugees, none of these facilities can be adequately enlarged to meet the needs and demands of the millions of arriving refugees. In addition, refugees necessarily compete with the local people in the job market. Because they are often willing to sell their labour at much cheaper rates, out of desperation, they often succeed in alienating many jobs away from the local populace.

**Refugees and Political Challenges**

Often, resourceful refugee groups get involved in local politics in order to advance their political and economic objectives. On the ground, the often changing alliance – between the Refugee Tamil groups and the Tamil Nadu Politicians – has intensified D.M.K. / A.I.A.D.M.K. political rivalry.

Refugee movements often generate political tensions and conflicts between the home state and the host state. Since the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees are actively engaged in pursuing their political struggle in their home state, based in the Host state, they fit this category very well. Often, these Sri Lankan Refugees, and their issues also influence the relationship between the centre and the state. One of the persistent issues remains the attempts repeatedly made by the central government to repatriate Sri Lankan refugees to their homeland. The state government, on the other hand, insists that they must remain until the situation Sri Lanka improves or until the
Eelam is created. Local political parties, too, have been taking advantage of these issues, and using the refugees as a vote bank from time to time in recent elections.

This political tussle is well exemplified by the fact, that even at a time when a Sri Lankan offensive operation against the LTTE was ongoing, in July 2009, Congress spokesperson Abhishek Singhvi claimed that the congress was standing up to undue pressure, from the political parties of Tamil Nadu aimed at forcing the Indian government to interfere in Sri Lanka.

Similarly, in the local politics of Tamil Nadu, there is a constant state of war of words, in the last two decades or so, between AIADMK leader Ms Jayalalitha and DMK leader M. Karunanidhi on the refugee issue. In April 2009, for example, Jayalalitha took Karunanidhi publicly to task for failing to issue a strong warning to the centre in order to bring about a ceasefire. “If Karunanidhi can not apply adequate pressure on the Union Government now, when will there be a ceasefire?” she caustically demanded. “And if India, a big power in the region, does not intervene and take strong measures then what other countries will do.” She inquired.

The more recent death of the L.T.T.E supreme commander V. Prabhakaran sparked off sporadic incidents of violence in Tamil Nadu. Many major cities in the state were put on a high alert status, and additional Parliamentary forces were brought in for deployment in sensitive Areas.7

It is clear then, that the people and political parties of Tamil Nadu are in sympathy with Sri Lankan matters. The arrival and presence of Sri Lankan Refugees is clearly raising numerous Political, Social and Economic challenges for the host state – Tamil Nadu.

It was the aim of the present chapter to examine the views of held by the people of Tamil Nadu about the Sri Lankan Refugees living in Tamil Nadu since 1983. It has also examined the various policies that both the Central Government and the State Government have adopted with regards to the handling of Sri Lankan
Refugees, living in Tamil Nadu for so long. This chapter has attempted to deal with the various socioeconomic and political challenges that the arrival and continued presence of these refugees, in Tamil Nadu, create for the host state and for the nation. It also includes the findings and observation of field work conducted in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Said field work adopted a structural approach, in the collection of the views of the common people of Tamil Nadu.

Empirical research for this chapter was conducted in the form of fieldwork performed in the state of Tamil Nadu as a part of this study. All data collected during the fieldwork keeps in mind the proper representation of all age groups, levels of education, income categories, religion, occupation, and sex.

A stratified random sample of 100 people was taken from among the general population of Tamil Nadu and a sample of 50 refugees, was taken from the refugee camps.

**COMMON PEOPLE’S RESPONSE TOWARDS REFUGEES**

When I interacted with the common people of Tamil Nadu, and asked them whether they feel any kind of brotherhood or kinship with the Sri Lankan Refugees, 70% of the people of Tamil Nadu respond in the affirmative. Some people attribute this sense of kinship to the familiarity and similarity of the language spoken by the refugees with that of the local populace. Additionally, there is a similarity of religion and culture. Like the great majority of Tamils in Tamil Nadu, the greater portion of the Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees consists of Hindus. A number of Indian Tamils feel that the Sri Lankan Refugees are kin, their brothers and sisters, and it is unethical and inhuman to force them to repatriate to Sri Lanka, given the turbulent socio-political situation in that country. Their stand is that peace should first be restored in Sri Lanka. Only then, once the situation is normalised, that the governments of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka should even think about a repatriation scheme for the refugees currently in residence in India (See Fig. 6.1).
The continued existence, in Tamil Nadu, of large numbers of Sri Lankan Tamils however, naturally spells problems for India, which has to house them, feed them, care for them and provide security.

According to Professor Ranbir Samaddar, “the southern part of India and the northern part of Sri Lanka are like Siamese Twins, what affects one will affect other.”

It has been more than Twenty Eight years now that these Sri Lankan refugees have been living in different parts of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The governments both at the central and the state level have made a variety of efforts to make all kinds of help available to them. The I.A.S. Commissioner of Refugees, Mr. Raja Mohan, explains that the government of Tamil Nadu has been making continuous efforts to help the refugees live under good conditions. It has provided all sorts of amenities to refugees and made extra provision to provide educational opportunities for the children of refugees. Similar opportunities were extended to the youth as well after a while. In addition to the aforementioned, higher
educations in professional courses has also been opened to them since 1994. The younger generations of Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees in India have been able to make strides in the professional world by becoming qualified in professional and higher education courses. He also spoke about the yearly expenditure undertaken by the Government of India on behalf of the refugees (See Table 6.3).

Table 6.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Money</th>
<th>Fund</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Source: Department of Rehabilitation of Chennai (2007-2008)

Most of the common people of Tamil Nadu have some faith in the activities of the LTTE. Numerous government employees, working in various branches of state and central government employment were interviewed for this fieldwork. These employees of the passport office, immigration office, post office, and other government departments housed at Shastri Bhawan expressed skepticism about news that the LTTE were involved in terrorist activities in Sri Lanka. They consider it unlikely, if not impossible, that the LTTE would be killing their Tamil brethren or Tamil leaders in Sri Lanka, since the organization is Pro-Tamil, and created to act for the welfare of Tamils, not for killing them.

However, in spite of this sense of a common heritage and kinship, there has been a growing gap between the local Tamils and the Sri Lankan refugees that has been widening over the years. Their extended and continuing presence in Tamil Nadu has made the refugees seem like parasites to the local Tamil population. Their long term presence in Tamil Nadu has caused a perceived pressure on the available resources and, perforce, depleted the employment opportunities for the local Tamils. As happens in most such cases, the refugees, in greater desperation
as to finding some means of livelihood, were prepared to work for lower than the going wages. This meant not only a fall in the overall wage structure, but also a wave of employment amongst the local Tamils as more and more jobs went to the cheaper Sri Lankan Refugee labour force.

The refugees, on the other hand, feel entitled to employment in Tamil Nadu under the U.N. Declaration of the Rights of the Refugees. Under this scheme the central government of India, as well as the state government of Tamil Nadu, has granted special concessions to the refugees on humanitarian grounds. Consequently, the refugees have found it easier to make a foray, and create a foothold, into the local labour markets. In matter of fact, as India is not a signatory to the 1951 convention on refugees, it has more of a leeway in the matter, and treats refugees as per current political convenience, rather than as a part of a codified plan.

Sri Lanka Tamil refugees are unique in the kind of political problems they have given rise to in India. Unlike Bangladeshi or Nepali Nationals in India, or the Hindu refugees who arrived in India in the aftermath of partition, the number of Sri Lanka Tamil Refugees is relatively small. Yet, they have managed to influence the Politics of Tamil Nadu, where a majority of them have taken shelter, disproportionately. On account of the very nature of Tamil Nadu Politics, and the hugely emotive response that the issues of the refugees evoke locally, the entire phenomenon has assumed relevance for the larger scope of Indian national politics. This is exacerbated by the fact that the state had been home to a secessionist movement during the early sixties. Both the contenders for power in Tamil Nadu – The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) – have relied heavily on their ability to project an image as the champions of the Sri Lankan Tamil cause. The Congress Party, ruling at the centre, has shifting its alliance with the two regional parties time and again, depending upon the prevalent political exigencies. As it happens, in this kind of a situation the party in the opposition has the added compulsion to assume an ultra-chauvinistic stance to which the ruling party is forced to respond in almost equal terms (See Fig. 6.2).
The intermeshing of Sri Lankan Tamil Politics with that of Tamil Nadu, and in turn with that of India at the national level, found its most dramatic expression in the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi during the run up to the Parliamentary elections of 1991. The assassination, masterminded by a suicide squad of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, took place in Tamil Nadu, and of the twenty six accused in the assassination, six were registered refugees.

Some of the people who were interviewed were of the opinion that the Tamil Nadu government attitude always has been very supportive, even too supportive, towards the Sri Lankan Refugees. The state government provides basic facilities such as tents, water, and cash doles. Some locals even go so far as to say that with all this, and a highly subsidised rate of rice (only Rs 3 per Kg) and reservations in schools and colleges, why would the refugees ever wish to go back?

Most of the students, interviewed at Madras University, were of the opinion that there should be regular security checks of the Sri Lankan refugees. They are of the opinion that unless the government takes stringent steps regarding security, the situation may turn dangerous for the local Tamils of Tamil Nadu. One of the
students mentioned that Nalini, who killed the Indian Prime Minister – Rajiv Gandhi, could soon be released from prison. It is an example of the flaws in the system of India, and a matter of astonishment, according to the students. \(^\text{10}\)

Retired general Purushotam Jagannathan, of the Indian Army, says the refugee problem one of politics and Politicians, and not a problem of the refugees versus local people. The politicians create and continue fights over the issue for the benefit of their own party agenda. \(^\text{11}\)

In a discussion on the same problem, M. Alladdin, Special Correspondent for The Hindu, a South India based newspaper explained further. According to him, Tamil leaders such as the Tamil Nationalist leader P. Nedumaran, and Vaiko, the leader of the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazagam(MDMK), continue to support the cause of the Sri Lankan Tamils, both in India and back home. \(^\text{12}\) Their argument, and rationalisation, is that they are fighting for the rights of their Tamil brethren in the island nation. They state, repeatedly, that they will continue the fight for the cause of their Tamil identity, indefinitely. In fact, when a fresh batch of refugees arrived in India in 2008, Vaiko wrote to the Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, urging him to “take effective measures to protect the lives and welfare of the refugees reaching the Indian shore from Sri Lanka”. \(^\text{13}\)

**Refugees and Security**

Dozens of incidents of smuggling and over 100 arrests in the last couple of years stand testimony to the Tigers network in the state, even though there is insufficient evidence to indicate actual collusion by the state machinery. Even after the death of their Chief Prabhakaran, the LTTE still continues to maintain a wide network of committed sympathisers and mercenary supporters within the state of Tamil Nadu to ensure that they have access to regular supplies of fuel, medicines and war-related materials which allows them to carry on their armed campaign in the island nation.

As many as 108 people have been arrested for suspected smuggling activities since May 2006. \(^\text{14}\) The Proximity of the Southern Coastal districts of
Tamil Nadu to the mainland of Sri Lanka has continued to make the smuggling of weapons and goods to the island nation an easy task. This poses an ongoing security threat that the armed forces of India and the Tamil Nadu Police are forced to deal with on a day to day basis.

Retired Colonel R. Hariharan, who headed military intelligence in the Indian Peace Keeping Force, notes that the LTTE seems to have received fresh ammunition and supplies in the recent past. “It is not clear which clandestine route is being used by the L.T.T.E to import munitions, but the Indian coastal zone continues to be the weakest link in the naval defense of Sri Lanka.”15

During my field work, one of the questions I asked people was regarding the use of the refugee camps. When asked whether the L.T.T.E uses the refugee camps for its own purposes, 65% of the people I interviewed replied in the affirmative. Some people even suggested an addition to the question – viz are the people of Tamil Nadu helping the LTTE This kind of response clearly shows that people here believe that the local population might be actively helping the LTTE, and that the LTTE often uses refugees camps as safety zones (See Fig. 6.3).

Fig. 6.3

“Do LTTE people use refugee camps for their own purpose?”

Source: Sample Survey of 100 people conducted in Tamil Nadu during 1st July to 16th July 2008
It must also be pointed out that Tamil Nadu holds a special attraction for the refugees. When asked whether the assistance provided by the Tamil Nadu government was an incentive to the Sri Lankan refugees to stay on in Tamil Nadu, 76% of the respondents answered yes. Their explanation was that the subsidised rates for food and shelter, and the facilities offered in Tamil Nadu, in addition to the education and employment opportunities, and the government assistance they receive, were clear incentives to the refugees to stay longer in Tamil Nadu. Ration and cash doles have been distributed to the refugees regularly by the Tamil Nadu government (See Fig. 6.4).

**Fig. 6.4**

"Do you think assistance provided by Tamil Nadu government are incentive to the refugees to stay here in Tamil Nadu?"

![Pie chart showing the responses: 76% Yes, 20% No, 4% Can't say.]

*Source: Sample Survey of 100 people conducted in Tamil Nadu during 1st July to 16th July 2008*

**Sri Lankan Refugees and the Tamil Nadu Government**

Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees have been living in Tamil Nadu since their flight from Sri Lanka Territory in the early 1980s. Changes in the political scenario over the years, and a much more stringent patrolling of the coastal areas and the Palk Straits by the Indian and Sri Lankan officials, had managed to considerably lower the influx of
refugees into Tamil Nadu. However, with the defeat of the LTTE in 2009, a new wave
of Sri Lankan refugees began to come into Tamil Nadu looking for a safe haven.

It may be noted that, for quite a long time, only the more enterprising
among the Sri Lankan Tamils, or the ones without any other hope, had been
seeking refuge off the island, in India. Many of the refugees with better contacts
had been moving in the direction of greater opportunities, to the west. But those
who had already spent some years in Tamil Nadu were generally the people who
had no relatives in the west. These refugees were the ones who were much less
than keen on returning to their country, for they had nothing to return to. In search
of better opportunities, and in constant lack of surety of their future, they were
determined to stick to the land of refuge, to wait and watch the developments in Sri
Lanka before deciding to go back home. During my interaction with the refugees,
some of them said,

"We have seen so much violence in the island, like never before. We
came here because of the constant ethnic violence in Sri Lanka. We
do not want to return unless we are sure that the country is safe and
secure for everyone".

When asked why they had come to India, most of the refugees attributed
their flight to a lack of security and said they did not wish to return until the
situation in Sri Lanka improves considerably.

In addition to the common heritage and language of the Tamil land, other
attractions include the subsidised food, shelter and other facilities offered here in
Tamil Nadu. There are also better educational and employment opportunities and
the government offers additional assistance. All of these were incentives for the
refugees to arrive, and to stay here in Tamil Nadu for a longer period of time.

When asked, during the interaction, how they are earning their livelihood at
the moment, 72% of the refugees responded that they are getting by with the help
of the Tamil Nadu government. Some of the refugees even pointed out that, as a general rule, the Sri Lankan refugees have fewer job opportunities in Tamil Nadu. The jobs they are offered are generally through private bodies and are often temporary in nature. Most of the refugees were not even aware of the U.N.H.C.R. and its functions (See Fig. 6.5).

**Fig. 6.5**

“How are you earning your livelihood now”

| Source: Sample Survey of 50 refugees conducted in Chennai during 1st July to 16th July 2008 |

Most of the refugees I interviewed felt that the Indian Government should try to bring peace in Sri Lanka. When asked about the reason they chose to come to India, almost all of them blamed the ethnic crisis as the reason that they were forced to leave home and take shelter in India.

One of the refugees, Y. Darshini, said that before the Tsunami occurred, the refugees did not command much respect or sympathy in the recent past as they had done in the early years of the crisis from the people of Tamil Nadu. However, when the Tsunami hit, and refugees helped the local people rebuild their houses and to get back to their normal lives, the result was a more amicable atmosphere between the refugees and the local people of Tamil Nadu.¹⁶
When asked whether they felt pressure from the Government of Tamil Nadu for repatriation to Sri Lanka, most of the refugees respond with a negative. They said they do not feel under any kind of pressure to go back to Sri Lanka (See Fig. 6.6).

Fig. 6.6

“Do you feel any kind of pressure for repatriation to Sri Lanka from Government of the Tamil Nadu”

Source: Sample Survey of 50 refugees conducted in Chennai during 1st July to 16th July 2008

As most of the refugees pointed out, the Government of India, in coordination with the Government of Tamil Nadu has satisfactorily conducted the work of providing shelter, offering food and fulfilling all the other basic needs of the Sri Lankan refugees for more than twenty five years now.

Recently, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, M Karunanidhi, expressed his desire to provide citizenship to all Sri Lankan refugees in India. He made the announcement at a function that was closing the year long celebrations, in Kancheepuram, of the centenary of C.N. Annadurai, the D.M.K. founder. He made a claim that he would take steps to ensure that the centre granted citizenship to the more than one lac Sri Lankan refugees living in the state, if they should desire it.17 Previously, prior to this announcement, the D.M.K. had passed a resolution
requesting the Party chief to take the necessary steps to ensure that the Tamil refugees in the state were given the option of citizenship under the Indian citizenship act.

Following the End of the Eelam war, and the defeat of the LTTE, there has been much apprehension among the refugees that they might be sent back to Sri Lanka against their wishes. The DMK announcement comes as a big relief to those of the refugees who do not wish to go back to Sri Lanka.

**THE ROLE OF OFERR: A VOLUNTARY ORGANISATION OF REFUGEES**

The Organisation for Eelam Refugees Rehabilitation (OFERR) was founded in 1984 by a group of Sri Lankan refugees. The main objective of the organisation is to assist and render relief to the Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka who had taken refuge in India. An Organisation created and run by the refugees themselves, OFERR has volunteers in every camp. The organisation has been doing consistently good work in the field of education and health services, including child care. The organization, with the collaboration of various specialists, has made an intensive study of the peculiar problems of the refugees. The organisation also organises and encourages sports and cultural activities among the refugees.

In June 1993, the government of Tamil Nadu imposed curbs on NGOs working in refugee camps. The only Organisation which continues to work among the refugees is OFERR, as it continues to be an NGO of the refugees and by the refugees. As stated earlier, the OFERR is doing good work among the refugees. The "refugee syndrome" does not affect most refugees; and they have been able to retain their self respect and dignity, largely due to its activities. An innovative experiment conducted by the organisation was the starting of the farm at Nallayan Research Centre for the innovation of sustainable development strategies. The whole project was completed with refugee labour and the farm has since then...
embarked upon innovative experiments including the use of solar energy and the recycling of waste products.

These are some of the examples of the kind of refugee empowerment activities taking place in Tamil Nadu with the help of OFERR. The Sri Lankan refugees who are currently living in Tamil Nadu live here as they would in their home country, and not as most refugees live in a host country. This has been made possible primarily by the facilities provided to them by Tamil Nadu government, which helps them live a normal life.

During my interaction with Mr. Chandrahasan (founder of OFERR Orgainisation) he admitted that although refugees are the subject of the Centre, in India, they have always had access to support from both the Central and State Governments. He also mentioned specially that in 2004 elections, Ms. Jayalalita leader of the AIADMK, changed her party manifesto to include the provision of a special subsidy, after the elections, for the Sri Lankan Refugees, since the Central Government of India had stopped the rehabilitation subsidy given to the refugees in the past.

He also accepted the fact that the rehabilitation support provided by the Tamil Nadu government (ruled by the DMK. or the AIADMK by turns) has always been very adequate to meet the needs of the Sri Lankan refugees.

When asked about the negative impact of Sri Lankan refugees on the people and resources of Tamil Nadu, he stated that there has been no negative impact of that sort on Tamil Nadu due to the arrival or stay of the refugees.\textsuperscript{18}

In conversation with the other people involved in the N.G.O (OFERR), it became clear that the refugees played a major role in helping with the resettlement of the local population after the Tsunami. However, there was no mention of the problems faced by the people of Tamil Nadu due to the refugee influx. There was
also a lot of praise for the efforts undertaken by the Tamil Nadu Government in an effort to handle the refugee problem.

**Conclusion**

It is clear that certain conclusions can be drawn from the fieldwork conducted in the refugee camps in the state of Tamil Nadu, and the interviews with the various people – both refugees and local people, – as well as government employees and NGOs. Almost all the refugees interviewed agree that the efforts and the measures undertaken by the government of India and the government of Tamil Nadu for the benefit of the Sri Lankan refugees in India have been more than adequate to meet the needs of the huge numbers of refugees who have arrived in India in multiple waves since the early 1980s. In fact, with a combination of the governmental efforts and the NGOs, the refugees have been able to have a life as close to normal as possible. They have been able to live in the Host state in almost as much comfort as they would have in their own Home state. However, the arrival and continued existence of the masses of refugees in their territory has also posed a number of social, economic and political problems for the host state – India. From added pressures on common resources, which need to stretch much further to accommodate and supply the needs of the extra people, to political pressure groups and pressure politics which are a result of the vote bank maneuvering of the various political groups in the state of Tamil Nadu, as well as at the center, there has been a lot to contend with. Petty crimes, smuggling, and other illegal activities, often indulged in by some of the refugees also causes a law and order problem for the nation, and internal and external security issues are caused by the continuing ties of the Sri Lankan refugees in India with the LTTE.

The scope of this chapter was to examine these issues and problems in greater detail, and to try to find out where, and what, measures are necessary to balance the natural imbalance caused in this, and any, nation by the arrival and presence of large numbers of refugees.
REFERENCES


2. Ibid.

3. The influx of Refugees Coincided with the Ealam wars. Ealam war I began after the spread of 1983 riots against the Tamils. The Eelam war II started in 1990. In April 1995 the LTTE broke off talks with the Sri Lankan government and declared the Eelam war III. After the 1995, fight between L.T.T.E and Military increased in 2006 and fresh batch of refugees came.


5. According to a Rehabilitation Department official, this may be underestimation. This figure includes only those who have registered their names with the local Police stations, there may be more staying without registration.

6. Ibid.


11. Interview with Mr. Purushotam Jagannathan, 9 July 2008, He is the Retd. General of India Military.


15. Personal Discussion with Mr. R. Hariharan, 10 July 2008, He is the Retd. Colonel of Indian Army.


18. Personal interview with Chandrahasan S.C, founder of OFERR, 10 July 2008.