CHAPTER – IV

SOCIO-ECONOMIC LIFE OF SRI LANKAN REFUGEES IN TAMIL NADU

The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights narrates several rights of the refugees living in foreign lands. Yet, their condition in general, in any land had been not very much satisfactory. They feel that their mere survival in another land is their fortune. A close observation on their mental attitude will reveal that whatever is offered to them as relief would be acceptable to them because they have seen the harder side of the life, which forced them to consider that their mere existence in another land itself was a boon. This is generally the attitude of the destitute refugees who had been living mostly in the camps of Tamil Nadu.

It's over eighteen years that these refugees had been living in different parts of the State of Tamil Nadu. The government at the Centre and State had been taking all kinds of efforts to offer them all kinds of help. Yet, the refugees had been feeling that they were still insecure and they became depressed the moment they thought about their future. Their experiences in Sri Lanka during the ethnic violence had always caused a feeling of panic that they could not come out of it easily. Yet, they continued to live hopefully in this land from where they migrated to the
island country long back with a view to eking out their livelihood. The Socio-economic condition of these refugees in the camps all over Tamil Nadu narrates the nature of their life and the strength they possessed to improve their conditions of life in the new asylum.

**LIFE IN CAMPS**

The camp population of Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees was distributed in all the 23 districts in Tamil Nadu. The distribution depended on the accommodation availability in the place for sheltering the refugees, considering the aspects like the convenience for management by the government officials and the easy movement of the refugees like accessibility to the main city by bus, train, etc. The term “Camp” itself pronounces its temporal nature but in the case of the Sri Lankan Refugees it falsified and its existence continued due to the turmoil repeated in their country forcing them to live in these temporary camps for years.

The refugees who were living in a temporal condition for years and were waiting for the change of situation in their country were always in a state of agony. These people have transformed themselves within that time and have learnt to survive in the land of their shelter with confidence. Those living in the camps had considered their lives in India as lives in quandary and as one of desperate nature. Most of the middle-aged people who had witnessed the turbulence and turmoil in their land
and felt the pinch personally, had been feeling that their lives in camp had no meaning except that they were in the form of a mere existence. It has to be noted that few of the refugees living in the camps have relatives living in the foreign countries and they had been waiting for their turn to get sponsorship for their migration to those countries. But the refugees who had been poor and had no contact with the foreign countries were at constant look out for the agents who were influential enough to get jobs for them in the Middle East and European countries. For getting these opportunities they have to spend lot of money which was very difficult for them to manage. Many of these poorer refugees had earned their "extra money" doing coolie work and odd jobs outside the camp. Some of them had to sell their belongings which they earned in their island country. Jewels and other precious articles were to be sold and they had to raise loans to meet the expenses. However, the well to do among the refugees were quite comfortable in Tamil Nadu, waiting for their migration documents and related papers from governments of the countries before joining their relatives who were expatriates in Europe and North America. Often these refugees had received money from their foreign relatives, who had helped them to live in more comfort compared to other refugees in the camps. The news of the political activities and continuance of ethnic violence rampant in Sri Lanka influenced these refugees to proceed to foreign countries leaving the soil of Tamil Nadu.
The Government of Tamil Nadu had very willingly permitted these refugees who had proper valid papers to leave the country by facilitating them with minimal regulatory mechanism.

In this process some of the refugees had also spent much of their money and materials towards the agent services, other government application procedures, etc. Some of these refugees worked outside the camp to earn 'extra money' in addition to that of the government maintenance allowance received by them to meet these additional expenses. But mostly they did not get regular work to supplement the government's maintenance allowance. Other than this, lack of unemployment problem, early marriages in the camps, marriages with the intention of migrating to foreign countries had led them to financial difficulties. Most of them had been interested to take the bride or bridegroom outside India in order to settle them abroad. One of the refugees in the Minnur camp was categorical in his response when asked about his proposal to proceed abroad. He expressed as follows:

"After a days work here we can hardly earn Rs. 25 to 50 per day, but in any western country such hard labour will fetch minimum $100 a day. In Indian currency it will be around Rs. 5,000 per day. Who is not interested to earn such a big amount?...Further, we have nothing to lose. Here also we are living as 'refugees' and there also we will be given the same 'refugee status' with international standard of relief".

1 Confidential Papers, Department of Rehabilitation, Government of Tamil Nadu.
2 Personal Interview with a Refugee Boy 'Selva' age 20 school drop out in Minur Camp, Villupuram, 21st February, 2002.
This is the general temperament of the refugees in the camps of Tamil Nadu.

In general, the refugees had been desperate and they had no enthusiasm in continuing their residence in Tamil Nadu for the simple reason that they had not much attachment with this land. Nor they had any deeper fascination towards the cultural ties with this land. However, a few elders among the refugees had the attachment with the Tamil land and its traditional culture and they had been feeling very much at home in the camps. If this is inferred as the attitude of the refugees, it is interesting to note that the Government of Tamil Nadu had been taking efforts to keep the refugees in good stead. It had been providing all kinds of amenities to the refugees in addition to the provision of educational opportunities to the children of the refugees. Those opportunities were extended to the youth also after some time. Further, higher education in professional courses were also opened to them since 1994. The younger generation of the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees had really gained more in the field of education by qualifying themselves in professional and higher education. This, in fact, would stand as an asset to them and to their country when once the political turmoil was settled and renovation work was taken up soon after the return of the refugees to their country.

The refugees had been feeling that their life in the camp had been very dull. Rations and cash doles had been distributed to the refugees periodically. But to earn extra money they had to work on an average of 10 to 15 days per month (subject to the availability of jobs) in the place of their choice. The habit of spending heavily on marriage, birthday celebrations and death ceremonies also made them fall in the clutches of the local moneylenders. Some of these people had relatives in foreign countries such as Canada, Switzerland, Holland, Germany and United States. In the early period of exodus one of the first tasks for the refugees after landing the Indian soil was to re-establish contacts with close relatives in Tamil Nadu. It was by this contact that they were able to carry on their activities in Tamil Nadu. Also, they had spent a lot in Tamil Nadu and once their resources were lost they had to depend on moneylenders. When they earned and paid back their loan to these moneylenders, they were left with little money and were left in distress. On the whole the life in camps had been "hand to mouth" existence and their condition had also been not very much satisfactory.

**LIFE STYLE IN THE CAMP**

It is interesting to note the life of the Refugees at various camps in Tamil Nadu. The main occupation for most of the Sri Lankan refugees in their island country had been farming, fishing and trading in different consumer articles. Most of them lived in villages or in mini towns. Each
house had been situated far apart from the other. All the members in the families had to work in their fields or to do the work in tune with their skills and abilities. Mostly they didn’t have time for socialising themselves. Even the school going children had school in the morning session and in the afternoon they were to work in their fields. This was the work schedule in the Sri Lankan front. But the situation was entirely different in the Tamil land. People seldom got work and had lot of leisure time at their disposal. Added to this huts provided by the government were ten feet in length and ten feet in breadth and these single rooms for each family were constructed side by side with two rows in a single line. The entrances to these huts were on either side. This kind of construction did not provide any privacy to the refugee families. Minor quarrels or wordy duels among or within families were the regular features in the refugee families for one reason or the other and these occurrences embarrassed them very much. Students were not able to concentrate in their studies since they had joined new courses in the Tamil land by Government support. However, this living condition had also brought each and every one living in the camp close to each other. They have also learnt to live as a big family in the alien land. This was really the picture on the advantage side. Caste and class discrimination also diminished side by side. Sharing and caring had become the
phenomenon of these people, which made them competent enough to survive any type of odds in any kind of circumstances.

Every camp in Tamil Nadu had people of various age groups. The older group did not have much contact with the locals. But the middle-aged people who had worked along with the local people and the children who had been studying along with the local counterparts developed close friendship. With the influence of the local Tamils, Television had become the mark of the social status in addition to the audio and video systems. Also, the local customs and practices had taught them many traditional and modern aspects in respect of dressing, eating, and other types of human activities. Though the camps had some amenities like electricity facilities between 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. this 12 hours were fully utilised by these people to watch regularly the TV and to use other electronic equipment to improve their knowledge and awareness about the happenings around. Under these circumstances the lifestyle of these people have been transformed to a greater extent and the refugees had developed a cosmopolitan outlook.

**EMPLOYMENT AND JOB OPPORTUNITIES**

The refugees in general had not much job opportunities in the Tamil land. The jobs offered to them by the government and private bodies were generally temporary in nature. Most of the men-folk found it difficult to search for jobs, as their movements were generally restricted
in the camps. Some of them wanted to go farther from the camps in search of employment suitable to them. But their long time absenteeism would cause cancellation of their registration in the camp. So, they had to face such ordeals also. Hence, most of them had to look for a job that was available in the proximity of the camp. Transport business had been one such area where the refugees were greatly engaged. Few refugees were employed as auto-rickshaw drivers and some among them found it convenient to become the owner of their own auto-rickshaws. Some other refugees had worked as vegetable and fruit sellers. Women refugees also engaged themselves as sellers of fruits, vegetables, fish and flowers. They even established petty shops near the bus stands or railway station and engaged themselves in active business selling eatables and consumer articles like sweets, savouries, stationaries and fancy articles.

Some refugees dwelling near the seashore camps had joined with the local fisherman and had taken part in the fishing business. Some times taking this as an opportunity they had also acted as mediators for the smuggling of the essential commodities like kerosene, petrol, medicine, food items, electronic gadgets, cycles, motorcycles, etc., to Sri Lanka. But over the years the smuggling activities had considerably ceased after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. Apart from these activities the refugees had also gone out from camps to work as daily coolies in the local
markets, construction sites and tiles and bricks manufacturing companies. But in certain places like Ramnad and North Arcot districts these refugees were not able to get jobs due to the backwardness of these regions. Even the local people were finding it difficult to get jobs for themselves since employment opportunities were very less in these drought affected areas. It was due to this reason that the refugees were not given jobs by local employers. Further, the locals were not prepared to recruit or employ the refugees on permanent or semi-permanent basis considering their stay in this land was going to be temporary and for a short period\(^4\). In fact, this kind of situation affected the enthusiasm of the refugees to some extent. Basically, these people were from the labourer class. Some of them owned lands and many of them worked in the lands of others in Sri Lanka. When they were left without jobs in the place of their asylum and were not engaged for any employment they were compelled to spend their time in unwanted and frivolous activities like drinking and gambling which ultimately made them debtors to many of the avaricious moneylenders.

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Local People and Refugees

The people of Tamil Nadu have been known for their hospitality from very early times as it is gleaned from Sangam classics. No wonder that the people of Tamil land have been very much hospitable to the refugees also. This was not only because of the geographical proximity but also due to ethnic affinity. The refugees were once the sons of the soil and at one stage they had gone out for employment in the island country of Sri Lanka as it offered substantially the opportunities for plantation labour. Thus, the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees saw this land as a safe haven for their immediate escape. At the initial level the local Tamils extended their sympathy and help and offered considerable support to the refugees by sharing with them food and some essential comforts. The media also responded equally and the political trend during this time was also favourable to the refugees. This was the scenario during the 1980s. This situation continued for several years. The local population also was very sympathetic towards them and many a time offered some employment by which many Sri Lankan Tamils were able to carry on their life comfortably to some extent. In fact, the local Tamils comforted these Sri Lankan refugees by way of offering consolations to them and by stating that a day would dawn for them to start their new and peaceful life in Sri Lanka. The local Tamils further stated to the refugees that the days were not far that they would recover all their properties which were lost in the
ethnic war in Sri Lanka and would enjoy their life again in that country. These soothing words invigorated the feeble spirits and tottering morale of the refugees. Particularly, after the signing of the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord in 1987 the local Tamils gave much encouragement to the refugees to fight for a permanent solution in order to start their life afresh in their country.

But after the barbaric assassination of the former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in May 1991 by the LTTE suicide squad the treatment meted out to the Sri Lankan refugees began to change slowly. However, not a single Sri Lankan Tamil living in Tamil Nadu was harmed or troubled. For the dastardly act some of the Tamil militants were hunted in Sri Lanka and in Tamil Nadu. Suspicion prevailed over all the Sri Lankan Tamils living in the Tamil Land. Even then, they were not harassed badly or ill-treated either by the Indian security force or by local Tamils. But this was a striking contrast to the incidents which occurred soon after the tragic killing of Indira Gandhi by a Sikh security man in 1984 at Delhi where many Sikhs were killed and some Sikh families were brutally attacked. The criminal activity of one man in a community led to the massacre of several men and women in the community and the scenes of violence and assaults on these Sikhs were witnessed in several parts of India during October 1984. However, such scenes were not witnessed during May 1991. During 1990s, the local Tamils had not taken this
incident seriously since they felt that the refugees should not be penalized for such an act and they stated that the innocent and helpless refugees were not to be blamed for this. It is this temperament of the Local Tamils that protected the refugees from the assaults of unscrupulous elements in the society. It also facilitated the refugees to move freely in and around the camps during that period without any fear.

It may be pointed out here that the host society had not been on the search for reasons to expedite the expulsion of refugees and certainly that was not in the case of the Sri Lankan Refugees initially. Over the years when the refugees stayed on for longer period, the local Tamils found it difficult to provide their long term needs. The refugees who were in search of means of livelihood were prepared to work for cheaper wages. The decrease in wages was a sufficient factor to accelerate the wave of unemployment among the local Tamils. Also, there was an increasing demand for essential goods due to the long stay of refugees in Tamil Land and there was a feeling that the prices of essential commodities would shoot up soon due to this situation. But the refugees felt that it was their legitimate right to claim for employment under UN Declaration of the Rights of the Refugees. Under this scheme the Government of India and Tamil Nadu granted concessions to the refugees on humanitarian grounds and consequently this made their entry into local labour market easier. These in fact, contributed in course of time to the hostility of the
host population towards refugees. They in later times generally felt that the refugees posed more challenges than the aliens did.

Further, the gap between the local Tamils and the refugees began to widen as days passed on. Particularly, their long stay and presence in Tamil Nadu made the local people to feel that the refugees had become parasites remaining in Tamil Nadu to sap the resources of Tamil Nadu and to reduce the employment opportunities of the local Tamils. Further some unreliable news spread everywhere that some of the unemployed Sri Lankan Tamils have started indulging in criminal activities. This news was further strengthened by the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi at Sriperumbudur near Madras by the Tamil militants of Sri Lanka. This again increased some bitterness of the people of Tamil Nadu towards the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees. The Indian fishermen who at one point of time helped the LTTE to build a network for the smuggling of essential goods and for transporting people from one place to another were sympathetic towards the Sri Lankan Tamils in early years. During late 1990s they snapped all links with the militant organisation and this was due to the stringent measures of the governments of Sri Lanka and India. Actually, they have lost all LTTE contacts and the Tamil militants also did not find them useful so long as Tamil Nadu was not a safe base and haven for them to carry their activities. Further, the mainstream fishermen were no longer interested in helping the Sri Lankan Tamils or the
members of the LTTE group for the fear of the wrath of both governments. Also, they did not find the exercise worth the trouble. With the LTTE out of the picture, the returns or profits from smuggling were also not high. But the risks were high and dangerous especially when they had to run the risk of getting on the wrong side of the law. Indeed, many of the mainstream fishermen disowned any affinity with Sri Lankan Tamils. Some of them in the later years of 1990's pointed out to the harassment from Tamil militants in Nedundeepu when they were engaged in fishing activities.

Mr. Paul Raj, the President of the Meenavar (Fishermen) Association of Tamil Nadu was of the view that they had been very much harassed by the Sri Lankan Navy during their fishing operations and so they avoided Nedundeepu. The earlier affinity to the LTTE, built mainly on business contacts, no longer existed and the local fishermen of Rameswaram stopped entertaining such contacts with LTTE for the risks involved in such endeavours. But the vanishing fortunes in fishing industry sometimes prompted the unorganised fishermen to try their luck at making fast money through smuggling goods for Tamils on the island. Even in such acts none of them appeared to have had any contact with the LTTE group. However, in times of peace during the 1960 - 1980, the fishermen had established links with non-militant Sri Lankan Tamils for
their profitable business and smuggling activities. But in 1980's during the times of ethnic violence this also could not be done. Thus, the fishermen in Tamil Nadu who once supported the cause of the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees could not offer the same support to the refugees due to the changed circumstances.

The Tamils, in general, had developed a different view about the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees accommodated in the camps. The Civil War between the Tamil militants and the Sri Lankan Government had not only affected the peace of the island country but also the peace in the Tamil Nadu because of the frequent secret efforts made in Tamil Nadu by the militant members of the LTTE hiding in various places of Tamil Nadu not quite known to the people as well as to the police force of Tamil Nadu. Particularly, the refugees did not command that much respect and sympathy as they did in early years from the people of Tamil Nadu during the late years of the twentieth century. This is the scenario of relations between Local people of Tamil Nadu and the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees that prevailed during later days of 2000.

However, certain Tamil leaders like Vaiko, the leader of the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazagam and P. Nedumaran the Tamil Nationalist leader were still behind the cause of the Sri Lankan Tamils. They had been arguing that they had been fighting for the rights of their

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Tamil brothers in the island country and reiterating that they would always fight for the cause of their Tamil identity. They, as it was reported in media, had even gone to the extent of setting out for a secret voyage to Sri Lanka to establish connections with the unassailable militant leader of the LTTE and to assure him of their support to the cause of the LTTE.

Some political parties like Congress and A.I.A.D.M.K.\(^7\) criticized their act and stated it as a show to deceive the people of Tamil Nadu and to gain popularity for their parties. But the general picture in the 1990s was that the local Tamil people have some sympathy towards the refugees since they were displaced from their land due to the ethnic violence. The ideologies like “Tamil Nationalism” and “Jaffna Tamil” did not much play a role in their sympathies and relations. The local people would have offered similar accommodation and shown similar respect to the Tamil refugees displaced from other nations also. The Burma Tamils received the same treatment in the early period of the Post-Independence period when they were displaced from Burma.\(^8\) The local people of Tamil Nadu did not have the same sympathy in the late 1990’s as they had in the early 1980’s. However, the situation began to change when the local newspapers in Tamil Nadu reported that some of the refugees had gone to join their relatives in European and American countries. This had reduced

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\(^{7}\) All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (A.I.A.D.M.K.) political party in Tamil Nadu.

the number of Tamil refugees in Tamil Nadu. Further, they also expressed that this dwindling number had considerably reduced the resentment of the local people of Tamil Nadu towards the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees.

MILITANCY

During the early 1980s, the flow of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees into Tamil Nadu was closely inter-linked with the violence unleashed in Sri Lanka against the civilian population. The twists and turns in India’s Sri Lanka policy also had its inevitable impact on the refugees. It should also be mentioned here that the Sri Lankan Tamils had been very much utilised for political ends and the refugees “were the warm waters in which the militant fishes thrived”. The rivalry among the Tamil Nadu parties, with the two Dravidian parties vying with one another in championing the Sri Lankan Tamil cause and the New Delhi’s policy of arming the Tamil militants paved the way for the militant groups for setting up large number of militant camps in different parts of Tamil Nadu. As time went on, for a variety of reasons, the LTTE emerged as a close-knit, disciplined and ruthless organisation. The Tigers had twelve units in Tamil Nadu to fuel their war machine. The centre and the specific

functions and the centres where their activities were carried on in these places were as follows:

1) Procurement of explosives – Dharmapuri;
2) Arms and ammunition manufacturing – Coimbatore;
3) Manufacturing of explosives – Salem;
4) Manufacture of military uniforms – Erode;
5) Coastal area from where supplies were to be sent to Jaffna – Vedaranyam;
6) Transit area – Madurai;
7) Landing area for supplies from abroad – Nagapattinam;
8) Area where refugees arrived and militants were recruited – Rameshwaram;
9) Communication centre – Thanjavur;
10) Trade in silver, gold and narcotics – Tuticorin;
11) Liaison with political parties – Chennai and
12) Treatment of wounded guerrillas – Trichy.\(^{11}\)

The peculiar part of the whole situation was the fact that New Delhi was trying to conceal the presence of militant camps in India. As time went on, the militants became a thorn in the flesh and the peace and tranquility of Tamil Nadu were vitiated by gun-toting Tamil militants.

As Narayan Swamy had described:

"All Tamil groups had their own camps, which were virtually prohibited zones for outsiders. One could do anything in these secluded fortresses. Nobody could question them. Even when some one was tortured to death, the screams would never reach anyone. If the victim died, he would be simply buried there or in the barren vicinity."\(^{12}\)

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11. Rohan Gunaratne, "International and Regional Implications of the Sri Lankan Tamil Insurgency" (Colombo, 1997), pp. 19-20
It was in this process that refugee camps were converted into safe havens for harbouring militans. In fact, militans utilized the refugee camps for taking rest and medical treatment and treated them as hiding places, recruitment centers and ground bases for continuing their terrorist activities in the island country. Therefore, the military force of India and the security apparatuses of the Tamil Nadu State were forced to intervene in such situation and watch the refugee camps with greater vigil and caution.

Secretly bringing in of refugees and smuggling out the goods were the activities witnessed in the 1980’s in the zones of India and Sri Lanka respectively. This for years had been the twin problem faced by the law enforcing authorities in Tamil Nadu. An organised racket of secretly bringing in people from Sri Lanka to Tamil Nadu took place quite often in the 1980s. When boats from Sri Lanka landed and dropped Tamil refugees near the southern shores of India, the Indian authorities could not possibly push back the refugees. All that they could do was to identify the greedy Sri Lankan agents involved in the racket and report to the Government of the island. But with no proper co-ordination from the other side, the Tamil Nadu police were determined to stop the refugee inflow into Tamil Nadu than to use force and detain the boats that brought in the Sri Lankan Tamils. Tightened vigil along the coastal lines had already made it difficult for Indian fishermen to undertake such
illegal activities. In the 1980s, the Indian fishermen were enticed or coerced into bringing in refugees, including those with a militant background. At that time, the bringing in of people secretly and the smuggling of goods from India were controlled by the LTTE. It was a less risk for Indian fishermen, and it yielded high returns and profits for them. The ‘political climate’ in Tamil Nadu at that time too was favourable to the LTTE, and consequently, the smuggling was carried on under their behest by the Indian fishermen. But in the Post-Rajiv Gandhi assassination period, any pro-LTTE activity, including transportation of men to Sri Lanka for terrorist activities against the Sri Lankan Government and smuggling of weapons and materials to Sri Lanka for terrorist activities invited trouble and strict action from Indian authorities and smuggling had turned out to be a high risk with low returns and profit.  

With India no longer a safe haven for the LTTE after the assassination, there was no to-and-fro movement of the members of the LTTE which was the case in the 1980s and in the beginning of the 1990s. Even the coming of number of non-militant refugees to Tamil Nadu had almost ceased due to the changed situation in Sri Lanka. Particularly in recent years, the refugees in Tamil Nadu had invited their brethren in Sri Lanka to come to Tamil Nadu pointing out the safety of this place for the

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refugees. However, the government had instructed the officials to actively
discourage the inflow of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees into Tamil Nadu
since the arrival of every batch of new refugees into Tamil Nadu would
increase the workload for Tamil Nadu policemen and an additional
expenditure to the government.

The proximity of the southern coastal districts of Tamil Nadu to Sri
Lanka had continued to make smuggling of weapons and goods to the
island country an easy task and this posed a threatening problem to the
security force of India and Tamil Nadu police. The situation during the
late 1990s was not as dangerous as in the earlier years. The Tigers and
pro-LTTE elements were in charge of the smuggling activities viz., the
movement of motorcycles, fuel, food and medicine to the island and this
was quite an irritant for the Indian authorities. But during these occasions
persons who were looking for petty profits were engaged in the
smuggling of goods from the Tamil Nadu side. Fishing trawlers were no
longer the preferred mode for smuggling goods. But 'vallams' and other
country crafts were used for their smuggling activities. The main centres
such as Rameswaram and Mandapam, where the Coast Guard patrolling
was intense to check the smuggling were changed and insignificant places
in isolated areas, such as Uchipulli became the new smuggling spots to
escape from the vigilant eyes of the security forces of India. There were

14. Ibid.
buyers on the island side for motorcycles and fuel partly on account of the economic blockade in the Tamil areas of Sri Lanka. For Sri Lankan Tamils' 'illegal import' of motorcycles was easier and cheaper. However, the situation quite often changed according to political vicissitudes in both the countries.

It is also to be stated here that a strict vigil was maintained in all the camps on all the refugees by the police force of the respective areas. This had restrained the refugees from participating in any unwanted and illegal activities against the interests of the Tamil Nadu Government. Similar vigilance is maintained on the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees who had gone and taken asylum in the South Asian countries also. In fact, such efforts by the governments of the States effectively refrained them from falling a prey to the machinations of the members of terrorist organisation of the island country.

**Refugees and Politics**

The refugees had been the creation of a particular political process and to expect them always to be apolitical is like demanding for the impossible. Refugee groups sometimes take part in politics also both at global and domestic level, and hence the host governments had always been afraid of the refugees. They fear that the refugees might turn against them one day or other, if the host governments are unwilling to assist them in their task of opposition to the country of their origin. The threat
is higher, if the host government declines to provide assistance and arms to the refugees to fight against their odds and their country of origin. After the Rajiv Gandhi’s assassination, the refugees in Tamil Nadu were watched very carefully. Also, the refugees were very careful from this time onwards while making open statements about any political development. However, any diligent observer can easily find out that their sympathy and admiration were always for the members of the LTTE. After the capture of the Elephant Pass in Sri Lanka by the Tigers from the Sri Lankan Army, the New Delhi Television (NDTV) visited the refugee camps located near Chennai and took films of the situation. They have graphically described the jubilant scenes in their films with refugee children singing and dancing with great ecstasy on the success of the LTTE members against the Sri Lankan army.

The assassination of Rajiv Gandhi by the LTTE guerrillas swung the pendulum to the other extreme. In Tamil Nadu, the people and political parties alike were yet to recover from the great shock. A report of the Jesuit Research Service, which visited Tamil Nadu in March 1994, mirrored accurately the feelings of the people. “Many of the locals, including the church people, now view their Tamil brothers and sisters no longer as refugees but as militants and terrorists”15. Presumably spurred by security considerations, the Government of Tamil Nadu persuaded the
Central Government to ban the L.T.T.E. The ban on L.T.T.E. continues to this day in this country. Jayalalitha, the former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu demanded immediate action in this situation so that all Sri Lankan Tamil refugees could be sent back and she reiterated her demand as follows:

"I appeal, rather demand, that the Centre should take immediate action so that all Sri Lankan Tamils are sent back... It should take place immediately."

The Government imposed restrictions on the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees and gradually started repatriating them. This situation embarrassed the refugees to a great extent. Many wanted to make amends to what they had done sometime back to irritate the Tamil Nadu people and government. After the mid 1990s the Sri Lankan refugees have kept themselves apart from the militant group and took little interest in the political affairs. They also kept themselves away from the political parties of Tamil Nadu to avoid unpleasant situation.

**Health condition of the Refugees in the Camps**

Primarily these people have migrated from the land called 'a mini Heaven on Earth'. It has been said by eminent practitioners of medicine that a good climate and environment where people live would cure half of
their diseases. The refugees from Sri Lanka after their arrival in Tamil Nadu found it to be a very dry place with water scarcity and poor living conditions compared to their country. So, in recent times after living here for a longer period they were affected by the local diseases. Health problems like the Blood Pressure, Diabetes, Elephantiasis, Virus Fever, skin diseases, asthma, etc. have affected them to a great extent. The medical practitioners attending on them were of the opinion that the refugees were susceptible to minor ailments since they were not taking proper food and not following clean practices. They were not only physically alright but also mentally disturbed because their stay outside their homes and country had affected them greatly. Further, day by day the practice of alcoholism had been on the increase among them along with sex related diseases.

ROLE OF THE CAMP ‘TALAIYARS’ (HEADS)

The refugee camps situated all over Tamil Nadu had their own leaders to take care of and lead the refugees. They were the uncrowned leaders working as the mediators between the government officials and the refugees. Elected by the refugees under the guidance and co-operation of the local NGO, namely Organisation for Eelam Refugees Rehabilitation (OfERR) who were working along with the government.

for the welfare of the refugees. They were directly in charge of the security and well being of the refugees in their respective camps. Providing security to the refugees had been one of the mandatory tasks of the government officials but at times it was not possible for them to appoint a security officer or a police Sub-Inspector at every camp. So, to simplify the process two three camps were clubbed together into a group and an officer was appointed to take care of the camps. But the routine monitoring of the camp with regard to aspects like persons leaving the camp, arriving the camp, visiting the camp and condition of refugees were kept in track by the camp “Talaivar” (Head). Apart from this the “Talaivar” had taken the responsibility to see that all the refugees were properly benefited by the government assistance and support. They were also present during the official inspection in the camps and were expected to give proper explanation for any thing that would be demanded by the government officials. They also worked with the non-governmental organisations functioning in all the camps conducting successfully the educational programmes and periodic health check up schemes. They had also kept the camp environment clean and healthy.

Also, periodic meetings were conducted by them to advise on all aspects of welfare to the members of all the families living in the camps. Every family had attended these meetings and had expressed their needs and had looked forward towards the “Talaivar” to solve all kinds of their
problems. The 'Talaivar' also had the practice of co-ordinating with the local police officials about the movement of the camp inmates and seeking permission officially and unofficially depending upon the demand of the situation for their movements in and out of the camp. Most of the time the 'Talaivars' had remained in the camp. So, they did not go out for work and normally they set up a stationary shop inside the camp so that they could stay in the camp always and offer assistance and advise to their fellow refugees.

YOUTH IN THE CAMPS

The refugees in the camps had one advantage in Tamil Nadu and this was the government approval of their admission into institutions of learning. The children and youth in the camp had abruptly discontinued their studies in Sri Lanka due to the eruption of ethnic violence there. Their studies were very much affected and hence the Government of Tamil Nadu had taken efforts to put them in suitable institutions for learning. But most of the parents were not in a position to admit their children and youth in better schools and professional courses respectively. They sought the assistance and support of the Government and Non-Governmental Organisations which had come forward to offer their help by way of getting admissions in educational institutions and securing jobs for them in some organisations. Yet, the youth in the refugee camps felt that they would have bleak future in this land because
of their "Refugee" status, which prohibited them to join any reputed companies, public sector under takings, government organisations, etc. This again left them confined to the camps depending on the "Cash Doles" given by the government. This thought had further brought mental agony to many of the youngsters leading to considerable dropouts in the middle and high school levels. This had also misled many youth to become lethargic and alcoholic. This had further led them to indulge in many illegal and evil activities like pick pocketing, robbery, smuggling, burglary etc. Few out of them had been awaiting opportunities to go to Western countries for better education and jobs with the help of their relatives living in those foreign countries.

Cultural Diversity

The initial concern of the migrants was to protect their cultural identity and interests of their community. When their cultural activities gained political identity, they interfered with the local practices. They developed a tendency to align themselves with the opposition parties to force the government to serve their goals.

In general, these refugees had been tradition bound and had always liked to retain them. For instance, their spoken Tamil language popularly known as "Jaffna Tamil" was different from that of the local Tamils. Many refugees have complained that they could not follow some of the accents of the local people. Inspite of that they were determined to follow
their own style of dialect. Particularly, they were very stern in clinging to their traditional dialect and they were very much interested to maintain their identity. Traditional Ceylon Tamil women had a different mode of dressing. They used to wear skirt and blouse unlike the local Tamils who were normally used to wear pavadais, half sarees and sarees. Though they also used to wear sarees it was only the dress of grand occasions. Following the local custom they had, to some extent, adopted some of the local practices. This transformation in their dress code was mainly for enabling them to have free movement in the society of Tamil Nadu. But in the restricted areas they had maintained their own culture and customs staunchly and had preferred to pass them on to their younger generation.

**Women Refugees**

More than fifty per cent of the refugee population residing in the camps were women. Women-folk were of diverse nature. At times, they were the uniting force linking the ties of different families. The women, in the camps belonged to different categories. In fact, in many of the families they were the wage earners in different capacities. Some were teachers, tailors and petty shop owners and many had been working as servants and daily wage earners in several houses of the host society. When the refugees came to this land initially every thing was difficult for

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them. For instance the climate was very hot, many of their food habits were different. For instance, they used more amount of coconut in every dish they prepared which was occasionally used in Tamil Nadu dishes. The increase in the use of coconut by these people raised the demand in the surrounding areas and the prices rose shortly.

These Sri Lankan Tamil women were the custodians of the culture of their native territories for which they were very proud. But at times when they saw their younger siblings growing in the cosmopolitan surroundings amidst the multiple TV channel programmes and electronic marvels their dress habits changed to some extent, behaviour with their elders slightly started differing and practices also had undergone some changes. They became very bold and the young men and women started adopting the western methods. To this change the women folk felt that their society was losing control over their younger ones. In fact, such developments in the refugee camp caused some concern to the conservative tradition bound women refugees.

**WOMEN HEADED FAMILY**

Most of the refugee women were the self employed lot who were either widows or mothers who lost their children during ethnic violence or women who suffered the loss of their property, rights and dignity and were uprooted from the Sri Lankan Tamil community. Their new role had made them compatible to face fresh burdens and new responsibilities.
They became the breadwinners to support their family members including the elders. Taking care of the education of their offspring's and guiding and grooming them to face the challenges of the future had become their prime task. Sometimes in certain families even husbands had become dejected and depressed while women were more resilient and they struggled steadfastly against heavy odds, to rebuild the broken lives and homes. Whatever circumstances prevailed in an existing environment, women remarkably responded to the challenges of the hard times and rescued themselves and others of their household to relive the life again. At times some women were left shattered, miserable, frustrated and these few women became diffident and disappointed in life and such unfortunate women had developed a tendency to look for the ultimate salvation in death. Though their condition of existence had been pathetic their virtual pride of the past some times revived the strength for survival, leading them to fight the odds.

**Flurry of the Camp Refugee Women**

Rights of the Women and her children in the Husbands' Family had become the question of the day of all the destitute women who had lost their husbands in the ethnic violence. Disruption of Inter- and Intra-Family Relationships had become a problem of the Sri Lankan Tamil

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refugees in the Tamil land during the past few years. Many of the women
refugees clearly stated that the relationship with the husband’s relatives
(including his mother and father) deteriorated in many instances after the
death or disappearance of the husband. Thus, one section of the related
family members ceased to be supporting members of the women and her
dependents. In fact, on many occasions, the cessation of interaction was
sudden, leaving the bereaved family in serious financial and social crisis.
For example, in one family, when the husband was killed by a member of
Janatha Vimukthi Perumana (JVP), his family took over his grocery store,
removed all the goods to their own home, and denied the woman and her
children any access to the property. It is not an exception and such
problems with the husband’s family over property occur frequently in
many of the refugee families. There have been attempts by members of
the husband’s family to seize lands as well as the homes occupied by the
dependents of the deceased. In fact, the properties of the deceased did not
reach the heirs properly and it is sad tale to hear.

A great majority of the women have had to seek help from their
own parents. But even such networks were not as effective as one would
have expected, mostly as a result of poverty. It is also to be pointed out
here that in many of the families the parents themselves were not in a
position to help their daughters whose husbands had either been killed or
had disappeared during the ethnic violence.
Further, problems of many kinds have also cropped up within the families. Many of these problems were linked to notions of justice and revenge on the part of children, particularly sons, and their mothers’ efforts to pacify them. Sons who were very young at the time of their father’s murder or abduction have grown up with a certain amount of hatred precipitated also by the fact that justice in the conventional legal sense did not appear to be forthcoming. For many of them revenge seemed to have become a primary pre-occupation, disrupting the families’ efforts to rebuild their lives by forcibly raking up the memories of a painful past. The tasks of these women become more hazardous by such developments. Overcoming this serious feeling and marching with the regular life had become very difficult for them. It was also difficult to console these victimised women living in the camps from such painful memories of events that drowned them in great miseries.

Women and Remarriage

Remarriage was not considered as a reformatory act by the majority of the women living in the camps, as most of the women felt that it would disrupt the lives of their children. Also, there was serious social pressure not to remarry among the camp refugees. On the other hand, there was also a certain degree of ostracization of widows. Some women have opted to remarry or simply to seek a male partner without going through the legal procedures and formalities both for economic reasons as
well as for purposes of companionship. But, the fact remained that many of these women received compensation for the death or disappearance of their husbands and the men who entered into such relationships were interested only to gain access to the money. On many occasions it could be seen that they moved out after the money ran out

**Economic Contribution of Women-Folk in the Refugee Camps**

While the men in the camps were engaged in various kinds of employment in different places near and far from the camps, the women also kept themselves busy with some job or other suitable to them. The women living in the camps generally work on daily wages. In almost all the refugee camps people were interested to seek jobs that were available close to their camps, as there were restrictions for the movement of the refugees. Refugees would leave the camp by eight in the morning and must return by six in the evening. These kinds of rigid rules affected the job opportunities for them. Most of the women were engaging themselves as the road-laying coolies, betel nut peelers, construction workers, tailors in the garment factory, stone breakers in quarries etc. All these jobs were strenuous for them and in this work they were engaged for long hours.

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Some living near the shores procured catches and sold fish in the market. Few women were found selling flowers near the temples situated in many areas of Tamil Nadu. On the whole, the women folk have moulded themselves according to the needs of the times and with all kinds of odds they were working with much fortitude and confidence.

It may also be pointed out that some destitute women registered in the camps had worked as housemaids in the nearby villages and stayed with that family all the time. They used to return to the camp on the day of 'Cash Dole' distribution. These women were mostly old, weak and less fortunate. The police and revenue officers in charge of the camps permitted them to stay outside the camps due to the nature of their employment as exceptional cases. In all the cases the camp 'talaivar' was always informed about the movement of each and every individual. Their huts were either rented to their close relatives or to some persons for running petty shops in the camp. The income generated out of it was spent on her food and medicine. Sometimes this money was given to their children who were struggling hard to meet their essential needs.

It was often found that the refugees staying in the camps had always considered their stay here as temporary and this place as the launching pad for their entry into some foreign lands which would give them better life and opportunities. Generally, it was very difficult for the men-folk to get jobs in foreign countries and particularly for those who
were not in possession of any technical qualification or work experience. Under these circumstances women had to take up this responsibility. Some women who initially registered in the camps were working abroad and supporting their families living in the refugee camps in Tamil Nadu and in Ceylon. One of the local headmen ("Talaivars") in the refugee camp in Dharmapuri district stated that his daughter was working in the Middle East as a housemaid and he had spent about 60,000 rupees to get her that job. He stated further that she was earning about twenty-five to thirty thousand rupees per month after a period of about four years. She had been working for the past four years, and her earnings had been utilised later for repaying the debt and also for sending his son to Canada on student's visa. He had also been sending money to his wife and his youngest son who were very much depending on this income for their survival. In fact, his daughter's income had relieved him of much of his financial burdens. He had also planned to send his another son to Canada to earn more for the family. This was the condition of the refugees in many camps and this was how women as breadwinners in the family had been contributing to the general wellbeing and subsistence of the family.  

There was a grocery and vegetable shop run by a woman in one of the camps in Villupuram District. She was the mother of seven children-

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four daughters and three sons. Her husband had lost 65 per cent of his earning capacity due to the torture he had undergone during the ethnic conflict in the north-eastern parts of the Sri Lankan country. She had married her eldest daughter to a refugee living outside the camp. The eldest daughter also had been taking care of her three younger brothers who were studying in a convent in that area. She had felt that it was her responsibility to undertake such commitment. With great difficulty, the parents had been educating the children. With the help of the three daughters she was able to run the business without any help from her community. The other children were having their education in the local government school. She was also planning to give her second daughter in marriage to a refugee since she felt that it was her prime duty to do it soon as it was done in other families. She felt that her sons would complete their education and would go to Canada after their education. Till that time she had to manage some how to carry on her work with much difficulty. Her only grievance was that the government officials had shifted them to five different camps in the past eight years which had affected her business very much as every time she had to start the business in the new place once again from the scratch. This speaks clearly of the mental strength of the woman and her capacity to survive in this
kind of world which had been many a time unkind to her and to her community.\textsuperscript{23}

**FUTURE OF SRI LANKAN REFUGEES IN TAMIL NADU**

The Sri Lankan Tamil refugees had been living in Tamil Nadu since early 1980's after their plight from Sri Lankan territory. Changes in the political scenario and stringent patrolling of the Indian and Sri Lankan officials in the Palk Strait region had considerably brought down the inflow of refugees into Tamil Nadu for the past few years. Their future had been the lingering question to them. It is to be noted that for quite a long time, only the enterprising among Sri Lankan Tamils and not those without any hope, had been coming as refugees from the island. Much of the refugees had been moving in the direction of greater opportunities. But those already in Tamil Nadu for some years were the people who had no relatives in the West to offer them any help. These poor refugees, were not keen on going back to their country for they had nothing in that place. However, they were determined to wait and watch the developments in Sri Lanka before deciding to go home. Some distressed refugees stated as follows:

\begin{quote}
**\textit{we have seen much of violence in the island which we had never seen before. We came here because of the violence there. Here we can at least eat in peace. We do not want to return to the island.}**
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{23} Personal Interview with 'Manvula', a 'Women Refugee', Villupuram, March, 2002.
unless we are sure that the place is safe and secure for every one".

Few others felt that there was no point in returning to Sri Lanka, unless there was some tangible improvement and introduction of measures for the protection of lives and properties. However, it can be gleaned from their words that most of them were interested to go back to Sri Lanka and they have a greater attachment to that country. They had always felt that they had to struggle here to lead a decent life. But at the same time they intended to go over there only when situation returned to normalcy.

It must also be pointed out that the Tamil land also had attracted them to some extent. The subsidised food shelter and facilities offered here in Tamil Nadu, education and employment opportunities and the government's assistance were incentives to the refugees to stay here in Tamil Nadu for some more time. Though their life was beset with many difficulties, ordeals and miseries, their long stay in Tamil Nadu had shaped them very much to bear all the troubles with fortitude. Further, their future in the island country seemed also not clear. Hence, these refugees had been remaining in dilemma whether to stay here for long or to move to Sri Lanka soon to start afresh their life there which was shattered greatly during the ethnic violence.

A Refugee Camp in Tenpallipattu, Villupuram District

Recreation Club in the Refugee Camp