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The power of education in refugees' lives: Sri Lankan refugees in India

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In their determination to take control of an uncertain future, Sri Lankan refugees living in the camps of Tamil Nadu, India, have prioritised education. The story of how they did this, and the crucial role of the host government in supporting them, may inspire other refugee communities who wait in uncertainty for a durable solution.

Violence that erupted in Sri Lanka in 1983 and on various subsequent occasions triggered a decades-long exodus of Sri Lankan Tamils to seek asylum in India and other countries in Asia, Europe, America and Australia. In total, some 303,000 people moved to India between 1983 and 2010, and were mainly accommodated in government-run refugee camps spread across Tamil Nadu in southern India. While the majority of the refugees have since moved back to Sri Lanka, there are still 19,451 families – about 63,350 refugees – living in 107 refugee camps. A further 37,868 live in Tamil Nadu outside the camps.¹

Those living in the camps can access a range of support measures, including cash allowances and access to all the social security schemes available to local citizens. However, for the refugees, education is paramount. They see education as fundamental to efforts to rehabilitate and empower the refugee community, and believe that an educated community will be better prepared to rebuild a peaceful and prosperous society upon return to Sri Lanka.

Prioritising education

Under the leadership of OfERR (Organization for Eelam Refugees Rehabilitation, an organisation of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees), the refugees lobbied the central and state governments of India and obtained special concessions

to allow refugee students – most of whom had lost their school certificates during displacement – to continue their education.

"We, Sri Lankan Tamils, having lost everything, requested the governments to provide space for our children to come and study in the classrooms along with the Indian children. To our surprise, the Tamil Nadu government offered space in their heart agreeing to admit all the children in schools without academic certificates. Nowhere in the world had this happened." (S C Chandrahasan, founder of OfERR)

A variety of programmes were organised by OfERR to promote education among the Sri Lanka Tamils: nursery education, primary and secondary schooling, evening classes, higher education, computer training, and school and college student forums. Sri



A student-led forum for school children in a Sri Lankan refugee camp in Tamil Nadu, India.

Lankan Tamils prize education highly and if any child from a refugee family is seen not to be attending school, the neighbours will intervene and take responsibility to ensure the child's education.

OfERR helps the students of vulnerable families to access higher education by providing scholarships, with a major part of each scholarship funded by an external donor.² More than 3,526 students in this refugee community have graduated or achieved diplomas, including in medicine, engineering, IT, banking, business and social work. The Tamil Nadu government's support in allowing access to higher education has been crucial.

More than three decades have passed and now basic education is ensured for every child in the camps, while special non-formal education and psychosocial support are provided for children with disabilities. OfERR's programmes aimed not only to help the refugees be gainfully occupied but also to help them overcome the psychological trauma resulting from prolonged residence in camps and years of uncertainty regarding prospects for return to Sri Lanka.³

Through district and regional forums involving over a thousand students, the refugee student community helps the next generation of students by providing mentoring, coaching, training and monetary support. They also monitor academic dropouts, organise community programmes such as neighbourhood clean-ups, and build awareness within the refugee community about social and global issues. But their ultimate goal is to utilise their higher education back in their homeland.

"Graduates, being the highly educated group in our community, have the responsibility of constantly updating refugees with the current situation of Sri Lanka and preparing the community for making voluntary, considered and informed decisions about their future." (Ajith Kumar, Paramathi camp, Namakkal district)

Long-term benefits

Education has made a significant contribution to the social and economic lives of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees living in Tamil

Nadu. There is neither poverty nor hunger; women are empowered and gender equality is maintained; almost 100% of children have access to basic education; there are no epidemics, and infant and maternal mortality is very rare in the camps; and refugees are conscious of the consequences of global warming and climate change and actively engage in promoting environmental sustainability. The support of the Tamil Nadu and Indian governments has been significant in helping to achieve this.

Sri Lankan Tamil refugees have not deviated from their objective of developing their human resources and building their capacities. Despite insecurity about the future, education has been used as a bulwark against the harsh challenges encountered in their lives, and their empowerment through education has brought a sense of sustainability and self-reliance, and has helped equip them for their return to Sri Lanka.

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My name is Antony Jeevarathnam Mayuran. I am Sri Lankan, and have recently returned to my motherland Sri Lanka after 25 years of life in exile as a refugee. I lived my life as a stateless refugee in a small house in a refugee camp in India.

I completed my Masters in Social Work and then an MPhil in Social Work at Loyola College, Chennai, India, and am now a Community Social Worker serving the returning IDPs and refugees in Sri Lanka. I work with OfERR (Ceylon) to provide education, empowerment, documentation, capacity building and livelihood support to the resettled Tamil population in Sri Lanka.

1. Commissionerate of Rehabilitation and Welfare of Non-Resident Tamils, Camp Population Abstract, 1 November 2016
www.rehab.tn.nic.in/camps.htm

2. Scholarships part-funded by the Evangelical Church in Germany's Ecumenical Scholarship Program.

3. Saha K C (2004) 'Learning from empowerment of Sri Lankan refugees in India', *Forced Migration Review* issue 20
www.fmreview.org/sustainable-livelihoods/saha