

Sri Lanka crisis: Refugees in Tamil Nadu were dreaming of returning to their island nation

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Life in Tamil Nadu is fairly secure, but it is the ‘refugee tag’ that prompts Sri Lankan Tamils to consider returning home

For over 80 Tamils, including children and infants, who took boats and landed in [Tamil Nadu](#) in the last few months, the risky journey was not only about fleeing [Sri Lanka’s dire economic situation](#). It was also about chasing an elusive dream — a secure, peaceful life.

Most of those leaving the northern Jaffna and Mannar districts of Sri Lanka, paying lakhs to be put on a boat to Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu, had returned to the island only in recent years.

“After spending years or decades away in refugee camps in Tamil Nadu, many families came back hoping to build a new life here,” says P. Nagenthiran, a coordinator at Forum for Returnees, a voluntary organisation helping families resettle on return. “But post-war reconstruction is incomplete, with hardly any jobs or meaningful development. The grim reality here is making families hopeless especially during the crisis.”

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Thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils fled the island’s civil war in the 1980s and 1990s and found refuge in Tamil Nadu.

Several others, who had the means, went as far as Europe and Canada. The civil war years saw civilians caught amidst clashes between the military and the rebel Tigers. Some faced the brutal violence of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) deputed to Sri Lanka from 1987-1990.

The indiscriminate shelling in the north and east during the height of the war meant families lost their loved ones, homes, and belongings — all this while being constantly displaced from one temporary shelter to another with only hopes, no assurance, of safety.

[Tamil Nadu’s sympathy](#) for the Tamil Tigers, or LTTE, that was leading the armed struggle against the oppressive Sri Lankan state, prompted different governments to take in scores of refugees in specially set up camps across Tamil Nadu. Every time the civil war let up a little, some families tried returning. The number increased after May 2009, when the war ended, with the Sri Lankan forces defeating the LTTE. Except, they may not have returned to peace.

S. Nadesalingam, 65, has spent some 35 years in Tamil Nadu. He tried returning twice before he succeeded in 2019. “I was there from 1985 to 1987, then 1990 to 1994, and finally from 1996 to 2019, when I managed to return. So many who are planning to return seek my advice, because I have tried this many times,” he says from Kilinochchi district where he is now based.

For refugees, life in Tamil Nadu is fairly secure, he says. “Even if you don’t have a job, the family can manage with the [dole given by the government](#) and use the amenities at the refugee camp. Most people don’t mind that life, but for the refugee tag they must bear.”

It is indeed the ‘refugee tag’ that prompts some to consider returning to their homeland, where they can live on land that belongs to them — if it is still not military-held — possibly take up a job and build a life without fear.

War-battered

“That could have been the case if only local and international non-governmental organisations, foreign governments, and local bureaucracy had cared about developing the war-battered area in ways that could benefit the people,” Nadesalingam contends, sharing a prevalent view of ‘failed reconstruction’ in the north and east that has pushed many families into debt. “But all these organisations and officials failed. On return, people feel abandoned. The crisis has only made them more disillusioned about their future.”

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The specific motivations of each family leaving their village vary. While most appear to be returnees, there are some who aren’t, according to locals. Many are from ‘lower-middle and middle classes’, community workers observe. Then, there are administrative challenges to making asylum claims in India, for they have fled economic adversity this time, and not war.

Meanwhile, Indian authorities have flagged “security concerns” and stepped-up surveillance along coastal Tamil Nadu, to deter ‘intrusions’ during a possible refugee influx.

Faced with acute shortages and long-term deprivation, many Tamil families are still chasing that dream of a secure life.

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