



The Journey of Sri Lankan Tamils in Aliyar Rehabilitation: from Refugee to Resident

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Abstract

This research Article, which centers on the Aliyar Rehabilitation Camp, tracks the movement and resettlement of Sri Lankan Tamils in Tamil Nadu. More than 300,000 Tamils crossed over to India in four significant waves after the civil war in Sri Lanka and many were relocated to camps such as Aliyar. Initially characterized by overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, and social isolation, Aliyar posed considerable difficulties for refugees' employment, education and mental health. However, through coordinated actions by the Indian Government, the state of Tamil Nadu and NGOs, the camp gradually changed over time. Basic needs such as education, housing, healthcare, and vocational training were met through welfare programs. The second and third generations now have better opportunities for employment, education, and transportation. The symbolic renaming of "refugee camps" as "rehabilitation camps" in 2021 represented a move in the direction of identity reconstruction and integration. However, hurdles persist: legislative obstacles to citizenship, restricted land rights, and societal prejudice continue to prevent complete integration. The example of Aliyar shows how refugees, via ongoing support and agency, can transition from crisis to community and redefine their identity as productive members of Tamil Nadu rather than just as survivors. This paper highlights the changing definition of home and belonging, as well as the fortitude of the Sri Lankan Tamil community.

Keywords: aliyar rehabilitation camp, citizenship barriers, education and employment, government welfare programs, identity reconstruction, integration challenges, refugee resettlement, sri lankan tamils.

Introduction

The tale of Sri Lankan Tamils relocating to Tamil Nadu is a compelling account of displacement, perseverance and gradual change. Thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils fled to India over the narrow strait, carrying just hope, as a result of decades of ethnic strife and civil war in Sri Lanka. Their lives began in congested and understaffed camps like Aliyar, where they faced hardship, uncertainty and few prospects for employment and education. The Aliyar camp developed over time from a temporary shelter into a

thriving community because of ongoing Government intervention and NGO assistance. The refugees have been able to reconstruct their lives because of advancements in infrastructure, social care, education and housing, which have helped them develop a new sense of self that is grounded in respect and community. The essential role of inclusive policies and social integration is highlighted by this transformation from refugee to resident, which also demonstrates the resilience of the Sri Lankan Tamil community. As evidence of



how persistent efforts can turn displacement into stability and provide a genuine route from survival to empowerment, the Aliyar Rehabilitation Camp still exists today.

Etymology of Refugee

The English word “refugee” comes from the French word “refugie,” which referred to Protestants who fled France after the revocation in 1685 of the Edict of Nantes, the legislation that had given the Protestant Huguenots religious freedom and civil rights for almost a century. In the years that followed, more than 400,000 French Protestants fled France, many of them to Protestant England. Throughout history, many people have been forced to leave their homes due to conflicts and invasions, and various cultures have offered shelter to those in need. The early 20th century is often called the “Age of the Uprooted” and the “Century of Homeless Men” because of the widespread refugee crises during that time. The term “refugee” brings to mind images of people who have been forced to leave their homes, like women in camps and families fleeing with limited possessions. A refugee is a person who cannot or will not seek safety in their own country due to a strong fear of persecution. This persecution can be based on race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinions. This definition comes from the 1951 UN Refugee Convention.

The Migration of Sri Lankan Tamils to Tamil Nadu

Sri Lanka is only 20 miles away from India and the two countries share strong historical and geographical connections. Tamil laborers from Tamil Nadu were brought to Sri Lanka to labor on plantations during British colonial rule and they eventually became known as Malayaha Tamils. Post Sri Lanka’s independence in 1948, policies favoring the Sinhalese majority, such as establishing Sinhala as the official language, resulted in discrimination against the Tamil minority. As a result of rising tensions that led to civil war in 1983, many Tamils sought refuge in India. These refugees frequently left their homes, identities and dreams behind, arriving in

India with nothing. Life in refugee camps was tough and it undermined their dignity and sense of direction. The Sri Lankan civil war, which ended in 2009, was caused by the Government’s inability to safeguard minority rights and maintain democracy, as well as by ethnic policies that favored the Sinhalese majority and exacerbated tensions. More than 60,000 people perished as a result of the war and about 516,000 were uprooted. Internally displaced people (IDPs) experienced significant hardship, such as lack of basic needs, trauma and few opportunities, despite post-war rehabilitation initiatives. The mass influx of Sri Lankan refugees started on July 24, 1983 and there had been a long delay in seeking asylum in India. The refugees had arrived to Tamil Nadu in four waves. The primary stage saw 1,34,053 refugees from Sri Lanka make contact with Tamil Nadu, which began in 1983 and continued through 1987. Periods of the influx of Sri Lankan refugees to India are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Various influxes of refugees into India

Waves	Period	Inflow
I Waves	24.07.83 to 31.12.1987	1,34,053
II Waves	25.08.89 to 30.04.1991	1,22,078
III Waves	31.07.96 to 31.08.2003	22,418
IV Waves	12.01.06 to 04.01.2010	24,527
	Total	3,03,076

Source: Department Of Rehabilitation, Tamil Nadu

Beginning on July 24, 1983, a large number of refugees from ethnic violence in Sri Lanka arrived in Tamil Nadu and they were inhabited in various camps. District Collectors issued “Exit Permits” to refugees who decided to pay for their trip back to Sri Lanka or to another nation. Due to ongoing ethnic conflict, Sri Lankan Tamils began to arrive in Tamil Nadu on January 12, 2006, as part of the fourth wave of refugee migration. By January 4, 2010, 8,450 families (24,527 people) had arrived in Rameswaram, of whom 18,222 were adults and 6,305 were children. Screenings were carried out at



the Quarantine camp upon arrival by intelligence and police authorities. Those who are thought to be involved with militants are kept in specific camps in Poonamallee (Thiruvallur district) and Chengalpattu (Kancheepuram district), whereas refugees who have been cleared of ties to militants are sent to the regular camp in Mandapam. A person from Sri Lanka who arrives by plane and plans to live with family members must get permission and register with the police. These people are accepted through non-camp registration and are not entitled to aid for refugees. On the other hand, after being cleared at a Quarantine Camp, refugees are photographed, registered and recorded at the Mandapam Camp, where they also get family identification cards. They receive housing, basic needs, and a monthly advance in financial support. These people are required to register for camp. Sri Lankan Tamils who arrive from Sri Lanka are temporarily housed in the Mandapam transit camp, which has a capacity of around 5,000 people. Later, they are transferred to 115 Government-operated camps located throughout 26 districts in Tamil Nadu, two of which are specifically designated. To better their socio-economic standing and access better education for their children, many people from the camp moved with their families to Aliyar in Coimbatore. The majority were given houses by the Government, while some relocated in response to family advice.

Challenges for Sri Lankan Tamils' livelihoods in Aliyar

According to official accounts, the refugee camp in Aliyar, which is roughly 50 kilometers from Coimbatore, has taken in about eighty-seven individuals, including some Sri Lankan youngsters. The Sri Lankan Tamils in the camps encounter a number of major issues, such as living in close quarters, sharing amenities, having little privacy, being cut off from the host community, being unemployed, having low wages and having a limited living space that restricts their daily routines. These refugee camps have a terrible physical environment. Electricity is only available between 6:00 PM and 6:00 AM, even though the Tamil Nadu Government

offers free power and shelter. The streets are quite small and the houses are dispersed, which raises the possibility of diseases and bad health among the locals. Additionally, the refugee camp's social atmosphere is subpar. The majority of the refugees came from Sri Lanka's Mannar, Vavuniya, Mullaitivu and Jaffna districts and had previously worked in business, agriculture and fishing. However, they are not properly used or promoted within the camps. The majority of them work as daily wage labourers because the Government's financial help is inadequate for their needs. Large families residing in small houses is another widespread issue impacting the social atmosphere.

Despite Government assurances of improved housing, Sri Lankan refugees in the Aliyar camp were unsure about their stay in 2006. Children were enrolled in Tamil-medium schools in the neighborhood, but their families were worried about the quality of their education and the language barriers, since they had previously learned in English or Sinhala. As a result of the civil war, many refugees also suffered from trauma, loss, and displacement anxiety. The Government and several NGOs, such as JRS (Jesuit Refugee Service) and OFERR (Organisation For Eelam Refugees Rehabilitation), stepped up to improve the living standards of the Sri Lankan Tamils more efficiently.

The Sri Lankan Tamils' Recent Trends in Aliyar

The economic circumstances of Sri Lankan Tamils slowly improved with time. The Government provided basics like food, supplies, water infrastructure and healthcare, while NGOs actively assisted in the development of programs for education, psychological therapy and skill development. With the second and third generations being educated, the camps are currently home to three generations. In the past, a number of restrictions prevented people from moving to different areas for school, jobs or business. But with the consent of local Government representatives, they are currently allowed to travel for these reasons.



Latest Developments at the Aliyar Rehabilitation Camp Impact of Educational Development on Job Outcomes

The majority of the camp's residents have completed their education through the 12th grade. A large proportion of the girls work in the medical profession, schools, industries and private banks. The majority of the males paint, while a few work for private IT companies. Despite their financial hardship, parents are firm in their belief that giving their children a good education will guarantee a bright future. They frequently borrow money, sometimes jewelry loans, or operate their own businesses to support themselves.

The Aliyar Rehabilitation Camp has Housing Initiatives

New house construction initiatives are still being launched because the Aliyar Rehabilitation Camp is under the supervision of the Public Works Department (PWD). The State Government intends to construct apartments for 1,016 Sri Lankan Tamil refugee families who are currently residing in congested camps in four districts, including Aliyar and Kottur. The asbestos roofs of these camps are in terrible condition, and they lack essential facilities. The project has already seen the construction of 200 residences in Aliyar, which have been given to families from the overcrowded Kottur camp. The residents of the Aliyar Rehabilitation Camp are now attempting to repair their houses on their own. The Government pays for their electricity use and the populace is renowned for maintaining a high level of home cleanliness.

Improved Infrastructure, Welfare Services

There have been notable advancements in the infrastructure and services at the Aliyar Rehabilitation Camp. The Public Distribution System (PDS) guarantees access to necessities such as ration, water, hygiene and power. Community requirements are catered to by neighboring schools, Anganwadi centers and healthcare facilities. Welfare programs currently include refugees and provide monthly pensions, vocational training and educational

support. Numerous young people are now benefiting from Government skill development initiatives and higher education.

The Development of their Identity

In August 2021, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin changed the name of "Refugee Camps" to "Rehabilitation Camps" in an effort to foster a more compassionate and respectful attitude toward the long-term settlement of Sri Lankan Tamils. He said, "We are here for them; they are not orphans," highlighting their worth.

Stability in the Socio-Cultural Sector

Aliyar has become home to many people throughout the years, who have established families and careers there. Many Sri Lankan Tamils in Aliyar, despite being deemed "non-citizens," continue to have a decent living, engage in community social activities, and strive for long-term legal recognition.

Programs to Enhance Livelihood and Welfare of Refugee

The Central and State Governments' welfare initiatives for the Sri Lankan Rehabilitation Camps will be covered in the following section. The Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA) is executing the "Relief and Rehabilitation Assistance to Sri Lankan Refugees in Refugee Camps" program as part of the "Umbrella Scheme for Relief and Rehabilitation of Migrants and Repatriates." Its goal is to help Sri Lankan refugees by offering vital humanitarian support such as food, housing, medical care, education, and livelihood support. The following Table 2 will show the details.

Table - 2 Umbrella Scheme for Relief and Rehabilitation of Migrants and Repatriates

Schemes for	Facilities
Food & Nutrition	Cooked meals (₹45-70/day), subsidized rice (400 g/day adults, 200 g/day children).
Clothing & Utensils	Annual clothing materials, blankets every two years, basic utensils.



Cash Assistance	₹400/month for family head; ₹288 for other adult; ₹180 for first child; ₹90 for additional children.
Healthcare	Free medical check-ups, vaccinations; maternal support via Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy Maternity Scheme.
Education Support	Free schooling up to 12th grade with uniforms, books, bus pass; bicycles for Class-11 students.
Infrastructure Support	Camps equipped with huts, roads, electricity, water; identity cards issued upon registration.
Employment Access	Allowed informal work outside camps (6 a.m. to 6 p.m.) though limited.

The State Government's schemes

1. Infrastructure and Housing

- The welfare package, worth ₹317.4 crore, was announced by Chief Minister Stalin in August 2021
- The price of fundamental facility improvements (electricity, restrooms, drinking water) is about 30 crores rupees, and the yearly maintenance cost is 5 crores rupees.
- The 'Sri Lankan Tamil Lives Improvement Scheme' has a deployment of 5 billion rupees.

2. Education & Scholarships

Full tuition and hostel costs are covered for the top five agriculture/agricultural engineering students and fifty engineering students. An increase of one crore rupees annually to help students in higher education.

3. Increases in scholarships

Technical School: ₹2,500 → ₹10,000

Graduates in Arts & Science: ₹3,000 to ₹12,000

Undergraduate professional: ₹5,000 to ₹20,000

The total amount of scholarship money is 1.25 crores.

4. Development of skills

10 crore was set aside to train roughly 5,000 young refugees and improve their prospects for making a living.

5. Integration over the Long Term

To enhance the quality of life for refugees and strive for dual citizenship for them, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin established a high-level advisory board headed by Minister K.S. Masthan.

Findings

- **Camp Conditions:** Early camps like Aliyar suffered from overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of seclusion.
- **Livelihood:** Despite their skills, refugees were forced into low-paying jobs because of legal and economic obstacles.
- **Employment and Education:** Over time, access to education has increased, resulting in better employment opportunities, especially for women.
- **Support & Welfare:** Government and NGOs increased access to food, housing, education, and mental health care.
- **Identity and Integration:** The renaming of camps to "Rehabilitation Camps" reflects increasing stability and respect.
- **Legal Obstacles:** Refugees are still restricted from fully integrating due to difficulties in acquiring land rights and citizenship.

Recommendations

- **Legal Recognition:** Give long-term refugees routes to permanent residency or dual citizenship in order to grant them complete rights and integration.
- **Education and Livelihood:** Improve focused educational assistance, microfinance, and skill training, with a particular emphasis on third-generation children and young people.
- **Healthcare and Housing:** Enhance access to medical and mental health services, basic infrastructure, and permanent housing.



- **Social Integration:** Encourage community participation, cultural exchange, and open monitoring of rehabilitation activities.

Conclusion

The journey of the Sri Lankan Tamils to Tamil Nadu is characterized by trauma, fortitude, and an ever-changing sense of self. Their lives have seen notable improvement thanks to backing from the Indian government, Tamil Nadu and civil society. However, full integration, employment and legal acceptance are still ongoing problems. Genuine rehabilitation involves seeing refugees as part of Tamil Nadu's social fabric rather than merely providing short-term relief. This change is represented by the experience of Sri Lankan Tamils in the Aliyar Rehabilitation Camp, who went from being displaced refugees to becoming empowered residents rebuilding with dignity. **"Home is not where you are born, but where you are given the chance to become."** Their journey marks not just recovery, but a lasting humanitarian legacy.

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