

Chapter 8

Summary, conclusion and recommendations

8.1 Summary

India has been receiving refugees from its neighbouring countries including Sri Lanka. As of 2009, India hosted 456,000 refugees and asylum seekers. Of them, 120,000 were from Sri Lanka. They have been a matter of concern for India since a long time. However, India has effectively managed their inflow and has been offering shelter to them and providing basic amenities. However, India has its own limitations for accommodating refugees and cannot afford to extend citizenship to Sri Lankan Tamil refugees despite their ethnic ties. UNHCR, being the agency that stands for refugees, suggests voluntary repatriation, resettlement and local integration as the durable solutions for them. This study investigated the decision of refugees to return to Sri Lanka in the post-conflict situation. Both India and Sri Lanka have initiated talks about repatriation of Sri Lankan refugees. This chapter summarises the findings of this study and concludes with policy recommendations.

In 1983, the ethnic conflict between Tamils and Sri Lankans in its serious discord led to civil and political unrest. After this the Tamil minority group started leaving their country seeking refuge in other countries. The first mass exodus was during 1983-87 where around 134,000 Sri Lankan Tamils arrived in Tamil Nadu. Due to the civil war in 1990, another 122,078 Sri Lankan Tamils came to Tamil Nadu during 1989-91. The third mass exodus started in 1996. During the period 1996-05, more than 22,000 Sri Lankan Tamils came to Tamil Nadu. The fourth mass exodus during 2006-07 recorded influx of another 19,680 Tamils. During 2007, there were about 97,708 refugees reside in Tamil Nadu of which 74,219 refugees reside in about 117 camps (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2007). The Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in Tamil Nadu are broadly categorised into following three divisions of which the study was on the foremost division.

- i) Camp Refugees – those who live in camps meant for refugees;
- ii) Non-Camp Refugees – those who have personal resources in Tamil Nadu and obtain special provision for accommodation to stay in Tamil Nadu; and
- iii) Special Camp Refugees – those who found to be a part of any militant outfits.

Theories associated with migration cannot be directly related to the context of forced migration as they by and large state the economic motive behind migration. Whereas, theories associated with forced migrants are micro theories that are individual and family centric where survival is perhaps only motive of the migrants. The very definition of UNHCR highlights that any movement for economic motive should not be considered as refugees. Hence, the general migration theories though cannot be directly associated with forced migration, to some extent they can be associated with the factors of forced migration such as push-pull factors, decision making, networking, social capital and ties (Lee, 1966; Bordieu & Wacquant, 1992; Massey, 1990; Thomas Faist, 1997 & 2000).

Studies relating to forced migrants including refugees globally and in India are abundant. However, studies on post conflict measures are scarce. In particular, studies linking factors such as adjustment, health status, social capital and the factors influence their decision to return to the country of origin where conflict has been halted. For instance, normalcy declared in Sri Lanka in the mid 2009 after the extinct of militant group. It has initiated talks about repatriation of Sri Lankan refugees. Being developing country India has limitations to accommodate refugees from different parts of the world and thus cannot afford to provide citizenship to Sri Lankan Tamil refugees despite of their ethnic ties with India. So this acts as a push factor in the host country. On the other hand, the Sri Lankan government has ensured sustained peace for refugees and displaced. Humanitarian agencies are also taking proactive measures in resettlement process and ensuring peace. These all acts as a pull factors in the origin.

Given this situation where the protracted refugees are in indifference between choosing their country of origin and host, it is essential to study the factors which affect their decision to return. Also, these people are expected to have well integrated with the host population which is identical in terms of culture, language, etc., it would be an opportunity to study their decision to return. Further, social relations in the host acts as a social capital in feeling the belongingness of the refugees in the host. Studies show that when refugees settle in host, they keep a close watch on the conditions in the origin and a conducive environment if they have intention to return. Also, those with adequate wealth and family members left behind in the origin would more likely to look

for such opportunity to return. Given the adverse experience they had during their first phase return and the dejection caused of it would influence their decision to return. Given the experience the refugees have in the past, their decision towards return will also be rational and mindful of the situation in the origin. Thus, the study is aimed to investigate the aspects that influence the decision on return. The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the socioeconomic relationship between individuals within the refugee population itself, and the socioeconomic relationships between the refugees and the surrounding host population;
2. To investigate the family reunification among refugees with their social connections;
3. To examine the health status among refugees;
4. To understand the adjustment pattern among refugees;
5. To examine the factors determining intention to return to origin and stay back in the host.

The current study is conducted in Tamil Nadu among the Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka who are accommodated in camps across the state. Sample respondents were selected from five refugee camps, viz., Dharmapuri, Krishnagiri, Salem, Thiruvannamalai and Villupuram. Both quantitative and qualitative data collection were done to study the population. The quantitative data were collected from 204 respondents and qualitative data from 17 respondents belonging to unique households in both the cases. Univariate, bivariate and regression analysis are used for bringing out the results. Composite index is used as per the requirements.

Most of the camps have basic amenities and infrastructure such as drinking water, drainage facility, transport facility, road connectivity, government hospitals, private hospitals, health assistance from aid agencies, post office, etc. They are well connected with metallic roads and are situated to the vicinity of hospitals and post offices. The Government regularly provides medical aid and other livelihood support to the camp residents. By the infrastructure index, the camp in Salem district has the finest infrastructure, followed by the camps in Dharmapuri, Krishnagiri and Thiruvanamalai

districts. On the other hand, the camp in Villupuram district has relatively poor infrastructure where the detrimental indicators are vicinity of private hospital, number of persons using one bathroom, connectivity to metallic road, frequency of public transport and vicinity of the nearest bus stand.

Our respondents are mostly from the northern and north-eastern districts of Sri Lanka. They have come to India in four broad defined phases (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2007). The male and female respondents constitute 3:2 ratio. Most of them are in economically productive age group, while few are above 60 years old. Education remains a concern among refugees. Very few are highly literate and they are especially youngsters. All of them are proficient in Tamil, while one-fourth of them are proficient in Sinhala. Proficiency in English is average. Most of the respondents are married, while one-tenth of them are unmarried or widowed/deserted. The respondents are mostly marginal workers in unorganised sector and do not have full-time employment.

Social connections and network have been considered as a strength for migrants including refugees (Wahlbeck, 1996; Cheung and Phillimore, 2013; Bousquet, 1991; Gold, 1992; Steen, 1992). Having explored the social connections, it was found that refugees broadly have three types of social connections such as friends/ family members/ relatives – within refugee circle with those in Sri Lanka and with Indian citizens. Social connection can be seen pervasively across all the respondents. Two-thirds of them have connections within refugee circle while two-fifths have with Indian citizens. Current age and education are the characteristics that are found to have a statistically significant relationship in deciding the network in Tamil Nadu. In the case of refugees having network with the local population and who are citizens of India, a significant relationship is found with respect to characteristics such as age, education, household income, language proficiency, phase of arrival and number of moves.

Communication with social relations is another vital element that determines the intensity of social status among the refugees in the host community. Mutual communication in the social connections can be seen among the respondents. Age, phase of arrival in India and number of moves as refugees are the characteristics that

are found to have a statistically significant relationship in deciding mutual communication among refugee relations. Education, marital status, household income and phase of arrival in India seem to determine mutual communication with the relations in Sri Lanka. In the case of mutual communication of refugees with relations in India, the determining characteristics seems to be age, education, household size, type of employment, household income, proficiency in Tamil and proficiency in Sinhala which are statistically significant in explaining the pattern. The social network index shows that refugees with longer duration of stay in the host country have a better social network. On the other hand, refugees with more number of movements as refugees do not necessarily have a better social network.

Family support for refugees is a strong determinant of health status. The study assessed the disconnections of refugees with their loved ones and factors that have contributed to reunification. Qualitative finding shows that refugees put effort to get connected to their loved ones with whom they have lost their contacts. Though few of them have succeeded in getting through with their effort, many others have failed and are found to be depressed about the survival status of their loved ones. The mental and psychosocial health status of refugees has been assessed in this study. Most of the respondents reported poor health on three health conditions, viz., sadness/depression/fear, uncertain about future and refugee feeling. The poor health condition is across all the socio-economic population sub-groups. The regression analysis found that refugees with better social connection and network need not necessarily have good health status.

Adjustment with the host population is among the factors that has a strong link with the decision to return. The study assessed two parameters of adjustment, namely, occupational adjustment and socio-cultural adjustment, and arrived at an index called refugee adjustment index "RAI". Our finding is that a majority of the respondents are doing different work than what they were doing in Sri Lanka. They have reported difficulties in adjusting to the new job and its requirements. Since they are employed in unorganised sectors, formal training to do the new work has been hardly a

requirement. However, being refugees they have reported discriminatory wages and very hard labour work which is often life-threatening.

In the case of socio-cultural adjustment, a fairly good number of refugees reported getting along with the socio-cultural parameters such as attending local festivals, marriages and are better speaking in Tamil. The regression analysis shows that sex and age are two variables that are significantly associated with adjustment level. As compared with the unmarried refugees, the adjustment level of widowed/deserted refugees is low. The respondents have better adjustment if their family members are married to the Indian citizens. Adjustment levels of the respondents are twice higher when their family members are married to native persons. Strength of social network gives an edge to adjustment levels of respondents in both the models. The result shows that refugees with strong social network have better adjustment. In addition, we came across a pathway of integration where refugees get married to local Indian citizens and look forward to settling in India.

Two-fifths of the respondents wanted to return to Sri Lanka, while the remaining opted to stay in India. Mutual communication with social connections in Sri Lanka, poor mental health, possession of land in Sri Lanka and number of movements as refugees are the factors that determine the refugees' intention to return there. Refugees with better adjustment with the host population have lesser intention of repatriation. Reasons that cited for returning to Sri Lanka are eagerness to see the family members, better socio-economic conditions, uncertain future in the host country and refugee feeling, and combination of these issues. Reasons cited for settling in India are safety and insecurity, absence of resources in the country of origin, social support, expectations of securing citizenship and uncertainty in the country of origin.

8.2 Conclusion

This study was conducted when the time was ripe to effectively think about returning back to Sri Lanka as conflict that made them flee was halted and the condition was under restoration. Thus, the findings presented in this study could be strongly

attributed to the decisions of refugees about their intention to return to Sri Lanka or stay back in India as refugees. Also, uncertainty about future remains low among the recently arrived refugees as compared with the protracted counterparts. These result suggests the readiness of the recently arrived refugees to return back to their origin. Hence, the repatriation measure should take into account these preferences and gradually initiate the process of sending back to the origin.

Some of the research questions investigated in the study suggests strong association between duration of stay and social network; social network and adjustment; and adjustment with host population and lower intention to return. It is interesting to note the role of social network on adjustment which is one of the processes that indicates the pathway of assimilation.

Though association was found between few variables, there are other research questions where the association could not be established such as more number of movements (as refugees) and social network; social network and health status; and duration of stay in the host country and adjustment.

8.3 Recommendations

Extensive measures have been taken by Sri Lankan Government and UNHCR in the resettlement of refugees and IDPs. The most challenging task is the resettlement of IDPs rather than of refugees. Over time, it could be possible that the uncertainty would wean-off and the situation will improve, bringing in conducive environment for both of them to resettle in their own land. While a good number of refugees want to stay in India, this becomes a policy concern as their repatriation cannot be forced. Given this, the question arises whether the country would be able to continue supporting and providing aid to the refugees who stay back? Also, what is the solution in the long term? Important alternatives are given below.

1. There is a strong desire among refugees for settling in India. Providing citizenship to the most desired population could be a durable solution for them.

2. There is a huge population which does not know about its parental origin as it born in India or has spent its whole life growing in India. Indian foreign policy should be reviewed to accommodate this population to provide it citizenship.
3. There are refugees who have close links with India and Indian citizens. Providing citizenship to them could be a viable solution.
4. There are discussions at international level about shifting in refugee protection by UNHCR and integrating refugees to national development plans so as to develop livelihood opportunities and promote self-reliance among them, capitalizing on their skills and utilize their potential to contribute to the local economy. The Government can think about these matters when the time is ripe for necessary action.
5. For the refugees who want to live in India, the Government can continue providing aid to them and can periodically assess their interest in returning to Sri Lanka. Thus, it can gradually initiate the repatriation process as and when the people are interested to return.

8.3 Limitations of the current study

While this study is expected to fill the gap in the pool of literature on refugees, it also has some limitations like any other studies. The foremost limitation is low sample coverage which was due to the sensitiveness nature of the study subject and denial of permission to get connected to this population. Though the results do not seem to have affected with low sample size, it still gives an impression that the findings lacks accuracy due to standard error of sample size. With 95% confidence level, the standard error would be 4.2 for an indicator value of 10 per cent with the number of samples studies. For the same 10 per cent indicator value, with 400 samples, the standard error would have reduced to 2.9 in which case the accuracy level is high as compared with the earlier sample size.

The study does not provide comparison with other population such as general migrant population, IDPs or other forced migrants. It is limited only to the aspects of refugees. For instance, the household monthly income for a refugee driver or painter could be

the same as of the person from general population who work in the same profile. On the other hand, the refugees would have had decent employability in the host country while the IDPs could lack such a decent employability being in the country of origin.

Another limitation is the study does neither focus on the political aspects surrounding the issue nor talk particularly on the militant group. There are various other issues which haunts the refugees in the host country such as gender and violence, physical health, sexual abuse, alcohol use among male refugees and its associated factors and consequences, etc. The study prevents such a broader investigation onto diverse aspects/issues and limits the researcher only to the issues highlighted in the objectives.

8.4 Scope of future research

Some of the limitations highlighted in the previous section could add onto the scope of future research. However, there are certain aspects of the current study has scope for future research. For instance, studying the repatriates in the origin, about their adjustment in the initial days of return and later, reunion with social connections who would have moved away as IDPs, mental health status, enquiry into the decision that they made to return, etc. Studying on these issues could also lead to completing the limitations that the current research has. Also, the studies in the country of origin can be done immediately as well as after few years of settlement.