

# Returning Home: A Comparative Analysis of the Experiences of Sri Lankan First- and Second-Generation Refugee Returnees from India

Anoji Ekanayake \* and Kopalapillai Amirthalingam\*\*

## ABSTRACT

Since the end of the civil war in 2009, Sri Lankan refugees in India have begun to return home slowly. This article examines the reintegration experiences of first-generation returnees vis-à-vis second-generation returnees who were either born in India or were small children at the time of migration and thus have limited memory of their lives in Sri Lanka before migration. Particular attention is given to challenges encountered, coping mechanisms adapted to overcome these challenges and returnees' perceptions of their own return decision in hindsight. Using 13 in-depth case studies in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, we found that while the reintegration of first-generation returnees has been relatively uneventful, second-generation returnees, particularly those with Indian higher educational qualifications, faced a cluster of challenges upon their return involving financial, social, and bureaucratic aspects. Their coping mechanisms include accepting jobs beneath their qualifications, remigration to India, and maintaining strong bonds with fellow returnees and friends still in India. While challenges faced upon returning to Sri Lanka have led some returnees, particularly the young, to doubt their decision to return, others are content with their decision as they feel they have better rights in Sri Lanka.

**KEYWORDS:** refugee returnees, Sri Lankan refugees in India, reintegration, coping mechanisms, intergenerational impact

## 1. INTRODUCTION

For decades, international legal and political frameworks on forced migrants considered voluntary repatriation of refugees to their home countries once peace and stability have been achieved in these countries as the logical final stage of a refugee's path

\* Researcher, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo 00800, Sri Lanka. Email: anoji.ekanayake@gmail.com

\*\* Senior Professor in Economics, Department of Economics, University of Colombo, Colombo 00700, Sri Lanka. Email: amir@econ.cmb.ac.lk

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towards stability and self-sustainability. In other words, these frameworks were developed based on the view that voluntary repatriation is the most durable and optimal solution to issues pertaining to refugees.<sup>1</sup> This view is connected to the notion that people are closely linked to a specific geographical territory which forms a significant basis of their identity and sense of belonging. As a result, facilitating return “home” was considered the most natural and least problematic approach to addressing the refugee crises.<sup>2</sup> However, recent studies on repatriation of refugees argue that the mere end of a conflict and the absence of violence does not make it conducive for sustainable return and successful reintegration. These studies call for more research on the experiences of refugee returnees, particularly second-generation refugees born in exile, who often do not identify themselves with the home countries of their parents.<sup>3</sup> However, though there are plenty of studies on refugees in host countries, literature on the experiences of refugee returnees, especially comparative studies on the experiences of first- and second-generation refugee returnees, is sparse.

In the Sri Lankan context, during the 26-year conflict that ravaged Sri Lanka from 1983 to 2009, tens of thousands of Sri Lankans, the vast majority of whom were Tamils, sought refuge in other countries. As per the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Global Statistics, by the end of the war, 136,605 refugees from Sri Lanka were residing in 65 countries.<sup>4</sup> The vast majority (approximately 107,000) were in neighbouring India and accommodated in refugee camps (approximately 73,000) and with family and friends, and in rented houses (34,000).<sup>5</sup> Since the end of the war, some of these refugees in India have begun to return, and currently, only approximately 93,032 Sri Lankan refugees reside in India.<sup>6</sup> According to the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL),<sup>7</sup> between 2011 and 2018, 7,818 persons belonging to 3,001 families who migrated to India as refugees due to the conflict returned to Sri Lanka voluntarily with UNHCR aid. In addition,

- 1 F. Cornish, K. Peltzer, & M. Maclachlan, “Returning Strangers: The Children of Malawian Refugees Come “Home”?”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 12(3), 1999, 264–283, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/12.3.264>; S. Kamal, “Afghan Refugee Youth in Iran and the Morality of Repatriation”, in D. Chatty (ed.), *Deterritorialized Youth: Sahrawi and Afghan Refugees at the Margins of the Middle East*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2010, 183–212; S. Stöckmann, “Struggling to Feel at Home: An Inquiry into Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees’ Experiences of Reintegration” Sweden, University of Gothenburg, 2017, available at: <https://gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/52329> (last visited 09 Aug. 2022).
- 2 Stöckmann, “Struggling to Feel at Home”.
- 3 Kamal, “Afghan Refugee Youth in Iran and the Morality of Repatriation”; Stöckmann, “Struggling to Feel at Home”.
- 4 UNHCR, *UNHCR Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Asylum-Seekers from Sri Lanka*, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 21 Dec. 2012.
- 5 J. Pagonis, *Coming Home: Sri Lankan Refugees Return*, UNHCR, 13 Aug. 2010, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2010/8/4c657ec69/coming-home-sri-lankan-refugees-return.html> (last visited 26 Dec. 2022).
- 6 Ministry of Home Affairs India, “Rajya Sabha Unstarred Question No 2443”, 17 Mar. 2021, available at: <https://www.mha.gov.in/MHA1/Par2017/pdfs/par2021-pdfs/rs-17032021/2443.pdf> (last visited 26 Dec. 2022).
- 7 Ministry of National Policies, Economic Affairs, Resettlement & Rehabilitation, Northern Province Development and Youth Affairs, *Performance Report 2018*, Colombo, Ministry of National Policies, Economic Affairs, Resettlement & Rehabilitation, Northern Province Development and Youth Affairs, 2019.

many others returned using private funds,<sup>8</sup> though the statistics on such returnees are sparse.

Even though many studies have been conducted on the experiences of Sri Lankan refugees in India and the challenges they face navigating life as refugees in their host country,<sup>9</sup> little attention has been given to refugee returnees from either a policy or an academic perspective. In particular, there has been minimal attention on second-generation refugee returnees, who were either born in exile or were young children at the time of migration and thus have limited memory of their lives in Sri Lanka prior to migration.

Though the number of refugee returnees from India so far has been small in comparison to the number of refugees still in India, exploring the reintegration experiences of returnees is of utmost importance from a policy perspective as nearly a hundred thousand Sri Lankan refugees in India take into account the experiences of their kith and kin who have returned to Sri Lanka when making decisions about their own return. Therefore, this article which provides a comparative analysis of the return experiences of first- and second-generation refugee returnees from India, contributes to the literature in many ways.

First, it examines the various challenges that refugee returnees' experience upon their return to Sri Lanka, with a special focus on the impact of the age of migration to India on the severity of reintegration difficulties faced upon returning to Sri Lanka. Secondly, it assesses the coping mechanisms adapted by returnees to overcome the various challenges they encounter in Sri Lanka and looks at whether there are any intergenerational differences in the coping methods used. Thirdly, to assess the level of reintegration in Sri Lanka, the article explores returnees' perceptions about their return decision. Finally, despite excellent research on the repatriation and reintegration of second-generation refugees in other parts of the world, there is a vacuum in the literature on the reintegration struggles of second-generation returnees in South Asia; this study fills this gap to a certain extent.

The rest of the article is organised as follows. Section 2 provides a conceptual framework for the study by reviewing literature on the notions of return, home, and identity among refugees. Section 3 outlines the history and the lives of Sri Lankan refugees in India, while the fourth section is on the methodology and descriptive data. Section 5 examines the challenges encountered by refugee returnees in Sri

8 UNHCR, Sri Lanka, *Sri Lankan Refugee Returnees in 2015: Results of Household Visit Protection Monitoring Interviews (Tool Two)*, Colombo, 7 Dec. 2016.

9 D. Balan & D. Athray, "Life of Sri Lankan Refugee Women in the Camps of Tamil Nadu", in I. Rajan (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Refugees in India*, 1st ed., Oxon and New York, Routledge, 2022, 642–654; A.-S. Bentz & A. Goreau-Ponceaud, "To Be or Not to Be a Refugee? Reflections on Refugeehood and Citizenship among Sri Lankan Tamils in India", *Citizenship Studies*, 24(2), 2020, 176–192, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2019.1706446>; M. George, W. Kliewer, & S. I. Rajan, "Rather Than Talking in Tamil, They Should Be Talking to Tamils": Sri Lankan Tamil Refugee Readiness for Repatriation", *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 34(2), 2015, 1–22, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdv004>; P. Newman, "Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees: A Voiceless, Undignified Existence", in I. Rajan (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Refugees in India*, 1st ed., Oxon and New York, Routledge, 2022, 628–641; C. Valattheswaran & S. I. Rajan, "Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees in India: Rehabilitation Mechanisms, Livelihood Strategies, and Lasting Solutions", *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 30(2), 2011, 24–44, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdr005>.

Lanka, while Section 6 explores the coping methods used to overcome these challenges. The seventh section is on how returnees perceive their return decision, while the final section provides concluding remarks and recommendations.

## 2. NOTIONS OF RETURN, HOME, AND IDENTITY AMONG FIRST- AND SECOND-GENERATION REFUGEES

The UNHCR defines refugee returnees as “former refugees who have returned to their country of origin spontaneously or in an organized fashion but have not yet been fully (re)integrated.”<sup>10</sup> Literature on return migration identifies two categories of returnee refugees. Those who spent their formative years in their home country before being forced into exile are referred to as first-generation refugees. In general, these refugees have vivid memories of their life in their home country. On the other hand, second-generation refugees are the children and the grandchildren of first-generation refugees. These second-generation refugees were either born in exile or were small children at the time of their forced migration. As a result, these refugees spend their formative years in exile and have limited to no memories of life in their home country.<sup>11</sup>

More often than not, first-generation refugees, irrespective of the number of years they have spent in their host countries, tend to maintain boundaries with their host communities with the hopes of ultimately returning “home,” i.e. to their countries of origin.<sup>12</sup>

Scholars from various disciplines have explored the notion of “home” from a range of angles. While it is often associated with shelter and comfort, it is a far more comprehensive concept.<sup>13</sup> Mallett (2004),<sup>14</sup> who researched dominant and recurrent ideas about the concept of home to determine “whether or not home is (a) place(s), (a) space(s), feeling(s), practices, and/or an active state of being in the world” argues that home is a repository for memories of the lived experiences of interaction between people, places, and things and can be an expression of one’s identity. Thiranagama (2011),<sup>15</sup> who studied the displaced persons in Sri Lanka, argues that home represents a collective identity and is “an everyday language of love, affection, sentiment and memory” for Sri Lankan Tamils. Building on the arguments of Mallett and Thiranagama, Chatteraj (2017)<sup>16</sup> argues that the concept of home is “endowed

10 UNHCR, “UNHCR’s Mandate for Refugees, Stateless Persons and IDPs - UNHCR Emergency Handbook”, available at: <https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/55600/unhcrs-mandate-for-refugees-stateless-persons-and-idps> (last visited 16 Feb. 2023).

11 Cornish, Peltzer, & Maclachlan, “Returning Strangers”; Z. O. D. S. Kropiwnicki, “The Meeting of Myths and Realities: The “Homecoming” of Second-Generation Exiles in Post-Apartheid South Africa | Refuge: Canada’s Journal on Refugees”, *Refuge Canada’s Journal on Refugees*, 30(2), 2014, 79–92, available at: <https://refuge.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/refuge/article/view/39621>.

12 Kamal, “Afghan Refugee Youth in Iran and the Morality of Repatriation”.

13 D. Chatteraj, *Ambivalent Attachments: Shifting Notions of Home among Displaced Sri Lankan Tamils*, Germany, Institute of Development Research and Development Policy, Ruhr University Bochum, 2017, available at: <https://d-nb.info/1144614422/34> (last visited 26 Dec. 2022).

14 S. Mallett, “Understanding Home: A Critical Review of the Literature”, *The Sociological Review*, 52(1), 2004, 1, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2004.00442.x>.

15 S. Thiranagama, *In My Mother’s House: Civil War in Sri Lanka*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

16 Chatteraj, *Ambivalent Attachments: Shifting Notions of Home among Displaced Sri Lankan Tamils*, 10.

with powerful meaning including attachment to a social and physical place and a sense of belonging.” Therefore, as Kropiwnicki (2014) argues, while “home” for first-generation refugees is often centred on a geographic location, it is a concept that is far more extensive and includes habits, traditions, and cultural practices to which they show affinity.<sup>17</sup>

While refugees born in exile and those who migrated when they were small children<sup>18</sup> have little or no memories of their place of origin, from an early age, the “myth of returning home” is constructed for them by their parents through narrations of the parents’ memories in the homeland.<sup>19</sup> However, though they inherit from their parents’ notions of homeland, political claims, and socio-cultural links to the homeland, they tend to have somewhat differing views from their parents regarding their identity and “home” due to their naturalisation in the host country, the only country they know through first-hand experience.<sup>20</sup> Often, these second-generation refugees adopt attitudes and mannerisms of the host country, especially if they attend schools and universities in the host country with children of the host country.<sup>21</sup> As a result, the attitudes of second-generation refugees towards returning home are ambivalent: “an opportunity to remake the home left behind by their parents but also [a] loss of the material and symbolic attachments and cultural skills gained in the [host country].”<sup>22</sup>

In the Sri Lankan context, Chatteraj (2017),<sup>23</sup> in her study on the meaning of home for those who were displaced (both as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)<sup>24</sup> and refugees) due to the civil war in Sri Lanka found that while older generations of Sri Lankan IDPs and refugees in India have spiritual and emotional attachments to their past homes and want to return to their place of origin to embrace death in their own land, those who were displaced at a young age consider their place of origin as strange and unfamiliar. Therefore, for these second-generation refugees, returning “home” would lead to new uprooting and estrangement.

Often, for all refugee returnees, irrespective of whether they are first generation or second generation, the first visit to the country of origin post-exile is a meeting between imagination and reality. Some first-generation returnees might feel that home has changed for the worse and realise that returning home did not lead to “the end of multiple bereavements associated with displacement” as they had hoped.<sup>25</sup>

17 Kropiwnicki, “The Meeting of Myths and Realities”.

18 Herein, both groups are referred as second-generation refugees

19 Kropiwnicki, “The Meeting of Myths and Realities”.

20 Chatteraj, *Ambivalent Attachments: Shifting Notions of Home among Displaced Sri Lankan Tamils*.

21 Kamal, “Afghan Refugee Youth in Iran and the Morality of Repatriation”.

22 L. E. Perez Murcia, ““The Sweet Memories of Home Have Gone”: Displaced People Searching for Home in a Liminal Space”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(9), 2019, 1515–1531, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1491299>.

23 Chatteraj, *Ambivalent Attachments: Shifting Notions of Home among Displaced Sri Lankan Tamils*.

24 The 1998 UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement defines IDPs as “persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border,” available at: <https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/199808-training-OCHA-guiding-principles-Eng2.pdf> (last visited 15 Dec. 2022).

25 Ibid.

However, Kropiwnicki (2014) argues that for first-generation refugees, returning home can be a “transition from belief to hope and from mythologising the past to coming to terms with the present.”<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, for second-generation refugees, it can be an experience full of disillusionment.<sup>27</sup> Part of the reason for this is that second-generation refugees often return to their countries of origin with heightened expectations due to the “myth of home” created by their parents through descriptions of blissful reunions, freedom, and political rights in the home country. However, upon return, they find the reality is much harsher. Therefore, second-generation refugees may feel disheartened after witnessing unbridgeable gaps in extended families and socio-political networks, discrimination based on race, gender, and social class, and realising that notions of “home” were merely idealised constructions.<sup>28</sup>

For example, the study by Cornish<sup>29</sup> found that Malawian youth refugee returnees from Zambia became confused about their national and cultural identity, experienced isolation, and contemplated returning to their former host country. In a way, these second-generation Malawian refugees, upon their return to Malawi, had to experience many challenges and undergo a process of acculturation that their parents underwent in the host country.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, South African second-generation refugee returnees found that warm social networks, freedom and equality, and a just political system they expected upon their return did not exist. Instead, they were confronted with unemployment and rejection, and in some instances, linguistic challenges as well.<sup>31</sup>

In the Sri Lankan context, while the literature on refugee returnees is sparse, studies on returnee Muslim IDPs from Puttalam to Jaffna indicate that while return to the place of origin by young IDPs is “inspired by and accompanied with high expectations, [upon arrival, these high expectations are] soon replaced by a deep sense of disappointment.”<sup>32</sup> Similar to the experiences of South African second-generation refugee returnees, this disappointment stems from a myriad of reasons, including but not limited to a lack of employment opportunities in Jaffna, safety and security concerns, and the destruction of old houses due to the war.<sup>33</sup>

However, studies on youth returnees argue that despite challenges involved in the return process, second-generation refugees remain resilient due to traumatic events their parents have experienced while fleeing for safety or during resettlement in the host country. These studies argue that though second-generation refugees may not have experienced this trauma first-hand, they tend to be flexible and adaptable in the face of adversity due to the traumatic histories of their parents.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, these studies argue that while the realities in their homeland might lead to disillusionment

26 Kropiwnicki, “The Meeting of Myths and Realities”, 80.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Cornish, Peltzer, & Maclachlan, “Returning Strangers”.

30 Ibid.

31 Kropiwnicki, “The Meeting of Myths and Realities”.

32 D. Chattoraj & E. Gerharz, *Difficult Return: Muslims’ Ambivalent Attachments to Jaffna in Post-Conflict Sri Lanka*, Working Paper, Brunei, Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, 11 Feb. 2019.

33 Ibid.

34 Cornish, Peltzer, & Maclachlan, “Returning Strangers”.

for second-generation returnees in the short run, they often develop new roles, identities, and social networks, enabling their reintegration.<sup>35</sup>

### 3. SRI LANKAN REFUGEES IN INDIA

The 26-year war that ravaged Sri Lanka starting in 1983 and ending in 2009 between the GoSL and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who were demanding a separate nation for Sri Lankan Tamils, resulted in the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankan Tamil citizens.<sup>36</sup> While the vast majority of displaced people remained in Sri Lanka as IDPs,<sup>37</sup> others fled overseas, seeking protection and better lives.

Due to geographical proximity as well as ethnic and linguistic kinship, neighbouring India, particularly the State of Tamil Nadu in Southern India, was the primary destination among most of those who fled the war in Sri Lanka.<sup>38</sup> As a result, even though it has been more than a decade since the end of the war in Sri Lanka, India still hosts the highest number of Sri Lankan refugees. It is estimated that currently, approximately 93,032 Sri Lankan refugees reside in India.<sup>39</sup>

Sri Lankan refugees arrived in India mainly in four waves that coincided with the escalation of the war and hostilities towards Tamils in Sri Lanka.<sup>40</sup> The first wave occurred with the Black July, the anti-Tamil pogrom of July 1983, which began when the LTTE murdered 13 soldiers of the GoSL. While most of the approximately 134,053 refugees<sup>41</sup> who arrived in India in the first wave returned to Sri Lanka between 1988 and 1990, the breakout of the second Eelam war between 1990 and 1994 resulted in new arrivals of around 122,078.<sup>42</sup> The end of the 100-day ceasefire between the GoSL and the LTTE in April 1995 led to a further exodus of 22,418 Sri Lankan refugees between 1995 and 2002. The fourth and final wave of refugee arrivals from Sri Lanka began in 2006 with the breakdown of the peace deal mediated by Norway between the GoSL and the LTTE in 2002.<sup>43</sup> This final wave resulted in an influx of 24,527 Sri Lankan refugees.<sup>44</sup> While Sri Lankan refugees were encouraged to flee to India in the early years of the conflict, with the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, former Prime Minister of India, by the LTTE in 1991, Sri Lankan refugees faced increasing hostility and lost the support they once enjoyed in

35 Kropiwnicki, "The Meeting of Myths and Realities".

36 George, Kliewer, & Rajan, "Rather Than Talking in Tamil, They Should Be Talking to Tamils".

37 The number of IDPs in Sri Lanka vary widely based on the source and the period for which the estimations are calculated. The final stage of the war is assumed to have created 300,000. (K. Amirthalingam & R. W. D. Lakshman, "Displaced Livelihoods in Sri Lanka: An Economic Analysis", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 22(4), 2009, 502–524, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fep031>.)

38 Balan & Athray, "Life of Sri Lankan Refugee Women in the Camps of Tamil Nadu"; George, Kliewer, & Rajan, "Rather Than Talking in Tamil, They Should Be Talking to Tamils".

39 Ministry of Home Affairs India, "Rajya Sabha Unstarred Question No 2443".

40 Newman, "Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees: A Voiceless, Undignified Existence"; Valatheeswaran & Rajan, "Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees in India".

41 Valatheeswaran & Rajan, "Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees in India".

42 Balan & Athray, "Life of Sri Lankan Refugee Women in the Camps of Tamil Nadu"; Ibid.

43 Valatheeswaran & Rajan, "Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees in India".

44 Balan & Athray, "Life of Sri Lankan Refugee Women in the Camps of Tamil Nadu".



India.<sup>45</sup> As a result, the number of refugees in the third and fourth waves was considerably lower than that of the first two waves.<sup>46</sup>

Refugees fleeing the war in Sri Lanka mainly used the sea route from Mannar in Sri Lanka and arrived in India in small fibreglass fishing boats. They most often landed on the Dhanushanodi Island or Kodiakkarai in Tamil Nadu.<sup>47</sup> The Indian authorities recorded the names of these refugees and sent them to the Mandapam Transit Camp for a temporary period before placing them in other camps dedicated to Sri Lankan refugees across the country.<sup>48</sup> At one point, there were 123 camps in India dedicated to Sri Lankan refugees, with 115 of them located in the State of Tamil Nadu.<sup>49</sup> Currently, there are 109 camps dedicated to Sri Lankan refugees (108 in Tamil Nadu and one in Odisha). It is estimated that 58,897 Sri Lankan refugees reside in these camps. In addition, around 34,135 reside with relatives, friends, and in their own accommodation in Tamil Nadu and they are registered at the nearest police station.<sup>50</sup>

Those who reside in camps receive various relief assistance from the Tamil Nadu State Government. This includes cash assistance of INR 400 (approximately 5 USD) per month for the head of the household, INR 288 (USD 3.5) per each additional family member above the age of 12, INR 180 (2.2 USD) for the first child and INR 90 (1.1 USD) for each additional child. They also receive subsidised rice, sugar, wheat, and kerosene monthly, free clothes once a year, and cooking utensils worth INR 250 (USD 3.02) biennially. In addition, Sri Lankan refugees in camps also receive free access to water and electricity.<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, all Sri Lankan refugees in India, irrespective of whether they live in camps or not, receive medical care and education up to higher secondary level free of charge from the Indian government.<sup>52</sup>

Even though Sri Lankan refugees in India, especially those in camps, receive many types of cash and non-cash assistance, over the years, their situation has deteriorated.<sup>53</sup> Most of the huts in camps were built in the late 1980s as temporary shelters, and at present, due to lack of renovations, they are in dilapidated conditions. During the summer months, the heat becomes unbearable, and during monsoon months, there are water leakages, overflowing septic tanks, and muddy streets leading to the spread of communicable diseases such as malaria, typhoid, and diarrhoea.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to housing issues, refugees face employment-related issues due to their refugee status. Studies on Sri Lankan refugees in India suggest that it is difficult for

45 M. George, "Sri Lankan Tamil Refugee Experiences: A Qualitative Analysis", *International Journal of Culture and Mental Health*, 6(3), 2013, 170–182, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17542863.2012.681669>.

46 Valatheeswaran & Rajan, "Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees in India".

47 Newman, "Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees: A Voiceless, Undignified Existence".

48 George, Kliewer, & Rajan, "'Rather Than Talking in Tamil, They Should Be Talking to Tamils'"; Valatheeswaran & Rajan, "Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees in India".

49 George, Kliewer, & Rajan, "'Rather Than Talking in Tamil, They Should Be Talking to Tamils'".

50 Ministry of Home Affairs India, "Rajya Sabha Unstarred Question No 2443".

51 Valatheeswaran & Rajan, "Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees in India".

52 Ibid.

53 I. Rajan, "Refugees: Status, Conditions, and Their Future", in I. Rajan (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Refugees in India*, 1st ed., Oxon and New York, Routledge, 2022, 3–32.

54 George, Kliewer, & Rajan, "'Rather Than Talking in Tamil, They Should Be Talking to Tamils'"; Valatheeswaran & Rajan, "Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees in India".



Sri Lankan refugees to find employment in the local labour market, and even if they could find work, it is mainly in the informal sector as casual labourers. Studies also suggest that those who manage to find employment in the formal sector are paid less and hardly receive increments that are offered to local employees.<sup>55</sup> In addition, following the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, restrictions were imposed on the movement of Sri Lankan refugees further curtailing their employment opportunities. While these restrictions were gradually lifted from 2006 onwards, still, Sri Lankan refugees seeking employment have to seek permission from camp guards when going out for work for extended periods.<sup>56</sup>

Another major issue Sri Lankan refugees in India face is that irrespective of the time they have resided in India or whether they were born in India to Sri Lankan refugee parents, they cannot obtain citizenship in India. The UNHCR has only limited say in India as the country has not signed the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, and its 1967 Protocol. Therefore, India takes in refugees based on its bilateral relations with the country of origin.<sup>57</sup> As a result, although the new CITIZENSHIP AMENDMENT ACT of 2019 introduced by the Government of India which makes Hindu, Parsi, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, and Christian refugees from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan eligible for Indian citizenship, it has excluded refugees from Sri Lanka currently residing in India the opportunity to seek Indian citizenship<sup>58</sup> limiting their rights and making them vulnerable to deportation in the future. While on 8 January 2020, the Tamil Nadu government shared with the state assembly the requests made by Sri Lankan refugees in camps in Tamil Nadu for Sri Lankan and Indian dual citizenship,<sup>59</sup> no concrete action on the matter has been taken so far. Due to these issues, since the end of the war in Sri Lanka in 2009, some of the refugees who fled to India have begun to return. According to the Ministry of National Policies, Economic Affairs, Resettlement & Rehabilitation, Northern Province Development and Youth Affairs in Sri Lanka (2019), between 2011 and 2018, 7,818 persons belonging to 3,001 families who migrated to India as refugees due to the conflict have returned to Sri Lanka voluntarily with UNHCR aid (Table 1). In addition, many others have returned using private funds. However, there is limited data on such returnees.

Refugees in India who wish to return to Sri Lanka receive their passports free of charge from the Sri Lankan Deputy High Commissioner Office in Chennai, India, and the UNHCR provides their air ticket. Upon returning to Sri Lanka, those who return through a UNHCR-facilitated programme receive LKR 10,000 (USD 27.35)

55 M. Kuttikat, "A Synthesis of Studies Examining Sri Lankan Refugee Families in India", in I. Rajan (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Refugees in India*, 1st ed., Oxon and New York, Routledge, 2022, 655–663; Balan & Athray, "Life of Sri Lankan Refugee Women in the Camps of Tamil Nadu"; Valatheeswaran & Rajan, "Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees in India".

56 Valatheeswaran & Rajan, "Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees in India".

57 Balan & Athray, "Life of Sri Lankan Refugee Women in the Camps of Tamil Nadu".

58 Ibid.; R. Chandran, "Missing from India's Citizenship Law: 100,000 Sri Lankan Refugees", *Reuters News Agency*, 24 Dec. 2019, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-refugees-protests-trfn-idUSKBN1YS0VA>.

59 A. Ranjan & D. Chattoraj, "The Tamil Issue in India-Sri Lanka Relationships: Priorities and Interests", *India Quarterly*, 78(1), 2022, 104–120, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/09749284211068161>.

**Table 1: Refugee returnees from India from 2011 to 2018**

Year	Families	Persons
2011	557	1,728
2012	453	1,291
2013	273	718
2014	137	338
2015	208	453
2016	326	852
2017	487	1,170
2018	560	1,268

Source: Performance Report 2018 – Ministry of National Policies, Economic Affairs, Resettlement & Rehabilitation, Northern Province Development and Youth Affairs, Sri Lanka.

if they are above 18 years of age and LKR 7,500 (USD 20.5) if they are below 18 years. In addition, each returnee family receives LKR 2,500 (USD 6.84) as a transportation allowance and LKR 10,000 (USD 27.35) as a resettlement allowance.<sup>60</sup> While those who do not return through a UNHCR-facilitated programme are not eligible for these types of aid, if they visit the UNHCR offices after returning, they are directed to specialised agencies that can facilitate their reintegration.<sup>61</sup>

Though Sri Lankan refugees in India who wish to return to Sri Lanka receive the aforementioned financial aid, as data in Table 1 indicates, overall, their rate of return has been slow. Studies conducted among refugees in India highlight that a considerable number of refugees in camps are reluctant to return to Sri Lanka due to uncertainties about employment, housing, transportation, education and healthcare facilities, and social support networks in Sri Lanka. In addition, fear of persecution, lack of support from the GoSL, refugees’ lack of Sinhala language skills and administrative delays involving Sri Lankan and Indian government institutes, which last for months and sometimes more than a year, dissuade their return.<sup>62</sup> Studies also show that young refugees who consider themselves culturally and linguistically Indian were worried about the culture shock (i.e. the feelings of anxiety people may experience when moving to new countries and adjusting and assimilating to the new culture) in Sri Lanka and their lack of access to social networks in Sri Lanka.<sup>63</sup>

On the other hand, those who are willing to return to Sri Lanka indicated family reunification, ownership of property in Sri Lanka, and difficulties related to living in camps

60 Ministry of National Policies, Economic Affairs, Resettlement & Rehabilitation, Northern Province Development and Youth Affairs, *Performance Report 2018*.

61 UNHCR, Sri Lanka, *Sri Lankan Refugee Returnees in 2015: Results of Household Visit Protection Monitoring Interviews (Tool Two)*.

62 George, Kliewer, & Rajan, ““Rather Than Talking in Tamil, They Should Be Talking to Tamils””; M. George, A. Vaillancourt, & S. Irudaya Rajan, “Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees in India: Conceptual Framework of Repatriation Success | Refuge: Canada’s Journal on Refugees”, *Refuge Canada’s Journal on Refugees*, 32(3), 2016, 73–83, available at: <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.40234>; Stöckmann, “Struggling to Feel at Home”.

63 George, Vaillancourt, & Rajan, “Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees in India”.

in India as reasons for their willingness to return.<sup>64</sup> In addition, they also highlighted factors such as the absence of a pathway to gain Indian citizenship,<sup>65</sup> the restrictions and lack of freedom inherent to being a refugee in India, and their sense of belonging and identity linked to Sri Lanka as reasons for seeking to return to Sri Lanka.<sup>66</sup>

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1. Sample

The study is solely based on primary data collected through 13 in-depth interviews with Sri Lankan refugee returnees who had returned to Sri Lanka from India and had settled down in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, particularly in the districts of Jaffna and Mannar. The Northern Province was selected as it is the province that accounts for the bulk of refugee returnees from India.

Participants were identified through purposive sampling with the aid of a refugee returnee whom the research team had developed contacts with through prior research work. Participants were eligible to be included in the study if they were (1) Sri Lankan refugee returnees from India, (2) had returned to Sri Lanka after the conclusion of the war in 2009, (3) had stayed in India as refugees for at least a year, (4) had been based in Sri Lanka for at least a year at the time of the interview, and (5) were at least 18 years of age. Those who had returned using their own funds as well as those whose return was facilitated by the UNHCR were included. Researchers aimed for proportional stratification by age (to include an almost equal number of returnees above and below the age of 35 years) as well as gender and avoided including more than one member from the same family.

### 4.2. Setting

Eleven interviews were conducted in Jaffna, at the beginning of October 2020. The last two interviews were conducted via Zoom in November 2020 due to restrictions on movement imposed by the GoSL to contain the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in the country.

### 4.3. Data collection

We used a semi-structured interview schedule to conduct the interviews. The interviews were conducted in either Tamil or English, depending on the participants' preferences, and were audio-taped with the consent of the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was conducted in private. The interview guide, which was developed based on the literature review and prior fieldwork in the area, was approved by the ethical review committee of the second author's institution, included questions about three main areas of the participants' life: life prior to migration to India, life in India and life after returning to Sri Lanka. The section on the participants' life after returning to Sri Lanka included sub-sections on the challenges they encountered upon return and their perception of their decision to return.

64 Stöckmann, "Struggling to Feel at Home"; Valatheeswaran & Rajan, "Sri Lankan Tamil Refugees in India".

65 George, Kliewer, & Rajan, "Rather Than Talking in Tamil, They Should Be Talking to Tamils".

66 Stöckmann, "Struggling to Feel at Home".

All questions were open-ended and were designed to produce a broad range of answers from the participants.

#### 4.4. Limitations in data collection

Due to mobility restrictions imposed in Sri Lanka in mid-October 2020 following the second wave of Covid-19 in the country, the research team had to conclude fieldwork in the Northern Province earlier than planned. While the team succeeded in completing a couple of virtual interviews upon returning to the capital Colombo, it proved to be challenging to arrange more such virtual meetings with returnee refugees from India. Considering the richness of the qualitative data already gathered from the completed interviews, the research team decided to proceed to data analysis. Therefore, while noting that the sample size. Moreover, as Braun and Clarke (2016)<sup>67</sup> postulates, in qualitative research, “sample size ‘cannot be predicted by formulae or perceived redundancy’ and is something qualitative researchers often revisit during data collection, in a live and critically-reflexive, evaluative way.”

#### 4.5. Data analysis

At the conclusion of all interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed and analysed using a thematic approach. The analysis included both deductive and inductive approaches. From a deductive approach, codes and themes were generated from the interview schedule, such as the codes and themes on the financial, social, and administrative challenges encountered upon return. From an inductive approach, codes and themes were developed from the transcribed text, such as the coping strategies of refugee returnees. In the analysis, all interviewees were given pseudonyms to protect their identities. Since the interviews were conducted in 2020, prior to the onset of Sri Lanka’s economic crisis, the researchers did not take into account the impact of the current economic crisis in the analysis of data.

#### 4.6. Descriptive data

The 13 interviews included six female and seven male participants (Table 2). Among them, seven respondents were between the ages of 26 and 35. Two were between 36 and 50 years, while four were above 51 years. Four of the respondents had left for India in 1990 during the second wave of mass migration from Sri Lanka to India, while another four had left between 1998 and 2000 during the third wave. One had left in 2007 during the last wave of refugee migration to India, while another participant had left in 2010 after the conclusion of the war. Two participants were born in India to parents who had migrated in 1990. One participant had migrated to India twice as a refugee in 1990 and again in 2000, after returning to Sri Lanka in 1995. All the respondents had returned to Sri Lanka as refugee returnees for the last time in or after 2010. On average, they had spent approximately 18 years in India as refugees with the lowest time spent in India being 3 years and the highest being 27 years.

67 V. Braun & V. Clarke, “(Mis)Conceptualising Themes, Thematic Analysis, and Other Problems with Fugard and Potts’ (2015) Sample-Size Tool for Thematic Analysis”, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 19(6), 2016, 739–743, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2016.1195588>.

**Table 2: Socio-demographic characteristics of returnees**

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Highest level of education	Years of stay in India as a refugee	Last arrival year in Sri Lanka as a refugee returnee <sup>a</sup>
Sarojini	Female	64	Grade six	03	2013
Thangaraja	Male	71	Grade four	17	2012
Velamma	Female	61	Grade five	18	2016
Yogesh	Male	29	Bachelor's degree	26	2017
Maheshwari	Female	34	Ordinary levels	03	2010
Ratheesh	Male	34	University first year completed	11	2010
Suresh	Male	28	Diploma	16	2015
Yogaraja	Male	54	Grade eight	27	2017
Revathy	Female	37	Bachelor's degree	20	2011
Anushan	Male	30	Bachelor's degree	26	2016
Parvathi	Female	45	Grade 10	27	2017
Rakesh	Male	30	Bachelor's degree	25	2015
Krishani	Female	28	Bachelor's degree	19	2019

<sup>a</sup>Refugee returnees who remigrated to India after the end of the war did not receive refugee status.

All respondents belonged to the lowest strata of the social structure and had been displaced multiple times before they fled to India. Of those who were adults at the time of migration, most were from families engaged in fishing-related work prior to migration and were engaged in manual labour jobs while in India. Most of the respondents who left Sri Lanka as adults have completed only primary education. Those who left as children or were born in India have completed at least secondary education.

## 5. CHALLENGES FACED BY THE REFUGEE RETURNEES IN SRI LANKA

We found through the interviews that the vast majority of Sri Lankan refugee returnees from India face several challenges upon their return to Sri Lanka. These challenges can be broadly classified into four categories; employment-related, housing-related, social-integration-related, and bureaucratic issues. Among them, employment-related challenges are the most pressing for most returnees, followed by housing-related issues, while bureaucratic and social-integration-related issues are experienced mainly by young returnees.

Overall, we observed that those who were either born in India or migrated to India as small children encountered more challenges upon their return to Sri Lanka, while those who migrated to India as adults adapted relatively easily upon returning to Sri Lanka. These findings are supportive of the existing literature on forced migration which argues that refugees who have pre-exile education, work experience, or

familiarity with the environment of the home country have an easier time adapting to their country of origin upon returning from exile.<sup>68</sup>

### 5.1. Employment-related challenges

As scholars on forced migration argue,<sup>69</sup> for most refugee returnees, the most critical issue they face upon returning to their home country is finding a job that suits their qualifications, expectations, and needs. Eight of the respondents we interviewed indicated that their families struggled with establishing a sustainable livelihood source after returning to Sri Lanka. While the families of some returnees we interviewed had received livelihood support from International Non-Governmental Organisations in the forms of either fishing nets or sewing machines, the respondents indicated that they feel such support was not sufficient to re-establish their lost livelihoods in Sri Lanka.

Though issues related to unemployment and underemployment had affected all categories of refugee returnees in the sample, we found that young returnees with graduate-level qualifications from Indian higher education institutes have been affected to a greater degree than any other group of returnees. Interviews revealed that some young returnees with bachelor's level qualifications from India have been waiting for years to find suitable jobs upon their return to Sri Lanka and that some have even resorted to engaging in manual work, which is far below their qualifications, due to lack of desirable options for them.

For instance, 30-year-old Anushan, who returned to Sri Lanka in 2016, is a Bachelor of Technology graduate from a college in Chennai, India. Before returning to Sri Lanka, he worked at a multinational corporation in Chennai. However, at the time of our interview with him in October 2020, he was working as a fisherman and a painter in Jaffna as he had been unable to find a job that matched his qualifications and salary expectations upon his return to Sri Lanka. He stated, "I studied hard for four years [to get the degree]. [Now], I work with those who have just Eighth Grade qualifications." Likewise, Rakesh, who now has a permanent job in the government sector as a Development Officer, stated that he had to work as a manual labourer to meet ends initially upon his return in 2015.

Yogesh, a 29-year-old Bachelor of Arts graduate who returned to Sri Lanka in 2017, also has a similar experience. In India, he worked as a medical representative for a pharmaceutical company. In addition, from time to time, he worked as a stunt actor in South Indian movies as he was a skilled karate practitioner. However, upon returning to Sri Lanka, both his academic skills and karate skills proved to be not useful and he struggled for years to find a suitable job. He stated, "My mother said I could get a job in Sri Lanka as I am a graduate. I came [to Sri Lanka] because of that. . . [But,] there is no employment here. Not only for me. Even Sri Lankan university graduates [are unemployed]." One of the reasons for the unemployment or underemployment of tertiary-educated refugee returnees is that most look for work only in the Northern Province and are reluctant to move to the Western Province, where the country's capital is located. However, the Northern Province, ravaged by

68 Stöckmann, "Struggling to Feel at Home".

69 Ibid.



the civil war for around 30 years, does not have many industries that create opportunities, especially for educated youth. Moreover, like many other cities in Sri Lanka, the province's main city of Jaffna does not have a vibrant private sector.

The main reason that dissuades returnees from seeking jobs in the capital Colombo or areas other than the Northern Province is their inability to speak Sinhala. While Tamils who do not speak Sinhala manage to work and live in Colombo and other Sinhala-majority areas (albeit with difficulties), they manage to do so as they have networks of friends and family in those areas to support them. Moreover, over the years, some have acquired a working knowledge of the Sinhala language and learned to navigate the Sinhala majority areas. However, in general, young Tamil returnees from India do not have anyone in Colombo or other Sinhala-majority areas to help them with language barriers if they were to move to those areas. Also, unlike Tamils who have lived in Sri Lanka all their lives, they do not have any experience navigating life in the Sinhala majority areas in the country. Therefore, migrating to Colombo away from family without support tends to be frightening for most young returnees.

For instance, during our interview with Yogesh, he revealed how daunting it is for him to move out of the Northern Province due to his lack of Sinhala skills. While he is fluent in English, the country's second language, he feels that English will not help him navigate the complexities in everyday life in Sinhala majority areas. He stated, "most of the community in Sri Lanka prefer Sinhala and not English, even in government offices. I went to a government office and spoke in English. [The officer] said 'I don't know English. I only know Sinhala.'" This sentiment was also shared by Anushan, who believes he "could get a job in Colombo if [he knows] Sinhala."

Another reason for the underemployment of refugee returnees with diplomas and degrees is related to the social stratum their parents belonged to prior to migration. Most of those who migrated to India as refugees worked in fisheries or related industries and belonged to lower classes and castes in the social hierarchy. They lacked influential social connections prior to migration, and after years of living in India, they have even fewer social connections than before they left. As they were dependent on Indian government aid and were engaged in low-paying jobs while in India, they have not returned to Sri Lanka with sufficient savings that could help them build social connections and influence after returning. So, even though they managed to educate their children up to the tertiary level in India, they cannot help their children with influential social connections that are important in Sri Lanka when seeking jobs.

Another employment-related issue tertiary-qualified refugee returnees face is their desire to secure government-sector employment. We found that refugee returnees, similar to many others in Sri Lanka, wait for years for public sector jobs due to their belief in the prestige and security of government sector occupations. While all refugee returnees with a bachelor's degree that we interviewed indicated their desire to work in the government sector, at the time of the interviews, only one had secured permanent employment in the government sector. All of the others had applied to jobs under a government scheme to hire unemployed graduates. However, to their extreme disappointment, they had not been selected as only unemployed graduates with degrees from Sri Lankan government universities were recruited under this

scheme. Such discriminatory barriers to the job market have further exacerbated employment-related issues of refugee returnees.

For instance, 37-year-old Revathy, who has a Bachelor's degree in Computer Applications, stated that soon after returning to Sri Lanka in October 2019, she applied for a job in the government sector under the unemployed graduate recruiting scheme based on the advice she received from Organisation for Eelam Refugees' Rehabilitation (OFFER).<sup>70</sup> While she received a letter in February 2020 stating that she had been selected, later on, when the final list of selected candidates was shared on the government website, Revathy realised she had not been selected like all the other candidates with overseas degrees. Revathy argues that the Sri Lankan government should treat the case of refugee returnees separately without lumping them with all other candidates with foreign degrees, as refugee returnees did not migrate for educational purposes but were forced into exile due to security issues.

## 5.2. Housing-related issues

Studies on refugees in other parts of the world indicate that life in camps often creates dependency for the refugees, and as a result, their skills for independence deteriorate.<sup>71</sup> Sri Lankan refugees in India also experience this. In our sample, all the respondents had resided in camps at some point during their stay in India, while 11 were in camps throughout their stay. These camps, though in very dilapidated conditions, were provided free of charge along with free electricity and water by the State Government of Tamil Nadu. Moreover, in camps as registered refugees, all respondents received a monthly allowance to cover essentials.

However, upon returning to Sri Lanka, these refugees had to find accommodation and bear the utility charges on their own. Most of the interviewees in our sample complained that their living costs drastically increased upon their return to Sri Lanka due to increased housing and utility costs. The LKR 10,000 (USD 27.38) allowance that UNHCR-assisted returnees received upon their return was a one-time payment; hence, according to the returnees, it was insufficient to cover the necessities for long, unlike the monthly allowance they received in India.

As mentioned in the previous section, most of those who migrated to India as refugees were from the lowest strata in the social hierarchy prior to migration and were financially unstable. Therefore, most of them did not own a house or land before migrating to India. Even the returnees in our sample who stated that they had land prior to migration found that their land plots were inaccessible due to lack of maintenance for an extended period, military occupation, or encroachment by civilians. Hence, they had to find alternative accommodation upon returning to Sri Lanka. While some returnees opted to stay with relatives, those without any relatives providing free accommodation had no other option but to rent out accommodation, which was an added expense to refugee returnees who were used to residing in camps free

70 OFFER is a non-governmental organisation established in 1984 as a voice for Sri Lankan Tamil refugees who were forced to flee to India due to the war.

71 S. Fransen & K. Kuschminder, *Back to the Land: The Long-Term Challenges of Refugee Return and Reintegration in Burundi*, UNHCR Research Paper, New Issues in Refugee Research, UNHCR, 2012, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/research/working/5040ad9e9/land-long-term-challenges-refugee-return-reintegration-burundi-sonja-fransen.html> (last visited 15 Aug. 2022).

of cost. For instance, 29-year-old Krishani stated, “In camp life, we don’t [have] to pay home rent, and water, electricity and everything [was free]. Here [in Sri Lanka], we have to pay for everything. It is somewhat difficult.” This opinion was also shared by 64-year-old Sarojini, who found the cost of house rental an extra burden on their meagre income. She said,

[While in India], the Indian government gave us 1200 Indian rupees (14.5 USD) every month. We were able to manage with that money. Even though we were in the camp, we felt that it was our house. Here [in Sri Lanka], it took us several years to find suitable land [to build a house]. In the meantime, we had to live in a rented house. But, in India, we did not have to pay any rent.

At the time of the interviews in October 2020, some returnees had received government assistance to build their houses while others were still awaiting assistance. While refugee returnees from India receive priority in government housing assistance, all respondents stated that still, the process was exhausting and extremely time-consuming. Therefore, for those who do not have relatives they can reside with, renting out a place has been the only option until they receive government assistance to build a house. However, it is difficult for those who are underemployed or have unsustainable income sources to find affordable and satisfactory housing. For instance, 29-year-old Yogesh, an accountant in Jaffna, stated that while his salary was LKR 15,000 (USD) per month, his house rental was also LKR 15,000. Similarly, 45-year-old Parvathi, who could not find suitable employment upon returning to Sri Lanka, stated that she and her family had to move three times in two and a half years due to difficulties in finding affordable housing.

### 5.3. Bureaucratic challenges

The third crucial challenge that refugee returnees from India face is the administrative and bureaucratic issues they face when obtaining identification documents. Through our interviews, we found that while refugee returnees who were born in Sri Lanka can obtain a new or misplaced National Identity Card (NIC) without any major issues, those who were born in India to Sri Lankan parents have to sometimes wait for more than a year to receive their NICs as they have to obtain their citizenship certificate prior to applying for the NIC. The delay in obtaining the NIC makes it difficult for these returnees to open bank accounts in their name, get employed, sit for any competitive examinations, and sometimes even prevent them from travelling within Sri Lanka.

For instance, Anushan, who returned to Sri Lanka in 2016, had to wait for a year to receive his NIC as he was born in India. Though he is a Sri Lankan citizen and has a birth certificate issued by the Sri Lankan High Commission in India, he had to wait 8 months to obtain the citizenship certificate needed to apply for the NIC. Similarly, his younger brothers, who returned to Sri Lanka in 2019, had not received their NICs at the time of our interview in October 2020. Anushan says that his brothers do not travel more than a few kilometres away from their home in Jaffna due to increased surveillance by security forces all around the country following the

Easter bombings in April 2019. While Anushan's brothers have a valid reason for not having NICs, their fear of being questioned or arrested by security forces prevents them from finding work outside their village.

Similarly, Parvathi, who returned to Sri Lanka in 2017 with her family, had to obtain special approval from the Ministry of Education to get her children to sit for the Ordinary Level Examination as the children did not receive their NICs in time for the examination. She said, "we had to wait for a long time to get [the children's] citizenship certificate. The A/Level and O/Level exams were approaching and [the children] cannot sit without the NICs. So, we went to the ministry and asked for a letter and using that letter, the children could sit for the exam."

#### 5.4. Social-reintegration challenges

Even though refugee returnees who were adults at the time of leaving Sri Lanka did not indicate any issues with integrating back into their communities, returnees who were young at the time of migration and those who were born in India indicated that they struggled to integrate with the local community upon returning to Sri Lanka. One of the reasons for this more extended reintegration period is the lack of connections they had with their relatives in Sri Lanka while in India. Young returnees we interviewed stated that while their parents and elderly relatives continued to maintain relationships with their extended families in Sri Lanka through phone calls and letters, the youngsters hardly had any opportunity to connect with their extended families in Sri Lanka.

Another key factor that makes reintegration difficult for young returnees is that the South Indian Tamil dialect they speak differs from the dialect of Tamils in Sri Lanka. While the two dialects are interchangeable and do not create any communicational barriers, returnees stated that they have been made to feel inferior and sometimes are laughed at when they use the Indian Tamil dialect when conversing with those who had lived in Sri Lanka all their lives.

For instance, Rakesh, a 30-year-old returnee who had returned to Sri Lanka in 2015 with his siblings, stated, "before returning to Sri Lanka, we lived in India for 21 to 22 years. So, we were speaking the Indian dialect. So, people [here][...] they did not recognise us. They made jokes. When we played sports, boys [here] did not include us. They said that we are Indian garbage."

Similarly, Krishani, a 28-year-old returnee who migrated to India at the age of eight and was there for 19 years, stated,

For my parents, our community [in Jaffna] is ok. For me, it is difficult to mingle with people. My [dialect] is somewhat different. [People here] are not accepting our [Indian Tamil dialect]. Our slang is somewhat different. Most of the time, I don't talk. When I open my mouth, I can't change the slang.

We found that these dialect issues and discriminatory actions of certain locals have made it difficult for some young returnees to make friends in Sri Lanka, prolonging their challenges of social reintegration. These findings are similar to those of Franssen

and Kuschminder<sup>72</sup> on refugees returning from Tanzania to Burundi and those of Cornish et al.<sup>73</sup> on returnees to Malawi from Zambia, which found that negative attitudes of the community towards refugee returnees had a significant adverse impact on their social reintegration.

In addition to language issues, young refugee returnees from families which are deemed to belong to lower castes have experienced caste-based discrimination exacerbating their social reintegration issues. For instance, 29-year-old Yogesh stated, “everyone here [in Sri Lanka] asks about the caste. In India, I did not see it among my friends or the community. I did not feel that in school. People did not talk about caste with me. But, here, everyone talks about caste. I don’t like that.”

While caste-based discrimination is rampant in India, Yogesh believes that he did not experience any differential treatment based on caste as he was a Sri Lankan. While we did not delve deeper into caste-based issues Yogesh faced due to the sensitive nature of the topic, his tone indicated that caste-based discrimination added to his difficulties with social reintegration and building friendships in Jaffna.

## 6. COPING MECHANISMS ADAPTED BY REFUGEE RETURNEES

We found that refugee returnees adopted various coping mechanisms to deal with the challenges they encountered upon returning to Sri Lanka. In order to overcome financial challenges, returnees mainly resorted to accepting whatever job was available for them in the Northern Province. Since available job opportunities are limited in the Northern Province, refugee returnees we interviewed stated that until they could find a satisfactory job or establish their own business, they accepted whatever job was available for them, even if these jobs were beneath their qualifications and expectations.

Some returnees resorted to mortgaging their jewellery to ensure their stability in Sri Lanka. For instance, 28-year-old Krishani stated that she sold her jewellery to purchase land in Sri Lanka. “At the beginning, we did not have land [. . .] In India, I earned some money and bought jewellery. From the jewels (brought from India), I got a plot of land.” Similarly, 34-year-old Ratheesh said he used the money from pawning his family jewellery as initial capital for his fishing-related business.

On the other hand, some returnees who had relatives in western countries such as Germany, Canada, Norway, France, and Switzerland resorted to seeking financial support from these relatives. These financial aids were mainly used for land and housing purposes. For instance, Sarojini said that she sought the help of her elder daughter, residing in Germany, to purchase land in Jaffna for herself and her younger daughter.

Interviews revealed that remigration to India was a popular coping mechanism, especially among the young returnees. Six of the respondents we interviewed stated that they had been to India after their return. While three of them stated that they visited India on short-term visits to meet their family and friends who were still living

72 Ibid., 4.

73 Cornish, Peltzer, & MacLachlan, “Returning Strangers”.

there, others had remigrated to India to overcome the socio-economic challenges they had to encounter upon their return to Sri Lanka.

For instance, 29-year-old Yogesh, who returned to Sri Lanka in 2017, remigrated to India on a tourist visa as he could not find satisfactory employment opportunities in Sri Lanka. In India, he worked for 3 months before returning to Sri Lanka due to the expiration of his visa. On the other hand, 28-year-old Suresh, who returned to Sri Lanka in 2015, returned to India on four occasions using tourist visas as he felt that his decision to return to Sri Lanka was a mistake. During his visits, he stayed with his extended family, who were still residing in a camp in India as refugees. Similarly, 37-year-old Revathy, who returned to Sri Lanka with her husband in 2010, remigrated to India within 10 months of her return and stayed in her former camp with her mother. Her reason for remigration was her inability to find an affordable housing option in Sri Lanka. As she lost her refugee status after her return to Sri Lanka in 2010, she stayed in India as an irregular migrant until her re-return to Sri Lanka in 2019.

However, these short-term visits often prove to be unsustainable and tend to complicate reintegration in Sri Lanka. At times, their continuous visits to India in search of their familiar environment tend to make reintegration in Sri Lanka harder.

We found that young refugee returnees faced with, or who used to face, social-reintegration challenges upon their return to Sri Lanka regularly communicate with their friends in India (both Indian nationals and Sri Lankan refugees) as a coping mechanism. For instance, 29-year-old Yogesh, who continues to struggle to establish friendships in Sri Lanka after his return from India in 2017, stated, “I communicate with my friends in India every day. I have college friends, school friends, [neighbourhood] friends. [I have] more than 100 friends in India.” Similarly, all other young refugee returnees stated that they continue to maintain close bonds with their friends in India even years after their return.

Apart from bonds with friends in India, young Sri Lankan refugee returnees establish and maintain bonds with fellow returnees like themselves as a coping mechanism. These refugee returnees have created various social media groups to share their experiences and discuss the issues they face. For instance, 29-year-old Krishani, who was seeking a government sector occupation at the time of our interview in 2020, stated that she is a member of a WhatsApp group including 135 returnee refugees like herself who have bachelor’s degrees from Indian universities. Krishani stated that members of this group discuss how to lobby the government to give government sector occupations for refugee returnees with Indian degrees.

These findings regarding the lack of friendships developed in Sri Lanka and the bonds with their friends in India and fellow refugee returnees are reflective of the findings of Bascom,<sup>74</sup> who found that for Eritrean refugee returnees from Sudan, social networks developed in exile were stronger than those developed in the first few years after the return.

74 J. Bascom, “The Long, “Last Step”? Reintegration of Repatriates in Eritrea”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 18(2), 2005, 171, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/refuge/fei019>.



## 7. RETURNEE PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR RETURN

The way returnees perceive their decision to return in the post-return period indicates how successfully they feel they reintegrated into their home countries. Through the interviews, we found that returnees' perception of their return decision depends on a combination of factors. These factors include whether the return was a personal choice or occurred due to persuasion by family, the challenges they face upon their return, their age and educational qualifications and the number of years that have passed since their return.

Overall, we found that irrespective of the age and challenges faced upon return, those who returned to Sri Lanka based on their own decision were more likely to consider their return a success than those who returned due to the persuasion of their family members. For instance, 71-year-old Thangaraja, who returned in 2012 based on his own decision, positively perceives his decision to return even though he faced numerous financial issues after returning. When we interviewed him in October 2020, Thangaraja did not have his own house or land and received a monthly income of a mere LKR 3500 (USD 18). However, he considered his return decision correct and encouraged Sri Lankan refugees in India to return to Sri Lanka. He stated;

This is our country. All our relatives and friends are here [...] The weather in Sri Lanka is nice. It was very hot in India. We had to work hard [in India] as labourers. I don't have to work as a labourer anymore. There are livelihood issues [in India]. The support of the Indian government is minimal. So, it is better to return.

Similarly, 45-year-old Parvathi, who willingly returned to Sri Lanka in 2017 along with her family is happy that she returned despite her family's livelihood issues post-return. "Since we were refugees, [in India] they treated us like slaves. They kept us [in a place that was] like a prison. India supported us. That is true. But, [we faced] a lot of psychological pressure. After coming here, we have freedom. This is our country. We have rights here."

On the other hand, 64-year-old Sarojini, who returned to Sri Lanka in 2013 due to her husband's insistence, is not content with her decision. "We were [in India] for three years. I would have stayed there forever. But, my husband was crying, saying that he needed to go to Sri Lanka. We were happy in India. Even though we were in the camp, we felt it was our house."

Young returnees who came back to Sri Lanka due to their parents' insistence are the most disillusioned about their return. These young returnees left India reluctantly as their parents desired to return to Sri Lanka before their death. For insistence, 28-year-old Krishani said, "My parents wished to come to Sri Lanka. So many times they were telling 'we don't want to die here (in India)'."

The disillusionment of these young returnees mainly stems from the fact that even though they do not have Indian citizenship, they consider India their home country. Their disillusionment is further exacerbated by the reintegration challenges they face. For instance, 29-year-old Yogesh, who returned to Sri Lanka due to his

mother's insistence, regrets his decision. He does not recommend those in India to return due to the social and financial issues he faces in Sri Lanka.

I am the person who is struggling here. Why should I refer [them to come to] Sri Lanka? After coming only, I [realised] I like India only. I don't like Sri Lanka to be frank. There [are] no employment [opportunities] here [...]. My parents are happy because they came back to their native [country]. But, I am not.

While a significant percentage of young returnees who returned to Sri Lanka due to the insistence of their parents appear to struggle to reintegrate upon their return, we found that young returnees who do not have higher education qualifications view their return more positively than those with undergraduate degrees. For instance, 34-year-old Ratheesh, who abandoned his university programme while in India, is content with his return decision as he believes he has more recognition and rights in Sri Lanka. He returned to Sri Lanka in 2010 at his mother's behest after staying in India for 11 years. Upon returning to Sri Lanka, he started a business as a fish dealer and is content with his livelihood. Similarly, 28-year-old Suresh, who returned in 2015 with a 1-year diploma, stated that he is currently content with his job in the private sector. Suresh stated that even though he was initially unhappy with his decision to return, after he met his wife and found a job in the private sector where he got many opportunities for skill improvement, he became content.

In contrast, those with higher education qualifications take time to settle down as they do not feel content until they find an occupation in the government sector. For instance, Rakesh, who returned to Sri Lanka in 2015, stated that he returned due to his father's insistence and was unhappy initially. However, after securing a permanent job in the government sector, he is content with his life in Sri Lanka. He encourages others in India to return, saying that "you will face difficulties for one year. Then, you'll have a better life." Rakesh's argument is supportive of the stance of forced migration scholars who argue that it takes time to adapt to life after returning to the home country as the return is not a reintegration into old ways of living but a new beginning.<sup>75</sup>

In our sample, all of those who perceive their return to Sri Lanka was the correct decision feel so as they believe they have better rights in Sri Lanka than India. In contrast, those who feel that returning was a mistake highlighted the financial woes they had to encounter upon their return. In addition, for young returnees, their lack of sense of belongingness to Sri Lanka and their identity crisis upon return are also reasons for their regret.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Following the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka in 2009, a small percentage of Sri Lankan Tamils who migrated to India as refugees have returned to Sri Lanka to settle down and reclaim and re-establish their lives in their country of origin. Based on interviews with returnees in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, this study indicates

75 Stöckmann, "Struggling to Feel at Home".

that similar to findings of previous studies on returnee refugees to other parts of the world,<sup>76</sup> they face a cluster of challenges upon returning to Sri Lanka involving financial, social, and bureaucratic aspects. Among them, the most pressing challenge is the difficulties these returnees face in securing satisfactory jobs. This, in turn, has given rise to various other socio-economic issues, such as finding affordable housing.

Similar to findings of past studies,<sup>77</sup> overall, compared to older returnees, young returnees struggle more upon their return to Sri Lanka. Their reluctance to migrate to areas outside the Northern Province in search of jobs due to their fear of language barriers, lack of networks, social support, and guidance to navigate life upon return, various discriminatory barriers to the job market as well as their high expectations about securing government sector jobs, which is often a result of “myth of return” instilled by their parents, have given rise to various socio-economic issues for these young returnees. These issues are further exacerbated by bureaucratic issues such as delays in issuing NICs for refugee returnees born in India to Sri Lankan refugee parents.

Due to the lack of support received by these refugee returnees, they have come up with various methods to cope with the challenges they encounter upon their return. These coping mechanisms include accepting jobs beneath their qualifications and expectations, pawning jewellery, requesting remittances from family members and relatives in western countries, remigration to India on temporary visas, maintaining strong bonds with friends and family who are still in India and establishing informal groups with fellow returnees. As most of those who face challenges upon return are young returnees, most of those who utilise these coping mechanisms are also young returnees below the age of 35. Some of these coping methods utilised by young returnees, such as remigration to the host country, have been employed by second-generation refugee returnees in other parts of the world.<sup>78</sup>

The study also finds that challenges faced upon returning to Sri Lanka have led refugee returnees who were born in India or were small children at the time of migration to doubt their decision to return and question their identity and place in their country of origin. This is in line with the findings of past studies on second-generation refugee returnees, which argue that they often struggle with assimilation and feel a sense of uprootedness upon returning to their countries of origin.<sup>79</sup>

However, in contrast to past studies on first-generation refugee returnees, which indicate that first-generation refugees welcome their return to their home countries as it involves going back to a place, identity, and way of life with which they are familiar,<sup>80</sup> the interviews indicated that this is not always the case. The qualitative data suggest that while most first-generation refugee returnees were happy with their

76 Perez Murcia, ““The Sweet Memories of Home Have Gone””; Kropiwnicki, “The Meeting of Myths and Realities”; Cornish, Peltzer, & Maclachlan, “Returning Strangers”.

77 Cornish, Peltzer, & Maclachlan, “Returning Strangers”; Kropiwnicki, “The Meeting of Myths and Realities”.

78 Cornish, Peltzer, & Maclachlan, “Returning Strangers”.

79 Ibid; Kropiwnicki, “The Meeting of Myths and Realities”.

80 D. Chattoraj & E. Gerharz, “Strangers at Home: Narratives of Northern Muslim Returnees in Post-War Sri Lanka”, *Sri Lanka Journal of Social Sciences*, 42(2), 2019, 113–126, available at: <https://doi.org/10.4038/sljss.v42i2.7686>.

decision to return, there were returnees who regretted going back to Sri Lanka. Those who viewed their return negatively, irrespective of whether they are first-generation returnees or second-generation returnees, are often those who were compelled to return, at the persuasion of family members.