

International Migration of Sri Lankan Tamils and its Consequences

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Introduction

In Population dynamics, fertility and mortality are related to physiological factors where as migration is concomitant of socio, economic and cultural factors. When a person or group of persons decide that their place of origin is not suitable or they think that the place of destination is comparatively advantages one there is a possibility for population migration. That is to say, push and pull factors decide population migration. In an out migration has been taking place in Sri Lanka from historical times. Political changes, natural hazards and ethnic conflicts have induced migration in the past. In the 20th century in Sri Lanka especially since 1958 migration has taken place from time to time due to ethnic conflict. However, migration of population at large scales and loss of lives and properties took place after 1980s. Irrespective of ethnic groups in the North and East province a sizeable percentage of the population belonging to Tamil, Muslim and Sinhalese communities had become refugees and migrated to other destinations from their places of origin. According to the available data in the North and East province 800,000 people have displaced internally and nearly 65000 people died due to the war situation that continued for two decades prior to signing the memorandum of understanding between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ełam in 2002¹. According to official data, nearly forty person of the internally displaced people have returned to their places of origin. Besides, nearly 700,000 people have internationally migrated².

This study discusses the nature, pattern and distribution of international migration and its present and future social impact. Nature of International Migration in Historical Perspectives. There are ample evidences to show that migration of population was taken place among continents and regions on small and large scales during historical

times³. The migration of population was used to bring new areas under control by conquerors to expand trade activities, to acquire new wealth and economic resources of the subjugated countries and to engage in missionary work. For Instance, the invasions of Ariyans and -Muslims into Indian sub – continent. Capture and annexation of new areas by European powers are activities concomitant of migration of population. Although Sri Lanka is a small island nation, recorded evidence from ancient times show that in and out migration has taken place from historical times due to a number of political, economic and culture factors⁴. However exact number of the population that was subjected to in and out migration not known from the historical records. Knowledge on migration of population between. Sri Lanka and India was derived from traditional Literature. There is no doubt that migration between Sri Lanka and India has been continuing from historical periods.

Sri Lanka is a heterogeneous country. According to census of population 1981, percentage of each ethnic group in the total population of Sri Lankan are as follows. Sinhalese (74.0%) Sri Lankan Tamil (12.6%) Indian Tamil (5.6%) Muslim (7.4%) Malay, Burgher and Euro Asian (0.4%)⁵. No census of population was conducted in 2001 in districts of the North and Eastern province except in the Ampara district⁶. It has been reported that the percentage of Tamil population in the Island has been dropped. The above mentioned ethnic groups live scattered over the Island with their own district identities. The Sri Lankan Tamils who live scattered in each and every district of the country is the predominant ethnic group in the North and East province. Which is their traditional homeland. Between Sri Lankan Tamils and Indian Tamils very close culture and linguistic relationship, affinity and contacts have been historical evidence to show that in and out migration and settlement had occurred between India and Sri Lanka⁷ However, earlier Tamil settlers from India to Sri Lanka are categorized as Sri Lankan Tamils and Latter Tamils both who migrated to Sri Lanka from Tamil Nadu to work on the during the British period and those migrated to engage in trade and commerce from Tamil Nadu are categorized as Indian Tamils.

There are evidence to show that the Sri Lankan Tamils were compelled to make Internal migration due to involuntary religious conversion carried out by the Portuguese and the Dutch, to acquire new economic opportunities and to engage in agriculture activities. During the British period the people migrated to the southern part of the

country to get employment in both private and public sector and to get the benefits of economic development that was striding forward⁸. There was a great demand for English educated persons for the employment in plantation industry. They served as a medium of communication between the Indian Tamil employees on the plantations and the employers. A considerable percentage of Sri Lankan Tamils population especially the Jaffna Tamils migrated to the south to engage in commercial activities.

Initially it was a temporary migration. Over a period of time they settled down in their new destinations and they became permanent migrants. For example, the Tamil population in cinnamon Garden area.

International Migration of the Sri Lankan Tamils

- I. With the commencement of the British rule a small number of Sri Lankan had migrated to countries which were under the British rule for higher education and employment. "Singapore Vaithilingam" was the first person who had migrated to Singapore⁹ Subsequently many persons migrated, according to the census of population of 1911, out of 9370 Sri Lankan who lived in the United Malay States, 6003 were Sri Lankan Tamils¹⁰. This number had gradually increased during later years. However, during World War I and World War II a considerable number of people had returned to Sri Lanka. Although a sizeable number of people had migrated to Burma from the Jaffna district. Due to the atrocities committed against the Indians. Sri Lankan Tamil too returned to Sri Lanka due to the fear that atrocities migrate be committed against them¹¹.
- II. When the Sri Lankan governments followed communal stance and introduced the Sinhala only act in 1956, many high ranking Tamil official embittered by this move either retired or resigned from their posts and left for English speaking countries such as the United Kingdom Australia, Canada and the United States of America. Although it is not possible to collect the data relating to exact number of persons who had migrated to those countries, those expatriates lead a comfortable life and their family members have excelled in education and employment¹².

- III. Many African countries gained independence from the European countries during 1950s and 1960s. Following independence the African countries paid particular attention for socio – economic development. There was a dearth for professional and academic manpower in those countries. Many people in professional and academic fields migrated to African countries from Sri Lanka, seeking better prospect and higher rate of earnings. Most of these categories of people who migrated from Sri Lanka to African countries. Were Tamils. However, data is not available regarding the exact number of people. Migrated to African countries during this period many people belonging to professional category and skilled and unskilled workers migrated to oil rich west Asian countries. Although a portion of these migrants had returned to Sri Lanka a considerable number of people who had originally migrated to West Asian countries, later migrated to the United Kingdom and the United States of America.
- IV. In the fourth stage international migration had two types, Namely
- a) Migration of Labour grade man power to West Asian countries.
 - b) Migration of people to India and western countries due to ethnic problem in Sri Lanka.
- a) During 1970s not only professionals, house maids and Labourers migrated to west Asian countries. Nearly 500,000 Sri Lankan were employed in west Asian countries in 1995¹³. However when compared with Sinhales and Muslim people employed in those countries, Tamil employees formed a very small percentage in the Sri Lankan work force in West Asian countries.
 - b) The ethnic violence that continued from time to time and racial discrimination followed by successive Sri Lankan Governments have forced the Sri Lankan Tamils for international migration. Although the international migration. Commenced due to discriminatory policies of the Sri Lankan government tempo of migration took a new dimension due to denial of fundamental rights to Tamils, discrimination in higher education and employment opportunities, state sponsored colonization in the North and East province to change the ethnic composition, implementation of Sinhala only policy in administration are some of the measures which forced the Tamil politicians to organize

non violent struggle against the then governments to win the lost rights of the Tamil speaking people. When the non violent struggle had failed to redress the grievances and state had unleashed repressive measures against the Tamil community.

Tamil youths started an armed struggle against the governments in power following this, militarization process in the country started, battles between armed groups especially with the LTTE and Sri Lankan armed forces continued until the MOU was signed in 2002 between the LTTE and the government of Sri Lanka for a cease-fire. During military operations the civilians in those areas were chased away from their historical habitations. As a result, hundreds of thousands of Tamils became refugees and they were accommodated in the refugee camps established within the North East province, that is their traditional home land, forced to flee elsewhere in country and left for India and western countries legally and illegally as asylum seekers.

Not much change has taken place in the situation as yet. Therefore it is pertinent to discuss the pattern of migration of the people who are in India and western countries and favourable and unfavourable impact of the international migration.

Migration to Western Countries

The Sri Lankan Tamils have migrated either through legal or illegal means to the developed Western European countries, France, Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland. The United Kingdom, Italy and other English speaking former British colonies: Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and United States of America and sought asylum in those countries. According to an estimate in 1986 nearly 150,000 Sri Lankan Tamils migrated to those countries¹⁴. During this year 22,000 Tamils crossed the international borders of Germany and migrated to that country while 19,000 people migrated to France and they continue to live in those countries¹⁵. However authenticity to these estimates is doubtful. Inquiries made to the embassies of the above mentioned countries in Sri Lanka to collect up to date data on the number Sri Lankan refugees in each country had no avail¹⁶. Except the embassy of Switzerland in Sri Lanka the other embassies informed the author that they did not have the statistics regarding refugees. During the from 1981 to 1991 period 23409 Sri Lankan made applications seeking refugee status in Switzerland. Of this number only 208 people got refugee

status and it was informed to 2850 people that their applications would be considered on humanitarian basis¹⁷. As in October 1990, nearly 38000 Sri Lankan Tamils had migrated to the United Kingdom and sought refugee status¹⁸. Besides another 16000 Sri Lankan Tamils had completed 10 years period of residence in that country which included students too. According to data available at the Netherlands Refugees Federation there are 3500 Sri Lankan Tamils live in this country¹⁹. It was reported, there are 5000-6000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in Italy, 10000 in Australia and 16000 in Norway²⁰.

Number of Sri Lankan Tamil population in Canada is only next to Sri Lanka. After 1956, Middle class Tamils migrated to Canada²¹. From the early part of 1980 s Migration of Sri Lankan Tamils to Canada increased in number²². Between 1982 and 1986 the People who had been seriously affected in their places of origin due to ethnic violence were allowed migration to Canada under special in migration programme²³. Following this in 1989 Sri Lankan Tamils numbering 19,000 made a request to the Canadian government to recognize them as refugees. It had been reported in 1990, the Sri Lankan Tamil population in Canada increased to nearly 40,000. It may be noted that in 2004 there were 250,000 Sri Lankan Tamil in Canada²⁴.

Up to 1990 there had been continuous increase in international migration of Sri Lankan Tamils. Since 1990, there have been some changes in international migration. That was mainly depended on the nature of ethnic violence and changes that were effected in rules and regulations governing the admission of refugees in the western countries.

Two general characteristics were observed in the migration pattern after 1990

- a) There has been a drop in the number of people seeking asylum.
- b) The Sri Lankan Tamils who had settled down in western countries legally sponsor the migration of their spouses / family members bride, bridegroom and brothers and sisters below the age of eighteen. Although it was not possible to get an up to date about the number of Sri Lankan Tamils in foreign countries. From pieces of information and unconfirmed data it is roughly 500,000 people. Prof.P.Balasunderampillai has estimated that out of the total Sri Lankan Tamil population living abroad half of the total are living

in Canada and each of the following countries, has Sri Lankan Tamil population as follows. The United Kingdom 85000, Germany 45000, France 50000, Switzerland 25000, Norway 15000, Belgium and Netherlands 7000, Denmark 5000, Italy 5000, Sweden 4000, Australia 25000, New Zealand 7500, the United State of America 10000²⁵. Legal in migration of Sri Lankan Tamils has been taking place to the United States of America, New Zealand and Australia, whereas for other Western countries there are instances of illegal migration. Many Western countries have introduced legislation in order to curb and restrict in migration of population from other third world countries in the recent years. Stringent punishments are imposed on airlines and travel agent who engage human smuggling to these countries.

Migration to India

Sri Lanka and India are physically connected to each other. These two countries have been maintaining cultural link from historical times especially close relationship has existed between the Tamils of Tamil Nadu and the Sri Lankan Tamils from time immemorial. It had become inevitable for the Sri Lankan Tamils to migrate to South India following 1983 pogrom and ethnic violence and repressive measures unleashed against the Sri Lankan Tamils by the Sri Lankan government. Between July and December 1983, nearly 27,000 passengers arrived in Tamil Nadu by air from Sri Lanka²⁶ and the number of persons crossed the Palk Strait by boats and reached Tamil Nadu during this period was 17500²⁷. According to Indian High commission in Sri Lanka in April 1991, the number of Sri Lankan Tamils was 135,000²⁸. Unofficial statistics revealed that nearly 225,000 Sri Lankan Tamils have been living in Tamil Nadu²⁹. Of this number between 40,000 - 50,000 have been living in urban areas and the others are living in refugee camps and village, In February 1989 under the auspices of UNHCR, 25,000 people returned to Sri Lanka. The unsettled situation that developed in 1990 made many people to flee again from Sri Lanka. It has been observed the disinterested attitude of the Indian and Tamil Nadu Government and uncongenial conditions in the refugees camps are marking Sri Lankan Tamil refugees to cross the Palk Strait in small groups by boats. It could be estimated that in 2004 nearly 160,000 Sri Lankan Tamils are living in India.

Socio Economic and Cultural changes that have been taken place in their places of origin and destinations

a) Changes that have taken place in place of origin.

In the place of origin large – scale migration of work force has taken place and a sizeable number of youth has joined the armed struggle. This has affected the availability of manpower greatly. This situation has been an impediment for the economic growth in this region. The youth are also engaged in international migration. Both internal and international migration has affected the educational standard of the youth. This has created a situation where many women who had reached the marriageable age are unable to find partners for marriage. This in turn has caused drop in fertility and stagnation in population growth.

Considerable portions of the fertile agriculture lands scattered in these districts are under the control of Sri Lankan security forces. Both the declaration of high security zones and the international migration of youth have greatly affected the agriculture activities. The children who have migrated abroad discourage their parent, to engage in agriculture pursuits. Besides, the assistance by the government by way of dry ration and the other forms of assistance given by the NGO are also serve as an indirect disincentive for the workforce to engage in productive pursuits. High rate of migration of the youth has increased the percentage of the elders in Tamil areas. It may be noted that in Sri Lanka National average of the elders in population is 5.0% in contrast it is 13.0% in the North East provinces.

Despite these unfavorable conditions due to the internal migration there has been an appreciable increase in money circulation among the Tamil population. The political and economic policies that have been followed in Sri Lanka by the successive governments have increased the number of unemployed. The rate of unemployment among the Tamils are higher than that of national rate. This may be due to discriminatory recruitment policy, war – is ravaged situation and lack of skill development avenues for the youth etc. However inflow of remittances from abroad has increased the standard of living of a certain percentage of the population and a sizable population is leading a luxury life.

We could observe special characteristics of life style and adverse condition of

the Tamil community in the place of destination. The people who migrated abroad in particular to the western countries with adequate qualifications required for seeking employment in those countries have already gainfully employed. The people who migrated with primary and secondary educational level attainment were unable to obtain steady employment opportunities and forced to do odd jobs and eke out a living. They are morally bound to support their next of kins and relatives out of their meager earnings. It was observed among the Sri Lankan Tamil expatriate that there is competition among themselves for economic advancement of their children. The discussion that the author had with Sri Lankan Tamil expatriates have revealed almost similar situation in the other western countries. However the educational level of the children of the Sri Lankan Tamil community in the United Kingdom and the United States of America is different from that of the other western countries. In the United Kingdom and the USA the level of educational attainment is very high. Most the children who had completed secondary level education pursuing University education and they have shown excellence in Mathematics³⁰.

The Sri Lankan Tamil members who had not acquired citizenship or PRO (permanent resident visa) are getting married to women of those countries in order to get resident visa. Although it is a very small number, by this type of marriages the distinct ethnic entity is lost. However the general trend that is being observed is that the males and females who have attained the marriageable age are prefer to choose their spouses in their places of origin and show unwillingness to marry the girls of boys who have integrated with the culture of places of destination.

A small number of people who had migrated abroad were subjected to drug addiction. Mental depression, and adultery and live in seclusion and separation. A case study revealed that a person living in Switzerland from a respectable in Jaffna family who had migrated abroad twenty years ago was living in seclusion and he was addicted to drug. A few people with the intention of getting rich – quick engaged in drug trafficking, smuggling, money laundering and other illegal ways to earn money and they have been languishing in jails. Nearly 600 Sri Lanka have been imprisoned in Italy for different types of offences community by them³¹.

The canker of caste system and parochial outlook which are prevalent among the Tamil community continued to be maintained in the place of destination. Many

news items had appeared in print and electronic media that group clashes have taken place especially in Scarborough, Canada, Lachappal in France. Many societies have been formed on regional and hamlet basis. These societies arrange regular get together and raise funds to provide financial assistance for development of education and rehabilitation of temples in their place of origin.

In the case of people who had migrated to India from Sri Lanka. Following the withdrawal of the Indian Peace Keeping Force and assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, former prime minister of India, the state government and central government and the officials have been giving step motherly treatment to the Sri Lankan Tamils.

As most of the refugee families living in India even do not have a single member in the western countries, there living in abject poverty line. The dry ration issued to each family monthly is inadequate even for a week. Many family members eke out their living by doing marital jobs. As far as marital status the refugees are concerned a small number of people have got married Generally almost all the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India are willing to return to Sri Lanka. However their weak economic condition, indifferent attitude of NGO and the changing political and military conditions prevent the acceleration of repatriation process. In 2004 the refugees have been crossing the park strait in groups in boats. Many peoples died while they were travelling in boats.

The Future Trend

Nearly 700,000 Sri Lanka Tamils live scattered all over the countries of the world. The migration of Tamils has caused advantages and disadvantages impact in the places of origin and places of destination. It is an inevitable consequence. The impact that has already caused and that will be caused in the places of destination could be as follows.

- I. Most of the Sri Lankan Tamils who migrated abroad is belonging to the young. Most of their parent continue to live in their place of origin. The rest of the parents live in the places of destination of their children. In many areas of the Tamil speaking regions lands and their dwelling units have been abandoned. Especially in Island divisions of the Jaffna peninsula most of the housing units

are left abandoned without any maintenance and changed as habitation for stray cattle.

- II. The agricultural lands that have not been cultivated due to displacement have become following.
- III. The young generation of people who have migrated abroad are unable to identify their parental properties. The elders who maintained their properties and claimed legal property rights by deeds either died or migrated. Therefore the second and third generation will not have any supporting documents to establish their ownership of their ancestral properties.
- IV. When compared with their earnings in the countries of destination the value of their ancestral properties is very negligible in value. Therefore, they will not show much interest in their ancestral properties. However, the land value in urban areas has been escalating in an unprecedented level in the recent past. This situation induces the expatriates to sell their landed properties in urban areas.
- V. Even in the event of return of refugee to Sri Lanka from foreign countries after a political solution and peace it would be doubtful that they will return to their places of origin. Of late a considerable number of people who are resident in foreign countries are buying apartments. Houses hotels and business centers in Colombo and in the south of Sri Lanka.
- VI. Migrant's contribution out of their earning to socio, economic development of their places of origin is negligible. However, they contribute large sums of money to the reconstruction works of temples.
- VII. Owing to their international migration of Tamil population, the percentage of Tamils in total population of Sri Lanka has been dropped.

(b) It is pertinent to analyze the future of the Sri Lanka Tamils in their places of destination.

- I. With the passage of time they in the future will lose touch with Tamil language and with the death of their parents they will have to integrate with the culture and language of the country of destination.

- II. The progeny of the migrants in English-speaking countries will have command only in English language. They will have opportunity to communicate with the people of their places of origin but in case of offsprings of the present day migrants in the non-English. Speaking countries after two generations they will have disadvantages in the future. It is likely that they will not be in a position to communicate with their relations in the country of origin or other countries. For example the Indians who had migrated to African and Caribbean countries although they claim to the Indians, relationship with India has been cut off³².
- III. As Sri Lankan Tamils are a microscopic minority in the countries of destination willingly or unwillingly they have to integrate themselves with the socioeconomic traits and either they are forced to forget their cultural traditions or not in a position to follow them.

Foot Notes

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