

Rohingyas and Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in Tamil Nadu: a replicable model of semi-permanent resettlement in low-resource settings

R.K. Radhakrishnan

*Athena Institute, VU University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands and
The Banyan Institute, Chennai, India*

Emma Emily de Wit

Athena Institute, VU University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Vandana Gopikumar

The Banyan Institute, Chennai, India, and

Joske G.F. Bunders

Athena Institute, VU University, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Abstract

Purpose – After being forced to flee their respective home countries, Sri Lankan Tamils and Rohingya refugees resettled in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. This study attempts to explore the extent to which the state has provided means for integration in the absence of refugee protection laws and citizenship.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative research approach was used, including in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) with participants from both refugee groups between 2019 and early 2020. A representative sample of male and female Sri Lankan Tamils, living in or outside government camps, in urban and rural areas, was included (total number = 75). Similarly, a representative sample of the Rohingya refugee community was included for this study ($n = 44$).

Findings – Despite constraints imposed by inadequate infrastructure, the study finds that Sri Lankan Tamils and Rohingyas both show to be progressively integrated in local society and have been capable of fulfilling

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Declarations: This paper is the original work of the authors and has not been published or submitted for publication. All authors have contributed significantly and have been involved at each stage of the research from the formulation of concept, the setting of the research agenda, interpretation of data, analysis and the writing and re-writing of the manuscript. All authors have approved the final draft and agreed with the content of the manuscript. The authors are accountable for all aspects of the work, and questions related to the accuracy/integrity of the work will be addressed to the satisfaction of the publisher. The authors seek to build a better future for the marginalized and vulnerable people in society, and this affirmative action can sometime be seen as a conflict of interest. All human studies have been performed in accordance with the ethical standards as laid down in the Declaration of Helsinki and reviewed and approved by an external ethics committee of the Banyan Academy of Leadership in Mental Health, Chennai. No external funding was sought for the study.

The authors would like to acknowledge all the participants in this study for providing their valuable time and engagement in this study.



some important basic livelihood needs, especially with regards to education. Some areas for improvement are identified as well, most urgently in terms of health and accommodation.

Practical implications – Other states in India, as well as in similar low-income countries (LICs), could learn from the current case study with regards to administering workable policies for small groups of refugees.

Originality/value – With minimal state facilitation and within the context of limited legal backing, refugee groups have somewhat managed to re-built their lives. This study identifies the threshold of requirements that make this achievement possible and suggests what more could be done to further advance the current state.

Keywords Refugees, Tamils, Rohingyas, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, India, Integration

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In 2019, as many as 79.5 million people, about one percent of the world's population, were forced to move from their homes because of conflict or natural disasters (UNHCR – Global Trends, 2019: Forced Displacement in 2019, 2021), making displacement one of the most complex of contemporary international issues (Easton-Calabria and Omata, 2018). This number has almost doubled since 2010, when there were just over 40 million people displaced around the world. Of this, about 26 million people are registered refugees (UNHCR – Global Trends, 2019: Forced Displacement in 2019, 2021). More than 60% of displaced people live in low-income countries (LICs). A refugee, according to the United Nations Refugee Convention of 1951 (Relating to the Status of Refugees), is

Someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion (UNHCR, 2010).

Refugees and those who are forcibly displaced live in hope of a permanent solution provided by the receiving country (Hvidtfeldt *et al.*, 2020). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, this is part of the problem:

We are witnessing a changed reality in that forced displacement nowadays is not only vastly more widespread but is simply no longer a short-term and temporary phenomenon.

India has hosted refugees since its independence, but is not a signatory to the United Nations (UN) Refugee Convention of 1951 or the 1967 Protocol (Relating to the Status of Refugees) and does not have a national policy applicable to refugees (Kumar, 2018). Since these are the only instruments accepted worldwide by nation states, the Government of India (GoI) thus has no formal obligation to provide aid (Rolfe, 2008). In the absence of specific laws, refugees are commonly denied protection and various basic entitlements (Bhattacharjee, 2008). The fate of refugee communities in India has historically been determined by local politics referred to by B.S. Chimni as “strategic ambiguity” (Samaddar, 2021). Indian refugee policies are often influenced by the nature of domestic sentiments towards specific refugee groups, particularly when they are perceived as a potential national threat (Cheung and Phillimore, 2014; Kumar, 2018; Ullah, 2016). Nonetheless, various scholars have commended India in the past for being relatively hospitable in its response to refugees despite the lack of a consistent policy (e.g. Rolfe, 2008; Sampathkumar, 2015; Shirwadkar, 2018). In terms of numbers, about 9,458 refugees were registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in India in 2019, and around 160,000 more are recognized by India as refugees because they were granted identity cards by the UN body, UNHCR (UNHCR, 2020). This group includes Afghans, Bangladeshis, Burmese, Palestinians, Rohingya, Somalis, Sri Lankan Tamils, Yemenis and Tibetans.

1.1 Rohingyas and Sri Lankan refugees in Tamil Nadu

Rohingyas, the largest Muslim minority group in Myanmar, have been discriminated and oppressed for decades, resulting in mass displacement within Myanmar and beyond

(including Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Thailand) (UNHCR, 2018; Mahmood *et al.*, 2017). From early 2012 to late 2017, about 40,000 Rohingyas have come to live in India, according to a writ petition filed in the Supreme Court [Mohammad Salimullah and others \(2017\)](#). About 16,000 of them have been registered and received refugee identity cards by the UNHCR ([Verma, 2019](#)). Unlike another refugee group from Myanmar, the Chin Buddhists, who were granted asylum in India, the Rohingyas were not given any official refugee status ([Chakraborty, 2015](#)). In fact, in 2012, a group of Rohingya held a one-month protest outside the UNHCR office in the Indian capital, New Delhi, demanding that they be recognized as refugees. Though this demand was not conceded, the GoI granted some of them long-term visas, which allowed them to stay in India. Still, Rohingyas have often been described as “nowhere people”, non-citizens or even “the lost generation,” stateless and without fundamental rights ([Chakraborty, 2015](#); [Rahman and Mohajan, 2019](#)).

Sri Lankan Tamils refugees came to India following the pogrom against the Tamils in 1983 ([Ratnapalan, 2014](#)), which sparked a civil war that raged intermittently until 2009. In the last phase of the civil war, from January 12, 2006 to 2010, Indian government data recorded that 8,450 families (24,527 persons) arrived in the country. A total of 304,269 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees came to India between July 1983 and August 2012 [Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India \(2019-20\)](#), with most of them (250,00 approximately) having returned to Sri Lanka during times of peace between the Tamil militant groups and the Sri Lankan government. According to the data, by April 1, 2019, as many 60,438 persons were living in 107 refugee camps (including a special camp at Tiruchì) located in 25 districts of Tamil Nadu. In addition, 34,684 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees were living outside the camps on March 31, 2019.

Both groups live in Tamil Nadu with some support from the provincial government. Both cases involve “*protracted refugee situations*” [1] (UNHCR, 2018). The UNHCR has recognized Rohingya refugees for rehabilitation (settlement, naturalization or repatriation) (UNHCR, 2019). Since some Sri Lankan refugees have voluntarily opted to go back to Sri Lanka over the past few decades, this option is not open to them. For the Sri Lankan Tamils, this presents a peculiar situation whereby they have some benefits, but almost no rights; they are allowed to live in Tamil Nadu but cannot, for instance, approach a state agency for redressal of a grievance. The two refugee groups have thus been living in a prolonged state of displacement, which might have a negative impact on some important aspects of life, including social mobility and the ability to act politically.

Despite the situation described above, both groups have seemed to establish an equation with the local communities after which integration has happened. In Tamil Nadu, several local government-supported mechanisms, largely inspired by humanitarian principles, have been recorded ([Valatheeswaran and Rajan, 2014](#)). The reason for refugee access to welfare schemes in Tamil Nadu ([Governemnt of Tamil Nadu, 2020](#)) is competitive electoral politics, where political parties in power have vied with each other to help Sri Lankan Tamils specifically. Such reinforcing political factors are absent in the case of Rohingyas across India. The expenditure incurred by the state government on relief to Sri Lankan refugees was reimbursed by the GoI, including a total of about INR 1,021 crore (roughly about US\$ 130 m in 2020 conversion rates; about US\$ 3.5 m a year) spent between July 1983 and March 31, 2019, according to the Indian Home Ministry’s annual report for 2018–2019. In the case of the Rohingyas, their housing, access to health facilities, education, free water and power, costs about INR 1.2 m a year (just over US\$ 16,000 at 2020 conversion rates). The Tamil Nadu situation is unique in India because unlike any other state of the Indian Union, it makes policies and programmes for the refugees within the broad framework outlined by the GoI and presents these in the State Assembly for approval.

1.2 Problem statement

Uncertainty regarding the future is an inevitable condition in the lives of most refugee groups (Fitzgerald and Arar, 2018). Sri Lankan Tamils and Rohingyas are sure to experience insecurity due to the lack of legal and political protection and while waiting for either repatriation or deportation. How do these groups manage to live a humanly dignified life within these set conditions, and what has been the role of the state of Tamil Nadu in this respect? The current study attempts to examine the livelihoods and lived experiences of the Rohingya and the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India, who are in an intermediate state in a space between non-citizens and irregular migrants and explore how they have adapted so far. It specifically addresses the type of facilitation they received from the state of Tamil Nadu, and how these have impacted their integration process.

2. Integration theories

Aspects of integration have long been a focus of scholars studying refugee groups and policymakers (Bucken-Knapp *et al.*, 2019; Manojlovic, 2009; Grigoleit, 2016; Valtonen, 1999). Although no real consensus exists on definitions for integration, it might be broadly defined as “the process by which migrants become accepted into society, both as individuals and as group” (IOM, 2011). It can be furthermore referred to as “a two-way process of adaptation by migrants and host societies, implying consideration of the rights and obligations of migrants and host societies, of access to different kind of services and the labour market, and of identification and respect for a core set of values that bind migrants and host communities in a common purpose” (IOM, 2011, p. 1). For persons in protracted refugee situations, integration is a considerably more complex process, but an exceedingly important issue as there is commonly no hope of a return to the country of origin at an early date. For “successful” integration, refugees ideally gain opportunities to work, manage to understand and communicate in the local language and are treated as equal citizens (Moreira and Baeninger, 2010). However, such parameters often remain unattainable, as state policies of refugee-receiving countries often deliberately seek to avoid integration of refugees by impeding, e.g. access to citizenship, banning legal employment and isolating refugees in large camps (Fitzgerald and Arar, 2018). Zetter and Ruauadel (2016) also describe how many countries (including India) do not permit displaced persons and refugees to exercise their right to work or enter the labour market. In an environment where they are entitled to fewer rights to seek employment, obtain health care, education for their children or even the right to remain or return to any other place, they are left in a limbo or in the “betwixt and between” (Kits, 2005).

Effective integration, even if temporary, thus requires a host society that is supportive in a way that allows stateless residents to contribute to the social life of their new community rather than staying in a continuous state of dependency (Duke *et al.*, 1999). The 1951 Refugee Convention (Relating to the Status of Refugees) and 1967 Protocol place considerable emphasis on stimulating refugees’ capacity to acculturate and gain economic independence (Nawyn, 2011). Economic independence, in particular, has been found to be a major contributor to such self-reliance and future building, which can be promoted by vocational training, language courses and permission to work (UNHCR, 2002). According to a model by Ager and Strang (2008), integration depends on four distinct elements: (1) access to employment, housing, education and health (i.e. markers and means); (2) citizenship and rights (i.e. social connection); (3) social connection within and between groups in the community (i.e. facilitators) and (4) structural barriers to such connections related to language, culture and the local environment (i.e. foundation). Their model for integration presents a comprehensive picture of the domains that need to be in place to progress along the continuum of integration.

All the above can be achieved only if there is an enabling context, with policies and programmes that help stimulate self-reliance (UNHCR, 2018; Easton-Calabria and Omata, 2018). The current study attempts to review the process of integration on the basis of the

framework of [Ager and Strang \(2008\)](#) and explore how much the state has enabled Sri Lankan Tamils and Rohingyas in this process. How have they been able to live and work in relative peace as a consequence of state actions, and what has Tamil Nadu provided in terms of what [Ager and Strang \(2008\)](#) refer to as markers and means (e.g. housing, education, employment and health)? The proposed research questions are as follows:

What has the state of Tamil Nadu done for Sri Lankan Tamils and Rohingyas since their arrival? (in terms of housing, education, health and employment), and what has been the impact of these measures been on the two groups (in terms of economic development and prosperity, educational progress and sense of belonging)? Also, how replicable are these actions?

3. Materials and methods

3.1 Study design

This study took place in the context of an ongoing action research (AR) engagement with the refugee communities in Tamil Nadu, led by a local non-governmental organization (NGO) in Chennai. AR offers a way of doing research that helps generate inputs for policy change and intervention ([Bartels and Wittmayer, 2018](#)) and was used thus not just to gather information about the status of refugees but to ensure that pressing needs might be addressed better. In the context of this larger study, the primary author is continuously engaged with the communities, as a mediator between the groups and NGOs in the locality.

The study employed a qualitative research approach to understand the experiences of two refugee groups after they arrived in Tamil Nadu. Over a period of two years in 2019 and 2020 (in the first wave of the COVID pandemic), 13 semi-structured interviews, 27 unstructured interviews and 14 focus group discussions (FGDs), with men and women in both refugee groups, were conducted. The primary researcher visited the refugee settlements once a week for over two years in 2019 and in 2020, resulting in various observational notes. In 2021, the primary researcher visited a few of the camps in April and May for impressions on how the refugee groups were coping with the second wave of the COVID pandemic.

All data collection took place in spaces in which each of the two groups felt comfortable. In the case of the Rohingyas, these took place at Kelambakkam, in the village where their settlement is located. They were informed ahead on the purpose of the FGDs and invited to be part of it. In the case of Tamils living in camps, the interviews and FGDs were outside the camps because of the presence of the state police in the camps. The Sri Lankan Tamil refugee camps are in 106 locations in Tamil Nadu. Views from those living in an urban setting (near Chennai) and a rural camp from south Tamil Nadu were taken. The aim was to arrive at a representative sample.

The Tamil refugees who were not living in camps were approached separately because they were not monitored by the police and access was much easier. In the case of the Tamils, the youngest participant was 16, and the oldest was over 70 years of age. In the case of the Rohingyas, the youngest was 17, and the oldest was 51 years.

3.2 Data collection and methods

Each interview lasted for about 40 min. The questions posed as part of the qualitative methods was intended to gain insights into the participants' experiences somewhat before their arrival in India, but particularly as they settled in the state of Tamil Nadu. The questions related to the historical background of the participants, their journey to India, their experiences as refugees in intermediate countries (in the case of Rohingyas) and in India, and how they were received in Tamil Nadu. They were asked about their experiences of living in the settlements provided to them, the daily activities men, women and children, their concerns and hopes for future, their approach to a variety of issues related to livelihood, education, health, family and how they perceive their integration in the local communities.

The FGDs lasted between one and two hours. On average, nine people attended each FGD. The process was guided by the principal author of this study. Most of the interviews were conducted in Tamil (the mother tongue of the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees) and a combination of Bangla, Rohingya and Hindi with Rohingya refugees. A woman facilitator was used to reach Rohingya women because of the cultural sensitivity of Rohingyas. For the FGDs with Rohingya participants, translation was organized from Rohingya to Tamil and English. Later, a Rohingya-speaking facilitator held an informal discussion with the community to assess if their views were recorded in the manner intended.

This study also draws on secondary data obtained from official sources, as well as interviews and briefings with a variety of government stakeholders, such as former national security advisors, secretaries of the Government of Tamil Nadu, the head of the Tamil Nadu Police Force, serving and former officers of India's internal and external intelligence organizations, former ministers, serving members of the Indian Parliament and the State Legislative Assembly, representatives of political parties in Tamil Nadu, diplomats stationed in New Delhi, Colombo and Chennai, who have dealt with or are still dealing with the issues relating to refugees, academics who provide inputs to the government and Indian agencies and UNHCR officials. The aim of these interactions was to blend official and academic perspectives with field practices and the search for working models for refugee care in situations with no international protection, which might be considered for replication. The author also travelled to the Rohingya refugee camp in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh to have a first-hand understanding of the conditions that forced the Rohingyas to migrate illegally to India.

3.3 Analysis

All the interviews and FGDs were transcribed verbatim. The data were then read and re-read by the two principal researchers to find relevant themes and draw up a joint code list. The code list included themes that followed the theoretical framework of [Ager and Strang \(2008\)](#), identifying issues related to housing (e.g. government plans, positive and negative experiences and future plans), health (e.g. health packages, protective and risk factors, and consequences for public health), education (e.g. access to and experiences with schooling, language development and issues of inclusion) and finally work (certification, legal frameworks around work and the job market). This guideline was used to organize the themes under categories and sub-categories. The resulting work was discussed among the researchers, before writing up the results.

3.4 Ethical considerations

The participants were made aware that the research was being conducted for the purpose of understanding their livelihood concerns and other issues that they encounter and to chronicle their lived experiences. They were assured that by participating in the FGDs and the interviews, complete confidentiality would be maintained by the primary researcher. They were made aware that they were free to leave the research at any stage and/or withdraw their inputs. All the discussions were recorded, with the express undertaking that the recording will be used only for research and for no other purpose and would not be shared with others. Formal letters for permission to conduct the research were handed to the Government of Tamil Nadu's School Education Ministry (Secretary to Government of Tamil Nadu), the Director General of Tamil Nadu Police and the head of Tamil Nadu Police's intelligence wing, and the permissions were obtained. The research proposal was extensively examined by the external research committee of the Banyan Academy of Leadership in Mental Health (BALM), and the consent was granted. There was no external financial aid sought for the research since the primary researcher was based in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, where bulk of the data collection was carried out. The BALM provided logistics support.

4. Results

While refugees are not actively integrated in India as a matter of policy, the concessions offered by the state of Tamil Nadu essentially drive integration, without perhaps intending to do so. Concessions made to Sri Lankan Tamils and Rohingyas were studied, and the impact of these concessions for both groups was recorded quantitatively. These concessions are (1) housing for those who required it; (2) access to government health facilities; (3) access to education for the children of both groups; (4) relative freedom to seek and gain temporary employment and (5) pandemic relief.

4.1 Sri Lankan Tamils: aspects of integration for those in and outside camps

Sri Lankan refugee flow to Tamil Nadu began in 1983. Providing housing to the large influx of refugees (in total, 3,04,269 Sri Lankan Tamils; by 1995, as many as 99,469 were repatriated in stages) quickly became a government priority. The state decided to settle the Sri Lankan Tamils from different villages/areas in different locations to avoid potential in-fighting. Because there was no time to build new housing, existing, unused government buildings in districts were used to accommodate the Sri Lankan Tamils. For example, in Mallankiranu, in Virudhunagar district in the south of Tamil Nadu, a broiler (chicken) farm was converted into a living space (with partitions) while in Tuticorin district, in the same region, a few defunct buildings of the government-owned Palm Development Corporation were used for housing and an educational facility. One refugee, Kannan [2], had the following to say about this experience of settlement:

When we landed here, all we wanted was to survive and make sure that our families survived this war that was going on in Sri Lanka. We did not expect that the government here would go past giving us a temporary shelter and help us with going forward with our lives. But all political parties have been kind to us and have supported us.

After the first group in 1983, five more waves of Sri Lankan refugees arrived, of which about 59,428 (18,834 families) were settled in 106 refugee camps and in one special camp in Tamil Nadu (camp refugees). The government gave the option of living in the community for Sri Lankan Tamils who could bear their expenses (non-camp refugees). The one restriction for non-camp refugees was that they need to inform the local police and obtain an extension of their residence papers each year. For camp refugees housing situation is relatively harsh, with less space and inadequate sanitation. Most refugees' desire was to leave the camps, when they earn sufficient money to pay rent. A Sri Lankan camp refugee (a man, aged 45) said

Our house is very small. We only have a room, which we have partitioned to a living room. There is also a small space for a kitchen. We have managed so far. But if I start a family, it will be a problem. I was thinking of moving out from the camp, after taking police permission, because I had a steady job and I was making enough money.

On health, the state provides free medical treatment for all refugees. The Sri Lankan Tamil refugees living in camps are better served than the Rohingyas because they have access to free government health care following a 2011 government order [3]. The order specifies that there will be no cap on the cost of free treatment in any government facility. The camp and the non-camp Tamils routinely access the local primary health centres and other hospitals.

In terms of employment, though there is no formal order from the Indian Home Ministry which prohibits the formal labour, the state has interpreted that since refugees receive financial aid, they should not work. Since Rohingyas do not receive any financial aid, it can be argued that they could work, based on humanitarian principles. In Tamil Nadu, refugees are informally allowed to work, though they are not permitted to hold a regular job or have a permanent contract, which would include benefits such as a monthly salary, medical insurance and a provident fund. This is because the government believes that if this is

sanctioned, it could lead to tension between the local population and the refugees. Hence, refugees access different kinds of jobs, but they are also not eligible for government jobs. A government official, in charge of Sri Lankan refugees, said

They are refugees and hence can't work here. But we do not prevent them from going to work. To formalize any employment opportunity, the call has to be taken by the Central government.

Refugees are also free to take up jobs in NGOs and non-profit community organizations. Some of these organizations work for refugees' welfare. There are a few other initiatives too: a for-profit online boutique, Serendip, has been set up in Chennai (the capital city of Tamil Nadu) to provide an outlet for various products made by trained Sri Lankan women refugees [4]. The Tamil Nadu government opened bank accounts for all Sri Lankan Tamil refugees to route its periodic monetary assistance. This crucial aspect of financial inclusion has helped the refugees' access formal banking channels.

Each Sri Lankan Tamil refugee has received the Indian national identity card, called the Aadhar, which makes it easier for them to find work. Practically speaking, Sri Lankan Tamils have less problems assimilating to the local culture because they speak the language and also have the national ID. Yet, the fact that the refugees cannot be employed with a legal status regularly leads to their exploitation, regardless of whether or not they live in a camp. This is despite the fact that the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees who do not live in camps are free to move to a place of their choice and work as the hours they wish. The refugees who live in camps face additional problems. One is the consistency of employment and the other is the lack of employment because of where the camp is located. Mohan, a refugee leader who consented to be quoted, from southern Tamil Nadu, highlighted the problem of uncertainty of movement of persons:

I have done my Masters in Tamil language, but I work as a [house] painter. If I am given a painting job, it takes a few days to complete. In the middle of this, if there is a problem in the camp, then, all of us are forced to stay here. This can be the weekly inspection by the Q Branch [a wing of the Tamil Nadu police] or it could be that some official is visiting, and we will not be allowed out of the camp. My problem is that anyone who hires me expects that I complete the job in a specified number of days. He will think I am unreliable. We need to be allowed to move out freely.

Finally, with regard to education, all refugees from the age of six, living in Tamil Nadu, can enrol in Class 1 in local government schools, free of cost. Students receive special benefits, including mid-day meals, books and notebooks, a school bag, two sets of uniform each year, shoes and free bus pass in order to attend school. Teachers from government schools go around their catchment areas (a radius of about five km around the school) to encourage parents (not just refugees) to enrol their children in school. Free education is provided to all refugee students at the school level while a Tamil Nadu government order provides free education at vocational, college and professional undergraduate and graduate level for Sri Lankan Tamils. More than 23,000 refugee students are enrolled from Class 1 to graduate courses across government institutions in Tamil Nadu. Of these, more than 18,000 are in Classes 1 to 10. From 2011 to 2012, Tamil refugee students in Tamil Nadu can compete for admission to B.E./B.Tech and post-graduate courses, such as M.B.A./M.Tech./M.Arch./M.Plan. Tuition fee concession is granted to Sri Lankan Tamil refugee students. As many as 268 students have benefited from this scheme, from the academic years 2011–2012 to 2018–2019.

4.2 Rohingyas; aspects of integration

The Rohingyas in India are considered foreigners, not refugees. A foreigner needs a valid visa to stay in India. This means that unless Rohingyas have an UNHCR identity card, they can be summarily deported to Myanmar for overstaying without a valid visa in India.

In terms of housing, the Rohingyas have been provided a cyclone shelter by the government in Kelambakkam village, in the outskirts of the Chennai, the capital (about 3,500 square feet, spread across two floors for nearly 90 refugees now). Since then, the refugees have built around the shelter a temporary mosque, additional temporary housing, a community kitchen and a washing facility. The sanitary facilities are limited and inadequate. The Kelambakkam village has a population of 5,189 (Government of India, 2011).

The camp is also situated just off an arterial road in a crowded and densely populated area. There is a row of government quarters to the right of the structure, shops and business establishments to its left and private houses behind the camp. Many Rohingya refugees long to live elsewhere because the place was too cramped. One male refugee, aged 34, said

I want to move my family away from here. Look at my legs [which are afflicted with scabies]. I am getting diseases merely because I am staying in this surrounding and because most of the people here are uneducated and they do not understand the need to maintain clean surroundings. I still live with my parents in a small accommodation that we have inside the shelter. I am married and we have just had a baby. I do not want him to grow up in these surroundings.

With regard to health, although it is not mentioned in any specific government order, government hospitals treat Rohingyas free of cost. Some of the health problems experienced by the Rohingyas might have to do with the poor housing conditions, including the poor quality of water and sanitation, particularly during the monsoons, when the waste water, sewage and the rain water get mixed up and the whole area tends to become flooded. This creates an environment which renders the residents vulnerable to various infectious diseases.

A doctor from a nearby NGO, who visited the camp several times, noted the lack of sanitation in the area and said that unless the sanitary conditions improved, the Rohingyas will continue to fall sick frequently.

A health disaster is waiting or it is already happening. There are various communicable diseases, there are vector borne diseases, as well as water-borne diseases. Everything is here. We need practical interventions which reduces this environmental distress. We can link them to the local PHC. Everyone say they have “gas.” It is a H. pylori infection. This is primarily because of sanitation problem here.

With regard to education, all Rohingya children of school age have been enrolled in the local co-educational government school in Kelambakkam (now closed because of COVID). About 20 of them can speak a little Tamil, and three speak it fluently. Although there is no separate order on free education for them, the Directorate of School Education, the Government of Tamil Nadu allows all children of school age domiciled in the state to obtain schooling. There are four students in Class 8, and the remaining 28 are in lower classes.

As with Sri Lankan refugees, the Rohingya children get free schooling. They are also provided bags, uniforms and free mid-day meals. Although initially most children were attending local Madrassa schools, now all children of school age began attending the government school from the academic year 2016–2017 [5]. At first, some of the children had a tough time because some of the other pupils ostracized them. One of the reasons why the children were excluded was because they could not yet speak Tamil. This initially caused a considerable number of dropouts among the Rohingya children. Yet, in just over a year, they picked up the language skills and also became more familiar with the Tamil culture and hence become better accepted at school.

Finally, in terms of employment, the Rohingyas are unofficially permitted to work. They depend on NGOs for food, clothing and other needs. All but three adult Rohingyas are scrap collectors. Of the three, one works in a fruit juice outlet, another in a chicken shop and the third is a fish-cart rider and doubles up as a mechanic. The Rohingyas collect the scrap, sort it and retrieve metals, such as copper, and sell it to a scrap dealer. They make anything from

INR 250 (about US\$ 3.5) to INR 500 (about US\$ 7) per person each day that they work. Unlike Sri Lankan Tamil refugees, Rohingyas are yet to get access to banking channels, though NGOs and the local office of UNHCR are working with the local banks on this issue. Accessing banks is a complex issue because the national ID has been made mandatory to open a savings bank account in India.

In the past four years, there have been sporadic NGO initiatives to impart vocational skills to Rohingya women to enable them to earn a living. The first project was making paper bags. A few of them were trained, but the orders stopped coming in about six months after the women had learned the skill. The Rohingyas who were interviewed did not know why the orders stopped coming.

Overall, the accounts of the participants in both groups, as well as the statements of other stakeholders in this study, show that various amenities have been provided by the Government of Tamil Nadu. No other state has a detailed policy note, passed by Members of the Legislative Assembly and an approved budget for refugees other than Tamil Nadu. Most other refugee groups in India register with the UNHCR and are mostly handled by the Indian Union Home Ministry.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to gain insights into the process of integration of two refugee groups in Tamil Nadu, who both are in a prolonged state of statelessness, and to what extent this process was supported by local initiatives of the state of Tamil Nadu. The focus was particularly on four fundamental aspects of integration: housing, health, employment and education. The paper did not address the complex issues of citizenship, repatriation or resettlement, which have been discussed at academic, practical, governmental, non-governmental and civil society levels for at least a decade. The paper addresses the refugees in an “as is where is” condition (and in the state that the first refugees have lived in since their arrival in Tamil Nadu). The paper has attempted to answer: what has worked for the refugees? What more can be done within the current constraints that exist?

The findings of this study indicate that both groups have been able to access various services based on humanitarian grounds, such as free housing, health care and education. Indeed, although numerous studies emphasize the unfavourable ways in which both Sri Lankan and Rohingya refugees have been treated in India (e.g. [Dasgupta and Demény, 2003](#); [George and Debbarna, 2011](#)), particularly while awaiting formal citizenship, the Government of Tamil Nadu has taken various measures to support them. Still, the study also indicates that both groups face various problems in securing their livelihood, particularly in relation to maintaining good health and accessing employment opportunities. Although housing is freely provided, particularly in the case of Rohingyas and Sri Lankan camp refugees, the conditions of these facilities leave much to be desired and are currently causing health problems. Similarly, despite free education for all youth, many participants complained that they were unable to use their qualifications, including university degrees, in appropriate jobs because of their refugee status. In that sense, most participants in this study aspire to better outcomes regarding their ability to work and secure their families’ living conditions.

Similarly, as indicated by other scholars (e.g. [Stöckmann, 2017](#)), some participants are frustrated and disappointed about not being able to obtain Indian citizenship, after having lived for a relatively long period in Tamil Nadu. The issues of Sri Lankan Tamils and Rohingyas are complicated by the fact that the GoI offers no guarantee to them to continue staying in India. The GoI Home Ministry’s 2018–2019 Annual Report (p. 244) explicitly states regarding Sri Lankan Tamil refugees that “[t]he ultimate objective is that they should be repatriated back to Sri Lanka. Relief is given pending such repatriation.”

Our study also indicates that many participants, despite their longing for better accommodation and work conditions, were grateful to the government for helping them thus

far. In offering such services, Tamil Nadu seems to have been more progressive than other Indian states. This is more obviously true for Rohingya refugees, who, studies show, have been denied basic public goods in many other places, such as e.g. Delhi, Jammu, Haryana and Rajasthan, and continue to struggle their way out of “sub-human” conditions (Amin, 2018). Prasad (2013) also stresses the fact that, due to a lack of nationwide Indian refugee regulation, including a transparent framework of rights, laws and policies, the treatment of refugees differs significantly from state to state.

Our study thus highlights that, through a series of minor policy changes that promote a certain degree of self-reliance, the government has created an ecosystem which allows the refugees to develop a sense of livelihood, both individually, for their families and in their communities. As the findings show, on education and health, the state of Tamil Nadu has created a congenial atmosphere for the refugees to stay by granting access to these services free of cost. The refugees are grateful for a roof over their head, even when housing is an area where many improvements can still be made. The refugees live in relative safety, and there have been no instance of a refugee versus local contest or fight in the recent past, according to the Tamil Nadu police [6]. While the refugees are grateful for the employment avenues in the state, they want these avenues to be formalized so that there is lesser exploitation. The Government of Tamil Nadu has taken into consideration the needs of the refugees too during both the first phase of COVID-19 in 2020 and the second phase in 2021 and has extended most of the benefits that was accorded to vulnerable citizens in the state (e.g. rations and monetary support).

There are some differences between Rohingya and Sri Lankan communities in how Tamil Nadu has approached them. The policy formulations were made for the Sri Lankan Tamils, and the Rohingyas have mostly benefitted from these, although Rohingya participants also articulated their need for a healthier and safer living environment, some of which arise from their currently inadequate housing facilities. Still, considering the historical and cultural differences between the groups, as well as the fact that Sri Lankan Tamils are considered “refugees”, whereas Rohingyas are “foreigners”, the facilities offered to both groups have led to relatively similar outcomes so far. Our study shows that, in the case of Tamil Nadu, although there is greater affinity with the identity of Sri Lankan refugees (see also e.g. Jones, 2012; George and Debbarma, 2011; Bentz and Goreau-Ponceaud, 2020), the outcomes regarding these basic aspects of support for integration are relatively uniform. It could be argued that, in a context where the Rohingya refugees are often susceptible to hostility from right-wing political bodies (Yhome, 2018) and fears among Muslim minorities have recently increased – particularly since the introduction of the 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) (Chapparban, 2020; Ahmed and Pathak, 2020) – the findings of this study are somewhat encouraging. The cost for the improvement in the lives of the refugees’ total to a mere US\$ 3.5 m a year for the Sri Lankan Tamils and just over US\$ 16,000 for the Rohingyas, as explained earlier.

This being said, although this paper focuses on the relative success of policies that help prepare a bare-minimum foundation for refugees in Tamil Nadu, both groups in this study also shared instances of discrimination in their lives, which should be considered with care. Discrimination, which is a major barrier to integration (Moreira and Bareninger, 2010), came up in this study in several ways, such as the teasing of Rohingya children for their (lack of) Tamil language skills or the limited mobility of both refugee groups in and outside the camps. With regards to work, refugees commonly did not always expect to be paid equal salary, and there have been instances of refugees being denied payment after completing a contract job of painting or fixing a plumbing issue. These biases faced by refugee groups in India are certainly debilitating and must continue to be addressed in future studies (see also Chapparban, 2020).

5.1 Strengths and limitations

The strengths of this qualitative study are the depth of the exploration and breadth of the stakeholders involved in the research. As this study included a variety of participants, over a

relatively long period of time, the conclusions reflected the prevailing situation in the study areas and were based on a process of effective triangulation. The study, which was conducted in situations where refugees are, for all practical purposes, corralled, also has the advantage of being based on direct interaction by the primary researcher with this otherwise barely accessible cohort. The third strength of the study is ability of the primary researcher to connect the ground-level realities with not only the policies that are in place but also to engage policymakers and present the thinking behind such policies.

In terms of limitations, the study might have been biased towards relatively optimistic outcomes, due to the engagement of the primary researcher in the camps and his connection to an organization which, for sometime, has been committed to providing a listening space and occasional physical support (e.g. offering a doctor to check the health conditions of the inhabitants, etc.) to refugee populations. The presence of such support and the way the primary researcher was embedded in that organization may have led the participants to present relatively positive accounts. This is a general epistemological concern in qualitative, particularly action-oriented, research in which the presence of an active listener itself may alter the reality of what is studied, and what sort of knowledge is produced (Oquist, 1978). With reference to the positionality of the researchers in this study, we acknowledge the subjectivities that are involved in any form of research (e.g. Bourke, 2014). As much as possible, we aimed to minimize biases through a process of consultation, opinion-seeking and rigorous fact-checking from other stakeholders, including official, multilateral and independent bodies working with the two groups, as well as using secondary data to validate our ideas.

6. Conclusion

The process of integrating a vulnerable and easily exploited refugee community into the local community was not the result of actions by the GoI, but rather of the state of Tamil Nadu. The state independently created benefits for the groups included in this study. It shows specifically that an addition of about 100 persons (average refugee population size when first housed in a community) into a semi-urban/rural setting, which have an average population of about 5,000, is relatively easy to manage and does not create animosity about these “outsiders”. This is probably even more true when welfare schemes and opportunities for employment are made available. Segregating the refugee community and sending them to 106 camps across Tamil Nadu, though primarily a security-related measure, has helped to prevent overcrowding of refugees in one place (such as in Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh) and has led to diverse opportunities. First, it was easier to house them (mostly in abandoned government quarters/buildings), allow them to attend local school (without crowding out locals) and use the local health facilities. This is a unique model where the cost to the state is negligible, but the benefits to the refugee community are significant. This case thus offers an example of what has been accomplished in a low-income setting for over three decades and might offer some lessons on how to resettle refugees without antagonizing the local population.

Notes

1. One in which 25,000 or more refugees from the same nationality have been in exile for five or more years in a given asylum country.
2. Pseudonyms are used throughout to maintain participants’ anonymity.
3. This order extended all concessions available to citizens to Sri Lankan Tamil refugees.
4. See DT Next newspaper for details: <https://www.dtnext.in/News/City/2020/10/08003706/1255210/This-NGO-bats-for-Lankan-refugee-women.vpf> (accessed May 26, 2021).

5. Interview with UNHCR officials, corroborated by the Department of School Education, Government of Tamil Nadu.
6. Interview with the Tamil Nadu Director General of Police.

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Further reading

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Corresponding author

Emma Emily de Wit can be contacted at: emmaemilydewit@gmail.com