

Relocation of internally displaced persons (IDPs) into the host communities in Anuradhapura District, Sri Lanka: Socio political and planning implications

2: Abstract:

Since 1980 in Sri Lanka as well as in other parts of the globe, displacement and resettlement has affected a large population, who had to leave their original villages and seek refuge in areas alien to them. The new areas of settlement were often different from their original settlements and villages, in terms of natural resource endowment, economic activities and culture, and hence had to adapt themselves to those new circumstances socially, culturally and physically.

After 1983- communal riots in Sri Lanka, the civil war wedged between the government forces and the LTTE, has caused many people living in the war-affected areas to flee away. The Tamils in particular, especially the affluent and those who had connections abroad took refuge in western countries, while the less affluent Tamils left for India. A second category of the Tamils moved away, within the country, to Colombo and lesser townships, or remained in the camps setup by the government in the borderline and war-affected districts. The Muslims who were displaced were either resettled in newly created settlements in districts such as Puttalam, or were living in camps put up by the government in the borderline districts.

The Sinhalese on the other hand did not move into camps or welfare centres, or moved in only temporarily until they found some land or house in the nearby areas, and subsequently moved into those houses and lands voluntarily. The majority of the Sinhalese took safe refuge in adjacent areas less affected by the war, which were closer to the original villages. This study deals with how the Sinhalese, who took refuge in adjacent areas, lived in there, in a situation of complete social destruction, economic breakdown, and cultural disharmony.

This study examined how the displacement process took place in this area among this category of voluntarily displaced people who comprise largely the Sinhalese. In many forms of displacements, such as those involving involuntary settlement following development programs, mass exodus of people and families took place from original

villages to new settlements. In the case of the Sinhalese in this area however, it appears that the process had been an individual, family-based initiative on a voluntary basis. It has its own character that differentiates it from any other form of displacement that has been documented.

Secondly, the study examined the integration process of these families in the new villages or settlements. What adaptive strategies and mechanisms were used in integration has been an important research question. Integration into the larger social matrix in situations of displacement is a challenge on the part of the displaced. Examination of how the displaced have adapted to the new environment, economic activities, social and cultural setting is important to understand. This includes identifying how individuals and families adjusted to the new economic activities in the area, production and marketing sectors, new neighbourhood structures, new social relationships and ritual and cultural practices.

Thirdly, the study documented the interface between the host and the displaced (settler), which is an often stated aspect in settlement studies of displaced people. Often the host and the settler are viewed as rivals, and a distance is created which works as a barrier for integration. In this particular case, the Sinhalese who have migrated to the adjacent villages of their original settlements are not completely alien to them. They had their relatives, who in the initial stage helped them in finding places for settlement. This situation is unique and different from most of the host community situations found in other displacement settings which makes it still more interesting to find out how this interface has evolved, what transpired afterwards and so on.

Finally, the study aimed at documenting the specific character of the displaced Sinhalese with reference to their society and culture, family life, relationships, and agricultural practices and other forms of livelihoods. It appears to be interesting to find out how the Sinhalese displaced in these villages form into such social groups, and maintain relationships because they do not seem to form extensive kinship groups within the settlement and often live in single families, and maintain relationships with a few relatives who live in faraway places. Thus, the various mechanisms employed by the displaced to establish their localised community diaspora, which in many ways different from how the community of the host families is examined.

The advent of the displaced people had changed the political order in the new areas, although this aspect has not been sufficiently dealt with in this study. The host community in the main, who, on the one hand criticize and run-down the self-esteem of the displaced, as intruders and *anathayo* or destitute, (in Tamil it says *Idam Peyarntha*¹) but on the other hand make use of the presence and predicament to gain political power in the wider society through nationalism, and anti Tamil sentiments. It is important to examine how the political system and the power structure had undergone changes and shaped by dominant ideologies of nationalism due to the presence of the displaced people in the area.

The study was carried out in three phases. First, in its formative stage in 1999, using popular anthropological methods, data were collected in a few families in detail, to understand the variable domains involved in the process. Thereafter in 2000, based on the variables identified through qualitative material, collected through unstructured interviews, and observations in the main, a questionnaire was developed to collect data from a large sample of displaced persons belonging to all ethnic groups, in six borderline districts in the war-affected areas. Finally a Sinhalese displaced community was selected in 2003/04 to carryout an intensive study as it is different from most of the displaced communities that have been documented. This research is drawn largely from the intensive study of a village area, but it described the character of displacement in Sri Lanka based on the findings from a formative study and a survey.

¹ Brun C, Local Citizens or Internally Displaced Persons? J of Refugee Studies, 2003, Vol. 16, N0.4