Experiences of Sri Lankan Tamils Displaced to Colombo: Three Narratives

Diotima Chattoraj

Institute of Development Studies (IEE), Ruhr University Bochum, Germany

Abstract

This paper focuses on the experiences, challenges and aspirations of three middle-aged Sri Lankan Tamil Displaced persons in Colombo who are reluctant to return to their places of origin in the northern provinces of Sri Lanka due to several personal and professional reasons. The paper aims to analyze the diverse experiences they faced due to displacement. It also uncovers strategies used to cope in a new city and portrays the differences they experience between the places they came from and the city they now live in. The empirical point of departure has been drawn from the stories of three middle-aged Sri Lankan Tamil Displaced persons in Colombo. The paper argues that they have adapted to their place of displacement and view the city as a more suitable place to live compared to their places of origin. In addition, they also identify displacement as a blessing in disguise as they believe integrating in Colombo helped them to aspire to a better future which would have never been possible in their places of origin. Thus, this paper provides a picture of how they have reconstructed their lives in Colombo and how this has led them to reconsider and renegotiate their relationship to their 'homes'.

Keywords: Sri Lanka, internally displaced persons, Colombo, Tamil

T he ethnic violence of 1983 in Sri Lanka forced Sri Lankan Tamils to flee their homes, leave their material belongings, and seek refuge in different parts of the country or abroad. A substantial number of Tamils migrated to the capital city of Colombo to escape the miseries of the ongoing war and many also viewed the city as an easy transit out of the country. Those who ended up staying in the city experienced difficulties during their initial days in adapting to the new environment and new culture as Colombo is a multi-ethnic society comprising Sinhalese, Tamils, Tamil-speaking Muslims, Burghers, Malays, Borahs and foreigners. Eventually, they managed to survive in their new local and succeeded in establishing themselves in the city. The children of these migrants, who were already born but young at the time of displacement, in the beginning experienced and isolation in the new city, but slowly became accustomed to both the new place and its people; many grew up to be successful. Brought up amidst the city life, these former youngsters, who were in their mid-30s at the time of this research, are reluctant to return to the smaller town life of the places from which they, with their families, were originally displaced.

This paper seeks to raise several points which, I argue, are important when it comes to developing a deeper understanding of now middle-aged[1] migrants' relationship to their places of origin and places of displacement. The paper is based on empirical data collected in January 2013 in Colombo. The focus is on narrative interviews with middle-aged Internally Displaced People (IDPs) who decided to settle in Colombo. Among the eleven middle-aged persons interviewed, this article discusses three of the narratives.[2] In the following paragraphs, I will provide a picture of how the interviewees have reconstructed their lives in Colombo and how they identify displacement as a blessing in disguise as they believe integrating in the capital city helped them to aspire to a better future which would have never been possible in Jaffna, Velanai or Mannar, their places of origin. This has also led them to reconsider and renegotiate their relationship to their 'homes'.

These three different case studies each demonstrates the particular reasons why the interviewees are unwilling to return to their places of origin in the Northern provinces. Ideally, 'home' is emotional attachment to territory, and 'return' means a 'feeling of relief from uncertainty, insecurity, fear and terror' (Chattoraj & Gerharz, forthcoming). But each interviewee felt a deep sense of disappointment in regards to returning, which urged them to reconsider and renegotiate their relationship with Colombo. Memory, as well as future perspectives and aspirations determine the ways in which people relate to their homes. This material shows that for the displaced, integrating in Colombo is a necessary step in order to develop the capacity to formulate perspectives and aspirations and to envision the future.

The paper is structured as follows: First, it will introduce the notions of home and belonging and reveal how I conceptualize the relationship between the two concepts. Second, the Sri Lankan context in general will be introduced along with an overview of the war, displacement and the post-war days in Sri Lanka. This section will also introduce Colombo, the site in which this research has been conducted. In the third part, the narratives of three middle-aged IDPs are reconstructed. By revealing their stories, I attempt to decipher not only their emotional stances and grievances, but also highlight the various and multifaceted ways in which they renegotiate their relation to their places of origin. The conclusion discusses the findings.

Notions of home and belonging

The notion of belonging is both a processual and relational perspective (see Chattoraj & Gerharz, forthcoming). The notion relates to collective positions. In contrast to 'identity', it denotes not only formal membership and labeling, but highlights imagined and narrated constructions related to sameness, unity and togetherness (Pfaff-Czarnecka & Toffin, 2011). Apart from performances of commonality, it highlights the ways in which people relate to each other in terms of 'mutuality' as well as their material and immaterial attachments. The notion of belonging thus enables differentiation between the ways in which people themselves construct belonging to collectives, and also to places (such as cities), and the

---

[1] People in between the age of 35-45 are considered as middle-aged and the target group of this article fall in this range at the time of interviews in 2013.
[2] Interviews held during fieldwork in January 2013 in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

ways in which their individual and collective quest for belonging may be denied them. Membership, in particular, is a social property which depends heavily on the ability and willingness of groups to admit a person. Drawing on Pfaff-Czarnecka's (2013, p.13) differentiation between individual's relations to a collective from collective belonging, this paper concentrates on the individual's quest for belonging, e.g. "belonging to" rather than "belonging together". However, it is acknowledged that the dimensions of belonging intersect in many ways. Therefore, the three dimensions that Pfaff-Czarnecka (2013) identifies as ways in which people construct their belonging are useful to this analysis. The first dimension of 'commonality' refers to collective processes but also grasps how individuals feel and embody 'belonging' in collective constellations. The second one, 'mutuality', refers to how individuals acknowledge one another and how this results in compliance to rules ordering social relations (2013, p. 16). More than just rules and obligations, 'mutuality' also means loyalty and commitment – and thus is highly emotional. The third dimension, 'attachment' is the one emphasised in the subsequent sections of this paper. 'Attachment', refers to a deep and enduring emotional bond connecting individuals across time and space (Ainsworth, 1973; Bowlby, 1969), it links people to material and immaterial worlds (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2013, p. 17) making them belong to spaces and sites, to natural objects, landscapes, climate, and to material possessions (Appadurai, 1986; hooks, 2009). These kinds of attachments are produced through embodiment, for instance, the resonances of smells and tastes, as well as citizenship and property rights (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2013: p. 17). It is not only the place as such, but the locality in the sense of a point of social and emotional reference that provides the basis for attachment.

As with cases involving refuge conditions, in contexts marked by internal displacement attachments to "home" bear a particular quality. People had been forced to move, they had to abandon their homes as well as their material belongings. This experience, along with loss in social terms, characterizes their state of being. Most displaced people long for their homes, and returning home means to make a fresh start.

However, in the case of this study, making 'a fresh start' becomes the main reason for the middle-aged interviewees to stay and integrate within Colombo as they have already been able to acquire a better social status while being displaced. For them, returning to their places of origin means to start a new life which will again be accompanied with all the struggles and hardships that they went through while settling in Colombo.

In order to better locate these IDPs in Colombo, I will now summarize the historical context of displacement and trace the major developments which have taken place in Sri Lanka more recently.

War and Displacement

Migration in Sri Lanka dates back to the days of British colonial rule during the first half of the 20th century. The educated and professional elites, mainly the Jaffna Tamils, temporarily migrated for education and employment either to the capital city of Colombo or other southern places in the country as well as to the West (Sriskandarajah 2002, p. 289). However, with the onset of the civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

(LTTE)[3] and the Government of Sri Lanka in 1983, migration of Northern Tamils was curtailed. They were forced to flee their townships and the rate of displacement increased exponentially over the years. This outbreak of displacement became a multi-religious migration when several thousand Muslims were evicted in 1990, and became multi-dimensional when LTTE drove out the Northern Tamils in 1995. With the defeat of the LTTE in May 2009, the war came to an end. The LTTE had claimed to fight for the self-determination of the Sri Lankan Tamils and had involved the military in ever intensifying battles over the territories in the North and East which were considered Tamil Eelam (homeland). In total, well over 100,000 people lost their lives and many more were displaced. Thousands migrated to the capital city of Colombo, and more than a million left the island and sought refuge in Europe, Canada, Australia, India and other places. According to the Ministry of Resettlement,[4] by October 31, 2017, 891,125 IDPs have been resettled in the North-Eastern provinces. A further 40,938 IDPs are yet to be resettled. Among them, 2,998 persons are still living at welfare centers in Jaffna while the rest are staying with relatives and friends.

Since 2009, Sri Lanka has been depicted as a 'post-war' society (Herath, 2012), although there is a massive controversy in academic and policy discourses regarding this issue. Discontent remains a strong issue, especially when it comes to reconciliation and transitional justice. Expressions of this discontent include accusation that rather than trying to find a way to lay a foundation for the accommodation of minority interests within the democratic system the government has ignored the Tamil quest for truth. Also of concern is that the military still continues to control large parts of the former war zones which ensures not only law and order but contributes to indignant feelings among the Tamil population especially in the Northern region. The denial of judicial truth thus adds to the economic, social and psychological costs of the conflict. Livelihood, particularly for the poor in these areas, has been devastated and unexploded land-mines are a danger to many of the returnees. Although economic reconstruction initiatives have been fostered, feelings of having been left out of the processes are widespread. Many IDPs, still housed in the welfare centres throughout the North, claim that they have not received proper assistance from the Government. Simultaneously, more affluent IDPs have managed to settle down and integrate within the places of displacement, which include Colombo. While this may be among the main reasons for which most of these IDPs refuse to return to their homes in Jaffna and other origin towns, there is also still a high level of mistrust, which, as Thiranagama (2013) amply demonstrates, is related to the traumatic experience of being expelled.

Therefore, this paper focuses on the experiences, challenges and aspirations of the middle-aged Sri Lankan Tamil Displaced persons in Colombo who are reluctant to return to their places of origin in the Northern provinces due to several personal and professional reasons. Based on the empirical data, I aim to analyze the diverse experiences the IDPs have faced due to displacement. The analysis also uncovers the strategies used to cope with in a new

---

[3] The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam was formed in 1975 by Vellupillai Prabhakaran with the aim of seeking an autonomous region for the Tamils in the North-Eastern part of Sri Lanka through armed struggle.
[4] http://resettlementmin.gov.lk/site/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5&Itemid=21&lang=en

city and portrays the differences the interviewees experienced between the places they come from and the city they live in. Investigating the case of the Tamil IDPs is particularly insightful because in their experience "home" is a place of future aspirations and relates to a specific place, Colombo.

Located on the west coast of the island, the tropical city of Colombo is the commercial, industrial and cultural capital of Sri Lanka. The paper argues that the IDPs have adapted to this city of displacement and view it as a more suitable place to live compared to their places of origin. The following provides a picture of how they have reconstructed their lives in Colombo and how this has led them to reconsider and renegotiate their relationship to their 'homes'. I reconstruct the stories of three IDPs, describing and analysing their cases. For security reasons I have used pseudonyms for all interviewees.

The journey from attachment to detachment: 'home' becoming a 'broken dream'

"*Home to me is Colombo as we have been living here for 22 years now*".

Eshwari Parthasarathy is a 33-year-old Lecturer at a university in Colombo. She spent her early years in Jaffna and has been living in Colombo since she was a teenager. The attachment effect – where the longer the residence, the stronger the attachment – is prominent in Eshwari's case, where due to the long duration of her stay, she considers Colombo her home. She also tries to hide her 'Tamil' identity by not wearing "*the pottu, which is a marker of our Tamilness. This is because, I am afraid that by labeling myself as a Tamil I might unnecessarily antagonize the other group of people*".

In many cultures, a woman's appearance, and the way she dresses serves as a symbol of the community or nation to which she belongs. Hindu girls and women are expected to wear the 'pottu' as has been observed by Schrijvers (1999, p. 312). However, in Sri Lanka, Sinhalese and Muslim women do not have the tradition of wearing the pottu. Therefore, the pottu has become an 'ethnic marker' in Tamil culture and acts as a primary means of identifying a Tamil woman (Schrijvers, 1999, p. 312)*.* At present, for security reasons, Sri Lankan Tamil women, especially in Colombo, are in a dilemma whether to reveal their Tamilness by wearing the pottu. For some Tamil women, like Eshwari, this is a fundamental and emotional issue; for others, it is a pragmatic question.

Eshwari's current attachment to Colombo – despite such everyday emotional negotiations such as dress codes – was not always the same throughout her life. Her childhood memories of Jaffna are filled with a feeling of contentment, "*I really loved to be in Jaffna during those days. I fell in love with the quietness... I used to ride bicycles and roam around without any fear. Our 'home' was the best thing we had. We felt like staying so close to nature there. But things started changing as the military and LTTE started interfering in our daily lives. I started to hate Jaffna slowly as it became quite hard to stay there".* According to her, having freedom and living close to nature are important aspects to have in one's childhood. Interestingly, at present, she does not regret the fact that she lives in a capital city and not living 'close to nature'. Indeed, the feelings of nature associate with her home town were surpassed as she witnessed the town turn into a violent place with the onset of the

fighting between the Sri Lankan military and the LTTE which also suddenly took away her cherished sense of freedom.

After coming to Colombo, and with the passing of time, her feelings of attachment to Jaffna grew distant: *"In the 90s, I really wanted to return, but as days passed my feelings also changed. In 2011, I went to see my 'old home' after 21 years and got really upset to see it, once constructed by my parents, has now turned into a broken dream".* However, she has the desire to renovate her 'home' in Jaffna, because it is the last symbol of her father. In a relaxed tone, she stated that she does not mind going to Jaffna during holidays to feel at ease, but at no point in time she will return to settle there. *"If the government at any point in time asks us to leave and return to Jaffna, then I would fight, as being a citizen of the country I have the right to live anywhere within the island".*

Her decision to stay in Colombo is mostly influenced by the uncertainties that Jaffna presently offers. *"The last couple of decades we are used to live a different life in Colombo than Jaffna. Also in Jaffna, all the facilities, that I enjoy now, are absent"*. Eshwari is socio-economically well-settled in Colombo with her family. If she returns she has to start afresh, which she is unwilling to do. Her fear of not gaining an appropriate job in Jaffna, which she has in Colombo, is another of her concerns. She doubts there would be any jobs for her at all due to increased unemployment. It took several years of 'hard work' for her to achieve her current position which she does not want to lose with a return to 'home'. Her aspirations for a good life cannot be fulfilled in Jaffna. Moreover, all her friends and relatives have either migrated abroad or are in Colombo. Without them, home in Jaffna is merely a place, which, for Eshwari, fails to provide her with the feeling of being 'at-home'. This kind of thinking about home has already been articulated by Mesch and Manor (1998) where they state that attachment to community enhances with the increasing number of close friends and neighbors. Eshwari's long stay in Colombo and her professional job has changed her lifestyle. She has become accustomed to the urban life which is in stark contrast from the life in Jaffna; it would be difficult to transition back. She states that any attachment she felt to her home in Jaffna is 'past'; she considers it to be the place where her parents lived decades ago and which has had no contribution in the formation of her present identity. In this regard, Eshwari's situation is similar to the assumption made by Wiborg (2004), that in today's world, with the onset of globalisation and mobility, homes in rural areas are gradually losing their importance as they fail to create any impact on individual's lives in the formation of their identity.

The journey from rural to urban life: aspirations to a better future

"I am from Velanai, a village nearby the Jaffna town... It was a pure, honest and free village life, a totally different life. I was so close to nature as if we were friends...".

Rajesh,[5] a 37-year-old unmarried Tamil-Hindu man, shared his memories about his 'former home' in Velanai, a village six kilometers from Jaffna town. He grew up amidst paddy and tobacco fields, playing with his pets, eating home-cooked foods and leading a life centered in

---

[5] Rajesh was interviewed in his apartment in Colombo on January 19, 2013. He is presently employed as an accountant in one of the leading NGOs based in Colombo.

the village. His adolescent upbringing created a strong sense of belonging in which nature was the central element that linked him to his ancestral home. In addition, his parents had built their home with so much love, affection and care that the home has become an object of longing. As reflected in Pfaff-Czarnecka's writings (2013, p. 17), Rajesh's attachment to his village and the ownership of his home gives a sense of belonging 'to spaces and sites, to natural objects, landscapes, climate and to material possessions'.

"But with the bloody civil war, things started changing."

Life changed in the year 1987, when Rajesh and his family were forced to leave their home. The following nine years they faced continuous displacements and suffering which finally came to an end in 1996 when they reached Colombo and gradually settled down. Rajesh's initial days in Colombo resemble the hardships evidenced by others of his age whom I have interviewed. However, with the passage of time, he became well-aquainted with city life, he finished his studies and gained a job. His job requires frequent travel to many places in Sri Lanka, including Jaffna. This has led him to witness the changes that have taken place in his hometown in the post-war era, especially with the opening of the A9 road,[6] which connects Jaffna to the rest of the country. As Rajesh states, "*In my times, Jaffna used to be a safe and closed place where people respect each other and are unaware of any evil deeds. Now, people are looking for scope to fight with each other, no one trusts anyone in his surroundings. With the opening of the A9 road in 2009, technological advancement has opened room for heinous crimes like drug and alcohol addictions, watching illegal websites, raping and murdering innocent teenagers and so on*".

The opening of the A9 road was referred to by Gerharz as 'opening to the world' (2008, p. 173) because it allowed Jaffna to become integrated into national and global economic exchange networks (Gerharz, 2010, p. 157). Until then, Jaffna had remained 'isolated in terms of infrastructure' and 'inaccessible' to the world (Gerharz, 2008, p.173). Supermarkets, previously unavailable in Jaffna, emerged and started selling luxury and branded goods. This created a huge change, not only in the economic sector, but also in local consumption patterns. The town regained a connection to global mediascapes (see Appadurai, 1996, p. 33). Mobile phones, satellite TV and Internet cafes became common all over town. This helped the Jaffna Tamils to maintain easy contact with their relatives abroad. Also, they are now able to stay up to date with happenings around the world. In addition, there has been a massive movement of people from the Southern parts of the country who wanted to visit the devastated peninsula. While Jaffna, on one hand, began to develop as a city, on the other hand, the innocence, trust and honesty among the local population faded. Rajesh's growing concern is expressed when he opines that the town has become 'technologically developed', but unfortunately this development has proved to be 'fatal for the young generations' because they are getting involved in crime.

"*I do not want to return. My life's changed now.... Displacement has become a blessing to me...*".

---

[6] http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/a9-highway-linking-jaffna-being-opened/article3050374.ece accessed on October 16, 2017.

Colombo has brought transformations in Rajesh's life. Now, in his personal perception of 'survival', he needs 'air conditioning, refrigerator, television, washing-machine, computer and other electronic gadgets'. In Colombo he is earning a satisfying salary and leading a 'luxurious life'. Rajesh is well aware that to maintain his life-style he needs to sustain a certain income which can only be possible if he remains in the capital. Thus, he shifts "from a subsistence system based on the satisfaction of relatively fixed needs, to one based on the maximization of income" (see Nathan, 2005, p. 37). Rajesh is well aware that to maximize his income, he has to settle down in Colombo, as his village of Velanai lacks the possibilities for his developmental aspirations. He considers himself lucky to have been displaced to Colombo, a sophisticated urban area, and perceives displacement as a 'blessing'. This relationship between rural and urban lifestyles, as observed by Wiborg (2004), forms a point of departure for investigating social distinctions. The value of having a rural background in an urban context can be analyzed in the context of a cultural hierarchy where the urban displays a hegemonic position, even if the countryside retains an important position as a basis for central cultural values (Creed and Ching 1997, cited in Wiborg, 2004, p.431). This echoes the previous story of Eshwari where the stability of today's life restricts her from returning and thus inviting uncertainties. In contrast to Eshwari, who has no family or friends in Jaffna, Rajesh could have opted to return home with his mother, who has lived alone in Velanai since 2011 as their relatives and neighbors have all migrated either to Colombo or abroad. According to Rajesh, security is a big concern there, so it can be assumed that his mother is not safe. However, he is so determined to stay in Colombo that his mother's return to Jaffna could not influence his decision. His feeling towards his 'home' has changed over these years from attachment to detachment. His childhood memories in Velanai were entirely positive, filled with his family and pets, but after he left, he distanced himself from his home and everything it represented. The distance in time and space has enabled him to differentiate the positive and negative experiences from childhood by cultivating feelings of belonging to his home represented by people and nature. Urban life-style has greatly influenced his self-image and identity and has distanced him from his rural life-style. Therefore, here, he presents a negative image of his hometown and does not feel like associating himself with either Velanai or with its people.

Place of origin versus place of displacement: aspirations to a better future

Thirty-one-year-old, Sihaan[7] is neither involved in his ancestral home in Mannar nor is he influenced by his birthplace values and practices. He conceptualizes home as a place surrounded by family and friends, along with the economic and educational benefits necessary to lead a happy and decent life. Thus Sihaan's feelings about home are similar to Mallett's (2004, p. 74) invocation of home: "Without the family a home is only a house"*.* To Sihaan*, "Mannar is my birthplace but returning and resettling there is a big challenge now because of very less job opportunities and also education has not yet reached up to that level as we have in Colombo. Moreover, I was eight years old when we came here, so my memory of Mannar is very less. Also most of our relatives and friends are well settled in*

---

[7] Sihaan is a higher ranked officer in one of the renowned Telecommunication sector in Sri Lanka. The interview was conducted at his home in Colombo in January 2013.

Colombo and are also reluctant to return to Mannar. We hardly have anyone there. So no point in returning...".

Though he believes Mannar to be his birthplace, his home is in Colombo where he has been brought up and has established himself. His decision to stay in Colombo is mostly influenced by the economic benefits which he believes are not available to him in Mannar. Educational opportunities also play a pivotal role in influencing his decision-making process. Simultaneously, time is a crucial factor which has influenced his decision. Similar to Rajesh, and Eshwari, the rationale behind Sihaan's reluctance to return is his aspirations to a 'good life about health and happiness' which is only available in Colombo (Appadurai, 2004, p. 10). Sihaan's meaning of home has changed because of the displacement he experienced. This is analogous to the argument of Brun (2001) regarding the Northern Muslims of Sri Lanka who were displaced to Puttalam. Displacement effects individuals in subtle ways which often leads to changes in the meaning of home.

Another reason Sihaan presents for his reasoning not to return, is that his close kin do not live in Mannar anymore; most of them are well-settled in Colombo. So to decide to return, besides focusing on his personal reasons, it is also necessary to include his everyday interactions with his friends, family and others. This has been observed by Azmi (2012, p. 181) in discussion about the second generation Muslim IDPs in Sri Lanka in post-war resettlement. These meanings are constantly being evaluated and redefined in the light of changing social and physical relationships with home. For Sihaan, one of the main reasons to consider Colombo as his home is the fact that his family and friends are also living there.

Additionally, the feeling of being a stranger, which he faced when he drove to his birthplace to get a glimpse of their home and neighborhood after the end of the war, left him with negative feelings about his place of origin. *"In 2009, I alone drove to Mannar for the first time after 1990 and the first question I encountered was Why are you here? I was really astonished hearing this as Mannar is my hometown, my birthplace, I have the right to come... I have lost my identity in Mannar, now I am a stranger to them so they ask me all kinds of rubbish questions...".*

As soon as he reached the town, his identity was questioned. None of the persons whom he had previously known were there. Everyone was unknown to him and as they also did not know him, he was asked about his identity and the reason for his visit. During the war, most of his neighborhood had either shifted to Colombo or to other parts of the country. Subsequently, most of their homes have been occupied by Tamils displaced from the North in 1995. This identity problem strongly influenced Sihaan's decision to not to return to Mannar. Whenever he thinks of his home in Mannar, he remembers his family, friends and neighborhood. Unfortunately everybody in his ancestral home has become a stranger to him. Previous neighbours he could have recognised have also become strangers to the town. Former relationships in and of the town, magnified in his imagination, had changed over time and were unmatched by the experience of his visit. Sihaan was disappointed that relationships were "*not what they used to be*". This also means that he would not be enjoying his family's former status as they are 'new' to the present occupants of the town. Therefore, his first visit, which was supposed to be the first physical and emotional connection with his place of origin, a meeting of past and present, of imaginations about his *home* and the reality

of the present, turned out be disappointing and painful. A complexity of feelings arose for him when he faced comments on entering the town: "*…you are a stranger to us*".

If at any point of time, Sihaan manages to get his home back from the government, then he would visit, but only during vacations or special occasions. His dissatisfied first visit shattered his perception of 'home' and he continues to view Colombo as his *home*. Colombo became the sole option of a place to call home, and Sihaan applied for naturalisation after his return from his first visit to Mannar as he realized that he did not wish ever to return there. This visit also gave him the scope to examine the aspects of life he would have if he returned in terms of his career, which would be very uncertain as there is nothing in Mannar to compare to his present job.

Concluding remarks

This paper explores the experiences of three middle-aged Tamil IDPs in Colombo who share similar experiences of displacement at a young age. After staying in Colombo for more than two decades and getting accustomed to city life, none of them are willing to return to their town or rural places of origin. Colombo has grown up as a city which has created space for people like Eshwari, Rajesh and Sihaan. Although 'Home' is considered an emotional attachment to territory, while 'return' means a 'feeling of relief from uncertainty, insecurity, fear and terror', this paper demonstrates that the interviewees have a contrasting view of the notion of 'return'. They identify displacement as a blessing in disguise. They believe integrating into Colombo paved their way to aspire for a better future. This has also led them to reconsider and renegotiate their attachment to their 'homes'.

I argue that the 'attachment to home' that implies a 'positive affective bond' where an individual must maintain closeness to a specific place alters with time, place, and priority. The interviewees discussed here have practically no attachment to their places of origin, and thus do not plan to return. Each one of them has her or his own tale to tell regarding their displacement; nevertheless, when it comes to their decision not to return, all of them share the commonality of having integrated into the city. They have adapted themselves to the city and have asserted their own individual attachments. Post-war return is viewed as a 'new uprooting' because they would have to build up a life in an environment which was once familiar but has now turned into a strange place. They are now happy to be 'living in the city' and are not likely to leave their secure life to return to a rural life where livelihood opportunities are confined to either agriculture, labor work or fishing. Moreover, if they return, they would have to assimilate themselves with a community of people who stayed back and have for decades suffered immensely due to the war that deprived them of basic facilities and economic opportunities. Therefore, there remains a high possibility that the middle-aged returnees would not be welcomed by the locals, as they could be perceived as acquiring urban values which are totally different from the town values of Jaffna, or the village values of Velanai and Mannar. This, in turn, could lead to an experience of 'social exclusion' which would affect their daily lives and present further discrimination and isolation from the locals. The experiences they gained in their present locale of Colombo have influenced the meaning of their 'homes' which plays a vital role in their decision to (not)return. They have integrated socially and economically, and thus the value and importance of their 'past homes' has gradually decreased with time. The city life-style has greatly influenced their self-image and identity and has distanced them from their original more rural and conservative

lifestyle. They now hold a tarnished image of their hometown and do not feel like associating with either their places of origin or with the people who live there. What they were attached to in the 1990s had become detachment by 2013.

Therefore, I argue that the meaning of 'home', and attachment to it, changes with time and priorities, making the concept more fragile and an object of negotiation and reflexivity. In today's globalised world 'traditional homes' are losing their importance as people are more likely to be in places which offer them a 'better future' rather than remaining attached to emotions. In this regard, displacement has been viewed as a blessing by the three middle-aged Tamils displaced to Colombo.

References

Ainsworth, M.D.S. (1979). Infant-Mother Attachment. *American Psychologist, 34*(10), 932-937.

Appadurai, A. (1986). *The Social Life of Things.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization.* Minneapolis & London: Minnesota University Press.

Appadurai, A. (2004). *The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition,* In Rao, V. and Walton, M. (eds.), *Culture and Public Action.* (pp. 59-84). California: Stanford University Press.

Azmi, F. (2012). To Go or Not to Go : Struggle for Belonging among Second Generation Muslim IDPs in Kalpitiya in Puttalam District in the Context of Post-War Resettlement. In Herath, D. & Silva, K.T. (eds.), *Healing the Wounds: Rebuilding Sri Lanka After the War.* (pp. 167-192), ICES, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and Loss.* Vol. 1. New York, NY: Random House.

Brun, C. (2001). Reterritorilizing the Relationship between People and Place in Refugee Studies. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography, 83*(1), 15-25.

Chattoraj, D. & Gerharz E., Difficult Return: Muslims' Ambivalent Attachments to Jaffna in Post-Conflict Sri Lanka, (forthcoming).

Creed, G.W. & Ching, B. (1997). Recognizing Rusticity. Identity and the Power of Place. In Ching, B. and Creed, G.W. (eds.), *Knowing your Place. Rural Identity and Cultural Hierarchy.* (pp. 1-38), London: Routledge.

Gerharz, E. (2008). Opening to the World: Translocal Post-War reconstruction in Northern Sri Lanka. In Anghel, R.G., Gerharz, E., Rescher, G. & Salzbrunn, M. (eds.), *The Making of World Society: Perspectives from Transnational Research.* Bielefeld, Germany: Bielefeld transcript.

Gerharz, E. (2010). When Migrants Travel Back Home: Changing Identities in Northern Sri Lanka After the Ceasefire of 2002. *Mobilities, 5*(1), 147-165.

Herath, D. (2012). Wounded Society: Social Wounds of the War and the Breakup of Community Social Structures in Northern Sri Lanka. In Herath, D. & Silva, K.T. (eds.), *Healing the Wounds: Rebuilding Sri Lanka after the war.* (pp. 58-95), ICES, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

hooks, b. (2009). *Belonging: A Culture of Place.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Mallett, S. (2004). Understanding Home: A Critical Review of the Literature. *Sociological Review, 52*(1), 62-89.

Mesch, G. S., & Manor, O. (1998). Social ties, environmental perception, and local attachment. *Environment and behavior, 30*(4), 504-519.

Nathan, D. (2005). Capabilities and aspirations. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 36-40.

Pfaff-Czarnecka, J. (2013). *Multiple Belonging and the Challenges to Biographic Navigation.* MMG Working Paper 13-05.

Pfaff-Czarnecka, J. & Toffin, G. (2011). Introduction: Belonging and Multiple Attachments in Contemporary Himalyan Societies. In Pfaff-Czarnecka J. & G. Toffin (eds.) *The Politics of Belonging in the Himalayas: Local Attachments and Boundary Dynamics* (pp. 11-38). New Delhi: Sage.

Schrijvers, J. (1999). Fighters, Victims and Survivors: Constructions of Ethnicity, Gender and Refugeeness among Tamils in Sri Lanka. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *12*(3), 307-333.

Sriskandarajah, D. (2002). The Migration–Development Nexus: Sri Lanka Case Study. *International Migration*, *40*(5), 283-307.

Thiranagama, S. (2013). The Self at a Time of War in Northern Sri Lanka. *Journal of Historical Sociology, 26*(1), 19-40.

Wiborg, A. (2004). Place, Nature and Migration: Students' Attachment to their Rural Home Places. *Sociologia Ruralis*, *44*(4), 416-432.