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Administrative inclusion without legal incorporation among Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India

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Abstract

This paper examines the conditions of prolonged displacement and legal ambiguity experienced by Sri Lankan Tamil refugees residing in the Puzhal camp in Chennai, India. Drawing on mixed-method data collected through household surveys ($N=30$), semi-structured interviews, and field observations, the study analyses how administrative inclusion without substantive legal incorporation reproduces long-term precarity. Despite decades of residence in India, refugees continue to face significant barriers in accessing welfare schemes, formal employment, higher education, and political rights due to their ambiguous legal status. Quantitative patterns from KoboToolbox data, combined with qualitative narratives, reveal persistent challenges in documentation renewal, livelihood insecurity, and constrained future aspirations. The findings contribute to wider debates on statelessness, postcolonial citizenship and post-war Sri Lankan Tamil displacement by highlighting how administrative exclusion shapes everyday life. The study emphasises the need for rights-based policy reforms that address structural vulnerabilities rather than temporary relief-based mechanisms.

Keywords Statelessness, Sri Lankan Tamil refugees, Puzhal camp, Bureaucratic exclusion, Forced migration

1 Introduction

The Sri Lankan Civil War (1983–2009) initiated one of the longest displacement movements in South Asia, which had mass displacement of Tamil civilians to seek shelter as refugees across borders. A major destination for Sri Lankan Tamil refugees had been Mandapam, a town in Tamil Nadu, where the Sri Lankan Tamil community sought a better future from the people of Tamil Nadu based on historical and cultural ties. However, this connection has not resulted in long-term security. Tamil Sri Lankan migrants remain in legal limbo even after it was the decade the war ended. They are relying on temporary documentation and state welfare programs that do not offer lasting solutions. Their livelihood are impacted by uncertainty in getting a legal tag from the state. Their citizenship path and the absence of a national refugee protection framework keep them



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in a dilemma [6]. This brings the issue of identity to these refugees and codifies them into one legal tag.

A major setback in the refugee problem within the Indian state is the lack of law. India is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention [16]. This absence of a domestic refugee law relates to the ruckus surrounding the formation and implementation of policies for these refugees between the centre and state governments. Similarly, in the case of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees, who are sympathised with by the state-level government when it comes to the welfare schemes and basic rights. Which basically means that the Tamil Sri Lankan migrants are governed by fragmented state-level policies rather than by nationally codified rights. These administrative setups create a form of conditional belonging, where access to education, employment, and mobility remains limited. During the research, further discussed in the paper, Bureaucratic exclusion of certain policies limits Tamil refugees to stay in limited Camp-based living, a lack of public access, the absence of legal status, and restrictions on work or settlement outside the Tamil Nadu state emerge as major highlights of the study. This put these refugee communities into an identity crisis [4]. Such dynamics make Tamil refugees both visible as a recognised population and invisible within formal citizenship structures.

Based on this background, this study focuses on analysing socio-political structures that create marginalisation for Tamil Sri Lankan refugees while also highlighting the resilience and agency strategies they employ to navigate these challenges. By contextualising these experiences within broader debates on statelessness, border governance, and postcolonial citizenship, the study deepens understanding of the long-term effects of displacement and the unfulfilled promises of post-war rehabilitation. In addition, the study seeks to contribute to ongoing policy discussions on refugee welfare, legal identity, documentation access, and an inclusive governance framework relevant to the protracted refugee population in South Asia.

2 Statelessness, displacement & marginalization in existing research

The Tamil Sri Lankan refugees in India and their experiences intersect with several major strands of scholarship, including statelessness, citizenship, displacement studies, and postcolonial border governance. These theoretical perspectives provide an important framework for understanding how long-term displacement shapes rights, identity, and belonging outside formal citizenship structures.

Statelessness is a key vital basis of theoretical discussions. Hanna Arendt's [2] framing of statelessness as the loss of the 'right to have rights' highlights the vulnerability of individuals who exist outside recognised national membership. According to Arendt [2], the absence of citizenship is not merely a legal void but a condition that exposes people to bureaucratic domination and exclusion. Furthermore, Giorgio Agamben's [1] work describes this through the notion of the camp, which works as a political space where normal legal protections are suspended. Homo Sacer, Agamben, [1] also argues that the camp institutionalises a state of exception, reducing individuals to "bare life" governed through administrative control rather than rights-based guarantees. Sadiq [12] demonstrates that the absence of secure citizenship documents creates an obstacle for intergenerational statelessness, particularly in South Asian communities, reinforcing the ambiguity for reproducing marginality over time. Conceptual understandings resonate

firmly in the context of Tamil refugee camps in India, where Sri Lankan Tamil refugees continue to live in temporary, state-regulatory spaces that have an uncertain future.

Existing scholarship on Tamil displacement and diaspora politics further highlights the socio-political and historical dimensions of post-war mobility. Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake's [11] work emphasises the gendered and political dimensions of post-war displacement, providing how unresolved ethnic war and militarisation in Sri Lanka continue to affect Tamil mobility and aspirations even after the war. Likewise, D. Sris-kandarajah's [14] analysis of diaspora identity explores how memory, loss and political imagination shape Tamil transnational networks. These insights highlight the prolonged effects of conflict-induced migration and illustrate how Tamil communities negotiate their identity and sense of belonging across the border state.

Additionally, analytical lenses offer a Postcolonial and critical border studies. A. Mbembe's [8] concept of necropolitics highlights the unequal distribution of vulnerability and the state's power to regulate life conditions. However, developed in a different context, Mbembe's argument helps explain how the refugee population experiences constrained autonomy when their access to services, movement, and future pathways is determined by administrative power. Boaventura de Sousa Santos concept of "Epistemologies of the South" further shifts attention toward the agency, knowledge systems and resilience practices emerging within marginalised communities [13]. There is a shift from a state-centric perspective to the social world of displaced groups, which Boaventura's argument has encouraged.

Across these literatures, one common issue that has emerged is the legal and political ambivalence faced by those displaced groups who are located in an extralegal status beyond formal citizenship. Although these issues have been extensively explored and examined within current theories on statelessness, displacement, and refugee governance, relatively little empirical work has been done among Sri Lankan Tamils residing in Indian camps. In particular, little thought has been devoted to the dilemma arising from being included administratively but remaining excluded from citizenship rights through welfare provision [15].

This study combines survey data, semi-structured interviews, field observations, and insights from the Organisation for Eelam Refugees Rehabilitation (OFERR) staff. It helps fill the gap in existing research. It highlights empirical accounts of how Tamil Sri Lankan migrants in Puzhal camp navigate structural marginalisation while maintaining cultural identity, community connections, and daily resilience.

3 Methodology and fieldwork approach

An inductive qualitative research design was adopted to explore the lived experiences, institutional exclusion and legal precarity faced by Sri Lankan Tamil refugees residing in Tamil Nadu, India. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the Organisation for Eelam Refugees Rehabilitation (OFERR), an NGO actively engaged with refugee communities across multiple camps, particularly Puzhal camp near Chennai. Interviews were conducted during November 2025 with camp residents, community representatives, and individuals associated with refugee support initiatives. Ethical precautions were taken to establish trust, ensure voluntary participation and maintain confidentiality throughout the research process.

This study examines the lived experiences of residents in the Puzhal refugee camp in Tamil Nadu, which hosts around 300 Tamil Sri Lankan families. Through this survey and data collection, which included demographic profiles, refugees' histories, education levels, employment patterns, documentation status, and access to welfare schemes, 30 samples, one per family, out of 300 family residents of the camp were collected through Kobo Toolbox. Some survey items contained minor non-responses; therefore, valid response totals vary slightly across specific figures and tables. They provided consent to participate in the study and to have their data used in this research. A preliminary conversation was conducted to help build rapport between the interviewer and participant regarding the purpose of the study, and to provide interviewers with information on the researcher's affiliation and follow-up contact details. Apart from interviews and data collection, field observations were made on the ground regarding youth disengagement, gendered challenges, and ongoing dependence on NGOs. Interaction with OFERR, which is headquartered among all NGOs of Tamil Nadu, sheds light on institutional processes, advocacy work, gaps in state welfare delivery, and the legal precariousness faced by refugees. This comprehensive dataset offers insights into how barriers to documentation, welfare exclusion, limited employment prospects, and legal precarity intersect to shape refugees' experiences.

Analysis of the dataset revealed several recurring institutional barriers affecting respondents' everyday lives: refugees face systematic exclusion from government jobs, including teaching, administrative roles, and public sector positions. Professional fields such as medicine, nursing, and paramedical work also remain largely inaccessible due to a lack of recognised citizenship or stable legal status. Welfare schemes, numerous, are often inconsistently accessed because many require Indian identity documentation. These findings demonstrate how legal precarity generates uncertainty surrounding long-term political rights, social mobility, and access to state protection, thereby reinforcing dependence on State and NGO structures. Although India is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol, refugee protection has historically operated through administrative and humanitarian arrangements rather than a codified domestic refugee law framework, creating ambiguities in legal rights and long-term inclusion [17].

To complement the survey data, in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with camp residents and key informants to capture lived experiences that could not be represented numerically. Interviewees were selected using purposive and snowball sampling, facilitated by community leaders and OFERR staff who helped identify families with varied socio-economic and migration backgrounds. The semistructured interview guide covered themes related to legal identity, documentation barriers, access to welfare schemes, employment restrictions, education, health, and future aspirations. Key questions included: *"What challenges do you face in renewing or accessing identity documents?"* *"How do legal status and camp rules (if any) affect your ability to work or move freely?"*, *"What type of government support do you feel is missing?"*, and *"How do you imagine your long-term future—in India or elsewhere?"* Additional probes were used to explore intergenerational concerns, including children's access to education and their livelihood prospects.

All interviews were audiorecorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using thematic coding. An initial round of open coding was used to identify recurring categories across interviews, such as mobility restrictions, bureaucratic delays, livelihood precarity, and

aspirations for citizenship. These were refined into axial codes to examine how legal status, welfare access, and livelihood constraints intersect in everyday life. This analytical process enabled the study to move beyond descriptive reporting and identify the structural relationships between legal status, livelihood insecurity, documentation barriers, and patterns of institutional exclusion. Coding and analysis were supported by review of field notes and camp observations, allowing triangulation between interview narratives, survey patterns, and NGO perspectives. Ethical considerations included informed consent, anonymisation of participants, and secure handling of audio files and transcripts.

Taking into account the exploratory and field-based nature of this research, the use of a sample size of 30 households was aimed at obtaining deep insights of a qualitative nature and not statistical generalisation. Purposive sampling was employed to make sure that there would be variation among participants in terms of age, gender, length of time spent in India, means of earning a living, and documentation status. It is acknowledged that the use of such a small sample size as well as the use of NGO-mediated access, may limit the level of generalizability of the findings due to possible sampling bias. Indeed, individuals who were easier to access or willing to communicate with the researcher might not be fully representative of the entire community of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India. At the same time, the use of survey questions, interviews, and field observations helped to achieve triangulation of data.

3.1 Sample characteristics and profile

The survey included 30 households from Puzhal Refugee Camp, selected through purposive sampling to ensure variation in age, education, household size, and duration of stay in India. Table 1 summarises the key socio-demographic, legal, and livelihood attributes of the sample. The respondents were primarily women (73%), reflecting gendered patterns of availability in camp settings where women are more likely to be present during daytime surveys. Most households had lived in India for more than two decades, indicating the protracted and intergenerational nature of displacement. Educational attainment remained low, with over two-thirds having only primary or no formal schooling. Documentation-related barriers—particularly refugee certificate renewals, birth certificate access, and ID-linked welfare exclusion—were widespread, affecting 40–60% of households. Livelihood patterns were dominated by daily wage and informal labour, with no respondents eligible for government employment due to their non-citizen status. The income distribution further highlighted economic precarity, with a majority earning under ₹5 lakh annually or unwilling to disclose due to uncertainty and irregularity in earnings (Income figures are self-reported annual household estimates).

4 Analytical strategy

This study employs thematic analysis to examine recurring patterns across survey responses, interviews, and field observations. The purpose of this research was to explore challenges Tamil refugees post-civil war of Sri Lanka face as refugees in Tamil Nadu, and to analyse these obstacles. Themes were coded around bureaucratic exclusion, welfare access, identity, resilience, and aspirations. Statelessness, postcolonial citizenship, and displacement are certain frameworks drawn out of the analytical process, which enabled an integrated interpretation of data across individual and institutional levels.

Table 1 Socio-demographic, legal, and livelihood characteristics of surveyed families ($n = 30$)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender of Respondents	Female	22	73.3
	Male	8	26.7
Age Group (Respondent)	18–30 years	9	30.0
	31–45 years	14	46.7
	46 years and above	7	23.3
Years Lived in India	10–20 years	6	20.0
	21–30 years	11	36.7
	31 years or more	13	43.3
Household Size	1–3 members	5	16.7
	4–5 members	18	60.0
	6 or more	7	23.3
Education Level (Respondent)	No formal schooling	9	30.0
	Primary schooling	11	36.7
	Secondary schooling	8	26.7
	Higher secondary or above	2	6.6
Legal Documentation Issues	Delayed renewal of Refugee Certificate	16	53.3
	Birth certificate difficulties	12	40.0
	ID-linked welfare exclusion	18	60.0
Employment Status	Daily wage labour	15	50.0
	Domestic/Informal work	9	30.0
	Skilled/Semi-skilled	4	13.3
	Unemployed	2	6.7
Annual Household Income	₹2–5 lakh annually	13	42
	₹5–10 lakh annually	3	9.7
	Prefer not to disclose	14	45
Job Opportunity Satisfaction	Very satisfied	10	32.3
	Neutral	7	22.6
	Dissatisfied	7	22.6
	Satisfied	5	16.1

The table presents descriptive characteristics of surveyed households from Puzhal Refugee Camp ($n = 30$). Percentages are calculated based on the total number of valid responses for each variable and may not sum to 100 due to rounding or multiple-response items. Data are self-reported and intended to provide contextual insight rather than statistical generalisation beyond the study site

4.1 Theme A- Bureaucratic exclusion and legal ambiguity

The data from Puzhal camp reveal that bureaucratic exclusion is central to the marginalisation experienced by Tamil Sri Lankan refugees in Tamil Nadu. Despite having lived in India for decades, these residents' legal status remains temporary and conditional, governed by administrative documents such as refugee certificates and camp registers, and they also face travel restrictions. Theoretical alignment supports the argument that displaced populations often exist in a position of 'partial recognition,' neither fully included nor excluded [1, 2].

Among all 30 samples, documentation-related problems emerged as the most consistent theme. Reported challenges by respondents include renewal of refugee certificates, securing birth certificates for children born in India, and accessing identity-linked welfare schemes. The pattern of partial recognition and selective inclusion is visually reflected in Fig. 1, which describes respondents who widely possess documents such as an Aadhaar card and a ration card; they remain excluded from other documents and rights that confer genuine security and mobility.

This figure illustrates the key identity documents currently possessed by Tamil Sri Lankan refugee households in Puzhal camp. A very high proportion of respondents

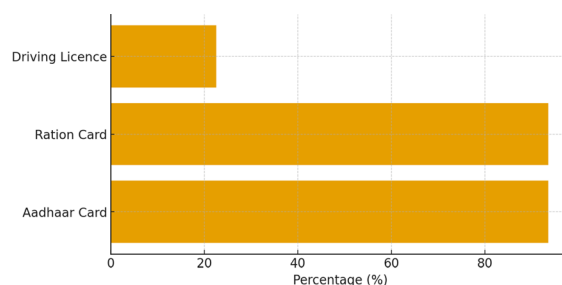


Fig. 1 Documentation possession among respondents ($N=30$). Percentages represent the proportion of respondents who reported holding each document; multiple selections were allowed

reported holding Aadhaar Cards (93.55%) and Ration Cards (93.55%), reflecting Tamil Nadu's administrative inclusion of refugees in certain welfare-linked identification systems. However, possession of a Driving Licence was significantly lower (22.58%), indicating restrictions on mobility-related documentation. Although these documents provide limited functional identity for daily life, they do not confer any legal pathway toward citizenship or access to state employment, thereby maintaining refugees' broader condition of legal precarity.

During the interaction, members of these communities at the OFERR office expressed concern about how refugees are required to approach multiple offices, like the taluk, district administration, and camp authorities- each with different requirements. This is highlighted by Rajasingham-Senanyake [11] as a layer of bureaucracy which he termed 'administrative precarity', where rights are shaped by institutional discretion rather than legal guarantees. This creates a condition of administrative ambiguity in which refugees remain partially recognised yet structurally excluded from substantive legal incorporation.

Across all findings, the strongest concerns are restrictions on employment, particularly in government and professional sectors. The survey indicated that 100 per cent of sampled households had no member employed in a government job, reinforcing the clear link between documentation and exclusion from formal employment. Even at interviews with refugees revealed that even highly qualified youth are legally barred from public service positions due to the lack of Indian citizenship. This further extends the obstacle to these people to medical, nursing and paramedical training programmes, reinforcing structural immobility. These exclusions reflect broader patterns described in South Asian migration studies, where legal ambiguity intersects with socio-economic vulnerability [3, 12].

Fieldwork further highlights unequal access to welfare schemes among refugee households. One of the major obstacles here that emerged was the tension between centre and state-level approaches towards Sri Lankan Tamil refugees. While the Tamil Nadu government has historically extended welfare assistance and educational support, the absence of a national refugee protection framework and restrictive citizenship regulation imposed by the Union government continues to limit long-term legal integration and access to rights [6, 9]. Representatives from OFERR noted that the organisation often functions as an intermediary between refugees and state institutions. This institutional dependency reflects Mbembe's [8] argument that marginalised populations often depend on intermediaries to navigate state systems, reinforcing unequal power relations.

Interviews with Sri Lankan Tamil refugees revealed uncertainty about their political rights and long-term sense of belonging. Interviewees frequently expressed uncertainty regarding long-term citizenship prospects and future settlement pathways. According to a few residents in these camps, they would lose camp-based assistance emerge as a concern if they tried to pursue alternative legal routes. This sense of liminality aligns with Sriskandarajah’s [14] analysis of Tamil refugees’ long-standing political uncertainty in the subcontinent.

Overall, these findings demonstrate how bureaucratic governance structures, rather than overt forms of discrimination alone, operate as primary mechanisms of exclusion for Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India. As illustrated in Fig. 1, the possession of partial documentation does not necessarily translate into substantive citizenship rights or institutional inclusion. Respondents who had resided in India for longer periods frequently continued to experience restricted access to formal employment, welfare entitlements, and political participation due to the absence of recognised citizenship status. This reflects a condition of legal precarity in which prolonged settlement and socio-economic participation fail to produce meaningful incorporation into the state structure. Such patterns align with postcolonial critiques of fragmented citizenship regimes in South Asia, where legal recognition remains unevenly distributed despite long-term residence and social contribution (Table 2).

The findings further reveal a contradiction between long-term settlement and substantive citizenship inclusion. Although many respondents had resided in India for extended periods and participated in informal labour structures, access to formal employment, welfare entitlements, and mobility rights remained contingent upon documentation and legal recognition. Notably, 96.77% of respondents expressed a desire to obtain Indian citizenship, while 80.65% identified employment rights as a major policy concern. This indicates that legal precarity is experienced not only as a juridical condition but also as an everyday socio-economic limitation affecting dignity, mobility, and institutional participation. Unlike citizens possessing stable legal recognition and unrestricted documentation within the Indian state framework, Sri Lankan Tamil refugees continue to experience conditional inclusion despite long-term residence and socio-economic participation.

Collectively, these findings suggest that refugee precarity in Tamil Nadu is sustained less through overt exclusion alone and more through prolonged administrative

Table 2 Documentation status, employment restrictions, and access to welfare among respondentsSource: Field Survey Conducted in Puzhal Camp, Chennai (2025)

Variable	Key finding	Analytical insight
Citizenship and legal status	The majority of respondents lacked recognised citizenship or permanent legal status	Demonstrates conditions of liminal citizenship and restricted political inclusion
Employment barriers	80.65% of respondents identified employment rights as a major concern	Reflects economic exclusion despite long-term residence in India
Welfare access	Access to welfare schemes often depended on Indian identity documentation	Indicates bureaucratic dependency and fragmented inclusion
Citizenship aspirations	96.77% expressed a desire to obtain Indian citizenship	Suggests persistent insecurity regarding belonging and long-term settlement
Mobility and residence restrictions	Respondents reported limitations in movement and housing opportunities	Highlights the spatial dimension of refugee precarity and camp-based governance

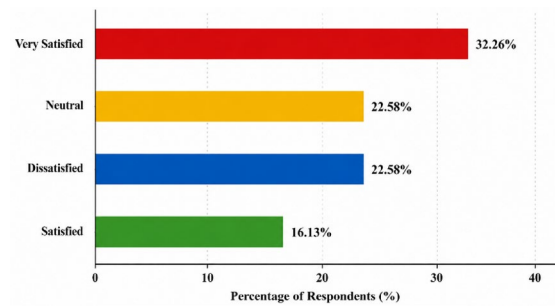


Fig. 2 Job Opportunity Satisfaction measures respondents' satisfaction with employment opportunities available within the refugee context. A notable proportion of respondents (32.26%) reported being very satisfied, while 22.58% expressed dissatisfaction, and an equal percentage remained neutral. Only 16.13% reported moderate satisfaction. These mixed responses indicate that although some respondents have adapted to available informal livelihood opportunities, significant structural barriers to formal employment continue to persist due to non-citizen status, legal insecurity, and restricted access to formal labour markets. The findings, therefore, reflect both adaptive resilience and continuing economic precarity among refugee households. This apparent satisfaction may reflect adaptation to available informal livelihood opportunities within camp-based social networks rather than genuine access to stable or upwardly mobile employment structures

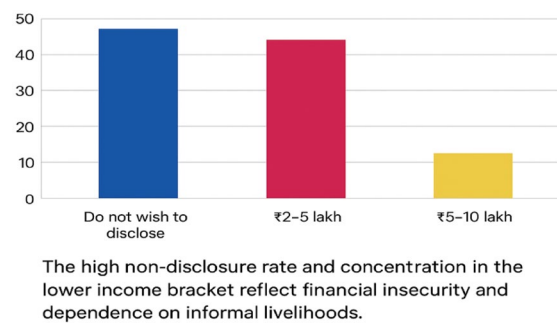


Fig. 3 Annual household income levels of refugee families. This figure depicts annual household income categories among surveyed families. A large portion (45.16%) chose not to disclose income, which may indicate economic stress or reluctance to report unstable earnings. Among disclosed incomes, the majority (41.94%) reported annual earnings between ₹2–5 lakh, while only 9.68% earned between ₹5–10 lakh. This distribution reflects the broader pattern of economic precarity, informal work dependence, and restricted mobility observed in refugee households. Income categories are self-reported ($N=30$). Some respondents chose multiple brackets in cases of fluctuating or seasonal income; the highest consistent bracket was recorded

uncertainty, where limited welfare inclusion coexists with restricted legal and political incorporation.

4.2 Theme B: Social marginalisation and access to services.

4.2.1 Livelihood constraints and informal employment

Social marginalisation was quite evident while interacting with locals. Refugees here in the Puzhal camp have limited access to stable and formal employment. They rely more on household, daily wage labour, tailoring, construction work, caregiving, or other informal activities. Figure 2 illustrates respondents' satisfaction levels regarding employment opportunities available within the refugee context. Although some respondents expressed moderate or high satisfaction with available livelihood opportunities, the findings overall reflect continued dependence on informal and unstable forms of employment with limited access to secure professional mobility. This exemplifies the broader scholarship on restricted economic mobility among protracted refugee communities [3, 5] (Fig. 3).

Interviews with respondents further revealed that, despite completing higher secondary education or vocational training, many refugees remain legally barred from public-sector employment due to the absence of Indian citizenship. These restrictions extend to nursing, paramedical training, and several state-supported professional programmes. Due to this, the camp economy is highly dependent on precarious, labour-intensive occupations.

4.2.2 Barriers to education and professional mobility

Access to primary and secondary schooling was comparatively more available for the Sri Lankan Tamil refugee community; however, significant barriers emerged in relation to higher education and professional training opportunities. Though the state government had a policy and made a category for these people in state universities and at the state level, they were still barred from admission into degree programmes, scholarships, and professional courses, such as medical and nursing fields. These required documents, such as a caste certificate or nationality proof or residency proof, are not secure due to their non-citizenship status. This creates a ceiling that limits mobility upwards regardless of merit or aspiration. These structural restrictions echo findings from global refugee scholarship, where legal liminality shapes generational inequality [3].

4.2.3 Unequal access to healthcare and welfare schemes: a clash of the centre and state

Healthcare access further reflects tensions between welfare support at the state level and the absence of durable legal protection at the national level. Although Tamil Nadu has historically provided limited rehabilitation assistance and welfare schemes for Sri Lankan Tamil refugees, access to healthcare and institutional support remains conditional and uneven due to the lack of a comprehensive national refugee framework in India [10]. Respondents interviewed during fieldwork highlighted high out-of-pocket expenditure for chronic illness or specialist care. Even the OFERR ngo mentioned that they are engaged to keep health-related records and facilitate hospital referrals; however, these interventions remain insufficient substitutes for systematic legal and welfare entitlements.

Although refugees' access to certain identity documents (as discussed in theme A, Fig. 1), most advanced benefits- housing grants, educational scholarships, subsidised insurance-remain inaccessible due to citizenship-based eligibility.

4.2.4 The structural roots of social marginalisation

The findings taken together suggest that social marginalisation is a result of structural consequences and not only a result of direct discrimination. Several issues, like access to higher education, formal employment, and welfare protections, reproduce cycles of dependence on NGO and other informal networks. These obstacles have led to limiting long-term social mobility and reinforcing vulnerability across generations.

The analysis of field narrative, survey data, and the visual evidence provided in Fig. 2 demonstrates that legal precarity shapes every domain of social life, from livelihoods and education to welfare and health. For long-term refugee communities like Puzhal, marginalisation is rooted in the systems of documentation and rights rather than in everyday social interactions.

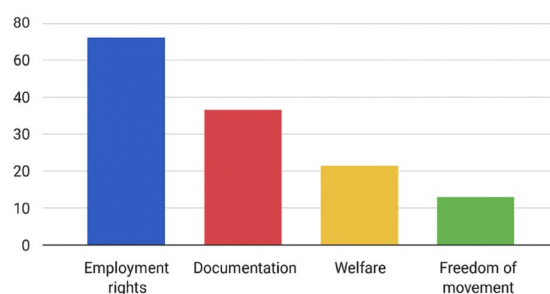


Fig. 4 Refugees' policy priorities in Puzhal camp. This figure illustrates the key policy changes that respondents identified as essential for improving their long-term living conditions in India. Employment rights—particularly the ability to work freely like Indian citizens—were the most cited priority (80.65%), followed by simplified documentation procedures (51.61%). A significant proportion also emphasised the need for inclusion in public welfare and healthcare schemes (32.26%) and greater freedom of movement within and outside Tamil Nadu (29.03%). These preferences indicate a shift from basic humanitarian assistance toward broader claims for legal security, socio-economic mobility, and dignity. Responses were based on a multiple-option question ($N=30$). Percentages represent the proportion of households selecting each policy priority

4.3 Theme C: Resistance, identity and belonging

Although structural barriers are documented across the survey and interview data, the residents of Puzhal camp demonstrate active forms of resilience, community-building, and identity preservation. Refugees articulated a range of cultural and social practices that reinforced collective identity, continuity and community belonging rather than positioning themselves solely as passive recipients of welfare or bureaucratic subjects. These forms of everyday resistance are central to understanding life in long-term displacement.

4.3.1 *Emerging political aspirations and rights-based demands*

The aspirations of Tamil Sri Lankan refugees in Puzhal camp reflect a gradual shift from basic survival concerns toward broader rights-based demands. Respondents increasingly articulate the desire for stable livelihoods, mobility, and socio-political recognition within India. This aligns with earlier scholarship showing that long-term displacement transforms humanitarian needs into political claims [3]; (Chimni, 2004).

Figure 4 illustrates these emerging priorities, showing that the strongest demand—expressed by 80.65% of respondents—is access to employment rights equivalent to Indian citizens.

This emphasis on labour equality reflects not only economic hardship but also a deeper desire for dignity, autonomy, and social integration. Employment is viewed as the foundation for long-term security and self-respect, themes repeatedly emphasised in interviews with youth and community leaders.

The findings therefore suggest that employment rights are understood not only in economic terms but also as a pathway towards social recognition, autonomy, and substantive inclusion within the host society.

4.3.2 *Documentation, mobility, and everyday negotiations of belonging*

The second major demand shown in Fig. 4 concerns refugee documentation (51.61%), particularly the desire for simplified renewal procedures and clearer legal status. This reinforces the findings from Theme A: legal ambiguity shapes refugees' everyday relations with the state. Many respondents expressed frustration with repeated visits to

taluk offices, delays in obtaining birth certificates, and the uncertainty surrounding long-term residence.

Closely linked to documentation is the right to mobility. Nearly 29% of respondents identified *freedom of movement*—including the ability to travel outside Tamil Nadu—as a key policy area needing reform. Restrictions on movement not only limit employment options but also reinforce feelings of enclosure within the camp system. As one respondent remarked during fieldwork interviews: “Our world ends at the camp gate.”

These demands collectively illustrate how refugees negotiate belonging through administrative categories and spatial boundaries, a dynamic consistent with postcolonial citizenship debates [12].

4.3.3 Welfare inclusion, housing, and the desire for a dignified life

Figure 4 also indicates significant concern for welfare and healthcare inclusion (32.26%), reflecting the gaps highlighted in Theme B. While Tamil Nadu provides certain benefits, refugees remain excluded from central welfare schemes that require Indian citizenship or caste certification.

Housing and camp policy reform (25.81%) emerged as another priority. Many participants expressed a strong desire to live outside the camp and transition to independent housing, seeing this as a pathway toward normalcy and dignity. These demands align with the broader argument that protracted refugee situations generate aspirations for self-reliance and community-based empowerment [7].

4.3.4 Identity, future belonging, and the question of citizenship

Although education rights scored lower (16.13%), interviews revealed that this reflects frustration rather than disinterest. Many youth explained that despite completing schooling, they are blocked from higher education and professional courses due to citizenship-linked criteria. Thus, the lower percentage represents resignation rather than lack of aspiration.

Together, these data show that refugees’ claims extend beyond immediate needs: they reflect a desire for long-term settlement, legal clarity, and intergenerational mobility. The demands visualised in Fig. 4 illustrate an evolving sense of political identity—one shaped by hopes for citizenship, inclusion, and the right to live with dignity despite prolonged legal uncertainty.

5 Statelessness, regional politics, and world affairs implications

The experience of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India must be situated within broader regional and global debates surrounding forced migration, post-conflict governance, and international refugee protection. Statelessness is not merely a domestic administrative issue but a reflection that even the fragmented global refugee regime in South Asia lacks a coordinated refugee protection mechanism, leaving the displaced population subject to discretionary national and subnational policies.

India’s position is significant in geopolitics when it comes to the Indian Ocean region and its historical involvement in Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict. While India played a diplomatic and military role during the Sri Lankan civil war, its post-war refugee governance remains marked by legal ambiguity. The refusal to accede to the 1951 refugee convention allows flexibility in border control but simultaneously produces prolonged precarity

for the refugee who cannot return safely nor be fully integrated. This has emerged as a global trend that balances humanitarian obligations against sovereignty, concerns often resulting in ‘temporary permanence’ for the refugee population.

From the comparative glance, the Sri Lankan Tamil case parallels other protected refugee situations globally, such as the Rohingya refugee in Bangladesh or the Palestinian refugee in the Middle East, where long-term displacement is normalised without durable solutions. However, the Sri Lankan Tamil refugee experience differs in one important respect: relative social acceptance at the local level coexists with exclusion at the legal and national level. This duality of social inclusion without political rights adds a unique contribution to international debates on belonging, citizenship and non-deportability.

At the international level, the findings challenge dominant humanitarian frameworks that prioritise emergency relief over long-term integration. Decades after displacement, refugees in Puzhal camp continue to be governed through welfare-based containment rather than rights-based inclusion. This reveals a structural gap between international norms on durable solutions-voluntary repatriation, local integration, or resettlement-and the lived realities of refugees in non-signatory states.

6 Limitations of this research

Although this study provides detailed insights into the lived experiences of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in Puzhal camp, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study is geographically limited to a single refugee settlement; conditions may vary across rural camps or other regions in India hosting the Sri Lankan Tamil refugee populations. Further research could adopt a comparative multi-site approach to examine how regional governance differences shape refugee experiences.

Secondly, the sample size, while appropriate for an in-depth qualitative and mixed methods study, limits statistical generalisability. Although the scope of this research is analytical rather than statistically representative, large-scale quantitative studies could complement these findings by mapping documentation access, employment barriers, and educational outcomes across the refugee population in India.

Thirdly, the language barrier presented certain methodological limitations during field interaction. Translation assistance and audio-based interpretation tools were used where necessary; however, some nuances of participant responses may have been affected during translation and transcription processes.

Finally, future research could extend this analysis to examine India’s refugee governance in a comparative global perspective, especially in relation to other non-signatory states. Such work would strengthen understanding of how informal protection regimes operate in the absence of international legal commitments and how they reshape contemporary notions of citizenship, rights, and belonging.

7 Recommendations

The findings from the Puzhal camp highlight the urgent need for policy interventions that address the structural roots of marginalisation experienced by Tamil Sri Lankan refugees in India. While Tamil Nadu has historically provided extensive support, long-term solutions require coordinated state and national engagement, reforms in documentation procedures, and pathways that recognise the protracted nature of displacement.

7.1 Establish a clear legal pathway to citizenship

The absence of a structured naturalisation process remains the primary barrier to rights, mobility, and future security. Introducing a time-bound, transparent pathway to Indian citizenship—particularly for those born and raised in India—would significantly reduce administrative uncertainty. Scholars have emphasised that stable legal status is foundational to refugee integration and socio-economic mobility.

7.2 Reform documentation procedures

Many exclusionary barriers stem from inconsistencies in documentation. Simplifying processes for obtaining birth certificates, refugee ID renewals, and education-related documents would reduce dependency on intermediaries and lower bureaucratic obstacles. Digitalising refugee records and integrating them with state service portals could enhance efficiency and accountability.

7.3 Expand access to education and professional training

Targeted interventions are essential to break intergenerational cycles of marginalisation. Policies should enable refugee youth to access technical, professional, and medical training programmes through special admission quotas, fee waivers, and alternative ID mechanisms when standard citizenship documents are unavailable. Tamil Nadu's existing inclusion frameworks could be adapted to incorporate refugee-specific provisions.

7.4 Enable livelihood and employment opportunities

Given refugees' exclusion from government jobs, there is a need to expand access to semi-formal and formal employment sectors. Skill development programmes, MSME support, and private-sector partnerships can open new economic opportunities. Allowing refugees to obtain trade licences or register small enterprises would foster financial independence.

7.5 Strengthen healthcare access

Refugees should be included in state-level health insurance schemes through alternative documentation pathways. Additionally, dedicated health outreach in camps—particularly for women, adolescents, and the elderly—can improve long-term wellbeing.

7.6 Support community-led initiatives

The resilience observed in cultural practices and informal support networks suggests that community-led programmes should be strengthened. Funding for educational clubs, youth groups, women's collectives, and cultural activities can enhance social cohesion and psychological well-being.

7.7 Enhance coordination between OFERR and government agencies

OFERR plays a central role in bridging administrative gaps. Formalising its coordination with district administrations, providing stable funding, and integrating its staff into state-led initiatives would improve service delivery and advocacy.

Overall, these recommendations emphasise the need for legal inclusion, structural reforms, and community empowerment to address the longstanding marginalisation of Tamil Sri Lankan refugees in India.

8 Conclusion

The experiences of Tamil Sri Lankan refugees in the Puzhal refugee camp illustrate how long-term displacement, legal ambiguity, and structural inequality intersect to shape everyday life for protracted refugee communities in India. Although the end of the Sri Lankan Civil War in 2009 signalled a moment of political transition, it did not resolve the uncertainties faced by Tamil migrants who fled during earlier waves of violence. Instead, their lives continue to be marked by a lack of clear citizenship pathways, fragmented welfare access, and constraints on mobility and livelihood opportunities.

The findings show that bureaucratic structures—rather than overt discrimination—form the central mechanism of exclusion. Documentation challenges, inconsistent administrative procedures, and the absence of recognised legal identity restrict access to education, employment, healthcare, and state services. Refugee youth, despite being born and raised in India, remain outside the boundaries of national membership, reinforcing what scholars describe as “belonging without citizenship.” These structural exclusions generate a sense of uncertainty that affects both individual decision-making and long-term community aspirations.

At the same time, the study highlights the strength of community resilience and how refugees negotiate identity and belonging. Cultural practices, informal support networks, and community-led initiatives help sustain continuity, collective identity, and social support amidst prolonged uncertainty. These everyday acts of agency challenge the narrative of refugees as passive subjects and instead foreground their capacity to create meaningful social worlds within constrained conditions.

The involvement of organisations such as OFERR further demonstrates the importance of intermediary institutions in navigating state systems, advocating for rights, and providing essential support. However, NGO efforts cannot substitute for long-term legal and structural solutions. The findings clearly show that sustainable integration and social mobility require national-level reforms—particularly the establishment of clear legal pathways, documentation reforms, and expanded opportunities for education and employment.

Overall, the study contributes to broader debates on statelessness, postcolonial citizenship, and displacement by offering an empirically grounded account of life within a protracted refugee context. It underscores that without structural changes in legal recognition and administrative frameworks, Tamil Sri Lankan refugees will continue to inhabit a space of uncertainty—visible within welfare systems yet invisible in formal citizenship. Addressing this contradiction is essential not only for improving refugee welfare but also for advancing more inclusive and rights-based approaches to displacement, citizenship, and belonging in South Asia.

Author contributions

S.B. conceptualised the study, conducted the fieldwork, collected and analysed the data, and wrote and revised the manuscript.

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Data availability

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to the sensitive nature of refugee-related information and concerns regarding participant confidentiality, but anonymised data may be made available from the author upon reasonable academic request.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study was reviewed at the departmental level by the Departmental Research Evaluation Committee (DREC), Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Malaviya National Institute of Technology (MNIT), Jaipur, India. The Committee confirmed that the study adhered to standard ethical guidelines for social science research, including informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality of participants. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles and guidelines approved by the Departmental Research Evaluation Committee (DREC). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in this study before they participated in interviews and surveys. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence, and the use of anonymised data for academic research and publication purposes. No participants under the age of 18 were included in this study.

Consent for publication

The author confirms that informed consent was obtained for the use of anonymised interview excerpts and research findings included in this publication.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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