

Remembering the Eviction of Northern Muslims

Disruptions, Livelihoods and Coexistence:

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One of the darkest moments of the long war in Sri Lanka was the eviction of the Northern Muslims. In October 1990, the LTTE in an act of ethnic cleansing forced the entire Muslim population of the North to leave behind their homes, assets, livelihoods, and their way of life itself, in a matter of hours if not days. This horrendous disruption of a community haunts the North to this day even as their return after the war has been fraught with problems.

Some research on the predicament of this vulnerable community had been undertaken by the late Prof. Shahul Hasbullah and his colleagues. Much of that research had focused on the crucial issue of land. Even as many activists worked to secure the housing rights of the resettling Muslim community, Hasbullah put forward a broader vision of reconstructing the Muslim quarters; for example, reconstructing Moor Street in Jaffna as a heritage area with sensitivity to its historical vibrancy.

Drawing on similar engagement with the returning Muslims' economic issues, we are part of a larger group of researchers working to document the livelihood challenges of Northern Muslim communities and their implications for co-existence. We present here the concerns raised by Northern Muslims living in the Musali region of Mannar, the Mulliyawalai region of Mullaithivu, and the Moor Street area of Jaffna.

Displacement and education

The long displacement lasting decades, and attempts to resettle with little support from, and in some cases worrying obstacles placed by, state officials, have disrupted the lives of a few generations of Northern Muslims. For many Muslim women, who were children during the eviction, education was a sorrowful loss. Most of the families had been displaced to several areas in Puttalam; schools there conducted classes in the evenings

for the “displaced children”. However, many girls had to give up on their studies as they could not travel to evening school. Girls were also burdened with taking care of their younger siblings while their parents labored in coconut estates. Furthermore, many boys dropped out of school to engage in waged labor to support their families.

This disruption of education, years later, has a serious impact on their economic possibilities and social mobility. Given this troubling past these women expressed their desire for the younger generation to advance in education and be free from poverty and destitution. However, the education of the returning Northern Muslim children is still sour grapes for many reasons. Most of the schools in Musali, Mulliyawalai, and Moor Street lack adequate infrastructure and teachers for many subjects. Even those schools that have comparatively better facilities lack committed teachers.

Next, flawed planning of resettlement schemes has pushed these families to resort to low-income generating activities. Parents having to move between Puttalam and their resettled areas to earn a living further disrupts the education of their children. The economic background and limited livelihood opportunities for returning families have greatly affected their social life and hopes for the future.

Land and resources

Lack of access to land and natural resources is a significant factor determining livelihood possibilities. There is a broader need for residential land due to the increase in population with the newer generation of families. Most families are dividing their already small plots of land to share it with their sons and daughters. Such fragmentation of land ownership as well as contestations over ownership, for example, displaced Tamils squatting on their lands, have made residential land a central concern for sustainable resettlement. In this context, some families have attempted to build houses and settle on agricultural land. However, the local land and agricultural officers have been partial; they are vigilant on laws and regulations with respect to the Muslims but lenient and look the other way when it comes to Tamils.

In Musali, land grabs by the state – through military and “environmental” gazettes – have

limited access to residential land as well as agricultural land. Muslims from Silavathurai Town in Musali, have been relocated from their land because the Navy, Army, and more recently the Police have occupied about 36 acres of prime land. Residents were given barren land where there was no water or firewood, and distant from access to basic services like the hospital. Furthermore, the Forest Department has grabbed much of their agricultural and pastoral lands; this limits their engagement in food production and livestock breeding. Meantime, local fishermen in Musali are subject to a pass system, which makes the access to sea difficult.

In Mulliyawalai, Northern Muslims are marginalized from accessing their agricultural lands in Thannimurippu and Murrippu. Due to limited public transport services, women in particular find it hard to travel to these lands located about 8 km from their residences. Despite having documents to prove land tenure for agriculture, the local state officials are denying them the required permits. This discrimination in documentation has serious consequences for the community; they become ineligible for state grants for wells and other agricultural supports. As a result, they limit their production to one season depending on the monsoon. Furthermore, insufficient land with their homes inhibits Muslim women from raising livestock—a livelihood they engaged in before their displacement and while in Puttalam. Resettling Northern Muslim communities have requested authorities at many levels for land and other resources, but those concerns have fallen on deaf ears.

Women and coexistence
Northern Muslims are as heterogeneous as any other community and engage in various livelihoods and income-generating activities. As with any other marginalized community, a single person's income is barely sufficient to run a family, all the more so during the current economic crisis. These families engage in livelihood activities like agriculture, fishing, different forms of wage labor, trade, poultry and cattle farming, home gardening, tailoring, selling food packets, dry fish production, and selling seafood. While these activities allow them to survive on a daily basis, most of them struggle to ensure a decent standard of living for their families.

To expand their engagement with their livelihood activities, there is a need for credit. However, they do not have adequate assets to meet the conditions of banking services,

nor do such banks provide services considering the religious beliefs of the community where interest payment on loans is considered usury.

In this context, Muslim women in the North are striving to support their families through not just home-based income-generating activities but also by forming self-help groups; to increase savings and provide emergency loans to each other. In Mullaitivu and Jaffna, a few Muslim and Tamil women have come together to support each other's livelihood initiatives by forming informal women's development centers. These centers are also spaces of social support for women, including addressing domestic violence by providing care homes and legal assistance.

As we remember the eviction, it is crucial to explore possibilities of how Muslims and Tamils in the North can forge inter-ethnic relations even as they struggle together to build sustainable livelihoods. The joint initiatives of Muslim and Tamil women to provide support and relief during times of individual and community crises are a beacon of hope for coexistence.