

Stories of roots and return



30 years since the expulsion of the Northern Muslims



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The Law & Society Trust (LST) is a non-profit organisation engaged in human rights documentation, legal research and advocacy in Sri Lanka. Our aim is to use rights-based strategies in research, documentation and advocacy in order to promote and protect human rights, enhance public accountability and ensure respect for human rights.

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October 1990: 30 years on

In October 1990, some 75,000 Muslims in the Northern Province (about five percent of the province's total population) were forcibly expelled from their homeland by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In some places, the LTTE gave the Muslims a 48-hour notice to leave the province. Beginning in Chavakachcheri on October 15th, Muslims were evicted in their entirety throughout Mannar, Mullaitivu, Killinochchi, Jaffna, and certain parts of Vavuniya by October 30th. Families were allowed to take only 500 rupees and some clothes; some were forced to flee without any belongings at all. Unable to get transport until they reached towns further south, many walked for upwards of three days.

My family was among them—as a student in Colombo at the time, I waited anxiously for news as my family members fled our home in Mannar.

To date, this community's sufferings have not been recognised officially and there has been no adequate support for return or reparations. Three decades of neglect and misunderstanding by local residents, government officers, international donors, and southern Muslims have left northern Muslims feeling there is no one left for them to trust.

Since the civil war's end in May 2009, northern Muslims have started returning in substantial numbers, but returnees have not always been welcome. Senior government officers are said to under-quote Muslim returnee numbers, which significantly reduces allocation of resources and the development support required for resettlement. Government officers in the North respond that Muslims are already 'well-settled' in Puttalam, and the government's priority should be on the war-affected. It is certainly true that the plight of war-affected Tamil civilians remains distressing. A decade after end of the war, many still wait for land, housing and other basic needs and continue to struggle for truth and justice in a dangerous space. These needs are critical, but addressing them should not forestall the northern Muslims' right to collective return.

Mistakes upon mistakes

Although the LTTE faced heavy criticism for their act of ethnic cleansing, its leader Velupillai Prabhakaran was conspicuously silent on the issue during the peace negotiations of 2002-2005. Further, none of the parties engaged in talks – including the Norwegian mediators – were willing to consider the right to collective return of the northern Muslims as one of the primary conditions for establishing normalcy in the North. This was the main reason for the low rate of return for expelled Muslims in comparison to Tamil internally displaced persons (IDPs) during the 2002 ceasefire.

At the start of his first term in late 2005, President Mahinda Rajapaksa promised to appoint a presidential commission to inquire into the expulsion of the northern Muslims – a promise he never fulfilled. At an event commemorating the end of the war, the former President stated that “when the innocent Muslims were harassed and forcibly evicted from the north by the LTTE, no one came forward to stop this displacement...now, with my government putting an end to terrorism, all efforts will be made to resettle the Muslims by May 2010.” The speech marked the first time that a senior government official made a categorical statement on evicted Muslims. Still, Rajapaksa failed to prioritise northern Muslims' right of return in his rapid, post-war nation-building process. A decade later, with the Easter Sunday attacks stoking already-rampant anti-Muslim sentiment and prompting the Rajapaksas' return to rule, Muslims question whether there

is any point in once again engaging with the government in the hopes of gaining support and recognition of their plight.

Government officials and Sinhala nationalist commentators often bring up the plight of northern Muslims when criticising the LTTE or claims to Tamil Eelam, but few genuinely consider what happened to those forced to flee and what must be done to make them whole. Northern Muslims have faced the same hatred as the broader Muslim community in recent years.

Today, some southern Muslim politicians question Muslim nationalism and urge Muslims to politically assimilate with the Sinhala majority as we reel from extremist Islamist terror. They criticise the ethnic-group politics of the North and East. There is no small irony there. In 1990, I heard many southern Muslims say that the expulsion was punishment for Muslims for living like Tamils and 'not being pious enough'. These themes were repeated in Friday sermons at some mosques, where imams claimed Allah was punishing Northern IDPs for not being 'Muslim enough'. What they failed to understand was that the LTTE expelled us only on the basis of our faith. Northern Muslims not only have a right to practice Islam but also to reclaim the heritage that closely linked them to the northern Tamils. No one has the right to force them to choose.

In the period from 2015 to 2019, early transitional justice efforts to redress northern Muslim grievances through proposed mechanisms were abandoned. The investigation launched by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and resulting in the Report of the OHCHR Investigation on Sri Lanka (OISL) only probed the period from the 2002 February ceasefire until 2011. This meant that earlier crimes, such as the LTTE's ethnic cleansing of Muslims from the north, were ignored. When the Sri Lankan government committed to transitional justice through UN HRC Resolution 30/1 in 2015, it likewise did not commit to addressing earlier events. Northern Muslims nonetheless took it upon themselves to play an active role in the public hearing led by the Consultation Taskforce on reconciliation mechanisms, but to no effect. As a result, the current reparation policy does not specifically recognise Northern Muslims' loss in any form.

Already nearly 30 years of neglect, northern Muslims recently faced assaults on their basic democratic rights. During the November 2019 presidential election, northern Muslims who travelled from Puttalam to vote in Mannar came under attack, with their buses fired at early morning on 16th November. After voting, they were attacked again that evening by Sinhala mobs; many women and children were injured but to date no inquiry has been held, nor even an investigation report by the Election Commission. Their buses were stopped at Chettikulam prior to the attack, and police detained them hours. Many injured voters did not seek medical treatment, fearing reprisals. Based on this violence, the Election Commission made arrangements that allowed over 6,000 Mannar voters to cast their ballots in Puttalam at a cluster of special polling booths during the August 2020 parliamentary election. Despite this positive development, the Assistant Elections Commissioner in Mannar has since instructed the district's Grama Sevakas to only register voters who are permanently living in Mannar. When questioned by civil society activists, he asserted there could be no 'floating voters': people who live in Puttalam must register and vote in Puttalam.

Unlike war-displaced Tamils who experienced multiple displacements within the Vanni, forcibly evicted Muslims were compelled to live away from war-torn home areas, sparing them of the terrible losses that the Tamils of Vanni have undergone. But this must not be used to disqualify northern Muslims from returning when it is viable and claiming their rightful properties and other resettlement rights. To avoid any further suspicion and distrust growing between northern communities, it is imperative to recognise the justice of the northern Muslims' right to return in

parallel with other resettlement and development programs that are ongoing in the north. Already, some Muslims who have returned to the North have found their village boundaries changed, resulting in the loss of their community rights to land. When government officers alter the boundaries of villages, they take away public lands – allocated to build public schools, burial grounds, places of worship, playgrounds or even grazing land for animals – and redistribute it for new settlements. Forced to live away from their land for decades, displaced Muslims have had no say in how these decisions have been made and have suffered additional losses as a result.

What can be done?

Even as a handful of Tamil politicians and few community and diaspora members have been sympathetic to the issue, the collective Tamil polity has long kept silent on the expulsion. In a September 2009 meeting on minority concerns with then President Rajapaksa, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) for the first time publicly raised the concerns of the northern Muslims. When the TNA won the Northern Provincial Council elections in 2013 it appointed a Muslim to one of their bonus seats as a councillor to demonstrate its positive approach towards the Muslim people of the North. Efforts by a small number of TNA MPs' to directly address these issues has been welcomed and were seen as an attempt to secure rights for the country's two largest minorities. In August's parliamentary election, the Killinochchi and Jaffna Muslims openly endorsed a couple of the TNA representatives and voted for the TNA. Despite this laudable political move, most Tamil leaders and intellectuals have yet to demonstrate their solidarity for the cause of the expelled northern Muslims.

Muslims are returning to the north without expecting much from anyone, simply in the hope of restarting their lives from scratch and co-existing once again with their Tamil brothers and sisters. They have advanced few demands, apart from modest ones for equal treatment, access to their lands, basic livelihood activities and swift clearance of their land that has turned into jungles. It is imperative that Tamil government officers and politicians in the north recognise that evicted Muslims have the right to reclaim their properties and livelihood opportunities in their native places, irrespective of if their families choose to continue to live elsewhere.

As trust builds, more northern Muslims will feel safe to return and reclaim their ancestral lands and cultural heritage. At the moment, however, there seems to be a collective resistance to their return. This is a situation that will only set in place further communal strife between the Muslims and Tamils of the north and benefit majoritarianism, undermining the long-term interest of the Tamils and their still-unmet political aspirations. It is in the interest of both communities – with the support of the international community and sympathetic Sinhalese – to prioritise deeper cooperation and sustained efforts to work through their separate, but deeply intertwined, grievances and suffering.

Shreen Saroor

Introduction

This work is a collection of narratives, seeking to capture the current lived realities of women from the communities of Muslims evicted from the Northern Province by the LTTE in 1990.

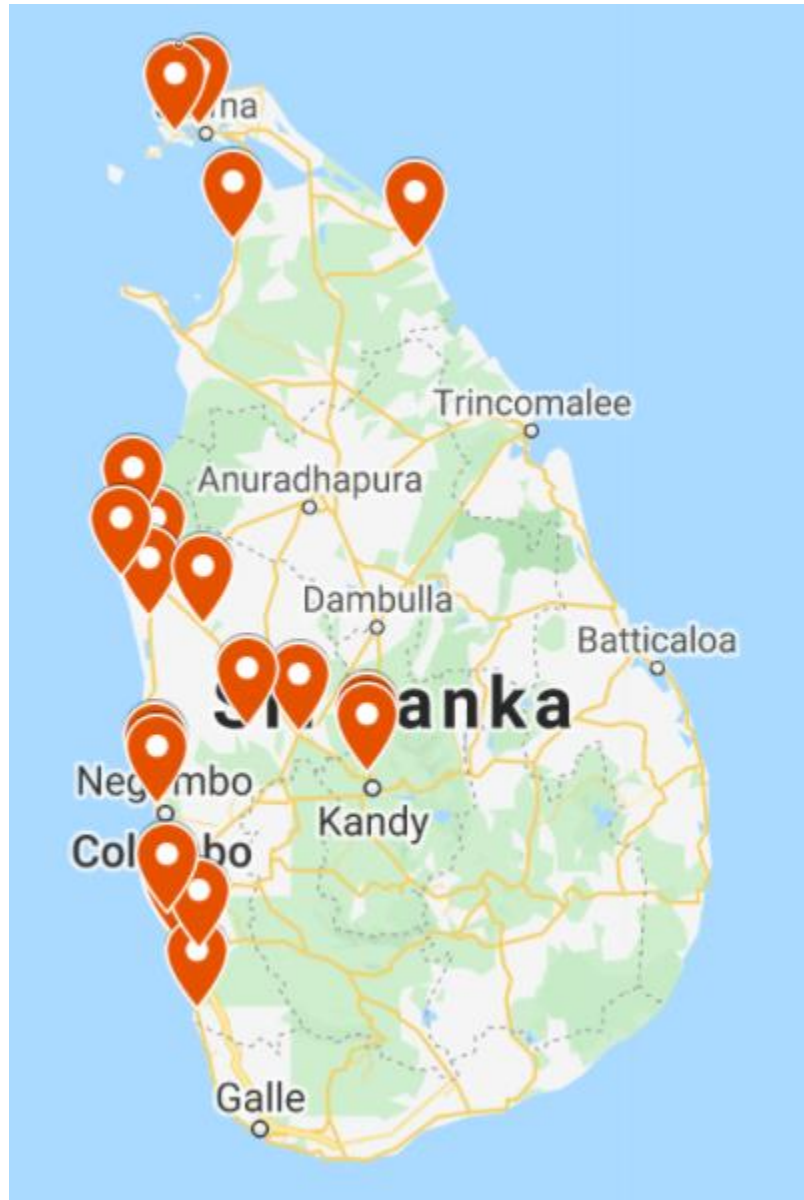
Several members of the community note how the story of the Northern Muslims seems to be forgotten in political and social spaces, with few media or civil society engaging with their plight. This work was undertaken primarily to place on record the struggles this community has experienced, and continues to experience, thirty years after the eviction.

The voices presented here are from a number of conversations with communities, primarily with groups of women, held in early 2020 in Puttalam, Mannar, Jaffna and Negombo. The conversations captured the complexities of the choice and the process of return, showing them as anything but linear or simple. Those returning addressed the political and administrative roadblocks they have faced, and their relationships with the Tamil community around them. Those still living where they were displaced spoke of the challenges with the communities around them, and finding 'home' in more than one place. Names have been withheld to ensure privacy and safety.

The authors are deeply grateful to all those who spent time sharing their thoughts, memories and reflections in these conversations. They also thank the Women's Action Network and the Muslim Women's Development Trust for their support in creating connections and facilitating the conversations that made this possible. They also wish to thank the Citizens' Commission on the Expulsion of Muslims from the Northern Province by the LTTE in October 1990, whose 2001 report 'The Quest for Redemption: The Story of the Northern Muslims' offers a thorough and exhaustive account of the displacement, migration patterns and other stories of this community.

Where are they now?

These points indicate the locations where families, loved ones and friends of the women the authors spoke to for this project reside right now, after their displacement from the North in 1990. They do not represent the entirety of the Northern Muslim population, displaced and returned.



Puttalam, Panadura, Palangathurai, Poruthota, Periyamulla, Madurankuliya, Vanathavillu, Pulichchakulam, Sarikamulla, Thotawatte, Kurunegala, Kekunugolla, Akurana, Beruwela, Katugastota, Nachchikuda, Atulugama, Anamaduwa, Negombo, Kalpitiya, Alankudah, Kayts, Jaffna, Mullaitivu



Jaffna

3,500 Muslim families had to flee (left) Jaffna in the expulsion of October 1990. 30 years later, only 750 have returned.

Many of those who had found secure jobs and businesses in the areas they were displaced to and whose children are now enrolled in schools in those areas did not return. Many elders, unable to physically bear the strain of relocating again, also did not return. Among the returnees are mostly those who were children when they were made to leave in 1990.

'Many of us elders who returned did so because of the strong convictions that our land in Jaffna belongs to us, and it is a place we can claim as our own.'

Rebuilding home, reclaiming land

As soon as the war ended, several families travelled to the northern peninsula in 2010. They would end up waiting years to be given housing, through a housing project carried out by Indian governmental aid. 313 individuals filed applications to get houses under this project, and to this date only 190 have received them.

“Of the 750 returning families, only a small portion have their own lands. The others live in houses on rent, or with their relatives. Some have taken up residence in empty houses that their relations have not expressed plans of returning to. Some individuals sold the houses they had to buy new land. Rent, however, remains high, and there are limited houses available.”

Houses that had been damaged by fighting and subsequently fallen into disuse over three decades had to be fixed by owners from their own personal funds. The houses provided by the government and various international housing projects were all new.

On their return, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees offered each family a package that included appliances and materials to rebuild their house, as well as pots and pans for the kitchens. Another compensation package from the government was offered to displaced people returning to traditional homelands after the war. According to this, families where they would first receive a payment of Rs. 5,000 and subsequently, another payment of Rs. 25,000.

A few of the Muslim families returning received the Rs. 5,000 payment. However, they observed that many Tamil families received the following Rs. 25,000 payment as well while they did not. Returnees say this is reflective of the bias that exists in the District Secretariat and other administrative offices in the Tamil-majority Northern province.

The Safinagar area, another traditionally Muslim locality before the eviction, was claimed as government land by the authorities and has since been distributed to Tamils. The intersection of



Moor Street with Araly road is an area of land that originally belonged to Muslims. Now, the District Secretariat is claiming it is a paddy land intended only for cultivation. Returning Muslim families tried to reclaim it themselves but were blocked by orders from the courts.

Several displaced Muslim men returned to Jaffna in 2009 for business, soon after the end of the war. At this time, they sold their and other Muslim families' adjoining lands to Tamil people. Several Muslims returned following this to avoid their own lands from being sold.

“Why did you come back?”

Before the eviction, some aspects of Tamil culture was integrated into the life of the Muslim community. Some Muslim women who were married in Jaffna before the eviction recall having a thali tied on them during their weddings. The women also wore sarees as daily attire, and shawls were worn only on the shoulders. The wearing of face covers increased when they had to move to Puttalam, in keeping with the conservative religious practices of the Muslims living there.

When these Muslim families returned to Jaffna in 2010, there was suspicion from some Tamils who had already resettled there after the war. They were asked “why did you come back?” by the younger generation, including those who were now officials in the various administrative offices, who were not aware of the eviction. Some Tamils from older generations were well aware that there was a Muslim population on the peninsula before the eviction, but they still claimed that the Muslims had come to ‘take Tamil people’s lands.’

“In day-to-day life, interactions between Tamil and Muslim people in Jaffna are cordial. However, when a small issue arises, Muslims as a community are quickly blamed.”

There have been several such instances in recent times. After the April 2019 Easter bombings, Tamil people were heard saying ‘all Muslims are like that’, equating them to the suicide bombers responsible for the violence. Some Tamil people would call Muslims ‘ISIS’, and even Tamil doctors would make similar comments to their Muslim patients. Many Muslim women stayed at home not venturing out for anything when regulations were passed banning the wearing of the abaya and niqab. Out of fear and uncertainty many have not worn it since.

The high costs of return

As a result of their decision to return, several families find themselves separated from their relatives and loved ones who were unable to or chose not to return to Jaffna at the moment. For several families, this does not mean they have ruled out return entirely - some are waiting for infrastructure development in Jaffna, when they are assured of houses and opportunities, as they do not want their return to be another state of displacement.

“Returning has not been an easy or linear process, and many of us who returned are still in a state of transition.”

The process to have a house made it also difficult. The Government expects the family to stay in the vicinity, either in a hut built on the land or in a rented property until it is built. This is particularly difficult for families returning with young children. If the authorities were to find that you have gone out, even if you were simply visiting the grocery shop when they came by, you are reported as having ‘left’. The process to have a house built for you is then halted.

Now, if a family member, relative or friend passes away, their loved ones might miss the funeral because it is a long journey which is also subject to the availability of transport. Since it is customary for Muslims to bury their dead within 24 hours, many women say it has resulted in several family members missing funerals or arriving too late. A significant cost is incurred by these families travelling to see each other between Jaffna and the towns they have settled in after displacement, be it for a funeral, a wedding or a religious festival.

The struggle with employment

During their displacement in Puttalam, employment was a challenge for many Muslims. If a man had worked as a tuk-tuk driver in Jaffna, the tuk-tuk drivers in Puttalam wouldn't always allow them to do the same work. Many displaced Muslim men and women then had to work as labourers for low wages, sometimes earning only Rs. 600 a week.

Employment for Muslims returning to Jaffna has been difficult. Most men collect and salvage old steel, plastic, and other materials. They take it for recycling or sell it to shops and factories in Colombo. The work is extremely precarious and generates only a small income. After the Easter bombings, Muslim men were not allowed to pass through Tamil areas to collect scrap material.

Remembering the displacement

The women recall being treated well by the people living in the areas they lived in when displaced. One woman recalls travelling from Jaffna to Pooneryn by lorry and then onwards from Pooneryn to Nachchikuda by boat, where they would stay in a church for one night.

They note that the Muslims in Jaffna were financially and economically well off prior to 1990. However, on the day of the eviction, the families were made to leave behind everything they owned. The LTTE would take all valuables, searching thoroughly for items that people were carrying hidden in their clothes or on their person. They have yet to be given anything in terms of compensation for the belongings and properties they had to leave behind.

These families had no relationships with Muslims outside of Jaffna. Only those who had previously travelled to other cities for business would have connections, and these would serve them well when looking for places to stay, even temporarily, after the eviction from Jaffna.

When some reached Puttalam, they stayed in schools, and mosques gave them food. Some who reached Anuradhapura were able to connect with families that had gone further south.

While they were staying in camps and mosques, everyone would sleep, wash, and go to the bathroom in the same vicinity. For the women, having to go about these activities alongside men who weren't from their families was a jarring reality to which they had to adjust. On one occasion, 40 families were taking shelter on one land, with only four toilets and two wells available for their use. As they moved on to their final destinations, the families would help each other build houses in new towns.

They were constantly reminded that 'they are displaced' when people in those localities spoke about them.

Looking to the future

Before the eviction, there were five schools operating in the Muslim locality. Only two – Osmaniya College and Khadeejah School – have reopened. Osmaniya has offered Advanced Level classes for just one year now. Khadeejah has classes only up to the Ordinary Level, and students must switch to Tamil schools to finish their education.

Some parents are reluctant to spend additional money for tuition classes or for their children to travel to classes that aren't close to their homes. Young Muslim boys are therefore going to work, and many young children are also getting involved with drugs.

The women talk of social issues facing Muslim women at the moment. Community leaders and religious leaders say or preach that women mustn't study too much or hold positions of authority that would require them to have a public face.

The community has been able to engage in people's forum that are convened by scholars, writers and academics, to discuss the eviction and its implications. They know, however, that the same kind of topics cannot be broached with those who live around them in their villages.

“Young children from the generations that did not experience the eviction are not interested and don't really ask us elders about the community's history. They were mostly born in the south and in the areas the community was displaced to, and therefore do not feel any connection to the North.”

The community is registered to vote in the Jaffna district. When elections draw near, the returned persons contact their family and friends living elsewhere to travel back 'home' to vote. Not everyone is able to or chooses to make this journey.

30 years have passed since the eviction, and many people have taken or bought lands in the areas they have lived in since they were displaced. Returning to their homelands in Jaffna would mean having to start their lives all over again, and possibly without any support from the government.



Mullaitivu

1,000 Muslim families in Mullaitivu were among those Muslims evicted from the Northern Province in 1990. Now, that number has grown to 5,000 families as time has passed and new generations populate the community.

Space, housing and water remain key issues for the families that have returned and settled in their homelands. Seeing the lack of resources and space, several families chose to stay in Puttalam and other areas they were displaced to. They registered themselves in Mullaitivu, but only half of the 2,000 registered Muslim families still live in the district.

“The choice for others not to return was due to the fact that after nearly two decades of displacement, they had put down roots in Puttalam and other areas. Those who left from Mullaitivu had married spouses from Puttalam, begun families there and also established jobs and businesses there.”

Muslims who now live in Mullaitivu are happy to have returned to a place they call their own. In some cases, branches of a family have all returned, meaning that some have all their relatives together. Before the eviction, the women remember how most lived in Cadjan houses. Now, through housing projects or their own family’s expenditure, many live in more modern homes.

Through private donors, they have been able to build wells and water tubes for use in agriculture.

Several issues still persist, such as the difficulty for them to find work. The economic situation is more difficult for women-headed families in particular. Many sought work overseas as a resolution and as a way to help feed their families, but since the Easter Sunday attacks last April, it has no longer been an option.

Returning to a new struggle

One of the key challenges for those returning to Mullaitivu has been their interactions with government and administrative officers to obtain their lands and houses. The women say Tamil Grama Sevaka officers don't like registering Muslims in the Mullaitivu district. Often, they would go from house to house checking to ensure that people actually live there. On a few occasions, officers are reported to have checked the hearth and firewood for warmth, to see if the residents had recently cooked in the house.

If anyone is in need of letters or certification from the Grama Sevaka, they travel to get it from Mullaitivu, as the Puttalam officers don't issue these documents to the displaced Muslims. Temporary arrangements were made during the August 2020 Parliamentary election, for those living in Puttalam to cast votes for their Mullaitivu representative without having to make the long journey. Many do not want to change their voting registration to Puttalam.

Many families had agricultural land a few kilometres from their homes, with permits for these under the Land Development Ordinance (LDO). When they returned, they approached the Divisional Secretariat to renew their permits so they may cultivate again. However, the process has been prolonged by the officers who engage in repetitive questioning and checking. There are families that, after having submitted an application seven years ago, are still waiting for their permits to be renewed.

In other cases, this agricultural land was under mixed permits or ownership. When they returned, they were told it was now reserved as forest land and they could not settle there. The same did not appear to apply to the Tamil people who were now using and living on these lands. The community eventually found out that the Divisional Secretariat officers had pressured Forest Department officials to designate the land as forest and to put stone markers there, thereby restricting the community from claiming their own lands.

“We returned in spite of these issues. In Mullaitivu, we have land to call our own. In the places they were displaced to, we did not, and could not afford to buy or lease land. We have returned to ‘our place’, and it was our right to do so.”

Parts of their families still live in areas outside the Northern Province. Naturally, they would want to visit each other to celebrate weddings or to provide support during an illness. The travel costs of these exchanges can often be quite high.

Women who returned in 2012 remember interacting with Commissioners from a proposed Secretariat for Protracted Displacement. Muslim IDPs were to be the first priority of this office. However, when the Cabinet changed in 2019, payments to build houses and housing schemes themselves stopped. Rs. 792,000 had reportedly been set aside to provide housing for any Muslim families that had returned but only Rs. 200,000 had been utilised until then. The Secretariat ceased to function, and a policy for prolonged displacement was never realised.

The women say that they, and many other Muslim families they know, have received no support from the Office of Reparations. All the returning families have applied for compensation, and to be able to recover lost assets, but nothing has been received.

The land available in in Mullaitivu now is not adequate to accommodate the population increase in the Muslim community over thirty years of displacement. Since their return to the North in 2012, the Muslims have gone before the land kachcheri several times. Tamil people protested their participation in this process.

Seeing no resolution here, the Muslims went to clear their lands so they might live and cultivate there again. The women say there were two protests against it, and among the protestors were students from the University of Jaffna. The protestors claimed that Mullaitivu was only for Tamil people. In addition, they pressured authorities to not allow Muslims to settle close to areas where there were teak trees planted by the LTTE which was intended for use in constructing bunkers. To this day, people come from Puttalam to meet the land kachcheri and claim their land again, as many still don't have resolution in this regard.

25 individuals were issued government land close to a decade after they returned to Mullaitivu. Before 1990, there were some families that had 80 perches of land for themselves, and lived in houses with large gardens. Now six families can be seen sharing that same amount of land. They also note how while Muslims were allocated seven perches of land per house, Tamil people got ½ acre.

Many Muslims came back to the area in 2010 itself to claim their lands after the end of the war. When registrations were carried out, priority was given to Tamil families returning from the Manik Farm refugee camp. After they all had been settled and the refugee camp closed, opportunities were opened for the Muslims to register to return. At the time of their return, they arranged everything themselves. The only support they received from the government was a supply of dry rations over six months.

One woman who returned in 2010 says she shifted to ten places, building Cadjan huts on other people's lands, until she was able to buy land with financial support from well-wishers. Another says she pawned all the jewellery she had to buy a plot of land.

Memories of the eviction

In the months leading up to the eviction, the community had felt a sense of uncertainty. Several families gathered all their valuable documents in a box, ready to leave if the need ever arose. Others who were not as well prepared lost their documents and certificates in the rush to depart.

The women recall how there were instances of babies being born on the way, as they left the North on foot, their mothers giving birth to them in the jungles. On these long journeys, they would request some drinking water from Tamil homes, but in some places, they were refused.

“Up until the border of the Northern Province, there were LTTE cadres on guard, making sure that we didn't take anything valuable with us. One woman in our village tried sewing her jewellery into the lining of her clothes, but we were checked thoroughly, and it was all taken from her.”

After Vavuniya, Muslim people living in villages came to help the convoy of IDPs. The Sri Lanka Army arranged lorries intended to be free of charge to transport them to various camps or their onward destinations. However, the lorry drivers had apparently asked for money from the IDPs.

In the years since they returned, the Muslim community has not held any collective commemoration on October 30th to recall their eviction. No one is willing to take the responsibility to organise any memorialisation as they are scared that such an event will affect the relationships between the Tamil and Muslim communities in the North and create unwanted trouble.

When the ceasefire was declared in 2002, there was an agreement that Muslims could come back for their land. When several families returned, they found that Tamil people were living in their homes with the LTTE's permission. LTTE cadres, officers and their families had taken up residence in Muslim homes too.

Since the Easter bombings in 2019, people from Puttalam cannot come to stay with relatives in Mullaitivu and cannot register to live in the district. Many of those who returned had National Identity Cards that bore Puttalam addresses and the Army asked them to get these changed. Some women recall the crowds in the photo studio to have photos taken for these new NICs.

While the military had not scrutinised the Muslim community when they returned in 2012, heavy surveillance began after the bombings. Houses would be regularly checked and many families were afraid to travel at that time. People were being arrested for owning the Quran – several families burned their copies of Islam's holy book to avoid arrest.



Connecting and re-connecting

The women note that the Tamil community were not pleased when they came back. They referred to the Muslims as 'Puttalam people' and did not smile or talk to them. While it didn't create any issues for the Muslims in their daily lives, they carried it as a burden in their minds. Young children would hide and watch the families, asking their elders who these people were. These children didn't know about or had never seen Muslim people before. Some adults would explain to them 'these are Muslim people; this is how they dress'.

The community's relationships with Tamil people has improved over the years. They are able to talk about the eviction, their experiences of displacement, and most people understand. Tamil people who also witnessed or experienced violence from the LTTE empathise with their struggle. Building relationships with such individuals helps create some bonds between the two communities. It is still difficult to raise their issues with people who remain sympathetic to the movement – the women say the changes in their facial expressions indicate it is a topic that should not be broached yet.

Prior to the eviction, the Tamil and Muslim communities in Mullaitivu were close. Muslim families provided food to the LTTE, interacting with the officers and their families. In fact, women recall how the LTTE's public discourse on rights encouraged Muslims as well. Both communities joined in conversations around development and the discrimination present in the quota system for campus admissions at the time.

“Reconciliation and transitional justice have been discussed across the country since the war came to an end. However, it seems these ideas and mechanisms are not meant for Muslim people.”



Puttalam

Challenges in displacement

On their way to Puttalam, the IDPs took shelter in schools. The women would get together to go to the bathrooms outside, hoping for safety in numbers. During their time at a school in Nochchiyagama, they would all gather and cook under a tree, the food then shared among their families.

When they first came to Puttalam, the women recount being clustered at Manalkundu camp. With all the families living close together, they had to bear the unwanted attention that came from men in the small spaces.

“Our experience of displacement was layered with many struggles. We did any work we could to be able to earn and feed their families. We shouldered the additional work of watching and caring for our children, all while having to get used to a new place.”

The only form of aid that each family received at that time was a monthly coupon of Rs. 630 from the World Food Programme and 30 kg of rice. The women say that they would sell 15 kg of the rice in order to earn money for more supplies and cook the rest for their families to eat. This

aid and small support from the Red Cross carried on up to about 1992 before ceasing altogether.

Families who had business connections prior to 1990 were able to settle a little easier when arriving from the North than those who didn't. Muslim businessmen who had established contacts in Kalpitiya and Puttalam were able to find better shelter for their families.

The disruption of children's schooling was probably one of the biggest impacts of the eviction, the women in Puttalam say. For instance, students who had been in Grade 7 in Tamil schools in their hometowns in Mannar, were now meant to join in at Grade 3 of the Sinhala schools in Puttalam. In addition, the difficulty in accessing schools from where they lived meant many young girls stopped school early. Some found themselves walking as much as four kilometres one way to get to school.

Putting down roots

In the three decades that have passed, almost all the displaced families who initially arrived in Puttalam have bought land, and with wood and cement from various donors, built new houses themselves. The lands that they bought were the cheapest plots available and were situated close to forests and lakes. This meant they had to work harder to build the houses and make them liveable.



“For every family that arrived in Puttalam after the eviction, there are now ten more families, with the passage of time and the birth of new generations.”

Yet, many of these families still share one house. The 2,000 or so families that went back either did all construction arrangements themselves while a few got houses through Indian housing projects.

The women say that many of them did not complete their education and married young. Through the experience of displacement, they have struggled to raise their children and give them a good education. People in Puttalam used to refer to the northern Muslims as ‘refugees’, indicating their difference even as they attempted to establish their lives in the town. However, the women are happy that the same label cannot be attached to their children, who were born in Puttalam after the eviction.

Looking ahead

A persistent issue the community faces is the inability of youth to find employment owing to the lack of opportunities in the area. Children as young as 16 and possibly younger are turning to drugs. Their mothers feel that this is in part due to the lack of work – if the youth had a routine to follow, it is possible that drug use in the community will stop.

People in their community who didn’t get an education take on small jobs in Puttalam, such as working in shops and operating vadai carts. Women work in mills, farming and packing salt in the many salterns along the road to Kalpitiya. These bring in only a very small income, however. If they were to go abroad seeking work, their children would be alone here. The women therefore feel there needs to be support for sustainable self-employment for women. Several women have already taken their own lives as a result of crippling debt brought about by predatory microfinance loans, with interest rates that are impossible to repay on their meagre incomes.

Two homes

The northern Muslims in Puttalam visit their families in Mannar sometimes, for functions such as weddings and other events. On these visits, they can see that their houses are still there, intact. However, many note that returning to their homes in the North would mean having to start their lives from scratch. It would also mean uprooting their children from their education and in some cases, with families of their own, in Puttalam. The women ask themselves whether they would stay here with their children or go back alone in that situation. Many families never sold their lands in the North because it is part of their identity.

“If you ask me where is home, I can’t tell one place, it is now both Mannar and Puttalam simultaneously.”

There are 12,000 northern Muslims registered to vote in Puttalam. Another 38,000 still have their votes in Mannar, but not all of them will return there during an election. Since the Divisional Secretariat in Puttalam will not issue any official letters or documents to the Muslims from Mannar, they need to travel back to obtain any paperwork they need. Therefore, the youth from the generations born in Puttalam are not registered to vote there.

Thirty years has passed since the eviction, and to some northern Muslims still living in Puttalam, political leaders act like it never happened. Even in the decade following the war, a process of

resettlement was never put forth for the community. Even now, there is a lack of information about how many exactly remain in displacement, how many have returned, and whether anyone is still living in refugee camps.

Civil society rarely visits Puttalam for work and discussions on post-war situations and struggles. The Northern Muslims feel they are forgotten in discussions of transitional justice and post-war reparations that have taken place in the last ten years.



Negombo

There is a generation of young people who did not witness the eviction, but were the first in their families to be born in displacement, some just a few months or a year after northern Muslim families settled in new places. In the thirty years that have passed, they too have begun lives of their own, and put down roots in places that their parents didn't call home.

“In the years our family has lived in Poruthota, we have shifted house ten times within the 1 kilometre distance between the mosque and here. This house, unlike those rented properties, belongs to us, the land bought and built with money we earned from our business.”

An attempt to return

In the years immediately following the end of the war, some families did return to Jaffna, to resume the businesses they had left behind. Men who owned shops in the markets they would travel every few weeks between Jaffna and Negombo, and the option of return was a little more viable then. Having set up lives around Negombo, many do not have the expectation to return to the North, and they definitely don't expect any assistance from the government if they were to do so.

Those who had not been able to set up work or business in Negombo returned to the North. Now owning businesses in Negombo town or in Pettah, others wondered if the same opportunities would be available in Jaffna. They also suspect that education options would be limited for their children, as schools in Jaffna would likely show preference to enroll Hindu students.

A fragile community

Their relationship with the Poruthota community – an entirely Muslim locality – is complex. Women who left the North in 1990 recall the generosity they were met with when they arrived in Negombo. Locals were quick to set up shelters in the mosque and provide food for the Northern Muslims, and would eventually help them with rental properties as families looked to move into homes.

Despite having had to leave all their documentation behind, schools in Poruthota admitted students from the Northern Muslim community with ease, without asking for the usual paperwork. Islam preaches the importance of generosity to others, so the women believe the help they received was due in part to the local community being very religious, and closely following religious teachings.



“In daily life, we live alongside the local community and for the most part, have good relationships with them. However, throughout our lives, we have been labelled and referred to as ‘Jaffna people’.”

This distinction is used mostly in times of quarrel and disagreement. Issues between two individuals, if one is from the Northern Muslim community, is often reduced to an issue with the ‘Jaffna people’. In the same way that the Northern Muslims know these prejudices aren’t held by all Muslims in Negombo, they wish their entire community wasn’t painted with broad strokes in this way.

This attitude comes, they say, in part as a result of the economic success the Northern Muslims have been able to achieve in the three decades they have lived in Negombo. Most Poruthota locals engage in fishing or carpentry work, which is both unpredictable in nature and also does not yield a high income. They wonder then, how the Northern Muslims who came to Negombo carrying just shopping bags containing a few belongings, now own land, better houses and shops in Pettah.

Positions in the trustee board of the mosque or the school development board are never given to Northern Muslims. While the local community creates no issues in daily life and interactions, they would not accommodate any of the ‘Jaffna people’ in a position of power.

Uncertain futures

They have noticed the rise of racism in the last decade, directed towards the Muslim community at large. This increased in the wake of the Easter Sunday attacks. However, they feel that there would have been added pressure on them – from within the local community - if the bombers had been from Jaffna or anywhere in the North.

The first recorded death of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka was a Northern Muslim man who lived in Poruthota. Recorded, despite no medical records showing that he had the virus, and no one in his family testing positive for it even after prolonged time spent with him. His body was cremated against the family’s wishes and religious beliefs, and also without their knowledge (while there was a health ministry circular that gave option of safe and deep burial as well) . In the days immediately following the incident, there was a swell of local support for the family, in the form of food being brought to the home, and many rallying to ask for accountability for what was done wrong. In the months since, many of which the deceased’s family spent in quarantine, this support has since reduced. The family doubts whether the Negombo Muslim community would stand behind them if they were to take the matter to court.

Some Northern Muslims notice parallels between these attitudes and those of the island’s majority towards minority communities. In the same way that the Sinhalese nationalists declare that Muslims have no claim to Sri Lanka, Negombo Muslims declare that the Northern Muslims do not have claim to a place they have lived in for three decades now.

There was an incident recently where a Northern Muslim was indirectly linked to a disagreement between two Muslim families from Poruthota. Tensions escalated, and despite being of no fault, the Northern Muslim family was told to leave the village, via a letter sent from the mosque trustees. This case has many Northern Muslim families wondering that there might come a day when they could also be ordered to leave.

In the case of the supposed COVID death, the entire community was aware that the man did not in fact have the virus, and that there were multiple levels of interference to declare it so. If the COVID infection had actually been confirmed, the family aren't sure if they would have been able to live in the area anymore.

“We are sometimes unsure until when we will be able to live peacefully here. However, more people have been born in Negombo, and many have also married into the local Muslim community. We hope the relationships will improve with each new generation.”