

A Study of Muslim Internal Displaced Persons in Post-War Sri Lanka:

Women's Perspective of Social Changes among IDPs

Tokiko Inoue

Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies

Kyoto University

Introduction

The civil war between the Sinhala-dominant Sri Lankan state and the Tamil militancy group ended in 2009. After the war, resettlement programs were conducted by the government, international organizations, and NGOs. Although progress is visible, in terms of the resettlement of Tamil Internal Displaced Persons (IDPs), neither the state nor NGOs succeeded in establishing concrete programs to facilitate the resettlement of the displaced northern Muslim people. This compelled them to live in temporal settlements that are primarily concentrated in the northwestern region of the island for approximately three decades. Therefore, there is inequality in the treatment of Muslim people and Tamil IDPs.

One of the reasons for the inequality is the vulnerable position of Muslims in Sri Lankan politics. The Muslim community has been sandwiched between Sinhala and Tamil nationalism as a second minority. Since the mid-20th century, Muslim politicians, who were elites primarily from the western part of the island, made efforts to derive benefits by cooperating with Sinhala majoritarian parties. Later, the Tamil-Muslim coalition based on the Tamil-speaking identity arose in the eastern region, and they fought together during the early stage of militancy. However, Tamil militancy gradually excluded Muslims, and finally, the LTTE, a predominantly Tamil militancy group, expelled Muslims from the northern province in 1990. Approximately 70,000–80,000 Muslim people became IDPs, and most of them have been unable to return.

Many studies regarding Muslim IDPs have also focused on their return and resettlement [The Citizens' Commission 2011; Yusoff *et al.* 2018]. Research has emphasized the importance

of developing policies and laws regarding the resettlement and protection of the northern Muslims, according to international standards and norms [Milhar 2018; Yusoff *et al.* 2018]. Some studies have noted that land issues had been related to the citizenship of displaced persons. The northern Muslims lost their traditional lands due to the LTTE depriving them of their land deeds as well as occupation by authorities or individuals. This lack of information prevented them from accessing or returning to their homes.

However, studies focused on the northern Muslims returning to their traditional land sometimes overlooked their sense of belonging in their present place. Malkki [1995] argued that the identity of refugees is not tied with the land and that they may create new identities and “homes” through the displacement process. Some studies have noted that Muslim IDPs reported experiencing a sense of belonging to their present place. For example, Thiranagama illustrated the process of remaking “homes” in camps as well as the generational gaps in their sense of belonging [The Citizens’ Commission 2011; Thiranagama 2011; Norwegian Refugee Council 2010].

Although problems related to return and resettlement are often discussed in academic debates, the practical issues of Muslim IDPs and the coping mechanisms used for rebuilding their lives in their new localities are not well-documented in the literature. In their present places, they confront various difficulties, including tensions between IDPs and the local communities. There are conditions that necessitate “identity work” for IDPs, such as their longing for their ancestral land and apparent loss of land rights, friction with unfamiliar social/gender norms in the local community, and generational gaps and disintegration of the community. In a future study, I will attempt to address these issues and examine how people deal with them in their daily lives. This future study will specifically focus on these issues from the perspective of women. In this paper, I examine the circumstances of Muslim IDPs while primarily focusing on issues related to dowry and land, and delineate the specific themes and perspectives for my future study. The current study is based on a comprehensive literature review. Books, journal articles, and reports from governmental, non-governmental, and international organizations served as major secondary sources.

Muslims in Sri Lanka

Muslim¹ people constitute 9.2% of the population and are considered the second minority group in Sri Lanka², whereas Sinhalese and Tamil people constitute 74.9% and 15.4%, respectively, of the population. Sri Lankan Muslims have two major characteristics. First, in contrast to the Sinhalese and Tamil, Muslim communities are scattered throughout the island, except the eastern region, wherein the majority of Muslim population is concentrated and forms the majority in some areas. They share kinship and social structures, customs, and languages with other adjacent ethnic groups as neighbors, instead of forming a trans-regional Muslim community based on a pan-Islamic identity. Second, while the term “Muslim” is a category encompassing both religion and ethnicity [Thiranagama 2011], the terms “Sinhala” and “Tamil” are identity categories based on languages. Although most of the Muslim population speaks Tamil, their identity is not based on language, but is instead based on religion.

The roots of the Muslim community in Sri Lanka is seaborne trade between the Middle East and Southeast Asia since the pre-Islamic period. During the 8th century, after the rise of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula, Arab Muslim merchants brought Arabic culture to the coast of South India and Sri Lanka, which resulted in Islamization in those regions. Since the 15th century and onward from the 17th century, large numbers of Muslim farmer communities settled on the east coast of Sri Lanka, where the highest Muslim population is concentrated today [McGilvray 1998]. During the Portuguese and Dutch colonial periods, the colonial government persecuted Muslim people because of their Islamic faith and their advantages in seaborne trade. The Portuguese and Dutch colonists restricted trade by Muslims, which led to the large-scale inland migration of coastal Muslims because the Kandyan Kingdom protected them from persecution. Until that time, “Ceylon was highly socially and religiously heterogenous” [Thiranagama 2011: 113].

Nissan and Stirrat [1990] argued that the centralization of power in Ceylon under the British rule classified social groups into different racial groups. Since the 19th century, race and representation were fixed and the issue of ethnic identity arose. The Muslim revivalism movement arose in the late 19th century, following the Buddhist and Hindu revivalist movements. They struggled for upliftment, education, and religious reform. In 1889, when the colonial administration included Muslim and Kandyan Sinhalese members in the legislative council, a Tamil leader, Ramanathan, claimed that Muslims were racially Tamils; however, the

southern Muslim elite leaders opposed this claim. They argued that Muslims were a distinct ethnic group, with Arab origins. The image of Muslims as articulated by the leaders, which denoted that they were the descendants of Arab traders, could not apply to the majority of Muslim people, who were farmers or fishermen in the northern–eastern region [Thiranagama 2011]. However, by then, the southern Muslim elites had profited from the religious movement and Muslims from the eastern coast were left behind [McGilvray 1998]. The economic and socio-political gap between southern urban Muslim elites and Muslim people in other parts of Sri Lanka had widened.

The gap between the two Muslim groups in politics was not bridged even after independence. Historically, Muslim politicians who were elites from the southern part of Sri Lanka had tried to derive benefits by cooperating with the Sinhala majoritarian parties, in contrast to Tamil leaders, who sought self-governance in a Tamil-dominant region. In the east coast, Tamil and Muslim politicians formed a coalition based on a Tamil-speaking identity. However, the coalition was short-lived because the Tamils could not accommodate the interests of Muslims, thus leading the Muslim politicians to switch to national parties [Thiranagama 2011]. During the early stage of militancy, Tamil and Muslim youth in the northern and eastern regions fought together. However, Tamil rebel groups gradually excluded the Muslim population, thus leading the eastern Muslim population to fear being affected by violence. The eastern Muslim population also had grievances against the central government that did not address their concerns. In 1981, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress emerged to protect northern and eastern Muslim people and they became a powerful force in Sri Lanka's politics. This threatened the LTTE's "Tamil-homeland" narrative and resulted in the massacres of Muslims in Eravur and Kattankudy, and the eviction of northern Muslims by the LTTE [Thiranagama 2011; Yusoff *et al.* 2018]

The circumstances around the Muslim population changed after war ended. The protracted civil war polarized the three ethnic communities. In the present day, Muslims are under attack due to religious intolerance; this can be noted through events such as the violence against Muslim people by Sinhala Buddhist mobs. Moreover, anti-Muslim sentiment has increased in Sri Lanka after a series of bombings at Easter 2019³⁴. On the other hand, the Muslim community has also undergone changes. Although as mentioned earlier, the Muslim population in Sri Lanka has been regionally integrated with the specific characteristics of each

regions, they have been affected by global Islamic movements. Similar to other parts of the world that are experiencing Islamic reform and fundamentalism, the Islamic piety movement, such as the uniforms adopted by Muslim people all over the world and *da'wa* (preaching) groups, is visible in Sri Lanka [Haniffa 2008].

Eviction of the Northern Muslims

In October 1990, the LTTE, which controlled the northern region, forcibly evicted 70,000–80,000 Muslim people from the northern province within 24–48 hours. Most of them fled to and resettled in the Puttalam, Kurunegala, and Anuradapura districts of the northwestern, north central, and other provinces. This distressed the northern Muslims because the LTTE stripped them of all their possessions on their way to seek asylum in the southern region; they were forced to give up their lands and houses during the protracted displacement. Most of them have not yet been able to return to their traditional villages due to the lack of resettlement policies and programs, and the occupation and desolation of their lands and homes. This protracted displacement led the Tamils in the north to disregard the presence of their Muslim neighbors, thus made northern Muslims reluctant to return [Haniffa 2014; The Citizens' Commission 2011; Thiranagama 2011].

The protracted civil war expelled thousands of people internally and externally from the most affected northeastern region. Although the actual number of displaced people is unclear, displacements had been taking place during many phases of the war. During the final stage of the war (2006–2009), the battle between the LTTE and the government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) had intensified. At that stage, more than 300,000 people were displaced in the northern province alone and most of them were housed in a state-run camp that was located between the Vavuniya and Mannar districts [Saparamadu & Lall 2014].

The GoSL, NGOs, and INGOs implemented relief, recovery, and resettlement projects for the people who became IDPs during the last stage of the civil war. These projects were generally successfully carried out. The “Northern Spring” and “Eastern Reawakening” were large-scale, state-led projects aimed at the resettlement of IDPs from the northern and eastern provinces. The GoSL hoped to develop the economy in those regions by constructing

infrastructure facilities and livelihood programs [Saparamadu & Lall 2014]. Thousands of people would be able to resettle with basic infrastructure and livelihood development through those programs. However, as many scholars have noted, most resettlement programs were targeted at Tamil people who became IDPs during the last stage of the war and thus could not accommodate the northern Muslims who had been displaced since 1990 [Saparamadu & Lall 2014; Yusoff *et al.* 2018]. The government insisted that the resettlement of war-induced IDPs has been almost completed. In May 2010, then President Mahinda Rajapakse claimed that 90% of IDPs had been resettled and the remaining IDPs were due to be resettled by the end of that year [Saparamadu & Lall 2014]. According to the GoSL, approximately 97% of IDPs in the northern and eastern provinces have been resettled, and current welfare centers in Sri Lanka in Jaffna consist of 35,926 people that are due to be resettled as of December 2018 [Ministry of National Policies 2018]. This shows the GoSL's lack of interest in helping Muslim IDPs.

The eviction of the northern Muslims caused a rift between the northern Tamils and Muslims although they had lived together as neighbors before. Northern Tamil citizens have felt guilty about the eviction, but have remained silent because they could not do anything when their neighbors were evicted, and some of them profited from the auctions held by the LTTE to sell the possessions of the evicted northern Muslim people [Thiranagama 2011]. After the defeat of the LTTE, most Tamil people remained indifferent, if not unwelcoming, toward the return of the Muslim people. Tamil politicians and bureaucracy also remained indifferent toward the northern Muslims and were uncooperative with them [Yusoff *et al.* 2018]. These incidents generated distrust toward Tamil people among the northern Muslim communities. Therefore, it will be difficult to develop a political solution to this problem.

Problems of Displaced Life

Research has documented various problems that northern Muslims have faced in their displaced life. These studies have lamented the poor lifestyles, lack of basic infrastructure, education, livelihood, and loss of their properties, homes, and traditional lives [The Citizens' Commission 2011; Thiranagama 2011]. These studies have also reported the tension between IDPs and their host communities. In the beginning, host communities warmly welcomed and took active roles in providing aid for IDPs. However, intervention by INGOs excluded these

local communities during the decision-making process, thus leading to difficulties and issues between Muslim IDPs and host communities. IDPs and people in the local communities also have to compete for job opportunities and resources [Yusoff *et al.* 2018]. Studies have also noted tension within Muslim communities. The influx of northern Muslims with different mosque committees and community links threatened the Puttalam Muslims and led to conflicts primarily between local and northern Muslim men. Furthermore, projects run by INGOs and NGOs created competition over resources and aid within the northern Muslim communities [Thiranagama 2011].

Struggles specific to female IDPs have also been reported in the literature. One outstanding issue was the policing of gender norms and the restriction of their mobility in the new settlement. Jayasankar and Ganhewa [2018] reported negative social attitudes about socio-cultural norms, both from IDPs and local community members, especially men, regarding women going outside their homes. They argued that women were expected to take care of family members and engage in household chores and these socio-cultural norms restricted the displaced women's livelihood activities. This placed a harsh stigma on widowed women who were the heads of their households. Thiranagama [2011] observed that "Refugee camps were made larger *ur*⁵, surrounded by a seemingly hostile host community outside. Within, the community itself constantly policed women to maintain the integrity of these *ur* as ordering schemas for society" [162]. In refugee camps, where people had difficulties maintaining their traditional homes and norms, women and marriage were considered the key factor for the regrowth and reconstruction of their future homes. Thus, women experienced a different type of suffering compared to that of men.

Loss of land and land-related issues is often highlighted in studies regarding Muslim IDPs because it is significant for their decision to return. During the war, it was difficult to access their traditional villages that were under the control of the LTTE; therefore, they could not receive much information about their land. However, even after the war ended, there were many discussions regarding ownership conflicts, lands changing due to the conflict, land occupation by Tamil IDPs or the government, and loss of land deeds. A natural increase in the population also led to a shortage of land. These factors made it difficult for northern Muslims to decide to return. In addition, many of them had sold their land due to poverty during the protracted displacement [The Citizens' Commission 2011]. Loss and desolation of land was connected to

the loss of livelihood in their traditional villages [Jayasankar & Ganhewa 2018].

Debate over Resettlement of Muslim IDPs

Many scholars, commissions, and international organizations have reported concerns and grievances regarding the displacement and resettlement of Muslim IDPs. They have argued that Muslims have been marginalized from the post-war resettlement and reconciliation process. They emphasized the importance of concrete policies and commitment from the authorities for the return and resettlement of northern Muslims [The Citizens' Commission 2011; Saparamadu & Lall 2014; Yusoff *et al.* 2018]. They have analyzed the underlying factors leading to the marginalization of Muslim people in post-war resettlement. Most studies have examined the vulnerable position of northern Muslims, while focusing on the political aspect in the context of Sri Lanka. Yusoff *et al.* [2018] argued that Muslims' position as the second minority and the failure of Muslim leadership made them vulnerable in the political arena, thus leading to the lack of resettlement policies. Scholars have asserted that northern Muslims had the right to return and resettle in their traditional land; therefore, resettlement projects by the government should be implemented adequately to help them recover their rights [Mihlar 2018; Yusoff *et al.* 2018].

Although some studies have focused on issues related to resettlement and asserted that Muslim people's concerns must be accommodated in the resettlement process, these studies have overlooked the complexities related to the disposition and thoughts of "returning home" and the local integration to the present community. Few studies and statistics⁶ have suggested that several northern Muslim people have voluntarily settled in Puttalam.

Moreover, the Norwegian Refugee Council [2010] noted that although 52% of Muslim IDPs from Jaffna wanted to return, 48% wanted to remain in Puttalam, and 27% believed that their home is Puttalam. The results of their study showed that 89% of Muslim IDPs in Puttalam had property in Puttalam. Thiranagama [2011], who conducted fieldwork in Puttalam in 2003, argued that although northern Muslims felt the sense of "home" in their traditional villages, they could create a "new home" in the process of displacement. She argued that although there was a generational gap within the northern Muslim communities about returning home and the sense

of “home,” they had a shared identity as northern Muslims. Over ten years have passed since Thiranagama conducted her fieldwork. There may have been some changes in their images of traditional homes and their sense of belonging.

In theories related to refugee studies, there are two schools of thought regarding the concept of home. The first school of thought asserts that the identity of refugees is tied to a specific land and they can reaffirm their identity when they return [Coles 1985; Karadawi 1999]. The second school asserts that the return of refugees to their traditional land is not related with the reaffirmation of their identity [Warner 1992; Malkki 1992]. They believe that refugees can create new identities through the process of displacement. I support the latter perception.

To conclude, although they have been longing to return to their homes since they were evicted, their actual return became difficult over the three decades of displacement. They lost their traditional land, livelihoods, communities, and homes through displacement and have attempted to rebuild new homes in Puttalam. Studies regarding post-war rehabilitation have focused on the political and economic vulnerabilities of Muslim IDPs and claim that these vulnerabilities can be overcome by securing their rights, including their rights to return. However, when we consider their eventual settlement in Puttalam, it is also important to examine how these vulnerabilities affect the daily life of northern Muslims who started to rebuild their homes in new places. My future study will investigate the present circumstances of the northern Muslim people who are trying to rebuild their “new homes” in Puttalam. I will examine how they recognize and cope with socio-economic vulnerabilities and how their vulnerabilities will affect their identity reformation in the long run. To that end, I will explore land- and dowry-related issues in Sri Lanka.

Social Changes and Transitions of Dowries in Post-War Sri Lanka

The impact of displacement on dowries is often mentioned in association with land issues. Jayatilaka and Amirthalingam [2015] argued that socio-cultural changes due to the war and the tsunami in 2004 strongly affected the dowry system and women’s gendered roles in each ethnic community. They examined the impact of displacement on dowries and suggested that it is important to focus on indigenous safety nets, such as dowries and local cultural traditions,

which serve as the center when people deal with their displaced life. The loss of properties, family members, and livelihoods due to the war may have transformed the social status and women's traditional roles as caregivers, mothers, wives, and daughters.

In Sri Lanka, similar to other South Asian countries, dowries have been practiced in the Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim communities. Dowry systems are often said to be double-edged, with both positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, a dowry serves the role of a safety net for married women and a symbol of community and belonging and a family's "good name." A dowry contributes to constructing and strengthening kinship relations. On the negative side, dowries cause tensions between families and family members. Saving for dowries creates economical and psychological pressure, especially for poor families. In addition, the dowry practice can be perceived as encouraging gender inequality. The groom's family sometimes uses marriage to get a dowry and the lack of dowry threatens women's positions in their husbands' families [Jayatilaka & Amirthalingam 2015]. Although the Muslim religious code does not encourage dowries, Sri Lankan Muslims give land, houses, jewelry, and cash for their daughters as their dowries. Muslims and Tamils in the north and east share a kinship structure and dowry customs, although they have different customary laws. Property, such as land, is given as dowry from mothers to daughters. Giving dowry is significant for establishing oneself as a person who fulfills their obligations toward their family [Jayatilaka & Amirthalingam 2015; Thiranagama 2011].

Land is significant for people not only because it is the core of their livelihood, but also because it is closely tied to their identity and sense of belonging. People inherit land through the dowry system to daughters. Northern Muslim people who lost their traditional land would lose their daughter's future dowry, which implies the diminishing potentiality of reproduction and kinship-making based on land. Thiranagama [2011] argued that their desire and anxiety for regrowth and recuperation allowed them to invest in dowries in Puttalam. However, northern Muslims experienced a dilemma with relation to their longing for their home in the north. As they started to rebuild their homes in Puttalam, the possibilities of their return would diminish.

Thiranagama [2011] reported that dowries had increased among Muslim IDPs even after displacement. This implies that although the post-displacement economic aspects have been highlighted, people had placed value not only on the economic aspect but also on the symbolic aspect of dowries. In contrast to Tamil elites, most of whom sought asylum abroad and had

placed value on liquid and transportable cash instead of land, most Muslims IDPs refused to sell their traditional land. On the other hand, several northern Muslim people bought land in Puttalam out of the necessity for reproduction. Jayatilaka and Amirthalingam [2015] noted a trend to ask for cash instead of land and house, due to their expectations to return to their traditional homes in the north.

I assume that most Muslim IDPs are taking root in Puttalam and creating new homes and connections, such as dowry, in the present place. They have been struggling to create new lives due to the loss of their traditional way of life. By focusing on dowries, I will examine how political and economic conditions due to displacement have affected northern Muslim people's daily lives, particularly in the domestic and personal spheres. I will seek answers to the following questions in my future study. First, how were northern Muslim people, who were dispossessed of their land and were thus unable to follow traditional dowry customs, able to reaffirm their identity and belonging other than through livelihood rehabilitation? As mentioned above, dowry plays a significant role in establishing one's identity reformation. I will explore how the transition of dowries affected northern Muslim people's identity. Second, how do they create connection and belonging in their present place without dowries? Traditionally, the dowry system worked for kinship-making and connection to a place. However, especially among the younger generation, land in the north is no longer valuable for such purpose, while the symbolic aspect of dowry is highlighted. By focusing on dowry, I will conduct a detailed examination of women's concerns about returning and creating new lives because the dowry significantly affects their lives. In addition to women's role as a symbol of reproduction, women spend their time primarily in the domestic space, in contrast to men who have a connection outside their home and negotiate in the public space. Therefore, I will investigate the impact of displacement on the domestic sphere by focusing on women's lives. As suggested in findings by other studies, women and men have experienced displaced life differently. Analyzing women's perspective is important to understand the process of identity formation and negotiation among northern Muslims in an increasingly comprehensive manner.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I examined the nature of protracted displaced life of northern Muslims by

exploring their backgrounds and their concerns. As the second minority, Muslims have been in a vulnerable position and that has led to the marginalization of northern Muslims in the post-war resettlement and reconciliation process. Studies have reported inequality of treatment toward northern Muslim people compared to that of Tamil people, and have asserted that it is important to facilitate their return to their traditional land to help them recover their rights. However, protracted displacement and lack of resettlement programs for Muslim IDPs made it difficult for them to decide to return to their former homes; therefore, according to many sources, most of them have settled in Puttalam. I assume that they have been rebuilding their new lives in Puttalam, while coping with difficulties due to the displacement of local resilience. My future study will examine how northern Muslim people recognize their situation and how they strive to deal with the issues around them. In this paper, I focused on dowry as one of the components of reproduction and regrowth in a new place because it evokes their traditional home. Through the investigation of the transformation of dowry practices, I will examine northern Muslim people's perception of their former home and the process of reaffirming their identity and belonging, and how political and economic conditions that are specific to Muslim IDPs play out in the private sphere and in personal relationships, such as power relations within families, and generational gaps. By focusing on dowries, I can highlight issues regarding women. When we consider post-war rehabilitation and reconciliation, we must address the concerns of IDPs who were unable to return and have been rebuilding new homes in the place of dislocation.

In the current paper, I could not examine the effect of Islamophobia and Islamization in contemporary Sri Lanka. However, we must pay attention to their effects on the daily lives of northern Muslims as inter-ethnic tension is increasing in post-war Sri Lanka. I will also explore through field research whether northern Muslims have been integrated into Puttalam cohabiting with other ethnic groups, or they have intensified their pan-Islamic identity.

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¹ Although there are other small groups that subscribe to the Islamic faith, such as the Malays in Sri Lanka, I use the term “Muslim” to refer to “Sri Lankan Moors” in this paper.

² Department of Census and Statistics. 2012.

³ Daily Mirror online. May 21, 2019 “Anti-Muslim riots and the absence of a government”
 〈<http://www.dailymirror.lk/opinion/Anti-Muslim-riots-and-the-absence-of-a-government/172-167520>〉

⁴The Wall Street Journal. May 14, 2019 “Buddhist Mobs Target Muslims in Sri Lanka Following Deadly Easter Bombings”

⟨<https://www.wsj.com/articles/buddhist-mobs-target-muslims-in-sri-lanka-11557854344>⟩

⁵ A Tamil word that can be translated as “home” or “natal village”. Thiranagama separated this term from “homeland” and emphasized its person-centric and contextual nature.

⁶ Population rate indicates the impact of the influx of Muslim IDPs on the population composition. Although the Sinhalese population was 82.6% and the Muslim population was 9.9% in Puttalam, the Sinhalese population decreased to 72.6% and the Muslim population increased to 19.3%. In contrast, the northern Muslim population decreased. In Manner district in the Northern Province, the Tamil population was 61.8% and the Muslim population was 26.1% in 1988. However, the Muslim population decreased to 16.6% in 2012, whereas the Tamil population increased to 81.3%. [Department of Census and Statistics 1988; 2012]